Managerial imperatives for the improvement of school reporting to parents

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Highlights the importance of school reporting to parents and the need for its effective management, as fundamental practices underpinning the central purpose of schools. Argues that, in spite of the centrality of reporting to the core activities of teaching and learning, current efforts to secure accountability appear to focus more on increasing school accountability to central offices and school councils than on addressing much needed and long overdue improvements in parent reporting. Identifies, through a review of literature on school reporting to parents, aspects of reporting on individual student achievement and progress which need to be rethought in order to align with developments in education policy and parental expectations in the latter half of the 1990s. Uses the aspects of reporting in need of improvement, as elicited from the literature review, to generate a set of roles and responsibilities for school leaders and administrators to adopt in improving the reporting process, which, it is argued, needs to be well managed and organized if it is to meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

The accountability context

The restructuring of school systems in recent years provides the context for tighter accountability of schools to their system centres. Emphasis placed on decentralization, devolution and school-based management have necessarily been counterbalanced by demands on more autonomous schools to render accounts for their performance to their central administrative offices. In addition, public scepticism over educational standards has forced policy makers to examine the use of system-level assessment to respond to calls for more information about levels of student achievement. The perceived decline in “standards” has resulted in pressure to introduce system-wide assessment procedures, usually in the form of external examinations or tests. School accountability to system centres through reliance on system-wide monitoring and testing is probably now seen as sufficient to satisfy the concerns of most interested parties. However, even this form of accountability has been called into question. For example, some[1-3], dispute the public conception that the reporting of external examination results by schools does actually increase public confidence in the results and qualifications achieved by students in...
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Many of the aforementioned criticisms and concerns with respect to school accountability seem to arise because attention has been focused on making schools more accountable to system centres rather than on forging closer school-parent accountability relationships at the same time. The fact that in most societies there is a long standing tradition of schools reporting to parents on their children’s progress may explain why system authorities have tended to focus on newer forms of accountability between centre and school, where few existed previously. Recent developments, however, in many system-level curricular policies emphasize student learning outcomes and student learning achievements, measured in terms of benchmarks, levels or stages of learning, against which individual student attainment can be profiled and recorded with greater specificity than in the past. In addition, many schools and central offices are in the latter half of the 1990s, promoting a new service-focused image, placing the student and parent at the centre of their mission. This client-driven approach accords with system policies empowering parents to exercise their prerogative to choose more carefully the school to which they send their children. In this market-driven, outcomes-oriented environment, parents, students, teachers and administrators all have a pressing need for valid and reliable information on which to make decisions and choices. School reporting to parents is a key source of information of this kind.

While the case for improving school reporting to parents appears robust, we must not lose sight of the fact that this form of accountability is not without its problems. On this matter, cognisance needs to be taken of the arguments advanced[2, 7, 8], that despite there being a long tradition of school reporting to parents, the mode of reporting has been, and often is, problematic. Part of the problem centres on the ambivalence regarding the purpose and definition of school-parent reporting. The work of Griffin and Nix[8, p. 5] is helpful in this regard. They state that the term “reporting” usually describes the formal procedures within schools whereby teachers prepare written statements for parents about student achievements. They assert that this concept should be broadened, arguing that reporting is the process of transmitting information to stakeholders to create an awareness of, and interest in, the policies, goals, operation and achievements of the school, the students, the teachers and the school community in general. They go on to provide the following definition: “Reporting is the purposeful process of gathering, interpreting, recording and communicating to stakeholders, information on student progress that is related to the outcomes of teaching and learning”.

