Striking Up Conversations vs. Striking Out With Parents

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There were so many things we wanted to tell you, Teacher. Too many things we were left unsaid. So I’m writing to you. I’d like to tell you the things we didn’t have time for that first morning... We’re all counting on you. Every one of us who left our children with you that day.
—Richard F Abrahamson, 2002: 178-180

You, as parents, have entrusted me with the education of your children. I feel the weight of this trust with each lesson, every assignment and grade. There is so much that can be said, so much that needs to be said, to help you understand all that goes on in our class. There is just so little time...
—my response

When I first began teaching, I was straight out of university and very ‘self-focussed’ in my classroom and with my students. I thought of myself as a dedicated teacher, committed to my students. I attended numerous professional development opportunities exploring various teaching strategies and classroom management techniques with the aim of improving my practice as a teacher. Despite my best efforts, year after year there were always those I could not entirely reach or satisfy—the parents. Communicating with the parents of my students was something I avoided whenever I could. I would dread parent-teacher conferences and procrastinate over making telephone calls home because of a deep paranoia that I would be blamed in some way for the students’ poor achievement.

Mrs. Woodruff, the number of missed assignments indicated on A’s interim report is unacceptable on many levels. We have discussed homework and responsibility with A. Please adjust your parameters to inform us sooner when A. falls behind in his work.
—note from a parent following an interim report

Dear Sir, there have been four separate occasions in the last three weeks where you have been provided with the opportunity to receive information regarding A’s progress. I understand your frustration with A’s poor achievement, but A. must assume responsibility for his lack of effort as well as the missing assignment reports that you have obviously not seen.
—my response

In the past, when I would receive messages such as the one above, I would immediately become defensive. It took the life-altering event of becoming a parent myself to understand there was a flaw in my thinking. I was not the important one, the students were. If the parents were at times confrontational, it was out of concern for their children. My sensitivities served no purpose, were in fact a hindrance, when searching for solutions to these concerns. Now that I am also a parent, my perspective has shifted when interacting with the parents of my students. The dread
of possible blame still exists, but I am able to look at the larger picture and ask myself “How would I feel if this were my child?”

When my lack of initiative in contacting parents was taken into account, my answer to this question would have to be ‘frustrated and powerless.’ Parents are meant to be partners in their children’s education, partners who are informed and included at all stages, not just when there is a problem or concern. When I began working towards my Masters of Education degree, and the opportunity to investigate my own teaching practices presented itself, the obvious course of action was to look at ways to increase communications with the parents of my students in a proactive, rather than reactive, way.

**The Transition to Middle School**

The transition in grade seven from elementary school to middle school is often a difficult and confusing one for students, but also for their parents. Many parents are unaware of the new expectations that their children are facing and are therefore unable to provide effective support at home. Often, the students are not forthcoming about what is going on at school in an attempt to be independent (Becker, 1999; Rathvon, 1996). As a teacher of Grade 7 students, I am frequently made aware of how often parents are misled by their children in regards to school issues such as homework, missing assignments, test scores, availability of extra assistance, and so on.

A student’s success requires more than the efforts of a student and teacher. “When schools and families work in partnership, students hear that school is important from their parents and teachers and perceive that caring people in both
environments are investing and coordinating time and resources to help them succeed” (Epstein, 1992, 1141). The parent(s) must be involved in the process as well. Without support at home the students will struggle to manage on their own, particularly during a ‘transition year’ when so much is new and unknown.

I have been a grade seven mathematics teacher for the past six years. Each year I was aware of many of my students struggling with the various changes that coincide with the shift from elementary to middle school. The parents with whom I have had contact all express concern and a willingness to help smooth this transition, but are also unfamiliar with the new school and its system. I am often asked questions such as ‘how can I help’ and ‘how often is homework assigned.’ I had taken for granted that parents are aware of homework expectations and how to effectively help their child.

