Honor's Capstone

Collaborating With Parents Beyond Parent/Teacher Conferences

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It is imperative for pre-service and practicing professional educators to utilize resources to improve their students' learning. Teachers often search for ways to improve their classrooms through donations by local businesses, or conversations with colleagues, administrators, or friends that may have children around the age of their students. Although these resources may be helpful, there is a crucial resource the teachers often forget: The students' parents are often left out of the equation of improving the structure of the classroom.

Communication between people who have a task to achieve is crucial. And what more important job is there than educating a child? It's a monumental undertaking, but fortunately, the efforts of a few improve exponentially when everyone is working together. Plain and simple: students will be much better scholars if parents and teachers communicate effectively.

(Articles Base, 2009).

Therefore, developing a relationship with a child's parent or guardian will greatly improve the child's relationship with the teacher. By putting forth effort to improve communication, teachers will demonstrate an interest to the child and parent which in turn will create an open door. Although parents and teachers meet at conferences, to truly build connections, collaborating with parents must go beyond Parent/Teacher Conferences.

Common Misconceptions

If communicating with parents will improve the child's behavior, attitudes, and academic efforts, why is contact often avoided? Several common misconceptions cause parents and teachers to avoid communication. As Katz (1997) points out,

it is important for teachers and parents to remember that they know the child in different contexts, and that each may be unaware of what the child is like in the other context. It is also useful to keep in mind generally that different people often have distinct but disparate perspectives on the same issue. (2)

Parents often assume that if their child's teacher is calling, there must be a problem related to behavior or academics. Therefore, parents may feel the need to be on the defensive upon answering the phone call or reply to an email. "For many parents, a fundamental part of the
parenting role is to be their child's strongest advocate with the teacher and the school" (Katz, 1995 as cited in Katz, 1997, p. 2). Due to these feelings of advocacy and defense, parents may be reluctant to speak to teachers in order to steer clear of conflict altogether.

Other parents may feel inferior to the teacher. In American cultures, teachers hold high respectable positions which include influence and guidance. Parents "may have difficulty talking with teachers as a result of memories of their own school years" (Katz, 1997). Teachers represent authority and superiority to children, a position which remains into the students' adulthood. Many adults who see their grade school teacher in the supermarket will continue to refer to them as Mrs. Clark or Mrs. Winbigler. Out of the classroom, the former teacher still holds a schema of power. The symbolism of teachers may cause parents to avert contact. Therefore, parents may feel inadequate to speak to their child's teacher when lingering memories keep them feeling like small children themselves.

The parent may "be unsure of how to express their concerns or fear that questions or criticism will put their child at a disadvantage in school" (Katz, 1997). The parent may feel that challenging a teacher's authority might have a personal effect which will result in unfair treatment of their child. Highly unprofessional actions such as unwarranted mistreatment of a student would regard the teacher's philosophy of education. These parents do not realize most teachers know unethical it would be to punish a child for a parent's actions or comments. As teachers, we understand that children are individuals and should be treated accordingly. In fact, according to Greenwood and Hickman (1991, as cited in Katz, 1997, p. 4)

many parents may be surprised to learn that teachers, especially new teachers, are sometimes equally anxious about encounters with parents. Most teachers have received very little training in fostering parent-teacher relationships, but with the growing understanding of the importance of parent involvement, they may worry about doing everything they can to encourage parents to feel welcome.
As a pre-service teacher, I can vouch that we receive little to no formal training in speaking to parents. Communicating with parents is frightening. What will they say or do? How will they react if they know their child is struggling or misbehaving? What will happen to the child if I call home with less than positive information? Fearsome thoughts dominate teachers' minds when they contact parents. However, teachers need to remember that parents are people too just like them. Teachers tend to place parents on pedestals just as parents deem teachers authoritative. Teachers who are using the same techniques humans use on a daily basis to convey negative information will be effective on parents; therefore, not as formidable as once thought.

**Reality of Avoidance**

Despite the misconceptions teachers and parents may have, they need to meet and effectively communicate to improve the child's educational experience.

With our changing society, the nuclear family is an ideal that is not always a reality. More than likely, the single parent will work during or after school hours. In many homes, both parents are working in part-time or full-time jobs. It may be difficult to meet during or after school hours due to conflicting work schedules. Parents may feel tired after work and wish to forgo communication. Same as many parents may also be divorced, separated, or living in different homes, cities, or states because of their careers. In the case of single-parent homes, one less adult is available to discuss the child's progress. The parent who is present in the child's life may not be available. Parents may also have younger children that would require an additional caregiver in order to meet the teacher. Parents may be reluctant to make adjustments as they may feel their lives are hectic without adding contact with their child's teacher. Although their schedules maybe demanding, parents must recognize the importance of their child's education and make time to communicate with teachers.

