Exploring Student Ownership and Responsibility Through Student-led Conferences: A Case Study of One Elementary School

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
August 6. 2011

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Abstract

Traditional parent-teacher conferences and student-led conferences are tools employed by schools to convey student progress with parents. The parent-teacher conference format has typically not included the student in the conference (Hackmann, 1997). The student-led conference offers a valuable means for increasing student responsibility which allows students to take ownership for learning (Benson & Barnett, 2005). There is a lack of research in the area of student-led conferences and whether or not they are as effective as traditional parent-teacher conferences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of a relationship between student-led conferences and student responsibility, self-efficacy, and ownership. This study also identified perceptions of teachers, parents, and students regarding the process and outcomes of student-led conferences. The study utilized descriptive, qualitative methods to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the emergent themes related to student self-efficacy, responsibility, and student ownership of learning for participants in student-led conferences?
2. What are the perceptions of parents, students, and teachers about student-led conferences?
3. What are the perceptions of study participants regarding the support needed for parents, students, and teachers to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Data collection was inclusive a student, teacher, and parent focus group session with 9 students, 7 teachers, and 9 parents. The participants discussed student's academic and personal experiences utilizing the student-led conference model. The results of this research indicate that student-led conferences improved the quality of knowledge shared during the conference, promoted student responsibility, self-efficacy, and ownership of learning, and helped build habits of self-reflection based on as suggested by student, teacher, and parent responses to focus group questions. This research supports findings in previous research conducted on student-led conferences and student involvement in the learning experience.

Acknowledgements

To my friends, mentors, and professors at Auburn University, this work could not have been completed without your help. To my academic advisors and committee members Dr. Maria M. Witte, Dr. Cynthia J. Reed, and Dr. Margaret E. Shippen for your advice, continuous patience, and the generous gift of time. To Dr. Tammy Frederick, Lisa McGhee, and the D.L. Sims Elementary School family whose support, advise, and encouragement inspired me to conduct meaningful research and complete the doctoral journey.

To my immediate family who gave me the love, support, and freedom to pursue this goal. To my mother Laura Ruffin for being my teacher, mentor, and friend, and for inspiring me to dream beyond the confines of Queensbridge Housing Projects. To my late biological father James H. Windom, whose strength and pride in his daughters gave my sister and me self-efficacy. To my father Gregory Powell for his help in raising me, his undying love for all of his children, and for keeping me grounded. To my sister, Tyhessia Windom, for your understanding, love and support and for being my biggest cheerleader. To my late grandmothers, Sarah Haynes and Mildred Powell, whose prayers and vision kept me on the right path. A special thanks to my beautiful daughters, Nydia and India, for tolerating my hectic schedule. I am indebted to you beyond capacity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Ownership refers to the importance and need for students to actually participate by discussion, choice, responsibility and decision making."

Robert Brooks

Parental involvement in education has been an area of interest in the United States since the turn of the nineteenth century. One of the most well-known school involvement programs was created in 1897 by the National Congress of Mothers (Wallace, 2002). This initiative began with parents working in coordination with schools to create an atmosphere of trust and understanding in their child's academic future. To achieve more meaningful communication about a student's progress, conferences would occur because the report card did not completely capture the student's overall performance (Simon, 2001). The traditional parent-teacher conference generally has three goals: to give information, to get information, and to find solutions to academic or behavior problems (Krejci, 2002). Research suggests that parent-teacher conferences result in a higher interest in the school communication on the part of most parents (Krejci, 2002).

Parent-teacher conferences are one of the main tools schools utilize to communicate student progress with parents (Krejci, 2002). The number of conferences scheduled with parents and teachers depends on whether additional issues arise throughout the school year, but are typically held at least once each year. Including the parent in the conference is a proactive approach that creates active roles in a student's academic success. According to Swap (1987),

there are three reasons to involve parents:

1. Parental involvement benefits children.
2. Where parents and teachers work successfully together, teachers report experiencing support and appreciation from parents and a rekindling of enthusiasm after problem-solving.
3. Schools benefit from access to resources that parents bring. (p. 2)

These steps provide an open line of communication that help parents and teachers learn more about personal situations that might have a potential to affect academic success.

Background

After decades of conducting parent-teacher conferences, educators began to question the value of the traditional conference as the only means of school-to-home contact (Dunne, 2001). Student-led conferences have emerged as an effective alternative to parent-teacher conferences by those who want to activate student engagement (Dunne, 2001). Benson and Barnett (2005) state "student-led conference format is the biggest breakthrough to happen in communicating student achievement in the past century" (p. 2). In the traditional conference, parents are more accountable for their child's academic actions. Parents and teachers are placed in the position of taking complete responsibility for their child's learning. A different approach is that conferences do not need to be an event led by the teacher and the adults to discuss their perceptions of the child's ability while leaving out the child (Simon, 2001).

During student-led conferences, students discuss work with their parents while teachers assist in the process. This encourages students to take on ownership and accountability for their work (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Opening a door of communication between parent and student is an important process that needs to be maintained for academic success. Teaching the student to

be reflective and comprehend his/her work is also a valuable tool needed to enhance personal accomplishment. Bailey and Guskey (2001) state:

> When we talk about students to their parents, however, we feel that something is missing. We have difficulty conveying to parents all the fine points we want to share about students' work, about their participation in class, and about their success in meeting standards. We feel constrained by time, but more important, that we are not the ones who can most accurately report student progress. We realize that the "something missing" is actually someone missing from this conversation, the student. For a discussion of student work to be relevant, accurate, and complete, students must be involved in the process. Having students lead a conference with parents or significant adults is a way to maximize involvement. (p. 1)

Student-led conferences and portfolio assessments are initiatives underway in schools across the country. Portfolio assessments refer to a collection of a student's work with an emphasis on areas to improve as compared to his/her mistakes (Benson & Barnett, 2005). When combined, portfolio assessments and student-led conferences encourage meaningful discourse between the parents, students, and teachers throughout the school year. When implemented properly, it results in a clearer understanding of objectives in the classroom and how the portfolios help achieve them. It also identifies the roles of the parties involved with the overall success of the student. Student-led conferences support students in taking an active part in their portfolio progress.

The implementation of student-led conferences could change the atmosphere of the classroom environment (Benson & Barnett, 2005). The standard teaching practice is altered by using portfolio assessment. Teachers also reflect on classroom lessons using this tool as an

additional means in viewing student progress. When teachers are in full support of the student-led conference model, they report that student work is focused, students have more academic success, and student behavior in the class is improved (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Conferences provide parents and teachers the opportunity to discuss issues of concern, develop team strategies and create future goals for students to be successful (Dunne, 2001). The traditional parent-teacher conferences are an opportunity to have a personal two-way communication. Sometimes in parent-teacher conferences, the negative aspects are highlighted more than the positive, which leads one to question whether this practice accurately allows students to take ownership in their academic work or provides the opportunity to be actively involved with their learning. The parent-teacher conference format has typically not included the student in the conference (Hackmann, 1997). There is a lack of research in the area of student-led conferences and whether or not they are as effective as traditional parent-teacher conferences.

Students hold the key as to how much they know and are able to do (Paglin, 1996). They understand their strengths and they can identify things that challenge them. However, they often are the last to be consulted in developing procedures or practices for their own learning. Students rarely have the opportunity to reflect on their own learning and growth and are rarely asked to use what they know and are able to do to demonstrate growth and understanding. Students hold important information about what they know and what they are able to do (Paglin, 1996). Given the opportunity, students can discuss their learning and their growth competently with others (Hayden, 1998).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of a relationship between student-led conferences and student self-efficacy, ownership of learning, and responsibility. This study also seeks to identify perceptions of teachers, parents, and students regarding the process and outcomes of student-led conferences. Benson and Barnett (2005) note that student-led conferences foster great responsibility for learning and productive student-teacher relationships. Student-led conferences may improve student-parent relationships, generate pride, support the development of classroom culture with a sense of community, reduce cheating, build leadership skills, and lead to greater parental participation in conferences.

Overview of Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological research method was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of teacher, parent, and student perceptions of the process and implementation of student-led conferences. The goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to describe a "lived experience" of a phenomenon (Waters, 1987). Qualitative phenomenological research is concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences. Therefore, it is centrally concerned with the meaning which those experiences hold for the participants (Waters, 1987). A case study was implemented as the research design. A case study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit (a person or community) stressing developmental factors in relation to environment (Walsham, 1993).

The study site was a growing elementary school east of Atlanta, Georgia with approximately 600 students in grades Pre-K-5th grade. The elementary school is part of a school district inclusive of 16,000 students with 22 schools total: 11 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 4 high schools, 1 alternative school, 1 career academy, and 1 open campus school. The

study included six elementary school teachers (3rd, 4th, and 5th grade) who volunteered to participate based on interest, practice, and individual growth plans.

The process of research implementation was inclusive of requesting permission from the superintendent to conduct the study, develop a student-led conference professional learning community (PLC) to provide training and support to participants, and implementation of the process of student led conferences during Spring Semester, 2011. The Media Specialist led teachers in preparing themselves and students for the student-led conference process through participation in a professional learning community. The PLC met weekly leading up to the conference date.

An introductory letter (see Appendix B) was sent out to all participants of the student-led conferences explaining the information gathered for the study. The case study was confidential and used for the purpose of this research. Participation was not required by teachers, students or parents and was based on consent with no penalty to non-participants. Student and parent participants in grades 3rd, 4th, and 5th were recruited based on the six teachers that volunteered to participate in the student-led conference process.

Three post-conference day focus groups (teacher, parent, and student) were conducted by the Instructional Coach and Media Specialist on May 6, 2011, following the May 5, 2011 student-led conference date. Focus groups were inclusive of 8-10 participants unknown to the researcher. A set of 6-10 focus group questions were discussed, audio-taped, and transcribed by the Media Specialist for the researcher to analyze in response to research questions. Open Coding qualitative data analysis was utilized in analyzing transcribed focus group data. Open Coding is inclusive of going through the data, breaking down the data into pieces to examine closely, then compare for relationships, similarities, and dissimilarities. Different parts of the

data are marked with appropriate labels or codes to identify them for further analysis (Seidel & Kelle, 1995).

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the emergent themes related to student self-efficacy, responsibility, and student ownership of learning for participants in student-led conferences?
2. What are the perceptions of parents, students, and teachers about student-led conferences?
3. What are the perceptions of study participants regarding the support needed for parents, students, and teachers to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Significance of the Study

Student-led conferences create an opportunity for students to take control of their learning and empower them to be part of the educational process. This process is beneficial for staff development in terms of understanding how students are executing the given curriculum through the review of portfolios. The importance of introducing student-led conferences is to evaluate the child's learning by celebrating success (Sweet, 1993). Employing this conference style may also provide the opportunity for students to be involved with their school work and to see that the portfolio work being used for one subject can be used for all subjects.

Benson and Barnett (2005) notes that student-led conferences foster a great responsibility for learning and productive student-teacher relationships. Student-led conferences may improve student-parent relationships, generate pride, support the development of classroom culture with a sense of community, reduce cheating, build leadership skills, and lead to greater parental participation in conferences. By exploring student ownership and responsibility through student-

led conferences, the results may be used by students, parents, teachers, administrators, local and state board of education and state and federal government agencies to enhance methods that may be used to incorporate student-led conferences as a means of enhancing school-to-home communication, school culture, and accountability among students in their learning environment.

Limitations

Marshall and Rossman (2011) defined limitations as "research boundaries and how its results can and cannot contribute to understanding" (p. 42). Limitations are conditions that are beyond the control of the researcher that may cause restrictions on the conclusion of the study and future application. The limitations for this study include:

1. The study will be limited to elementary teachers in Conyers, Georgia.
2. This study will represent data from one elementary school with Rockdale County Public Schools.
3. This study will be limited to data that will involve one school semester.
4. This study will be limited to information gained from the responses of teachers, students, and parents.
5. This study will have the potential to be limited by the fact that the Media Specialist will be a primary facilitator of the pre-conference professional learning community in the school.
6. This study will have the potential to be limited by the fact that the Instructional Coach will be a primary facilitator of the post-conference focus groups.
7. This study has the potential to be limited because participants could be teachers, parents, and students that have a positive perception of activities related to student-led conferences.

8. The identifiable risks to the participants relate to the principal investigator's role as school administrator at the research site. The Media Specialist and Instructional Coach are Co-Investigators to reduce the risks of possible coercion or breach of confidentiality and removed the principal researcher from the process.
9. Potential limitations of focus group implementation are the impact of results on the interaction between respondents and facilitator and the possibility of participants not expressing their personal opinions and instead conform to a popular opinion of a particular group member.

Assumptions

Marshall and Rossman (2011) defined assumptions as "the act of taking for granted or assuming" (p. 33). The following are assumptions related to this study:

1. Faculty, parents, and students will not collaborate on their responses to the focus group questions.
2. Faculty, parent, and student responses to questions about their perception of student-led conferences will reflect their own individual perceptions.
3. Students will respond honestly to self-efficacy, responsibility, and ownership questions.

Definition of Terms

The following statements will be used as functional definitions for the purpose of creating clarity of understanding for the literature and to clarify use of the words that may have various interpretations in different studies. Functional definitions for the following terms as use in this study follow:

Accountability. An obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for your actions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Authentic Assessment. When student learning is applied in a complex, real-world situation and assessment in more than an event for a grade (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

Elementary School. Pertains to kindergarten through fifth grades.

Insightful. The act or result in apprehending the inner nature of things or of seeing intuitively (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Ownership. Refers to the importance and need for students to actually participate by discussion, choice, responsibility, and decision-making (Bandura, 1977).

Parent-teacher Conference. A meeting occurring between parents and teacher regarding the process of the student academically or regarding social behaviors (Simon, 2001).

Portfolio. Collection of students' work assembled to provide a presentation of student achievement of set targets about which teachers, students, and parents wish to communicate (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

Professional Learning Community (PLC). An inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other to inquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches to enhance student learning (Stoll & Seashore, 2007).

Reflection. Quality commentary, created by students, for sake of improvement and performance (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

Self-efficacy. Conceptualizes a person's perceived ability to perform on a task as a mediator of performance on future tasks (Bandura, 1977).

Student-led Conference. Student conducted formal conference with parents and guests to display school work, as well as discuss learning, educational goals, and strategies (Hahler, 2003).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provides a general overview of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, significance of the study, limitations, assumptions, delimitations, and definitions of terms. Following the first chapter, this study is organized as follows: Chapter 2 presents a review of related literature regarding characteristics of effective discipline programs, the importance of caring relationships, the importance of mutual respect between teachers and students, disciplinary styles preferred by teachers and students, and the effects of discipline on student achievement. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology employed in the study including the research design, instrumentation, subjects, and role of the researcher. Chapter 4 is comprised of an explanation and discussion of the data analysis. Chapter 5 consist of the summary, discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

"The secret in education lies in respecting the student."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Introduction

Conferencing is a valuable tool for parents and teachers to gain complete understanding of the student's overall progress. Conferences have evolved over the years (Simon, 2001). A recent modification for educators is to involve the student in the parent-teacher conference. Bringing the student into the organized setting to discuss their work with parents seems to be valuable in the overall progress of student achievement.

Currently, student-led conferences are not the primary means of communicating with parents compared to traditional parent-teacher conferences. Through this review of literature, the importance of such an innovative approach is explained and the positive nature of the program is identified as a resource for schools interested in student-led conferences. A review of literature outlines the importance of a positive school climate on parent involvement, teacher-student relationships, the evolution of the traditional parent conference, provides an overview of student-led conferences and outlines perspectives from students, teachers and parents.

