

## **Strengthening learning partnerships through purposeful reporting**

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### **Introduction**

Reporting is one of the main methods of communicating information from the school to home on children's learning. Typically, reporting plays a fundamental role in informing parents/whānau, or other supporting adults, of children's achievement and progress (Broadfoot, 1990; Education Review Office, 2008; Guskey, 1996). In addition, this communication is a key aspect of the partnership between the school and home (Bastiani & Doyle, 1994). It appears likely that reporting can strengthen the learning partnership between school and home if the information reported is of a nature that enables parents to support children's learning. However, school leaders and teachers may need to reframe how they report in order to achieve this purpose.

A key question for school leaders and teachers therefore is: how does the nature of the information in written reports support the purpose of strengthening the learning partnerships between school and home?

### **Strengthening the learning partnership**

Parents play an important role in supporting children's learning in academic and non-academic fields. Parents provide encouragement, expectations and aspirations for their children, and in this way they can support and mediate learning (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Ministry of Education, 2004). This parental support of learning is critical, as a large body of evidence indicates links between positive parental encouragement, expectations and aspirations, and the raising of children's achievement (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Hattie, 2008; Hong & Ho, 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In order for parental support of learning to be advanced, a learning partnership between the school and home appears beneficial (Edwards & Warin, 1999; Epstein, 2001). Furthermore,

it would seem that a critical aspect of a learning partnership is parents' ability to access meaningful information from the school in terms of their child's achievement and progress.

Schools are required to assess students' progress and achievement and report this information to parents. This can produce many challenges for teachers, especially in relation to the method used to report to parents. Schools typically use a range of methods to report student progress and achievement. This might include the more traditional written reports, parent interviews (with or without the child), paper-based portfolios, and informal conversations. Alternatively, schools may use newer forms of reporting methods, such as performance assessment, student-led conferences and e-portfolios. That schools use a range of reporting methods is important and relevant to the purpose of reporting. No one method of reporting is likely to serve all purposes well, with the purpose likely to be different for each method (Guskey, 1994).

### **Purposes of reporting**

As a school principal, I found it useful to find out whether current reporting was perceived as purposeful for our twenty-first century learners' parents and teachers. This was important given that newer assessment concepts and terminology have emerged as a significant aspect of assessment discourse over the last two decades (Brown, Irving, & Keegan, 2007; Moss & Schutz, 2001; Newton, 2007).

Descriptions of purposes of reporting have remained fairly constant over the last half century. The purposes for reporting suggested by Thorndike and Hagen in 1955 have many similarities to those suggested over the last two decades. Thorndike and Hagen suggested several primary purposes of reporting: to provide a parent with their child's record of achievement, provide background material for understanding the child's development, help the school itself to do an effective job of teaching and guiding pupils, inform parents so that they can work closely with the school for the child's good, and help motivate and guide learning. More recent research has indicated that purposes include the intention of providing documentation to parents, enlisting parents in supporting learning, possibly providing incentives from the school or home for learning, identifying learning objectives and outcomes, and supplying a

