

Establishing a Collaborative Relationship between a Teacher and Parent:

A Reflective Analysis

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Scenario Abstract: *I took on the role of a grade one general education teacher who is about to take over the class of a teacher going on maternity leave in May. I arranged a meeting with a parent of a child who just joined the class one month prior and whose parents moved because they were not satisfied with their children's educational opportunities at their old school in a very small island community. After meeting with the teacher I was going to replace, I decided to meet with several parents ahead of time so that I could collaborate with them about decisions on how I was going to run the class for the remaining month. I wanted to ensure the transition for the class was as smooth as possible, both in terms of their academic progress as well as maintaining the social fabric of their classroom community. I found out one of my new students, "Colin" (pseudonym) had joined the class most recently, that he is from a culturally diverse family, and that his parents were especially concerned about his delay in learning how to read. As I am a teacher who is aiming for Shelley Moore's "outside pins," I asked to meet with his family first (SSHRC, 2016).*

According to Marilyn Friend and Lynne Cook, the first step in conducting an interview is to establish the goals of a communication event (2013). My stated goal for this mock interview, an introductory meeting, was to gather input from parents (in addition to meetings with the previous teacher, administration, other school personnel and with the class itself) in order to ensure as smooth a transition as possible from the previous teacher to myself. An unspoken but highly significant goal for me in this meeting was to meet and form a welcoming, open, and nurturing collaborative relationship with the family of potentially one of the most vulnerable of my new students who might need the highest level of intervention. Secondly, I wanted to co-construct a transactional understanding (Friend & Cook, 2013) of where the child is at academically, socially, and emotionally, and to ensure he felt like a full member of the class, despite having joined it so late in the year. My third goal was to evaluate, update, and/ or create a learning plan to better meet the child's needs than the old school the family had left. I wanted to get a sense from his parents as to what they thought was working well at the new school and if anything could still be improved further.

Analysis of Interview

Setting

One of the first challenges for this assignment was picking an appropriate setting. Given that some parents do not feel comfortable in a school environment, we decided to meet in a café picked out by the parent, “Alexandra”. As her favourite café, it could be considered her “habitat” – safe and familiar, with no time constraint or pressure (Friend & Cook, 2013). It was a little bit noisy in the video, but completely fine in real life – actually the level of background music and chatter (and the fact that it was a big café with lots of free tables near us) meant that our conversation was totally private. Although of some concern beforehand, the “message to noise” ratio ended up being great, with few sound or visual distractions and a high level of physical comfort (Friend & Cook, 2013). We only really got interrupted once by a particularly noisy

espresso machine, so I selected a part of the interview that did not include that noise for the video and transcript part of this assignment.

A Channel that Matched the Message

When I invited “Colin’s” mother “Alex” to have a meeting with me, I asked her which setting she would feel most comfortable in, and who she would like to have at the meeting. She was happy to meet with me on her own as her husband is away for work during the week and she didn’t feel her child needed to be at the meeting as he is only 6 and they have a good rapport, so she felt she could speak easily on his behalf. She agreed to my request for an in-person meeting, which I felt would best allow me to effectively and confidentially share a large and complex amount of information while forming a new relationship in a relaxed, open and warm environment (Friend & Cook, 2013). I felt I was able to evaluate Alex’s understanding and control her attention in this environment and through this in-person “channel” (Friend & Cook, 2013), where neither of us would be distracted by the demands of the children, as we might be at the school.

Communication Skills to Use

I sought to establish professional and ethical communication by using non-verbal attending behaviours and demonstrating strong responding and interviewing skills (Friend & Cook, 2013). I also sought to provide culturally sensitive and responsive services by building respectful foundations and bridges towards parity (Friend & Cook, 2013; Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010). I tried to show that I had been developing awareness and knowledge of a variety of cultures, that I value and respect difference, that I’m open to learning and that I’m committed to self-examination and change (Olivos et al., 2010). Ultimately I think I was successful in developing a personalized, informal, helping relationship because I took seriously the feedback

and opinions that were clearly important to the parent in question, and changed my original plan in accordance with her valuable insights into what was already working well for her son, despite it running counter to some of my assumptions (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Communication Skills to Practice

During the “reflective writing four square chart” activity our class undertook, I wrote down some of my personal and professional strengths, my strengths in parent meetings, my feelings and thought about parent meetings, and synthesized ideas about what I was interested in exploring further to foster better parent/child relationships with regard to school environments. I think this is important for inclusive education not only in elementary but also secondary schools where I normally work (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Liston, 2005). I thought I was generally pretty good at gaining the trust of parents but needed to work on some specific skills deemed necessary in conducting interviews (Friend & Cook, 2013, 81).