School Climate

School climate can affect learning and must be considered in an effort to improve academic performance (Tableman, 2004). Whether a school climate is positive or negative will determine whether it yields positive or negative educational outcomes (Marshall, n.d.). A

negative climate can prevent learning development (Freiberg, 1998; Johnson & Johnson, Johnson & Aimmerman, 1996, Manning & Saddlemire, 1996). Tableman (2004) noted that school climate characterizes the atmosphere in the school building and at classroom levels. School climate reflects the physical and psychological aspects of the school that are more susceptible to change and that provide the preconditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place (Tableman, 2004). Tableman (2004) further defined school climate as the way students and staff feel about being at school each day.

Tableman (2004) added that a positive school climate is an orderly environment in which the school family feels valued and able to pursue the school's mission free from concerns about disruptions and safety. A safe school is one in which the total school climate allows students, teachers, administrators, staff, parents, and visitors to interact in a positive, non-threatening manner that reflects the educational mission of the school while fostering positive relationships and personal growth (Bucher & Manning, 2005). A positive school climate exists when all students feel comfortable, valued, accepted, and secure in an environment where they can interact with caring people they trust (Bucher & Manning, 2003; Marzano, 2003a; Tableman, 2004). School climate is the belief system or culture that identifies the day-to-day operations of the school (Bucher & Manning, 2003; Tableman, 2004).

Many factors influence school climate. Kuperminc et al. (2001) pointed to the number and quality of relationships between adults and students as a factor that influences school climate. Johnson, Johnson, and Zimmerman (1996) identified students' and teachers' perceptions of their school environment, or school's personality as influencing school climate. Johnson and Johnson (1993) further showed academic performance as an influential factor in school climate. Freiberg (1998) cited the feeling of safety and school size as impacting school climate. Manning

and Saddlemire (1996) concluded that the feeling of trust and respect for students and teachers influenced school climate. Marshall (n.d.) added that environmental factors such as physical building and classroom, and the materials used for instruction impact school climate. Tableman (2004) described caring and safety as the most influential factors related to school climate.

Many factors comprise the complex concept of school climate which has a significant role in providing a healthy and positive atmosphere (Marshall, n.d.). Assessments of school climate consider multiple factors and individuals within the school system and provide further detail into the nature of school climate (Marshall, n.d.). Dupper and Meyer-Adams (2002) noted that an assessment of school climate should result in characteristics of warmth, tolerance, positive responses to diversity, sensitivity to others' views, cooperative interactions among students, teachers, and school staff, and an environment that expects and reinforces appropriate behavior. Haynes, Emmons, and Comer (1993) identified teacher-student relationships as one of the key factors for consideration in assessment of school climate.

Freiberg (1998) cited nineteen studies that found a better school climate is associated with higher grades, engagement, attendance, expectations and aspirations, a sense of scholastic competence, fewer school suspensions, and on-time progression through grades. Studies documented that students in schools with better school climate have higher achievement and better socioeconomic health (Johnson & Aimmerman, 1996). School climate is an element in the discussions concerning improved academic performance and school reform.

McEvoy (2000) suggested that positive interpersonal relationships and optional learning opportunities for students in all demographic environments can increase achievement levels and reduce maladaptive behavior. Manning and Saddlemire (1996) agreed, 'trust, respect, mutual obligation, and concern for others' welfare can have powerful effects on educators and learners'

interpersonal relationships as well as learners' academic achievement and overall school progress" (1996, p. 41). Marshall (n.d.) proposed that a positive school climate can provide an enriching environment, for personal growth and academic success. Safe schools are supportive schools and all things being equal, safe and supportive schools are more likely to be high performing and address the needs of all students (Furlong, Paige, & Osher, 2003). Rea and Bergin (2002) argued that student performance is impacted positively or negatively depending on the climate of the school. Yet, with increased attention to student and staff accountability in education, there is a tendency to minimize the role of school climate has on student performance and success (Rea & Bergin, 2002). Rea and Bergin (2002) further noted that children do not excel or achieve when they do not feel wanted or where they do not want to be.

Parental Involvement

Increasing community and parent involvement in education has been a reform theme for the last 30 years. Educational philosophers, researchers, and reformers repeatedly revisit the issue of public school ownership and what that means for schools organizationally (Gall, 2003). The responsibility of creating a strong connection between school and home resides with the teachers, parents, and community. Most recently, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required districts and schools to be more open and transparent in their operations, to communicate more often with outside stakeholders, and to partner with parents in the learning process. For example, NCLB defines parent involvement as:

> The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities, including ensuring that parents play and integral role in assisting their child's learning. Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child's education at school. Parents are full partners in their

> child's education and are included in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child (Gall, 2003, p. 18).

In addition to NCLB, the US Department of Education (2002) included a parent and community involvement provision in their 11 components of Comprehensive School Reforms (CSR), which states that a CSR program: "Provides for the meaningful involvement of parents and the local community in planning, implementing, and evaluating school improvement activities" (Gall, 2003, p. 21).

Parental involvement is a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of the parent to the school and to the student (LaBahn, 1995). There are some concerns with parent involvement. Some schools do not know how to approach the nontraditional family and the areas of concern that it represents. Parents feel unwelcome at school, lack knowledge and education, and may not feel that education is important (LaBahn, 1995).

"Parental involvement produces measurable gains in student achievement" (Dixon, 1992, p. 16). The concept of parental involvement with the student and the school is important and can produce rewards for all involved. According to Vandergrift and Green (1992), there are two key elements that work together to make up the concept of parental involvement. One of these is a level of commitment to parental support. This includes encouraging the student, being sympathetic, reassuring, and understanding. The other element is a level of parental activity and participation, such as doing something that is observable. "This combination of level of commitment and active participation is what makes an involved parent" (p. 57).

Joyce Epstein (1995) developed a framework for defining six different types of parent involvement. This framework assists educators in developing school and family partnership programs. "There are many reasons for developing school, family, and community partnerships

including helping all youngsters succeed in school and later in life" (p. 20). Epstein's framework defines six types of involvement and lists sample practices or activities to describe the involvement more fully. Her work also describes the challenges needed to foster each type of parent involvement as well as the expected results of implementing them for students, parents, and teachers. Epstein's (1995) Framework of Six Types of the Involvement is as follows:

1. Parenting: Helping all families establish home environments to support children as students.
    a. Parent education and other courses or training for parents.
    b. Family support programs to assist families with health, nutrition, and other services.
    c. Home visits at transition points to pre-school, elementary, middle, and high school.
2. Communicating: Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.
    a. Conferences with every parent at least once a year.
    b. Language translators to assist families as needed.
    c. Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.
3. Volunteering: Recruit and organize parent help and support.
    a. School and classroom volunteer programs to help teachers, administrators, students, and other parents.
    b. Parent room or family center for volunteer work, meetings, and resources for families.

    c. Annual postcard survey to identify all available talents, times, and locations of volunteers.

4. Learning at Home: Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning.
    a. Information for families on skills required for students in all subjects at each grade.
    b. Information on homework policies and how to monitor and discuss schoolwork at home.
    c. Family participation in setting student goals each year and in planning for college or work.
5. Decision-making: Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.
    a. Active PTA/PTO or other parent organizations, advisory councils, or committees for parent leadership and participation.
    b. Independent advocacy groups to lobby and work for school reform and improvements.
    c. Networks to link all families with parent representatives.
6. Collaborating with Community: Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen school programs, family practices, and student learning and development (p. 38).
    a. Information for students and families on community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs/services.

b. Information on community activities that link to learning skills and talents, including summer programs for students. (p. 27)

The National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement builds upon the six types of parent involvement previously indentified. The National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs are as follows (Epstein, 1995):

1. Standard I: Communicating-Communication between home and school is regular, two-way, and meaningful.
2. Standard II: Parenting-Parenting skills are promoted and supported.
3. Standard III: Student Learning-Parents play an integral role in assisting student learning.
4. Standard IV: Volunteering-Parents are welcome in the school, and their support and assistance is sought.
5. Standard V: School Decision Making and Advocacy-Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.
6. Standard VI: Collaborating with Community-Community resources are used to strengthen schools, families, and student learning. (p. 33)

Teacher-Student Relationships

Relationships characterized by a sense of closeness to the teacher may permit students to be open to taking risks in the classroom, developing new academic interests, and appreciation of the value of what is being learned as well as the process of learning (Davis, 2001). These all lead to greater student achievement. Strahan, Cope, Hundley and Faircloth (2005) concluded that the most successful teachers orchestrated classroom management by creating caring relationships with students by using genuine empathetic responses to their concerns.

When teachers and students build positive relationships, the teacher places themselves in the position to influence the behavior of the student (Jones, 1987). Deiro (2003) indicated that relationships formed for the purpose of affecting change in one party are called influential relationships and need to be built between teachers and students. When two people share a positive relationship, pleasing the other person serves as a reward in its own right (Jones, 1987).

Getting to know students at the beginning of the year can be an invaluable tool for teachers in establishing positive teacher-student relationships (Babkie, 2006; Byrnes, 2005; Ferko, 2005). Babkie (2006) found that knowing as much as possible about them (students) helps the school year begin smoothly for teachers, students, and parents. Master teachers have shared some common practices that lead to positive teacher-student relationships. These teachers begin by really getting to know their students, setting up a one-to-one relationship with each student as soon possible, establishing trust, and trying to figure out what motivates each student (Reider, 2005). These actions help to create a connectedness between the student and teacher. Handley (2002) asserted that much of a teacher's instructional success is wrapped in that personal connection.

Many teachers do not build relationships with those students that need them the most, students from different cultures and socio-economic statuses than their own, and especially students from poverty. Payne (1996) ascertained that the key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships with them. Payne (1996) further asserts that the most significant motivator for students from poverty is relationships. Brophy (1996) found that effective teachers do not treat all students the same, particularly in situations involving behavior problems. Payne (1996) submitted that when students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into the middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer nine

times out of ten has to do with a relationship-a teacher, a counselor, or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals.

When teachers seek to create one-to-one positive relationships with all students in their classes, a caring class community is created. According to Almeida (1995), the five c's of classroom management are: clarity, consequences, consistency, caring, and change. Almeida further argued that the curriculum is important, but if students sense you are more concerned about finishing a lesson than you are about them, they will be less likely to behave the way you would like them to. Every student should feel comfortable, capable, and should consider themselves contributing members of the class (Babkie, 2006). A caring class environment creates school connection. Blum (2005) proposed that school connection leads students to believe that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The key to a caring class community is the teachers' attitude and intent. When teachers model caring behavior for their students, they will inevitably create a caring environment (Levine, 2006).

The mutual respect that is a by-product of a positive relationship readily translates for the student into a respect for the opinions, rules, and values of the adult (Jones, 1987). Respect is perhaps the most important of all the principles of Discipline with Dignity, without dignity students learn to hate school and learning (Curwin & Mendler, 2008). Jones (1987) agreed that when an adult is in the role of teacher to a student, a willingness by the student to please the teacher produces both cooperation and mutual appreciation. To honor students as human beings worthy of respect and care is to establish a relationship that will provide for enhanced learning (Payne, 1996).

Levine (2006) revealed that unless students feel connected to the school experience and the people he or she encounters there, learning will be compromised as emotional survival

becomes the primary focus during the school day. Levin (2006) also suggested that the key is a teacher's attitude and intent, the modeling of caring behavior for students inevitably creates a caring environment. Successful relationships help to create a caring environment. Payne (1996) defines a successful relationship as one in which emotional deposits are made to the student, emotional withdrawals are avoided, and students are respected. Jones (1986) further ascertains that from this giving and receiving of caring, helping, concern, and respect, a bond is built between teachers and students. This bond is the basis for cooperation and spontaneous helping. Jones (1986) suggested that when adults build a positive relationship with a young person, they place themselves in a position to influence the behavior of that young person. Jones (1986) further contends that the mutual respect that is a by-product of a positive relationship readily translates for the young person into a respect for the opinions, rules, and values of the adult.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Communication is the primary ingredient in building effective relationships and partnerships between school and home. School conferences are a great means for communication between parents and teachers. The main purpose of the conference is to review the educational aspects, along with certain behaviors of the student in the classroom. "The conference process has come to represent a sharing of information and a display of a child's growth" (Simon, 2001, p. 8). Conferences have been as informal as seeing a parent in the community to formally inviting the parent to the classroom for more detailed summary of a student's academic progression.

In past decades, school districts were smaller and teachers most likely lived in the same community as their students (Simon, 2001). Parents were able to see teachers within their own community. However, as school districts evolved, the lines of communication between teachers

and parents became divided. Gaps were created in regards to school communication and connectedness. Today's formal conferences have replaced the informal contacts as a means of discussion from parent to teacher (Simon, 2001).

Simon (2001) explains that changes in the 1960's prompted the work of James Comer in dealing with parent-school partnerships. It was then believed that the importance of parental involvement with students' academics should be used as a valuable resource. "The Comer model encouraged schools to create governance management teams composed of parents, teachers, support staff, and mental health officials for the purpose of developing comprehensive plans that set goals for academic and social behavior" (p. 4). Simon's research revealed that by 1980, 90% of all school districts used the formal conference at which parents discussed their children's progress with their teacher.

Parents and teachers have been meeting through formalized conferencing for decades. For a successful conference, a teacher starts with positive information, creates a warm and inviting atmosphere, and is straightforward but not insensitive (Brandt, 2003). Brandt believed that following this model, the teacher was not giving all the information that parents really needed. As this model connected the school and home over the years, time barriers and restrictions made the process monotonous and stressful.

Parental comfort is valuable for continued communication with teachers and the school. Parents who attend conferences may arrive with their own personal agendas or anxiety. "When parents view the school's climate as inviting, they become good public relations advocates for that school" (Krejci, 2002, p. 5). Conversely, other parents dread conferences, fearing that they do not know what to say, or what to ask, or possibly because they remember their own negative

experiences in school (Simon, 2001). In both cases, there is a changed perception of the conference, which makes focusing on the child difficult.

As communication is a main reason for conducting traditional parent-teacher conferences, there are a few risks to relying solely on this style. When parents do not attend the conference, it hinders the communication level that is needed. Students' presence at conferences fosters the atmosphere of trust and responsibility that may be needed to further future learning success. A student would most likely assess their work honestly and with insight. Whatever styles of conferences that are chosen, teachers and administrators must remember that "communication is always the key to a positive home-school rapport" (Swiderek, 1997, p. 580).

Some contend that the format of the traditional parent-teacher conference is flawed. In Gustine, California, faculty and school administrators have been frustrated by the low parent conference attendance and lack of student interest at Gustine Middle School (Borba & Olvera, 2001). Teachers at Larchmont Elementary School in Tacoma, Washington found the fifteen-minute parent conferences in November were too short and occurred too late in the semester. Their school improvement plan offered a better solution with conferences for parents, teachers, and students called "partnership conferences" (Hess, 2002). When children are left out of the process, they do not learn from the experience nor do they gain knowledge about themselves as learners (Picciotto, 1996).

Student Attributes

Student–led conferences provide a venue for students to cultivate self-knowledge. In preparation for student-led conferences, most students create a portfolio of their work, rehearse an introduction, and role-play their presentations to practice their deliveries (Hebert 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Stiggins, 2001). Through this process, students develop a greater

understanding of their learning. Students achieve metacognition about their cognitive and social growth while the teacher facilitates learning. The teacher is not relinquishing responsibilities as an educator, but rather fostering student ownership, greater trust, and attainable student goals (Shepart et al., 2005). According to proponents, student-led conferencing "places students at the heart of the process" (Stiggins, 2005, p. 348).