Managerial imperatives in reporting to parents

The above definition highlights the fact that reporting is essentially bounded by managerial and organizational considerations. It is a central argument of this paper that school administrators have a key responsibility in implementing and maintaining improved school reporting procedures for at least two reasons, both of which are signalled in the definition. First, the definition recognizes the prime focus of reporting as student learning outcomes emanating from the school’s teaching and learning programme. In the same vein, it is the responsibility of school managers and administrators, working with their teaching staff, to secure the best learning outcomes for their students. School administrators are charged with the responsibility for providing the best quality teaching and learning environments for all students, thereby maximizing learning outcomes. Reporting to parents on the processes and outcomes of their children’s learning achievements is thus to be seen as an important vehicle by which administrators can fulfil their prime function. Second, the definition recognizes that the stakeholders in the reporting process include students, teachers and school administrators, as well as parents. A managerial and organizational perspective on reporting is thus one which takes cognisance of the needs of all stakeholders in the process. In so doing, it recognizes that a system of reporting has to be managed and orchestrated to satisfy a number of audiences. In meeting stakeholders’ expectations, a sound reporting system will have clear purposes and aims, be valid, reliable, consistent, flexible, comprehensive, accurate, communicated, understood, valued, trusted, organized, resourced, and supervised. In other words, because reporting is bounded by these managerial and organizational considerations, it cannot be left to the discretion of teachers.
In addressing some of these issues, this paper is organized into the following sections: parental expectations; the report in the context of other school records; content; format; timing and organizing of reporting procedures; in-service training of teachers with respect to reporting; the responses to reporting from parents, students and teachers; and the key managerial and organizational responsibilities of school leaders to ensure an improved system of reporting is implemented and maintained. The structure of each section is based on relevant literature, from which implications for administrators are drawn in the final section of the paper, where it is argued that managerial and organizational considerations are imperative for improved reporting processes geared to meeting current developments, needs and expectations of multiple stakeholders.

What parents expect from school reporting

Taking cognisance of parental expectations is clearly important in rethinking the school reporting process. Briggs[9], Broadfoot[2] and Weir[10] have investigated what parents want from school reports. According to these researchers, parents would like:

• more information than present, provided in a written report format;
• diagnostic assessment with problems identified early and constructive suggestions for future action;
• information about a whole range of different aspects of achievement;
• some grasp of how the information is arrived at and what criteria are used in order to know whether their children are making satisfactory progress for their age;
• to know whether their children are reaching their potential; and
• information about attitude, values and social adjustment.

Hall's[11] study of the parents of primary school children indicated that parents and teachers preferred narrative reports to grades because they were seen as more personal, less competitive and conveyed more information about their child's progress. Likewise, King[12] in a study in the USA found that parents of children at the early stages of primary school welcomed a portfolio approach. This included samples of students' work, teachers' observations, audio tapes and photos which gave parents a tangible and visual proof of their children's achievements; an experience that far surpassed that of seeing a letter grade on the report card.

The report in the context of other school records

Reid[13] has raised the question of the extent to which the parental report and internal records complement each other, the extent to which one duplicates the other and, most important, what information is contained on school records which is not made available to parents and why. Docking[14] argued that we should not forget the "second audience" of a report, namely, other teachers. Reports are used to communicate useful information to teachers for whom the information is helpful in making present and future decisions. This assumes greater importance the less familiar a teacher is with a student. A further issue concerns information on individual students which is kept in school files but which is not made available to parents in the report. The reasons for such may be manifold. One possibility is that information may be withheld from parents because the school considers that the child's interests are best served by so doing. There may well be extenuating circumstances to justify such policies. However, with freedom of information legislation, parents in many societies now have the right to see school records.

The content of the report

Many arguments concerning the content of school reports deserve a lot more debate than they often attract. Shedlin[15], for example, has stressed the need to counterbalance the quantitative trend in reporting with more qualitative approaches. Achievement test scores, it is claimed, tend not to reflect creativity, curiosity, perseverance, flexibility or true thinking ability. There is a strong case for more research on what the content of reports should be. Among the variety of matters worth investigating further are the following:

• Traditionally, it has been commonplace for school reports to include the child's position in each subject as well as an overall position in the class; that is, a normative approach is used. However, the trend is for criterion-referenced reporting to replace normative approaches.
• Reporting has focused on formative and summative assessment at the expense of diagnostic assessment. In particular, there has been little attention given to providing parents and students with appropriate advice based on diagnostic methods and subsequent counselling. Further more, we know very little as to the most appropriate
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Choice of format

One aspect of reporting which has attracted a considerable amount of attention is the format of school reports. The main formats commonly used are:

- single sheet;
- report book;
- slip report;
- letter report;
- grade card.

A brief summary of the characteristics of each follows.

