

# Reporting to Parents in Primary School: Communication, Meaning and Learning

Kathy Hall, Paul F. Conway, Anne Rath, Rosaleen Murphy, Jacinta McKeon



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## List of Acronyms

**AfL:** Assessment for Learning

**AoL:** Assessment of Learning

**DES:** Department of Education and Science

**DEIS:** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

**ESRI:** Economic and Social Research Institute

**EAL:** English as an Additional Language

**EPSEN:** Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004

**HSCL:** Home School Community Liaison Scheme

**ICTs:** Information and Communication Technologies

**IEP:** Individual Education Plan

**INTO:** Irish National Teachers Organisation

**IPPN:** Irish Primary Principals Network **LS:** Learning Support

**MIST:** Middle Infant Screening Test, used to identify early literacy difficulties

**NCCA:** National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

**NQT:** Newly Qualified Teacher

**SEN:** Special Education Needs

**SES:** Socio-economic status

**SNA:** Special Needs Assistant

## Glossary

**Assessment** is the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting information about a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes.

**Assessment for Learning (AfL)** involves using assessment in the classroom to raise pupils' achievement. It usually takes place in the day-to-day interactions between teachers and children. It emphasises the child's active role in his/her own learning, as it is based on the idea that pupils will improve most if they understand what the outcome of their learning should be, how they can achieve that outcome and the criteria for judging to what extent the outcome has been achieved. Providing feedback is central to AfL.

**Assessment of Learning (AoL)** focuses on assessing a child's learning at the end of a given period, such as a unit of work a term or a year. The emphasis is on measuring a child's progress towards curriculum objectives. Teachers use AoL to assess and periodically record children's progress and achievement for the purpose of reporting to parents, teachers and other relevant persons.

**DEIS: Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools** is an action plan introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 2005, under which schools with high levels of children at risk of educational disadvantage receive additional supports under the School Support Programme.

**Drumcondra Achievement Tests:** a range of standardised tests in literacy and numeracy produced by the Educational Research Centre.

**Early Start:** Early Start is a one-year pre-school programme offered in selected schools in educationally disadvantaged areas.

**Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)** scheme is concerned with establishing partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning. The local coordinator, an experienced teacher deployed from the staff of the school to full time work with parents and community, is assigned to a school or school cluster in disadvantaged areas to work with school staff, parents and relevant community agencies in advancing the educational interests of children.

**Individual Education Plan:** An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is a written document prepared for a named student which specifies the learning goals that are to be achieved by the student over a set period of time and the teaching strategies, resources and supports necessary to achieve those goals.

**Language support teacher:** Schools are granted a language support teaching post for every 14 pupils with low English proficiency. Such pupils are entitled to a maximum of two years support in addition to the mainstream classroom. Schools are limited to a maximum of three language support teachers, regardless of pupil numbers.

**Learning support and resource teacher:** A learning support and resource teacher caters for children with learning delays or with a high-incidence disability such as mild general learning disability or dyslexia. They add to the support given to the child by the class teacher.

**Likert scale:** a scale used in questionnaires, which measures attitudes, e.g. by asking respondents which of a five point scale ( Strongly Disagree, Disagree, No Opinion, Agree, Strongly Agree) represents their view on a statement.

**MICRA-T:** a range of standardised norm-referenced English reading tests for children from first to sixth class.

**Parents:** Throughout this report, the term parents refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardians.

**Parent-teacher meeting:** Schools are required to hold a formal meeting with individual parents at least once a year in order to report on children's progress and attainments.

**Qualitative research methods:** Qualitative research usually involves field work in a small number of settings and the use of methods such as interviews, observations, focus groups and participant observation. The qualitative researcher is interested in discovering and describing behaviour in context, and in how people understand and make sense of their lives. The researcher him/herself is the primary instrument for collecting and interpreting data.

**Quantitative research methods:** Quantitative research is carried out to test hypotheses rather than to generate them. A quantitative survey involves the use of structured questions where the response options have been predetermined. It requires a large number of respondents. The quantitative researcher must be able to demonstrate that conclusions are statistically valid and reliable.

**Report cards:** Report cards are forms which teachers use to report children's achievement to parents, usually mid-year or at the end of the school year or both. The report cards may be drawn up by the school or by the individual teacher, or they may be one of a number of commercially available formats. The NCCA has drawn up a set of report card templates to help schools report to parents.

**Resource teacher:** A resource helps schools to support children with low-incidence special needs arising from disability. These children may, for example, have a hearing or visual impairment, a physical disability, a moderate or severe general learning disability,

several disabilities together, emotional difficulties, autism, or a speech and language disorder. (National Council for Special Education, 2006)

**SIGMA-T:** a range of standardised norm-referenced mathematics tests used with children from first to sixth class.

**Standardised tests:** a standardised test is an instrument of assessment that contains standardised procedures for its administration and scoring and for the interpretation of its results. The Sigma T, the Micra T and the Drumcondra Primary Assessments are all examples of standardised tests.

**Standard scores;** The results of standardised tests may be reported using a standard score. Standard scores usually range between 55 and 145 with an average of 100.

**STen scores:** The results of standardised tests may be reported using a STen (standard ten) score. STen scores go from 1 to 10. A score of 5-6 is average, 8-10 is well above average, and 1-3 is well below average

**Special Educational Needs (SEN)** means, in relation to a person, “a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health, or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition” (Section 1, Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004). Children with special educational needs may be in ordinary classes in mainstream primary schools or in special classes in these schools. They may get help from learning support and resource teachers and from Special Needs Assistants (SNAs).