Wiggins and McTighe (2005) have identified self-knowledge as one of the six facets of understanding essential to student learning. Student-led conferencing enhances achievement because pupils are making connections between their prior and present learning (Herbert, 2001). Tileston (2004) lists examples of student self-knowledge, such as having students identify their strengths and weaknesses and opportunities for students to self-assess their work at the elementary level. "Students assess their own thinking, work, processes, and learning in this format" (Tileston, 2004, p. 44).

Teaching the student to be reflective and comprehend their work is a valuable tool needed to enhance student accomplishment. This encourages students to take ownership and accountability for their work (Bailey & Guskey, 2011). Student ownership, understanding of learning builds self-identity, self-efficacy, and opens a door of communication and trust between teacher and parent (Sweet, 1993). These attributes are important processes that should be maintained for academic success.

Self -Identity

Self-identity is defined as having positive conceptions of the multiple dimensions of oneself (Tajfel, 1982). Positive conceptions will be valued and nurtured by significant others in each of the contexts in which they function, particularly within the school and home environments. When young people have positive conceptions of themselves, attachment and

commitment to school, and successful school performance will become the outcomes (Hattie, 1992). Self-identity is inclusive of who we are and what we think of who we are. Therefore, self-identity has both a knowledge and an evaluative component (Berry, 2010; Tajfel, 1982). The knowledge component (often referred to as self concept) pertains to the total set of perceptions one has for oneself. The evaluative component (usually referred to as self-esteem) is the value judgment a person places on him or herself (Hattie, 1992).

Self-identity is multidimensional in nature. Baumeister and Muraven (1996) describe identity as "a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self, including social roles, reputation, and structure of values and priorities, and a conception of one's potentiality" (p. 406). According to Hattie (1992) and Purdie and Hattie (1995) people can have a positive conception of themselves in relation to their peers, for instance, but a negative view of themselves in relation to their parents. There are multiple influences on the development of self-identity including family attitudes, physical characteristics, self-perceptions, and socialization experiences (Helms, 1990). Although identity can be conceptualized as a sense of self that derives from private and personal factors, it also derives from public and social experiences (Hudspith & Williams, 1994).

Trust

Studies of trust define the concept as a belief that a person or group will not take advantage of the trusting person's weaknesses (Meier, 2002). Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2001) define trust as "an individual's or group's willingness o be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, reliable, competent, honest, and open" (p. 23). Bryk and Schneider (2002) used the term "relational trust" to describe the dynamics of social interactions that occur in the school environment. Organic trust is based on common moral or

ethical beliefs among a homogenous group of people (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The development of trust is based on several factors including the personalities of each party, shared values, moods, institutional processes, and the stage of the relationship (Goddard, 2001).

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) identify five characteristics of people or group who are trusted which are benevolence, reliability, competency, honesty and openness. Benevolence is explained as a consideration for the needs of another party and a willingness to promote their interest. Reliability reflects the consistency and predictability of positive behaviors. Competency refers to the skills and abilities needed for the task. Honesty is a commitment to the truth and promises made. Openness includes transparency in decisions and operations through accurate and timely communication and sharing of control (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 2003).

Children's attitudes about school in elementary school predict long-term growth in achievement (Helms, 1990). However, little is known about what impact student perceptions about school, why some students have different perceptions than others, and how these perceptions impact achievement. As children enter school, they face a period of adjustment as they transition from home to school, where they must cope with new demands and expectations of being a student. Yet, some children tend to be more successful than their peers (Gall, 2003).

When students enter school, they create attachments to their teachers. Students who enter school with a pattern of secure attachments are better able to form trusting relationships with peers and adults. Students with less secure attachments will be faced with more challenges (Hoy, 2002). The security of these trusting relationships with adults, such as teachers, could influence students' overall attitudes about school in a similar way that children's attachment to their caregiver impacts their cognitive development. In the school environment, some of the attitudes that these trusting student-teacher relationships might influence whether or not students feel that

school is an important place where they want to be and that they feel a part of, and how willing they are to seek and accept the help and support they need in order to be successful in an academically-oriented environment where expectations are high (Louis, 2007).

Traditionally, school failure has been blamed on external influences where students are passive participants in the school environment (Bandura, 1993). However, the emphasis is now on how children perceive their educational situation, especially the quality of social support which is available from the people around them. Teachers who engage students and develop a relationship with them, support their learning (Fencl & Scheel, 2005). Students are impacted by their relationships at school. Students will work hard for teachers they like and by whom they feel respected (Hoy, 2002).

One of the key elements to developing a positive learning community is establishing trust. Trust among teachers, students, and parents is extremely important. Trusting relationships are reflected in a positive school environment and increased student achievement (Hoy, 2002; Louis, 2007). Hoy (2002) defines trust as an assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something. Building trust begins one day at a time and will support students in achieving their academic goals. Students experience trust when they are a part of a larger group or community (Louis, 2007).

Trust in the educational environment is affected by the way the teacher communicates with the student in daily interactions. If the student perceives that the teacher has the student's best interest in mind, then the level of trust is likely to increase (Bandura, 1993). Trust is comprised of the students' perception of their teachers' use of their power in the classroom and the students' beliefs that they should follow and respect their teachers' requests. Trust is viewed as essential in the relationship between student and teacher for maximal learning to occur. Trust

is necessary for effective cooperation and communication and is essential to maximize the learning opportunities for students (Hoy, 2002).

Student Ownership

Ownership is defined as a complex, multifaceted process that captures the relationships that students build between themselves, as youth and as learners, with the content they aspire to participate in and with the context in which that participation takes place (O'Neill & Barton, 2005). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2008), students are more satisfied, more academically productive, more likely to participate in school activities, and better behaved when they are encouraged to take responsibility and ownership for their learning. Teachers at all levels have made efforts to motivate students and to enhance their learning by developing incentive programs, fostering self concepts, and by establishing positive classroom environments (Platz, 1994). Teacher efforts have resulted in some success and have given momentum to the exploration of additional strategies to motivate and enhance student learning. According to Platz (1994), students take ownership for their learning when they are included in how the learning process takes place. Students feel connected, engaged, and are meaningfully involved when they are addressing relevant issues that reflect their interests, their passions, and their identities. Curriculum, leadership activities, extracurricular programs, or roles that students consistently identify as meaningful, enable students to have ownership of their learning experiences (Fletcher, 2008). Schools can involve students in building ownership in schools by promoting students as planners, teachers, partners, and shared decision makers in the learning process (Fletcher, 2008).

Students can develop responsibility when they decide on the content of their portfolios that they use to explain their progress during conferences. When students are in charge of the

presentation about their work, advocates report that they assume more responsibility for their achievement and how it is reported at the conference. Students assume greater ownership for their academic performance and develop trustworthiness. Students realize that they cannot make excuses and need to present artifacts as evidence of their progress (Hackmann, 1997).

Many parents indicate in post-conference evaluations that student-led conferences contribute to an increase in their child's accountability (Stiggins, 1994). Benson and Barnett (1999) maintain the process of student-led conferencing allows students to evaluate their work, set goals, prepare and give a presentation about their progress, and reflect on the results. Bailey and Guskey (2001) recognize student-led conferences as a powerful way for students to understand they are responsible for reporting what they have learned. This requires a process of

In the traditional parent-teacher conference, all of the evaluative information is delivered secondhand to the student after the conference and filtered through the parent. There are some earlier cases where a student may have been present at conferences as a passive recipient of information (Hackmann, 1997). Student-led conferences put children in the driver's seat. With practice, it is reported most children are comfortable taking the leadership role.

The student attains leadership power because he or she has information about his or her learning. Bolman and Deal (2003) identify eight sources of power for leaders. Leadership power can stem from a) position, b) information and expertise, c) control of rewards, d) coercive power, e) alliance and networks, f) access and control of agendas, g) control of meaning and symbols, and h) personal power.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one's capabilities to achieve a goal or an outcome. Students with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves with difficult

tasks and be intrinsically motivated. These students will put forth a high level of effort in order to meet their commitments, and attribute failure to things which are in their control, rather than blaming external factors. Self-efficacious students also recover quickly from setbacks and are likely to achieve their personal goals. Students will low self-efficacy are less likely to take effort and may consider challenging tasks as threats that are to be avoided. Self–efficacy can be built by providing opportunities for practice and success, association with the skill set, verbal persuasion, and exuding a positive mood (Fencl & Scheel, 2005).

Student perceptions of their ability to master academic tasks may predict more accurately their motivation and academic achievements (Paglin, 1996). This implies that self-efficacy may play a role in academic success and students need both the will and the skill to be successful (Bandura, 1993). Although students believe they have the skills or knowledge to complete a task, it is the belief that they could perform a task successfully and have confidence in their ability is where they will likely experience success (Hoy, 2002). Studies have shown that students with high self-efficacy are more likely to succeed than students who do not have self-efficacy. Additionally, students who are highly efficacious are likely to persist further on a task when facing obstacles than those who have low efficacy (Bandura, 1993).

Students may encounter obstacles during the learning process. Self-efficacy influences the choice of behavioral activities, effort expenditure, persistence in the face of obstacles and task performance (Bandura, 1993). Those who have higher self-efficacy about being able to manage the task under difficult circumstances are expected to have a higher probability of succeeding even if their peers have a comparable skill level (Hoy, 2002). Bandura (1993) found that the amount of effort used for a task influences how much perceived efficacy is a result of their achievement on the task.

Self-efficacy beliefs are sensitive of differences in contextual factors (Brophy, 1993). These contextual factors include situational impediments, assistance provided by the teacher, availability of resources and the circumstances under which the activity is performed (Bandura, 1993). Although there are classroom situations and tasks that can foster motivation, there is also evidence to suggest that students' perceptions of the classroom as well as their individual motivational orientations and beliefs about learning are relevant to cognitive engagement and classroom performance (Brophy, 1993). Students create classroom perceptions based on observed teacher behaviors that occur in the classroom (Brophy, 1993).

Student-led Conferences

One way to ensure that students become involved with the process is to have them discuss their school work with parents in an organized conference setting. Student-led conferences are an information meeting with the family in which the student leads a discussion of his or her work and a review of their portfolio. Bailey and Guskey (2001) note the following regarding the student-led conference process:

1. The classroom teacher goes from being the leader of the conference to becoming a facilitator.
2. Student goes from non-participant or passive observer to leader of the conference.
3. Families become more actively engaged in discussions with their child rather than the teacher.
4. Support teachers go from non-participant to making sure that work samples are included in portfolio and available for conferences. (p. 26)

Student-led conferences enable students to display their work as well as discuss their learning, goals, and strategies for meeting those goals with parents (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

The motivator in this innovation is that student-led conferences require students to take ownership in reporting what they work on in class and share their strengths and struggles from their perspective (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Hackmann (1997) described the following five goals of student-led conferences:

1. To encourage students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance;
2. To teach students the process of self-evaluation;
3. To facilitate the development of students' organizational and oral communications skills and to increase self-confidence;
4. To encourage students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue; and
5. To increase parental attendance. (p. 1)

When using student-led conferences, parents and teachers create a stronger connection and are more likely to contact each other throughout the school year (Hackmann, 1997).

The student-led conference empowers the students toward self-efficacy. The students take ownership of their efforts. Bailey and Guskey (2001) stated:

> Successful student-led conferences require changes in the roles each participant has become accustomed to through traditional parent-teacher conferences. Teachers become facilitators while students become leaders. Parents become active listeners and questioners. Support personnel such as secretaries, teaching assistants, and administrators become active participants in the preparation and implementation of conferences. (p. 7)

Support of the school and community is needed to create successful student-led conferences. Support staff and administrators use their time to practice run-throughs of conferences to help the student in preparation, time management, and organization (Austin, 1994). Faculty members enjoy volunteering their time for students to practice their conference

(MacConnell, 2004). "Portfolios and student-led conferences are so powerful in the classroom because they are applications of the theories on the use of authentic tasks and assessments as tools to enhance student motivation" (Benson & Barnett, 2005, p. 5).

As with parent-teacher conferences, the student and parent make an appointment to visit the classroom. More parents attend the conference because they have been invited by their child to see how he or she performs (Benson & Barnett, 2005). Student-led conferences motivate students because it is their authentic work. They share a part of their life with their parents and can truly take full ownership of work being presented. When entering the conference, students escort their parents to their personalized work area. Personalization of their work area is highly important because it allows the students to control their setting, feel comfortable with the process, and demonstrate the pride in their work.

The teacher's responsibility is to monitor the conference. The teacher ventures back and forth between conferences in progress and hands out report cards, answers questions for parents and students, and keeps students on task. Included in all portfolios are schedule sheets that remind students of the conference order.

Student-led conferences provide an atmosphere where both student and parent can freely discuss the student's strengths and areas for improvement (MacConnel1, 2004). At the end of the conference, teachers are available to answer questions, or discuss issues and problems that they may have while the students are present (MacConnell, 2004). In addition, the parents are offered a private conference if needed or requested (Hayden, 1998). In the traditional parent-teacher conference, students do not hear what their teacher says. In student-led conferences, if the student wants to deny claims, it is done in front of the teacher (Mask, 2005). Student-led

conferences include more content than traditional parent-teacher conferences and teachers find that conferences require more time (Hackmann, 1997). Conferences usually last 20-45 minutes.

Bailey and Guskey (2001) describe the following benefits of student-led conferences:

1. Require students to evaluate and reflect upon their work on a regular basis and identify what they do and do not understand about a given subject.
2. Facilitate students taking more responsibility for their own learning.
3. Help students see the relevance of school work to their lives and contribute to their metacognitive growth.
4. Allows for the individual voice of students.
5. Provides structure for goal setting and attainment.
6. Allow students to learn new skills.
7. Provides an opportunity for families to view their child's work and understand the students' progress in an effective and direct manner.
8. Families are more inclined to attend a student-led conference.
9. Changes the climate of school and perceptions by families can become a way of celebrating students and the school. (p. 31)

Successful student-led conferences require changes in the roles each participant has become accustomed to through traditional parent-teacher conferences (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Students become leaders. Teachers become facilitators. Parents become active listeners and questioners. During student-led conferences, these responsibilities are clear and are all focused on student learning (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). One of the most positive effects of student-led conferences is that everyone involved experiences increased pride and re-dedication to promoting and reporting student learning throughout the school building (Bailey & Guskey, 2001).

Student Responsibility

A student-led conference offers one method for increasing student responsibility for learning. Students know they will be reporting to parents or other significant adults on a range of topics over time and begin to see the importance of completing work, keeping track of work, and making sure work is done well (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). For students to take on greater responsibility and be accountable for their work, they must see the relevance. They must also value the work they are doing and must be actively engaged in managing their own learning. In describing choice theory, Glasser (1997) notes "we are all driven by four psychological needs that are embedded in our genes: the need to belong, the need for power, the need for freedom, and the need for fun" (p. 599).

Along with the parent and the teacher, the student role in student-led conferences is integral. "Throughout all stages of a student-led conference-preparation, implementation, and evaluation-the student is key" (Bailey & Guskey, 2001, p. 8). The student becomes the center of attention and is responsible for making the conference work. Student-led conferences permit students a chance to stand out and learn how to share their work with their parents. Students' self-reflections promote a higher awareness on classroom goals and objectives. Most importantly, the conference demonstrates to students the need to be involved with their personal academic success and is relevant in real ways. Student–led conferences provide students the opportunity to produce quality work and to take responsibility for their academics. There is an emphasis on student ownership of work and the quality of work during student-led conferences (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Bailey and Guskey (2001) identify the following as the student's role during student-led conferences:

1. Students' role changes from passive observer to leader.

2. The student is the key person responsible for:
    a. Identifying strengths and learning needs
    b. Collecting and reflecting evidence to document progress
    c. Inviting parents and scheduling
    d. Role-playing and rehearsing
    e. Preparing physical space for parents at the meeting
    f. Taking home important information for the family. (p. 45)

Some critics fear students will not be accurate in assessing themselves. Hein and Price (1994) reported that almost 100 school districts across the United States were involved in science education reform and active assessments reported that generally teachers found students' ratings of their work agreed with the teacher's. Cheating has less appeal (Stiggins, 2005). Students are more honest because when showcasing and talking about their work samples, it is difficult to misrepresent the facts.

