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## Three-Way Conferences—Students, Parents, and Teachers Working Together

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*I sit in my office at home adrift in student portfolios, videos and audiotapes, pages of anecdotal comments, checklists, and rating scales, books-full of conference notes, and files of students' self-evaluations. Yet here I sit, staring at the blank screen, trying to think how I will relay the information about each student to his/her parents. Words and phrases swirl inside my head, but I can't manage to formulate even an opening sentence.*

—Marianne McTavish, 1992: 64

I, too, have mixed feelings about report card writing. On one hand, it allows me the time to think carefully about each child. On the other, it is incredibly time consuming. While you might assume that thinking about each student individually would be a given for teachers, it is actually a luxury because there simply isn't enough time in a day to think about each student in the ways that they deserve. But, the amount of time report card writing takes is overwhelming. Each report card can take up to two hours to write and with twenty-two or so students in a primary class, time spent on reports adds another forty hours or more to the work week. Furthermore, unless time is put aside to meet with parents, there really is no guarantee that either the parent or the child understands the report card in any meaningful way, and that too takes time.

Uninspired by the typical report card writing process, I began to ask myself questions about report card writing in particular, and assessment and evaluation practices in general. I wondered why, for example, if assessments and evaluations "drive" teaching and learning—and I believe that they should—the reporting process remains so disconnected from the day-to-day lives of students. I wondered why, if report cards are supposed to be about students, students are often absent from the construction of them. I also wondered what parents thought of report cards. And I wondered if parents have an adequate sense of who their child is as a learner.

### Assessment and Evaluation—A Social Justice Issue

What disturbed me most about the standard approach to the report card process was that many students, even primary students, showed anxiety and fear as report-card time neared. They were afraid that they wouldn't receive a "good" report card and that trouble would follow. I was surprised because I write report cards with a student's strengths uppermost in my mind and because I believe that report cards should essentially describe a student's learning, not pronounce a moral judgment on their character. I realized that part of their trepidation was due to being left out of the process. They felt report cards were "done" to them, in a way that's similar to the patient who undergoes a battery of medical tests and waits for the diagnosis. Like the medical model that excludes or minimizes input from the patient—the very person the tests are all about—the typical report card process does the same to the student. The student, like the patient, moves from being the subject to the object as reports are written. The doctor declares the state of the patient's health, sometimes without asking the patient how she or he is indeed feeling, just as the teacher writes about a student's progress (or lack of it) without even asking the student to express an opinion about their own learning experiences.

Exclusionary assessment and evaluation practices may be examples of poor pedagogy, but since these practices also prevent students and their parents from participating, it becomes an issue of fairness and opportunity, placing it in the realm of social justice. Exemplary teachers have called for more student involvement in assessment and evaluation during the last decade or so, but few have framed it in terms of social justice.

Social justice issues in the educational arena have mostly been about equity funding and opportunity for poor and minority students, and deservedly so. However, if social justice is about fairness, equity, opportunity, and freedom from oppression, then much of our teaching practice could be scrutinized

through the social justice lens. And, unfortunately, the way most teachers learn to approach assessment and evaluation leaves the student, who is in the spotlight, right out of the picture.

I was fortunate to have joined a school staff that was also contemplating similar kinds of questions, looking for alternate ways to report to parents. We wanted a format that included and involved both students and parents. We believe that students take greater responsibility for learning if they are involved and included in assessing and evaluating their own work. We believe that if students are consistently involved in assessment that they become conscious of themselves as learners. They begin to realize their own strengths, understand their own learning, and set their own goals. This is true whether they are in Grade 1 or Grade 12.

Judy Taylor (1999), a Grade 2 teacher who hesitantly agreed to try student-led conferencing, a process that involved leadership by the student, was initially concerned that her students would not be able to explain their work to their parents. After observing her students conduct conferences with their parents, her worries evaporated. She summarizes, “What we learned from this experience was that not only can second-graders conduct parent conferences, but they can do it far more effectively than we!” (p.80).

I also wanted to move away from a philosophy and practice that considers the teacher as the sole expert in a child’s education. I recognize the authority that we have as teachers, but I did not want this authority to intimidate either parents or students. Instead, I view the child’s learning and education as a shared responsibility that actively involves the participation of the student, their family, and the school staff. I believe that involving the students and their parents in the assessment and evaluation process helps to democratize or “flatten out” the traditional hierarchy that was based on assumptions of “teacher knows best.” In a study, reported in *Educational Leadership* (1989), that examined the relationship between schools and families, Jane Lindle concludes,

All families, regardless of socioeconomic status, have similar preferences about the nature and the conduct of school communications. The responses of parents to questions about their contacts with school reveal that they view “professionalism” on the part of teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, or principals as undesirable. Parents mentioned their dissatisfaction with school people who are “too businesslike, patronizing, or who talk down to us.” (p.13)

Friendliness and welcoming attitudes may put parents at ease and set a good tone for a school, but I wanted to put real social justice concepts into practice. I began looking at different reporting models. Since I wanted parent participation and student involvement in the actual writing of the report card, I needed a different format than the student-led conference. While students are bursting with pride as they show their parents their work, and parents are equally proud of their children when they do, there is little time available at student-led conferences for meaningful or informative conversation that includes all three partners: the teacher, the parent, and the student.