**Special Needs Assistant (SNA):** The Special Needs Assistant helps with the care of students with disabilities in an educational context.

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**EXECUTIVE**

**SUMMARY**

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## **0.1 INTRODUCTION**

How schools report to parents about the learning of their children is becoming increasingly important and challenging in the light of a) new developments and understanding about learning and assessment, b) Ireland's relatively recent cultural diversity, and c) recent legislation and official policy highlighting how schools are accountable to students, parents and the State. The NCCA's *Reporting Children's Progress in Primary Schools* endorses the role of parents, as partners with schools, in extending children's learning. School reporting practices are central to this role. The nature of these practices is the theme of this NCCA-commissioned study. In terms of assessment policy and practice, we note that reporting is more closely linked with summative than formative assessment (as indicated in the shaded column in Table 1). As such, in terms of formal reporting at both parent-teacher meetings and in relation to written report cards the emphasis is on 'what has been learned by students to date', that is, 'assessment of learning' (AoL).

However, as Assessment for Learning (AfL) becomes more central to teachers' work in schools (as is likely in the Irish primary schools), the formative-summative relationship is likely to change somewhat. Nevertheless, formal reporting will maintain its important summative function.

The principal aim of this study was to examine existing policy and practice of reporting to parents and to offer evidence-based recommendations that could enhance the process. Chapters 1 and 2 set the background for the study and describe the research design, while chapters 3, 4 and 5 present and discuss the results. This Executive Summary presents a summary of the main findings of the case studies and survey and it then goes on to draw out the implications and recommendations for policy and practice in light

the findings and recent developments in primary assessment policy<sup>1</sup> (NCCA, 2005; NCCA, 2006; NCCA, 2007).

**Table 0.1: Dimension of assessment purposes and practices<sup>2</sup>**

Formative ↔ Summative				
	Informal Formative	Formal formative	Informal summative	Formal summative
Major focus	What are the next steps in learning?		What has been achieved to date?	
Purpose	To inform next steps in learning	To inform next steps in teaching	To monitor progress against plans	To record achievements of individuals
How is evidence collected?	As normal part of class work	Introduced into normal class work	Introduced into normal class work	Separate task or test
Basis of judgement	Student referenced	Student and criterion referenced	Criterion referenced	Criterion or norm referenced
Judged by	Student and teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher or external marker
Action taken	Feedback to students and teacher	Feedback into teaching plans	Feedback into teaching plans	Report to student, parent, others, etc.
Epithet	Assessment for learning	Matching	Dip stick	Assessment of learning

SOURCE: Adapted from Harlen, 2006

## 0.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Policy and practice were investigated using a combination of case study methodology and a large-scale questionnaire survey. Six schools were selected to represent the diversity of school settings. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were used to probe the perspectives and practices of principals,

1 Harlen, W. (2006) On the relationship between assessment for formative and summative purposes. In J. Gardner (Ed). *Assessment and Learning*, London: Sage.  
 2 NCCA (2005). *Reporting children's progress in primary schools: Background paper*. Dublin: Author. NCCA (2006). *Draft Report Card Templates Overview: Information for Schools*. Dublin: Author. NCCA (2007). *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools*. Dublin: Author

teachers, parents and children. Fieldwork spanned the summer and autumn terms of 2007. A national online questionnaire survey of a stratified sample of primary schools (412 of 3,292) was conducted in late Autumn 2007 which sought to represent practice more broadly. It resulted in a satisfactory, if less than ideal, response rate of 45%.

### **0.3 FORMAL REPORTING POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

2. All our case study schools have clear procedures in place for reporting to parents although not all have a written policy. The questionnaire survey shows that approximately one in four schools (28%) have a written policy on the use of school reports and approximately two out of three schools (67%) have a written policy on parent-teacher meetings.
  
3. A school report is prepared for each child in our case study schools and sent to parents annually towards the end of the school year. They tend to follow a standard commercially-produced format and contain a space for a brief comment in relation to every subject of the curriculum, other aspects of learning and schooling, specifically social development, attendance, homework, and general attitude to learning. Teachers say that they draw on a wide range of information in writing their reports, from their own observations in class to results of assessments, including standardised tests, and homework. The thrust of this evidence is confirmed by the survey. Of significance in the survey however is that while 5 out of 6 schools reported that they do send written report cards to parents approximately 1 in 6 schools<sup>3</sup> reported that they do not provide parents with a written report.

Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference

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<sup>3</sup> As noted above there is a margin of error associated with this estimate. Due to the lower than hoped for response the margin of error or confidence level is plus or minus 8 points.

between rural and urban schools in provision of report cards. Three out of four rural schools provide a written report card to parents whereas eleven out of twelve urban schools do so. In terms of the type of report card, approximately two out of three schools use a commercially produced report card and the remaining one third use a school produced report card.

