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REPORTING LITERACY OUTCOMES IN MIDDLE SCHOOLING: EXPLORING WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT TESTING AND IMPROVEMENT

Claire Wyatt-Smith and Joanne Pascoe

Introduction

While there is much anecdotal evidence and a growing body of writing on how parents and school communities react to various forms of school reporting, little is currently known about how parents value (i) the school-based reports of literacy assessment that they receive, relative to (ii) the reporting of each individual child's achievement on state-wide literacy testing programs. For our purposes, these are taken to represent two main categories of reporting, with the former understood to include interim and end-of-term and semester reports as well as formal parent-teacher interviews and informal parent-teacher discussions. This paper takes up the issue of what parents have to say about these two categories of reporting and explores the still problematic link between large-scale literacy testing and improvement. This link is of direct relevance to middle schooling and state-wide literacy testing programs, given that it is a central tenant of Australia's National Plan (Department of Employment, Education, training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2001).

In what follows we present a one-year exploratory study that had as one of its aims to examine parent views about what they count as effective reporting of literacy assessment in middle schooling. Of special interest in the study is how parents, as key participants in reporting practices, make sense of and value the information they receive about their child's literacy progression and achievement. Also of interest is what parents say about the (in)compatibility of the above-mentioned categories of reporting practices in which they and their children participate. In what follows, the details of study design are mentioned first below, with attention turning then to a discussion of key findings.

Research Plan and Methods

The study referred to earlier adopted an ethnographic approach to data collection, the two main data types being semi-structured interviews with teachers, and a print survey to parents written in non-technical language. The survey was designed for ease of completion, taking approximately 10 minutes and included questions with a choice of response options as well as open-ended questions with space for respondents' written comments. Some information was sought about respondents' language and cultural backgrounds, as shown below. A reply paid envelope was provided to ensure return postage was cost-free.

Schools

Six south-east Queensland State Primary Schools agreed to participate in the study. Some schools in rural areas were invited to participate and declined the invitation. The aim was to have some coverage of five target student groups representing the diversity of the student cohort in the State's primary schools. These groups are: (i) students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island backgrounds (ATSI); (ii) students from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds; (iii) students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, and (iv) students at risk due to transience and disrupted schooling. While groups ii, iii, and iv were represented in the final set of participating schools, only very limited coverage was achieved of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island (ATSI) backgrounds, as indicated below. Table 1 also outlines the profile of students at the participating schools.

A total of 24 teacher participants were interviewed from the schools listed above. The data collected from the teachers is analysed in other publications (see Wyatt-Smith & Campbell, 2002). Readers may also be interested in Wyatt-

Smith, 2000, which also addresses teachers' views of the relationship between large-scale literacy testing and classroom-based assessment.)

Table 1: Numbers of students at participating schools

School	No of Year 5 students		No of Year 7 students	
A	Males 36 Females 30 (ATSI 3)		Males 43 Females 40 (ATSI 3)	
B	Males 9 Females 12 (ATSI 1)		Males 7 Females 11 (ATSI 1)	
C	Males 39 Females 49 (ATSI 0)		Males 49 Females 27 (ATSI 0)	
D	Males 61 Females 69 (ATSI 0)		Males 63 Females 56 (ATSI 0)	
E	Males 7 Females 8 (ATSI 1)		Males 5 Females 10 (ATSI 1)	
F	Males 14 Females 15 (ATSI 0)		Males 14 Females 16 (ATSI 0)	

Parents/carers

Principals at five of the six schools agreed to distribute the surveys to their Year 5 and Year 7 students to take home, with School F not wanting to participate in this phase of the project. Overall, 80 surveys were returned from four schools. This

figure includes three parents who had children in both Years 5 and 7 and their opinions were counted twice as they had answered the surveys separately for each child. No parents self-identified as being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island backgrounds. Return details of the survey are provided in Table 2.

The following discussion draws on parents' survey answers, including the ticked options and the additional written commentary to open-ended questions. A representative sample of actual comments recorded on the surveys has been chosen to illustrate the full range of recorded views. Additionally, information is presented in graph form to show school-specific data.

