

3. Reframing the Parent-Teacher Conference

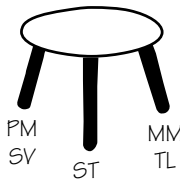
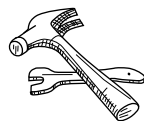
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If the classroom is a system (page 16) involving the teacher, student, and parent, then the link between the teacher and parent is the weak link in the system. All day long, communication occurs between teacher and student. Evenings and weekends, it occurs continually between student and parent. But between teacher and parent, there is just one quarterly communication: a group of letters and numbers on a report card, perhaps with a comment or two scrawled in the margin. The important knowledge within this system is not being shared effectively.

The parent-teacher conference was created to improve this link—but it, too, is rarely a learning experience. The teacher has a folder of notes about the child's strengths and weaknesses. The parent listens as the teacher runs down the notes for the scheduled fifteen minutes. Sometimes the teacher listens while the parent vents frustration. Both sides leave with their mental models of the conference intact—a ritual that ought to be fascinating for both sides but seems to end up being lackluster and frustrating. After a year or two, many parents stop going, and some teachers wish they could as well.

This article is not an exercise, because no single exercise will do. Every student situation, and every teacher, is different. Some teachers have a half hour or longer per semester to devote to each child. Others have a few minutes (and have to design accordingly). This menu of possibilities is based on the five disciplines:

1. Personal mastery—being honest about the strengths and weaknesses of current reality and nurturing to a child's own aspirations;
2. Mental models—surfacing assumptions about what is happening in class, the child's developmental stages, and the home environment;



3. Shared vision—talking about goals for the teacher, parent, and student;
4. Systems thinking—understanding academic performance in light of the full complexity of a student’s life;
5. Team learning—Teachers, parents, and students all have the same purpose: to achieve the best possible learning experience for each student for that year. Each member of the team possesses unique knowledge and understanding that the others lack. Each has the ability to act within his or her milieu: the teacher in class, the parent at home, the student everywhere else. And none of them has control over the whole situation.

The conference should be influenced by each person, and each participant’s views, including the student’s, should be seen as equally valid. Team learning, after all, is a process of seeing what each member of the team knows, so the team as a whole can act more effectively than the mere sum of its individual member’s actions.

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

Even when there’s very little time, parents or educators can effectively reframe a parent-teacher (or parent-administrator) conference by asking questions to build a common understanding of current reality. Educators can ask:

- What strengths do you see in your child?
- What does your child say about school?
- What kinds of activities, at school or elsewhere, seem to frustrate your child most?
- What kinds of activities excite your child? What does he/she play?
- Tell me about your child’s peers and social relations? Whom does he or she socialize with outside of school?
- What kinds of responsibilities does your child have at home?
- What goals do you have for your child?
- What goals does your child have?
- What is your child’s favorite subject or activity?
- What would you like me to know about your child?

Parents can ask questions like these:

- How does my child interact with you and other adults?
- How does my child interact with classmates?
- What activities engage or frustrate my child in class?

- What does my child do with unstructured time?
- What activities hold my child's interest the longest?
- How does my child work in teams?
- Whom do you team my child with and why?
- Based on your experiences with my child, what kind of classroom structure or instructional style would you recommend next year?
- What are my child's strengths?
- What areas need improvement?

MAPPING THE CHILD'S CURRENT REALITY

If time permits, mapping is a remarkably powerful tool for educators, students, and parents—any of whom can initiate the process—to set goals and monitor them and to document ongoing team learning. Families keep a copy and the school keeps a copy. Mapping also can help groups of teachers, or teachers and administrators, consider the whole-life situation of a child in difficulty. If issues arise, or if you are seeking expanded opportunities for the student, you can go back and ask, “What do we know about this child?” And if you can create the time, mapping can help turn parent-teacher conferences into beginning a shared vision.

On a sheet of paper, write the student's name. Then, in ever-widening circles out from the center, write in everything you can think of that represents an aspect of the child's life. You can use the “parents” and “educators” questions from this article to help generate elements for the map. Since everybody's thoughts go on the same map, they can reach insights together that neither would make on their own. The parent may say, “We've moved four times in the last five years, and my child doesn't make friends easily.” The educator might then respond: “You know, I've seen your child sitting back and watching the activity nearby without jumping in. Now I understand better what to look for, and I think I have some ways to work on this.”

If parents jump up the “ladder of inference”—making a broad generalization about the child or the school—the educator can say: “Let's talk more about that; tell me what you've seen, because I want to record this accurately on the map.” The parent can do the same. If the educator says, “She's a great kid,” the parent can say, “Well, in what way? What else on the map is the ‘great kid’ connected to?”

One map showed that a fourth grader had tremendous rapport with younger children; the teacher arranged for her to visit a first-grade class and tutor students there occasionally, learning a great deal about herself and her skills in the process.

If the map is drawn in September or October, then both the parent and educator can keep a copy. As issues arise during the year, they can look back at the map, reconsider what they know about the child, and add to it. It's always fascinating to watch the maps grow or change as the child moves through the grade levels.

}} For a sample concept map (in the primer), see page 121.