

Let's Look at Parent-Teacher Conferences

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Skillful leadership in effecting desirable parent-teacher relations is imperative if teachers and parents are to work cooperatively for better understanding of children. This account by Celia Burns Stendler, assistant professor of education, University of Illinois, Urbana, illustrates one means for helping teachers achieve greater effectiveness in the area of lay cooperation.

OUT OF MANY EXPERIMENTS in group dynamics have come techniques for effecting changes in behavior which can be applied to various problems in the field of education. One technique which has been successfully used in the group process is the sociodrama. Through the dramatization of a problem situation the attention of the group is focused upon strengths and weaknesses in the performance. Out of the subsequent analysis comes practical help for all those who are participating in the group process.

STUDYING PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES THROUGH SOCIOGRAMA

There is general agreement in educational circles that parent-teacher conferences are a very desirable means of furthering effective work with children in school. It has also been recognized that the area of parent relations is probably the most difficult one in which teachers have to deal and may very well be the area in which their performance is most inadequate.

While various reasons have been pointed out for teacher difficulty in this field, one of the most important may

be that this is an area in which teachers have not been trained to work. Teachers, for the most part, have been taught to deal with children, not with adults. Although they have been told that conducting parent-teacher conferences is one of the activities in which they ought to engage, too often they are not helped to do a good job with these conferences. Even when some training in conferencing with parents has been given, one might question the effectiveness of a training which pretty largely relies upon the method of exposition. How the sociodrama became a means for clearer insights into problems of dealing with parents is illustrated in this account of one activity in a graduate course in education.

After a preliminary discussion of some of the psychological factors underlying parent-teacher conferences, the class agreed to try some role playing. A brief description of a boy who was to be the subject of the conference was presented to the group:

Henry is a fifteen-year-old high school student with an IQ of 130. He is a tall, extremely thin, flat-chested, and sunken-cheeked boy with protruding teeth and receding jaw.

He has had many illnesses and must wear glasses.

This boy is always sloppy in appearance, seldom looks clean, and hardly ever has his hair combed. He often loiters listlessly in the school halls and he always looks fatigued and lacking in energy. In the classroom his attitude is one of languid indifference. He sits on the end of his spine, slouched down in his seat with his legs up or stretched out in front of him. His meager contributions to class discussion are made in a drawling monotone, except on the infrequent occasions when he becomes argumentative. When he does feel contentious his voice has a distinctly whining quality. In his attitude to school regulations he sometimes plays the role of indifferent or high-handed objector. Sometimes he is sullen, uncooperative, and intent upon "getting away" with as much as possible. He does not go out with girls, and in school appears indifferent to them.

One summer he thought he'd like a job and he asked his father to get him employment. When the father explained that he could not use his own position to help his son procure a job but urged the boy to find one on his own initiative, Henry refused on the ground that he knew he couldn't.

As for his classroom accomplishment, teachers note unevenness in quality and quantity of work, poor study habits, failure to meet requirements for written work, short span of interest, disinclination to accept responsibility to carry on work independently, an attitude of rebellion, inattentiveness and passivity, interspersed with occasional energy and cooperativeness. Only in athletics does he seem consistently interested; in spite of the handicap of a far from robust physique, he has attained proficiency in several sports. But although his skill is recognized by his peers, he is in no sense a leader in athletic activities.¹

Following the description of Henry, one member of the class was selected to play the part of the teacher and

another to play the part of Henry's mother. A wire recorder was set up to record the conference, and the scene, opened with the parent at the door ready to come into the classroom. Following the conference the class attempted to clarify the role of the teacher in a parent-teacher conference. Several possible roles were described:

The teacher as sympathetic listener.

Some teachers use the conference to find out more about a particular child. When this is the teacher's purpose she asks a few leading questions about the child to encourage the parent to talk and makes sympathetic comments from time to time. She may end the conference with a few words of advice.

The teacher as imparter of information.

