TRIAD CONFERENCE: IS IT A MORE EFFECTIVE WAY OF INVOLVING PARENTS AND STUDENTS?

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ABSTRACT. The present paper documents a relatively new approach adopted by a school to involve parents and students in the formulation of individualized educational goals and plans, in the collection of data to generate comprehensive profiles about the students, and, in the final assessment of students' performance. This paper assesses the effectiveness of the whole operation after one year. Feedback from teachers, parents, and students suggested that the three stages of the triad conference model were intimately related. All parties seemed to be satisfied with the outcome, but parents felt that the classroom teachers still dominated the conferences when the three parties were supposedly equal partners in the children's education. This could register initial adjustment difficulties teachers experienced in the transition from the traditional parent-teacher interviews to the more innovative format of engaging parents and students in all critical stages of the educational process.

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article illustre une démarche relativement nouvelle adoptée par une école afin de faire participer les parents et les élèves à la formulation de buts et de plans scolaires personnalisés, à la collecte de données pour brosser un portrait assez complet des élèves et enfin à l'évaluation du rendement des élèves. L'auteur évalue l'efficacité du processus au bout d'un an. La rétroaction des enseignants, des parents et des élèves incite à croire que les trois étapes du modèle de conférence à trois sont intimement liés. Toutes les parties semblent satisfaites du résultat, mais les parents estiment que les professeurs dominent toujours les conférences alors que les trois parties sont censées être des partenaires égaux dans l'éducation des enfants. Cela pourrait expliquer les difficultés préliminaires que les enseignants ont éprouvées à s'ajuster à la formule plus novatrice qui consiste à faire participer les parents et les élèves à toutes les étapes critiques du processus pédagogique.

Recent school reforms in the school governance mandated by most provincial governments across Canada focus upon the formation of parent advisory councils. Underscoring this unified effort is the general

assumption that parental involvement in public school operation is critical for school success.

In most mandated parent councils, parents are encouraged to participate in policy formulation, curriculum choices, and the development of school plans. At times, they are also entrusted to handle personnel management. Strictly speaking, these are domains that most parents have yet to be acquainted with. From the continuum of parental involvement described by Bloom (1992) and Epstein (1992), parents are still interested in coaching their children at home, assisting in field trips, and/or providing non-classroom services, rather than being "movers" and "shakers", initiating and monitoring basic changes in school structure and governance.

While the overall effect of parental involvement in these unfamiliar territories remains to be assessed, there is ample evidence in literature that supports the assertion that parents do exert significant influence on their children's school performance at every stage of their schooling. Tiedemann and Faber (1992), for instance, reported that maternal support had a significant direct impact on preschoolers' cognitive preschool competencies and academic achievement even when intelligence, age, and gender were taken into account. Wagner and Phillips (1992), likewise, confirmed that children's academic competence was positively related to father warmth. During the adolescent period, it was found (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992) that authoritative parenting (high acceptance, supervision, and psychological autonomy granting) led to better adolescent school performance and stronger school engagement. At high school, Grolnick, Ryan, and Deci (1991) reported that perceived parental autonomy support was positively associated with senior students' academic performance through perceived competence and control understanding. Keith, Reimers, Fehrmann, Pottebaum, and Aubey (1986) also concluded from their analysis that parental involvement positively influences the amount of time that seniors spent on homework and the latter had an important positive effect on student achievement.

Aside from the observed systemic influence parents had over their children's performance, other researchers focused on the impact of family structure and family environment on children's school achievement. Astone and McLanhan (1991), to cite a few, indicated that children who live with single parents or step-parents during adolescence receive less encouragement and less help with school work than children who live with both natural parents, and parental involvement

has positive effects on children's school achievement. Kurdek and Sinclair (1988) also reported that students in two-parent nuclear families had better academic performance and less problematic school behaviors than did students in either mother-custody or step-father families. They further emphasized that a family environment encouraging achievement and intellectual pursuits accounted more significantly for end-of-the-year grades than family structure or gender.