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Similar to their student's parents, teachers have lives outside of the classroom. They may be married and/or have children of their own to care for at home. The same complexities may affect a teacher's schedule. Within the classroom, a teacher's day is already bustling with lessons and activities, meetings with colleagues and administrators, and pre-planning for weeks to come. Teachers may be hesitant to contact parents in order to avoid another meeting in their already eventful day. If communication is necessary due to academic or behavioral issues, teachers may be nervous of the parent's possible defensive reaction. Teachers may defer contact until the behavior is disrupting the classroom. The continual cycle of avoidance will only suspend the relationship and collaboration between parents and teachers.

**Benefits of Collaborating**

Collaborating with parents will create relationships that may diminish issues from students. Parent and teacher relationships are apparent to students. This often reduces misbehavior and incomplete assignments. When children are aware of an open door policy between their parent and teacher, they understand that the teacher will contact their parent. "Researchers have found that when teachers or school personnel use parental involvement, students' attendance increases, students' behavior improves, and students develop positive attitudes toward school (Epstein & Hollified, 1996 as cited in Shirvani, 2007). Since children will be less likely to act up, negative interactions may be reduced altogether which eventually saves time and lessens disruptions in the classroom. Parents can be valuable allies to the teacher (Priceless Teaching Strategies, 2008). Priceless Teaching Strategies also states that,

After all, parents are a child's first teacher, know the most about their child and along with their teachers play the largest and most important roles in their personal and educational development as they grow to adulthood. Positive support, understanding and encouragement by both parents and teachers are the keys to developing a happy and successful student and adult.
Parents can become an at-home companion for the teacher. Although teachers may spend a majority of the day with their students, parents enjoy their evenings.

A lack of motivation is another problem teachers find in their students. Once again, parents are helpful resources. Asking parents to continue to teach and read with their students at home will motivate their child. The child may look forward to spending time with their parents after school. Working on homework together will provide a stable motivational basis for students. "Research has shown that by involving parents in their children's schooling, students will achieve higher academic achievement" (Shirvani, H., 2007, 1). Parents can also show an interest in their own education to motivate students by continuing in college courses, indicating a love for reading, or asking about school events prior to their children mentioning the occasion (University of Illinois Extension, 2010).

Parents can offer insight into why children may be misbehaving in the classroom. The teacher might need to use careful inquiry to find out private information by taking time to ask questions and actively listen. Teachers may be unaware of contributing factors that may affect the child mentally, emotionally, or physically. There may be a death in the family or the passing of a close family friend. A family member or friend may have recently been deployed in the military. The child may suffer from a medical condition that is not listed in school records. Parents may also be newly divorced or separated. "They just might offer some helpful information or insight into their child that will help you immensely in class" (Articles Base, 2009). Teachers are oblivious of these home events without speaking to the student's parent.

**Improving Communication**

Improving communication with parents can be simple. However, efforts are required to create true, lasting bonds between parents and teachers. Teachers can use several techniques and
tools to develop contact with their students' parents. Contacting the parents early in the school year will demonstrate enthusiasm and initiative. "Teachers can simply extend a warm welcome to parents and introduce themselves. It's a great way to start off the school year and the next contact will be that much easier to make" (Hom, 2006). Usually, Parent-Teacher Conferences are not scheduled until after the first quarter. Teachers have been in the classroom for over two months without having the background knowledge on their students that would come from the parent. Although past teachers may leave notes regarding the student's progress, this information is solely related to academics. Parents can offer insight to recent developments in their child's lives. Making early contact will convey a positive attitude and an eagerness to collaborate with the parent.

First and foremost, whenever teachers make contact it is imperative to make parents comfortable and feeling welcome (Articles Base, 2009, 1). Many teachers may not remember to remain cheerful when speaking to parents. "Make sure parents know you appreciate their involvement and willingness to communicate. If they know you will actively listen when they have a concern, they will be much more open to hearing what you have to say" (Articles Base, 2009). Parents who feel welcome will enjoy speaking to teachers and will be more enthusiastic to continue contact throughout the school year.

