

Who's doing the talking? Teacher and parent experiences of parent-teacher conferences

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The most common form of direct communication between parents and teachers in schools worldwide is the parent-teacher conference. Purposeful parent-teacher conferences afford the teacher and the parent the opportunity to address a particular topic related to the child, such as academic progress and behaviour. However, teachers are seldom trained to interact with parents, and both parents and teachers often find such encounters stressful and ineffective. This paper investigates parent and teacher perspectives on the parent-teacher conference through a qualitative inquiry. This is framed by the contributions of ecological theorists to home-school communication and an overview of extant themes in the literature. In the present qualitative inquiry, teacher, parent and learner participants were selected by purposeful and snowball sampling and data were gathered by individual and focus group interviews, school visits and the perusal of written parent-teacher conference reports. The findings indicate that parent-teacher conferences are ritualised school events in all types of schools; parents and teachers' expectations of conferences are limited; teachers are not trained to conduct parent-teacher conferences; and conferences are overwhelmingly directed at problem solution. Parent-teacher conferences are characterised by a client orientation to parents, rather than a partnership orientation to home-school relations.

Introduction

Regular home-school communication is fundamental to effective parent involvement in schooling (Evans, 2004; Graham-Gray, 2002). Parents and teachers need to share with, and learn from, each other during regular, open, two-way communication in the interest of the child. The most commonly and regularly used direct communication between parents and teachers in schools worldwide is the parent-teacher conference (Allen, 2008; Berger, 2008; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Olson & Fuller, 2008), also in South African schools (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2006; 2008). Jordan, Reyes-Blanes, Peel, Peel and Lane (1998:142) distinguish between unscheduled, informal parent-teacher encounters and purposeful conferences where the parent and the teacher schedule a meeting to discuss a particular topic, such as academic progress, behaviour or an individualised remedial programme. Parent participation in purposeful parent-teacher conferences is relatively high during the child's primary school years and the potential benefits are well documented (Jeynes, 2010). However, simply making parent-teacher conferences a regular feature in the school's annual programme is no guarantee that these benefits will be realised. Teachers often encounter problems in communicating effectively with parents in parent-teacher conferences (McEwan, 2005). This is exacerbated in the case of novice teachers (Graham-Clay, 2005:121) and in cross-cultural situations (Guo, 2010:122). Preservice or inservice teacher training seldom devotes instruction to develop communication

skills in teachers who are required to communicate effectively with parents (Minke & Anderson, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004).

In spite of the critical role of parent-teacher conferences in the sound development of the child, Minke and Anderson (2003:5) indicate that the literature on teacher-parent conferences has mainly been limited to 'hints' for teachers and that empirical investigations of the parent-teacher conference are surprisingly few. To address this gap, this article explores parents' and teachers' experiences of the parent-teacher conference through a qualitative inquiry conducted in the context of selected schools in the Free State, Gauteng and Mpumalanga. The purpose of the study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the practice of parent-teacher conferences in selected South African schools from the point of view of parents and teachers. The inquiry is foregrounded by the work of ecological theorists and draws on a literature review of extant themes in the area of parent-school conferences.

Theoretical framework and literature study

In order to provide a theoretical framework for home-school communication in general and the teacher-parent conference in particular, ecological models are relevant. This article draws on Bronfenbrenner's seminal work (1979; 1986; 2005) as discussed with reference to home-school linkages. This is followed by Epstein's (1987; 1995) contribution to the ecology of home-school-community partnerships and the more recent ecologies of parent engagement propounded by Barton, Drake, Perez, St Louis and George (2004).