Single sheet – subject teachers are required to assign a grade or mark and to write their comments in the boxes provided. To cope with the variety of subjects due to option choices, the reports for some years often leave the subject spaces unlabelled. A section at the bottom of the sheet is completed by the form tutor and frequently includes totals of absences and lateness. A small space is usually allowed for a brief comment and signature by the head teacher and head of a larger pastoral unit such as a house or year. On many of the reports a small key to the grading is also provided.


Slip report – this shows a marked departure from the previous two. It consists of a series of pages, one or more of which might be completed by each teacher, the whole series then being stapled together within a thin card cover.

Letter report – this resembles the single sheet report but generally contains no subdivisions, consisting of a headed page on which teachers can write at length.

Grade card – this consists of a single piece of paper or light card providing a list of subjects together with boxes in which to enter assessments. They contain no space for teacher comment. Hence, they are called “grade cards” and are often used to provide interim reports to parents.

Briggs[9, p. 47] states that the traditional report often lacks relevant information. He states that “informationally poor reports are damaging when the education of children is the issue, and denying parents the means of helping in this essentially cooperative enterprise is self-defeating”.

Broadfoot[2, p. 101] sums up the situation as follows: “Traditional reports are typically too brief, too infrequent, too general, too inaccurate, and make insufficient reference to a standard. In particular, it is the case that very many of them are couched in language which has a high ‘fog rating’.

There is also the issue of the relative merits and demerits of oral reporting as opposed to written reporting, and the extent to which oral reporting might supplement or supplant the written report. Briggs[9] and Weir[10] in separate studies reported that 85 per cent of parents showed a preference for written formats. In Weir’s study, parents preferred a combined written and verbal format. Weir goes on to state that traditional report cards are made up of all too familiar one-line comments which say nothing and often create needless anxiety and disappointment for many children and parents. Fairchild[17] found that for students with academic or behaviour problems teachers can successfully foster open communication and parental involvement through the use of a daily report card system in association with student conferences.

There appear to be a number of considerations with respect to choice of format. Some advocate a range of different forms to meet
specific purposes. Among the variety of specific purposes are the following:

- “settling-in” reports for newly enrolled students at any level;
- “spontaneous” reports for those whose performances show dramatic improvement or deterioration;
- school leaver reports, geared more to the needs of prospective employers or college entrance requirements.

Given the range of purposes of school reporting, Afflerbach and Sammons[18] in a study in the USA, conclude somewhat pessimistically that it may be difficult or impossible to create the ideal report card within or across schools or districts.

More optimistically, Broadfoot[2] states that parental involvement may well improve confidence in school achievement. However, such involvement should be based on informed dialogue. Such dialogue can only take place if parents are given the necessary information through reports. Coupled with this is Weir’s[10] argument that the best system of reporting is one which is developed with the purpose of communication in mind, taking into account the characteristics of the local community. Griffin and Nix[8] advocate that schools and parents need to examine written report for mats closely to ensure that the style of report in operation is relevant to them both. As Broadfoot[2, p. 103] states: “We want to establish and communicate to parents the notion that we are looking for a partnership between us and them in the curriculum and more and more frequently in reporting”.

One way forward is suggested by Miles[19], who documented the process a school community took when it became obvious that the school reporting system was not valued by parents. They held meetings at which they presented parents with a variety of reporting systems. Parents and teachers then developed the reporting format that best suited their needs.

More recently, Davies and Skinner[20, p. 123] have argued that “the way forward lies in schools devising their own forms of written reports to parents which steer a middle line between presenting so much information that parents are overwhelmed, misinterpret it or do not grasp its significance, and giving so little information that the report does not add to what they know already. If this formative reporting can open the way to parents being able to play a more meaningful role in their children’s school-based education, then progress will have been made”.

The timing and organization of the reporting procedure

Issues related to timing and organization of reporting closely overlap with matters concerning content and purpose discussed in the previous section. Some of the more important issues are captured by the following questions.

Important decision points: in what ways can reporting support improved decision making affecting crucial stages in a child’s schooling? The Wichita Unified School District Study[21] stressed the importance of parents being informed by the fifth week of the first quarter if their children are clearly failing in class.