Given the profound influence that parents and the home environment have over school performance, and given that parents and school both share the same goals, it is ironic to note that the needs of institutions of learning are often in conflict with those of the individual child and family. Law and Mincey (1983) observe that open conflict and resistance to communication can be the rule rather than the exception. Alter (1992) further insisted that if the collaboration were not as complex an issue as it is, there would be no need for the proliferation of how-to manuals, suggested remedies to "bridge the home-school gap".

Essentially, the strained relationship between teachers and parents arises during the critical period of primary schooling when mothers have to learn to share the spotlight of their child's favour with teachers (Gordon, 1979). Mutual distrust and enmity also arise in situations where children have special needs. Parents frequently believe that teachers do not really understand their children's problems and seem to be too demanding (Law & Mincey, 1983).

From the viewpoints of parents coming from the lower socioeconomic class, schools tend to be viewed as large, unfamiliar, and unapproachable institutions (Cox, 1983). There is a deep conviction that schools are run for the more privileged classes in society.

The strained relationship between home and school has not been made easier when quite a few of the educators perceive parental involvement as a direct challenge to their professional autonomy. Openly, they will maintain that education is currently too complex and that parental mismanagement can intensify a child's learning and behavior problems and disrupt professional efforts to remedy them (Kelly, 1974).

A variety of remedies has been suggested to overcome the schism that exists between the school and parents. These include the utilization of common sense (Croft, 1979), the improvement of conflict resolution and interpersonal communication skills (Gordon, 1974), increased human relations training (Gazda, Asbury, Balzer, Childers, & Walters,

1977), value clarification (Howe & Howe, 1975), negotiating resolutions (Alter, 1992), and assertive training (Rutherford & Edgar, 1979).

There is little doubt that all these suggested strategies will ease the tension between parents and teachers and minimize the intensity of mistrust as problems arise. They have not, strictly speaking, fostered a more permanent and sustainable working relationship between the two parties centred around some common purposes or objectives of assisting children. To do so will require a new forum of information exchange on a continuous basis which promotes mutual dependency and assistance in nurturing the growth and development of children under their care.

The purposes of this paper are, first of all, to introduce the triad conference model recently implemented in a K-8 public school in West Manitoba that provides such a forum for parents, teachers, and students to work together. Secondly, the paper describes the initial analysis of the model to detect whether it is more effective than the traditional teacher-directed planning, parent-teacher interviews, and student assessment.

In relation to the second objective, it seems critical to know: (1) whether the triad conference will enhance open dialogue in the planning process and bring about greater commitment and ownership among all parties concerned, (2) whether the process of profile generation will be more inclusive in terms of students' academic, social, and emotional skills, and their behaviours, and attitude towards learning; and (3) whether the assessment stage of the triad conference is not dominated by classroom teachers, contains less personal bias, and results are clearer and more understandable.

THE TRIAD CONFERENCE MODEL

The impetus for the development and implementation of the triad conference model came from the practical need to replace parent-teacher interviews which were viewed by the second author of this paper to be totally inadequate in monitoring the progress or problems of students. Conceptually, the model drew its inspiration from a number of literature sources. First, true partnership between parents and teachers should be built on two-way communication (Leeper, Witherspoon, & Day, 1984). Second, with genuine communication and dialogue, there was mutual learning (Friedmann, 1973) between school and home. People do not merely receive factual information but create their

own unique understandings of the world; their knowledge structures and these unique understandings require on-going dialogues to achieve common understanding. Third, there is a growing realization that by allowing the major constituency (parents) in the planning and decision-making process, educators might pay for sacrificing the traditional professional authority. However, in so doing, educators become the mediators of conflict rather than being the target of attack (Lam, 1993).

Nature of the Triad Conference Model

As the term "triad conference" implies, the model involves an on-going dialogue among the tri-party of a classroom teacher, parent, and student. At the beginning of each new academic year, the classroom teachers invite parents of each of their students and the student concerned to attend the triad conference. Parents are invited to describe their children's study habits outside the school settings. They are encouraged to share with the classroom teacher their children's behaviors and habits that influence the child's attitude toward learning. They are encouraged to shed light upon their children's classroom behaviors observed by the teacher, and to be involved in monitoring their student's learning at home.