Teacher Responsibility

The teacher's primary role in a student-led conference is to make the student-led conference positive and successful. Teachers are used to being in charge and often feel out of place when they become the observer and not the main participant (Benson & Barnet, 2005). Teachers, though, are the main organizers in helping the students understand their roles. Teachers quickly discover that they become facilitators as students lead their parents through a discussion about their progress and learning (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Key words such as portfolios, self-reflection, and organization are new words to students. Teachers not only have to explain and define these terms, but also guide the students in true understanding of their newly appointed roles.

The teacher's responsibility in this process is to organize the conference environment to foster success. This includes scheduling, creating portfolios, providing rehearsals, and arranging classrooms to accommodate families (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). The beginning phase may be the most difficult. Student-led conferences should not be viewed as one more requirement to add to an already crowded curriculum; rather, the activities leading up to the conferences can be effective way to clearly report student achievement and performance to the parent (Hayden, 1998). Hayden (1998) states that "preparatory time and work that this alternative task takes is worth it, especially when you hear a struggling student explaining what he or she learned from the assignment, and take responsibility for the score they received" (p. 2). The conference should be viewed as an exercise in independence and growth for the parent, teacher, and student.

The teacher's presence at the student-led conference is to support and encourage the child (Williams, n.d.). The support begins from the moment the concept is introduced to the students. Conferences are not only an effective means for making the students confident with their studies, but it also becomes just as valuable for the teachers. "From a teacher's perspective, he or she is able to get a better picture of each child…it forces the teachers to sit down with each student and review strengths and weaknesses" (Cromwell, 2005, p. 1). Getting to know the students' abilities comes with time in a classroom, but providing the forum for the teacher and student to discuss their feelings on strengths and weakness becomes developmental for students and teachers in the process of communication (Cromwell, 2005).

Parent Responsibility

According to Bailey and Guskey (2001), the responsibility of the parent/family is as follows:

1. Parents and families become partners in learning.

2. Parent responsibilities include:
    a. Providing reinforcement, encouragement and praise
    b. Asking probing questions
    c. Listening and spending time with their child
    d. Seeing what school is like through the eyes of their child. (p. 42)

It is the right of every parent to discuss his or her student's academic progress with the teacher. Student-led conferences allow communication to be clear and encourages parents to ask their child about their progress. In turn, parents will have a better understanding of school assignments. Student-led conferences give the students the opportunity to share what they are doing in class, using their own words (Austin, 1994). When students talk to their parents, information is being communicated in ways everyone understands (Bailey & Guskey, 2001).

"As parents enjoy watching the children present their papers and their information, it is also felt, as far as the old traditional conferences goes, parents enjoy having a little time with the teacher to discuss additional items like personal items that they would not want to discuss in front of their child" (Hetzner, 2003, p. 2). Student-led conferences foster comfort and confidence in the students; therefore, the more opportunities the students have to talk about their work, the easier it becomes for them to discuss it with their parents. Hayden (1998) explains that "parents believe it gave their son responsibility…they can ask him directly any questions on any particular material; this method helped give their son a feeling of partnership and ownership" (p. 1).

Outcomes of Student-Led Conferences

Student-led conferences are primarily anecdotal rather than systematic. The anecdotal research identifies many benefit students. Among the positive outcomes, Stiggins (2005) notes

that these conferences foster great responsibility for learning and productive student-teacher relationships. Student-led conferences may improve student-parent relationships, generate pride, support the development of classroom culture with a sense of community, reduce cheating, build leadership skills, and lead to greater parental participation in conferences.

Student-led conferences allow students and other participants the opportunity to learn something new (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). The experience of student-led conferences promotes new learning for students and adults. Student-led conferences are like performance-based assessment in that students acquire new learning through the process of completing the assessment task (Mitchell & Neill, 1992). With a student-led conference, students are telling a story from their own perspective (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Parents have the opportunity to understand and appreciate from the student's point of view what learning has been significant and important. Over time, student-led conferences allow parents to have the opportunity to see the intellectual growth and development of their child from a new perspective (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). With traditional conferences, growth is evaluated and reported from the teacher's perspective. Although the teacher's perspective is important, parents should also experience the student perspective (Hebert, 1998). The child's perspective is essential if parents are to fully understand and appreciate the relevance that learning experiences have for students. The process of reporting to parents through a student-led conference further strengthens meaning and relevance for students (Hebert, 1998).

Preparation

"On the practical level, if students' involvement means that they do some of the work for themselves, this can make it more feasible for teachers to carry through a program of formative assessment" (Black, 1998, p. 127). While students are selecting their work samples and writing

reflections about their academic growth, the teacher can be conferring with a student to determine that individual's level of understanding. Plans can be made to modify instruction to meet that individual student's needs.

The structure of student-led conferences can offer a more manageable conference schedule because conferences can take place simultaneously. Holding concurrent student-led conferences replaces two nights of hectic, one-at-a-time, back-to-back, traditional conferences with fifteen-minute conferences stretched over 3 hours to meet with twenty-four families. With student-led conferences, four families can be engaged in student-led conferences in the same room during the same 30 minute block. If three hours are allotted, an elementary teacher could facilitate up to twenty-four conferences in one evening. This format can accommodate more people at one time.

One goal of this conference model is to create parental partners in learning and listening. Bradt (2003) explains that parents loved the reflection portion of the conference; it was felt that "it was more important than the grade the students received" (p. 2). Parents, too, should understand and learn their role in the conference method. Listening to a student express him or herself as a learner is a powerful window into the child (Maher, n.d.). The parents should arrive with the clear understanding of the central goals of the student-led conference and clear expectations of their role.

A major responsibility of the parent is to be a listener, and this becomes the main source of motivation for their children. In the student-led conference, parents have an opportunity to listen to their child with positive interest as he or she presents the portfolio (Benson & Barnett, 2005). When students have an audience that cares more than just the classroom teacher, their work becomes important and relevant. Students enjoy sharing their accomplishments, answering

questions, and receiving attention for their efforts (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). The students are in control of the conference from beginning to end. With proper preparation and rehearsal, students know they are capable of leading any discussion using their portfolio, and they also know they will need to answer all questions that arise (Austin, 2004).

The process of implementing a student-led conference may appear easy. However, it requires a great deal of work and organization from both the student and teacher to prepare for the main event. The students understand that they will share their work with parents one day, which motivates them to do their best (Sweet, 1993). Every aspect of student-led conferences is critical to the child as he or she must know what is expected throughout the entire process. Students are conducting a live performance. When students know they must be ready to talk about their work to parents or teachers, they naturally engage in self-reflection (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). A student-led conference is not about teaching students new competencies, but a formal way to focus on the skills that already exist (Hahler, 2003).

Portfolio Assessments

A portfolio, which is a collection of one's work over a period of time, is a tool to help students self-assess their work using the curriculum already in place within their school. The purpose of the conference portfolio is to collect items that celebrate students as learners (Austin, 1994). The goal is that when students share their portfolio, growth should be observed in their learning (Williams, n.d.). Williams notes that students who share their portfolio have evidence to support the grades that they have earned in school. Portfolios include writer's workshop materials, math journals, and social studies projects. Student's portfolios would include authentic samples of work such as literature responses, science logs, and open-ended math responses. Tests

and quizzes from major content areas are also to be included but are not to be dominate in the portfolio.

A portfolio should include pieces selected by students that represent their efforts, skills, and understanding (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This does not mean that only the student's best work is highlighted; rather, pieces of the portfolio are normally selected that present an overview of a student's progress (Camic & Cafasso, 2003).

According to Spady (1994), authentic tasks are real-world activities that people perform in seven spheres of their lives:

1. Personal potential and wellness
2. Learning
3. Meaningful and fulfilling pursuits
4. Physical and cultural environments
5. Group and community memberships
6. Work and productive endeavors
7. Close and significant relationships. (p. 5)

Portfolios are authentic to adults because they are used to pursue professional and personal goals. For students, portfolios become authentic when used for more than just the classroom. Authentic tasks that use portfolios can improve student motivation for class work while raising the quality of that work (Benson & Barnett, 2005). Authenticity is an approach that schools seek to provide students, through sharing work not only for self-efficacy, but also for others to enjoy. By instituting student-led conferences and portfolio assessments, schools enable students to comprehend the meaning of their own academic progress.

The use of portfolios and student-led conferences cannot only improve student motivation and student learning but can change teaching methods (Benson & Barnett, 2005). This style demonstrates five standards of authentic instruction proposed by Benson and Barnett because the portfolio process requires:

1. Higher order thinking
2. Depth of knowledge
3. Connectedness to the world beyond the classroom
4. Substantive conversations in which student and teacher talking within the classroom to learn and understand the substance of a subject
5. Social support for student achievement. (p. 9)

In the beginning of the school year, the students are educated on how to create viable portfolios. Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer (1991) outline the following eight guidelines for establishing purposeful collections of student work:

1. Developing a portfolio offers the student an opportunity to learn about learning.
2. The portfolio is something that is done by the student, not to the students.
3. The portfolio is separate and different from the student's cumulative folder.
4. The portfolio must convey explicitly and implicitly the student's activities.
5. The portfolio may serve a different purpose during the year from the purpose it serves at the end.
6. A portfolio may have multiple purposes, but these must not conflict.
7. The portfolio should contain information that illustrates growth.
8. Many skills and techniques are involved in producing effective portfolios do not happen by themselves. (p. 61)

Students learn to organize their work and categorize the subjects of study. At the beginning of the school year, students should set up a binder to contain a portfolio with graded work; this becomes the students' responsibility for updating their binders in order to prepare for the student-led conference (Cromwell, 1994). The objective of compiling a portfolio is to teach the students the meaning and value of student-led conferences, which include relevance, responsibility, and reporting (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Students need relevance as to why this is important and how this will help them in the future. Relevance takes their responsibility to a different level. The students become responsible for their work area, portfolio, self-reflections and goals. When the portfolio is completed, it becomes the relevant means for conversation and reflection during the student-led conference-the script (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Following an outline, students have the chance to report their progress to their parents. Portfolios teach students the order of reporting and organizing their thoughts.

"Providing an environment to build relationships between teachers and parents is significant. It becomes important to hear and understand the words like portfolio and reflection as a natural part of the classroom vocabulary, as well as at home" (Austin, 1994, p. 7). Bailey and Guskey (2010) explain that when a student begins to talk about their work, parents are naturally curious and conversations that may not otherwise take place at home occur naturally when students lead conferences at school. A teacher stated that "I like the fact that the students have to be the ones to explain what they are learning in each subject and I love the expressions on the parents' faces as they listen to their children and realize they are learning" (Dunne, 2001, p. 2).

The portfolio helps illustrate how the child is succeeding."The process of capturing the individual voice becomes exciting and relevant about portfolio collections that students share

with their parents (MacConnel, 2004). The conference places responsibility on the student not only to meet their goals, but then to explain whether they succeeded in meeting the objectives that have been set (Hetzner, 2003). "This places the responsibility of the parent conference where it should be-with the student" (Dunne, 2001, p. 1). Although the portfolio is an effective tool to assess student progress, it is the student-led conference that will motivate students to a higher level of commitment and personal ownership (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

In preparing for a student-led conference, students must learn to describe their work. They must engage in self-reflection in order to articulate their thoughts about their work. By preparing and presenting the conference, students learn something important that is typically not an intentional part of the curriculum (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Wiggins and McTighe (1998) describe six facets that make up what it means to truly understand something. One of the facets they describe is "self knowledge: the wisdom to know one's ignorance and how one's patterns of thought and action inform as well as prejudice understanding" (p. 57). They also suggest that to assess a student's level of self-knowledge, we must "require students to self-assess their past as well as their present work" (p. 97). Wiggins and McTighe (1997) note the use of portfolios of student work as one common tool that teachers employ in order to ask students to review and assess their own work.

Organization

Stronger organizational skills are a potential outcome of student-led conferences as students learn to sort and select artifacts. Most schools using student-led conferences rely on portfolios to organize student work. Gredler (1999) identifies four types of portfolios: documentation portfolios, showcase portfolios, class portfolios, and evaluation portfolios. The documentation portfolio presents a continuous confirmation of the student's progress including

teacher checklists, anecdotal records, and performance tests. The showcase portfolio is designed to exemplify student achievement with samples of the best work usually selected by each student. The class portfolio is a summary of the entire class of students with the teacher's individual notes on each student. The evaluation portfolio provides reports to the community or government organizations (Gredler, 1999). According to Hebert (2001), showcase portfolios are used at her school when students present their learning to their parents.

Stiggins (2005) has categorized portfolios using different terms such as, growth portfolio, the celebration portfolio, the project portfolio, and the status report portfolio. The growth portfolio that provides evidence of a student's improved performance is used at most student-led conferences. The celebration portfolio is also recommended for younger children to learn how to select their best work (Stiggins, 2005). Trice (2000) names five audiences for portfolios: the student, the teacher as evaluator, the parents, the child study team, and future educators. During student-led conferences, the parent, teacher, and student from the audience. Some schools combine portfolios with other classroom activities.

Student Reflection

Reflection is defined as the process of examining and interpreting experience to gain new understanding (Austin, 1994). Reflection is a key component to student learning and can be experienced in the following ways (Austin, 1991):

1. Reflection transforms experience into genuine learning about individual values and goals and about larger social issues.
2. Reflection challenges students to connect activities to learning objectives and to develop higher-level thinking and problem solving.

3. Reflection works against the perpetuation of stereotypes by raising students' awareness of the social structures surrounding their environment.
4. By fostering a sense of connection of the community and a deeper awareness of community needs. (p. 68)

An important component of the student-led conference is student reflection. Reflection is important for students to accurately examine themselves as learners when reviewing their conference portfolios (Austin, 1994). Reflecting can reveal change for students as they must serve in a role of self-assessment, no longer passive players in their education (Perron, 1991). Building the habit of reflection on learning prepares the children for student-led conferences where they analyze their lessons for their parents (Benson & Barnett, 2005). Teachers instruct the students how to reflect early in the school year. Throughout this preparation, the students begin to realize what they do and do not understand about any given subject (Bailey & Guskey, 2001).

The student-led conferences are a natural outgrowth of the school's commitment to giving students "choice and voice: in classroom management and instruction" (Paglin, 1996, p. 1).The teachers lead the students to their assignments, but do not dictate their personal reflections. This increased accountability moves the student from being a passive, second-hand recipient of information to an active participant in a three-way interaction between student, parent, and teacher (Camic & Cafasso, 2003). When major areas are discussed and self-reflection is shared, the parent and child both have quality time assessing the academics. Teachers use the student-led conference as an opportunity to work with students on setting personal academic or social goals; this provides an excellent time for parents to help their children set educational

goals and to discuss things that can be done at home to help students achieve their goals (Bailey & Guskey, 2001).

