

Project 308

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Partnerships of Change:

Transforming Language in Three-Way Conferences for English as an Additional Language Student Success

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General Overview

The purpose of this participatory action research project was to strengthen the partnership between English as an additional language (EAL) parents and their children's teachers so schools can better support academic success of EAL students. Shawna Jurgens and Brenden Kroeger, the teachers involved in this study, working with Dr. Hyunjung Shin, Dr. Zhi Li, and Shannon Storey from the University of Saskatchewan, endeavoured to bring this study to fruition. Our experiences indicated the potential existence of a gap between EAL parents and teachers in their understandings and expectations of three-way conferences. To address this need, data collection was to include observations of three-way conferences and follow-up focus groups with EAL parents and their school-age children and interviews with the children's content-area teachers. Despite initially wanting to collect data within three schools, data was collected within a Saskatoon school as well as a rural school to understand needs within diverse EAL populations. The expectation was to critically analyze the discourse and communication patterns in three-way conferences and to examine how EAL parents, students, and teachers co-construct expectation and meaning. This grant was to be completed within the 2020-21 school year.

Timeline

While we received approval to commence work on the grant in the 2019-20 school year, COVID put a pause on this study's moving parts in the spring of 2020. One of the biggest reasons for this pause was that there were no three-way conferences in the spring of 2020. Therefore, we asked for an extension into the 2020-21 school year. During the 2020-21 school year, the team wrote and applied for ethics. This process lasted from fall until March of 2021, when both grant funding and ethics approval were released. Julia Daantos and Xiaoxue Xie were hired as independent contractors to translate and interpret for families and students, transcribe threeway conferences and focus groups, and code interviews. A call went out to parents, teachers, and students to participate in the study. Unexpectedly and despite all efforts, we received fewer teacher participants than intended and no parent or student participants. We forged ahead and completed the teacher interviews, study, and report seen here.

Recommendations are included within the document.

Project Report

Introduction

Student-led conferences occur as a means of supporting learners in Saskatchewan K-12 content classrooms. These conferences include teachers, their students, and the students' parents and/or other key family members. However, the effectiveness of these conferences with learners and families is uncertain when the first language of the family and learner is not English. With financial assistance from the McDowell Foundation, a research team was established consisting of an elementary teacher of English as an Additional Language (EAL) active in the STF (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation) Professional Growth Network SK TEAL (Saskatchewan Teachers of English as an Additional Language), a high school content-area teacher, and three University of Saskatchewan researchers. This team planned to study communication, potentials, and limitations of three-way conferences to support the academic success of English language learners. The teacher researchers sought to examine the discourse between teachers, families, and students within three-way student-led conferences, and through this process find effective ways to support families and the academic success of students.

Three objectives were identified at the start of the study:

- 1) Develop recommendations regarding ways to enhance student success from EAL parents and teachers collaboratively developing linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy;
- 2) Enable teachers to generate and articulate knowledge about EAL teaching and learning relevant to their own classrooms and those of their community of practice; and
- 3) Increase publication of knowledge about teaching and learning grounded in both rural and urban Saskatchewan schools to enhance academic success of the province's K-12 EAL learners.

Although the McDowell Foundation provided fiscal resources to support participation in the study and meaningful information was generated through analysis of interviews with teachers, the team found that non-financial barriers resulted in much more limited parent and student participation than hoped. The most important barrier was identified via the refusal of all parents to sign waivers allowing recording of the three-way conferences, which restricted the material available for analysis to teacher interviews. This meant that the largest part of the data needed to meet the objectives could not be collected. Findings therefore could not be triangulated as originally planned on the basis of original data from a combination of three-way conference recordings, focus groups, and interviews with teachers. Only two sources – teacher interviews and reviewed literature – were available. Recommendations generated by the study, therefore, deal not only with the original research questions but also with the need to more effectively engage families in future discourse by identifying and reducing non-financial barriers.

Literature Review

Schools and families need to engage with each other – actively, meaningfully, and as equals – to effectively support the cognitive learning and social development of the children in their care. Effective engagement is important for all families, but has particular importance when the child and parents are not first-language (L1) users of the dominant language of the school. One important tool of engagement with our English as an additional language/emergent bilingual families is the student-led three-way conference.