4. Teachers and principals are very concerned to represent children's learning positively and honestly in school reports and in meetings with parents. This is captured by the expression of one principal, 'nothing should come as a surprise'. Teachers and principals expressed their concern of the potential negative impact on children of critical reports. They are also wary of writing down their interpretations of children in too much detail, preferring to discuss issues in faceto-face settings. Schools keep school reports for many years after pupils have left the school. Over 2 in 5 schools (43%) store report cards until the child is 21 years of age (consistent with NCCA's 2007 assessment guidelines for schools, p. 80), one third of schools store report cards until the child has left post-primary education and one in five schools keep report cards until the child leaves primary school.
5. All six case-study schools arrange a parent-teacher meeting annually, typically in the middle of the Autumn term. One school schedules this meeting in the summer term after the school report has been sent out and this then provides a focus for the meeting. The standard format is for teachers to be available on a particular afternoon/evening and for parents to be offered a slot of about 15 minutes during which they, usually the mother, has a one-to-one meeting with the child's teacher/or with the learning resource teacher if the child has special educational needs. Some schools are more creative in

seeking to accommodate parents making themselves available to meet with parents from 7.30 every morning for several weeks. Teachers report that this practice increases the incidence of fathers' attendance at meetings and it is highly appreciated by parents.

6. The range of languages spoken by parents of newcomer children is perceived by responding principals as providing a significant communication challenge for schools. In responding to this challenge schools rely mainly on two strategies: to ask a parent or other adult from that language community who speaks English to translate (just under a third of schools) and/or to ask a student (of primary age) from that language community who speaks English to translate (1 in 6 schools).

#### **0.4 OTHER REPORTING MECHANISMS**

7. Schools also use and value a range of other ways of reporting to parents including homework journals/diaries (2 out of 3 schools), tests (e.g. weekly spelling tests) and 2 out of 3 schools report that they use a behaviour reporting system (e.g. star system for discipline). There was a statistically significant difference between rural and urban schools in the use of behaviour reporting system. Two in three urban schools employ such a system, whereas only one in three rural schools do so. One multi-ethnic school's exceptional approaches to involve and communicate with parents about children's learning include bi-weekly newsletters, coffee mornings, food fairs and other inter-cultural events. In addition, all our case study schools define themselves as operating an 'open door' policy in relation to parents, meaning that they are regularly accessible to parents and have frequent conversations with parents informally as they bring and collect children to and

from school. The latter was reported as being especially the case for children in the early years of school and for those with special educational needs.

## **0.5 REPORTING ON STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS**

8. While schools do administer a range of tests and assessment procedures, typically reading assessments in infant classes and Drumcondra Achievement Tests in middle and upper levels, schools tend not to forward assessment information in the form of test results to parents. Most schools interpret the results of assessments, particularly standardised assessments, and communicate their interpretations to parents in parent-teacher meetings. The case studies and the survey show that results of standardised tests tend to be given to parents only by appointment. When results are communicated to parents this is typically done by the class teacher in 2 out of 3 schools, by the learning support or resource teacher (1 in 3 schools) and by the principal in 1 in 6 schools.
9. Children deemed to have special educational needs (SEN) experience higher levels of assessment and are reported on in more detail and more frequently than their peers not so specified. Parents of children with special educational needs have more contact with schools about their children's progress.

## **0.6 OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCES: LEARNERS AND PARENTS**

10. Teachers are clear and unanimous about the purpose of the annual parent-teacher meeting: it is to inform parents of their children's progress, to communicate their learning strengths and weaknesses, and help in identifying ways of supporting their child's learning at home. While they are sensitive to the need to engage with what parents think is important, our

evidence generally suggests that teachers operate this forum as one in which they are in telling and explanation mode and parents are listening. The short time frame for these meetings would seem to focus minds on progress from the teacher's perspective. The impression our evidence gives is that other more informal occasions are assumed to cater for issues that do not pertain directly to children's progress.

11. Teachers report that they find the parent-teacher meeting more significant than the school report in terms of enabling parents understand and support their children's progress. They report that parents share written and verbal reports with their children and that parents discuss their children's school reports among themselves.
12. Teachers and principals perceive that parents are the main audience for the school report and, while reports are kept in school and are accessible to teachers, they do not typically consult them when they get new children/class.
13. For schools a major challenge to effective reporting practice is perceived to be linguistic diversity or more specifically the fact that increasing numbers of parents and children do not have adequate English to participate fully in the reporting procedures. This is confirmed by the questionnaire data where principals reported that parents who do not speak English or who may have difficulty communicating in English represent 'a significant communication challenge'. While schools in our case study sample vary in the scale of this challenge and in how they are addressing it, a common response is the use of community members as translators.
14. Our evidence points to more variation among parents than among teachers/schools in how they interpret their

opportunities to find out about their children's learning and in their general satisfaction with the process of reporting. There is also more variation across parents.

15. While many parents we interviewed expressed positive views about their experience of school reports and meetings, particularly those in one multi-ethnic school, others are less satisfied and do not experience their schools as quite as accessible as the schools describe and perceive themselves to be. Our data suggests a class divide here with parents associated with schools serving middle class catchments being very much more satisfied about their understanding of their children's progress than their counterparts in schools serving lower socioeconomic groups. Many of the latter parents (and some of the former) expressed uncertainty about the meaning of terms on school reports, of test results and generally of curriculum and assessment issues. They are more reluctant to question teachers and seek clarification on issues, seeing themselves as potentially disturbing teachers' work by seeking such help. They are also dissatisfied with the timing and amount of time allocated to parent teacher meetings, feeling that they are too infrequent, too short and not sufficiently flexibly scheduled.
16. The parents from minority ethnic backgrounds whose first language is not English and who participated in the case studies are especially positive about their experience of the reporting process. (Many of these participants are relative newcomers to the country). However, our evidence suggests that the traveller community may be less satisfied with their experience vis-à-vis reporting.