"Authentic tasks such as student-led conferences using showcase portfolios can improve student motivation for class work and, therefore, raise the quality of that work-two goals all teachers have for their students!" (Benson & Barnett, 1999, p. 4). When students discuss their progress about learning, it is an authentic event that is motivating and good preparation in presenting themselves. According to Stiggins (2001), when teachers communicate clear learning targets or achievement goals to their pupils, student motivation is a significant benefit. Most people are more inclined to perform at a higher level when they are motivated than when they are not motivated.

Summary

Stiggins (2001) reports student-led conferences provide students with a depth of communication about their progress from a span of time that is unmatched by any other form of contact. Advocates maintain that students become more articulate as they share portfolios of their work samples demonstrating growth. They also point out that by giving an oral presentation about their progress with artifacts, students improve their verbal skills when they use content which they are very familiar. Student-led conferences create an environment in which positive attitudes flourish, communication is enhanced among stakeholders, diffusing parent-teacher conflicts, and helps to foster a caring community. Student-led conferences build and nurture a caring community while supporting a strong academic program (Epstein, 1995).

As students practice their conference presentations with each other, there is a potential to foster a sense of unity as they work toward a common goal. The preparation for student-led conferences can also change teaching methods and the learning atmosphere in the classroom

(Benson & Barnett, 1999, Stiggins, 2001; 2005). In a self-contained classroom, Benson and Barnett (1999) recommended preparing the portfolios and presentations two weeks prior to conferences. As students rehearse their conference presentations with each other, they have the opportunity to create a community of learners. Student- led conferences often lead to an increase in parental conference attendance (Borba & Olvera, 2001). Traditional parent-teacher conferences can be intimidating for parents especially if their own experience as a student was not positive. In this dialogue, where the conversation appears to be focused on the child, adults often play out their own childhood.

Student-led conferences can lead to a celebration of student success (Bailey & Guskey 2001; Bebert, 2001; Benson & Barnett, 1999). The conferences can become a way of celebrating with family members. As students present their work to their parents, they identify their progress and the steps they will take next to improve and grow. The preparation for student-led conferences takes place under the teacher's guidance (Johnson & Johnson, 2002). Common language is developed between students and teachers (Stiggins, 1994). Teachers guide students as they prepare to share their learning with their parents and others. Student-led conferences also foster collaborative relationships between teachers and students instead of the traditional top-down hierarchy.

Parents often perceive the involvement of students in conference between parents and teachers as an improvement to the traditional parent-teacher conference. When parents attend student-led conferences where report cards are available, they spend little time looking at them and report a much greater understanding from the information their children share (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Children have the potential to provide more personal insights during the student-led conferences that contribute to stronger parent-child relationships. Testimonies are reported

from parents that validate the pride and amazement they experience after conferences led by their children (Montgomery, 2001). Johnson and Johnson (2002) suggests that parents be asked to write comments or suggestions after the conference is completed. Students also received more support from their parents after they articulated their successes and challenges (Strickland & Strickland, 2000).

Chapter 3: Methodology

" Schools can build a climate that takes students beyond mere engagement and into ownership of their learning."

Adam Fledher

Introduction

Conferences provide parents and teachers the opportunity to discuss issues of concern, develop team strategies, and establish goals for success for the student (Krejci, 2002). Traditional parent-teacher conferences and student-led conferences are tools employed by schools to convey student progress with parents. The parent-teacher conference format has typically not included the student in the conference (Hackmann, 1997). The student-led conference offers a valuable means for increasing student responsibility which allows students to take ownership for learning (Benson & Barnett, 2005). Student-led conferences transition the student role as passive learning to the center of learning and the leader of the conference experience (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). The teacher is the expert and provides support to conference participants as facilitator. The parent becomes an active partner in the learning experience (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). There is a lack of research in the area of student-led conferences and whether or not they are as effective as traditional parent-teacher conferences.

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of a relationship between student-led conferences and student responsibility, self-efficacy, and ownership. This study also identified perceptions of teachers, parents, and students regarding the process and outcomes

of student-led conferences. As principal of the research school site, the principal investigator identified the focus of research based on the needs of the school. After three years of transition with standards-based instruction and authentic assessments, disconnects were observed in the school community the area of school-home connectedness, student involvement in learning goals and objectives, and shared ownership of learning among students, teachers, and parents. The Media Specialist and Instructional Coach are identified as Co-investigators to reduce the risk of possible coercion or breach of confidentiality and removed the principle researcher from the process. The study utilized descriptive, qualitative methods to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the emergent themes related to student self-efficacy, responsibility, and student ownership of learning for participants in student-led conferences?
2. What are the perceptions of parents, students, and teachers about student-led conferences?
3. What are the perceptions of study participants regarding the support needed for parents, students, and teachers to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Theoretical Framework: Traditional Parent-Teacher Conferences vs. Student-led Conferences

After decades of conducting parent-teacher conferences, educators began to question the value of traditional conferences as the primary means of school-to-home contact. Student-led conferences have emerged as an effective alternative to parent-teacher conferences especially for those who want to increase student engagement (Dunne, 2001). Benson and Barnett (2005) state that the "student-led conference format is the biggest breakthrough to happen in communicating student achievement in the past century" (p. 2). In traditional conferences, parents are more

accountable for their child's academic actions. Parents and teachers are placed in the position of taking complete responsibility for each child's learning (Simon, 2001).

During student-led conferences, students discuss work with their parents while teachers assist in the process. This encourages students to take on ownership and accountability for their work (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Teaching the student to be reflective and comprehend his or her work is a valuable tool needed to enhance student accomplishment (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Students hold the key to much of what they know and are able to do (Paglin, 1996). Given the opportunity, students can discuss their learning and growth competently with others (Hayden, 1998). Figure 1 illustrates the characteristics and differences of traditional parent-teacher conferences and student-led conferences.

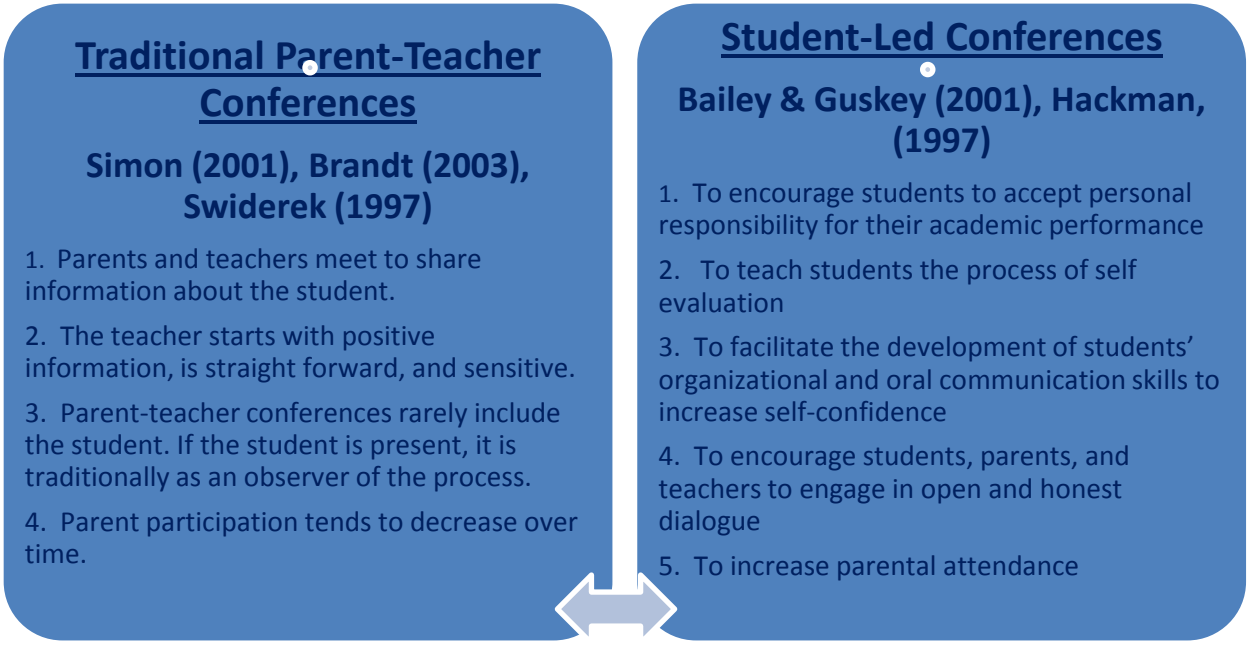

Figure 1. An illustration of the characteristics and differences of the traditional parent-teacher conferences and student-led conferences.

Research Method

Research methods are generalized and established ways of approaching research questions (Hall, 2008). A qualitative phenomenological research method was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of teacher, parent, and student perceptions of the process and implementation of student-led conferences. The goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to describe a "lived experience" of a phenomenon (Waters, 1987). Qualitative phenomenological research is concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences. Therefore, it is centrally concerned with capturing and understanding the meaning which those experiences hold for the participants (Waters, 1987).

In the data collection process, any way the participant can describe their lived phenomenal experience can be used to gather data in a phenomenological study. Unlike a survey or questionnaire, in a phenomenological study you would ask participants to describe their experience without directing or suggesting their description in any way (Holloway, 1997). However, participants are encouraged to give a full description of their experience, including their thoughts, feelings, images, sensations, memories, stream of consciousness, and a description of the situation in which the experience occurred. The researcher may need to ask for clarification of details or ask follow up questions for further description of detail, without suggesting the types of answers that the researcher is seeking (Hycner, 1999).

In the data analysis process, Hycner (1999) cautions that "analysis" has dangerous connotations for phenomenological research. According to Hycner, the term analysis usually means a "breaking into parts and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon…whereas explicitation implies an investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole" (p. 161). Coffey and Atkinson (1996) regard analysis as the systematic procedures to identify essential features and relationships" (p.

9). It is a way of transforming the data through interpretation. In phenomenological research, Hycner (1999) identifies five steps or phases to the explicitation process, which are:

1. Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.
2. Delineating units of meaning.
3. Clustering of units of meaning to form themes.
4. Summarizing each interview, validating it and where necessary, modifying it.
5. Extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews and making a composite summary.

Bracketing and phenomenological reduction. The term reduction is regarded by Hycner (1999) as a deliberate and purposeful opening by the researcher to the phenomenon "in its own right with its own meaning" (p. 50). Reduction is also inclusive of a suspension or bracketing out in a sense that in its regard, no position is taken either for or against" (Lauer, 1958, p. 49). The researcher's personal views, perceptions, and theoretical concepts do not interfere with the participant's views (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). Holloway (1997) and Hycner (1999) recommend that the researcher listens repeatedly to the audio recording of each interview to become familiar with the words of the interviewee/participants in order to develop a holistic sense of responses. Zinker (1978) notes that the term phenomenological implies a process that emphasizes the unique experiences of research participants.

Delineating units of meaning. This is a critical phase of explicating the data in which statements that are seen to illuminate the researched phenomenon are extracted or isolated (Holloway, 1997). The researcher is required to make judgments while consciously bracketing his or her own presumptions in order to avoid inappropriate subjective judgments (Holloway, 1997).

Clustering of Units of meaning to form themes. Clusters of themes are typically formed by grouping units of meaning together and the researcher identifies significant topics or units of significance (Sadala & Adorno, 2001).

Summarize each interview, validate and modify. A summary that incorporates all the themes elicited from the data gives a holistic context. The researcher conducts a validity check by returning to the informant to determine if the essence of the interview has been correctly captured (Hycner, 1999). Any modifications necessary are done as result of this validity check.

General and unique themes for all the interviews and composite summary. The researcher looks for themes common to most of the interviews as well as the individual variations (Hycner, 1999). Care must be taken not to cluster common themes if significant differences exist. The unique or minority voices are important counterpoints to bring out regarding the phenomenon research (Hycner, 1999).The researcher concludes the explicitation process by writing a composite summary that reflects the context themes that have emerged (Hycner, 1999).

Research Design

Research design involves determining how a chosen research method will be applied to answer research questions (Hall, 2008). The design of a research study can be thought of as a blueprint detailing what will be done and how this will be accomplished. Key components to a research design may include research methodology, participant/sample selection, role of the researcher, data collection procedures, and instruments (Hall, 2008).

The study was designed to determine the impact of student-led conferences used in an elementary school setting. In addition, it was important to identify the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students will be identified in order to better understand the lived experiences of those involved in student-led conferences. In this study, the most efficient means to report the

findings was through a case study. A case study is rich in development and captures the complexity within a specific context or unit (Stakes, 1995). In this study, the school is the study unit.

The researcher chose a case study to help readers experience the conference process through the eyes of the participants. "To sharpen the search for understanding, the qualitative study researchers perceive what is happening in key episodes or testimonials and represent happenings with their own direct interpretation and narratives. Qualitative research used these narratives to optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain experiential understanding of the case" (Stakes, 1995, p. 40).

Yin (2003) states that "a case study is appropriate when investigated by desire or forces circumstances (a) to define research topics broadly and not narrowly; (b) to cover contextual or complex multivariate conditions and not isolated variables; and (c) to rely on multiple and not singular sources of evidence" (p. xi). To accomplish this study, qualitative methods were used. Questions were asked to teachers, parents, and students regarding the ability to articulate their child's strengths and weaknesses, teachers' responses towards student-led conferences, and student's perceptions about being involved in the conference. This case study seeks to determine whether student-led conferences are effective for participants.

An introductory letter was sent out to all volunteer participants of the conference explaining the information to be gathered for this study (see Appendix 2). A case study approach was used for the purpose of the research. After participants were identified, a consent form was used to ascertain permission to allow the researcher to gain information for the case study (see Appendix 2). The researcher focused focus group questions on perceptions of the conference, advantages and disadvantages, end-results, and personal feelings toward student-led conferences.

Stakes (1995) and Yin (2003) identified a few sources of evidence in case studies such as documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participation-observation and physical artifacts. The researcher arranged open-ended interviews in which the key respondents were asked to comment about the student-led conference. The interview followed guidelines for the ethnographic interview as identified by Gibau (Saville-Troike, 1978). They are:

1. Avoid asking questions which can be answered with yes or no.
2. Remember the six key interviewing words: who, what, where, why, when, and how.
3. Be patient; allow for silences.
4. Use body language that conveys interest such as making eye contact.
5. Go with the flow: Formulate additional questions during the interview as new information is learned.
6. Make a record: Take notes
7. Be considerate of time. Try to limit the interview to a 1 hour maximum.
8. Save sensitive questions to last after trust has been established. (p. 1)

Data was collected using focus groups led by the Instructional Coach. Focus groups are defined as carefully planned discussions designed to obtain perceptions surrounding a defined area (Morgan, 1998). They typically include 8-12 participants with similar experiences in a specific content area and are led by an unbiased moderator asking open-ended questions of participants. The focus groups are audio-taped with the session being transcribed for analysis (Steward & Shamdasani, 1990).

The objective of the research was to study the implementation of student-led conferences at an elementary school. The researcher met with the Superintendent and the Board of Education at a subcommittee meeting prior to the Board meeting to gain permission to execute the case

study using the elementary school. The Board of Education approved the case study at a public meeting following the discussion. In addition, the researcher petitioned with the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Auburn University to have the case study research approved. As noted by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), in designing and planning a research study, obtaining necessary institution review and appeals, and permission from the sites are necessary.