Research demonstrates that student-led three-way conferences are effective tools to create parent engagement (Clemensen, 2021) and improve student achievement (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000) in the general student population. Cummins (2000) notes that “In effective schools, teachers have a strong commitment to home-school communication and parents are involved in formal parent support activities.” (p. 266). Lewis (2002) observes that parents need to see themselves as partners and leaders in the whole home-school communication process to ensure that communication generates effective support for the child.

Chang, Choi and Kim (2015) state that ELL (English Language Learner) parent participation in conferences with teachers is imperative for student success in reading, writing, and motivation. However, traditional parent-teacher conferences “take place literally behind the child’s back” (Lemmer, 2012), which does not support the need for students to take responsibility for their learning. Epstein et al. (2002) found that when the student takes the lead in presenting their learning and challenges, the conference “engages, guides, energizes, and motivates students to produce their own successes.” (p. 8). Fuller (2010) found that many parents who have experienced both student-led and traditional parent-teacher conferences prefer student-led conferences because “the presence of the students helped with student-parent communication” (p. 101) and “because of the emphasis on student responsibility.” (p.102).

Although parental participation in conferences is essential, parents of all backgrounds experience barriers to participation. ELL parents experience more barriers than other parents. Clemensen (2021) finds that, in general, to increase parental attendance at conferences, schools and teachers need to be cognizant of employment hours, childcare needs, and any other factors that create attendance barriers.

Another significant challenge, which is particularly difficult for parents of ELLs, lies in the ways teachers and parents make meaning in conferences. Davitti (2013) and others note the need for interpreters to help communication in conferences with parents who are non-native speakers of English rather than relying on the student as intermediary, but interpretation deals with only one facet of the meaning-making process. Greenfield, Quiroz, and Raeff (2000) posit that parents and teachers socially construct their image of the child through conferences and that differing cultural beliefs, such as individualistic versus collectivistic worldviews, create dissonances, cause misunderstandings, and therefore generate complaints. Differing social constructions of education and teacher roles are also a challenge. Shin and Robertson (2018) found that schools and parents, especially EAL parents, had different expectations and understandings of schooling. McBrien (2011) attributed such gaps to cultural perspectives, stating that, "In many Asian and African countries, parents respect teachers' opinions above their own with regards to their children's education, and they would consider it disrespectful to dispute teachers' decisions." (p. 76). Matthiesen (2016, p. 320) discusses the role of interactional processes as distinct from cultural differences as a cause of silence from parents during conferences, which may emerge from the power imbalance in the construct of conferences with greater power accruing to the teacher (Baker & Keogh, 1995). Cheatham (2007) observes that "teachers often control and dominate parent teacher conversations" and that "parents and teachers mutually constructed and maintained this power asymmetry within their interactions." (p. 22). As noted by Elbers and de Haan (2014), "Parents and teachers use their ideas about education to reach a common ground or, alternatively, to oppose each other and create distance from the other partner in the conversation" (p. 261). Distance is unsurprising when parents and teachers have different notions of what meaning has been communicated, what relationships of power or equality exist, and who, exactly, the child is. Pushor (2015) notes that teachers need to "look inward at their beliefs and assumptions and how they may be, consciously or unconsciously, conveying messages that may cause parents to feel an unwelcome part of their children's schooling, uncomfortable on the school landscape, or judged lesser in some way by the teachers." (p. 249).

For a student-led conference to be successful in enabling all parties to emerge with shared meanings and an understanding of their equality as partners, both teachers and students need to prepare appropriate plans prior to the conference. Williams (2004) found that teachers need training in effective family communication in general and the art of the conference in particular, and that such training needs to focus less on ethnicities of families than on values and practices which cannot be defined strictly along ethnic lines. Minke and Anderson (2003) report on a successful pilot of three-way conferences that resulted in parents who "enjoyed hearing children discuss their own strengths, needs, and strategies to solve problems" and "expressed surprise at how accurate children's appraisals wereTeachers concurred that children took an active, even central role in the conferences. They shared parents' perceptions that students displayed unexpectedly mature behavior and made honest, insightful comments about their own learning." (p. 60). In the Minke and Anderson study, preparation focused on "the need for students to be active participants, not simply observers, and it appears that this occurred" (pp. 51-52) thanks to training-generated changes in teacher perceptions and to skills that the students developed in order to present their own learning and challenges to parents at the conferences.

