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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Tom Hoerr

Connecting with Students' Parents

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Connecting with Students' Parents

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While time brings change, there are still some constants: educators are passionate people and education is always rife with conflicts. Today there are rancorous discussions about phonics and how to teach reading, questions about grading policies and the fairness of giving students a score of zero, and intense debates about charters versus public schools. Educators, it seems, can only agree to disagree. But one area about which there is universal unanimity is that parent involvement is a positive. Simply put, students do better when parents are engaged in their education. Of course!

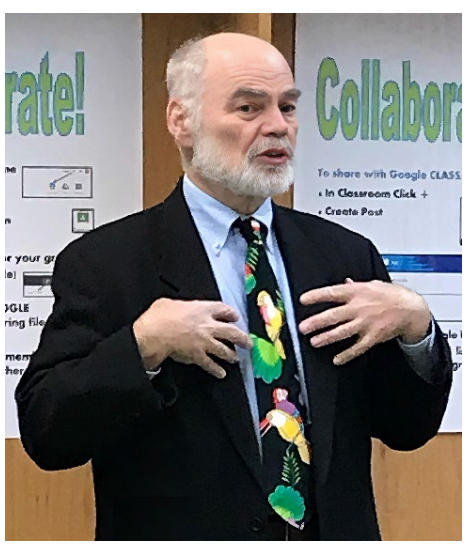
Yet despite this strong consensus, our profession does not do a good job of preparing and supporting teachers to work with their students' parents. Reflect back on your educational preparation, please: I'm sure that your undergraduate coursework gave little, if any focus, on this topic. You spent hundreds – maybe thousands – of hours observing in classrooms and student teaching, but it's highly unlikely that you experienced training on how to conduct a parent-teacher conference or received feedback on your interactions with students' parents. But you're not alone!

Oddly, despite the fact that we know that students perform better when parents are involved and informed, little emphasis given to this topic in teacher education. Perhaps even more oddly, all too often not much time is spent on this topic in professional development. These are missed opportunities.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Let's start with parent-teacher conferences. First, yes, teachers are asked to do more and more, so they generally never have enough time for anything - and that includes parent-teacher conferences. And realistically, how much information can be shared – can be exchanged - in fifteen or twenty minutes? Parent-teacher conferences should be thirty minutes, at least three times per year. Finding the time to do this won't be easy, but it can be done if it becomes a priority.

Related, as noted, regardless of how much time is available, it should not simply be teachers talking to parents; rather, it must be teachers and parents interacting, discussing, exchanging ideas. Teachers should have a question or two – perhaps a set of questions – for their students' parents: How does Jose like to spend his free time? Where does Mia do her homework and how does she proceed? What does Keith do when he is frustrated at home? The answers to these questions will help teachers understand their students better. Not incidentally, these questions demonstrate to parents that the teacher sees their children as more than just students.



Of course, regardless of how much time is available, engaging in dialogue rather than simply sharing data requires both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills by teachers. Their intrapersonal skills (their intrapersonal intelligence) will enable them to know how they are perceived so they can improve their communication skills with parents. (We often overlook the reality that communicating to students' parents is quite different than communicating to students.) Teachers will also need to work to improve their interpersonal skills (their interpersonal intelligence), eliciting thoughts from and listening to parents. With intent and effort, these are not difficult skills; without intent and effort, however, parent-teacher conferences can be unsatisfying for everyone. Success in these areas doesn't happen by chance. That's why PD sessions focused on parent-teacher conferences are so valuable.

Professional Learning on Communications

Indeed, one of my more successful PD sessions was focused on parent-teacher conferences. We began by meeting in small groups and generating the qualities that were needed for parent-teacher conferences to be successful. No surprise, we all agreed on the validity of the axiom that parents need to know that you care before they care what you know. But how to do that? How to demonstrate – remember, even at thirty minutes, time is fleeting – to parents that we care about their children? Then how to prioritize what's important and how to share? And what do we want to learn from our students' parents? We brainstormed ideas and strategies for each of these questions and then we role-played parent-teacher conferences.

I began the role plays by being a teacher and my assistant played the role of a parent. I asked the faculty to observe and look for what worked and what I could have done better (and then exhibited what I hoped were good strategies). Before meeting in small groups to discuss what behaviors they had seen, we did a second role play, only this time the person playing the parent role was aggressive, even hostile. Yikes! I was under attack and teachers watched how I tried to respond. I made some foolish errors which both taught and brought laughter. After groups met to share their perspectives about my performance, they met in groups of three to do their own role plays. They rotated among playing the role of teacher, parent, and observer. Afterwards, I asked folks to share what they learned. Teachers learning from teachers is always powerful.