17. While teachers acknowledge, to some extent, the problematic nature of sharing meanings of evaluations of children's learning, parents are more concerned than teachers about the lack of common understandings. The survey results show that schools have some strategies in place to address this issue: some 45% claim to have staff meetings to agree terms used in the school report.
18. School reports and parent-teacher meetings are very significant events for learners, their occurrence engendering a wide range of emotions from anxiety to excitement and from pride to disappointment. No child interviewed was indifferent. Our evidence confirms the deep interest children have in their own learning, many expressing the wish to attend and contribute to the parent-teacher meeting. Most expressed mature views about what they believe is absent from or inadequately detailed in the current reporting structure, namely, sport, drama, music and art. Some pupils expressed an interest in having more information about how to improve their learning.
19. Analysis of the survey data suggests that reporting practices (in the context of current practice in assessment and reporting) do not influence principals' perceptions that schools can impact student learning. Situating reporting practices in the context of the model of parental involvement, school composition and learning, the analysis indicates that principals in schools with large numbers of students as well as more SEN students and language support teachers, with higher intake of students from another ethnicity, were more likely to (i) indicate higher levels of parental involvement (ii) have higher expectations that their school could impact student learning. These relationships were weak but statistically significant.

## **0.7 FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. A key recommendation emerging from the evidence is that parents need more opportunities to negotiate the meaning of accounts of their children's learning. Terms like 'fair' and 'excellent' and assessment results need to be better interpreted and contextualised for parents so that meanings are opened up and better understood. *We recommend that policy makers and school leaders consider the necessary school structures and professional contracts that would enable greater parental participation in assessment and reporting.*
2. A key finding was that a small but significant minority of schools do not send written report cards home. As such, parents of children in those schools are missing out on an opportunity to learn about their children's progress in school. *We recommend that all schools be required to send a written report card to parents.*
3. *We recommend that schools should send a mid-year report to parents about their children's learning and that this report would provide the basis for learner and parental conversation and commentary. This would ensure that school reports serve a formative (as well as a summative) purpose.*
4. *We recommend that Whole School Evaluations explicitly attend to the reporting dimension of school policy and practice.*
5. In light of the strategies adopted by schools (asking parents, other adults or primary age children to translate) to communicate with parents who either do not speak English or have difficulty communicating in English, *we recommend that guidelines be developed, and where necessary additional resources beyond those currently available be provided, to support schools in such work.*

6. With reference to the new emphasis on assessment for learning and on the increased emphasis on assessment and reporting more generally, *we recommend that schools have the opportunity to engage in within-school, across-school, and especially within-level/class professional dialogue about evaluations of children's learning. We also recommend that schools have the opportunity to develop exemplars that would support the production of narrative accounts of children's learning that are trustworthy.* Such initiatives could offer a way of extending shared perspectives about what constitutes 'excellent' etc. achievement in various curricular areas.
  
7. In the context of policy expectation that schools utilise standardised tests to assess students (DES/Circular 0138/2006)<sup>4</sup> *we recommend that further guidance be provided that supports teachers (class, special needs and resource) and principals in communicating the results of such tests in a meaningful manner in the context of other evidence of student learning and achievement.*
  
8. In the light of the demands for assessment data recording and storage, *we recommend that robust and reliable record storage systems be developed to support school's ability to record, store and retrieve assessment data for different audiences and purposes.*

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<sup>4</sup> DES (2006). Supporting Assessment in Primary Schools: Circular 0138/2006. Dublin: Author

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**CHAPTER ONE**  
**REPORTING TO**  
**PARENTS:**  
**THE CONTEXT**

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## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

A review of policy and practice on reporting to parents<sup>5</sup> of primary school children seems timely, having regard to the many changes relating to curriculum and assessment that have been introduced in Ireland in recent years. Parents, especially of primary school children, play a critical role in supporting their children's learning and development. In order to do this effectively, they need information on how their children are progressing, and on how best to support, reinforce and extend their learning. Reporting is closely linked to assessment, since schools need to assess children's progress in order to give feedback that is accurate, timely and meaningful both to students and their parents.

The study was commissioned by the NCCA, which advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum and assessment for early childhood education and for primary and post-primary schools. It will inform the NCCA in its on-going work in relation to reporting and assessment.

The purpose of this study was to explore existing policy and practice on reporting to parents in Irish primary schools. This initial chapter sets out the context in which schools report to parents, and identifies some of the considerations that must be taken into account when considering reporting in general. Chapter Two describes the research methods used in this study. Chapter Three presents the qualitative case study element of the research and Chapter Four gives a detail account of the findings from the quantitative element, an on-line survey of primary schools. Chapter Five summarises the main findings, highlights the important issues that emerged, identifies some issues for consideration and makes some recommendations for future developments in this area.

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5 Parents: Throughout this report, the term parents refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardians.

## **1.2 REPORTING: THE IRISH CONTEXT**

This study set out to investigate current views and practices in reporting in primary schools in Ireland, with the aim of achieving an understanding of what constitutes effective reporting to parents. Knowledge of current policies and practices is fundamental to achieving this understanding. Reporting to parents serves two main purposes. The first is to satisfy the requirement that schools are accountable to parents and are required to keep them informed of their children's progress and attainments. The second is curriculum-related; effective reporting enables parents to know more about what their children are learning and how they can support this. Reporting is therefore an important part of the partnership between home and school.