As I indicated earlier, I recognize that one of my greatest weaknesses as a teacher has been in the area of communicating with the parents of my students. Usually, my contact with parents has been a response to their initial contact. As a teacher of students in a transition year particularly, I see it as my responsibility to expand my communications with parents beyond its past level of mere ‘maintenance.’ I sought a true communication with parents so that all parties could act in knowledgeable and effective ways to promote the success of the student.

The Homework Issue

No other aspect of a child’s education connects home and school as much or as frequently as homework. Despite decades of debate about homework’s contribution to learning, international studies indicate that students who spend more time completing homework obtain higher scores on achievement tests and that time spent on homework is a strong predictor of student grades (Miller & Kelley, 1991).

Advocates of homework argue that homework “fosters a closer relationship between home and school and promotes independent work and study habits.” (Miller & Kelley, 1991, 174) Homework, although assigned and assessed by the classroom teacher, is most often completed in the home without the teacher’s assistance or guidance. Parents often become involved with homework as a means to support their child’s learning and to stay aware of classroom activities (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Bossler, & Burow, 1995).

Three important similarities are evident in three recent research studies (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Bossler, & Burow, 1995; Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee, & Mellencamp, 1994). Firstly, the studies indicate that parents want and expect to be involved with their children’s homework. Despite the challenges that sometimes accompany the assignments, homework was viewed as being necessary as well as a priority.

The second similarity is that the parents indicated that communication between the home and school was critical for a successful homework process. Parents desired more information regarding how, or whether, they should help with homework as well as how much they should help.

Finally, the parents considered themselves to be partners in their child’s education, as they should. Unfortunately, the implication existed in all three studies that the parents did not always feel they had enough information to work effectively in the partnership. The studies revealed the need for effective and regular communications between the school and home and this implication reappears throughout recent research studies.
Dwindling Dialogue

The majority of literature agrees that parents, regardless of grade level, desire information on how to help with their child’s learning at home (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Becker, 1999; Epstein, 1992; Keith et al, 1993; Singh, et al., 1995). Despite this desire, however, one study reports that “for every group of parents, over half the high school teachers reported only a little contact” (Dornbusch & Ritter, 1988, 76) and that the most contact was made with the parents of students already experiencing difficulty.

Teachers in the same study reported that they had little contact with the parents of average students and did not generally want more contact with them. In addition, it seems that parents are often unsure of how welcome their input or involvement would be (Balli, Demo & Wedman, 1998; Becker, 1999; Epstein, 1992). With both teachers and parents hesitating to contact one another, it often seems that no communication takes place until a significant problem exists.

Two studies indicated that parents desire consistent and regular communication, clear expectations regarding homework, and the opportunity to be part of any decision making affecting their child (Freytag, 2001; Jayanthi, Nelson, Sawyer, Bursack, & M. Epstein, 1995). Further research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to examine ways in which to improve home-school communication regarding homework. In addition, the study by Jayanthi et al. indicated that homework communication problems increase and worsen as students progress through school. Future investigations should attempt to establish why this occurs and when communication problems become acute so that parents and educators can take steps to reverse this tendency.

Within this research study, I explored opportunities to increase communication between the home and school, thereby providing the parents with an increased opportunity for awareness of school/class expectations and events. The purpose of my study was to explore and implement various strategies to increase communication with the parents of my grade seven students and to monitor the results. The study focused upon the answering of the following questions:

1. In what ways can I increase communications with parents?
   a. What forms of communication can be used?
b. How effective are the different types of communication?

2. Does increased communication with parents impact student performance?

3. Are there other effects of increased communications with parents that are noteworthy in terms of schooling?

I focused on this aspect of parental involvement in order to improve my own practice as a teacher. In addition, I hoped to further understand the roles of the parent and the student in the homework process. Secondary questions included:

a. Will increasing communication with parents clarify the confusion regarding homework expectations at middle school?

b. Will increasing parental awareness of expectations translate to increases in homework completion?

c. Do students view all parental support in regards to homework as a threat to their autonomy?