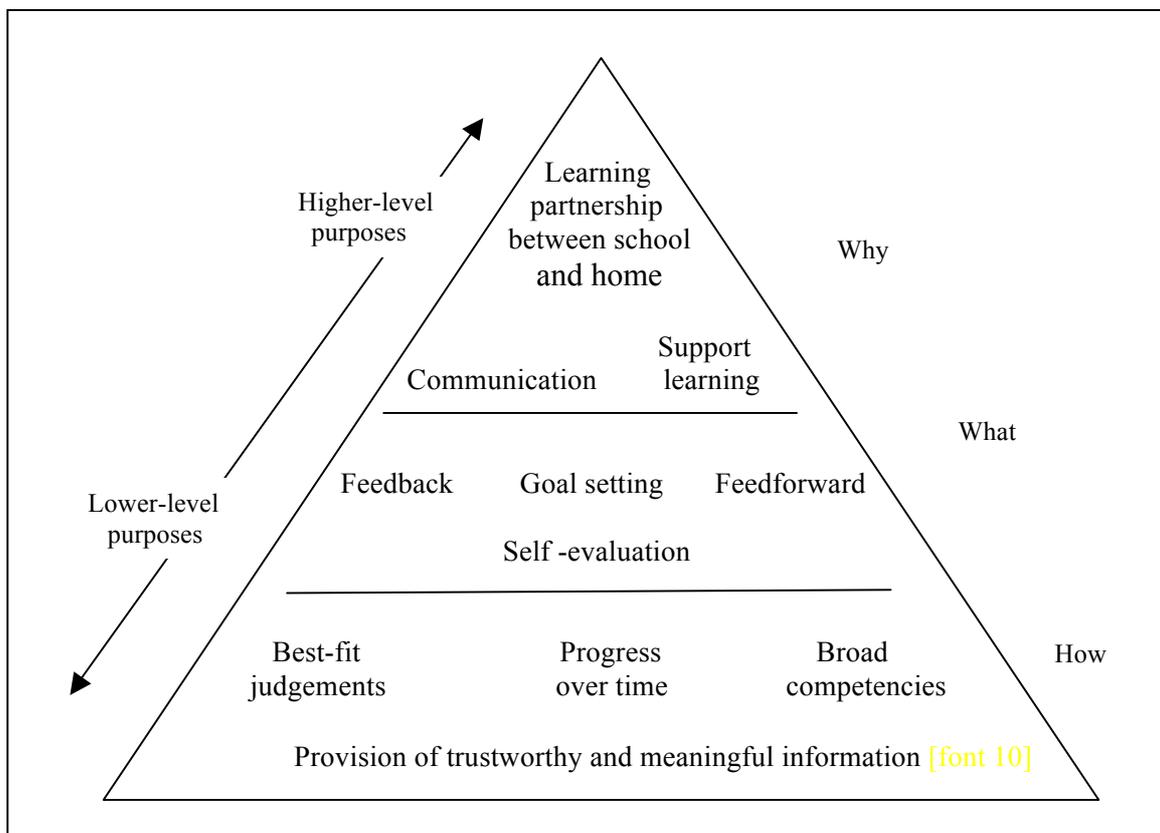
feedback mechanism to assist self-evaluation and enable children to set further learning goals (Guskey, 1994; Johnson, 2001; O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 2002; Stiggins, 1994; Wiggins, 1999). Given the wide time span between the publications mentioned, purposes have remained remarkably constant.

### Establishing a hierarchy of purposes

My research first explored how parents and teachers perceived current methods of reporting, and the characteristics included in school reporting frameworks. This exploration enabled me to establish a hierarchy of purposes (see Figure 1), in order to gain a greater understanding of how key purposes might underpin the design and use of reporting frameworks.

**Figure 1**

### Hierarchy of purposes for schools reporting to parents



The establishment of a hierarchy ultimately led to a framework and model for written reporting. A further benefit of establishing a hierarchy of purposes is that this arrangement provides an indication of relative importance and makes purposes explicit, but also emphasises the relationship between levels of purpose. When there are competing purposes, establishing a hierarchy is useful, because explicit prioritisation helps to define the primary purposes (Cangelosi, 1990; Newton, 2007). In addition, the differentiation of levels of purposes supports schools to develop reporting frameworks.

For example, it could be argued that the purposes of reporting range from those that are of a higher level – the ‘whys’ of reporting – to those that are more instrumental – the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of reporting – with the higher-level purposes informing the lower-level purposes. We need to know, for example, that reporting will serve overarching goals which can be considered as higher-level purposes, such as promoting learning partnerships with the home; but knowing this does not of itself tell us how this is achieved.

### **‘Why’ schools report**

The hierarchy of purposes flows from the overall purpose of strengthening learning partnerships between the school and home. Intuitively, it appears that a strong learning partnership between the school and home should be able to promote children’s achievement. Theoretically, in a strong partnership between the school and home that is centred on children’s learning, parents can be involved in productive ways to focus on raising achievement. For instance, in this research parents and teachers indicated that it is through the communication of meaningful information, of a nature that enables parents to support the learning of their child, that reporting is most effective and may play a part in raising achievement.

### **‘What’ schools report**

Both parents and teachers indicated the usefulness of assessment that informs learning, and were closely aligned in this perspective. Parents perceived that the

written report was useful when it focused on the child's learning, and provided goals and next learning steps. In particular, for parents, reporting was useful when it demonstrated both strengths and learning gaps. For this reason, the hierarchy shows the purpose of informing learning as central if a learning partnership is to be achieved.

