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“Who’s afraid of talking to parents?” Professionalism in parent-teacher conversations

Special Issue Editorial

Most publications from educational research which focus on parent-teacher relationships open by mentioning at least one of the following four observations: (i) Most teachers get poorly prepared for communicating with parents during their formal teacher training (Aich & Behr, 2010; Dotger, 2010; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Krumm, 1996; Neuenschwander et al., 2005; Walker & Dotger, 2012). (ii) Many teachers evaluate working with parents as one of the more stressful and challenging aspects of their work (e.g., Johns, 1992; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Sacher, 2008; Terhart, Czerwenka, Ehrich, Jordan & Schmidt, 1994). (iii) Pupils profit from positive contacts between parents and teachers (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002; Carter, 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Keyes, 2000; Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). (iv) Talking to parents is an important task teachers face in their everyday work (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1987; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Walker & Dotger, 2012).

Consequentially, extensive practice-oriented literature exists that seeks to inform teachers about how they should interact with parents (e.g., Hennig & Ehinger, 2003; Hertel, Bruder, Orwat-Fischer & Laux, 2010; Seeger & Seeger, 2010), but not too much research that would allow for drawing evidence-based conclusions on how teachers should handle these challenging encounters. What is promising is the

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recent advent of research on training programs which seek to improve (becoming) teachers' skills of talking to parents (Aich & Behr, 2010; Walker & Dotger, 2012; Gartmeier et al., 2015; Hertel, 2009). So, studying the issue of professionalism in teacher-parent conversations is an important, yet challenging goal for educational research. This special issue features current research that aims at improving this situation. In order to underline the relevance of the subject in focus, this introductory chapter illustrates why encounters between teachers and parents are so challenging and difficult. Our main point here is that teachers and parents differ in many respects which, in our view, group around three important areas: First, their relationship to the child in focus. Second, their scope of responsibility for this child and, third, their role and position in the educational system (Katz, 1984; Keyes, 2000). These three areas are described in the following.

Area 1: Relationship to the child

Parents and teachers differ in the relationship to the child they talk about when they meet and engage into exchange. We argue that these differences relate to two aspects (or sub-dimensions):

Firstly, parents are emotionally attached to their child to a much higher degree than it (usually) is the case for the teacher. For teachers, it is important to maintain an appropriate professional distance to the children they teach (Sacher, 2008), which has been described as *detached concern* (Maslach & Pines, 1977). At first sight, this situation could lead to the assumption that parents act more impulsively and spontaneously in teacher parent encounters. However, as Pillet-Shore (2014) shows, many parents are eager to meet teachers at eye level. This means, they tend to stress the rational and concerned aspect of their role and hide their emotional attachment to the child in order not to lose their credibility when talking to teachers (cf. also Kotthoff, 2012).

Secondly, most parents very strongly identify with their children (Katz, 1984). This notion is underlined by current reports on highly involved, so called *helicopter parents* (Shoup, Gonyea & Kuh, 2009; Wilhelm, Esdar & Wild, 2014). Teachers, on the other hand, normally have lower identification with the particular pupil. This is because they regard a pupil primarily as part of a larger group (i.e., a class) they are responsible for. Current research investigates the professional vision of teachers, e.g. with respect to classroom instruction (Seidel, Blomberg & Stürmer, 2010). It is very plausible that teachers also develop professional vision with regard to particular students in the sense of a diagnostic competency (Schrader, 2013). So, unlike parents, teachers view children in more standardized ways as part of a larger group of individuals (i.e., the class) that all receive the same treatment (i.e., the lessons) and are evaluated on a regular basis in more or less standardized ways (i.e., through tests).

Area 2: Scope of responsibility for the child

Parents are broadly responsible for their children: „There is nothing about the child that is not the parents’ business“ (Katz, 1984, p. 7). This means, parents have to cover multiple roles, and be educators, breadwinners, counselors, private teachers, organisers of recreational activities etc. Besides, the period of time during which the parents bear these responsibilities for their child is not limited in a clear way: Many parents do not abandon their caring role throughout their whole life. In contrast, Keyes (2000) argues that teachers adopt a less emotional role that is characterized by higher objectivity and rationality. In terms of responsibility, this means that the teacher is responsible for instructing the child, mostly in one particular subject area and for a limited period of time (e.g. one school year). Compared to parents, the teacher has only very narrow and limited responsibility towards the child.

Area 3: Role in the school-system

Most parents are laypersons in the pedagogical field. However, they know their own child very well and have raised, accompanied and taught it over many years. In contrast, teachers are certified professionals (e.g., Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Beck, Sembill, Nickolaus & Mulder, 2009) in the provision and organization of school-related instruction. This means, in all questions related to didactics, to subject-matter, and to learning and instruction at school, they mostly have superior knowledge and competencies than parents (Krumm, 1991; Ulich, 1993).