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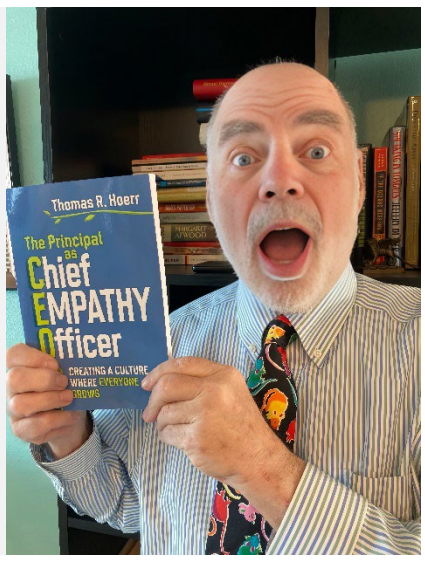
I concluded this PD session by offering some basic tips for conferences. For example, it is important, I noted, to begin by structuring the limited time, e.g., "Thanks for joining me today, Ms. Aiken. We have limited time so I will begin by sharing a story about Karl that made me smile, then I'll give you my thoughts about how he's doing, including showing some samples of his work. When there are about five minutes left, I'll ask if you have any questions. How does that sound?" Setting out the expectations, including the sequence and time allocation, shows parents that you respect their time and have planned for a productive conference. It also serves as a reminder that while this conference is a conversation, not a speech, the teacher is in charge.

Be sure, I said to the faculty, that parents have full-size chairs and that you have arranged seats so that you are facing the clock (glancing down at your wristwatch during a conference is never a good idea. Offering comfortable seating in the hall so that they can wait for their conference in comfort is wise. In addition to having a sample of the individual student's work available, I suggested, you may want to consider having papers of student work – with students' identifications obscured – posted in the hall so that parents can get a sense of the range of achievement on a particular task within the cohort group. Finally, I said, it's up to you to stay on track and not let a conference go beyond the time limit because doing so will have an impact on the timing of the rest of your conferences. When I taught, I shared, I would secure a free time after every sixth or seventh conference. If I was on schedule, this empty period would allow me to catch my breath and plan the next few hours; if I was running behind, however (something that happened more than I wished), that extra time could allow me to catch up on my schedule.

"Administrators should model respecting others' time, too. I recently read where a university president instructed the staff that no one should send a text or an email to someone they are supervising after 6:00pm. What a good idea, I thought, and wished that I had done this. I'm sure that the teachers at my school wished even more that I had done this!"



Conclusion

Beyond parent-teacher conferences, too often communication from school to home, from both teachers and administrators, needs more attention. My bias is that a weekly newsletter, one from a child's teacher and one from the principal, is important. Teachers' classroom newsletters are opportunities to share what is happening in the class and to offer ideas about how these activities might be supported at home. My weekly newsletters were designed to inform and educate parents. I shared student achievements and often wrote about multiple intelligences, mindsets, grit, diversity, and the importance of empathy. Writing these took a good deal of time because I worked to make them interesting, i.e., I often included a "Quote of the Week," sometimes humorous and sometimes educational, but always focused to encourage a busy parent to take the time to read my newsletter.

Finally, in this media-rich time (actually, media-too-rich time, I think), administrators need to set clear expectations about when home-to-school communications are acceptable and what is the time period by which a response will be sent, e.g., 24 hours. This expectation should be shared by the principal and be consistent for all teachers so that Mrs. Crankie isn't viewed in disfavor because she doesn't answer emails as regularly as Mr. Smiley.

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This article brims with ideas but I have only touched the surface. I hope your take-away is that we educators must devote the time and energy necessary to help our students' parents become informed and engaged. When that happens, it's a win-win for everyone, beginning with students.

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Tom Hoerr is a Scholar In Residence at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, where he teaches prospective principals. He became head of New City School in St. Louis in 1981 with a commitment to progressive learning and respect for human diversity. Under his leadership, New City began implementing the theory of multiple intelligences (MI) in 1988 and created the world's first MI Library in 2006. Tom would love to hear from you! Email him at one of the two email links below!

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