Site Population Selection

The study site is a growing elementary school east of Atlanta Georgia with approximately 600 students in Pre-K-5th grades. The elementary school is a part of a school district inclusive of 16,000 students with 22 schools total: 11 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, four high schools, one alternative school, one career academy, and one open campus school. On staff there is one principal, one assistant principal, one main secretary, one bookkeeper, one parent liaison, and 29 Pre-K-5th grade classrooms (1 Pre-K, 4 Kindergarten, 4 first grade, 4 second grade, 4 third grade, 5 fourth grade, and 6 fifth grade, 1 Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD self contained). In addition, there are 14 paraprofessionals. The approved Board of Education curriculum is outlined by Georgia Performance Standards and is used throughout the school day. Each student takes lessons in Writer's, Reading, and Math Workshop, Guided Reading, Math, Hands-on Science, and Social Studies. The school student demographics reflect 66% African-American, 24% White, and 8% Hispanic, and 2% other. Sixty-three percent of the students are low socio-economic status.

Participation Selection

The study was inclusive of seven elementary school teachers (3rd-5th grade) who volunteered to participate based on interest, practice, and individual growth plans. An introductory letter (see Appendix 2) was sent out to all participants of the student-led conference

explaining the information gathered for the study. Participation was not required by teachers, students or parents and was based on consent with no penalty to non-participants. Student and parent participants in grades 3rd, 4th, and 5th were recruited in conjunction with the seven teachers that volunteered to participate in the student-led conference process. Only students with consent to participate in student-led conferences and focus groups participated in the study.

Role of the Researcher

In preparation for the conference, the researcher utilized personnel from the elementary school who expressed interest in student-led conferences and volunteered to take part in the study. Participants also understood the school and district philosophy and curriculum. It was beneficial for elementary school staff to hear from colleagues that understood the district's curriculum demands. In addition, participants were able to effectively help other teachers grasp the new concept of student-led conferences.

In July 2010, prior to the start of the conferences, teachers selected their growth plan and professional learning community goals. Training on student-led conferences began in January 2011. The Media Specialist provided leadership to the student-led conference professional learning community group. During the sessions, the Media Specialist discussed the concept of the initiative and the preparation necessary in classrooms. Participant journals, observations, and discussion were data collection processes that were implemented throughout the professional learning community. Run-throughs were video-taped by teachers for detailed reflection. The participants had the opportunity to ask questions and prepare for their own conferences. The Media Specialist met with teachers for six sessions prior to the student-led conference date. On conference day, the researcher and Media Specialist conducted focus walks and observations of

conference sessions. The researcher analyzed post-conference data from implemented focus groups led by the Instructional Coach.

Instruments

The data collection process for this research was implemented in three phases which are pre-conference, conference, and post-conference collection. The role of the principal investigator was student-led conference co-facilitator and interpreter of collected data. The role of co-investigator, Instructional Coach, was facilitator of post-conference focus group sessions and audio-tape transcriber. The role of co-investigator, Media Specialist ,was student-led conference professional learning community facilitator.

Pre-conference Data Collection.

A professional learning community inclusive of participating teachers was implemented by the Media Specialist to gather information about background, philosophy, goals, planning, and implementation of student-led conferences. Information that the teacher presented about student-led conferences to parents and students was gathered. Artifacts used to communicate about the conferences were reviewed to develop a more comprehensive picture. The researcher observed teachers instructing and guiding students in how to select materials for their portfolios. Students were provided a student-led conference checklist and goal sheet for their portfolio to help guide their discussion with parents on conference day (see Appendix 3). The checklist included each step students should take during the student-led conference such as welcoming parents to the conference, sitting in the designated area for the conference, portfolio review and discussion, demonstrating a selected skill, identifying academic strengths and weaknesses, setting learning goals with parents, thanking parents for attending the conference, and reorganizing the conference space. The researcher observed students practicing their conference

presentations with classmates in preparation for conference day. A student-led conference pilot was implemented by teachers, students, and parents research participants on February 28, 2011. Descriptions of pre-conference processes are used as descriptive data in Chapter 4 of this study.

Conference Data.

Student-led conferences were held on May 5, 2011. Teachers served as supporters to students during this process. Students implemented the process as provided through the professional learning community, to review their portfolios and progress with parents. A checklist and goal sheet was provided to all students to complete during the conference (see Appendix 3). The researcher and Media Specialist conducted observations of student-led conference sessions.

Post-conference Data.

Three post-conference day focus groups were conducted by the Instructional Coach on May 6, 2011, consisting of participants unknown to the researcher. Focus group sessions were conducted separately including one group of 7 teachers, one group of 9 parents, and one group of 9 teachers. Parent and student focus group participants were selected by the Instructional Coach. Returned Parent Permission/Child Assent Letters (see Appendix 2) were numbered and randomly selected by the Instructional Coach for focus group participants. The Instructional Coach contacted selected participants by telephone to inform them and provide additional information regarding the day, time, and location of focus group sessions. The principal researcher was not present in the school building on the day of focus group implementation. The principal researcher only had access to coded, transcribed audio-taped focus group sessions provided by the Instructional Coach. The Instructional Coach transcribed focus-group data and coded participant's data by the use of letter names such as Student A. The Instructional Coach

reviewed transcribed audio-taped data from the focus group sessions prior to providing the transcripts to the principal researcher to assure accuracy. The data forms are stored in the school data center in a locked file cabinet not accessible to the principal researcher. Audio-tapes will be destroyed and discarded by the Instructional Coach.

A protocol including a set of 9 focus group questions (Appendix C), guided the focus groups which were audio-taped and transcribed by the Instructional Coach for the researcher to use to analyze and respond to research questions. The principal researcher was provided permission by the IRB to use the following focus group questions with participants categorized by domains of self efficacy and ownership, responsibility and self identity, trust, and leadership and student support. Focus group question domains were determined through common themes in the literature review research reflective in Chapter 2.

1. Self-Efficacy and Ownership (Benson & Barnett, 2005; Brophy, 1993; Bandura, 1993; Hoy, 2002; Paglin, 1996; Bailey & Guskey, 2001; Fletcher, 2008)
    a. Do you have a better understanding of academic goals, progress, and student performance at school?
    b. Were goals met in the process of student-led conferencing?
2. Responsibility (Stiggins, 2005; Cromwell, 1994; Sweet, 1993; Hackman, 1997; Bailey & Guskey, 2001; Simon, 2001)
    a. How was the student's responsibility different?
    b. How was the teacher's responsibility different?
    c. How was the parent's responsibility different?
3. Trust (Helms, 1990; Gall, 2003; Hoy, 2002; Louis, 2007; Bailey & Guskey, 2001)
    a. Do you feel safe and comfortable in the classroom community?

b. Do you feel valued and respected?

4. Leadership (Herbert, 1998; Tilson, 2004; Stiggins, 2005; Bailey & Guskey, 2001; Dunn, 2001; Simon, 2001)

    a. Were there any noted barriers of student-led conferencing?

    b. What support is needed to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Open Coding qualitative data analysis was used in analyzing transcribed focus group data. Open Coding is inclusive of going through the data, breaking down the data into pieces to examine closely, compare for relationships, similarities, and dissimilarities. Different parts of the data are marked with appropriate labels or codes to identify them for further analysis (Seidel & Kelle, 1995). The focus is on an understanding of the meaning of the description. To get at the essential meaning of the experience, a common approach is to abstract out the themes. These are essential aspects without which the experience would not have been the same. In a narrative, consider aspects such as the physical surroundings, the objects, the characters or aspects of the characters (their relationship), the social interactions between the different characters (or groups), the type of activity, the outcome, the descriptive elements, or the time reference. If the narrative would keep its essential meaning even when a variety of these aspects are changed, then the aspects are not part of the essential theme. Only elements that can be changed without losing the meaning of the narrative contribute to the theme (Waters, 1987).

Once the researcher has fully abstracted and presented the themes noted as essential to the research experience, the researcher is better able to present the unique experience in a way that is understandable and recognizable to anyone who has had the experience (Waters, 1987). Differences with other similar experiences would be made clear for theme analysis. In abstracting the themes from an artistic product, a similar process of reflection would be used to

determine meaning, elements, statements, or behavior of the participant that are qualitatively significant (Waters, 1987). The abstract category of which these concrete elements are particular examples would then be determined. In theme analysis, meanings do rely on socio-cultural and linguistic or artistic context: often, the researcher must go beyond the words to the context provided with the narrative to obtain clear meaning (Waters, 1987). The two types of themes are collective themes that occur across the group of participants, and individual themes that are unique to one or a few individual participants (Waters, 1987). Findings are identified in Chapter 4 of this study.

Duration of the Study

Contact with participants took place over a period of one semester. In terms of case studies, this may appear to be a short time frame. However, one semester was adequate time for collection data before, during, and after the student-led conferences. Overall, a minimum of six professional learning community sessions were experienced by the Media Specialist and participants. Three focus groups were held on May 6, 2011 by the Instructional Coach.

Summary

Benson and Barnett (2005) note that student-led conferences foster a great responsibility for learning and productive student-teacher relationships. Student-led conferences may improve student-parent relationships, generate pride, support the development of classroom culture with a sense of community, build relationship skills, and lead to a greater parental participation in conferences. This case study explored the effective implementation of student-led conferences with the goal of enhancing responsibility, ownership, and self-efficacy in the education process. This study also identified perceptions of students, teachers, and parents regarding the process and outcomes of student-led conferences through audio-taped focus group sessions. Audio-taped

focus group sessions were transcribed by the Instructional Coach and coded for confidentiality. Data analysis and discussion are reflected in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Findings

"The people who influence you are the people who believe in you."

Henry Drummond

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of a relationship between student-led conferences and student self-efficacy, ownership, and responsibility. This study also sought to identify perceptions of teachers, parents, and students regarding the process and outcomes of student-led conferences. Student-led conferences are an information meeting with the family in which the student leads a discussion of his or her work and a review of an academic portfolio Benson & Barnett, 2005). Benson and Barnett (2005) note that student-led conferences foster great responsibility for learning and productive student-teacher relationships. Student-led conferences may improve student-parent relationships, generate pride, support the development of classroom culture with a sense of community, reduce cheating, build leadership skills, and lead to greater parental participation in conferences (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). This study used descriptive, qualitative methods to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the emergent themes related to student self-efficacy, responsibility, and student ownership of learning for participants in student-led conferences?
2. What are the perceptions of parents, students, and teachers about student-led conferences?

3. What are the perceptions of study participants regarding the support needed for parents, students, and teachers to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Participants

The participants for this research included 7 elementary school teachers representing grades 3 through 5 from one Georgia elementary school located east of Atlanta. Teachers volunteered to participate in the study based on interest, practice, and individual growth plans. Student and parent participants were recruited so they were aligned with the teachers that volunteered to participate in the student-led conference process. Student and parent participants were randomly selected to participate in focus groups by the Instructional Coach after returning signed, returned, and numbered consent forms (see Appendix 2). All focus group participants have participated in the student-led conference process twice during the semester. A student-led conference pilot was conducted on February 28, 2011 with consenting parents, students, and teachers. The research-based student-led conferences were held on May 5, 2011.

Instruments

During the student-led conferences held in May 2011, teachers served as supporters to students throughout the process. Students implemented the conference outline process which was provided by the professional learning community. As part of the conference, students reviewed their portfolios and progress with parents. A checklist and goal sheet were provided to all students to complete during the conference (see Appendix 3). The researcher and Media Specialist conducted observations of the student-led conference sessions.

Three post-conference day focus groups were conducted by the Instructional Coach on May 6, 2011. The focus group included participants unknown to the researcher. Focus group sessions were conducted separately including one group of 7 teachers, one group of 9 parents,

and one group of 9 students. Parent and student focus group participants were selected by the Instructional Coach. Returned Parent Permission/Child Assent Letters (see Appendix 2) were numbered and randomly selected by the Instructional Coach for focus group participants. The Instructional Coach contacted selected participants by telephone to inform them of their selection and provide additional information regarding the day, time, and location of focus group sessions. The principal researcher was not present in the school building on the day of the focus group implementation. The principal researcher only had access to coded and transcribed audio-taped focus group sessions provided by the Instructional Coach.

The Instructional Coach transcribed focus-group data and coded participant data by the use of letter names such as Student A. The Instructional Coach reviewed transcribed audio-taped data from the focus group sessions prior to providing the transcripts to the principal researcher to assure accuracy. The data forms are stored in the school data center in a locked file cabinet not accessible to the principal researcher. Audio-tapes will be destroyed and discarded by the Instructional Coach.

A set of 9 focus group questions (Appendix C), were discussed, audio-taped, and transcribed by the Instructional Coach for the researcher to use to analyze and respond to research questions. The principal researcher was provided permission by the IRB to use focus group questions categorized by domains of self efficacy and ownership, responsibility and self identity, trust, and leadership and student support. Data were generated from the audio-taped and transcribed focus groups with students, parents, and teachers. Transcribed focus group data were coded using letter names such as Student A, Parent A, and Teacher A. Coding participant data assured confidentiality of participant responses and allowed for honesty in responses. The principal researcher was not present in the school building on May 6, 2011 when the focus

groups were conducted when an effort to further support the confidentiality of focus group participants.

Results

The purpose of the research was to discover themes and opinions about student-led conferences from students, parents, and teachers. Open Coding was utilized in analyzing transcribed focus group data. Through the Open Coding data analysis process, themes were abstracted based on consistent responses and discussion from focus group sessions among students, parents, and teachers. Figure 2 illustrates the three central themes that were identified through the data analysis process.

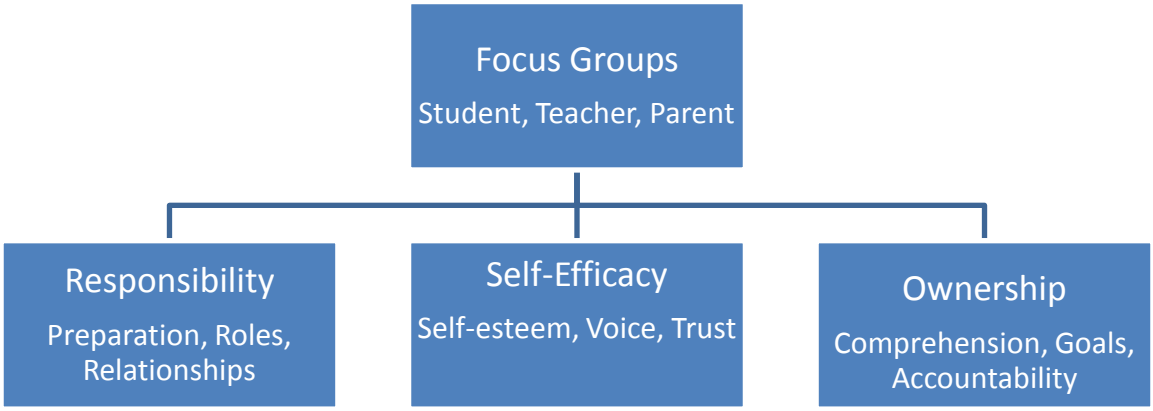

Figure 2. An illustration of the three central themes identified during student, teacher, and parent focus group sessions through the open coding data analysis process.

Responsibility

The roles and responsibilities during student-led conferences were different from traditional parent-teacher conferences. According to student, parent, and teacher focus group responses, there was a clear understanding of the differences in responsibilities of all three participants in the student-led conferences. Parent E noted "I like the different responsibilities because I'm not just a parent out confirming whatever the teacher has to say. At a parent-teacher

conference, it was like the student is being criticized while we just sit there like the teacher was against you." According to Teacher B, traditional parent-teacher conferences were filled with negative things as well and less focused on growth and accomplishment. With student-led conferences, students and parents feel like they are a team. According to Teacher D, "Students have more responsibility in the student-led conference than the traditional conference." These findings are consistent with research conducted by Bailey and Guskey (2005) which found that student-led conferences allow participants to have a better understanding of learning goals and outcomes. According to Parent G, "I have a better understanding of grades and report cards through student-led conferences. You get a better understanding of their academics." Parent F noted deeper conversation and understanding of student performance.