Minke and Anderson's otherwise comprehensive study did not include post-conference interviews with students, only with parents and teachers. In contrast, peer-reviewed literature regarding pre-conference preparation for three-way conferences seems to lack focus on preparation by parents, addressing only preparation by teachers and students.

Many other studies have been carried out on parent-teacher conferences in which parents are L1 (first language) speakers of English. However, few have examined three-way conferences in which parents and children are L2 (second language) users of English; very few of these have examined three-way conferences that are student-led, and although some good peer-reviewed Canadian research exists on L2 family engagement (for instance, Pushor, D., 2015), none has focused on L2 families in relation to student-led three-way conferences. A large gap exists, therefore, in our understanding of this essential area of support for EAL learners in PreK-12 education across Canada.

Methodology

The original research plan was based on four data streams in addition to the literature review: focus groups with parents, focus groups with students, interviews with content-area teachers, and recordings of three-way conferences.

As planned, two teachers conducted participatory action research in two Saskatchewan school divisions, one urban and one rural. Originally the research was to include data collection in the areas of observations of the three-way conferences, one-hour follow-up interviews with EAL parents in one focus group and students in another focus group, and interviews with teachers. However, the team was unsuccessful in obtaining consent for participation from parents and students, so observations of three-way conferences and focus groups did not occur. Despite having documents interpreted for the families and communication attempts made utilizing interpreters, parents and students chose not to participate in focus groups and refused to allow conference recording. There is uncertainty regarding the reason for this lack of participation, although in relation to focus groups, one family shared that they did not have the time. Further research is needed.

Research Plan and Methods

Individual Interviews with Teachers

The data were collected using qualitative methodology consisting of a semi-structured interview. The two teacher researchers, along with part of the team, constructed and edited the questions to ensure more reliability and validity. These interviews obtain broader perspectives of teachers regarding their expectations and understanding of three-way conferences to support EAL families, students, and learning. The teacher-researchers conducted individual interviews with eight content-area teachers from their own schools. Due to data collection occurring during COVID-19 and the school division's protocols during this time, interviews occurred utilizing Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

Recordings were transcribed verbatim, and multiple rounds of data-coding using NVivo 12 software occurred next. Statement of the Research Questions (RQs):

The study asked three primary questions:

1. What are some unique needs and challenges encountered by English as an Additional Language (EAL) parents, students, and their content-area teachers while they engage in three-way conferences in Saskatchewan?
2. How do EAL parents, students, and teachers co-construct the meanings and expectations of three-way conferences regarding learning and teaching during the linguistic interaction?
3. What do findings of the study suggest with respect to ways schools can build more constructive partnerships among EAL parents and teachers in order to develop linguistically and culturally responsive pedagogy to enhance EAL student success?

Teacher participants

Teacher Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience	Urban or Rural	Grades Taught
Jane	Female	14	Urban	Elementary
Bob	Male	1	Urban	Middle years
Jessica	Female	15	Rural	Middle years
Matt	Male	7	Rural	Middle years
Teddy	Male	10	Rural	High school
Dan	Male	4.5	Rural	High school
Sam	Male	4	Rural	High school

Findings

Teachers' Perceived Purposes of Three-Way Conferences

The interviewed teachers shared five perceptions regarding the primary purposes of three-way conferences:

- establishing and maintaining connection with student families,
- showcasing students' learning to parents,
- updating and sharing information about students with the parents,
- eliciting feedback from students and parents, and
- shedding light on differing perspectives brought forth by students, parents, and teachers.