Our starting position was that just as individual schools are distinctive, having their own preferred ways of enacting teaching, learning and assessing, so too, parents are not a homogenous group. Accordingly, we make no claim about the generalisability of responses beyond the participating sites. We therefore invite readers to consider how the findings reported in the following discussion relate to the reporting practices and parent views in the institutional contexts with which they are most familiar.

Table 2: Return details of the parent survey

School	No of Year 5	No of Year 7	Total	% return	Language/s spoken at home
A	12	Not handed out	12	16.7	None reported
B	5	5	10	25.6	None reported
C	10	7	17	10.4	2 Cantonese 1 Mandarin 1 Some Chinese 1 Finnish
D	25	16	41	16.1	1 Chinese, Dutch, French 1 Greek 1 Afrikaan 1 Icelandic 3 Mandarin 2 Cantonese 2 Hindi 1 Thai 1 Finnish
Total	52	28	80	15.1	18

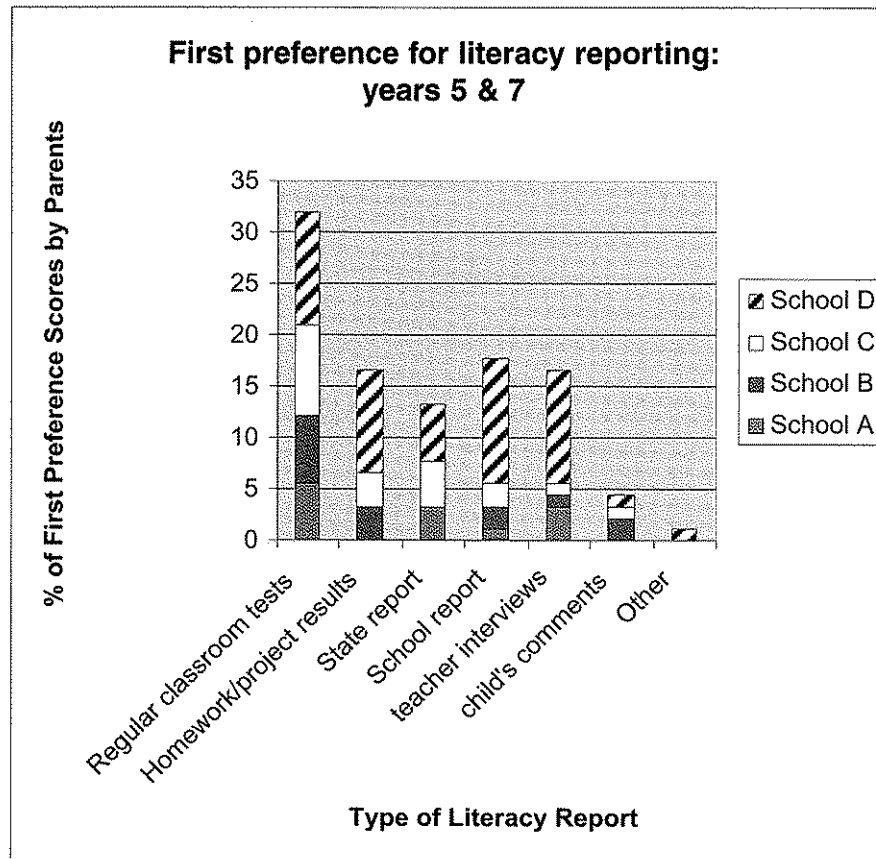
Findings

Finding 1: Most parents indicated that reports of in-class assessment including regular classroom tests and homework/project results to be most informing.

Overall, parents showed a clear preference for accurate, ongoing feedback from the teacher, and reports of formative in-class assessment for improvement purposes. Considerably less valued were one-off or terminal tests, and the child's self report of progress, the latter being discussed in more detail later in this paper. Valued teacher-controlled reports included: informal classroom tests, the school report card, homework/project results and teacher interviews. Taken together, these totalled 82.5% of parents' first choices (see

Graph 1 below). This could further be broken into 48.4% first choice for reports of teacher controlled assessments for learning purposes, including regular classroom tests and homework/project results; 34.1% first choice for teacher controlled assessments for measurement and accountability purposes, including school report and teacher interviews; 13.2% for state testing of literacy and 4.4% for child self reporting. Parents volunteered how other forms of literacy assessment that they valued included their own observations of their child's work; reported position in class; various external English competitions and examinations such as those run by various universities, and feedback from the learning support teacher.