The timing of reports: to what extent does the end-of-year report stand on its own? Should it be supplemented by reports at other times of the year? When are the most appropriate “other times” for various age groups and purposes? Why should reports often be limited to the end of term and sent home on the last day? What are the pros and cons of this conventional practice? Teachers in Taiwan send daily reports home to parents (is this impossible for Western schools?) Is there a case for staggering reports throughout the year, so that different students receive reports at different times of the year, perhaps according to their learning achievements, or lack thereof?

How time-consuming is report writing for teachers? Reid[13, p. 8] highlights the fact that the traditional form of reporting gives rise to considerable pressure on teachers at particular times in the academic year. She concluded that the more reports teachers had to complete, the less time they spent on each.

Teacher in-service needs related to reporting

Wholesale rethinking of reporting procedures would require the skilling of teachers. Indeed, some evidence suggests that most teachers have received little or no training in delivering present modes of reporting. A study by Afflerbach and Sammons[18] in the USA, for example, indicated that:

- few teachers reported receiving any training to help them write report cards;
- few teachers were involved in the development of the report cards which they were required to use;
- teachers reported writing report cards for a wide variety of purposes and audiences;
- the more the report card accommodated teachers’ knowledge, the more it was valued.
Among the new developments in reporting for which teachers appear to require greater skilling through the provision of in-service training, are the following:

- Incorporation of outcome statements and assessment profiles in reporting;
- Assessment techniques and strategies - formative, summative and diagnostic;
- Setting of learning goals as a means of improving future performance based on past and present performance;
- Teacher-parent interviewing skills;
- Teachers’ discussion of reports with parents;
- Teachers’ discussion of reports with pupils.

There also seems to be a case for advocating more parent education with respect to reporting. Docking [14, p. 336], for example, has argued that while there is general acceptance by parents of the use of the “average” as a standard, such acceptance is too often uninform ed and reflects preference for the known and familiar traditional reporting practices. Any change from this tradition will require parent education and general public relations exercise to inform other interested parties, such as employers.

Responses and reactions to the school report

After the completion of the report and its delivery home to the parent, there is the matter of subsequent reaction to it on the part of the parent, student and teacher. Some responses are captured in the following studies.

Parent reaction

Davies and Skinner [20] found that parents attach great importance to having good relationships with schools and that written forms of reporting are seen as only part of the relationship. Consequently, if reporting is to contribute to the relationship more generally, it must provide additional and distinctive information. Seeing reporting as a three-way relationship between parent, pupil and teacher, all of whom should together discuss the school report and plan future objectives, is considered crucial. The process should include problem-solving skills, creative thinking, critical thinking, and the ability to get along well with others as well as understanding of subject matter.

Kuersten [22] found that parents’ reactions to report cards can be severe, emotional and occasionally, even abusive. He argues for campaigns to give parents advice as to how to respond positively to poor reports. Negative responses from parents to bad reports can do considerable damage to a child’s self-esteem. They can also cause considerable stress to children and lead to their associating schooling with feelings of failure.

Reid [13] has demonstrated that in eliciting responses from parents, the written slip has a disappointingly low take-up by parents although it was found that this method had considerable potential as a means of home-school dialogue where steps were taken to encourage parents to use it. She concluded that both the phrasing used in inviting parents to reply and the amount of space allocated for their comments might influence whether parents decided to respond.

Other issues related to parent responses and which are worthy of note are raised by the following questions.

- Parents’ evenings following reports. What are the purposes of parent-teacher evenings? To what extent should they be concerned with following-up the contents of the school report? How soon after the issuing of the report should they take place?  
- Organization of parents’ evenings. How should the parent-teacher evenings be organized? What is the importance of considering such matters as seating, time per family, privacy?  
- Capitalizing on parents’ positive reactions. Many parents become positively disposed towards being involved in their children’s education as a result of receiving the school report. However, what guidelines can be developed to capitalize on this? What advice can be given to parents? How can teachers work with parents to further the interests of their children?

Student reaction

Since the school report centres on student performance, it is surprising that so little research has been conducted on how students perceive the reporting process. Important questions arising in this respect are:

- Do reports matter to students?  
- What is the effect of good reports?  
- What is the effect of bad reports?  
- How can schools capitalize on good and bad reports?  
- How important is it for students to discuss the report with parents and to discuss the report with teachers?

