

COLLABORATION WITH PARENTS

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Students' school adjustment relies at least in part on the practical and emotional resources made available to them over the years from home, school and the wider community (Christenson 2004; Deslandes et al. 1999). An over-riding rationale for collaborating with your students' parents, then, is to coordinate these sources of support. Yet, despite parents' and teachers' common belief in the value of education, and that both want the best for children and want them to be happy at school, teacher-parent relations are often strained (Hughes & MacNaughton 2002). I contend that this is because these relationships are based on a flawed model that entrenches a power imbalance between parents and teachers. This paper will examine the continuum of models guiding parent-teacher collaboration, and argue for a parent-driven style.

Professional-driven interactions

This first style of parent-teacher relationships is characterised by teacher dominance, whereby it is assumed that professionals are exclusively qualified to apply a specialised body of knowledge, which is the only information relevant to the issue at hand (Osher & Osher 2002; Thompson et al. 1997). They are the ones to assess children's needs, interpret these to parents and formulate a suitable program, with parents expected either to accept professionals' advice, or go elsewhere (Osher & Osher 2002).

From their elevated position, professionals often regard parents as the source of children's problems, particularly when their family is disadvantaged socially or has a structure other than the idealised nuclear family (Fylling & Sandvin 1999). Sometimes this view is softened into a conceptualisation of parents as joint victims with their child, as being somewhat fragile while, for their part, children are considered too young, ill-behaved, incompetent or troubled to participate in devising solutions to their problems (Osher & Osher 2002). Thus, within this model, professional diagnosis focuses on deficits, either within children or their families. This

deficit orientation criticises parents and leaves teachers feeling increasingly pessimistic over time about their inability to counteract family 'inadequacies' (Daniels & Shumow 2003).

Professional dominance can work only when short-lived, but will not sustain ongoing relationships, as occur in schools (Galil et al. 2006). This is not a model for the 21st century. It cannot equip teachers with the information from parents that they need to teach their students well, nor secure for them the support of parents. It sets teachers up to fail by expecting them to be the ones to generate solutions to problems that are beyond their sphere of influence. And this professional-driven stance contravenes both the spirit and provisions of departmental policies on parent collaboration.

Family-allied relationships

Epitomised in the platitude that, 'Parents are their child's first (or best) teachers', a common stance of educators is that parents should actively help teachers to educate their children (Dunst 2002). To achieve this, it is recognised that families and parents cannot work in isolation: parents need schools and teachers need parents (Christenson 2004). Therefore, educators accept the responsibility to communicate with parents about their child's education, while parents are expected to support the school. Nevertheless, this parental engagement is often only in token activities that do not challenge teachers' domain, with teachers directing parents and the two working in parallel rather than jointly (Elliott 2003).

However, even these token expectations for parents are both excessive and unworkable. They are excessive inasmuch as it is not parents' job to act as their children's teachers, to police homework completion, or to discipline their children at home for problems that occur at school. And the expectations are unworkable, because parents' formal instructional support does not improve outcomes for children, and can even be detrimental to them and to their family as parents become stressed and are obliged to neglect competing commitments to themselves and other family members (Foster et al. 1981; Harris & McHale 1989; Ramey & Ramey 1992; White et al. 1992). Instead, across the ability range, formal teaching by parents is less vital than merely reading to their young children (Halle et al. 1997).

A family-allied model also fails us in schools because, as with professional-driven relationships, this approach dictates how parents should raise their children, and thereby pits teachers against those parents who do not conform to expectations. An adversarial and confrontational relationship is established which leads either to more negative or to fewer interactions between teachers and nonconformist parents (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 1999). The end result is that the parents and students who most need teacher support to be educationally successful are the ones who are least likely to receive it (Hill & Taylor 2004; Rimm-Kaufmann et al. 2000; Schulting et al. 2005).

A family-centred philosophy

A family-centred philosophy upholds that schools and families share the common task of educating young people (Adams & Christenson 2000). Therefore, power between parents and teachers is equalised (Daka-Mulwanda et al. 1995), with the two collaborating to determine goals for children's education, jointly planning strategies, and sharing responsibility for delivering educational programs (Friend & Cook 2007). Nevertheless, while power is shared between parents and teachers, the two can fulfil different roles, as negotiated between them. Thus, family-centred practice entails both equal status and parity, which refers to valuing and blending each partner's ideas and knowledge (Christenson 2004; Friend & Cook 2007).

In a departure from the deficit orientation characterised by the two interaction styles described previously, family-centred assessment focuses on the strengths of both students and their families. Nevertheless, problems remain with this model. First, the presumption that practitioners are the rightful diagnosticians of families' assets violates the principles of true collaboration. Second, there is little evidence of its effectiveness. One study within early intervention found no developmental gains for children with disabilities, no reductions in parental stress, or any improvements in parent-child interaction patterns in those programs that were family-centred compared with those that were child-centred (Mahoney & Bella 1998). Third, family-centred practice is rare in early intervention services and even less common in preschools and schools (Dunst 2002; McWilliam et al. 1999). That family-centred practice is seldom enacted even when recommended by policy suggests that it is

impractical, largely because teachers lack the resources (especially time) that they would need to establish frequent enough contacts with parents (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta 1999), particularly by the high school years (Adams & Christenson 2000). In short, whereas the family-allied model imposes inappropriate expectations on parents, a family-centred model imposes inappropriate expectations on teachers, particularly when it comes to supporting students and families with multiple problems.

A parent-driven model

In its stance that teachers and parents are full and equal partners, family-centred practice gives too much power to professionals – without, however, giving them the resources or knowledge base to exercise that power. The one remaining option, then, is for teachers to adopt a parent-driven model to guide their relationships with their students' parents. This stance honours parents' role as family leaders. This transforms communication from telling parents to listening to them (Dunst et al. 1988, 1994; Sokoly & Dokecki 1995). The philosophy recognises that, more than being mere consumers or even equal participants in a partnership with you, parents are actually your employers. Their function is not to help you teach their children, but the reverse: they employ you to assist them in raising skilled, knowledgeable and well-adjusted children. They hire you for your expertise as an educator and pay your salary by way of private school fees or taxes for public education. Therefore, your task is to further their aims for their children.

In a parent-driven model, you are accountable to parents: they are not accountable to you. Using the analogy of taking a road trip, in a parent-driven approach, parents work out the route, with the practitioner holding the map as a guide so that the parents can reach their destination satisfied by the journey and its outcome (Tannen 1996, in Osher & Osher 2002).

CONCLUSION

Under models that give professionals ultimate power, the paradox is that if as a teacher you attempt to use that power, you will lose influence over both your parent group and your students. When parents do not comply with the solutions imposed on

them, the resulting despondency and failure will disempower all of you. Instead, when problems arise, the respect inherent in a parent-driven stance allows you to recruit parents' advice and harness their expertise at solving problems for their own family and its members. This will increase the likelihood of finding workable solutions that parents are willing to enact. Given that increases in parental involvement produce improvements in children's academic skills, particularly in those most at risk of academic failure (Dearing et al. 2006), a parent-driven approach has the best chance of achieving what you and your parent group both want: engaged and successful students.

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