Reporting may be defined primarily as the gathering, interpreting, recording and communicating of information on children's progress in school to their parents. This information will, of course, serve many other purposes: it will help to inform teaching and learning, it will form part of the pupil's record and may be consulted by other teachers as the child progresses through the school, and it may be used to identify a need for intervention or learning support. Thus, reporting is linked to the on-going process of planning, evaluating, assessing and giving feedback to children and their parents that is an integral part of effective teaching and learning in the primary school.

As well as being an important part of the relationship between school and home, there are legislative requirements that govern how schools report to parents. The Education Act (Ireland, 1998) recognises that the education system is accountable to students, their parents and the State. Primary schools are also now required to administer standardised<sup>6</sup> tests in literacy and numeracy to all children at least twice in a child's school career, once at the end of first class/

<sup>6</sup> A standardised test is an instrument of assessment that contains standardised procedures for its administration and scoring and for the interpretation of its results.

beginning of second class and again at the end of fourth class/  
beginning of fifth class and to communicate the results of these tests  
to parents in respect of their own children (Department of Education  
and Science (DES) Circular 0138/2006).

Parents are entitled under Education Act (1998) and the Data  
Protection (Amendment) Act (2003) to regular information about  
the progress and achievement

of their children and to access any personal data relating to their  
children kept by the school, and are therefore entitled to see the  
results of these assessments. Schools are required to hold at least one  
formal parent-teacher meeting per year (DES Circular PC14/04) and  
to give parents *as much information as possible on all aspects of the child's  
progress and development* (DES Circular 24/91). The importance of  
schools having regular consultations with parents is stressed in the  
Primary Curriculum (DES, 1999) both to inform them about their  
children's progress and so that teachers can benefit from the  
knowledge that parents have about their own children.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN)  
Act (2004) further extends the role of the school in relation to  
diagnostic assessment. Under the EPSEN Act, in order to identify  
children with special educational needs (SEN), schools are required  
to assess children in their second year of school and, in consultation  
with parents, to draw up individual education plans (IEPs) and to  
organise appropriate supports.

All schools therefore report to parents on the progress of students,  
both formally and informally. The two main formal methods that  
have traditionally been used to report to parents are the written  
annual report and the usually annual parent-teacher meeting. Along  
with these, schools communicate regularly with parents by a variety  
of means: homework notebooks and journals, newsletters, test copies

where parents are asked to sign the results of weekly classroom tests of spelling or mathematics, informal meetings at the beginning or end of the school day, phone calls, individual meetings by appointment to discuss issues of concern, e-mails and so on. Schools report to parents not only to inform them of their children's progress but to enable them to give appropriate support at home to their children's learning. Parents of children with SEN are especially involved in the process of planning for their children's learning, since under the EPSEN Act (2004) they must be consulted when individual education plans are being drawn up for their children.

### **1.3 REPORTING AND ASSESSMENT**

In practice and in the literature generally, reporting and assessment are closely linked. Assessment is defined in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Guidelines as

*the process of gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting information about a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes (NCCA 2007, p. 7).*

Teachers continually use this information to plan for learning, to give feedback to children, and also to report to parents, teachers and other relevant persons. In the Primary School Curriculum (1998), assessment was described as having four functions: formative, summative, evaluative and diagnostic. Formal reporting to parents has traditionally been linked mainly with the summative and diagnostic aspects of assessment, with a lesser emphasis on the formative aspects. The end-of-year school report for example generally gives a record of the pupil's levels of attainment in the different subject areas of the Primary School Curriculum, along with some brief comments on social and personal development (see scanned examples in Appendix 2). The timing of this report, often at the very end of the school year,

meant that there was little opportunity for feedback or discussion on its contents.

In terms of assessment policy and practice therefore, we note that reporting is more closely linked with summative than formative assessment (as indicated in the shaded column in Table 1.1). As such, in terms of formal reporting at both parent-teacher meetings and in relation to written report cards the emphasis is on ‘what has been learned by students to date’, that is, **Assessment of Learning (AoL)** although as **Assessment for Learning (AfL)** becomes increasingly important, this will have implications for reporting also.

**Table 1.1 Dimension of assessment purposes and practices<sup>7</sup>**

<b>Formative ↔ Summative</b>				
	<b>Informal Formative</b>	<b>Formal formative</b>	<b>Informal summative</b>	<b>Formal summative</b>
<b>Major focus</b>	What are the next steps in learning?		What has been achieved to date?	
<b>Purpose</b>	To inform next steps in learning	To inform next steps in teaching	To monitor progress against plans	To record achievements of individuals
<b>How is evidence collected?</b>	As normal part of class work	Introduced into normal class work	Introduced into normal class work	Separate task or test
<b>Basis of judgement</b>	Student referenced	Student and criterion referenced	Criterion referenced	Criterion or norm referenced
<b>Judged by</b>	Student and teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher or external marker
<b>Action taken</b>	Feedback to students and teacher	Feedback into teaching plans	Feedback into teaching plans	Report to student, parent, others, etc.
<b>Epithet</b>	Assessment for learning	Matching	Dip stick	Assessment of learning

SOURCE: Adapted from Harlen, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Harlen, W. (2006) On the relationship between assessment for formative and summative purposes. In J. Gardner (Ed). *Assessment and Learning*, London: Sage.