Re-Opening the Lines of Communication

In previous years my communications with parents have been limited to scheduled parent-teacher conferences, formal progress reports, and responding to parent-initiated contact (ie. notes, phone calls, etc.). At the start of the 2005-2006 school year, I implemented a variety of communication strategies designed to provide parents with information specific to their child’s homework and their child’s progress. These include:

1. monthly newsletter from academic subject teachers describing contact information, topics of study, important dates, reminders, and homework hints;
2. homework lists to be initialled by a parent or guardian and returned (Appendix A);
3. homework alerts to provide awareness when assignments were not being completed;
4. mid-term reports to be signed and returned by the parent or guardian; and
5. a parent homework assignment asking the parent to provide any information they believed would be of benefit to the teachers.

I also continued to participate in parent-teacher conferences and phone interviews as needed throughout the year.

The Communication Trail

In order to monitor the effects of the newly implemented strategies that I tried with the parents of my grade seven students, I gathered the following data:

1. sample of the team newsletter containing contact information, important dates, homework hints, etc.;
2. samples of homework lists initialled by the parents;
3. returned homework alerts, often containing comments from the parent;
4. copies of interim reports;
5. the parent homework assignment;
6. copies of notes and e-mails received from parents throughout the year;
7. student and parent surveys;
8. student records showing homework completion rates; and
9. a reflective journal compiled of field notes regarding various strategies, their implementation, responses from parents, and my thoughts regarding their effectiveness.
In order to look for patterns or trends, parent notes and messages were dated and copies of the teacher’s response were recorded. Grading spreadsheets were analyzed to determine the number of missing and late assignments as well as any increase or decrease in the students’ grades over two terms.

**Messages Received—Loud, But Sometimes Not-So-Clear**

Of the eighty distributed parent and student questionnaires, the rate of return was ten percent. Contrarily, the rate of return of interim reports, homework letters, signed tests, etc. averaged at over eighty percent. Returning course related reports was considered to be part of the students’ homework and would therefore be awarded a mark for completion. Students who did not return signed interim reports were also required to telephone their parents to explain that they had in fact received the report.

There was no incentive or consequence associated with responding or failing to respond to the questionnaire. The conclusion could be made that students, and perhaps many of their parents, will not voluntarily share communications between school and home unless there is an associated reward or consequence. It is also possible that the parents, despite assurances that the survey was completely confidential, were concerned that their responses could affect the teacher-student relationship.

Of the questionnaires that were returned, 87.5% were from parents of students with consistently high grades. This could indicate that parents are more comfortable communicating with teachers when their children are successful in school. While the respondent group was small, the anecdotal comments on the questionnaires revealed three similar concerns. Firstly, parents felt that the timing of large projects from more than one course at a time was an issue. Secondly, although parents saw homework as a priority, they revealed that balancing homework with extra-curricular activities and family schedules was often difficult. Finally, the parents expressed that good news needs to be communicated as well. These concerns are consistent with the findings of other research studies (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Freytag, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bossler, & Burow, 1995; Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee, & Mellencamp, 1994).

Analysis of field notes clarified the effectiveness of the implemented strategies. Two of the implemented strategies were discontinued during the course of the year. The team newsletter was only distributed once in September. Members of my teaching team found that the newsletter was cumbersome to maintain in the face of reporting periods and school interruptions such as teacher job action. I would like to attempt a team newsletter again in future years, perhaps sending one out each term rather than every month.

The use of homework alerts was also discontinued after the second term. The notices were difficult to manage and follow up on as the students would not fill them in and/or would not give them to their parents. The responsibility of the notices, therefore, fell to the teacher rather than to the student. Finally, the homework alerts were reactive, being sent home only after assignments were missed.

More success was experienced with a monthly homework list (Appendix A) that I created for Math and Science. Providing the student with a list of upcoming assignments and deadlines gives them the responsibility for their homework. Comments such as “thank-you for doing this” and “this will really help” indicated that the parents appreciated knowing what the assignments were so they could help their children organize their time. The lists were also beneficial to all students, not just those who struggled with completing their assignments. Students involved in extra-curricular activities found the lists to be helpful as they could plan ahead to work their homework into their busy schedules.
The homework lists were a proactive strategy, giving the parents information necessary to prevent missed assignments as well as information regarding homework expectations. The lists required advance planning on my part, but were also useful in regards to unit and lesson planning. For example, by looking at the curriculum a month at a time I was able to more effectively plan the number of lessons needed to cover specific topics. By planning ahead I found I was including more lab activities and ‘hands-on’ investigations in my science units than I had in previous years.