Preparation was a key component discussed by focus group participants related to student responsibility and the effective implementation of student-led conferences. According to Parent I, the student-led conferences were very organized. Parent H noted that students were professionals and invited you into their business. "They were focused and very professional." Parents C, Parent E, and Parent F recalled reminder notes, outfits picked out ahead of time, and schedules provided to them by their child in preparation for the conference. Parent E noted before she found out about the conference that her daughter created a reminder for her. "Don't forget. She even drew a little card! She was so proud and excited about the student-led conference." "Dress for success. We're on their turf now, for sure." According to Parent G, her daughter wore fake reading glasses to add to her professional outfit. "Do you think my teacher is going to like my outfit?" Parent G replied "Yes, you look really nice." Students introduced themselves, gave you a tour of the classroom, and they had their checklist to guide them. It was like they were little grown-ups that day", recalls Parent F. According to Parent A, "students

welcome parents into the setting, introduce themselves like we have not met before, and usher you into their world."

The student goal sheet helped to prepare students for the conference, keep them on track with what to do, and kept things going. According to parent A, "As a parent, it helped me and him see that these are the goals I set, these are the goals I met, this is how I did it, and this is the end result." Students had to talk about all the goals they set and how they met them, and what work was needed to meet the goals. According to Parent F, "I would say that the goals were met. My son had a check off list, and for every task, he checked off as he went." Parent E noted "I thought because there was that goal sheet, they were able to hit their target. I felt the students really understood what they were doing and related it to parents well." Parent F noted "when she saw me moving in the wrong direction, she moved me back. She redirected and focused on the good. I tend to focus on the bad things. She made me realize to celebrate the good stuff."

Student Responsibility.

During student-led conferences, students are to discuss work with their parents while teachers assist in the process. According to Student A, "my responsibility was to show my work to my parents and my teacher's responsibility was to watch over us and give us notes saying good job or something else. It was my responsibility to tell my mom how I was doing and to tell her how I need help with my goals." Student B and Student E noted, "my responsibility was to finish my work so I can show my parents in my portfolio."

Parent E noted, "These kids actually felt like this is my world and I have to now tell you this is what I am capable of." According to Parent D, "it was our kids' responsibility to know what they have to do. They are telling you what they need." "The emphasis during student-led conferences is now the student being responsible and knowing what he needed to do to improve

a particular skill and what support is needed," recalled Parent H. According to Teacher D, the process of student-led conferences helped to guide student focus and help them realize what they need to know to improve.

Student B noted that during the student-led conference, "we can actually explain to your parents what you need help with instead of your teacher doing it…they don't know everything." According to Student E, "when you have a regular conference, it's just between your teacher and your parent. The student can help the teacher and parent better understand the need to learn." Student C recalled, "You can explain the full side to your parent what you really need help on." According to Student F, "The student is responsible for explaining what we know and don't know so we can change it." There was an expectation that parents will support student progress and achievement among the students during the conference. Student D noted, "before, my mom would be too busy and say that she didn't have time to help me, and now she does." Student C noted, "You can teach your parents stuff that you didn't really know, or they could teach you something that you didn't know." Parent G recalled her daughter being able to articulate so well that I brought her dad to meet the teachers. "He had tears in his eyes because he was so proud of her that she was able to go through her folder and the checklist with confidence and clarity."

Teacher Responsibility.

Student G noted "my teacher's responsibility was to help me with what I needed." According to Teacher E, "Prior to conferences, we met with students, set goals, and the children were aware of how to reach and communicate goals to parents. It was still that triangular effect: teacher-student, student-parent and everyone has a key part in the role of student success." Teachers provided support to students as they led conferences with parents in a discrete manner so the purpose and structure of the conference would not be compromised. According to Parent

E, “I was so impressed to see the teacher walking around and she never entered the conference. She had little sticky notes to keep my child positive and on target. I loved it!” Parent A also noted, “I love the way the teacher gave little sticky notes to the students to encourage them during the conference.” Teacher B noted the initial difficulty of the teacher’s role during student-led conferences due to the new approach of allowing students to take the lead. Teacher C noted, “It was hard to not take the lead. We had to trust in our students and our preparation with them to have a good session. It was hard for me to be quiet, but the sticky notes helped us stay connected.”

Parent Responsibility.

During student-led conferences, parents serve as collaborative partners with students and teachers in the process of understanding and supporting learning goals (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). According to Student G, “My mom’s responsibility was to listen to me and to be there for me.” Student A, Student B, and Student E noted parents being responsible for attending the conference, listening to their discussion of work, and helping them at home. Parent C discussed the role of the parent at a “good listener and support system to the student and teacher.” Parent B noted “I had to totally change my way of thinking from past conferences. My child was telling me about learning and progress and I was given expectations for support from her. That is different.” According to Teacher D, “Parents have more responsibility in really trying to understand whether the child has mastered the standard or not and to get more involved in their child’s progress.”

Self-Efficacy

Students that reflect self-efficacy will put forth a high level of effort in order to meet their commitments, and attribute failure to things which are in their control, rather than blaming

external factors (Fencl & Scheel, 2005). Parent G noted, “I think student-led conferences boosts everybody’s esteem up and it makes everybody feel like next time, we’re going to do better.” According to Parent H, the teacher showed that she respected and valued the student by putting notes down to re-encourage them and let them know they were doing a great job. Student G noted, “my class is a safe community that I trust and respect others.” According to Student F, “the classroom is a safe learning place and I have teachers and friends I trust. That makes me comfortable to learn and teach others.” Teacher D noted, “I think kids really do feel valued because I had so many parents that said their child’s self-esteem was so much higher as a result of having participated in the student-led conference.” According to Teacher E, “The conference promoted a positive self-image of themselves. They feel valued and respected.” According to Teacher F, the students were more comfortable with the process than I was as the teacher because of letting go of some control. “I was more of the coach and I’m rooting for them.” I saw the confidence in some children, who were kind of quiet, but was very confident during the conference.”

Student-led conferences are a natural outgrowth of the school’s commitment to giving students “choice and voice: in classroom management and instruction” (Paglin, 1996, p. 1). Students were able to effectively communicate their needs to parents in an effort to promote academic progress. Parent E noted that her daughter taught her to be patient with her. “You have to be patient with me in this area mommy because I need help. The roles have really shifted and I feel like now I am in the chair and she is advocating for her right to learn and be supported.” Students were confident and felt comfortable and safe to lead the conferences. They trusted their own leadership. According to Teacher G, students felt safe and comfortable to say what was needed and speak the truth about their progress during the student-led conference.

According to Student B, “sometimes school work is really hard for you even though you got it right. Just because you got it right, doesn’t mean that you understand what you may need help with.” According to Student E, it is important for your parents to learn you need help so they can go on line to websites to help you. Student G noted, “I am really bad at writing and reading, and now my mom and I made a goal to read thirty minutes a day.” Student C noted, “I have trouble with math and set goals to improve during the first conference. At the second conference, my teacher and I saw improvement.” According to Student I, “The thing I had trouble in was multiplication and I know I had to practice so I would know how to do division. So, I asked my teacher to help me and my sister and she did. It helped me.” Student E noted “for the first time we had a student-led conference, it was hard to remember everything you practices but you’ll get it. When you have a conference, speak up, but it should take a little bit of effort.” According to Student D, “it is important to tell your parents the truth about how you are doing in school so they know how to help you.”

According to Parent F, students knew their areas of weakness and what they needed to work on. “They really can explain what is happening to their education.” Parent H noted her son telling her that she needs to help him with reading. “I said, you need to go to the library at school to get a book and he said no, you need to take me to the library. I need to do this so I can do this.” He was very focused on his goals and our need to support his progress. Parent I recalled her son actually asking to borrow her books for additional practice over the summer. The student noted “mom, she has a lot of responsibility on herself right now in school. So, I know I need to do my responsibility at home.”

Ownership

Student-led conferences encourage students to take ownership and accountability for their work (Bailey & Guskey, 2011). According to Teacher D, "I like the student-led conference because it really does cause ownership on behalf of the student. That's the positive compared to the traditional version which is usually focused more on the negative." In traditional conferences, parents are more accountable for their child's academic actions. Parents and teachers are placed in the position of taking complete responsibility for the child's learning (Simon, 2001). According to Parent G, "I think the responsibility was different. The teachers provided structure to help students understand how to set goals, meet, and track them." Parent H noted the evidence of teacher support and student practice. "You could tell it wasn't rehearsed because they tell you everything. Had it been rehearsed, he would have told me because he cannot keep a secret."

According to Student A, "Student-led conferences allow us to talk about our work and what we don't understand and why we don't understand it and how I could work on my goals. I need help and must be responsible for that." According to Parent A, "it's their conference. So, that ownership of it is so important. My child felt a sense of ownership and pride in his work." Parent A noted that her child missed recess to conduct her student-led conference. She was surprised that her child was more excited about the conference than recess. "Whoa! I was impressed that she was more intrigued to do the conference than going outside to play with her friends. That let me know she was eager to lead the conference with me. It was great how the children took ownership for their learning." Parent I recalled the process being very impressive. According to Parent C, the student-led conference was a self-esteem boost from them taking ownership of what they have done and can do. Teacher F noted, " I thought kids have more ownership, especially the second time around, after they saw the parents pleased the first time."

Parent E recalled her child stating what she did on her work and because she was the leader, she was the one communicating with her and emphasized what she needed to do in order to do well in school. According to Teacher G, "parents had the opportunity to ask questions and students explained why they did or did not succeed in their goals. It was very beneficial." Parent H recalled, "What impressed me was my child was able to explain what he did, what he was trying to do, and what the teacher expected him to do. "He knew the expectation and met the challenge." According to Parent E, "All of a sudden, I see children as being responsible for their own education." According to Parent C, "Student-led conferences help parent-teacher relationships because a lot of parents tend to put sole responsibility of the education of their child on the teacher. We all must take ownership in student learning."

Summary

Two student-led conferences were held during second semester. Each conference lasted 30 minutes. All students had a check list to guide the sequence of events during their conference. During student-led conferences, students, parents, and teachers assumed ownership and responsibility for student success. Students became leaders in the process of conference preparation, communicating, setting learning goals, and creating a plan for intervention and improvement with parents. Parents became active participants, listeners, and supporters in developing and monitoring academic goals. Teachers became facilitators and provided positive feedback and support to students and parents while allowing the student to maintain their leadership role in the student-led conference process.

Following the student-led conference implementation, three focus group sessions were conducted inclusive of students, parents, and teachers. Focus group sessions lasted one hour each. Data suggest that teachers and parents recognized the leadership and confidence that

students demonstrated as they led their conferences. Accepting more responsibility can foster greater confidence (Bailey & Guskey, 2005). Student-led conferences provided opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and be active participants in the improvement process. Student-led conferences provided the opportunity to articulate strengths and weaknesses, both academically and socially, and my provide incentive to improve future academic performances.

Chapter 5: Summary, Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

"Children are apt to live up to what you believe of them"

Lady Bird Johnson

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of a relationship between student-led conferences and student responsibility, self-efficacy, and ownership. This study also identified perceptions of teachers, parents, and students regarding the process and outcomes of student-led conferences. The study used descriptive, qualitative methods to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the emergent themes related to student self-efficacy, responsibility, and student ownership of learning for participants in student-led conferences?
2. What are the perceptions of parents, students, and teachers about student-led conferences?
3. What are the perceptions of study participants regarding the support needed for parents, students, and teachers to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Data were collected from student, teacher, and parent focus group sessions. The participants discussed student academic and personal experiences utilizing the student-led conference model. The results of this research indicate that student-led conferences improved the quality of knowledge shared during the conference, promoted student responsibility, self-efficacy, and ownership, and helped build habits of self-reflecting as suggested by student,

teacher, and parent responses in the focus groups. This research supports previous research conducted on student-led conferences and student involvement in the learning experience.

Student-led conferences are a viable alternative to traditional parent-teacher conferences. Students, teachers, and parents were excited to be part of the student-led conference experience. The student-led conference is a healthy communication tool for the school environment (Bailey & Guskey, 2005). The conference endorsed accountability, promoted communication, and encouraged the building of self-efficacy. The students became the focus of the conference. As students presented their work to parents, they were provided personal commentary by teachers and supported through their leadership process.

Based on findings, it is fair to say that student-led conferences created an opportunity for students to take control of their learning and empowered them to be a part of their educational process. Student-led conferences supported the process of students participating in educational discussions about their work with teachers and parents. Student-led conferences helped guide students to lead conversations with parents. Student-led conferences provided a forum that provides opportunities for high parental interaction with their child's education. This conference reminded students, teachers, and parents their opinions are valued and their time spent in school is significant. Most importantly, students discovered the value of their work in authentic ways (Benson & Barnett, 2005).

Discussion of Findings

Through the literature review, student-led conferences were noted to be beneficial to all participants involved (Camic & Cafasso, 2003; Cromwell, 2005; Hackmann, 1997). This research explored student-led conferences as compared to traditional parent-teacher conferences as a different means of communication from school to home and a way to include students in the conferencing process. Parent-teacher conferences are academic conferences that typically center on the report card at the end of a grading period. Although parent-teacher conferences are common form of communication between school and home, the ten to fifteen minute allotment of time is usually not enough for effective academic and social dialogue among teachers and parents. Traditional conferences sometimes made both teachers and parents uncomfortable and tense throughout the conference (Black, 2005). Krejeci (2002) noted that this style of conference does not allow enough time for parent questions or concerns without feeling intimidated or rushed to ask a question.

The main point of conferencing is to create effective communication. Simon (2001) explained that there are many roadblocks that hinder effective communication during any conference. The roadblocks are:

1. Feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty coping as a parent
2. Parents want to help, but don't know how
3. Parent experiences stem from their negative school experiences
4. Negative view of teacher competence. (p. 16)

Student-led conferences strive to detour around those roadblocks and aid in mending negative perceptions because students are actively involved in the process. Through a positive and organized conference, the parent is able to see assignments and assessments through student portfolios and identify how to help students continue to be successful.

Beyond the intended parameters of the research, student-led conferences became important to the school environment. Efforts were made to adjust teaching styles in the classroom to accommodate the student-led conference process. This encouraged responsibility and organization by students. Students were accountable in effectively preparing their portfolios prior to conferences. Students were responsible for leading the conferencing and staying on task as aligned with the provided student-led conference checklist and goal sheet.

Conclusions

This study confirmed the findings of Hackman (1997), Austin (1994), Bailey and Guskey (2001), Benson and Barnett (2005), Herbert (2001), Stiggins (2005), Fletcher (2008), Hoy (2002), Simon (2001), and Bandura (1993) regarding the student-led conference process as a means for enhancing self-efficacy, ownership, responsibility, trust, and leadership among students. Student, teacher, and parent focus group discussion also reflected these domains in addition to identifying honesty, involvement, confidence, self-assessment, reflections, and communication as purposes of student-led conferences.

Student Perspectives

During focus group sessions, students talked about how student-led conferences improved their communication skills and how they valued the opportunity to communicate with

their parents. Students reflected pride and excitement during the preparation process and the benefits of having time to discuss their performance at school with their parents. Many students noted how leading their own conference made them feel more self-confident. Some students reported that being in charge of their own conference made them more responsible and discussed how their work habits would change. Other students noted that leading their own conference helped their learning and would help them get better grades. Many students expressed value in parents knowing what they are doing in school and ways to support their continued progress at home. Privacy during conferences was a noted concern for many students during the conference. Some students suggested having a separate location temporarily for students during conferences instead of scheduling multiple conferences in the classroom each time period. According to those students, providing the option of personal space would allow students to discuss confidential matters of concern with parents. Other students noted that privacy may yield dishonesty among students and allowing students to conference in clusters with parents allows for teacher and peer support among students.