Once the parents feel welcome to discuss their child's progress, they should know when and where to contact the teacher. Providing contact information such as the phone number and email address, the teacher reinforces that welcome and encourages communication. Teacher need to act with respect and avoid calls at inappropriate times. Parents will feel more at ease if they are aware of the most appropriate time and place to contact their child's teacher.

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No one likes to be confronted or contacted simply to discuss negatives. If parents are only contacted when pessimistic conversations are to entail, they may be less likely to answer phone calls or reply to emails. Therefore, include positive communication to forgo solely negative contact (Articles Base, 2009). If the child has been participating in class or helped a classmate grasp a concept, contact the parent with the exciting news. Parents will appreciate positive notes and comments regarding their child's progress. If negative events do occur, include optimistic remarks as well. The sandwiching technique will help inexperienced teachers ensure positive comments are included. The sandwich technique begins with a positive statement, then announces the negative, and concludes with another positive. Therefore, the parent will not be focusing solely on the negative aspect of the conversation.

If a child is having trouble with content, contact the parents without delay (Articles Base, 2009). The parents may be able to extend lessons at home which may be all the child needs to succeed. If the child is misbehaving, immediate contact is just as important as is the child is struggling academically. "Send a brief note or make a quick call to parents when a child's behavior is not what it should be. Nothing is worse to a parent than finding out weeks later that their child has been causing problems in the classroom" (Articles Base, 2009). Parents want to be informed of their child's actions to prevent any future problems. Parents will appreciate teachers who do not postpone contact.

Create lessons that parents can make home connections. Ask families to work with their child on an academic level, the parents can participate in their child's learning. A popular lesson to create home connections is to have the child ask their parents how much different items cost when the adult was the child's age to demonstrate inflation. Parents might shock their children when they tell them that a movie ticket that costs eight dollars today was only fifty cents when

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their parents were growing up. Families will appreciate home connections that broaden lessons to the home. This lesson could be integrated into the social studies curriculum; however, home connections can reach all content areas.

Technology has created several easy means of contact. Teachers and parents may use personal phone calls or email messages to communicate quickly. As discussed earlier, exact contact information and specific times will greatly improve reaching one another when contact is desired. Communication tools grant quick and simple ways to contact one another when questions or problems arise. Documentation of communication is important to maintain for teachers to provide a reference.

Several methods can improve communication between parents and teachers. Teachers will benefit from creating a schedule to maintain contact throughout the school year. Routines will assist everyone on the team including the teacher, parents, students and other school personnel. Daily, weekly, and monthly contact procedures will provide constant and expected communication. Recurrent contact with parents will improve communication and continue to strengthen the parent-teacher relationship.

Quite a few options are available to maintain daily connections with parents. By creating a class website, parents can check events, curriculum, and activities on a daily basis. Although the teacher does not need to update the website every day, the webpage will be available twenty-four hours a day for parents and students to view at their convenience. Student agendas will show the parent what the child did that day and any homework that needs to be completed. Since most elementary teachers require, and check, students' assignment notebooks, parents may use the schedules to communicate information to teachers or monitor their child's assignments. Teachers may choose to require parents to sign their child's agenda on a daily basis. One teacher
would reward students with monopoly money every day their agendas were contained the parent’s signature. Positive notes are also a manner of daily contact. Teachers can set a goal to send one to three children home with positive feedback every day. If a child participates in class or scores well on an exam, the teacher can use a form similar to the example below to make contact.

A Tip of the Hat to:

__________________________
for:

__________________________
Signature: Date:

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(Education World, 2003).
For a less demanding undertaking, weekly contact opportunities are available. Teachers may use Friday folders to maintain communication on a weekly basis. One teacher used folders to send home graded homework every Friday. On Monday, the students were expected to return the folders, emptied, and signed by the child's parent. Parents enjoyed seeing the work come home on a weekly basis rather than each day to ensure a majority of the work successfully arrived home. In a conversation with a parent of a child in my student teaching classroom, she commented, "It is so nice to receive Joey's homework at the end of the week. I find papers stuffed in every pocket possible of his backpack. I know if you would give a seven-year-old child graded papers at the end of each day, I would never see them. The Friday folders work very well with our family" (Jones, 2009). A Weekly Progress Report similar to the example below may also be included in the Friday folder to monitor a child's growth on a weekly basis.

(Education World, 2003).

**Weekly Progress Report**


| Comments |

- Completed all classroom assignments.  
- Completed all homework assignments.  
- Used class time wisely.  
- Understood the concepts covered.  

