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Parent-Teacher Communication: Best Practices for First-Year Teachers

Catherine Tuholski
Regis University

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PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION:
BEST PRACTICES FOR FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS

by

Catherine Tuholski

A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Education

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ABSTRACT

Best Practices of Parent-Teacher Communication for First-Year Teachers

The purpose of this project was to develop a handbook containing the best practices in parent-teacher communication for first-year teachers (or any other person seeking further knowledge on this subject). According to The MetLife Survey of The American Teacher (2004-2005), new teachers reported the greatest challenge they face is communicating with parents. They also included it was the area in which they were the least prepared. The literature review covers research dating back nearly 30 years on practices veteran teachers and practitioners used for improving parent-teacher communication. The content of the handbook covers (a) the initial meeting; (b) building relationships; (c) encouraging on-going communication; (d) ways of communicating; (e) parent-teacher conferences; and (f) encountering difficult parents.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

After the academic practice of observing classrooms and student teaching, newly certified teachers are issued a classroom of their own. Multiple facets of instructional practice and related tasks, such as parent communication, are thus delegated to the novice teacher. Some first-year teachers may be invigorated by fresh new territories and consider it a challenge, yet others may be fearful and anxious in newfound unfamiliar surroundings. By reviewing the principles and practices in parent-teacher communication, new teachers (or any other person seeking further knowledge on this particular subject) may be able to learn how to build respectful relationships and how to positively collaborate in various circumstances, even during the unfortunate times when parents can be difficult. Although communicating with parents who do not speak English is also an important aspect regarding parent-teacher communication, this issue is not addressed in this particular project.

Statement of the Problem

During the student teaching process, generally, the cooperating instructor guides, assists, and/or intervenes (only if necessary), thereby allowing the student teacher to become familiar with developing his/her own techniques and style. Unfortunately, experience and skills in parent communication may be minimal, therefore not fully acquired. Consequently, frustration and anxiety may develop with respect to this important aspect of the teacher's role.

Even if the student teacher may have had adequate opportunities to communicate with parents, there are always areas that require improvement in parent-teacher communication. Some parents may perceive the interaction to be intimidating and condescending, while some educators may regard it as burdensome and time consuming. Bridging the gap has been a problem which has existed for years and continues to persist; it can be especially problematic for first-year teachers. It is essential for teachers to understand the reasons for frustration and anxiety related to communication with parents, and to learn and implement the best practices for acquiring better parent-teacher communication.

Background of the Problem

There is no dispute that parent-teacher communication, or the lack thereof, has been well researched. Theories date back for decades concerning a variety of the interrelationship issues. Nearly 30 years ago, Powell (1978) conducted a study that indicated there were specific predictors for teachers as well as parents which correlated communication frequency and/or the variety of topics discussed. This information still remains relevant today. Philosophers, administrators, veteran educators, and practitioners have also published reports documenting communication issues and offering advice for improving the relationships between home and school.

Furthermore, research is moderately vast in the area of first-year teachers and communication with parents. Studies indicate there are multiple obstacles that first-year teachers endure. However, in *The MetLife Survey of The American Teacher* (2004-2005), new teachers reported the biggest challenge they faced as a teacher was communication and involvement of parents. Additionally, there was a strong agreement that effective

teachers need to be able to positively interact with a student's parents. Other literature provides plentiful suggestions for applied strategies that have been successful when implemented in the daily curriculum. Positive parent-teacher communication is one aspect strongly proclaimed to be crucial in making the transition smoother from student teaching to managing a classroom in the new educator's initial year.

Purpose of the Project

Since parent-teacher communication is one of the issues typically on the forefront, first-year teachers would benefit by furthering their knowledge in this particular area. The purpose of this project was to develop a handbook containing the best practices in parent-teacher communication for first-year teachers. The handbook is designed to address effective applications for dealing in specific and/or various areas of parent-teacher communication. The content covers (a) the initial meeting, (b) building relationships, (c) encouraging on-going communication, (d) ways of communicating, (e) parent-teacher conferences, and (f) encountering difficult parents.

Chapter Summary

Research has indicated the potential for problematic relationships between teachers and parents, thereby demonstrating the need for further education and training for first year teachers. When parents and teachers feel comfortable communicating with one another, they can develop a deeper understanding in the importance and dependency of their relationship. Additionally, it is believed that not only can first-year teachers benefit by being more aware of the issues in parent-teacher communications, but they can acquire the skills necessary to be able to effectively interact with a student's family.

In Chapter 2, the author presents a review of literature related to the first-year teacher and the area of parent-teacher communication. In Chapter 3, the author describes the design of the handbook of best practices for effective parent-teacher communication.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this project was to design a handbook of the best communication practices for first-year teachers with regard to effectively interacting with parents. *The MetLife Survey of The American Teacher* (2004-2005) reported that 30 to 50 % of new teachers left the profession within the first 5 years, and were most likely to report that the biggest challenge that they faced as a teacher was communicating with and involving parents.