In some school systems the conference is replacing the report card as a means of communicating to parents a child's progress in school. The teacher will use records and samples of a pupil's work in reporting progress in school subjects as well as general adjustment.

The teacher as the omniscient one.

The purpose of this conference is to give advice to the parent. It is assumed that the teacher knows the pupil, knows the total situation, and knows what is best for both parent and child.

The teacher as counselor.

Here the conference is designed to help the parent, through discussion, develop insight into the causes of her child's behavior. As a result of such insight parent and teacher will work out a cooperative plan for bringing about a change in behavior.

ANALYZING THE CONFERENCE

With these roles in mind the students turned to an analysis of the conference

¹ Adapted from Zachry, Caroline B., and Lighty, Margaret, *Emotion and Conduct in Adolescence*. New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1940.

with a view toward identifying teacher roles. Students recognized that the particular role the teacher played helped to evoke a particular response from the parent. A very important part of the analysis was to watch for such cause and effect relationships. A play-back on the wire recorder facilitated such an analysis. A verbatim account of the conference with comments from the class discussion is presented below.

Teacher: Good afternoon, Mrs. Smith. Do come in.

Parent: Good afternoon. How are you?

Teacher: Have a chair, Mrs. Smith. Wouldn't you like to take off your coat and make yourself more comfortable?

Parent: Thank you. I guess you sent for me because we've got quite a problem in Henry. Isn't that right?

Teacher: I'm afraid you are right, Mrs. Smith. Henry isn't doing well in any of his school subjects. In fact, the only thing he is doing well in at all is sports—the coach reports he is pretty good in some of those. I've been wondering how many clubs he belongs to. Does he belong to many outside organizations?

(Teacher begins with a negative report on Henry and immediately assumes the initiative for the direction of the conference by a question. The question is misleading because it might imply that if Henry does belong to many clubs he may be spending time on them which he should be devoting to school work.)

Parent: Well, as a matter of fact he doesn't belong to any outside organizations. His academic work hasn't been good and we've sort of discouraged him; and he hasn't really been interested in joining up with any organizations or doing anything outside of school other than sports.

(Parent speaks confidently. She assumes

she has a reason for keeping Henry out of clubs which will be accepted by the teacher.)

Teacher: I think I can speak freely with you, Mrs. Smith, and tell you Henry's IQ is a good deal above average. Now it may be that because he is bright some of his classes aren't tough enough for him. It may be that if he were with a faster group of students he would be more challenged. Perhaps he is bored with some of his work.

(The teacher's role is now made very apparent. He is the omniscient one who will tell the parent possible reasons for Henry's behavior. Because of his own lack of knowledge, he is ready to jump to superficial explanations of behavior.)

Teacher: I think there is something else, too, and that is if Henry becomes good enough in basketball so that he makes the team and then finds that he can't play because of his academic record, that may work as an incentive to get him to study more.

(Encourage students to make the team in order to give teacher a club which he can wield to get them to study. This is peculiar motivation to be advocating.)

Parent: Yes, it may work out that way.

(Parent is not too enthusiastic about the teacher's plan. In fact, she has already been put on the receiving end in this conference.)

Teacher: I think he should be encouraged to enter into some outside activities. He needs to become more social minded and I think if he were encouraged to join some organizations that that might help him. If I remember correctly from reading Henry's record he was sick a good deal as a child and it may be for that reason that you didn't encourage him to mix with other children as much as he might have, and it may be that you

avored him for fear of what might happen if you didn't.

(Teacher continues in his role of the omniscient one. He has gone into the conference with a preconceived idea of what is best for Henry and now reveals his plan. Again he advances a theory to explain Henry's behavior, for which there is little evidence. His explanation implies a criticism of the mother.)

Parent: There is another side problem and that is that Henry's father is a bit of a problem. He has never been a very encouraging kind of person and he has tended to put a damper on some of the things Henry has tried to do. Our ideas about the bringing up of Henry differ a good deal.