Students are required to self-evaluate and share their own strengths and weaknesses, attitudes, and interests with their parents and classroom teachers. They are asked to think critically and make reasoned, valid, supportable judgments. Based on this initial discussion, they are asked to record their self-evaluations by using learning logs, writing report cards on themselves, keeping journals, and by being involved in preparing their own portfolios.

Classroom teachers' role is to coordinate the triad conference, and to provide a frame of reference in identifying key expectations in both subject matter as well as in acceptable behaviors that are in compliance with the spirit and intent of the overall school mission statements. Teachers will provide opportunity for mutually sharing and learning about each student in their class with the two partners.

Distinct stages of the Triad Conference

There are basically three stages in the triad conference. In the first stage of each triad conference, input from the concerned parent and student, and the teacher's own observation will constitute the basis for formulating some common instructional goals to guide the efforts of class-

room teachers, parents, and students as the academic year begins to unfold. Other than establishing some common frame of reference, the goals so defined solidify joint ownership and partnership to which all parties are committed to achieve. Should such goals fail to materialize, each party will have to bear some responsibility and this avoids the traditional finger-pointing and blame-shifting when things have not gone well.

As the three partners proceed further into the term, comprehensive profiles of students' performance both in school and at home begin to be compiled. The major tasks facing the parents, students, and teachers are to scrutinize and summarize a wide array of information in a coherent and accurate way. This second stage of triad conference could be conveniently termed the joint profile generation and interpretation of data. In contrast to a typical situation where classroom teachers base their assessment on limited observations, assignments, and test results, and where they are sole interpreters of students' achievement, the triad conference actively seeks parents' and students' input so that the assessment becomes meaningful and all-encompassing.

When the situation requires immediate remedial actions, parents will know what they should do at home to assist the school in helping the students concerned in solving the problems identified. Students will reflect upon the problems identified and see how they themselves can assist in reaching a solution. Teachers will reflect upon their instructional strategies and contemplate remedial activities that will facilitate students' internalization process. Through this collaborative process, there is no need for the traditional approach of contacting the surprised, and often irritated parents; there is no need to deal with a student who tends to cover the facts or deny the problems; and there is no need to point fingers at each other, blaming each other for creating or exaggerating the problems or not addressing the problems early enough.

In the third and last stage of the triad conference, the three parties, having gone through a series of summative evaluations will be fully prepared for the final formative evaluation. Such a process should neutralize the personal or emotional biases of either parents, teachers, or students in preparing the written report. The report itself documents the successes or areas of strength of the students concerned. In upper grades, the final marks or grades will be entered in each subject area. Operationally, the triad model can be depicted diagrammatically as below:
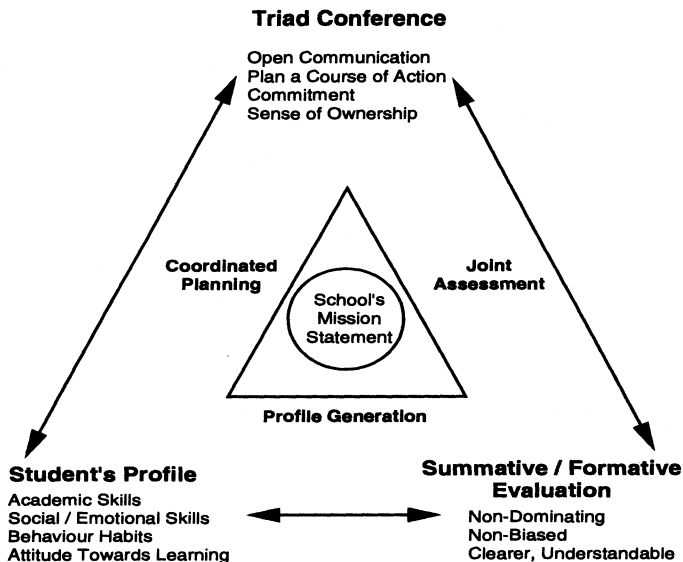
Triad Conference

Open Communication
Plan a Course of Action
Commitment
Sense of Ownership

Coordinated
Planning

School's
Mission
Statement

Joint
Assessment

Profile Generation

Student's Profile

Academic Skills
Social / Emotional Skills
Behaviour Habits
Attitude Towards Learning

**Summative / Formative
Evaluation**

Non-Dominating
Non-Biased
Clearer, Understandable

FIGURE I. Triad Conference Model

Based on the final assessment of students' achievement in the first term, the triad party has some reliable source for negotiating a new set of instructional objectives for the second term. All parties concerned will have a clear set of references in enhancing the learning environment before the next round of data collection begins.