Daugherty (2003) recommended that university courses provide specific strategies to involve parent communication in the educational process. However, despite what pre-service teachers have been taught or learned in their education program, teaching and how it impacts a teacher on a personal level, takes on new significance when the responsibilities of school life become the daily concern of the emerging professional (Loughran, Brown, & Doecke, 2001). Herbert and Worthy (2001) reported that a number of relative consistencies characterizing the first year of teaching emerged from the literature:

With a few exceptions, it was described in a negative manner, using terms such as frustration, anxiety, isolation, and self doubt. Teaching initiates, expected to assume the same responsibilities as veterans, are too often given difficult workloads and provided little formal assistance. Many begin this transition filled with uncertainty, find their jobs more challenging than anticipated, and rethink career choice. (p. 898)

The school relationship that showed the most need for improvement was the teacher-parent relationship, which could explain why it was during the first year of

teaching that new teachers felt the least prepared to engage families in supporting their children's education (MetLife, 2004-2005). Filled with feelings of insecurity and inadequacy, new teachers were unsure of whom to approach about their problems; they did not ask for help, for to do so would be to admit failure (Herbert & Worthy, 2001).

First-Year Teacher and Parent Communication

In a nationwide study of 800 new teachers, *The MetLife Survey of The American Teacher* (2004-2005) announced, "eight in ten new teachers (81%) strongly agreed that effective teachers needed to be able to work well with their students' parents, and virtually all (98%) strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement" (p.1). The survey also indicated that 32% of the new teachers considered engaging and working with parents as their greatest challenge and as the area they were the least prepared to manage during their first year. Additionally, more than half reported to be the least satisfied with their relationship with their students' parents. Only 25% described the relationship as very satisfying and 20% describe it as very or somewhat unsatisfying. The dissatisfaction with these interactions suggested that a gap existed between the level of parental involvement that new teachers desire and the parental participation that they observe in their children's education.

The common point reported by teachers was that the student and the parent's involvement in their child's education should take place in both the home and the school. Nine in 10 new teachers contended that involving parents in their children's education was a priority at their school. However, it was asserted that parental participation was not common despite the fact new teachers said that school staff asked parents to be involved in these activities. "Among those new teachers who have asked parents to do

these activities, hardly more than half said that all or most of the parents participate" (MetLife, 2004-2005, p.34). The results showed a significant difference between: a) when teachers or the school asked parents to participate as a matter of course, and not just in special circumstances, and b) the parental compliance of the general request. (Note: although the base number of teachers surveyed were different, the percentages were representative of the general population.

	A	B
	n=800	n=432
Parent-Teacher conferences	(97%)	(56%)
Participate in school fund-raising activities	(88%)	(21%)
Make sure homework is done	(87%)	(27%)
Involve children in educational activities at home	(86%)	(27%)
Go on field trips	(81%)	(14%)

Schweiker-Marra (2000) claimed teacher attitude may be responsible for the lack of participation, stating that, although teachers, parents, and even administrators may influence the quality of home-school relationships, teachers are often perceived as having the main responsibility for communication.

Additionally, in their perception of their role as communicator, it was reported to occur in only two ways—as a provider of information on a student's grades, and a reporter of a student's behavior. Due to these two negative reasons, the teachers viewed their role in a negative framework, and the task of communicator was unpleasant and seen as a hurdle to overcome, thereby creating a negative attitude when approaching parent communication (Schweiker-Marra, 2000).

Maxwell and Thomas (1991, as cited in Schweiker-Marra, 2000) indicated the causes for teacher resistance to actively pursuing parent-teacher communication may have been related to teacher attitudes or "norms." They defined norms as the "should's,

ought's, do's, and do not's" within the school's culture, which are based on the beliefs and values of the faculty, and which determines their behavior. Fortunately, it appears that their attitudes have changed.

Adjustments in Attitude

In a 2-year case study, Schweiker-Marra (2000) researched whether parent-teacher communication could be improved in spite of the teacher's initial negative attitude about communicating with parents. The researcher's goals were to devise methods to improve communication and to observe the effects the role of the teacher norms may have had on making the change. Parents were interviewed three different times during the study to evaluate the performance of the teachers and their school. (Note: although the study began with a sample size of 487 parents, due to the length of the research and other outside factors, it concluded with 250 parents.) Thirty-five veteran teachers were also interviewed throughout the study.

The new strategies implemented were (a) a monthly school newspaper in which students reported classroom activities as well as upcoming events; (b) a parent hotline for parents that could call for concerns, questions, or homework issues that needed immediate attention; (c) a web page for current school and classroom information and email communication; (d) "Good News" postcards in which yearbook staff compiled photos of catching students in the act of being good; (e) teachers encouraging parent volunteers to assist with classroom necessities; (f) twice yearly "Open House" for parents to see what students were doing; and (g) held special events including concerts, festivals, or holiday programs (Schweiker-Marra, 2000).

Initially, parents did not respond favorably to the communication they were receiving, with the exception of homework information and feeling respected by the school staff; however, after the implementation of the strategies their responses for all issues increased significantly. By the end of Schweiker-Marra's (2000) study, (a) 66% more parents reported that their teacher encourages feedback from me about the quality of the school programs; (b) 51% more felt the teacher does a good job of informing them about what is being taught in their child's classroom; (c) 46% more reported the teacher does a good job of letting them know when their child does something well; (d) 60% more felt the teacher does a good job of informing about ways they can help out in school; (e) 63% more reported the teacher does a good job of letting them know about meetings and special events; (f) 10% more felt the teacher gives them the information they need to supervise their child's homework; and (g) 33% more reported that school personnel showed respect for their opinion even if they did not agree with them.

As parents responded positively to the information about what the teachers were doing in their classrooms, teacher attitudes toward their role as communicator became more positive. Also, during the initial meetings, teachers seldom mentioned relating positive information about the student except indirectly during parent-teacher conferences. Although in the beginning of the study there were some minor complaints about the time restraints and extra work, eventually, the adjustments became easier. It was suggested that, because teacher attitudes grew to be more positive in the latter part of the study, so did the outlook on the new changes (Schweiker-Marra, 2000).