(Mother responds to the criticism by making the father a scapegoat. She can now effectively refute the teacher's suggestions without exposing herself to criticism.)

Teacher: It looks as if some of the missionary work will have to start at home with Henry's father, doesn't it?

Parent: That's a hard thing to do, you know.

(Mother is safe now. She can make father out to be a pretty tough customer.)

Teacher: Have you ever thought about a boy's camp? You're financially able to afford it and I should think it would be a good thing for Henry.

(Teacher is unable to get around the obstacle of the father so offers another plan.)

Parent: Well, there again I run into difficulty. Now I approve of camps for boys as the kind of thing I'd like to see Henry do, but his father has different ideas on the subject and every time it has come up he has put his foot down and said he didn't think that was the kind of thing we should spend money on. He thinks Henry needs more work, not more play.

(Mother has found an excellent alibi and continues to use father for all he's worth.)

(Teacher is puzzled. He can't figure out

how to get rid of father. Meanwhile he asks a question.)

Teacher: What kind of work?

Parent: Well, there's quite a bit of asparagus grown around these parts and Henry's father thinks that he might get a job picking asparagus in the Spring, or he might get odd jobs of other kinds as they happen to turn up. But that kind of thing doesn't seem to appeal to Henry and he hasn't wanted to do it. Now when there's a party or any entertaining going on he seems ready for that and that bothers his father a good deal.

(Parent lets the teacher know Henry is social under certain conditions and that his parents have a plan for Henry. Parent now has the upper hand in the conference.)

Teacher: Now, on the contrary, in school he is not social minded. He doesn't enter into any of the activities or social affairs and it was for that reason that I suggested the camp as one way of getting him into some of these things. After all, a boy can't pick asparagus forever.

(Now the teacher is on the defensive. He lets the parent know she's wrong about Henry's social adjustment. He ridicules the parent's plan for Henry.)

Parent: Well, of course we have higher ideals for him, too, but one of the difficulties is trying to realize them. Now I think what Henry needs right now is a chance to talk over his problems with someone, preferably a man, because it's hard for a boy as he gets older to confide in his mother. Of course, his father would be the logical one, but it seems as if there's a gap between Henry and his father. That's a real problem and it's one that I don't know how to handle. The other day I did ask Henry just casually which men that he knew he particularly liked and which ones he felt he was close enough to talk

things over with, and he did mention a few.

(Parent is reluctant to relinquish the reins. She continues in a dominant role in the conference by making another suggestion for Henry.)

Teacher: Who were these men? What kind of things do they do?

(Teacher is curious. Will he be one of the men Henry can confide in?)

Parent: Well, one of them runs a grocery near us. He's one whom Henry admires a great deal.

Teacher: Well, why don't you satisfy both Henry and his father by seeing that Henry gets a job in the store? Wouldn't that be a good thing to do? Wouldn't that be a happy solution for this whole thing? Henry's father would fall in line with that, wouldn't he? Henry could work there after school evenings and on Saturday.

(Teacher falls in line with the mother's ideas and makes a proposal in keeping with them.)

Parent: Well, yes, I suppose that would work. What would be your suggestion, that I contact this grocer to see about getting Henry a job?

(Parent is ready to act on the teacher's suggestion when it is in line with her own thinking.)

Teacher: Well, yes, I should think that that would be the thing to do. I'd talk it over with the boy's father first and then I'd contact this grocer to see what could be worked out. But then I think, too, we ought to see if we can't get Henry into some of the school clubs. What are his hobbies? What are some of the things he's interested in?

(Teacher comes back to original theme. But will Henry's difficulties be solved by mere joining of clubs?)

Parent: He seems to like machinery

and he likes to tinker with things. Teacher: He's interested in machinery, is he? Yet he isn't taking any of the machine shop courses—probably because his IQ is high and so he has been steered into the academic courses, which he dislikes. I don't know why he dislikes them but he seems to. It may be that they aren't tough enough for him. It may be that we could work him in with a faster group to provide more competition for him, but meanwhile let's see if we can't get him into some of these clubs and interested in some of the social activities.