Parent/Guardian Signature: ___________________________ Date: ____________

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Monthly contact provides habitual communication for teachers and parents. Newsletters are a fun and informational manner of monthly communication. Classroom newsletters can include the students' current studies, upcoming events, and important papers that may be coming home. Students' writing should be incorporated into the newsletter. The newsletter can be sent home with the child once a month in their Friday folders. The teacher may use exciting graphics and colorful paper to intrigue parents and students. Another parent commented: "I look forward to the monthly newsletters to find out what is coming up in Darcy's class. I appreciate the extra effort from the teacher to put together the newsletter." (Atkinson, 2009). The newsletter can also be uploaded to the class website to be viewed throughout the month in case the hard copy is lost. Below is a copy of my former cooperating teacher's newsletter located on her class website. She describes the curriculum, ways to extend learning at home, and upcoming events the parents should be know.

Welcome to Mrs. Strong's Second Grade!

Where has the time gone? The first quarter is over already and report cards have gone home. Second graders grow and change a lot; in their knowledge and capabilities but also in their social and behavioral maturity. Reinforcing curriculum lessons and behavioral goals at home is the best help you can give your child.

Our Student Teacher from Northern Illinois University, Miss Selina Merrill, is doing a wonderful job with the students and will continue to be with us until December 10th. The children respond well to her instruction and class management. I am always here to observe and assist. I wrote the report cards.

Some of our students are receiving additional reading instruction to help boost skills and total reading success. Practicing at home, modeling reading to your child or better yet—having them read to you is critical to becoming an fluent reader. Ask questions about the story or topic to develop comprehension skills. Reading is the backbone and early indicator of school success.

Our curriculum to this point has been much review of first grade skills: basic reading, basic addition and subtraction and basic writing of sentences. Now, this quarter things will take off dramatically.

Reading is developing so practice is essential. AR quizzes are being done on the computer each week so reading the library books at home is the key to successfully passing the comprehension test.

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In mathematics we are learning 2-digit addition with carrying and 2-digit subtraction with borrowing. Knowledge and speed with the basic number facts is essential or that becomes a stumbling block. Flip those flashcards at home, working on speed and accuracy.

Writing is developing to the point now that from a basic web of ideas/facts the student can generate a paragraph with main ideas and details. Length becomes longer as confidence builds. Writing is enhanced when a child has lots of experiences in life or with literature. Read a lot. Talk a lot about things. Watch educational TV programs to build background knowledge. Your child is a little sponge and the more good stuff that goes in-the more interesting writing comes out.

Most of the students are doing very well with weekly spelling tests. I can tell you are practicing at home :)

For the sciences, Miss Merrill completed a wonderful Native Americans unit last month. Now we are studying the government, the story of the Pilgrims and Jamestown and soon will be into light and color.

Swimming at the YMCA was received with lots of enthusiasm. It is a wonderful experience for children to have this as a part of their physical education. Sign up for more swimming lessons at the YMCA. Swimming is a healthful, life-long activity.

Coming up for November and December ... The three Second Grades will have our traditional Thanksgiving Feast. Look for details to come home before too long. There will be a holiday music concert at Ottawa High School. Start inviting the relatives! We will also have a school/class Christmas party with a gift exchange. More details to come later ...

I wish you happy, safe, healthy holidays!

Mrs. Strong

(PtA, Parent Teacher Associations, usually meet once a month. "Joining the PTA or attending a monthly meeting will cause the teacher to become more in tune with the parents' point of view" (Priceless Teaching Strategies, 2008). Monthly activities such as the PTA meetings offer an opportunity to look through the eyes of parents. Simply attending meetings will demonstrate a teacher's concern and efforts to include parents. Parents may feel more comfortable at the PTA meetings if they feel they are on neutral grounds, or even feel in control of the current situation. As mentioned earlier, parents sometimes view teachers as authority figures, especially inside the classroom when the teacher is sitting behind a desk that reminds the parent of their own elementary days. If gathering at a PTA meeting, the parents may feel the teacher is in their vicinity and less apprehensive of the prior authoritative teacher.

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To improve communication throughout the year, teachers can ask parents to volunteer in the classroom during story hour, for chaperones at field trips, class parties, or guest speakers from parents in specific careers the students may be studying. Students will enjoy seeing their parents in the classroom collaborating with their teacher. A former cooperating teacher created a signup sheet for parents to recruit volunteers for various parties throughout the school year which she displayed at the school's Open House. The parents were encouraged to lend a hand for at least one activity during the year. The teacher could then organize activities at the beginning of the year to assure every party had assistance. A notice similar to the letter below can be sent home in the child's Friday folder or posted on the class website.