Establishing Relationships

There is one piece of advice to remember: It *always* pays to establish a relationship with parents from day one—frequent, positive communication with parents is the key to helping the child get the best education possible (Howe, 2004). In earlier research, Powell (1978) alleged, the more developed the relationship between parent and teacher, the stronger the correlation was between frequency (how often) and diversity (what information was discussed). The purpose of Powell's exploratory study, which consisted of 212 parents, 89 teachers, and 12 preschool programs, was to identify parent and teacher variables that were predictive of parent-teacher communication frequency and content.

Although Powell's study specifically targeted parents and teachers of preschoolers, when compared to earlier studies, Powell felt the results could be generalized to other grade levels. The results suggested that 1) an increase in parent-teacher interaction corresponded to an increase in the content of discussions, and that 2) changes in one aspect of communication (i.e., content) may have effected changes in the other (i.e., frequency). In fact, the data suggested that increases in frequency would broaden the multifariousness of communication (Powell, 1978).

One of the most critical attributes in establishing relationships is mutual respect. MetLife (2004-2005) professed nearly 9 in 10 new teachers reported that teachers and parents at their school respected one another, which was considered to be an important component of the teacher-parent relationship. According to Mandel (2003), the more parents feel involved in the classroom program, the more supportive they will be of the classroom curriculum. Practitioners insist that the process of establishing relationships

should begin even before the first day of school (Nathan, 1995; Christopher, 1996; Swick, 2003; Mandel, 2003).

Before School Begins

Nathan (1995) encouraged first-year teachers to visit the school at least once before beginning their teaching position for two reasons: to become familiar with a strange building, and to provide an opportunity to gather some of the information needed. In order for teachers to contact parents prior to the start of the school year, Christopher (1996) suggested attaining a list of the students' contact information; however, this is only possible if the child attended the school in the previous year. Additionally, some teachers found it invaluable to survey parents and families prior to the year about their concerns, interests, and issues related to all facets of the school (Swick, 2003; Mandel, 2003; Christopher, 1996).

Postcards or informative letters are personal ways for teachers to indirectly communicate with parents, which also allows parents to be involved in the classroom, even when the students are not physically there. Some of the recommended content of letters might include, but not be limited to: (a) an introduction; (b) ideas on how to help children over the summer in math, reading, and writing; (c) items needed for the next grade; (d) clothing needed for recess; (e) how parents can become involved in the classroom; (f) expectations for the upcoming year; (g) brief overview or highlights of curriculum; and (h) classroom policies. Postcards should be brief and used to relay quick information for the End-of-the Summer Picnic and/ or information on Orientation Night (Christopher, 1996)

Mandel (2003) and Christopher (1996) proposed that home visits, when appropriate, and telephone calls are also effective ways that parents can initiate communication. In both means of communication, discretion needs to apply. Christopher suggested proper guidelines for telephone calls:

1. Depending on the grade level taught, the teachers' objective for contact will be different. A tenth-grade teacher would find an orientation night more relevant, whereas a first-grade teacher needs to develop a different rapport with parents due to the inability of students to communicate effectively.
2. Keep the contact simple and positive. It is appropriate for a teacher to let parents know their feelings and opinions, but they do not or should not need to go overboard or into too much detail.
3. Not all parents will be willing to come to a school function. Some may be embarrassed because of their appearance, their financial status, and their own personal feelings regarding school. However, teachers should continue to inform parents. Personal invitations do make a difference.

Montgomery (2005) adds that teachers should remember to call parents in the evening instead of at work, unless it is an emergency. It is important for teachers to respect parent's nightly routine as well as teachers respecting their own. Each of the ideas not only facilitates the willingness for interpersonal relationships, but also sends the message to parents that the teacher is interested in their involvement.

First Meeting

Parent conferences need to begin on the school's opening day, not at formal parent-teacher conference time (Mandel, 2003). Notes home, quick telephone calls, or a

welcome letter can open the gates of indirect communication from the start. However, according to Nathan (1995), the first physical parents' meeting is likely to occur when school has only been in session for a few weeks. If new teachers make a poor impression at this time, it could lead to a group of parents questioning their competence as a teacher. This type of thing escalates, and the teacher could find himself with the kind of reputation he would prefer to avoid. The teacher's appearance should be professional, business dress rather than casual dress, and the physical environment of the classroom should be bright and welcoming. Having the students involved in their classroom open house is another effective way to welcome parents into the classroom. Torreano (2000) listed six steps for student participation:

1. Show your parents where your desk is.
2. Show your parents all the textbooks.
3. Show your parents the chart on the wall that has our daily specials.
4. Introduce the teacher to your parents.
5. Show your parents the gym, library, cafeteria, and the nurse's office.
6. Enjoy some refreshments. (p. 15)

DePaul (2005) states that teachers should teach parents about what they can do to support their children's education. It is joint planning, shared learning, and regular conferencing which empower the total parent-teacher, family-school learning system (Swick, 2003). Teachers need to reflect positive attitudes that create encouragement for parent communication by simply realizing that most parents like being closer to them, especially when the discussion involves their child (Swick). Since parents and teachers communicate more frequently at the beginning of their partnership, even greater attention

needs to be applied to sustain the level of communication which will characterize the relationship in later stages of the parent-teacher relationship (Powell, 1978).