Parent Perspectives

Parents identified responsibility, self-confidence, self-assessment, communication, leadership, accountability, and ownership as results of student-led conferences. Many parents recognized self-confidence in relationship to student-led conferences increasing after the conference occurred. Parents noted amazement at the professionalism and organization of their children during the conference. Many were excited to see their child in a leadership role and taking responsibility for their own learning. Parents noted the positive focus of student-led

conferences as being different from the negative outcomes typically associated with traditional parent-teacher conferences. The ability for students to guide their parents through the support process for their learning and extend accountability to them was also routinely noted during parent focus group discussions. Parents expressed support for the continuation of student-led conferences as a necessity for student achievement and success. A few parents recommended that the teachers provide a feedback form or a few minutes following the student-led conference for additional discussion if needed. However, most parents identified calls, e-mail correspondences, or the scheduling of a follow up conference with teachers as routine and effective following student-led conferences.

Teacher Perspectives

The teacher perspective on the purpose of student-led conferences included student confidence, responsibility, involvement, communication, and accountability. Honesty was mentioned by many teachers as an outcome of student-led conferences. Students were accountable for their learning and presented their work to parents with teacher support. Many teachers emphasized the importance of the preparation process for students as it increased motivation and responsibility at school. Teachers noted continued self-assessment as a major outcome of student-led conferences. According to many teachers, the experience of student-led conferences has allowed many of their lower performing students to learn how to set goals and celebrate successes.

During the conference, the principal researcher anticipated negative feedback from teachers due to the intense preparation time needed for the conference. Informally, they stressed

the consumption of extra time in preparing students. However, after reviewing focus group data, teachers enjoyed the student-led conference and the preparation time was worth the cause. Teachers noted that they want to continue using the conference format in the following school year.

Recommendations

Recommendations for additional research would be beneficial in five significant areas. Areas for future study regarding student-led conferences include a) portfolios and reflection, b) goal-setting, c) more comprehensive participant sampling, d) possible relationship with student achievement and e) implications to school-wide practice.

Portfolios and Reflection

Portfolios were used during the student-led conferences in this study. Teacher commentary was provided to students regarding work samples and during discussion with parents. Students were allowed to reflect on their progress and create learning goals with parents. Research related to the use of portfolios and student reflection to evaluate the effect of daily self-assessment would be beneficial to determine students' ability to identify and assess goals for their learning.

An additional area for further research about student-led conferences is to investigate how the use of electronic portfolios would improve the process. Bailey and Guskey (2001) suggested that videotapes of student performance in physical education, music, or technical classes could be represented more successfully in an electronic format than in a paper portfolio. Students have the ability to include samples of their digital stories, podcasts, webpages, and

blogs in an individual digital portfolio. As technology increases, students will be able to reflect and organize electronic portfolios through proper use of computers. PowerPoint presentations could be utilized in lieu of paper trails for creating electronic versions of reflections and goals as well as links to support work. Such processes create authentic learning and assessing, while fulfilling technology standards.

Goal-Setting

It would be beneficial to study the effect that structured student goal-setting has on student-led conferences. In the beginning of the school year, teachers assisted students in outlining learning goals with students that were then used to monitor and self-direct their learning. The goals would guide students' assessments of their progress throughout the school year. With the identification of specific goals, student performance and student-led conferences may be enhanced. The goals would be directly or indirectly aligned with state academic performance standards.

Broader Participant Sampling

Although this study included participants from diverse ability levels and demographics in one east Atlanta, Georgia elementary school, a broader study would improve the generalization of the value of student-led conferences. It would be useful to determine if student-led conferences produce positive results in states across the country. There is some debate between educators about whether all student ability groups benefit from student-led conferences (Benson & Barnett, 2005). A closer look at student-led conferences and more clearly identified student

ability levels could provide insight for customizing student-led conferences based on student characteristics.

Link with Academic Achievement

In the age of high-stakes testing, it would be prudent to determine if a relationship exists between students leading their own conferences and higher levels of academic achievement. This study did not generate any concrete data to indicate if student achievement would be improved through the use of student-led conferences. Benson and Barnett (1999) reported the effect of student-led conferences on failure and dropout rates of high school students in Kearnersville, North Carolina, and the decrease in the number of middle school students in Floresville Middle School in Floresesville, Texas, who were retained and needed to repeat a grade. No measureable data were reported for elementary students to support a correlation between student-led conferences and improved academic achievement (Benson & Banrett, 1999). A link between higher academic achievement and student-led conferencing would be powerful evidence in support of this type of formative assessment. The mission of schools includes academic success for their students. If it can be documented that student-led conferences increase students' academic performance, more time and support for student-led conferences would perhaps be reflected by school districts across the country.

Implications to School-wide Practice

Student-led conferences create an opportunity for students to take control of their learning and empower them to be part of the educational process. Student-led conferences can be an essential resource to teachers and administrators at every level to maximize time, improve

communication with parents, and encourage student self reliance (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). This study focused on the student-led conference implementation in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade. Research exploring the relationship between student-led conferences and student responsibility and ownership among younger students in primary grades is needed. Children in Kindergarten and beyond can benefit from student-led conferences (Hackman, 1997). As schools continue to embrace standards-based grading, assessment, and reporting, research related to student-led conferences as a way of facilitating the interpretation of these processes to parents is valuable. The student-led conference process is beneficial in helping with staff development in terms of understanding how students are learning the curriculum and understand the purpose of assessment portfolios. Exploring the staff development process in preparation for student-led conferences and the impact of these conferences on school culture and climate would also be important information at the school, district, and state level as more educators embrace this collaborative process of communication.

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Appendix 1
Focus Group Questions

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

For a Research Study Entitled

"Exploring Student Ownership and Responsibility Through Student-led Conferences: A Case Study"

Charisse Windom Gay, EFLT Doctoral Student

Auburn University

DOMAIN	QUESTIONS
Self-Efficacy and Ownership	Do you have a better understanding of academic goals, progress, and student performance at school?
	Were goals met in the process of student-led conferencing?
Responsibility & Self-Identity	How was the student's responsibility different?
	How was the teacher's responsibility different?
	How was the parent's responsibility different?
Trust	Do you feel safe and comfortable in the classroom community?
	Do you feel valued and respected?
Leadership and Student Support	Were there any noted barriers of student-led conferencing?
	What support is needed to implement and sustain student-led conferences?

Appendix 2
Consent Letters

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/22/11 to 3/21/12 Protocol # 11-035 EP 1103

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

PARENTAL PERMISSION/CHILD ASSENT

for a Research Study entitled

"Exploring Student Ownership and Responsibility Through Student-led Conferences: A Case Study"

Your child invited to participate in a research study that examines the effective implementation of student-led conferences with the goal of enhancing ownership, responsibility, and self-efficacy among students. This study is being conducted by Charisse Windom Gay, a Doctoral Candidate at Auburn University. Your child has been selected as a possible participant because study is inclusive of six elementary school classrooms (3rd, 4th, and 5th grade) with teachers that have volunteered to participate based on interest, practice, and individual growth plans. Parents and students were selected for possible participation in this study because your child is a student in one of the six teacher volunteers. Since your child is age 18 or younger, we must have your permission to include him/her in the study.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to allow your child to partipate in this research study, teachers, students, and parents will participate in student-led conferences during the district parent conference day during Spring Semester, 2011. During the conference, students will lead in the review of instructional goals, progress, and portfolios with parents with teacher support. Three one hour focus groups (teachers, student, and parent) will be held following the student-led conference date and led by our Instructional Coach and Media Specialist. The focus groups will be inclusive of 8-10 volunteers unknown to the researcher. During the focus group discussion, volunteers will respond to 6-10 questions regarding student-led conferences experience as it relates to student ownership, responsibility, self-efficacy, leadership, and support. Focus group session will be audio-taped and transcribed by our Instructional Coach. Your child's total time commitment will be approximately two hours.

Are there any risks or discomforts? Breach of confidentiality is a possible risk in this study. However, data collected will be anonymous. Names will not appear on any document. Participant responses will be coded (ex: Student A) to maintain confidentiality of participants.

Are there any benefits to yourself and others? If your child participates in this study, your child can expect to enhance their role in their own learning. During student-led conferences, students discuss work with their parents while teachers assist in the process. This encourages students to take ownership and accountability for their work (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Opening the door of communication between parent and student is an important process that needs to be maintained for academic success. Teaching the student to be reflective and comprehend his/her work is also a valuable tool needed to enhance student accomplishment. Thus, the experience of student-led conferences are beneficial to students, teachers, and parents. We/I cannot promise you that your child will receive any or all of the benefits described.

Parent/Guardian Initails_____

Participant Initials_____

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460; Fax: 334-844-3072

www.auburn.edu

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

INFORMATION LETTER

For a Research Study Entitled

"Exploring Student Ownership and Responsibility Through Student-led Conferences: A Case Study"

You are invited to participate in a research study that examines the effective implementation of student-led conferences with the goal of enhancing ownership, responsibility, and self-efficacy among students. This study is being conducted by Charisse Windom Gay, a Doctoral Candidate at Auburn University. The study is inclusive of six elementary school teachers (3rd, 4th, and 5th grade) who have volunteered to participate based on interest, practice, and individual growth plans. Parents and students were selected for possible participation in this study because your child is a student of one of the six teacher volunteers.

What will be involved if you participate? With your approved participation in this study, teachers, students, and parents will participate in student-led conferences during Spring Semester, 2011. During the conference, students will lead in the review of instructional goals, progress, and portfolios with parents with teacher support. Three one hour focus groups (teachers, student, and parent) will be held on following the student-led conference date and led by our Instructional Coach and Media Specialist. Focus groups will be inclusive of 8-10 volunteers unknown to the researcher. During the focus group discussion, volunteers will respond to 6-10 questions regarding student-led conferences experience as it relates to student ownership, responsibility, self-efficacy, leadership, and support. Focus group session will be audio-taped and transcribed by our Media Specialist.

Are there any risks or discomforts? Breach of confidentiality is a possible risk in this study. However, data collected will be anonymous. Names will not appear on any document. Participant responses will be coded (ex: Student A) to maintain confidentiality of participants.

Are there any benefits to yourself and others? During student-led conferences, students discuss work with their parents while teachers assist in the process. This encourages students to take ownership and accountability for their work (Bailey & Guskey, 2001). Opening the door of communication between parent and student is an important process that needs to be maintained for academic success. Teaching the student to be reflective and comprehend his/her work is also a valuable tool needed to enhance student accomplishment. Thus, the experience of student-led conferences are beneficial to students, teachers, and parents.

Will you receive compensation for participating or any other rewards or gifts? There is no compensation for participating in this study.

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460; Fax: 334-844-3072

www.auburn.edu

Are there any costs? There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

What if you change your mind about participating? Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not jeopardize your relations with Rockdale County Public Schools or Auburn University. Further, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty during the data collection process. If you decide to withdraw from the study, you may also withdraw any information which has been collected about you. The study will take approximately one semester to complete from approval by the Institutional Review Board at Auburn University.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous. The investigator and Dissertation Committee Chair will protect your privacy and the data you provide by excluding your identity and restricting access to only those individuals who are conducting this study. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfilled an educational requirement, published in a professional refereed journal, and/or presented at a professional conference or meeting.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact Charisse Windom Gay at (770) 922-0666 (cgay@rockdale.k12.ga.us) , Dr. Maria M. Witte at (334) 844-3078 (wittemm@auburn.edu), or Dr. Cynthia J. Reed at (334) 844-4488 (reedcyn@auburn.edu) .

For more information regarding your rights as a subject, you may contact the Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone at (334) 844-5966 or email at hsubject@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO.

_____ _____

Investigator's Signature Date

_____

Printed Name

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/22/11 to 3/21/12 Protocol # 11-035 EP 1103

Appendix 3
Student-Led Conference Forms

Student-Led Conference Checklist

	Make sure your teachers know that you are here.
	Show your parents where to sit. Get out your portfolio.
	Welcome your parents.
	Begin sharing your work.
	Show and explain what you do best in school.
	Write goals with your parents. Include ways to improve.
	Share a learned skill with your parents.
	Thank you parents for coming.
	Return your portfolio.
	Complete your reflection with your parents.

Student-Led Conference Student Organizer

Name: Date:

Glows: Things I do well:
Grows: Things I need help with:
Goal(s):
Steps I will take to achieve my goal:
How my parents and/or teacher can help:
When will I revisit these goals? What would I like to find?

Signatures:

Student:	Parent:

Appendix 4
IRB Approval Letter

AUBURN
UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance
115 Ramsay Hall, basement
Auburn University, AL 36849

Telephone: 334-844-5966
Fax: 334-844-4391
hsubjec@auburn.edu

April 4, 2011

MEMORANDUM TO: Charisse Windom Gay
Department of Educational Foundation, Leadership and Technology

PROTOCOL TITLE: "Exploring Student Ownership and Responsibility through Student -Led Conferences: A Case Study of One Elementary School"

IRB AUTHORIZATION NO: 11-035 EP 1103

APPROVAL DATE: March 22, 2011
EXPIRATION DATE: March 21, 2012

The referenced protocol was approved as "Expedited" by the IRB under 45 CFR 46.110 (6,7):

> "(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes."
>
> "(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies."

You must report to the IRB any proposed changes in the protocol or procedures and any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others. Please reference the above authorization number in any future correspondence regarding this project.

If you will be unable to file a Final Report on your project before March 22, 2012, you must submit a request for an extension of approval to the IRB in late February 2012. If your IRB authorization expires and/or you have not received written notice that a request for an extension has been approved prior to March 22, 2012, you must suspend the project immediately and contact the Office of Research Compliance.

A Final Report will be required to close your IRB project file. You are reminded that you must use only copies of the stamped, approved consent documents when you consent your participants. Signed consents must be kept on file in a secure campus location for three years after your study ends.

If you have any questions concerning this Board action, please contact the Office of Research Compliance.

Sincerely,

Kathy Jo Ellison, RN, DSN, CIP
Chair of the Institutional Review Board
for the Use of Human Subjects in Research

cc: Dr. Sherida Downer
Dr. Maria Witte

Appendix 5
District Approval Letter

Rockdale County Public Schools
RCPS

Samuel T. King, Ed.D.
Superintendent

Forrest Jack Lance
General Counsel

Board of Education
Wales F. Barksdale
Jeff Dugan
Darlene E. Hotchkiss
Donald E. McKinney
Brad Smith
Jean Yontz
Katrina P. Young

December 14, 2010

Ms. Charisse Gay
Sims Elementary School
1821 Walker Road
Conyers, GA 30094

Dear Ms. Gay:

I have reviewed your research proposal, Exploring Student Ownership and Responsibility Through Student-led Conferences: A Case Study of One Elementary School. I am approving your request pending the following conditions:

- You must secure active consent from parents for student's participation in the research.
- Results must be reported in a confidential manner so that the anonymity of participant is protected.

I wish you every success as you begin this very important project. I would appreciate a copy of the final report along with any recommendations that your research may offer the Rockdale Public Schools.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Garrett Brundage, Ed.D.

Garrett Brundage, Ed.D
Executive Director for Support Services

954 North Main Street . Conyers, Georgia 30012 . Phone: 770-483-4713 . Fax: 770.860.4266 . rockdale.k12.ga.us