The broad theoretical foundation of this study is provided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model of human development. Core to his theory is the idea that the developing person exists within a complex ecological context consisting of five socially organised interlocking subsystems: the micro, meso, macro, exo and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to interaction between the child and the immediate environment, which includes the family and the school. The mesosystem represents the linkages between two or more immediate settings containing the child, such as the interaction between home and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:24). Berk (2000:112) describes the mesosystem as a 'layer' that provides the connection between the child's teacher and his/her parents. The third level, the exosystem, refers to settings beyond the person, such as the parent's workplace. The macrosystem refers to social forces and cultural values which shape all the other systems; the chronosystem refers to the influence of change that takes place over time on the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The model emphasises the interconnectedness both within and between the various subsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986:723). Within the microsystem the parent and the teacher develop intimate knowledge of the child or of children developed from their respective experiences within home and school. In the mesosystem parent and teacher interact within the school context in the interests of the child, both bringing their relevant experience with them. In the exosystem and macrosystem teacher and parent are influenced by more distant environments such as the demands of the workplace which may determine the time which teacher and the parent can devote to parent involvement, educational legislation determining procedures for parent involvement and customary practices and expectations shaping parent involvement (Keyes 2002: 113). The implications of this interconnectedness for home-school communication, in particular, are as follows: open, bi-directional communication between the child's school setting, and home and community setting exercise an important positive influence on the child's development and academic success.

Epstein (1987) developed her theory of 'overlapping spheres' from Bronfenbrenner's

ecological model. Epstein identifies three major overlapping spheres or environments: the family, the school and the community; at the centre of all three spheres is the child. Epstein's (1987:214) theory of overlapping spheres of influence of families and schools proposes that the work of the family and the school overlaps and they share goals and missions. The model includes both external and internal structures. The external model recognises that these three major spheres in which children learn and grow can be drawn together or pushed apart. Some educative practices are conducted separately by schools, families and communities; some are conducted jointly in order to strengthen children's learning (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, 1997:3). The internal model of interaction of schools, families and communities shows where and how complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence occur between individuals at home, at school and in the community. These social relationships can take place at an institutional level or at an individual level (Epstein, 1995:703). The theory of overlapping spheres assumes that the mutual interests of families and schools can be successfully promoted by the policies and programmes of schools and the actions of teachers (Epstein, 1987:130). Where teachers make parent involvement part of their regular teaching practice, parents increase their interactions with children at home, feel more positive about their abilities to help their children in the primary grades and rate the teachers as better teachers while learners improve their attitudes and achievement (Epstein, 2001:134). Most parents, however, still need help to know how to be productively involved in their children's education at each grade level. School programmes and teacher practices to organise family and school relations are needed to encourage already active parents and to assist those families who would not become involved on their own.

Epstein's ecological theory laid the basis for her widely used model of six types of parent involvement. The six types identified are as follows: Parenting; Home-school communication; Volunteering; Learning at home; Decision making; and Collaborating with the community (Epstein *et al.*, 1997). Each type of involvement poses specific challenges for its successful design and implementation and each type leads to different outcomes for learners, parents, and teachers (Epstein *et al.*, 1997:80-85). With regard to 'Home-school communication', Epstein (1997:700) recommends that schools should implement effective forms of home-to-school and school-to-home communication about the school's programmes and the child's progress. Heading Epstein's (1995:701) list of sample practices for this involvement type is the regular parent-teacher conference characterised by reciprocal communication between parent and teacher.

Bronfenbrenner's and Epstein's perspectives provide a useful understanding of how home and school interconnect and how this linkage should be nurtured and maintained by regular, open and mutual communication in the interest of the child. In general, this is recognised by schools; however, schools maintain the power to determine how and how often parents should be involved and how and when communication should occur (Spear-Ellinwood & Moll, 2005:337).

More recently, Barton *et al.* (2004) have used the lens of an ecological model to examine the parent's capacity to 'author' a space for participation in the school. The Ecologies of Parent Involvement model introduces the notion of parent engagement, rather than involvement, to denote a richer concept of the reciprocal and dynamic relationship that should exist between schools and families. The authors extend previous ecological models by including perspectives from the cultural historical activity theory and the critical race theory and combining them with Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of space and capital. Cultural-historical activity theory propounds