Graph 1



As shown Graph 1, the responses across sites showed the high value that parents reported placing on regular teacher feedback and the opportunities for face-to-face meetings to discuss individual progress over time, a point captured in the three responses below:

- *This numbering relates directly to the frequency of accurate feedback. [1.homework 2.regular in-class tests 3.teacher interviews 4.school reports 5. Child's comments 6. State test]*
- *With having an interview with the teacher you can get answers to questions straight away.*

- *The school room and in-class testing and teachers' reports are the regular contact you have all year round and if you have concerns, they can be addressed fairly early in the year.*

While the support for information from in-class assessment was strong, the survey answers also brought to light how some parents (less than 10%) valued rank-ordering students for the purpose of making direct inter-student comparisons. Further, while some of this group indicated a keen interest in comparing student achievement within the local context of class and school, others reported that they wanted to know how their child ranked relative to the whole cohort of students at state and national levels, as shown in the comments reproduced verbatim below:

- *It is obvious that my child is above average. The state test gives me a better idea where she is at as compared with the state average.*
- *Although it is vital to know your own child's progress individually, it is equally if not more important to know where they rank statewide. This after all, is how they are determined academically at the end of their school life.*

Though the appeal of rank-ordering students and reporting 'position in class' was not a strong feature of responses, it tended to emerge where parents also indicated that they had particular concerns about the quality or level of demand of in-class assessment practices. In the first comment below, for example, the level of challenge of in-class assessments is mentioned, while the second comment raises a concern about parental intervention in homework as an assessment issue.

- *State tests seem more challenging than the rest. School reports provide a bird's eye view and classroom tests give progressive reports.*
- *Homework and projects are not an accurate way of comparison – how much parental input was there?*

The question posed in the second response points to a construction of assessable work as being work properly undertaken by the student, alone and unaided, as a solo activity in which *parental input* has no proper place. Countering this view, however was a view expressed by some that

parents should take an active role as assessors by being directly involved in the reading and writing that students undertake at home. Consider how this view is expressed in the segments below:

- *Parental assessment through reading/writing homework is vital. I believe the combination of school and parental assessment is best.*
- *Homework is very important as is classroom testing. I can monitor my grandchildren's progress and assist where necessary.*

The data also showed how, across all participating schools, parents consistently indicated that the Year 5 and Year 7 student was the least authorised to speak about his/her progress, recording student self-reporting to be the least valued form of reporting. Some parents initiated an explanation of this, indicating the concern that students tend not to be a source of reliable self-assessment, as captured in the comment below:

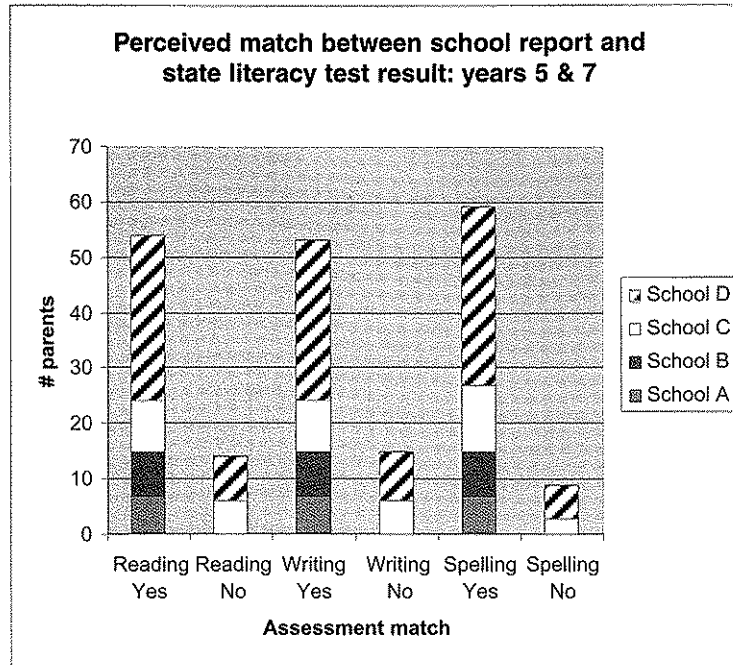
- *In verbal interviews I can ask [the teacher] questions as well. My children always think they are going brilliantly.*

The discussion to this point suggests how parents may carry with them powerful, latent understandings about the nature of assessment that, in turn, can impact on the identities that parent and student/child take on around the activities of 'doing homework' and monitoring literacy progress. Next we turn to parents' views about the relationship between system and school reporting of literacy achievement.