In particular, the research findings supported the notion that assessment to inform learning has a critical place in written reporting, because:

- feedback, goal-setting and feedforward can allow for progress over time to be clearly related to learning
- feedback in relation to next learning steps may be a conducive method of teachers ensuring that parents are informed of a children's strengths and learning gaps
- feedforward and indications of 'where to next' allow parents the opportunity to work with teachers to provide support for children's learning.

This finding has implications for the nature of the information presented in a written report, the collaborative nature of the decision-making involved in reporting, and the possible shifts needed in teachers' practice.

### **'How' schools' report**

This section outlines the more instrumental purposes that are important for school leaders and teachers when establishing reporting frameworks. In particular, it is through the identification of the lower-level purposes which support higher-level purposes that a strong written reporting framework can be developed.

The first lower-level purpose identified by the research findings is the use of the written report as a means of providing parents with a judgement about a student's learning. This is termed a *best-fit assessment judgement*, to ensure that a dichotomy is not created of one method of assessment or tool over another. The term 'best-fit' implies that the purpose is to provide a summary of performance on a sequence of instruction, but does not specify the tools used to provide such a judgement. There appears to be a place for reliable and relevant academic assessment from whatever

source (Newton, 2007). Moreover, it can be difficult to separate assessment judgements into discrete parts.

The second lower-level purpose is that of *progress over time*. Parents indicated that reporting of a child's progress over time allowed opportunities for their support of learning as part of a continuous process, which in turn allowed for changes to expectations of learning outcomes (Sadler, 1989). In this way the continuous assessments of processes that inform learning are useful information for teachers and parents. As well as providing valuable information in a written report for the child and parent, such fluidity is also highly likely to be useful for the child's next teacher.

Moreover, assessment information that allows the parent to reflect on the adequacy of a child's progress over time towards short-term goals, and, intrinsic to this, the child's learning opportunities, appears to be important for parents. If a child's progress is supported by the provision of information over time – a movement or motion from one place to the next – it implies a before-view and after-view of a child's achievement. Thus it appears that an instrumental purpose of reporting is to show progress over time, ideally of short-term goals.

A further finding was that parents and teachers perceived that a purpose of reporting was to provide broad information, that is, complementary academic and non-academic outcomes, or *broad competencies*, across the curriculum. Parents placed a high value on non-academic competencies. The relevant information identified in the research included personal and social development information, and effort grades or comments. This was consistent for all methods of reporting, and was particularly useful to parents in written reports.

The high value of non-academic competencies to parents and teachers highlights the role of the practitioner in reporting explicitly on the student's self-management and collaboration skills. Just as parents value academic skills, so too do they value and hold schools accountable for information about the extent that children achieve these competencies. This is an important focus in a written report, as life skills impact on the capacity of the student for significantly greater learning, and are highly pertinent to self-directed learning, including self-evaluation. This finding

is particularly relevant in New Zealand, given that the 2007 New Zealand Revised Curriculum includes five Key Competencies.

A final lower-order purpose of reporting is the provision of *information that is trustworthy and meaningful*. This purpose rests on three principles of reporting identified in the research: the information reported must be clarified, have commonality, and have clarity.

### **Clarification, commonality and clarity**

Three identified principles support the purpose of providing information that is trustworthy and meaningful. The first is the use of a key or guidelines to *clarify* the information presented. The second is the use of *common* information. The third includes stylistic features that may enhance *clarity* of meaning for the audience of the report. These principles were important, particularly as the alignment of their usefulness was perceived similarly by both parents and teachers.

### ***Clarification***

Clarification means that parents are helped to understand the information they are given by schools. Parents perceived information as incomplete without a reference point, guideline or key to help interpret what the achievement results meant for children's progress and achievement. Parents and teachers perceived that it was important to be able to clarify information, and that it was very useful for practitioners to make explicit some broad basis for the marks, grades or judgements they assign.

In order to be accountable to parents, information must be accessible, that is able to be understood by parents, but it must also have meaning for parents. This way, mutual accountability is made explicit through the nature of the information reported. Moreover, the need for practitioners to clarify information has received considerable attention in the literature (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Frisbee & Waltman, 1992).