Get Involved!

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Studies show that parental involvement in a child's education is one of the most important factors in raising student self-esteem and academic achievement. Moreover, most experts agree that parental involvement should go beyond attendance at teacher conferences and open house. We realize, however, that each of our families is unique - with its own priorities, needs, talents, and time constraints -- and so we try to provide as many different kinds of opportunities for parental involvement as possible. Please review the volunteer opportunities suggested below, and check any you are interested in -- or tell us what you would like to do. Then return the form to school.

- Speak at career day.
- Organize a college fair.
- Share curriculum related pictures and souvenirs from a personal or family trip.
- Direct a play.
- Teach students to play chess.
- Arrange for curriculum related speakers, exhibits, demonstrations.
- Share a talent, interest, or hobby.

Name: ____________________________

Phone: __________________ When can you be reached at this number? __________________

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(Honor's Capstone--"Collaborating with Parents beyond the Parent-Teacher Conferences")
When Disagreements Occur

Although communication may be improved with parents, differences of opinion are sure to ensue at some point throughout a teaching career. Conflict resolution techniques including active listening, paraphrasing, or looking for win-win solutions apply to parents in order to prevent damaged relationships. Communication skills will help relax parents. Speaking in a calm, soft voice will help alleviate tension in order to clarify misunderstandings. Using similar methods applicable to daily life will improve a teacher's chance of saving his or her relationship with the student's parent if disagreements do arise.

"Dealing with conflict and disagreement effectively is half the battle and can create positive outcomes. However, when conflict and disagreement is handled inappropriately, the outcome can be destructive and are rarely in the best interest of either party" (About.com, 2010). In order to prevent a confrontational attitude, a teacher may use several of the following strategies to relieve apprehension. Remind parents that to work as a team is in the best interest of the child will cause both parties to realize the child is their priority (About.com, 2010). It is important to remain calm with a positive attitude and never attack the parent as a person or their emotional reactions (About.com, 2010). By focusing on the present matter, both parties will be able to create solutions that maybe helpful (About.com, 2010). "Decide on what you can compromise on, effective resolution usually requires some form of compromise on both parties behalf" (About.com, 2010) while keeping practical anticipations in mind that the parent and teacher are willing to deliver. It is also important for the parent and teacher to collaborate in order to set reachable outcomes for the child to achieve (About.com, 2010). By applying conflict resolution techniques, teachers will be able to maintain the important relationship they have built with their student's parents.

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Conclusion

Collaborating with parents will create relationships that will reduce misbehavior and incomplete assignments from students in the classroom and open doors of communication, to all-around provide beneficial rapport. Pre-service and current teachers will be able to apply techniques of improving communication, speaking skills, and conflict resolution to build and maintain relationships with their students' parents. Teachers need to remember that parents are people too. Using similar strategies they would use with their friends to share unpleasant information will be helpful when speaking to parents regarding their child's achievement and progress in the classroom. The same speaking skills that are utilized on a daily basis with friends and colleagues will apply to parents as well. By remaining in constant contact with parents, relationships will be developed that are beneficial to children's learning.

Daily, weekly, and monthly communication tools can be utilized to provide constant contact with parents. Parents who feel informed will be more comfortable with discussing their children's education with the teacher. Daily contact can be through assignment notebooks or online websites. Weekly methods include Friday folders or Weekly Progress Reports. Monthly communication is less demanding and can be easily implemented through classroom newsletters. Teachers communicating with parents convey respect and a caring attitude that will build rapport and true, meaningful relationships.

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT
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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

Collaboration between parents and teachers is often disregarded. Communicating with the students' parents will offer insight regarding the child's background including personal, academic, and sometimes important medical information that may be undisclosed to individual school records. The parents know the child more than the teacher ever will in the school year and can provide perceptions that may be otherwise overlooked.

Thorough research integrated primary and secondary sources through interviews with parents, scholarly journal articles, web sites, and educational templates for improving communication. According to research, parents are to be considered valuable allies rather than disruptions in the teachers' day. An open door policy builds relationships which ultimately will reduce behavior and academic tribulations. The rapport will strengthen the teachers' bond with their students and their parents, as well as faculty, administrators, and the community at large.
Taking further time to initially form a relationship with the students' parents will ultimately lead to a more successful school year, reputation, and career for the teacher as well as building greater experiences for each child who enters his or her classroom.
Capstone Title: Collaborating with Parents beyond Parent/Teacher Conferences

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