Multiple Means of Communication

There are numerous ways in which schools can keep parents involved in their children's education while respecting the fact that many of them are unable or unwilling to physically come to the school (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001). Parent-teacher partnerships are strongly influenced by a 'silent world' of nonverbal communication, and in this silence, actions speak louder than our words (Swick, 2003). Many of the practitioners have developed various ways for teachers to inform parents of the events of the classroom. Swick, Mandel (2003), Christopher (1996), Hornby (2000), affirmed that a weekly newsletter is one of the best means to effectively communicate activities, upcoming events, homework assignments and strategies, and other educational information. Other practices included: (a) create a suggestion box; (b) create a Thursday folder for each student; (c) create a bulletin board that features particular students and their families and cultures, and/or (d) put together a parent bookshelf. Christopher (1996) also attested that classrooms or schools should develop ways to inform which would include: (a) Happy Calls; (b) School Calendar; (c) Homework Hotline; (d) Lesson Line; (e) Student Information Night; and (f) Parent/Student Signature Concerning Upcoming Assignments.

Classroom Involvement

Parents can be invited to participate in the classroom either directly or indirectly, whichever is the most convenient. Christopher (1996) declared there are a variety of tasks in which parents can be involved and communication can grow. Some examples are: (a)

cooking projects; (b) sewing projects; (c) volunteering; (d) Winter Picnic; (e) Tea Party; (f) Parent Homework; (g) Year-end fling; (h) Coat of Arms; (i) All-about-me books; (j) Family Background; (k) Child of the Week; (l) Multiplication Mania; (m) Science projects/ Science fairs; (n) Talent Show; and (o) Interactive Homework Assignments. Various schools have designed and developed many other creative practices to include and involve parent participation. However, in order to produce the most effective relationship with parents, the invitation needs to go beyond the classroom.

School-wide Involvement

According to Schweiker-Marra (2000) and The MetLife Survey of The American Teacher (2004-2005), educational success is far more attainable when not only parents and teachers have a strong relationship, but when the wider school is part of it as well. Christopher (1996) contended that schools can play a huge part in communicating with parents in a multitude of ways: (a) Back-to-school night; (b) National Education Week; (c) Reaching New Parents; (d) Shared Decision Making; (e) Parent Resource Room; (f) Community-Parent Education; (g) Open House; (h) Parents as Reading Partners (PARP); (i) Weekly or Monthly Family Nights; (j) Doughnuts for Dads and Muffins for Moms Program; (k) Parent/Teacher Organization and Parent/Teacher Association; and (l) Child Placement for Following Year.

Communication is the critical factor in relation to parent-teacher and family/school/community partnerships (Swick, 2003). "When children know that you are communicating with their parents, it sweetens the community of encouragement necessary for those children to conduct business and therefore the potential is there to uplift the subsequent impetus to achieve" (Brooks, 2005, p. 54).

Parent-Teacher Conferences

As quoted in Swick (2003), it is essential for trust building to have authentic, meaningful, and growth-promoting communication.

It is amazing what an incredible thing trust is. If we trust someone, he or she can tell us almost anything and we will believe him/her. By the same token, if we do not trust someone, he or she can tell us almost anything and there is not much chance we will believe him/her. The same thing is true regarding our relationship with the parents of the students in our classes. If we can establish trust with them, they will allow us great discretion in decisions that we make. However, if they do not trust us, then they inspect everything we do with a high-powered microscope. (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001, p. 41)

Holmes (2003) related that parent conferences can be daunting, especially if the teacher did not get a chance to attend one during academic training; but with a little preparation, the event should present no problems. She suggested the teacher prepare for the night by having pupils' books marked up to date, and records of attendance, homework, general participation in class, etc. at hand. Montgomery (2005) included that teachers also need to present parents with specific examples of their child's behavior ahead of time to give them the opportunity to talk to their child as well as think of possible explanations or concerns to add at the meeting.

Often, some parents may be on the defensive when teachers are speaking with them about their child. Therefore, Montgomery (2005) and Holmes (2003) believed it is equally significant to prepare parents for agenda items that will be discussed. This will reduce the chance for misunderstanding. With proper notification, this practice increases the likelihood the discussion will go smoothly. Additionally, it is very important for the dynamics of the communication that the teacher takes adequate time to evaluate his own biases and attitudes toward individuals and remain nonjudgmental throughout the meeting's entirety. For the purpose of better awareness and preparation, Holmes included

several suggestions: (a) talk to colleagues about who is coming to make sure the teacher will not be meeting any parents known to be difficult or aggressive, either towards staff members (relatively rare) or their children; (b) be certain of who is coming to the conferences and what their relationship is to the child, older siblings in some cases, and occasionally divorced or separated parents may want two appointments; (c) be prepared for a long evening—have plenty of sustenance, especially if there will not be time to get home before the evening begins; and (d) have a name card on the table or desk.

Once the meeting has begun, Holmes (2003) advised teachers: (a) to stand up to greet parents; (b) do not use educational jargon; (c) keep in mind that these evenings may be daunting for parents as well; (d) let parents know exactly what is expected of their child; (e) focus on the progress, or improvement, the child has made; (f) show parents evidence of the student's achievement; (g) record what happens at each interview, have a simple form ready; (h) do not take on extra consultations that have not been scheduled; (i) be professional when other staff or students are being discussed; (j) aim to give advice on how achievement can be improved; (k) do not get drawn into making predications about the child's future performance; (l) focus on the task immediately at hand; (m) take water or soda breaks whenever the time needed; (n) if there is spare time, ask a colleague to observe him or her in action; (o) and do not worry if things do not go according to plan.