Finding 2: In/congruence between reports

At issue with parents' views about the congruence between the literacy assessment reports they received, was whether the school report of their student's literacy achievement was in/consistent with the individualised report of achievement based on the literacy testing programs in Years 5 and 7. Graph 2 below shows that, collectively, 72% of parents reported a match between the reported student outcomes for reading; 69% reported a match between the reported outcomes for writing; and 82%, a match for spelling. Parents from schools A and B reported no inconsistencies between the reports.

Graph 2



Inconsistencies between the school and system reports were indicated, as shown in the following:

Table 3: Response categories

Category of Response	Illustrative Comments
School results higher than state Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student literacy results appear to be higher at school. This is a concern. • Reading came out a good deal lower in the state test.
School results lower than state Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My child/children can achieve Distinctions for literacy tests and yet only get a Satisfactory/C on a report card. • The teacher said Satisfactory on reports when he was above average on state reports.

In considering possible reasons for the above reported discrepancies in the information supplied to parents about literacy outcomes in schooling, parents initiated comments addressing these reasons, which they took to include test anxiety; different reporting formats; and physical or learning difficulties. A representative selection of written comments follows in Table 4:

These comments indicate parent interest in accounting for differences between the reports they receive in terms of what *they* know about *their* son or daughter – how s/he manages any sense of stress associated with test conditions and the level of teacher support routinely provided – as well as differences between the formats and categories of information provided in the reports.

Given this, it is perhaps surprising that very few chose to talk to the teacher or other school personnel about such differences, as discussed in the next section.

If reports are to be clear and readily accessible to parents, standardising or making uniform the approach taken to literacy reporting across schools would be necessary. This, of course, opens the critical issue of what teachers across the years of schooling take literacy to mean, beyond the concern with decoding and encoding to be developed in the early years. Until this more critical issue is addressed, it seems that parents will be faced with the challenge of establishing for themselves the coherence of the school and system reports.

Table 4: Parent reasoning for apparent discrepancies in reported literacy outcomes

Category of Response	Illustrative Comments
Test anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The difference is the school reports are a higher achievement. Exam stress of failure [in sitting the state-wide literacy test] was noticeable. She performed much better on the school report. Gets nervous in exams.
Different reporting formats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My child has written stories since she was 3. She reads widely. To get just above the lower end of the scale astounds me. It is difficult to ascertain as there are not the same areas lumped together eg separate ones for the following: READING - oral expression/ fluency - understanding WRITING - spelling/proofreading - punctuation - grammar - expression of ideas
Physical or learning difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My son has a hearing disorder. His teacher often gives me info on how much work she had to put in as well as him. In state tests, I don't get this info so I can't really compare.

Finding 3: Test results fall into communication gap between teacher and parent

Parents and teachers consistently indicated serious concern about the late arrival of the report from the Queensland state-wide literacy testing program. Specifically, many parents reported that the arrival of the test results – in some cases, in the final week of the school year – meant that they had limited, if any, opportunities to discuss the test results with the teacher. Many felt there was no merit in initiating discussion of the results with teachers, particularly in the case of Year 7 students making the transition to a secondary school in the following year. In the words of one parent:

The results of the report arrive too late in the year to be able to correct any problems before entering High School Year 8.

A small number of parents of Year 5 students (less than 10%) indicated that they would 'follow-up' the report with the teacher in the following year, if there were concerns. A selection of parent-initiated comments follows.

- No, we only received the results a day before school finished for the year. If I had a major problem, I would seek a discussion early the next year.
- We don't see the literacy test until the last week. What's the point in discussing it with the teacher/principal at that stage?