that the individual acts within a social context which has been shaped by past events and is interwoven with cultural values. Social organisations such as schools concretise values in social practices that give order and purpose to school lives. Official interactions between parent and teacher, such as the parent-teacher conference, move the shared activity in the direction of the optimal outcome, that is, the academic development of the child (Barton *et al.*, 2004:4). However, in this interaction the focus is on the parent-as-a-person who is accompanied by his/her interaction with the wider environment (e.g. workplace, cultural background and social norms). Thus, parent engagement with the school is a social practice situated in, and sustained through, parents' active participation and dialogue in a social world (Barton *et al.*, 2004:6). Further, by merging critical race theory into their ecology of parent involvement, Barton *et al.* (2004:5) further allow for the influence of race and language to intersect with the activities of the school. Parents from different language and ethnic minority backgrounds may experience the school from a subordinate position due to their social positioning; thus, schools who implement effective home-school relations should critically examine their partnership with the home and create strategies to accommodate such parents. Thus, the theory of Barton *et al.* (2004) shifts parent involvement to a more equitable framework in which the power to define parent participation lies in both parents and schools, rather than in one or the other. Applying this to home-school communication, teachers and parents should occupy equitable positions of power in the communication process. This implies that in the parent-teacher conference, teachers do not only fill the role of educational experts, but also function as learners about the family's history and experience; likewise, parents draw on their multiple experiences of the child as family member while they learn more about the school's programmes and processes (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004:699). Salient to the culturally diverse context of South African schooling, the model of Barton *et al.* (2004:11) also illustrates how the non-traditional life experiences and cultural capital of disempowered parents in high-poverty urban (or, I add, rural) schools can inform school practice in new ways and, as parents articulate what they want from the school, they 'author' a personal space for themselves in the school. According to this notion, the school needs to listen and respond to that articulation and, in this way, distance between home and school is reduced.

The foregoing discussion grounds this study in important ecologically based theories of human development and parent involvement which can be used to analyse parent-teacher conferences within a multi-layered environment. Emanating from this theoretical framework, it is understood that the teacher-as-person and the parent-as-person interact within the conference in the common interest of the child, bringing with them the influences of their more distance environments and contexts (Keyes, 2002:113).

Furthermore, this research has been informed by the findings of various studies of the parent-teacher conference as structure for interactive dialogue between home and school. Firstly, the importance of the parent-teacher conference as a means of open communication has been underscored (Epstein, 1995). However, barriers to the successful home-school conference have been identified: parents often experience anxiety during interactions with teachers due to their own personal experience at school (Minke & Anderson, 2003); parents and teachers may hold conflicting expectations of the conference outcomes (Keyes, 2002); parents who are of a different race, language or social background to that of the teacher may experience cultural barriers during communication (Eberley, Joshi & Konzal, 2007); the teacher, as educational expert, may appear to assume a more powerful position in the relationship with parent, who lacks professional knowledge of the school (Crozier, 2000); the lack of pre- and in-service

teacher training in communication skills to prepare teachers for the conference (Minke & Anderson, 2003) and practical constraints in the school, such as poor timing of conferences, inadequate venues for conferences, poor seating arrangements for parent and teacher and external noise in the school environment affect outcomes negatively (Berger, 2008:167). Teachers in multicultural schools need to understand the diverse educational, cultural and economic frameworks within which parents operate (Quiroz, Greenfield & Altechech, 1999) and teachers need to make special efforts to encourage further participation in conferences (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2008) by fathers, who seldom attend conferences (Gestwicki, 2000:144), non-custodial parents, such as the parent in a divorced home who does not have permanent custody of the child, and non-traditional caregivers, such as grandparents (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010:61). Language barriers should be addressed in cross-cultural situations where immigrant or language minority parents are not proficient in the language used in the school (Guo, 2010) and teachers need to be sensitive to parents' understanding of educational jargon, the school curriculum and report-card grading (Nichols & Read, 2002). Several strategies for improving parent-teacher conferences have been proposed: implementation of prior planning for conferences and parent-teacher contracts in which teacher and parent agree on written goals for the child (Stevens & Tollafeld, 2003:521); the availability of student files which document student grades and follow-up meetings after the conferences to assess progress (Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007:99) and the inclusion of learners in the parent-teacher conference which ensure that the child also engages in his/her own plan for improvement (Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004:69). Gonzalez-Mena (2010:85) stresses that the teacher-parent conference will benefit if it includes meetings to discuss positive points and not only 'bad news' about a child. Also important is the nature of the invitation to the parent to participate in the parent-teacher conference; the more parent-friendly the invitation, the better parent participation in conferences will be (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkens & Closson, 2005:105).

In summary, themes in the literature as identified above tend to promote the use of conferences, identify barriers and provide 'how to' guidelines for teachers most often focusing on the 'difficult' or culturally different parent.