When Carol-Ann Carlson (1993-94), a Mission, B.C. teacher asked parents at her school what they thought they needed to be in place for good communication about children’s progress, parents responded that they had participated in student-led conferences in the past and wanted more from the teacher. They felt there was “room for more teacher commentary” (69).

With that very clear comment from parents in mind, I understood that I needed to implement some kind of hybrid format that allowed students to first show parents their work and then have students and parents meet with me, the teacher, to discuss it. It seemed to me that this just made plain common sense for parents to want to have a conversation with the adult who spends at least five hours a day with their child!

I remembered hearing about “three-way conferences” when I was a student teacher. I thought the idea was intriguing yet daunting. In this format, the student first showed their parents their schoolwork, then they met with the teacher, and together all three parties wrote the report card on a laptop computer. I decided to try implementing this format but without modern technology—I was sticking to pen and paper!

### **Three-Way Conferences in Action**

Essentially, my three-way conferences look like this: the student demonstrates key concepts learned throughout the term, leading her or his parent(s) through a variety of centres or stations which involve “hands-on” demonstrations. For

example, at the Math station the student shows, with base ten blocks, how to regroup, adding and subtracting large numbers. At the Literacy station, the student completes a Morning Message, thereby demonstrating spelling and editing skills. The student passes and stops the soccer ball at the Physical Education station, moving through the stations, and sharing work from all of the content areas. At the Art station, students share work that they have previously assessed themselves. All of these demonstrations are deliberately planned to show parents concepts and skills that were introduced to their children throughout the term. These demonstrations typically take half an hour. When the student is finished showing and sharing, the student, the parents, and I meet to discuss and write the report card.

The report card is written on an 8.5" x 11" **template** here. As we discuss the student's academic and social development, I write down the salient points we have agreed upon. We each sign the report card when the discussion and writing is complete. It is then given to the principal who also signs it and writes a comment about the student's learning. The report card is photocopied and the original is given to the students and parents. This completed three-way conference process, including the demonstrations, takes about an hour to complete.

I have conducted these kinds of conferences for the past three years and find the process, as many other teachers have declared it, worthwhile and valuable. Don Konsmo, (1992-93), a B.C. primary teacher who was initially reluctant to organize conferences in which the child assumes leadership, came away from his experience with the process feeling heartened. He states, "Observing the conferences strengthened my appreciation for the parents and the importance of their involvement in their children's education" (48).

Other teachers and researchers echo Konsmo's sentiments. Barry Ricci, (2000), a principal at a Rhode Island school, reports that parents also feel that these three-way conferences are worthwhile (54). A parent involved in a similar kind of conferencing testified that they are able to get a "picture of my son as a learner that would not be possible from merely a report card, a portfolio viewing, or a typical conference" (54).

### **Rumination, Reflection, and Finally, Action Research!**

Even with the increased participation afforded by the new, shared report card development process, as each reporting period came to a close, I had a niggling feeling that something was missing. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I was left with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. I decided it was time to explore this uneasiness.

Through much discussion with my peers and periods of mulling and reflection, I decided that the problem I was wrestling with was a lack of "parent talk." Parent contributions were minimal during the discussions and hence their ideas were not being recorded in the report card. The students, not surprisingly, tended to contribute more than their parents. Was it because the conversation and the report card were about them and their work? Was it because the children had rehearsed the demonstrations in class? Was it because they had previously assessed their own work and were better prepared to speak about it?

More questions plagued me, especially concerning the parents. Were parent contributions few because parents deferred to me because they saw me as the sole authority? Did they not feel that their contributions were valuable or insightful? Were the parents not receiving enough information prior to the conference to feel sure about their role or how to participate in the process? Was it because of the way I facilitated or conducted these conferences—was I too formal—too informal? Was the gap between the home and school so wide that parents felt disconnected from their child's school experiences?

I realized I could not "second guess" what parents were thinking or feeling so I decided to ask them some of these questions directly. Specifically, I wanted to know if parents wanted to become more involved in this process and if so, how to encourage and facilitate that involvement. Consequently, I developed the research project that I report on in this paper.

### **School Demographics**

Our school is located in a working-class neighbourhood in Maple Ridge. We receive supplemental funding because we are classified as an inner city school. I conducted my research with Grades 2 and 3 students (ages seven, eight and nine), and their parents.

### **Data Collection Methods**









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