Throughout the entire process, parents, students, and teachers have developed a common frame of reference in guiding the progress of students in the cognitive, affective, and the psychomotor domains. The traditional "we-they" mentality of school-home relationship is completely removed.

PREPARATION OF PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND STUDENTS FOR TRIAD CONFERENCES

Given this triad conference is an experiment, breaking away from time-honoured practices, much preparation was required to ensure some chance of its success when implemented in a K- 8 school in Western Manitoba.

By using one of the in-service days in early September, teachers were the first participants to be oriented to this approach. The benefits of

sharing decision-making powers with parents and students in planning, organization of relevant data from school and home, and the development of comprehensive assessment of students were fully explained. Concerns about the various mechanics of adopting this approach were clarified. Formats for the summative evaluation were also decided. After the initial in-service, the principal of the school had weekly sessions with each grade level of teachers to discuss the details of implementing the triad conference model.

Parents and students had also undergone a session of general orientation. A special meeting for all parents and students was held at the beginning of the term to coincide with the Open School event. Parents and students were briefed on the new approach and their new responsibilities. Questions pertaining to the process were clearly answered. Following the orientation, each classroom teacher invited the parents and their children into the classroom to experience the triad conference model. Parents skeptical of this approach were given more opportunity to discuss their concerns further. Parents who were unable to attend the orientation and the classroom session were seen on an individual basis by the principal or teacher in their homes.

Students were prepared for the triad conference throughout the school term. All students were taught to reflect on their work. Students collected samples of their work and practiced participation in conferences with other students from a higher grade level.

The full adoption of the triad conference model began after one full year of preparation by all participants.

PLAN AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Initial obstacles to be overcome

One of the initial obstacles discovered was that a few teachers had shown reservation about the new approach to be adopted. Conditioned by past practice, they found the venture into the uncharted course somewhat nerve-wrecking. They raised much concern about parental intrusion into the evaluation process. They questioned the ability of students to engage seriously in goal formulation and the sharing of useful information in profile generation; and they were doubtful about the validity of immature students' self-reflection and self-assessment. While private meeting with the school administrators appeased somehow the anxiety and doubts, it was not until the time when parents

overwhelmingly endorsed the new approach that these teachers began to prepare themselves for this new practice.

A second obstacle encountered by the school was that a small fraction of parents were unable to be contacted. As there were about 33% of the families headed by single parents in the neighbourhood, some found it difficult to meet teachers during the school hours. Others were insecure to assume the new roles and were reluctant to take part. In situations like these, the school not only had to accommodate those with conflicting schedules but also, through the arrangement of a school-community liaison officer, to pay home visits or to meet in neutral territory, such as coffee shops, to further persuade parents of the utility of taking this approach.

A third problem to be overcome was related to immaturity of lower grade students which could hamper their meaningful input into the three critical stages of discussion. To overcome this, classroom teachers at the lower grades utilized pictorial means to assist children to express their inner feelings, their preferences, and their self-assessment. While children at these ages lack sophistication to articulate their points, they seemed, after practice and guidance, to grasp the general purposes of the triad conference and were able to take part in a sensible way.

Methodology

After one year of implementing the triad conference model, some initial assessment of its effectiveness was undertaken.