Method

Against this background, the following research question was formulated: *What are the experiences of teachers and parents of parent-teacher conferences?* A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for an in-depth exploration of parents and teachers' experiences of the practice of parent-teacher conferences in selected South African schools.

Participant selection

In the initial stage of the inquiry, I identified four knowledgeable teachers and two interested parent participants by purposeful sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006:320) according to the following attributes: teachers with at least ten years' teaching experience and parents who had attended parent-teacher conferences over a period of at least four years at their child(ren's) respective school(s). Recruitment of these participants was facilitated by my professional position as an educationist with a specialisation in parent involvement. Thereafter, I was introduced to participants by snowball sampling, that is, successive participants were named by a preceding individual (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006:321). Participants thus identified fitted the parent or teacher profile in terms of years' of experience and did not necessarily hold the same views about the topic as the person who had made the referral. My

professional reputation and expertise in parent involvement facilitated these introductions and all participants agreed enthusiastically to engage in what they considered a worthwhile project. Thus, my relationship with all participants was marked by cordiality and trust.

The size of the sample depends on logistical constraints, such as the availability of appropriate participants, the accessibility of participants and the costs of locating and enlisting participation. Due to the search for in-depth data, qualitative samples are frequently relatively small; however, qualitative researchers may choose to use larger samples (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010:328). In this study, the combination of purposeful and snowball sampling yielded a fairly large sample. Seventeen teachers and 20 parents participated. Teacher participants included two school principals, a deputy principal and four heads of department. Parent participants included only one father, an older sibling who accompanied her bilingual (Mandarin/English) mother to conferences to facilitate communication and an employer currently sponsoring the schooling of her employee's son. Mother, sponsor and son regularly attend all parent-teacher conferences together. The latter was one of two learners who spontaneously volunteered as participants; thus, although unplanned, learner participation emerged as the inquiry progressed. Learner participation in conferences is uncommon in all schooling systems (Tuinstra & Hiatt-Michael, 2004) and this was corroborated by the number of learners who participated in this inquiry. All participants were South African citizens and the teacher sample and the parent sample included an almost equal representation of black and white persons with the exception of the above-mentioned mother and adult daughter who were of East Asian origin. One learner was black; the other of East Asian origin. Several parents had children of different ages who thus attended different schools. Thus, the participants were able to reflect on experiences of parent-teacher conferences in twenty schools: public and independent primary and secondary schools with fees ranging from R120 per annum to R80, 000 per annum, located in townships, the inner-city and suburban areas in the provinces of Gauteng, the Free State and Mpumalanga.

Data gathering

Data were gathered by focus group and individual interviews with principals, teachers, parents and learners, four school visits and documents (standardised parent-teacher conference forms and written reports on parent-teacher conferences). In sum, five focus group interviews (three parent and two teacher interviews) and 16 individual interviews (seven parent, seven teacher and two learner interviews) were held in natural settings according to participant preference: the principal's office, the staff room, the home of a teacher, parent, or my own home. One focus group interview comprised four teachers from the same school; all other interviews, whether focus group or individual, comprised teachers or parents representing different schools. Parent interviews did not include parent couples; only the parent who regularly attended parent-teacher conferences was interviewed. With one exception, this was the mother. The predominance of mothers as participants in parent-teacher conferences reflects typical practice worldwide (Gestwicki, 2000:145). Two interview schedules for parents and teachers, respectively, allowed me to ask pre-planned questions and additional probing questions as the interviews evolved. Participants were asked to reflect on their experience of the practice of parent-teacher conferences as organised and delivered at the respective school where they are engaged. All interviews were conducted in English; ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded on digital voice recorder. Relevant documents were gathered and extensive field notes made during school visits.

Data analysis

In qualitative research data analysis is the process during which the researcher formally identifies themes as they are suggested by the data and an endeavour is made to demonstrate support for those themes (Delamont, 2002:171). Raw data comprised the transcriptions of the recorded interviews, field notes and the parent-teacher conference forms and reports. By reading and rereading the documents independently tentative themes were identified. Firstly relevant extracts in the text were highlighted and then grouped without comment under themes (Delamont, 2002:172). Thereafter, the themes were clustered into categories and compared with the relevant literature (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010:199) on parent-teacher conferences. Finally, suitable extracts from the responses were paraphrased or suitable quotations were selected as rich data (vivid and detailed data) to illustrate the categories (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010:223). Consistent with the guidelines for inductive analysis all the ideas discussed in the section entitled: Findings emerged directly from the data.

