University of New Hampshire
University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

Media Relations   Administrative Offices

9-2-2010

In Parent-Teacher Conferences, It's Often Not About the Student, According to UNH Researcher

Lori Wright
UNH Media Relations

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/news

Media Relations

In Parent-Teacher Conferences, It's Often Not About The Student, According To UNH Researcher

September 2, 2010

DURHAM, N.H. – Millions of children returning to school means that parents will soon face the often-dreaded parent-teacher conference. But what seems to be an evaluation of student performance is more often than not an evaluation of the parent and the teacher, by each other.

Danielle Pillet-Shore, assistant professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire, has been studying parent-teacher interactions for a decade. What she has found has surprised her.

Most people think of parent-teacher conferences as occasions wholly dedicated to the assessment and evaluation of the student – a kind of student performance review focused on how the child is doing in school, akin to performance appraisals done annually for employees in organizations. But what's really going on beneath the surface is an assessment and evaluation of one another.

"Parents and teachers behave in a way suggesting that they are each treating the conference as an occasion for their own performance review – using the student's progress, or lack thereof, as a gauge of how the teacher is doing at his or her job of 'being a teacher' and how the parent is doing at his or her job of 'being a parent,'" Pillet-Shore says.

So parent and teacher face a dilemma: How do they each display that they are "good" at their jobs given that they perform much of those jobs outside of direct observation by one another?

The parents' solution may surprise many. Instead of defending their children, parents are consistently critical about their children when talking with teachers, often delivering unsolicited, negative information about them.

"Parents use their criticisms as vehicles for accomplishing several goals, including showing that they already know about their children's potential or actual troubles, displaying that they are fair appraisers of their own children, willing and able to detect and articulate their flaws, and reporting on their own efforts to improve or remedy their children's faults, shortcomings or problems," Pillet-Shore says.

As the researcher explains, parents' criticisms of their own children provide them the opportunity to display to teachers what kind of parent they are – alert, attentive, observant, responsive and actively involved in helping their children improve – key qualifications for claiming one's status as a "good parent."

"In short, during parent-teacher conferences, parents manifest a pervasive concern to show teachers, 'I'm a good parent,' " Pillet-Shore says.

For their part, teachers regularly work to encourage parents to be first to articulate critical assessments of the student, such as by asking for the parent's perspective, observations, questions, and/or concerns about the student's progress.

"Doing this makes the teacher's job easier. Allowing parents the opportunity to articulate potential/actual student troubles first enables teachers to subsequently agree with and build upon what the parent has already said. And doing this also makes the parent's job easier, since a fundamental way to present oneself as a 'good parent' is to display that one already knows about any problematic aspects of the student/child's academic performance or behavior," Pillet-Shore says.

Contrary to the common perception that teachers are overly critical of students, solely focused on

identifying and reporting their troubles and problems, the researcher has found that overwhelmingly and throughout the duration of the parent-teacher conference, teachers instead work to keep talk about students relatively positive and optimistic.

For example, teachers often respond to parents' criticisms of students by providing face-saving accounts on students' behalf (e.g. "That's not atypical of kids"; "For a 12-year-old boy, normal is pretty flaky.")

Teachers also work to create and maintain a favorable stance toward students by, for example, delineating what the student "knows" versus what the student "shows she knows," and promising a natural resolution of the current trouble.

"It is the teacher who consistently works to end the parent-teacher conference interaction on a positive note, delivering future-oriented, favorable or optimistic comments about the student," Pillet-Shore says.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.

PHOTO
Danielle Pillet-Shore, assistant professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire
http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Pillet_Shore.jpg

-30-

Media Contact: Lori Wright | 603-862-0574 | UNH Media Relations

Researcher Contact: Danielle Pillet-Shore | 603-862-2362 | Department of Communication