Using a Comparison Task to Support Prospective Educators' Interpersonal Skill Development

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Abstract: Despite family involvement's importance in children's education, teacher preparation programs often fail to help educators develop the communication skills they will need to engage effectively with families. This exploratory study used comparison of two simulated parent-teacher conferences to assess and enhance prospective educators' interpersonal skills, knowledge and dispositions for family involvement. Its purposes were to: validate the cases' contents; pilot them as teaching tools; and develop rubrics for evaluating student responses.

Framework

Interpersonal skills are essential to success in a variety of professions yet they are difficult to quantify and teach. Medical education addresses this challenge via a simulated learning paradigm--the Standardized Patient Protocol –which immerses prospective doctors in authentic, no-fault clinical interactions with "standardized" patients (Barrows, 1993). Recently, Dotger and colleagues have adapted this paradigm to the context of teacher education, immersing teacher candidates in a series of simulated teacher-parent conference scenarios called a "Standardized Parent" (SP) protocol (Dotger & Smith, 2009; Dotger, Harris & Hansel, 2008).

The present study repurposed videos of these simulated parent-teacher conferences with an eye toward testing their utility as tools for learning through vicarious experience. Grounded in cognitive science research demonstrating that comparison of different approaches to the same problem improves learning (e.g., Namy & Gentner, 2002; Rittle-Johnson & Star, in press; Gentner, Loewenstein & Thompson, 2003), we asked teacher candidates to compare two 15-minute videotapes captured in the SP paradigm. Each video involved the same parent (an actress) and challenge, but two different teachers (both female teacher candidates); thus the task showed how two different teachers approached the same situation. The actress was trained to present both teachers with the same conversational "triggers" and attitudes; however, she was also instructed to change her behaviors (e.g., body language, provision of information) in accordance with the teacher's interpersonal stance. According to a panel of evaluators who independently viewed the contrasting videos, the teacher in simulation 1 was highly structured but unresponsive (gave many suggestions but did not listen well); the teacher in simulation 2 was highly responsive but unstructured (empathized and gained more information but failed to suggest follow-up steps or problem-solving strategies).

Methods

Participants were 47 students enrolled in an educational psychology courses taught by the first author (11 graduate students [8 female; 1 African-American, 7 White]; 36 undergraduates [25 female; 1 African-American, 1 Hispanic American, 23 White]). Four participants were parents who had attended parent-teacher conferences; no participants had conducted a parent-teacher conference. Participants received a written overview of the task in class and were given the chance to ask questions about the assignment. Later, they received an e-mail containing a user name and password that allowed them to log on to a secure online system where they would complete the task. Participants were instructed that there were no right and wrong answers and that the task would be graded as pass-fail. The task involved three stages:

Stage 1: Participants rated their self-efficacy for communicating with families using a 15-item survey (items rated on a 5-point scale, 1 = not at all confident to 5 = very confident; $\alpha = .90$; sample item "I am able to actively listen to parents' responses"). Then they read a challenge describing how one student's academic performance and behavior prompted a teacher-initiated parent-teacher conference (i.e., "*Chris Burton is one of 25 students in your 6th grade class. During the first ten days of the new semester, you have assigned and collected four classroom assignments, three of which Chris did not turn in at all.")* They responded to two questions about the challenge: (1) If you were the teacher in this situation, what questions

would you have? and (2) If you were the teacher, what strategies would you use to make this conference successful?

Stage 2: Participants watched and evaluated the two videos using a checklist that focused their attention on important communication sequences and skills (adapted from Makoul, 2001).

Stage 3: Participants chose which teacher did the better job and justified their choice in a paragraph, using specific examples to support their decision.

Analyses and Results

Stage 1. Participants' efficacy ratings were high, despite their limited experience (M = 4.07, SD = .21). Responses to the question, "What strategies would you use to make this conference successful?" were coded for seven categories adapted from the Macy model of doctor-patient communication (Makoul, 2001). The most frequently used strategies were asking questions (96%), sharing information (79%), maintaining a positive relationship (79%) and establishing an action plan (77%). Few participants focused on establishing a positive opening to the meeting (13%), accepting the parent's emotions (6%) or managing the flow of the meeting (2%). Analyses of responses to the question, "If you were the teacher, what else would you like to know?" revealed frequent requests for basic information (85%), but few student-centered questions (e.g., "Is he engaged in any after school activities?"; 15%) or partnership-oriented questions aimed at leveraging the parent's expertise ("How do you keep him focused and attentive?"; 11%).

Stage 2. Students' perceptions of each teacher's strengths and weaknesses aligned with our panel's evaluations.

Stage 3. Most students chose Teacher 2 (undergraduates = 64% [n = 23], graduates = 45% [n = 5], X^2 = .54, p < .66). Analysis of their rationales suggest this choice stemmed from the belief that responsiveness was more important than having an action plan, "*If you have a very harsh personality and are not welcoming then I don't think the parent would be likely to come back to you or keep in touch for any reason*." Those who chose Teacher 1 felt differently"*...to make sure that you do not waste your time and the time of the parent you must have a template of what will be discussed…you must have a plan for student improvement*." Other comments suggest the task helped students appreciate the complexity of parent-teacher interactions and their own dispositions and skills. For example, one student wrote, "*I see myself as being the friend type teacher to the parent. But I see that I should not get too friendly because then nothing would get solved or accomplished. Teachers need a balance with being the friend but also being in charge*."

Significance

The present study used carefully selected contrasting videos of simulated parent-teacher conferences as a tool for teaching pre-service educators about two essential dimensions of interpersonal communication: responsiveness and structure. There were three major findings: (1) video contents can be reliably coded according to a model of professional communication, (2) videos made two important dimensions of communication 'visible' to students in relatively short order, and (3) completing the task prompted insights about professional boundaries and identity.

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