In one of the few studies conducted on student responses to reporting, Reid [13, p. 7] concluded: ‘A finding which emerges clearly from the evidence and which deserves underlining is that the report matters to students. Nearly all the students studied found some useful information in the report and it was widely discussed with friends as well as
In a further encouraging conclusion with regard to student reaction, Reid [13 p. 7] states: "in the short term at least, the report stimulated the intention to change behaviour. Both good and bad reports were effective in producing a resolution to work harder, with bad reports the seemingly stronger stimulus (but with the danger also of inducing despair)".

In an insightful study, Ahmann and Glock [23] indicate that the value of the report increases as the student is helped to understand what it means. They state that students are not usually able meaningfully and validly to assess themselves, but that this need not be a permanent inability. Students are not taught by teachers to assess themselves, and tend to rely instead on the judgements of others. Ahmann and Glock convincingly argue that students are rarely involved in setting goals, monitoring their own progress, making decisions, drawing conclusions and reporting on their own performance.

Teachers’ reactions
The role of teachers once the report has been completed is often surprisingly limited. Reid [13, p. 87], for example, has concluded: “The findings of this study point to the somewhat bizarre situation where students discuss their report widely with their friends, almost universally with parents or guardians, but in many cases not at all with their teachers”. Rarely do teachers appear to use student reports to set future learning goals, a point already made. Teachers are more likely to discuss the report with parents on a subsequent occasion, although the attendance of parents at such meetings is variable. In this respect, Broadfoot [2, p. 486] argues for “interim summary documents” for pupils and parents which may be provided at certain times in the students’ school career to help to document both what the pupil has achieved in a wide range of activities and the individual targets which have been agreed between pupil and teacher for the future.

Managerial responsibilities in improving school reporting
Evidence from the foregoing literature attests to the need to rethink school reporting procedures to parents. One problem is that not all of the evidence is consistent in revealing clear directions for improvement. Some parents, for example, express a view that they would like to know their child’s position in class, a feature of school reporting which has become less common of late. Others disagree, citing the negative effects of such a practice in lowering the morale of students who are lowly placed. Differences of view are often used as excuses for inaction, when a more appropriate response to varying parental and stakeholder expectations of the reporting process and its outcomes would be to attend to them in more flexible and responsive ways.

Evidence from the literature reviewed also leads to the conclusion that improvements in reporting are unlikely unless they are seen within a managerial context. There may be a misconception that reporting is essentially a teacher-parent problem when, in fact, it is a whole-school issue with significant managerial and organizational implications. Acceptance of responsibility for managing the reporting system and improvements and changes made to it are imperatives for school administrators. Specifically, this study suggests six ways in which administrators can promote improvement in school reporting procedures to parents.

First, school administrators have a responsibility for bringing together members of the school community in order to promote discussion on school reporting and ways in which it can best meet their expectations. This springs from a realization that reporting serves the respective interests of students, parents and teachers. Present reporting procedures may not be satisfying the expectations of any one or all of these three groups. It is also likely that no single blueprint for reporting will be appropriate for all communities. Schools situated in socio-economic areas where the occupational structure demands shift work, for example, may find little parental interest in parent evenings. Likewise, where the customs of a particular social group express a dislike for, or place a low priority on, either the written word, or face to face meetings, then a school may need to adjust its reporting scheme accordingly.

Second, administrators can play a crucial role in redefining the purpose of school-parent reporting and reconceptualizing its place within a curriculum context. As leaders of their school communities, administrators can take responsibility for promoting a new vision and perspective of reporting while at the same time advocating that conventional thinking be discarded. Traditionally, reporting is seen as a final discrete stage in the curriculum process. Many teachers, for instance, are inclined to view the educative process in linear algorithmic terms: they teach the student; the student learns; the student is tested; and the school report to parents on the student’s performance then follows as the final step in a linear process. Reporting thus provides snapshots of student
A new perspective on reporting which sees it as an integral part of a curriculum-teaching-learning cycle is reinforced further by evidence from the literature reviewed and by current thinking on effective learning, both of which testify to its potential for promoting learning rather than merely acting as a record of past achievement. The literature, for example, demonstrates that reporting is presently geared towards summative assessment, somewhat to formative assessment and much less to diagnostic assessment. Its potential as an aid to learning thus remains relatively underdeveloped. Capitalizing on this diagnostic capacity of reporting would also enable it to lock into goal setting, a well supported aspect of current learning theory. A considerable body of research now supports the efficacy of setting learning goals for individual students. If reporting became more diagnostic, it could at the same time be used in a more futuristic and proactive capacity.