Credibility of data and ethical considerations

When qualitative researchers consider research validity, it generally refers to research that is plausible, credible, trustworthy and therefore defensible (Beach & Finders, 1999:89). Johnson and Christensen (2000:208) identify strategies of triangulation to maximise validity when using qualitative approaches such as participant feedback and expert peer triangulation, both used in this study. Expert peer triangulation (Johnson & Christensen, 2000:208) comprised the use of an external expert in the field of parent involvement who reviewed the analysis and interpretation of the data. Further, data was triangulated by participant feedback, that is, cross-checking information and conclusions with actual participants for verification and insight where necessary (Johnson & Christensen, 2000:208). Ethical requirements were fulfilled by obtaining written permission for all data gathering from the school principal and/or from individual participants; informing participants in writing of the research aim; voluntary participation; and participant anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. Learner interviews were conducted with mothers' permission of parents and in her presence. Finally, the limitations of the research are acknowledged. The findings are limited to an in-depth understanding of participant's experiences and are not intended to be generalisable.

Findings

The findings are presented as rich data, that is, full and detailed data rich in description of people, places, and conversations and substantiated by quotations from data sources (Maxwell, 2010: 282) according to the following themes: the ritualised organisation and delivery of parent-teacher conferences; and parents' and teachers' experiences of conferences.

Ritualised organisation of parent-teacher conferences

Commonalities in the participants' descriptions of the organisation of conferences suggest that these are ritualised events held with remarkable similarity in a wide variety of schools. A general parent-teacher conference is held at least annually, often early during the first term. Typically, it commences in a hall or large classroom where parents are addressed *en masse* by the principal and other speakers (e.g. chair of the school governing body/board, support staff, etc). During the second half of the meeting, parents break away to meetings in which grade/subject teachers address parents as a group in a classroom. Here teachers usually cover a curriculum overview, classroom and homework procedures. Time permitting, individual

parents may remain to discuss their children with the teacher in a one-on-one encounter. Opportunity for parent-teacher dialogue is extremely limited at this event, both in the general session and breakaway meetings. Three schools used an even less satisfactory arrangement for breakaways: grade/subject teachers met parents at tables set up in the hall for a very brief chat. This venue was noisy, privacy was minimal, and parents and teachers were acutely aware of the presence of other parents awaiting a turn.

In all schools opportunity for a round of individualised parent-teacher conferences is provided during the second term and, less commonly, during the third term. The frequency of a series of conferences differs from school to school. Parents are issued a general invitation by letter or e-mail to participate in these parent-teacher conferences on prescribed evenings, commencing in the late afternoon and continuing until late evening. Parents are asked to choose a particular time slot with the grade and/or subject teachers. In some schools this series of conferences is scheduled in school diaries so the dates are available at the start of the school year. Township schools sometimes schedule conferences on Sundays to accommodate shift workers. In independent schools with boarding facilities, conferences are held from midday on the last day of the term to accommodate out-of-town parents who travel to fetch their children. In addition, teacher and parent participants confirmed that *ad hoc* parent-teacher conferences may take place at any time during the year on request to address a particular problem, academic or behavioural. In all schools represented, parent-teacher conferences on request are largely teacher-initiated by a specific invitation issued by letter, e-mail, SMS, telephone call or the two-way homework diary. Only three schools, including two township schools, used a standard invitation, custom-designed by the school, which allows the teacher to earmark a particular topic for the parent-teacher conference, such as, punctuality, health and hygiene, homework or a learning area problem. All teacher participants (particularly the principals) emphasised emphatically that parents are welcome to initiate an *ad hoc* parent-teacher conference at any point during the school year, provided the communication procedures laid down by the school are followed. This arrangement was corroborated by all parent participants. No school among those represented by participants had ever conducted a survey of parent satisfaction with parent-teacher conferences. Principals and teachers felt that they had fulfilled their professional duty merely by providing for these encounters in the school calendar, regardless of their effectiveness.