Wilford (2004) claimed a face-to-face meeting provides the opportunity to put things into perspective and to explain decisions, grades that have been given, and the teacher's basic educational philosophy. It also allows parents to share their concerns and to ask questions. Wilford contended that the teacher must remember, more often than not,

the parent is an ally not an enemy. She insisted it is always best to begin with a positive comment and to continue using them for person qualities. Whitaker and Fiore (2001) defined praise as: (a) *authentic*—to praise people for something genuine, something that is true; (b) *specific*—to recognize positive efforts with specific recognition; (c) *immediate*—to recognize positive efforts and contributions in a timely manner; (d) *clean*—to compliment without a "but" and because the effort is authentic; and (e) *private*—to cultivate positive relations privately and personally.

The more comfortable teachers can become with using effective strategies like positive praise, the more confidence they will have in talking with parents. Attention then can be given to verbal and nonverbal communication of the parent. For example, Montgomery (2005) warned to watch for signs of confusion and make sure parents fully understand what has been said. If there are signs of confusion, backtrack and make sure the parent understands the message. She believes it is important to check for understanding before the meeting is over to make sure parents and the teacher agree on the outcome. Nathan (1995) concluded, always try to end a meeting with parents on a positive note, because this helps build up the relationship with them (p. 179).

Difficult Communication

"As professionals, we have perhaps frequently written such an innocent note not knowing that it was a signal to open fire" (Montgomery, 2005, p. 50). Hornby (2000) stated that, since parents, like teachers, have a range of personalities, some will be easy to work with, and others will be more difficult. There will always be conflict caused by a small minority of parents. In fact, a certain amount of conflict is to be expected when parents and teachers work together, because they have different perspectives. As

professionals, teachers must be aware of possible home tensions and become proficient at communicating without harm (Montgomery). Although any expected difficulties are outweighed by the potential benefits, teachers must continue to make an effort to use good communication skills so that parents see them as approachable (Hornby).

Encounters

Dealing with difficult parents first requires that the teacher deal with himself (Whitaker & Fiore, 2001). Nathan stated if a parent wants to voice dissatisfaction, the teacher will naturally be on the defensive. Some ploys that have been ineffectively used are (a) to blame someone else (i.e., the child, inadequate resources, the government, etc.); (b) to use technical language or jargon, or (c) to take a stance (i.e., teacher knows best). He confirmed that although such techniques as these may get the parents off the teacher's back for the time being, they are unlikely to work as long-term solutions because they do not address the problem. Nathan recommended the best thing to do is to remain as calm as possible and try to find out what the main issue really is. If an outburst occurs, make it clear that this is not the place for a prolonged discussion and arrange a follow-up meeting which gives the teacher time to prepare and to have someone experienced nearby if necessary (Nathan, 1995). Montgomery (2005) claimed that the teacher should not take the explosion personally and allow time for the parent to cool off and regain composure.

Quoting an old deodorant campaign, Whitaker and Fiore (2001) stated, it is important that, when dealing with a difficult parent, the teacher should "never let 'em see you sweat." This is to say that, as long as the teacher appears confident and self-assured, even the most difficult parent's anger will be somewhat diffused. As soon as body language indicates that the teacher is unnerved, the offensive onslaught of a difficult

parent may become pronounced. Other suggested ways for the teacher to diffuse an angry parent are: (a) to lower the voice; (b) increase movement; (c) close the physical gap between the teacher and the parent; and (d) to look the parent straight in the eye.

According to Howe (2004), everybody passes judgment, has preconceived notions, and is inexperienced to varying degrees about what life is like for someone else. With this knowledge and appreciation, teachers can learn and apply the best practices found to be effective ways of communicating with parents.

Chapter Summary

Whitaker and Fiore (2001) professed, everybody is concerned with making schools work, wants high-quality education for children, and is forever concerned with school improvement. Due to this, the many variables that affect school improvement are important. Highly critical among these variables are the parents. Ask teachers about the best part of their job, and most will say how much they love working with kids. Ask them the most demanding part, and they will say dealing with parents (Gibbs, et al, 2005). Whitaker and Fiore (2001) addressed the issue:

What is needed is an understanding of today's parents, a realization that many of them do not feel that they possess the resources to be actively involved in their children's education, a commitment to enable their involvement, and the strategies available for dealing with them even when they seem to be so difficult. (p. 20)

Educators also believe in the importance of connecting with and engaging parents in their child's education process (MetLife, 2004-2005). Brooks (2005) states that "in the contemporary period, teachers cannot be teaching a child fruitfully unless they are communicating with the parents" (p. 54).

Research has consistently indicated the need for improvement in effective parent-teacher communication. The Internet contains a wealth of vast information of "how-to's." Not only has parent-teacher communication been problematic for veteran teachers and practitioners, but it is also reported to be the greatest challenge for first-year teachers (MetLife).

As demonstrated in this literature review, there are multiple facets to the parent-teacher communication process, including possible problems for first-year teachers. To address teacher/parent communication, this author has designed a handbook of best practices for helping new teachers learn about and develop effective ways of communicating with parents. In Chapter 3, the method, target audience, goals, and procedures are discussed.

Chapter 3

METHOD

The purpose of this project was to develop a handbook containing the best practices in parent-teacher communication. Parent-teacher communication is an issue that has been well researched and is a frequent topic of educational discussions. In the MetLife Survey of The American Teacher (2004-2005), new teachers reported to be the least prepared to engage in communication with parents, and they felt it was the greatest challenge faced in the first year. The literature review brought attention to the need to provide first-year teachers with the best practices of veteran teachers and practitioners in a handbook that can be quickly accessed prior to and during parent communication.