Assessment *of* Learning is an integral part of teaching and learning. All teachers periodically record children's progress and achievement for the purpose of reporting to parents, teachers and other relevant persons. *AoL* typically takes place at the end of a learning period, and may include a variety of assessment tools such as teacher-devised spelling or mathematics tests or standardised tests. It is common practice for teachers to conduct weekly or monthly tests and to send home the results for parents to sign. These are normally tests devised by the teacher in order to see whether short-term learning goals have been met. Schools also use standardised tests as part of *AoL*. These tests are norm-referenced, that is they are used to measure a child's achievement compared to other children throughout the country at the same class level or age (Bond, 1996; NCCA 2007). Since 2007, schools are required to carry out standardised tests in English reading and mathematics at least twice in a child's school career, and to report these results to parents (DES, 2006). While many teachers have used these tests regularly in the past, they have not always shared the results with parents or with children. They are now required to do so, and the challenge for schools is find ways of sharing this information in a way that is meaningful, constructive and timely.

In recent years, there has been a widespread re-envisioning of assessment, and **Assessment *for* Learning (AfL)** has become increasingly important. This in turn means that traditional reporting practices may also need to be reviewed. Assessment is now seen not only as a measure of what has been learned but as an important part of the learning process (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 1998; Broadfoot and Black, 2004; Earl, 2003, Hall and Burke, 2003; Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2005, 2007; Council for the Curriculum Examinations & Assessment, Northern Ireland, 2007; QCA, 2007; Stiggins, 2002; Wiliam, 2007). In Assessment for Learning the teacher gathers information by observing and listening

to the children on an on-going basis as part of the classroom routine, and uses this information to answer three key questions:

- Where are children now in their learning?
- Where are children going in their learning?
- How will children get to the next point in their learning?

(NCCA, 2007)

However, AfL is far more than documenting learning and helping to inform decisions about teaching and learning. Assessments are used to build students' confidence, motivation and responsibility for learning (Stiggins, 2002, Black & William, 1998, NCCA 2006). Stiggins (2002) argues that a focus on AfL dramatically influences the learning environment and creates the conditions for higher student engagement and learning. Students are helped to become better at learning and learn to self-assess through the use of rubrics, portfolios of work, and specific feedback that offers them the steps to improve on their work. With AfL the criteria that a teacher uses in assessing exemplary work are clearly communicated to students. This can dramatically affect the quality of information that is reported to both parents and children about their progress. Teachers need to use AfL to set out learning goals clearly to students and parents. In this way, assessment is primarily used as a teaching and learning tool that is communicated to students and parents. It also means that children themselves would have an input into the reporting process.

The question then arises as to whether and how the results of both AfL and AoL are communicated to parents, whether and how parents make use of them, and how they are regarded by the children themselves. Reporting has been described as *central to teaching and learning* (Dimmock and O'Donoghue, 1997), but a number of studies have shown that parents have not in the past always been given the

kind of information they really want (Cuttance and Stokes, 2000; Hughes et al, 1994; O'Donoghue and Dimmock 2002; Wolfendale, 2004). These and other studies (e.g. Broadfoot, 1990) have found that parents want information about their children's progress in both academic and non-academic areas of development, given in a way that is understandable and jargon-free. They want to know their children's strengths and weaknesses, and they want to know how they can support their children's learning at home (Bastiani and White, 2003).

Research suggests that reporting practices in Irish schools vary (Hall and Kavanagh, 2002). The NCCA (2006) overview of reporting in twelve countries found that in general while the content and frequency of reporting is laid down nationally, the format of reports is mainly decided at school or district level. However, there is a trend towards making reports more informative and useful to parents, for example in Sweden, Australia and Scotland (NFER, 2003; Cuttance and Stokes, 2000; Queensland Government Department of Education and the Arts, 2004; Learning and Teaching Scotland 2007). In a number of countries (e.g. Sweden, Scotland, Australia, Northern Ireland), reports are now expected to provide advice to parents on the next stage in their children's learning, rather than merely summarising existing levels of achievement. A trend towards the involvement of children themselves in drawing up the report, as a form of self-assessment, was also noted in several countries. It seems likely that reporting practices in Ireland will also change in tandem with the changes in assessment practice laid down in the recent guidelines on assessment.

#### **1.4 EFFECTIVE REPORTING AND PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS**

Reporting to parents is therefore an important part of the work of the school. It is essential not only because schools are accountable to parents, but because effective reporting enables parents to be involved

with their children's learning. There is compelling research evidence that involvement of parents in children's education is a crucial determinant of successful educational outcomes. The review of literature on parent involvement by Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) and the research synthesis by Henderson and Berla (1994), further updated by Henderson and Mapp (2002), bring together a large number of individual studies to this effect. Internationally, In the United States, the work of the National Network of Partnership Schools is based on the premise that parent involvement with their children's learning is crucial (Epstein, 1995, 2001; National Network of Partnership Schools, 2007; Sheldon and Epstein, 2005). Initiatives in England (QCA, 2007) and in Scotland (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2007) recognise the importance of partnership with parents, as does the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme in Ireland (Conaty, 2002).

An Australian study (Cuttance and Stokes, 2000) found that parents place a higher priority on receiving information about their children's progress than any other type of information they receive from schools. They wanted to hear the 'good news' about their children, but they also wanted to be told about any areas of concern. They would like more information on future learning goals and how to help their children to achieve these. In another recent study in Wales on parent school partnerships in relation to students with special educational needs, Wolfendale and Bryan, (2002) reported that many parents had to struggle to get advice and information. Vernon, (1999) in a similar evaluation noted the need for a cultural change on the part of both teachers and professionals in the way they relate to parents.