Strategies for communicating reports of student progress were also effective. Interim reports, optional after first term, are generally expected by parents as the dates are published in the school calendar. To ensure that the interims reports were seen by the parents, I had students who did not return their signed interims phone their parents. Again, the responsibility belongs to the students. Several parents, although unhappy with the missing report, were pleased to receive the notifying phone call. Throughout the year I received increased levels of parent-initiated contact immediately following interim and mid-term reports. I made every attempt to respond to my voice-mail and e-mail messages within a twenty-four hour period.

Comments from parents during these exchanges suggest that as time passes between the initial message and the response, the parents became increasingly frustrated. For example, quite frequently parents would reply to my e-mails by thanking me for responding so quickly and, during one phone conversation, a parent expressed disappointment that another teacher had not yet responded to a message left more than a week earlier.
Continuing the Conversations

Throughout this study I have found several communication strategies that I will continue to use in my practice as well as some that were ineffective in my classroom. In regards to the medium used to contact parents, I found e-mail to be more effective than the telephone as I could respond to these at my convenience without being concerned with time of day or catching the parent in a quiet moment. Parents also appeared to appreciate the option of e-mail contact as they were often concerned with being interrupted at work or having phone messages intercepted by their child. It is my intention to make my e-mail address more available to parents in the future.

Although my results have not shown substantial evidence in response to the question that increased communication has a positive effect upon student progress or homework completion, I feel that my interactions with parents this year have been more positive and less confrontational than in the past. Most parents appreciate that the effort is being made to keep them informed of their child’s progress and will therefore consider the teacher to be more approachable when problems do arise. Also, providing parents with some basic information regarding homework, such as expectations or future assignments, places the responsibility for homework on the shoulders of the students, not the teacher. Due to the small response to the student and parent questionnaires, I am unable to draw conclusions regarding my secondary questions although I will continue to pursue these questions in the future.

In addition to more positive interactions with parents, I discovered that the homework lists also helped to streamline other aspects of classroom organization and paperwork. For example, I would often receive requests for homework for students absent due to illness, vacations, or school suspensions. Having the homework lists prepared in advance of these requests meant that I was able to easily and quickly provide the necessary work. Also, although initially requiring time to plan and create, the homework lists saved valuable preparation time throughout the month as my lessons and homework assignments were already decided. The time I would previously spend planning could now be spent keeping my marks updated and the parents informed of any concerns.

In September 2006 my oldest son began Kindergarten, casting me for the first time as the parent in the Parent-Child-Teacher triangle. I now know what it is like to bring your child to school for the first time, letting them go into the care of another, hoping and trusting that the teacher will see in your child all the potential that you do. I now have experienced the ‘other side’ of parent-teacher conferences...worrying and wondering as it approaches if my child is progressing as he should be and feeling the sense of relief when nothing overwhelmingly devastating is revealed.

I know that my son and I have been very fortunate that his first teacher is someone who values communication and takes every opportunity to inform and involve the parents of her students. Yet, I also know that somewhere, sometime in the future we will not be so lucky. When that time arrives, I hope that I will remember how I used to feel when confronted by a concerned parent and that I will use that memory, and all I have learned from this research experience, to work with my child’s teacher in his best interests.

References

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**About the Author**

Laura Woodruff was born, raised, and now teaching in Chilliwack School District. She has been a Middle School teacher since September 1996. Mother to three wonderful boys, Laura is a University of British Columbia graduate for her B.Ed. and a University College Fraser Valley graduate with a B.A. In her spare time ("when I used to have some") Laura loves to read, scrapbook, ski, and golf.