Surveys of feedback from teachers, parents, and students were conducted simultaneously and the results were subject to statistical analyses.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT: To probe the main questions posed about the triad conference, three sets of questionnaires were prepared respectively for parents, teachers, and students. Each set of questionnaires consisted of eight identical or comparable questions attached with Likert-type five-point scales. In accordance with the conceptualization of the triad conference model (figure 1), the eight questions were developed to reflect the three distinct stages of the new approach. The first question probed the utility of the model in collecting students' data in the areas of their academic skills, social and emotional skills, behavior habits, and attitude toward learning. The second, third, and fourth questions separately examined the manner in which assessment was undertaken. Specifically, the three questions investigated the extent that the conference was dominated by the classroom teacher, about the degree to

which the personal bias of each party might distort or confuse the outcome of the conferences and about clarity and comprehensiveness of the report generated. The last four questions pertained to the nature of the conferences and the overall planning process. Briefly, the fifth question examined the degree of openness in communication during the conferences. The sixth question looked into the degree participants in the conference felt that their suggestions were adopted into the planning process. The seventh question challenged the participants to reflect the extent that they were committed to fulfill the goals established. The last question examined the extent that participants developed a sense of ownership in goals formulation.

SAMPLE: Of the 289 families that were approached to provide feedback on the triad conference, 236 families (or 82%) responded to the questionnaire. Of these families that took part in the study, about 59% were "traditional families", 32% were from single-parent families, and 9% were from combined families.

There were 413 students (K- 8) involved in the triad conferences. About 49% were boys and 51% were girls, with ages ranging from 5 to 16.

All teachers (19) in the school participated in the study. Over half had more than 20 years of teaching experience in the public school system.

Given various class sizes and diverse needs of students, the number of triad conferences conducted by teachers varied substantially. About 63% of the teachers facilitated between 30 to 60 conferences during the academic year; 21% of the sampled teachers conducted between 60 and 90 conferences; and about 16% of teachers chaired between 91 to 120 conferences.

Findings

In response to the research questions posed earlier, three separate analyses were done respectively with the data collected from teachers, students, and parents. Examination of the mean scores of the eight scales by each group suggested that all tended to rate the model quite positively. Classroom teachers in particular seemed most enthusiastic about the new format of engaging the parents and students in every aspect of the learning process even though it took far longer and more intensive time than the parent-teacher interviews. Students as a whole also endorsed the process even though the mean scores tended to be lower than those of their teachers and they varied from grade to grade. The most encouraging sign arising from the process was that the middle year students (Grades 5-8) were also supportive of the new approach, now that they played a more active role in shaping their educational

priorities. Parents found the process useful as they now contributed more fully to the planning, data collection, and assessment stages of their children's progress. However, from parents' mean scores pertaining to the fact that assessment stages were not dominated by classroom teachers, and contained less personal bias, we noted that they rated these two aspects less favourably. This suggests that from parents' perspectives, classroom teachers still tended to exert a greater say in the final outcome of their children's learning process.

Correlational analyses (see Table 1 on page 260) revealed that from the perspectives of classroom teachers and students, the three stages of the triad conference model were significantly related. In other words, open dialogue, joint plan of action, greater commitment, and ownership of the planning stage lead to a more comprehensive set of data pertaining to all aspects of students' skills and behaviors and these lead to a fairer and more understandable reporting of evaluations. From the perspectives of the parents, the format of the conference did lead to a more comprehensive data collection of students. However, given that the conferences were still dominated by classroom teachers, the data on academic, social, and emotional skills as well as students' attitude toward learning were somewhat incomplete. And this somehow diminished the nature of "open dialogue" that the model proposed to achieve.

Based on the analyses of the data collected, it is quite apparent that in answering the three research questions posed earlier, the triad conference model does promote more open dialogues among the three key partners – teachers, parents, and students – and secure greater ownership and commitment in carrying out the individualized educational plans. Given that traditional "silent" partners have been transformed to assume a more active role, data profiles about individual students are now more comprehensive. Furthermore, as parents and students are now involved in the planning and data generation phases, they find the assessment process to be clearer and to have greater meaningfulness. On the other hand, parents still find classroom teachers displaying the tendency of dominating the discussion when they come to the assessment stage. Conceivably many classroom teachers might feel that assessment is within their professional jurisdiction and they should have every right in making the final decision. Viewing from the intent and purpose of the triad conference model however, one may also conclude that teachers are still having some difficulty in adjusting to the needed role transformation. Many might be so well entrenched in the traditional teacher-parent interview session that they simply transfer their authoritative style of conducting the meetings to the new format without fully aware of the need for change. Unless there is a conscientious