Effective reporting requires that parents are informed not only about their children's progress in learning but also about how best to support this. Henderson & Berla, (1994) identify four key roles that parents can play in their children's learning. These roles include

parents as teachers, supporters, advocates and decision makers. For successful reporting outcomes schools need to be aware of the potential of these different roles and how they impact on children's negotiation of school, learning and progress. In reporting on children's progress to parents schools have an opportunity to enhance and build on these capacities.

When parents have the opportunity to feed back information about their children to teachers, it enables teachers to be more effective in the classroom. However, parents may feel that the schools do not always seek or welcome their input (Desforges, 2003; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Ryan, 1994; Ryan, 1995). Wolfendale (2004) suggests that traditional school reports and parent-teacher meetings can, at worst, become *examples of one-sided communication wherein teachers relay information to parents, without adequate encouragement to parents to reciprocate or to contribute equally valid information and views about their children*. Wolfendale goes on to suggest that reporting should be seen in the broader context of partnership with parents, where parents can contribute a different, additional and complementary view of the child.

Many studies have found that that regular communication can increase levels of parent involvement, especially among those parents who have less formal education and who need additional structures to engage in schools (Ames et al, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Dauber and Epstein, 1993; Moles, 1993). Regular communication can also enable parents to take part in decisions that have to be made about their children's learning, for example if the child needs learning support.

Issues of social class, culture, socio-economic status, language, ethnicity, gender and ability/disability can all affect the relationship between home and school. There is evidence to show for example that much reporting to parents is actually reporting to mothers

(O'Brien, 2007). When there is a discontinuity between the culture of the home and that of the school, there are extra challenges to building productive learning partnerships between schools and families (Crozier and Davies, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Ladston-Billings, 1995; Epstein, 1995; Ogbu, 1982; Lareau, 1987; Eccles and Harold, 1996; Heath Harold & Eccles, 1986; Ryan, 1994, 1995; Nieto, 1999; Ran, 2001).

There can also be school-based obstacles to accessing information. The timing of meetings can make it difficult for a parent who works long hours or has a long commute to work to attend parent-teacher or curriculum information meetings. Time constraints can mean that parent-teacher meetings are rushed, without time to explore issues in detail. Informal contact with parents can be affected by the physical lay-out of the school, by the ages of the children (with parents of the younger children generally more likely to have regular contact with the teacher) and by the routines that are in place. If children are brought to school by someone other than a parent, this also reduces the opportunity for informal contact and means that teachers and parents have to make a deliberate effort to meet. A parent may have physical or sensory disabilities that make it difficult to access information in the way it is presented to them, and if the school does not take this into account, parents are cut off from important knowledge about their children.

Some studies have found that the effectiveness of reporting to parents can be limited by factors such as parents' differing levels of fluency and literacy in the language in which the report is presented or unfamiliarity with the school system (Blair and Bourne, 1998; Crozier and Davies, 2007; Ran, 2001). Parents' own experiences, expectations of and attitudes towards school can also affect their ability to access and make use of information. People may also resist or reject information *'when it does not mesh with how they construct their*

*identities or the larger contexts of their lives'* (Mendoza et al. 2003).

Different cultural groups may bring different resources to their ability to understand and interpret school reporting mechanisms and also differences in their ability to support their children's learning and advocate for them. They may have views on what their children should be learning at school that are different to those of the teacher; for example they may think that children should begin reading and writing at an earlier or later age. They may be accustomed to a more formal or didactic style of teaching, or they may have a different understanding of how the child's progress should be measured, based on their own experiences.

There is some evidence to show that working-class parents see their relationship with their children's schools differently to middle-class parents (Lareau, 1987, 2003; Crozier, 1997; Crozier and Davies, 2007). Students from families with a low socioeconomic status (SES) continue to fare less well than their richer counterparts on literacy and numeracy despite interventions (DES, 2005). It has been claimed that as many as 25% of the population aged 16–25 have severe literacy problems (OECD 1997). Some research shows that students from a low SES background are more likely to receive a less challenging curriculum and pedagogy (Smyth, 2002). In addition, there is a serious deficit among students and parents regarding the implications of decisions made about their schooling especially among less well educated parents (Lyons et al, 200; Crozier, 1997). According to Crozier, middle-class parents are better placed to interpret the significance of information they are given about their child, and to ask the kind of questions that will elicit further information. In other words, they possess sufficient 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) to 'decode' the information they are given.

Social class is not the only determinant of how parents interact with schools. Increasingly, Irish schools are teaching culturally and linguistically diverse students. Reporting on students' progress to parents from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds demands high levels of skill in understanding and reflecting on the norms, assumptions, expectations and the 'taken for granted' practices that have dominated the educational system without challenge. Schools increasingly need to have the capacity to become 'cultural brokers' and to mediate different cultural systems and meanings (Gay, 1993). Reporting mechanisms, whether formal or informal, provide a context for building cultural and linguistic bridges for both parents and teachers in order for real communication to occur. Research clearly demonstrates that students and parents who come from culturally different backgrounds to the mainstream need practices and systems that are culturally relevant and valued by all (Nieto, 1999; Ladston-Billings, 1995; Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Being aware of these differences and the different ways families/schools understand and communicate with each other is important. Schools are increasingly charged with recognising these differences and planning for them accordingly. For example, in *Charting our Educational Future* (Ireland, 1995) all schools are expected to develop a home school policy statement. In addition, the introduction of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) programme in 1990 especially recognized the challenges that schools with large numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds faced (Ryan, 1994; Conaty, 2002).