Target Audience

This project was designed to address effective parent communication practices, primarily, for first-year teachers. However, all teachers may find the information in the handbook helpful.

Goals and Procedures

The goal of this project was to provide an organized handbook which includes various recommended and previously applied practices for effectively communicating with parents. The content covers (a) ways of communicating, (b) suggestions prior to the school year, (c) the first physical contact, (d) on-going communication, (e) parent-teacher conferences, and (f) encountering difficult parents. The handbook is divided into specific sections that include simple, easy-to-read suggestions and practices.

Assessment

Three fellow teachers reviewed the handbook. Their suggestions and recommendations are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter Summary

A vast amount of research indicates there are, and have been, problematic relationships between teachers and parents, specifically pertaining to the area of communication. New teachers are struggling in these relationships. The handbook created for this project provides strategies for first-year teachers to be able to address some of the aspects for effectively communicating with parents. In Chapter 4, the author presents a handbook of best practices in parent-teacher communication.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

First-year teachers reported that communicating with parents is the greatest challenge they face (Metlife, 2004-2005). They also concluded it was the area in which they were the least prepared. The literature review covers research dating back nearly 30 years on practices veteran teachers and practitioners used for improving parent-teacher communication. The author believes that not only can first-year teachers benefit by being more aware of the issues in parent-teacher communications, but they can acquire the skills necessary to be able to effectively interact. This handbook of best practices in parent-teacher communication provides the necessary tools for first-year teachers to be able to address some of the aspects of effective communication with parents.

PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION:
A HANDBOOK OF BEST PRACTICES FOR FIRST-YEAR TEACHERS

by
Catherine Tuholski

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Section 1

MEANS OF COMMUNICATING

Ask teachers about the best part of their job, and most will say how much they love working with kids. Ask them the most demanding part, and they will say dealing with parents (Gibbs et al., 2005).

There are various ways to keep parents involved in their children's education and to inform them about events in the classroom and to effectively communicate activities, upcoming events, homework assignments and strategies, and other educational information. Although communicating with parents who do not speak English is also an important aspect regarding parent-teacher communication, this issue is not addressed in this particular project. In this section, the author lists the most common means of communication that occur throughout the year with brief definitions. In the remaining five sections, the author lists best practices for each topic as suggested by other veteran teachers and practitioners.

School-Year Communication

- Student Information Night—students and parents learn about expectations of the school and classroom, upcoming events, and homework strategies.
- Parent/Student Signature—acknowledges parents' receipt of contracts of expectations, assignments, homework, and assessments.
- Email—a school base Internet site allows parents, teachers, students, and administrators to communicate with each other.

- Parent Classroom Helpers—parent volunteers needed for duties in and out of the classroom.
- Letters Sent Home—keeps parents informed.
- Bulletin Board—features students and their families and cultures.
- Weekly or Monthly Newsletter—keeps parents informed of current and upcoming educational information.
- Telephone Contact—personal means of communication.
- School Website—for upcoming events and other school-wide educational information.
- Thursday Folders—send home graded work and encourage weekly communication.
- Open House—first face-to-face meeting of the year; also known as Back-to-School Night and is scheduled by the school calendar. Other classroom Open Houses can occur throughout the year and are scheduled by the classroom teacher.
- Parent-Teacher Conferences—generally occurs twice a year to discuss student progress, achievement, and ideas for improvement in achievement.
- Suggestion Box—a box containing suggestions from parents and students about the classroom.
- School Calendar—scheduled school days, holidays, and upcoming events.
- Homework Hotline—volunteer teacher assisting students with homework.
- Lesson Line—recorded telephone message that parents or students can call to receive daily lesson and homework assignments.

Section 2

BEFORE SCHOOL BEGINS

Practitioners insist that the process of establishing relationships should begin even before the first day of school (Nathan, 1995; Christopher, 1996; Swick, 2003; Mandel, 2003).

- Visit the School, become familiar with the building and classroom, gather information needed for preparation, and get a list of students' contact information, if possible.
- Survey parents about concerns, interests, and issues.
- Send informative emails, postcards or letters, and always be aware of proper guardianship.
- Go on home visits, when appropriate.

Letters

- Introductions.
- Provide ideas on how to help children over the summer.
- List items or supplies needed for the next school year.
- Recommend clothing needed for recess and P.E.
- Describe how parents can become involved in the classroom.
- Define expectations for the upcoming year.
- Give a brief overview or highlights of curriculum.
- Welcome parents and students.

Postcards

- Introductions.
- Be brief.
- Relay quick information, such as Orientation Night and/or Open House.
- Welcome parents and students.

Telephone Calls

- Introductions.
- Be respectful.
- Keep contact simple and positive.
- Inform parents of upcoming events, changes in schedules or to curriculum.
- Invite parents to come into the classroom.
- Call in the evening and at home, unless it is an emergency.
- Welcome parents and students.
- Document time and date of each of each phone call, attempt, and/or messages left regarding discussion for future reference.

Home Visits

- Check with school administration about appropriateness, guidelines, and policies of visit.
- Prearrange Time with parents.
- Be respectful.
- Keep contact simple and positive.
- Be specific about reason for visit.
- Welcome parents and students.

Emails

- Introductions.
- Be respectful.
- Keep contact simple and positive.
- Inform parents of upcoming events.
- Inform parents of any changes in schedules or to curriculum.
- Invite parents to come into the classroom.
- Be as concise as possible.
- Keep copies in a 'sent' file of all outgoing and responding email for future reference.