For example, Sam, a high school teacher with four years of experience, pointed out that three-way conferences "open up the door for communication." Middle years teacher Jessica believed that three-way conferences are opportunities to "gain insight" for both students and their parents. Jessica also mentioned that sharing "the message" with both students and their parents can facilitate further discussions within students' families if needed.

Nevertheless, the teachers varied slightly in their perceptions of the purposes of threeway conferences. Dan, a high school teacher with about five years of teaching experience, emphasized the purpose of updating parents about their children's learning and standing in class, followed by collecting teaching-related feedback from the students. On the other hand, Bob, a new teacher of middle years learners, prioritized the personal connection side of three-way conferences as a "welcoming environment" which enabled him to show a "different side" of himself as a teacher to the students and parents. For both Matt and Teddy, seasoned teachers with seven and 10 years of experience in middle years and high school respectively, the main purpose was for parents to "check in" with the teacher and ask questions.

Most of the teachers agreed that three-way conferences generally achieve their purposes, although a number of factors affect overall success. Teachers' perceptions played some role, together with other factors such as time constraints and English proficiency of the

participating parents, in defining the conferences' effectiveness. For example, Teddy tended to feel more accomplished if parents asked many questions, and less so when the meeting was short. Jane, an elementary teacher with 14 years of teaching experience, saw three-way conferences as a way to discuss students' progress and "areas of improvement" but reported that sometimes limited time allotments simply did not allow her to cover both, leaving a sense of unfulfilled purposes. Dan, who valued communication with parents about students' standing, commented that the fulfillment of purpose "depends on the parents." Dan explained that, "if parents have really low English ability ... I think it doesn't (achieve its purpose)."

Challenges

Teachers identified challenges of three-way conferences with EAL families in four main categories: logistics, language barriers, cultural differences, and lack of parent involvement.

The logistical challenges of the conferences were due to time constraints and the way the conferences were delivered. Three-way conferences had a time limit of 15 minutes, which some teachers found too short to have a comprehensive discussion with EAL families. During data collection, interviews were all completed on digital platforms because of COVID-19, which further complicated the interviews as there were technical problems and technology gaps with the users on both sides. Teachers also found the interviews online were less effective than in-person meetings.

Another challenge was the language barriers between conference participants. Teachers struggle when there is a lack of verbal response or identifiable body language given off from the parents. Davitti (2013) talked about the importance of having an interpreter to aid in the interview process but reported that finding translators for the interviews was difficult, which resulted in families using siblings or other third parties as their interpreters. This led to teachers not being sure if the information they wanted delivered was received or lost in translation. Davitti's findings were reflected in the teacher interviews. Teddy talked about having interviews with a sibling of the student as the translator, stating "even though that having siblings that could communicate is nice, it still doesn't feel you're necessarily getting in touch with the parent, you have the information going back and forth, but I have no way of knowing if the translation is ... you know, fully accurate, if the parents are getting all of the information that they want."

Perceived cultural differences was the third challenge that teachers found during the three-way conferences. Some teachers felt that with some families there was an extremely high expectation placed on their children when it came to academics. A few teachers found it difficult when a group of parents would come to an interview together. Jessica noted during her interviews that "with our Filipino community, when we would meet, the moms would come in a pack. So I'd usually be interviewing four moms at once regarding the students which would always be interesting because not all of the kids are at the same place in their learning or in their classroom attentiveness. So it's sort of speak to them as all one student in four different."

The final challenge that teachers spoke of during the interviews was the lack of parental involvement in the conferences. Some said that it was challenging to build connections with families of EAL learners because many did not sign up for conferences, so in those cases

a relationship could not be built as the conferences were the most substantial relationship building opportunity for those teachers, particularly during COVID-19.

The most important challenge, and indeed limitation, of this study proved to be the refusal of parents to participate in focus groups and their refusal to allow recording of conferences. One teacher-researcher found that parents were not booking in for conferences because they were so wary of the possibility that the conferences would be recorded or reported. Even after remedial communication to correct this impression, some chose not to participate in the three-way conferences that occurred during the data collection period. It is noteworthy that in the process of conducting the literature review, the project team found very few studies that focused on interviews explicitly with parents of EAL learners.