Instead of just recording students' past performance, reporting could become more diagnostic as a basis for its more effective use in setting future learning goals. Used as an instrument of goal setting in this way, reporting would require careful and well considered diagnoses of student learning abilities, their rates of progress and future learning potential. The integrative model of reporting being advocated, together with trends towards curricula defined in terms of learning outcomes and profiles, strongly supports a more futuristic, proactive goal setting orientation. School administrators have a crucial role in preparing the culture for, and subsequently implementing, this new approach to reporting in their school communities.

Fourth, administrators have a responsibility for ensuring that all parties involved have sufficient time for the delivery of a quality reporting process. Studies on reporting typically reveal that teachers' complaints centre on a lack of time as the main obstacle to operating an improved reporting system. The integral model of reporting advocated here demands ample time for keeping detailed information and learning profiles on each student, as well as for preparing more diagnostic reports. These, in turn, form the basis for setting individual learning goals for students to apply over the next term or semester, a task which requires more time for consultation and communication with both parents and students. Administrators have a responsibility for creating the time needed for teachers to fulfill these tasks in a professional way.

A new model is required which sees reporting as an integral stage in the curriculum-teaching-learning-testing-feedback cycle. Research on effective instruction[24] reveals the positive effects of feedback and reinforcement on learning. Reporting should more accurately be seen as an ongoing, continuous process capitalizing on the feedback-reinforcement benefits of this cycle. Recent developments in curriculum organization and design in many public school systems lend support to a new integrated model of reporting as part of a curriculum-teaching-learning cycle. In these public school systems, the traditional teaching syllabus documents spelling out the subject content which teachers are expected to teach are being replaced by more detailed learning outcome documents specifying the knowledge, skills and attitudes which students are expected to learn. There is a switch of emphasis from curricula framed in teaching terms to learning processes and outcomes. Moreover, the learning outcomes for each area of learning are often expressed in levels or stages according to expected attainments for students at different ages and stages of development. For each level or stage, profiles of attainment are usually developed, allowing the progress of individual students to be traced and monitored in considerable detail over time. These developments in curriculum design are conducive to a model of reporting which integrates it with curriculum, teaching and learning and which realizes its potential as an essential practice in promoting learning rather than as a final discrete snapshot record of a student's attainment.

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Conclusions

In the clamour for public schools to meet new forms of accountability to central offices and school councils, a traditional form of school accountability, namely, school reporting to parents on their children's progress, is tending to receive less attention. Reporting focuses on the most fundamental relationship in education, namely, that between teacher, student and parent. The parental voice for more meaningful accountability tends to be less pressing and less vociferous than the systemic demand for schools to be more accountable to bureaucrats and policy makers. School leaders and administrators, positioned as they are at the centre of a complex network of interrelationships, have the opportunity to ensure that the school-parent accountability relationship is moved back to, or at least retains, centre stage.

Many of the changes in reporting foreshadowed in this paper signal a fundamental shift in its significance. They require the adoption of a new paradigm which sees reporting as an integral stage in the curriculum, teaching, learning cycle; one which maps children's progress in more detailed profiles, records achievement in more detail and capitalizes on the effective practices of reinforcement, feedback and goal setting. In addition, greater flexibility in reporting formats, times and procedures is demanded to meet the diverse and growing expectations of different stakeholders. Consequently, customary notions of reporting as a final, discrete stage in the educative process, where teachers discharge their responsibility for the education of children in an otherwise linear process, have to be discarded.

It is a central argument of this paper that a new integrated model of reporting depends on sound school management and organization for its implementation. Therefore, substantive issues of school reporting and associated aspects of accountability need to be seen within a context of school leadership and administration.

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