It seems curious that schools present information without clarifying the meaning of the information with a reference point, as this appears vital if parents are to understand the information. For example, in this research the findings indicated that much information was presented using descriptors which reported relative progress over time against assumed standards. In the majority of reports analysed, the absolute or external standard or norm was not made clear to the reader. Schools often compared children's performance to a taken-for-granted standard of achievement and progress. If operational levels are to be used, making clear to parents what the descriptors mean in relation to the standard is likely to be useful, particularly if this is done relative to the child's own previous performance or potential for growth and performance.

### ***Commonality***

Commonality means that the information used in written reports needs to provide parents across schools with similar (but not necessarily the same) information. The diverse practices used in written reports currently appear to make it difficult for parents to gauge the progress children are making with learning across schools. However, presenting information that has some commonality of use for the audience, and that is most useful to parents, has implications for assessment practice at both a national and local school level.

While commonality has been discussed above in relation to the wider educational environment, it is also relevant to individual schools. If schools are to embrace parents as learning partners, it follows that teachers and parents might consider it useful to have a common understanding of children's achievement. Such a common understanding is vital, whether it be, for example, a normative-referenced assessment, goal-setting, where to next or feedforward. The value of a common understanding is that the parent can use their understanding of the assessment not only to learn more about the child's achievement, but also to support the next learning steps, through providing non-judgemental feedback to the child in relation to the assessment used.

## *Clarity*

Clarity means that the language used in reports needs to be understood by the audience. The notion that the audience of the report – the parent and/or child – must be able to decipher the contents of the report is central for meaningful partnering with parents. If parents are to be active partners, able to work with the school in the development of the child, both academically and socially, clear communication between parents and teachers appears vital. Moreover, to be meaningful for the reader, the report must be written with the audience in mind.

This research confirmed that the language of schooling can be very difficult for parents to understand. For example, the nature of the information presented in a written report could suggest that teachers might assume, incorrectly, that parents have expertise in educational practices. The research findings indicated that parents did not have extensive educational knowledge, and therefore found the overuse of technical data and terms from curriculum statements confusing. While it may be useful for parents to engage with the school to learn this language of schooling (Clinton, Hattie, & Dixon, 2007), it appears that teachers learning to temper their use of overly complex language would be of more practical value to parents.

The challenge for school leaders and teachers is how to present information in a way that provides clarity for the audience. While it is best for a written report not to rely heavily on or be imbued with educational language or complex data, how is this to be achieved? In order to answer this question, it may be necessary to develop new ways of presenting information which enable the audience to draw on information based on more common norms and expectations of student learning.

### **A framework and principles for written reporting**

Stemming from the construction of the hierarchy of purposes, a framework for written reporting was developed that included instrumental purposes and principles. These included:

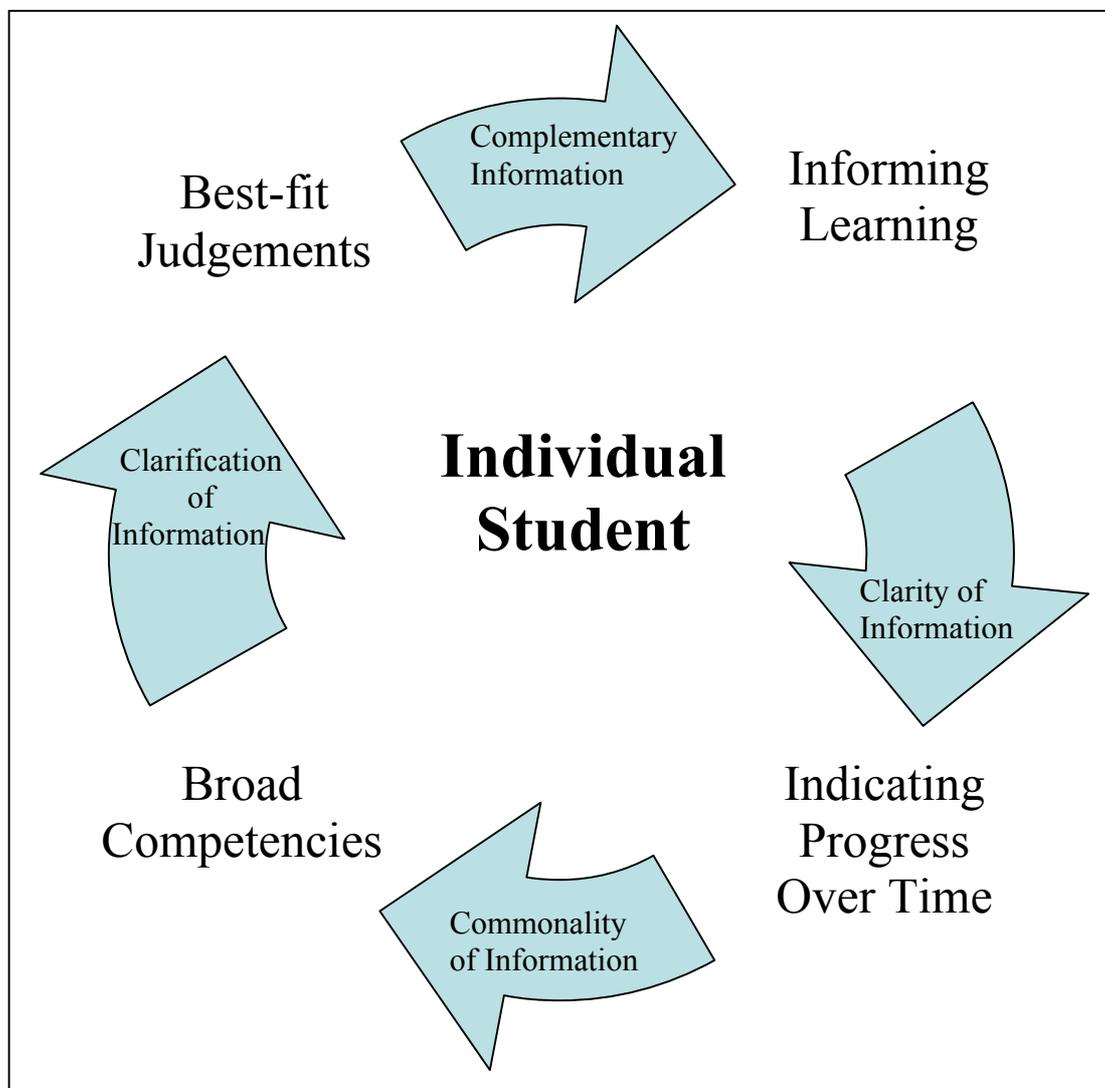
- best-fit assessment judgements on a sequence of instruction
- continuous assessment to inform learning
- progress over time towards short-term goals
- complementary and broad academic and non-academic competencies

- clarification of information with a reference point
- common information which is easily recognised and used in many schools
- clarity of information which is presented in a form that ensures good communication.

This framework led to the development of a model incorporating both key written reporting purposes and principles (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

**A written reporting model**



In this model, it is unlikely that each of the variables is discrete. For example, in order for a report's audience to gain an understanding of children's progress over time, they are likely to need summative judgements. However, this is not always the case, and as such, the progress category is treated discretely.

A next step for this researcher (or others) is to evaluate this model using applied research, given that using non-objective measures such as parent perceptions is liable to introduce bias. However, the research findings indicated that the model holds partial validity in practice.

## **Conclusion**

A major role of schools is to develop constructive learning partnerships with the home, and in doing so support parental involvement in a child's learning. An aspect of this partnership is the reliance parents place on a common assessment practice – the written report. If the written report is successful in meeting the purposes of reporting, the learning partnership is likely to be strengthened.

This research set out to make explicit the expectations and preferences of each partner in the learning partnership, with regard to school reporting. It is school leaders' and teachers' beliefs which influence practice, but it is parents who are the intended audience of the report. In order to achieve a greater understanding of written reporting, the research has taken us back to the purposes and first principles of reporting. It appears likely that the development of a learning partnership has much to do with the nature of the information reported.

This research has highlighted the need for all participants in the written reporting process to have shared expectations of the learning outcomes and future learning needs of students. Shared expectations make it possible for learning partners to set meaningful learning goals. It appears that on-going consultation with the audience of the report on why, what and how practitioners report will ensure reporting that is purposeful. As John Hattie (2003) has commented, schools that create a climate in which all are responsible for the progress of students, schools that de-privatise the information and evidence, and schools that collaborate to improve learning are great schools – it is that simple.

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