- Results given to parents on 11/12/00 – really too late for discussion!
- Only received reports a day before school closed for the year. Would follow up next year if required.

Additionally, as indicated in the comment below, some parents suggested that the report should be returned much earlier, as it would have enabled the teacher to use the information for designing intervention, where appropriate:

NB Would've liked the teacher-in-charge to go through the results and where necessary follow through/develop weak errors. Tests should be done mid-year for remedial teaching, if necessary. (Reproduced with parent underlining.)

Collectively, these observations point to how the parents and teachers did not appear to come together around the reported literacy test data to realise any improvement potential. It was as though the test was outside their shared concerns, falling into a communication gap, with neither party making a clear connection between test data and improvement interventions.

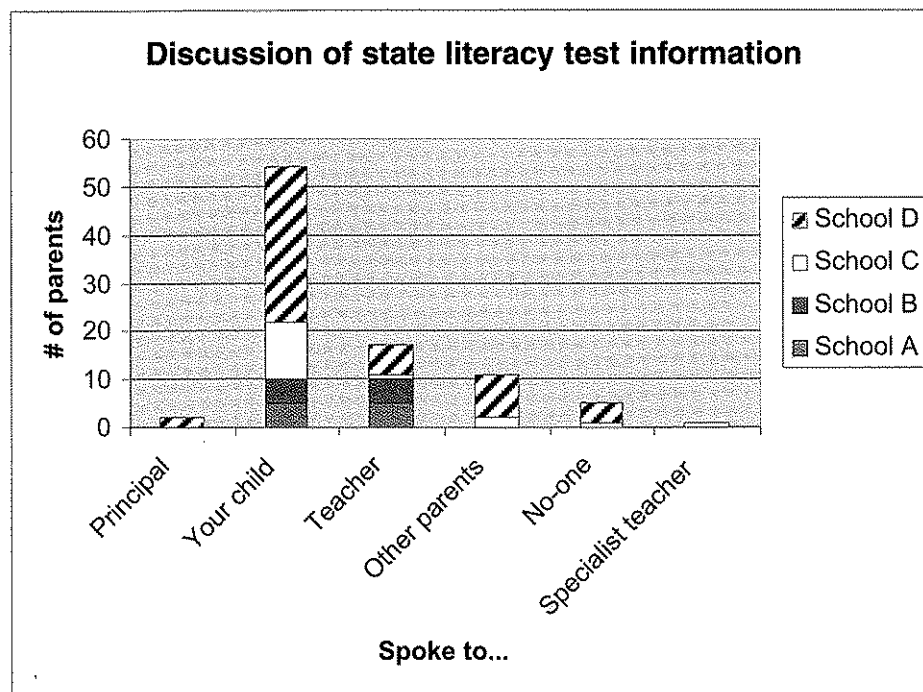
Finding 4: Talk about test results

In addition to finding that, for most parents, the literacy test report played no formal part in conversations with teachers or other school personnel and parents, the study brought to light

parental reliance on the student for some comment and interpretive information. As shown below, the student was the person most consulted regarding the test results (see Graph 3), even

though, as mentioned earlier, limited value was placed on the student's self-reports of literacy achievement.

Graph 3:



Further, parents did not expect such a communication gap to occur among teachers, with 82.5% of parent respondents reporting that they wanted the student's teacher in the following year to know the literacy test results. However, the following representative selection of parent-initiated comments in regard to the desirability of passing on test results to next year's teacher suggest how the connections between the testing program and student improvement was far from evident.

- *If the child is helped if necessary and not disadvantaged.*
- *Is it important?*
- *I don't mind, but I think it will happen anyway (High School).*
- *This will (and should) help with direction etc.*
- *Unsure, as I do not want her 'labelled' from day one as average when she has always achieved much higher results.*

Finding 5: Parental expectations about school/teacher use of test data

While the survey comments indicated general support for the Queensland aspects of literacy testing program, there is clear evidence of how the support is underpinned by an expectation that the data, generated in the test and returned to the school, should be used to inform curriculum planning and targeted interventions, especially when particular weaknesses for a group or for an individual are brought to light. This expectation appears not to be addressed in school-parent communications as several parents reported being uncertain about how the school and individual teachers used the data, a point made above.