Besides, parents could be described as *affected outsiders* of the school system: The way in which this system works and the quality it provides are highly relevant for them; yet, they can only observe the system from the position of outsiders or take part as peripheral participants. Teachers, on the other hand, are *responsible insiders* in the school system. This means, they have a strong position in this system and are responsible for the work they do within it. On the other hand, teachers themselves do not create the rules and regulations inherent in the school system. This means, they might see themselves as being “victims” of regulations and high demands and as having very limited degrees of freedom in their daily work. Summing up, it seems safe to say that teachers have a stronger position in the school system than parents do.

Summary and consequences

Taken together, it can be said that parents have a close and highly emotional relationship to their child for which they are broadly responsible. Still, they have rather low school-related expertise and a weaker position in the school system than teach-

ers. In contrast, teachers have a more detached and less emotional relationship to the child in question, for which they have narrow and limited responsibility. Unlike parents, however, they have a strong position in the school system they are experts for. Besides, they are certified professionals in matters of organizing instruction. In brief, parents are high in affect and low in systemic influence, whereas teachers are the more powerful participants in parent teacher meetings and possess a more detached and objective view on the child in focus.

These basic conditions can be seen as a framework helpful to understand challenges and pitfalls of parent-teacher conversations: Of course, most parent-teacher meetings take place at school. This means that parents – who mostly go into conversations with teachers as the weaker, but more emotionally involved party – meet teachers on their terrain, need to understand their language and be(come) familiar with the terms and regulations of school as a complex, maybe sometimes irrational, administrative system. Moreover, despite teachers are professionals in learning and instruction at school, they (mostly) are anything but professionals in the very business of talking to and counseling parents (Hertel, 2009; Sauer, 2015). Besides being less well educated than professional counsellors, they face a much more challenging task: This is because as they teach a child in question, they mostly are part of any problems that they negotiate with parents. For example, if a child's grades are disappointing, the reason might well be the way the very teacher provides instruction. So, even if teachers are highly professionalized counsellors, they act under more difficult circumstances and cannot adopt a perfectly neutral role like "real" counsellors because they also have to justify their own courses of action (Ulich, 1993).

Further, as parents seem to become more and more demanding (Shoup et al., 2009; Wilhelm et al., 2014), they might urge teachers to give them advice and propose solutions to school-related problems (Gartmeier, Gebhardt & Dotger, 2016). For teachers, this is an attractive role as they can demonstrate their competence and be more in control of the conversation. However, giving advice is a very problematic behavior: Quickly suggested solutions might miss the actual core of a problem and not fit into the everyday life of parents and pupils. Hence, chances are rather low that such solutions actually lead to improve complex and problematic situations.

Summing up, we hope it has become clear that establishing professionalism in teacher-parent conversations poses high demands upon teachers and teacher educators. This should underline the relevance of the common goal pursued by the contributions gathered in this edited volume – namely to better understand these demands and to develop and investigate strategies for how to meet them.

Overview of the special issue

The present volume is divided in two sections: The contributions in the first section investigate questions directly related to professionalism in parent-teacher conversations. The texts in the second section focus upon strategies for how to develop and assess this aspect of teacher professionalism. The contributions are described in more detail below.

Part 1: What is professionalism in teacher-parent conversations?

How can we describe and model teachers’ professionalism in parent-teacher conversations? This fundamental question is addressed in the first contribution of the present volume by Regina Jucks and Lena Päßler-Kuppinger, entitled “Teachers’ and parents’ beliefs about effective teaching and their assumptions on the other group’s perspective”.

In the third chapter, “Parent-Teacher Counseling: On ‘blind spots’ and didactic perspectives. A qualitative-reconstructive study on teachers’ counseling responsibilities”, Daniela Sauer further explores relevant antecedents that affect parent-teacher encounters.

Part 2: How can professionalism in teacher-parent conversations be developed and assessed?

A training approach which is very relevant in this respect has been developed at the Pedagogical University of Schwäbisch-Gmünd: “The Gmuend Model for teacher-parent conferences – Application and evaluation of a teacher communication training”. This second chapter of the edited volume was authored by Gernot Aich, Michael Behr and Christina Kuboth. In the fourth chapter, Anne Wiesbeck and her colleagues investigate “Simulated conversations for assessing professional conversation competence in teacher-parent and physician-patient conversations”.

A comprehensive and differentiated discussion of all four chapters is provided by Heike Buhl and Johanna Hilkenmeier; their contribution is entitled “Professionalism in parent-teacher conversations: Aspects, determinants, and consequences. A competence-oriented discussion”.

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