Delivery of parent-teacher conferences

According to the participants, parent-teacher conferences are usually held in the grade/subject teacher's classroom. Heads of department meet with parents in their small offices adjoining the classroom. Meetings are only held in the principals' office if a serious disciplinary matter is involved. The exception was the three schools already mentioned, which held conferences in a communal venue. In general, privacy for the parent-teacher interaction was maintained although parents and teachers were often aware of other parents awaiting an appointment. Time slots for conferences are very limited, ranging from 5 to 15 minutes, and conferences often exceeded the time allowed, creating long queues of impatient parents. Gloria, a mother of four, complained, "*It is a pain because...there is always a crowd of people and they run over time and you end up waiting and it gets late.*" *Ad hoc* parent-teacher conferences called by a specific teacher or parent request lasted longer and were guaranteed greater privacy.

Most teachers described accommodating parents around a table or desk. However, observations made during school visits showed parents sitting uncomfortably on child-sized

chairs while a teacher stood or sat on her own chair. Thandi confirmed this: “*We have to use those little guys’ chairs and the teacher will be seated in her comfortable chair.*” Parents often recalled sitting across the teacher at her desk. Teachers, parents and learners confirmed that a child’s written work was available to support a discussion about academic progress. However, only in four schools did teachers confirm that written records were kept of conferences. Conference report forms furnished by way of example included headings such as parent and teacher concerns, decisions, goals and follow-up. These four teachers were also the only ones in the sample who confirmed that firm dates were set for follow-up visits to monitor the child’s improvement. All the other teacher participants confessed to a *laissez faire* approach to record-keeping and follow-ups. A teacher’s comment, “*Where on earth must I find time for all that paperwork?*” elicited a vociferous flurry of agreement during a focus group comprising six teachers from five different schools. Teachers and parents felt that, if they heard nothing further from each other, they assumed the child’s problems had been resolved satisfactorily. Thus, the most common practice lacked any definite planning of improvement goals, the provision of worksheets or other resources for improvement and the systematic monitoring of progress. Several teachers confirmed that parents in well-resourced schools whose children had an academic problem were sent away with the admonition to “*enrol a child in extra lessons*”.

Parents’ expectations of parent-teacher conferences

Overwhelmingly, mothers attended conferences, with a few exceptions; a phenomenon confirmed by the literature (Graham-Clay, 2005). Learners seldom attended conferences and the experiences of the two learner participants as reflected in the interviews are included in this section. One parent mentioned with irony, “*Parent-teacher conferences take place literally behind the child’s back.*” Most parents attended conferences with modest expectations: to find out how their child was doing, how to help the child at home and to share their own insights about a child’s behaviour. Many parents slipped into the role of a quasi-learner themselves. As Rose remarked, “*I go to learn. I want to listen to the teacher. I want to know what the teacher has to say, how my child is doing, how he learns and so on.*” From most parents’ perspectives, conferences are dominated by teacher-talk. Gloria noted, “*Teachers take the whole ten minutes. I think it’s a defence mechanism. I don’t think there are many teachers who listen.*” This problem was illustrated by the difficulty encountered by an Asian mother and her daughter, who repeatedly tried to inform the teacher about her son’s immigrant status and living conditions during the teacher’s monologue about the curriculum, which allowed no room for parent input. Due to the brevity of the conferences, parents often mentioned that important personal information about the child (e.g. temperament, learning difficulties, domestic problems, etc.) was rather communicated by a phone call, letter or e-mail or by arranging an *ad hoc* conference where time was not so limited. Topics which involved parents’ dissatisfaction with teaching or the curriculum were raised with great trepidation at a conference, whereupon parents noted a swift change in the ambience of the encounter. Mary said: “*Teachers get quite defensive and sometimes become very unapproachable.*” Participants reported that in many cases they simply back off and drop the matter for fear of causing repercussions for the child. Thandi explained that it took great perseverance to pursue such a matter. She ascribed her success in getting a response from the school on such an occasion to the fact she was always accompanied by her husband and “*because I’m an experienced parent. Mpho is my ‘laatlammetje’ (late-born child) and, as my husband says, we have been through this before. No, I don’t think it [success] is due to our professional status.*”