Section 3

FIRST MEETING

The first face-to-face parent-teacher meeting is likely to occur when school has only been in session for a few weeks. If new teachers make a poor impression at this time, it could lead to a group of parents questioning their competence as a teacher. This type of thing escalates, and teachers could find themselves with the kind of reputation they would prefer to avoid (Nathan, 1995).

Open House

- Introductions.
- Dress professionally, business dress rather than casual dress.
- Have student materials ready.
- Organize the classroom, bright and welcoming.
- Provide refreshments.
- Invite students to share with parents where their desk, textbooks, daily specials are located as well as where the gym, library, cafeteria, and nurse's office is located.
- Relay positive information about student and clearly display students' work
- Relay expectations; have copies of expectations prepared and have classroom expectations and guidelines prominently displayed in the classroom.
- Invite parents to participate in the classroom either directly or indirectly with calendar sign-up sheets for availability dates.

Section 4

ON-GOING COMMUNICATION

There is one piece of advice to remember: It *always* pays to establish a relationship with parents from day one; frequent, positive communication with parents is the key to helping the child get the best education possible (Howe, 2004). According to Mandel (2003), the more parents feel involved in the classroom program, the more supportive they will be of the classroom curriculum.

Establishing Relationships

- Communicate frequently.
- Be positive.
- Create an atmosphere of mutual respect.
- Be aware of cultural differences.
- Invite families to share cultures.
- Be approachable.
- Be sensitive.
- Be flexible.
- Be dependable.
- Ask parents for input and feedback.
- Make parents aware of upcoming special events, field trips, and any other volunteer needs.

Classroom Involvement

- Cooking projects, sewing projects, or donating supplies for projects and /or refreshments for celebrations/prizes for achievement.
- Parent volunteering, in and out-of-classroom,
- Winter Picnic
- Tea Party
- Coat of Arms or Family Background
- All-about-me books
- Child of the Week
- Multiplication Mania
- Science projects/ Science fairs
- Talent Show
- Year-end fling

School Involvement

- National Education Week
- Reaching New Parents
- Shared Decision Making
- Parent Resource Room
- Community-Parent Education
- Parents as Reading Partners (PARP)
- Weekly or Monthly Family Nights
- Doughnuts for Dads and Muffins for Moms Program

- Parent/Teacher Organization and Parent/Teacher Association
- Child Placement for the following school year.

Section 5

PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

Parent conferences can be daunting, especially if the teacher did not get a chance to attend one during academic training; but with a little preparation, the event should present no problems (Holmes, 2003).

Scheduled

- Send home reminder letters and/or emails, or make reminder calls.
- Be approachable.
- Be authentic.
- Be sincere.
- Be sensitive.
- Have a name card on the table or desk.
- Stay focused on the objective.
- Avoid blame.
- Be prepared.
- Have records of attendance, homework, and participation in classroom at hand.
- Give specific examples of student's work and behavior.
- Evaluate biases and attitudes prior to conference.
- Be certain *who* is coming and what the relationship is to the student.
- Add students' names next to parents; last names may be different.

- Talk with colleagues about any potential problems that may arise.
- Take adequate breaks.
- Avoid educational jargon.
- Focus on progress.
- Show evidence of student achievement.
- Give advice on how achievement can be improved.
- Avoid making predictions about students' future performance.
- Be professional if speaking of other students or faculty.
- Be an active listener.
- Validate parents' ideas and expectations.
- Avoid being judgmental.
- Use consistent eye contact.
- Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Encourage partnering in the students' education.
- Confirm parents' understanding of meeting.
- Do not take on extra consultations.
- Thank parents for coming in.
- Have a "sign in sheet" for parents to document name and child's name.
- Document any additional notes or reminders, such as "call in two weeks to discuss progress" on a separate sheet of paper for confidentiality purposes.

Unplanned

- Talk with colleagues about who is coming; this will allow the teacher to ask for administration to stand-by or participate if there is knowledge of an aggressive or difficult parent coming in.
- Prepare the parent for what will be discussed; this will allow the parent to speak with the child prior to the meeting.
- Print copies of meeting agenda with topics to be discussed; this allows the meeting to stay focused.
- Avoid being sidetracked.
- Be certain *who* is coming and what the relationship is to the student.
- Be approachable.
- Be authentic.
- Be sincere.
- Be sensitive.
- Stay focused on the objective.
- Avoid blame.
- Give specific examples of student's work and behavior.
- Evaluate biases and attitudes prior to conference.
- Give advice on how achievement can be improved.
- Avoid making predictions about student's future performance.
- Be professional if speaking of other students or faculty.
- Be an active listener.
- Validate parents' ideas and expectations.

- Avoid being judgmental.
- Use consistent eye contact.
- Be aware of verbal and non-verbal communication.
- Encourage partnering in the student's education.
- Confirm parents understanding of meeting.
- Thank parents for coming in.
- Document any additional notes or reminders, such as "call in two weeks to discuss progress" on a separate sheet of paper for confidentiality purposes.

Section 6

DIFFICULT PARENTS

There will always be conflict caused by a small minority of parents. In fact, a certain amount of conflict is to be expected when parents and teachers work together, because they have different perspectives (Hornby, 2000).

- Be an active listener.
- Be aware of home tensions.
- Remain as calm as possible.
- Evaluate and acknowledge own biases and attitudes.
- Focus on the student.
- Find out what the main issue really is.
- Avoid blame.
- Avoid educational jargon.
- Avoid taking a stance.
- Avoid becoming defensive.
- Be aware of body language.
- Prepare to have someone experienced nearby, if necessary.
- Do not allow abuse in any form.
- Avoid sweating or becoming unnerved.
- Be confident.
- Increase movement.