(Is Henry's IQ really high enough to justify this theory?)

Parent: I guess the next step for me is to go ahead and contact the grocer and see if I can get Henry a job there.

Teacher: Yes, I think that's the best thing to do. Meanwhile we'll watch his progress and see what happens.

Parent: Yes, I feel that something has just got to happen so we can get Henry steered in the right direction. Well, thank you for all your help, and it's been so nice to have this chance to talk with you.

Teacher: Thank you for coming, Mrs. Smith, and I'm sure this will get Henry started in the right direction.

(Will it? Will Henry's apparent sense of inadequacy really be helped by getting a job? What if he falls down on the job? Parent has not been helped to think through the problems so that she has any real appreciation of Henry's needs. Emphasis has been placed on doing things *to* Henry—getting him into clubs and jobs—and Henry may fail in both because there has been no basic change in his feeling about himself.)

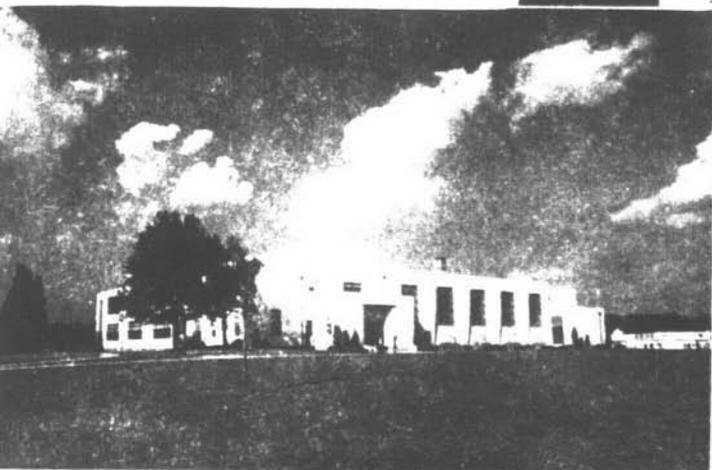
POINTING UP THE GENERALIZATIONS

A summary of the points brought out in the analysis of the conference was attempted, and the following generalizations agreed upon:

An exchange of ideas



Battle Creek, Mich.



Greenbelt, Md.



*Room to
work and play*



*Teachers know
intimately
and
understand
children*

Tuttle School, Minneapolis

► *The role the teacher plays in the conference bears a direct relationship to the personality pattern of the teacher.* A dominant personality may overpower the parent with suggestions and advice to the point where the parent may temporarily acquiesce. An aggressive personality may be openly critical and attack the parent for her methods of child rearing. The socio-drama may enable the teacher to gain insight into the typical role he plays in a conference, to see what effect such a role has on the parent, and to bring about a change of role.

► *The role the teacher adopts helps to determine the response of the parent.* The role of critic may bring about a defensive attitude on the part of the parent. If the criticism continues long enough, the parent may seek a scapegoat in the form of the other parent or a grandmother to whom the blame for the child's behavior can be shifted. The role of adviser may find the parent searching about for excuses as to why the advice won't work. "I tried that but it didn't work out for this

reason . . ." typically prefaces such excuses. Then the teacher is put on the defensive, points out to the parent she really hasn't tried the teacher's solution because she got off the track at a particular point. Eventually the parent may end up by accepting a piece of advice which may or may not be followed and which may or may not be effective.

► *Attempting to shift roles in the course of the conference may be difficult to do.* If the teacher starts out as the omniscient one, telling the parent the answers, she may establish such a relationship that when she later tries to establish an attitude of working together to solve a problem she will be unsuccessful.

► *Teachers need to know more about child behavior and development before they can counsel effectively.* All too frequently the advice given to parents has been grounded in faulty notions of child psychology, and teachers have been ineffective in helping parents achieve insight because they are lacking in insight themselves.



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