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Parent-teacher conferences in a secondary school:
A case study

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Abstract

The authors report on the findings of a case study of parent-teacher conferences in a secondary school in Hong Kong. They explored the parents' and teachers' perspectives of parent-teacher conferences by interviewing parents and teachers. They noted that parent-teacher conferences were sources of stress for teachers and embarrassment for parents. Parent-teacher conferences were useful for problem-clarification. The building of mutual trust was the most important conferencing skill. They drew some practical guidelines which are useful for teachers of the case school but be applicable beyond the Hong Kong setting.

Introduction

Working with parents whose children have adjustment difficulties in schools, teachers may conduct parent-teacher conferences, the results of which are often better home-school collaboration in helping the children. One limitation of conducting parent-teacher conference, however, is that the lack of training for many teachers in interviewing and consultation skills may ultimately impede the children's progress at schools(Cunningham & Davis, 1985).

In Hong Kong, there is a real need for teachers to develop better parent-teacher conference practices. It has been found that interviewing individual parents is the most common activity of home-school contact but the outcomes of parent- teacher conferences are not satisfactory (Hong Kong University Research Team, 1994). In broader terms, the parent-teacher conference is kind of home-school collaboration. It is a form of face-to-face contact between a parent and his/her child's teacher at an individual level (Atkin & Bastiani, 1988). The main concern of the conference participants is the child (Bastiani, 1989). For the teachers, parent-teacher conferences are a kind of consultation with parents. It is often referred as 'ad hoc contact and special appointments with parents to discuss children's problematic behaviour'(Hong Kong Education Department, 1988).

There were few studies on parent-teacher conferences. Their focus was mainly on one or two of the following areas: the parent-teacher relationship, the conference structure or the key to success of the conference (Gutloff, 1995; Kurtz, 1988; Reipe, 1990; Smith, 1997; Swiderek, 1997). However, the common problem to these studies is the lack of a comprehensive consideration from both the teachers and the parents

perspectives.

The teachers' and parents' perceptions on teacher-parent conferences have been an under-investigated aspects of teacher-parent conferences. Yet, when relating to teacher parent collaboration issues, the participants' perceptions are of critical importance. Among several models on home-school cooperation and consultation, the Brown et al. (1994) model has particular relevance for the purpose of study of participants' perceptions as it describes a common core of activities and issues in the stages of the consultation for the clients and consultants. The stages include initiation of a consulting relationship, assessment, problem definition, goal setting, intervention strategy selection, implementation, evaluation, follow-up and termination. One key principle in the model is that the client and consultant are equal partners in the consultation process.

This article reports some of the findings of a case study of teacher-parent conferences in a secondary school in Hong Kong. It focuses upon teachers' and parents' perspectives on the meanings of the parent-teacher case conferences, and on factors that make the parent-teacher conference satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

Method

Data were collected over a six-month period in the academic year 1998-1999. Semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews were held with five parents and five teachers. Interview data were supplemented by informal observations made before, during and after teacher-parent conferences. Extensive field notes were made during the observations. The data were analyzed followed the procedures of data reduction,

data display, interpretation and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Source of stress for teachers and embarrassment for parents

Both parent and teacher informants had negative views toward the parent-teacher conferences, which substantiated the findings made in a study in Hong Kong (HKU Research Team, 1994). This is particularly evidenced among the teachers, especially the inexperienced ones and those with many students in their class, they found parent teacher conferences very stressful. One young teacher commented honestly, *'I even regarded it as a burden I was reluctant to shoulder.'* The parents revealed that they had negative image of the problem-oriented nature of home-school contacts. One father explained the source of the embarrassment, *'being invited to school, other people may think that your child must have countless problems.'*

Useful for problem clarification

On the other hand, it was a surprise that both parent and teacher informants found the parent-teacher case conference useful. The finding is consistent with study in a high school in Leicester (Irving, 1997). The home-school interaction could fill their information gap about the child. It helped both teachers and parents define the problem of the child and develop the appropriate intervention based on the information shared in the case conference. One parent valued highly of the meeting, *'I can know my son's performance in school. The situations in school and at home are totally different.'*

Mutual trust as most important

This finding supported the idea that the mutual trust was vital for parents and teachers to work in partnership. The parent's trust towards the teacher was built on the regular home-school contacts. One mother commented, *'I have met the teachers for several times. Now it seems that we are close friends.'* The 'close friends' showed that she trusted the teachers. In addition, good student-teacher relationships might be helpful to the parent-teacher relationships. A parent informant appreciated a teacher who was in good terms with her son, *'I respect his last year deputy class teacher although I haven't met him before. He always taught him to solve the problems in his free time since my son was extremely weak in Mathematics.'*