TABLE I. Correlational analyses of the Triad Conference Model

Stage 1 / Stage 2 (rows = Stage 2 variables: A, S/E, B, Att; columns = Stage 1 variables: Op, P, C, O)

	TEACHERS' RESPONSE				STUDENTS' RESPONSE				PARENTS' RESPONSE			
	Op	P	C	O	Op	P	C	O	Op	P	C	O
A	.89*	.85*	.93*	.83*	.41*	.39*	.45*	.41*	.49*	.44*	.36*	.33*
S/E	.89*	.86*	.85*	.87*	.49*	.44*	.33*	.46*	.56*	.53*	.46*	.49*
B	.90*	.89*	.88*	.88*	.38*	.53*	.36*	.41*	.54*	.57*	.49*	.53*
Att.	.83*	.83*	.87*	.88*	.43*	.44*	.36*	.41*	.56*	.61*	.48*	.57*

Stage 2 / Stage 3 (rows = Stage 3 variables: N.D., N.P.B., c/u; columns = Stage 2 variables: A, S/E, B, Att)

	TEACHERS' RESPONSE				STUDENTS' RESPONSE				PARENTS' RESPONSE			
	A	S/E	B	Att.	A	S/E	B	Att.	A	S/E	B	Att.
N.D.	.70*	.75*	.68*	.69*	.40*	.27*	.31*	.38*	-.03*	.06	.16*	-.12
N.P.B.	.65*	.62*	.57*	.58*	.29*	.35*	.32*	.30*	.15*	.33*	.36*	.39*
c/u	.36*	.38*	.41*	.43*	.28*	.36*	.30*	.30*	.47*	.53*	.60*	.66*

Stage 3 / Stage 1 (rows = Stage 1 variables: Op, P, C, O; columns = Stage 3 variables: N.D., N.P.B., c/u)

	TEACHERS' RESPONSE			STUDENTS' RESPONSE			PARENTS' RESPONSE		
	N.D.	N.P.B.	c/u	N.D.	N.P.B.	c/u	N.D.	N.P.B.	c/u
Op	.57*	.50*	.46*	.41*	.35*	.36*	-.11	.37*	.60*
P	.60*	.47*	.44*	.35*	.41*	.26*	-.26*	.39*	.57*
C	.56*	.46*	.45*	.48*	.46*	.40*	-.18*	.26*	.56*
O	.66*	.58*	.49*	.50*	.44*	.41*	-.25*	.42*	.53*

Op: Open Dialogue   P: Plan of Action   C: Commitment   O: Ownership

A: Academic   S/E: Social/Emotional   B: Behaviour   Att: Attitude

ND: Not Dominated   N.P.B.: No Personal Bias   c/u: Clear & Understanding

attempt on the part of teachers to reorient to what the triad conference model intends to achieve, its effectiveness of bridging the gap among school, home, and students will be severely jeopardized.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Triad Conferencing is one of the most meaningful formats with which parents should feel important and comfortable to be involved. One would see that in its initial stages, the process is more time consuming and more intensive than the regular parent-teacher interviews; the benefits, however, seem to far outweigh the trouble that the school staff has experienced. The effort of bringing parents directly into the process of information sharing, goal development, and various phases of evaluation has actually transformed potential critiques into dependable allies. There is no more second guessing on the part of parents regarding what the school aspires to do with respect to their children. There are no more communication gaps between home and school. This is the format that nurtures on-going cooperation between parents and teachers and transforms students from passive to active learners, having direct input in how they are going to achieve their professed goals. The challenge, however, is to continue inservice classroom teachers in the process of their role change so that they should become true facilitators rather than monopolizers of conferences. By relinquishing the traditional power of directing the instructional process, they will help transform parents from "outsiders" to "insiders" in major education decision-making and emancipated students from passive receivers of information to active explorers of new knowledge in line with the school mission statements, instructional objectives, and their own capabilities.

NOTE

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