Notwithstanding these limitations, parents expressed appreciation for teachers' helpfulness and insights at conferences. Dr T, Lisa and her son, Lebo, have attended parent-teacher conferences for four years since Lebo moved from a village school to an ex-model C secondary school in town. Lisa, a domestic worker, described early conferences as "*a bit scary*", but taking the lead from Dr T's example, she has since participated actively in the discussion. The two learners took conference attendance in their stride. Sixteen-year old Lebo was not intimidated in the presence of authority figures: parent and teacher. He stressed the collaborative nature of the interaction, "*I'm not a troublemaker...it helps if they (mother, sponsor and teachers) ask me questions. They ask so that the teachers can help me in class with what is trouble to me.*" Leon, a ten-year old, was matter-of-fact when questioned about his experience at a joint conference, "*Oh, it's fine. I don't mind. They (parent and teacher) just talk and then I know what to do.*"

In general, the findings suggested that the short, perfunctory parent-teacher conferences met the expectations of compliant parents. However, two distinct groups emerged with unfulfilled expectations. The first group comprised the parent of the child who is performing satisfactorily. Marge typified this marginalised majority: "*Teachers always tell me they don't want to see me because my children are doing just fine. But I want to meet them! I want to know! Once the teacher told me, 'All's well in your world. I don't have time to see you. Just look at all the parents whose children have problems.' I was really put out. Why shouldn't I see them just because my children are not problems?'*" The second group comprised parents who seek advocacy for a particular issue which reaches much further than their own child's interests. Margo, a teacher herself, was dissatisfied with a subject teacher's performance which had affected the entire matric class. Although she scrupulously followed school protocol in addressing this issue, starting with the parent-teacher conference, her efforts had been ignored. Her experience (and that recounted by three other parents) demonstrated that parents who assume an advocacy role and thereby try to 'author' a space within the school which is not normally sanctioned, have little success.

Teachers' experiences of parent-teacher conferences

Most teachers regarded the regular rounds of parent-teacher conferences as stressful, tiring and time-consuming. A teacher summed it up by describing them as "*daunting*"; another teacher mentioned "*More and more late nights!*" A head of department tasked with pastoral care in the school, commented, "*The teachers hate it! That is why I have to support them as much as I can*". Teachers frequently used phrases such as "*tensed up*"; "*bombarded by parents*"; "*nerve-racking*" during the interviews to describe their feelings about conferences. Three teachers dismissed the usefulness of conferences, as captured by this comment: "*A waste of time, just window-dressing to see the same old parents over and over again*". However, three teachers argued the benefit of conferences as indicated by the following: "*I like to meet the moms and dads*" and "*It is very useful when they tell you about the child at home, even if we only have five minutes*".

Topics for discussion chosen by teachers usually revolved around academic difficulties that manifested in class tests and behavioural problems that disturbed the classroom. Examples given were weaknesses in reading and math, homework not done, untidy appearance, poor hygiene and poor socialisation. Conferences were generally regarded as the first (or the last) step in resolving negative performance. Principals and heads of department stressed the importance of the conference to alert parents to a problem as soon as possible to avoid later

recriminations from the parent. Remedial action given by teachers tended to be general advice to parents: “*Read more at home*” or “*Talk more to your child*”. Concrete action plans and follow-up monitoring were often lacking. Teachers relied on parents’ ability to communicate their advice to the child and enforce its implementation. Almost all the teachers treated the possibility of a child’s presence at a conference with surprise and even alarm.

Although teachers mentioned ‘no-shows’ (when parents failed to keep an appointment), the overwhelming response was that parents respond positively to a specific invitation. A teacher at an inner-city school remarked exultantly, “*They come! They really come!*” Teachers affirmed a parent’s attendance of conferences by making a point of telling children, “*How nice it was to meet your Mommy/Daddy last night*”. Contrary to parental experiences as shared in the interviews, teachers felt that parents were given adequate opportunity to give inputs at conferences. However, this did not necessarily constitute a free exchange of information and ideas. Parents were usually invited to “*have their say*” at the start of the discussion or ask questions at the end. A school principal of a township primary school described this practice: “*Afterwards we even take questions... there is a round of questions. Everyone is happy; we have to satisfy everybody.*”