Active listening

Teachers' active listening skills were very useful in parent-teacher conferences. Teachers, in some cases, listened to the parents' experiences with acceptance attitude and let them expressed their emotions. A teacher informant recalled her experience, *'a mother kept on talking about her unpleasant experience in the family and between her husband and herself. I listen to her story patiently and just let her vent out her emotion.'* This was the conferencing skill useful to meeting parents who might feel frustrated with their children.

Parents politeness

Parents might have a different opinion on problem definition and expectation on intervention. However, the parents tended to adopt a mouth-shut strategy and refused to express their opinion openly. This might be due to the Chinese parents' politeness

(Gao et al., 1996) or because parents worried that their children might be negatively affected. One mother showed her strategy of facing disagreement, *'during the meeting, I didn't say anything against the school's advice. I pretended to be cooperative with the school. But, after the conferences, I go to see the school social worker and tell her my disagreement to the school's advice.'*

Inadequate preparation

In the case school, there were no guideline on what and how teachers did in the case conferences with parents. The practices of the conferences, described by both parent and teacher informants, included the initiation of a consulting relationship, assessment, problem definition, intervention strategy selection, implementation, evaluation and follow-up. Both teachers and parents wanted to be better prepared for the conference. Two important themes emerged. First, the teachers needed to have psychological preparation for the conferences, and collect information about the child. The teachers would like to have the time to consult other subject teachers and to review the child's record file. This could strengthen the confidence of the teachers in meeting the parents. Second, both teachers and parents would like to be more goal-oriented. The contract making could ensure the higher chance of implementing the intervention plan agreed in the case conferences.

Inadequate involvement of students

In the case school, the students were not involved in the parent-teacher conferences. This could be explained by the cultural belief that the Chinese children were not requested to show their 'spoken voice' but expected to be 'listening' because the spoken voice equaled seniority, authority, experience, knowledge and expertise in the

Chinese community (Gao et al., 1996: 285). Therefore, the children, the target of the conferences between parents and teachers, were expected to play a passive role in the conferences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has reported some of the findings of a limited case study undertaken in one secondary school in Hong Kong. It provided some insights on parent-teacher conferences. They are sources of stress for the teachers and embarrassment for the parents. It is useful for problem-clarification. Building mutual trust and active listening are useful skills for the conferences. Politeness, inadequate preparation and inadequate student involvement are factors that limit the usefulness of parent-teacher conferences.

Based on the eclectic family consultation model (Brown et.al., 1994), the authors developed some guidelines in parent-teacher conferences for teachers:

- Before the parent-teacher case conference, the teacher prepares himself/herself psychologically – think of the strengths of the child in the case and any possible topics in the case conference. He/she also collects relevant information about the child and the case – the child’s academic and behavioral performance at school, and brief family background – through the student’s record card and interviews with the student.
- In the initiation stage of consulting relationship, the teacher begins with a proper greeting to the parent and small talk. The general purpose of the case conference is explained at this stage. The teacher then discusses with the parent the role of each participant in the process of helping the child.
- In the assessment stage, the teacher begins in a positive manner by appreciating the strengths of the child. The parent is asked to talk about the performance of

the child at home. When reporting the child's adjustment in school to the parent (when possible, the child can be invited to sit in), the teacher stresses that the child's strengths. This can restore the child's worth in the parent and the self-confidence of the parent.

- Then the problem of the child is defined through the discussion between the parent and the teacher. The parent is encouraged to talk how he/she perceives the problem of his/her child.
- In the stages of goal setting and intervention strategy selection, the teacher helps the parent (and the child, whenever possible) set the goal and the plan for improvement. The expectation and opinion of the parent is listened to because the improvement of the child can be achieved through the home-school cooperation.
- A verbal contract between the teacher and the parent is made with the presence of the child concerned to ensure the improvement plan can be implemented in school and at home.
- The teacher and the parent both are responsible to keep on evaluating the implementation of the improvement plan.
- The teacher maintains encouraging attitudes and listen actively to the parents throughout subsequent contact with parents.

In regard to the improvement of home-school collaboration, the findings of his case study suggest that school-based training workshops in interviewing skills and the eclectic model of family consultation are of high priority.

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