Running a Three-Way Conference

According to the interviewed teachers, running a three-way conference involves different ways of updating the parents regarding the students' progress, providing a safe venue for students to express their thoughts and issues, and giving opportunities for parents to ask questions.

Teachers have various ways to update parents about the progress of their children, which vary between elementary, middle years and high school. For teachers Jessica and Dan, they begin with a straightforward update of the students' progress in class. For example, Dan mentioned that he starts by giving the student's mark and mentioning missing assignments that may have caused a drop in the student's grade. Teddy first introduces himself and the subject he teaches. He follows this with a summary of how the student is doing in class. Although Matt also goes straight to the point about the student's progress in class, he sometimes uses notes for certain students for whom he needs to give more focus. Bob and Jane find having notes and a portfolio essential in running a three-way conference. Finally, high school teacher Sam begins by asking the student "How's it going?" which jump-starts the discussion. Sam's student-led strategy leads to another component of running a three-way conference which is discussed below.

Listening to students was given priority by Sam, Dan, and Matt. As noted above, Sam begins a conference by asking the student "How's it going?" or "How's school going?" According to Sam, the answer of the student guides the rest of the discussion. Dan and Matt specifically ask the students for their thoughts about the class. Although they both encourage students to talk, the focus varies. For Dan, the conversation focuses on how the class can be improved, while Matt elicits responses that encourage students to assess their own performances.

While many teachers explicitly state the importance of listening to students, Bob, Jane, Jessica, Dan, Teddy, and Matt report that encouraging parents to ask questions is also an integral part of running a three-way conference. They only vary on where in the conference parents are encouraged to ask questions. For Jane, it may be either in the beginning or towards the end of the conference. Jessica begins conferences by "asking parents what they're hearing at home or how they feel how things are going." The parents' responses pave the way for the discussion. For Bob, Dan, Matt, and Teddy, parents are encouraged to ask questions towards the end of the conference after they have been given updates about the students' progress.

Sam gives importance to students' thoughts and said that, "I usually frame it by asking students questions and try not to let parents overbear and take control of the interview unless there's some burning problems that I wasn't aware of."

Recommendations

The high level of difficulty in recruiting the planned number of parent participants for this study and the impossibility of obtaining their permission to share three-way conference content underscore the challenges to which the study was intended to respond. Recommendations, therefore, relate not only to the original objectives stated above, but also to the challenges faced by the research team and other educators serving EAL learners and their families.

School Practices

1. Conferences that require interpretation should be scheduled in larger time blocks than the commonly used 15-minute slots for three-way conferences as effective interpretation requires additional time.
2. Purposes and expectations for three-way conferences should be defined and shared with families by school divisions in advance of each conference period so that teachers, parents, and students enter the conference with common expectations. If translation of the expectations is needed, it must be provided early enough that parents can ask questions in advance of the conference for clarification.
3. In addition to the preparation of EAL students for three-way conferences, EAL parents should be prepared in advance about the purposes and processes of the three-way conference. This is because EAL parents may come in with expectations grounded in previous experience that does not necessarily match those of their children's current school. This orientation must not be limited to circulation of print material.
4. EAL parent expectations and values need to be integrated respectfully and meaningfully in three-way conference processes and outcomes.
5. Changes to the structure of conferences are needed to change the hierarchical, systemic power imbalance within conferences where teachers are seen as the dominant participants.

Additional Research Needs

1. Further research must be carried out on EAL student and parent perceptions and perspectives on purposes, processes, and effects of student-led conferences.
2. Further research should be carried out to identify reasons for EAL parent non-participation in research conducted in three-way conferences, so that parents can be engaged in future studies in order to contribute to improve the conference's usefulness.
3. When three-way conferences with EAL parents and students can be recorded, the discourse that occurs needs to be analyzed extensively from a linguistic perspective.
4. When siblings must serve as interpreters, the effectiveness of the conference's role as a reflection opportunity for the student becomes questionable. Research is needed on the effects of sibling interpretation on the conference's value to the student, and if a devaluing effect is found, school divisions must be supported to find and finance more appropriate options.

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