- Close the physical gap.
- Use consistent eye contact.
- Capitalize on parent's life experiences.
- Focus on parent's needs.
- Review action plan.
- Watch for confusion.
- If a parent does become angry, allow time for the parent to cool off and regain composure.
- If a disruption occurs, state clearly that the conference needs to take place at another time and with another colleague or administrator.

Remember, more often than not, a parent is an ally, not an enemy (Wilford 2004).

According to MetLife (2004-2005), educators believe in the importance of connecting with and engaging parents in their child's education process. It is crucial for parents and teachers to develop a positive and effective means of communication. Unless teachers are communicating with parents, they cannot be teaching a child optimally because when children know that you are communicating with their parents, it encourages good school performance and therefore increases the incentive and drive for achievement (Brooks 2005).

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Chapter Summary

By reviewing principles and best practices in parent-teacher communication, new teachers can learn how to build respectful relationships and how to positively collaborate in various circumstances, even during the unfortunate times when parents can be difficult. With this knowledge and appreciation, teachers can learn and apply best practices found to be effective in communicating with parents. Additionally, when parents and teachers are able to be more comfortable communicating with one another, there is a higher potential for increasing student achievement.

In Chapter 5, the author addresses the contributions and limitations of the project. Recommendations for further development and assessment feedback are also discussed.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Communicating with parents is reported to be one of the greatest issues that challenge teachers in education. There is a multitude of published reports documenting suggestions to improve parent-teacher communication. First-year teachers may have had minimal experience in interacting with parents; therefore, it can be especially problematic for them in their role as a new teacher. Understanding the reasons for frustration and anxiety in regard to parent communication and learning how to deal effectively with parents can assist the new teacher in acquiring the skills for positive and collaborative parent communication.

Contributions of the Handbook

Research indicates there are various obstacles that first-year teachers experience, with a strong emphasis on parent involvement and communication. Effective teachers need to be able to positively interact with parents, which is a crucial aspect in making the transition from student-teaching to managing a classroom in the new teacher's initial year. It is this author's belief that the handbook designed for this project will assist first-year teachers in understanding the reasons for effective communication and how and when to apply the suggested practices in order to become more confident and proficient in their interactions with parents.

There are a variety of published reports regarding parent-teacher communication, and due to the vast amount, it would be difficult to collect and compare if time were

limited, which for many first-year teachers this is the case. This author compiled the data and designed a handbook of the best practices recommended by researchers, veteran teachers, practitioners, administrators, and philosophers addressing effective applications for a variety of areas. The handbook is divided into six sections, which can be quickly accessed. Each section gives bulleted suggestions for improving parent-teacher communication. This allows the new teacher to become more familiar and comfortable with strategies that have been previously used, therefore can assist in acquiring the skills necessary to be able to positively interact and communication with parents.

Limitations of the Project

A limitation of this project was the author's lack of an opportunity to use the handbook prior to her first-year of teaching. Additionally, although the suggestions may appear to be appropriate in written form, when put into practice, they may not receive the expected results. Other limitations included the lack of research of non-English speaking families, which is a prominent aspect of parent-teacher communication. Since the project was designed to assist first-year teachers in acquiring skills for effective communication, it was difficult to include every issue pertaining to parent communication.

Recommendations for Further Development

In this fast-paced, ever-changing society, it is crucial to continue researching ways to improve parent-teacher communication, especially if the desire is to keep new teachers teaching. Various factors, such as lack of time, working and non-working parents, single parents, financial status, stronger curriculum, and multiple languages are among some of the aspects that are increasing demands on the relationship between parents and teachers. Research needs to remain current and up-to-date with the emerging

obstacles that continue to arise and affect not only the schools and homes, but also the children as individuals. Effective communication between school-class-home is worthy of continued research, specifically since it equates in higher achievement and potential for the student.

Assessment

Three teachers who reviewed the handbook liked the format and the accessibility of the handbook and they also felt the bulleted practices made it easy for the reader to follow. They agreed that the handbook is a necessary and valuable tool for all teachers, specifically for providing guidance for first-year teachers. Two out of the three teachers believed a section for non-English speaking parents needed to be included in order to target all the areas in parent communication.

The author is looking forward to applying many of the practices and feels fortunate to have the handbook when transitioning into her first year of teaching. There is much to learn about effective communication, and the author believes this project has enlightened her thoughts on how to better communicate with parents. Additionally, with this acquired knowledge and understanding of best practices, the author also feels less apprehensive and more confident in communicating with parents.

Project Summary

Although some first-year teachers may be invigorated by the fresh start of a new career, others may be fearful, anxious, and apprehensive about entering into the academic arena. MetLife's (2004-2005) survey indicated that new teachers felt that parent communication was the greatest challenge they face in their first year of teaching. Other research also noted the adversity teachers experience pertaining to their interactions with

parents. Therefore, the potential for problematic relationships between teachers and parents highlights the need for further education and training for first-year teachers.

Educators, administrators, philosophers, and researchers agree that effective teachers need to be able to interact with students' families, thus increasing the incentive for student achievement. This project addressed many of the issues with which first-year teachers are confronted, which led to the design of the handbook presented in Chapter 4. Using this handbook, first-year teachers can quickly access best practices for a variety of areas of parent-teacher communication. The handbook should assist new teachers in making an effective transition from student-teaching to the first year of teaching in a classroom of their own.

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