I think I demonstrated areas of previously identified strengths by chatting to relax the atmosphere, stating the purpose of the meeting and asking if I could take notes before doing so. I also successfully clustered and ordered my questions and statements in a funnel from open and indirect questions through to more specific, closed questions, once an open rapport had been established, and only after explicitly gaining permission to ask more specific questions (Friend & Cook, 2013). I used prefatory statements and a bit of presupposition to focus my inquiry and gain the information I needed while still ensuring my respondent felt comfortable through a delicate subject (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Specifically, I wanted to avoid “verbal landslides” and give others the opportunity to speak more. I think I already use prefatory statements a lot to make others more comfortable, but can sometimes use them too much and end up giving a monologue. Instead, I wanted to try to use

silence, pauses and look down at the table to give more verbal space to the parent (Friend & Cook, 2013). I also wanted to try to be aware of my stance to make sure it was open, to mirror the other person, and to listen carefully so that I can convey that I am competent and trustworthy (Friend & Cook, 2013).

While I think I succeeded in monitoring my time and not rushing to cram all of my planned questions in, I was not so successful at using silence and reducing my use of encouragers. While I do think I established a trusting relationship of parity through using some of these strategies, I think with a less assertive conversational partner I would need to work much harder to be patient and use more pauses. By carefully monitoring the interaction, however, I think I successfully adjusted my communication strategies as needed (Friend & Cook, 2013).

Reflection on Learning

Learning from the Mock Interview

I think the main thing I learned from this process is that no matter how carefully I prepare for a meeting with a parent, such as by crafting my statements and questions word by word and agonizing over their order until it is perfect, it will all fly out the window as soon as I finish my welcome! This is because it felt completely inauthentic to look down at my list of questions, and yet memorizing them word for word would have been a gargantuan task that I would not be able to replicate in the context of a normal teaching workload (see Appendix for list of planned questions). The strategy that is left is to prepare, practice and review my performance in these types of situations until these skills are internalized and I don't even think about them – it will just be the way I communicate naturally.

Learning from Reviewing the Video

I didn't realize before watching the video just how many encouragers I use – it was a near constant stream of head bobbing, “uh huhs”, “that’s fantastic!” and “great to know!” However, in this case, I don't believe these encouragers served to cut down on the speaking time of my outgoing and confident interview partner, which can be a concern with parents who are more tentative (Friend & Cook, 2013).

A more significant finding was that the parent had such a different and emphatic opinion on the benefits and disadvantages of pull-out special education services as opposed to co-teaching with a special education professional in the classroom. For example, in the interview video Alex emphasized her son's preference for pull out sessions with “Mr. Wilson,” the reading specialist: “He really likes it. He likes it because he learns better when there's not a lot of distractions and it is more one-on-one. But uh, so I think he sees the benefits from being taken out into a more calmer, quieter or smaller group.”

It was also interesting to note her perspectives on peer tutoring both in and outside of the general education classroom. Both ran contrary to my learning about the possibilities offered by co-teaching in this course (Bauwens & Hourcade, 1997), so I decided to dig a little deeper, by using a prefatory statement: “...because one thing I had been considering was keeping the exact same model or inviting Mr. Wilson to come into the classroom and then we can co-teach. So that I just wanted to check and see if some of the students receiving his services ever felt excluded...”