Parents also overwhelmingly indicated an interest in knowing more details about the state test. This is illustrated by the responses to the following two questions:

- In response to the question, 'Would you like to see the actual marks that your child received on the state test?' 91.3% of respondents indicated 'Yes'.
- In response to the question, 'Would you like to see examples of the types of questions used on the state test?', 93.8% of respondents indicated 'Yes'.

Additionally, the survey data showed how some parents continue to value numerical grades as a basis for arriving at direct inter-student comparisons. No parent reported knowing the standards used by the school/teachers to judge literacy, though several reported that they wanted information about the ranking or position of the student relative to the state cohort.

Accompanying this interest was an interest in the potential utility of the test data for providing information about how an individual school performed and more specifically, its value as a basis for comparing performances across schools.

Currently, literacy test data generated in large-scale testing programs is not provided to parents in a way that permits intra- or inter-state comparisons of schools. In some countries including the United Kingdom, however, parents can make such comparisons using on-line school league tables of test results in English, Science and Mathematics. Readers interested in such tables are advised to go to:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/953191.stm>.

Central to arguments in favour of league table publication is the notion that parents should be given relevant information about schooling quality, as demonstrated in test results, and even that such results should be tied to performance-related pay for teachers (*The Economist*, 1999, p18). The point worth making is that the majority of parent participants in the study did have an interest in learning more about the testing program and the information that it made available about their child's literacy development. Explicit provision had not been made however, to marshal this interest in a productive way. So, in the absence of clear communication about how to read and interpret their son or daughter's literacy test report, some wanted to treat it as representing a statement about school and even teaching quality. The real danger here concerns the potential for increasing any current downward pressure on teachers to assume that they must teach to the test as though

it were an ultimate goal, of itself. The challenge is to establish and make available to parents explicit information about the coherence of the respective statewide testing programs and the reports they generate, and the school's reporting of literacy outcomes. Currently it seems that parents are left to search for such coherence, without the benefit of discussion with teachers and other personnel.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study reported in the paper presents three main findings of direct relevance to teachers, administrators, parents and school communities. First, it is clear that, in the main, parents placed most value on the various formal and informal reports they received of teacher-controlled assessment, as well as the relationship that they could establish and maintain with the teacher. In effect, the parents showed how, as insiders of reporting processes, they were tuned into how the teacher was well placed to report first-hand observations about student learning in a range of contexts.

Second, the paper has brought to light an existing communication gap between parents and teachers about system reports of student literacy, based on performance in the Queensland statewide literacy testing program in Years 5 and 7. At least for the parent participants in the study, there existed no clear or discernible connection between testing and improvement, though such a connection was hoped for, and in some cases, assumed to exist. More specifically, for these parents, no explicit provision had been made at either the local or system level to support their efforts to connect the school-based and test-based literacy assessment information that they received. In fact, parents were alone and unaided in their efforts to read and make sense of the test-based report, with the test data apparently falling outside the scope of the schools' and systems' efforts to achieve clear communication with parents about literacy outcomes.

Third, what emerges from the study is how parents remained uncertain about the vital link between their son or daughter's reported literacy test outcomes and the individual school's strategies for mounting improvement interventions. This provides an opening for considering how the links between large-scale literacy testing, improvement and accountability,

promoted vigorously in federal policy (DETYA, 1998), appear weak in practice. This is not to claim that schools were not mounting needed interventions in response to the outcomes from the testing. It is, however, to suggest that parents remained in the dark about these, though they made clear how they assumed or hoped that such interventions would be put in place and, more importantly, be successful. The key questions to be raised here are what roles do the teachers have in working with the literacy testing program reports, and what value do the teachers attach to the reports? In short, in whose interests are the testing programs and the literacy assessment reports that they generate? A key insight of some concern is that parents were largely outsiders in this category of assessment practice, and as such, some chose to use the reports as a useful means for establishing the standard of the individual school and, by extension, the quality of the teaching that it offered.

A main message from parents is now clear: If we are intent on maintaining statewide literacy testing programs, then the congruence of literacy reporting from local and system levels must be given far more serious consideration.

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