None of the teacher participants had ever received any training in communicating with parents, preservice or inservice. Where teachers mentioned relevant professional development in communication, this kind of training was focused on the pathological, for example, assertiveness training, conflict management and anger management. Woven into all teacher interviews, irrespective of the great variety of school context in this study was the bogey of the difficult parent, the angry parent or “*the nightmare parent*” as one participant expressed it. Often contrary to many appreciative comments made by teachers about cooperative parents and pleasant anecdotes related by teachers of their experience with parents, within the school culture teachers stereotyped parents as the Other: either uncommitted and lackadaisical or intrusive and bossy.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings and informed by ecological theory, I argue that the most important, direct mesolink between families and schools (*cf.* Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is managed principally through regular rounds of parent-teacher conferences, whether by general or specific invitation. Parents may participate in a child’s schooling in many ways: as audience, volunteers, governors, et cetera. However, the formal conference around a child’s academic and social wellbeing is the most significant occasion in which the overlapping spheres of home and school (*cf.* Epstein, 1987) are drawn together to address a common goal, the child’s sound development. Interestingly, the magnet which attracts the spheres or systems together, the child, is conspicuously absent from the event, only to be included as exceptional practice as this study indicated.

Furthermore, schools appear to have some way to go to realise the potential of the parent-school conference as an optimal opportunity to work with parents as partners. In spite of the diversity of schools whose practices were described by parent and teacher participants in this study, there was relatively little difference in the way in which teacher-parent conferences were understood and delivered. In all schools the importance of conferences was trivialised due to the inadequate time allotted to interactions, which hardly allow true dialogue. Unequal power relations between parent and teacher were emphasised by the poor seating arrangements and venues that lacked privacy. All the schools represented operated mainly on a basis of what

Henderson *et al.* (2005:25) term: "Come if we call". Although parents were at liberty to initiate conferences, the venue, format, duration and communication style were standardised and strictly controlled by the school. Conferences are a fixture in all schools and are regarded as part of 'school business' in which parents are 'clients' whose payment of school fees, no matter how small, entitles them to a hearing. However, the voices of parents as authentic partners are generally treated with reserve. In particular, parents, who attempt to author an untraditional 'space' in the school by adopting the role of advocates for specific issues, have little success.

The dominant view of conferences among teachers is that they are diagnostic, problem-oriented occasions. The encounter with a parent is regarded as potentially tricky and to be handled with caution. Most teachers find it hard to assume the role of a 'learner' who can use a conference to tap into unique 'funds of knowledge' about the child which only a parent-as-a-person can introduce into the learning situation (Barton *et al.*, 2004). Parent capital, such as cultural knowledge, experience in raising a particular child and parenting experience and skills, is not easily recognised by teachers (Pushor, 2010:5). What then about parents' expectations? The responses of parents suggest that parents have been socialised into the rituals of parent-teacher conferences by school protocol, their own experience when learners and historical knowledge about parent-teacher conferences. Parents in the sample regarded conference attendance as a part of parental duty and parents of non-problem children felt cheated and sidestepped by school conference practice, which caters in the main for children with problems.

Finally, conferences are important occasions for parents and teachers to work together. They can alert parents to problems and enlist parental assistance even if it is only additional surveillance of a child's learning. They should also be occasions for the affirmation of good performance. In spite of the limitations indicated by this study, parent-teacher conferences are an indispensable tool for strengthening the home-school link in the best interest of the child. As such, the ritual of the parent-teacher conference is worthy of far more critical attention from school leaders, teachers and parents. To improve practice, schools should regularly appraise the effectiveness of their parent-teacher conferences by obtaining parent and learner opinions on their practices. Schools should provide teachers with guidelines to enhance parent-teacher conferences by holding regular professional development focused on home-school communication. Standardised forms with essential conference details (learner background, family data, behavioural and academic observations, planned follow-up) can be used to give conferences purpose and direction. Privacy, comfortable conference settings, sufficient time slots to allow full parent participation and learner participation in conferences are low cost strategies which would immediately enhance the effectiveness of conferences. Finally, school should use a variety of communication strategies which focus on the communication of positive feedback to parents to cater for families where children are performing satisfactorily.

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