After viewing the video I became curious: does the research back up Alex's opinion that a segregated approach is significantly better than in-class instruction, even if she believes her child does not in fact have any sort of learning disability or language processing difficulty? Apparently, the research on “pull-out” reading instruction compared with co-teaching, especially

when confounded by different peer-mentoring models is very context-dependent (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2014). I decided to err on the side of the parent in the short term during the interview and continue the pull out sessions as she requested, but to start to collect data in class based on the latest research on both effectiveness of reading instructions as well as impacts on peer relationships in order to be more informed for future collaborative decisions on this matter for next year.

Appendix 1: Interview Goals and Questions**Goal 1: Meet and form open, honest, warm, nurturing, welcoming relationship with parents**

Hello Alex, welcome and thanks for meeting with me! My name is Ms. Menzies and I'm the new teacher who will be covering your child's teacher's upcoming maternity leave. I'm looking forward to learning from you about what has been working well and what may need improvement so I can make the transition between teachers as smooth as possible, especially for your child and family.

I understand your family has just recently moved to the city from a small island. That must have been a big change, especially in the middle of the year! Actually, I moved here recently as well. How has it been going so far?

(Use responding skills to indicate attention and empathy)

Do you mind if I jot down some notes as we chat? I don't want to forget anything important. Can you tell me a bit more about your move to Victoria and what you hoped our school would offer your child?

Ms. Murchison told me that you are focused on improving your child's reading skills. I'm wondering about which aspects of our school's approach to teaching reading has been the most helpful for your child? How does our approach compare with that of your child's previous school?

I can understand how that would be frustrating. Do you think your child's delay in reading is due entirely to poor instructional practices or are you at all concerned that he might have some learning or language disabilities?

Goal 2. Co-construct transactional understanding of where child is at academically, socially, emotionally, and to what extent s/he feels like a full member of the class.

I don't want you to feel like you're being put on the spot but would it be okay if I asked you some more specific questions so that I can better understand how you feel your child is doing at our school?

How do you feel that your child is doing academically?

How about socially - is he making friends with his classmates?

How is your son doing emotionally - does he like coming to school?

How about physically- is he getting enough time to play outside? Does he enjoy gym class? Any favorite sports or games he likes to play with his classmates?

Was there anything specific that his current teacher did or said that made him feel especially welcomed into the class?

In the new grade 1 curriculum there is a real focus on family and community. The class seems to be doing great, but I would like to make it an even more fun and safe community. One thing I've noticed is that the class is very ethnically diverse, and the kids seem to clump together according to what they perceive to be their family background. What has been your child and family's experience so far in terms of cultural inclusivity and feeling like he belongs in the class?

With my previous class, I found that learning how to say hello and thank you in each other's home languages really helps to break down cultural barriers and helps the kids get along better. It can even be languages each family wishes their children could speak. For example, my husband is First Nations and my background is Scottish, so we are trying to teach our daughter how to speak Hul'qumi'num and Gaelic. Are there any languages your child speaks at home or you'd like him to learn?

I hear you. I was inspired by some of the research I did as part of my teaching degree revealed that kids who are learning more than one language actually can learn other languages better at the same time, including English.

Goal 3: Evaluate, update, and/ or create a learning plan to better meet child's needs than old school

So I noticed you said your child is participating in pull out sessions to focus on reading. Has that been particularly helpful?

Do you think he wants to continue with those sessions or would he like to do anything differently?

What would you like to see happen?

I ask because we do have three options moving forward: we could either invite reading Specialists into the classroom for all the students to access on a regular basis, or in order to continue accessing external special education resources for your son, we would need to undertake some sort of learning plan process. This could be fairly informal where we use the MAPS process to brainstorm your child's strengths, stretches, passions, and your concerns for him. Or it could be quite formalized and involve assessments to help us create an individualized education plan, which you may have heard being called an IEP.

Which of these routes appeals to you the most to explore further? Who else would you want to consult in this process?

Would it be helpful if I shared my observations on that?

I'd like to make sure I'm communicating clearly. Could you please summarize what you've understood me to say about our three options for Colin's future reading development?

Closing: Well, I look forward to getting to know Colin and working with your family to provide him with the best school experience possible. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today! Are there any questions you would like to ask me?

Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share?

Please contact me anytime – here is my email address and phone number.

Have a great rest of your day!

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