Power and Clark (2000) identify the need for teachers to develop an *extended professionalism* that recognizes the limits as well as the strengths of teacher knowledge. They recommend as a starting point the assumption that all parents are interested in their children's progress and that non-involvement does not necessarily mean a lack of interest. This would require the school in its communication

practices becomes aware of differences in culture class and ability also. Griffith, Norwich & Burden (2004) call for schools to review all school practices including reporting practices from the perspectives of parents. Schools need to be alert to the kind of information that they communicate to parents and sensitive to the emotional and non-cognitive concerns of parents, particularly when sensitive matters such as the child's special educational needs or behaviour problems are being discussed. Flexibility and adaptability are essential. This idea of an extended professionalism envisages a situation where teachers are aware of the delicacy that needs to occur in communicating to parents and creating a dialogue where all channels are kept open.

There are implications also at school level. O'Donoghue and Dimmock (2002) have put forward four propositions in this regard, which were developed out of a study on school reporting to parents in Western Australia. These provide a helpful set of reference points in that they address key aspects of reporting at the level of the school as a system, that is, leadership, learning, school communication and professional development. The four propositions are as follows (pp. 176-178):

1. 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 organisational implications.
2. School reporting should involve parents, students and teachers in assessing, discussing and setting future learning goals.
3. School reporting should be flexible with regard to the time during the school year when the written reports are completed and should contain much more information than is currently the case.

4. Amongst the traditionally neglected reporting skills in which teachers need special preparation are those associated with oral reporting to parents, with the use of computer technology, and with helping pupils to make sense of their reports.

Sharing information with parents thus requires not only a common vocabulary but a common understanding. In the rapidly changing social and cultural context that exists in Ireland in 2007, schools in many areas are meeting new challenges in communicating with parents whose home language and background are different from those of the majority, as well as with those parents who for physical, socioeconomic, cultural or other reasons have difficulty in accessing information as it is currently presented to them. Effective reporting practices are an important part of establishing and supporting the partnership between school and home which is vitally important for children's learning.

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**CHAPTER TWO**

**RESEARCH**

**METHODOLOGY**

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## **2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The aim of this research project was to explore existing policy and practice on reporting to parents in Irish primary schools to identify issues of concern to teachers, parents and children, and to make recommendations which might assist the NCCA in its work of advising the Minister for Education and Science on supporting assessment policy and practice. As detailed in the next section, a mixture of qualitative (case studies, individual and focus group interviews, collection of relevant school documents) and quantitative methods (on-line survey) were used to investigate school's practices and to gather the views of teachers, principals, parents, and children about them. Factual information on schools' existing policies and practices of reporting were gathered by means of the survey and in the course of visits to the six case study schools. Individual and focus group interviews as well as the comments and responses to the open-ended questions included at the end of the survey illuminated some of the attitudes and reasons underlying these existing policies and practices. The following table shows how the different elements of the study addressed the sub-questions included within the overall research brief.

**Table 2.1 Research questions and methods**

Research Questions	Research Methods
<p><b>1. School policy on reporting</b></p> <p>a) Do schools have a policy on reporting assessment information? What does the policy contain?</p> <p>b) What considerations informed the development/ monitoring/review of the policy?</p>	<p>Survey sections 3&amp;4 (Current recording, communicating and reporting practices) Case studies: interviews with principals</p> <p>Case studies: individual and focus group interviews with teachers Survey sections 2 (General information on school) and open-ended comments in Survey section 7: Successes, challenges and future priorities</p>
<p><b>2. School practice on reporting: Report Cards</b></p> <p>a) When do schools report to parents?</p> <p>b) Are reports written/printed or delivered verbally?</p> <p>c) What are the typical contents of the report?</p> <p>d) How is children's learning represented on the report?</p> <p>e) What differences are there in reporting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the different levels of the school?</li> <li>• For children with special needs?</li> <li>• For children who don't have English or Irish as a first language?</li> </ul>	<p>Survey sections 3 ,4 Case studies: interviews with principals, teachers</p> <p>Survey sections 3, 4, 7 Case studies: interviews with principals, teachers, parents</p>
<p><b>3. School practice on reporting: Meetings</b></p> <p>a) Practical/logistical arrangements for parent-teacher meetings</p> <p>b) How reports are used at these meetings</p> <p>c) The kinds of input children or parents have in the report</p>	<p>Survey sections 4, 5, 7</p> <p>Case studies: interviews with teachers, parents, children</p>
<p><b>4. Outcomes and effects of reporting</b></p> <p>How the reporting process could be improved for all (children teachers, parents, principals)</p>	<p>Survey sections 5, 6 (Impact on learning), 7.</p> <p>Case studies: interviews with parents, teachers, children.</p>

## **2.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to address these questions, and in particular to identify ways in which the reporting process could be improved, it was necessary to explore the wider context in which reporting occurs. This includes the role of reporting in relation to the accountability of schools to parents, and the part it plays in the partnership between parents and schools in promoting children's learning and development. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to conduct an empirical investigation of the ways in which schools communicate with parents about their children's progress. It sought to document the views and experiences of the various interest groups – principals, parents, teachers and pupils. This mixture of quantitative and qualitative elements was chosen as most likely to give meaningful and valid insights into the topic under investigation.

The qualitative case studies undertaken in six schools of varying sizes and demographic backgrounds generated rich data, from which a number of themes emerged. Initially, case studies were conducted in five schools; this took place in May/June 2007. Following feedback from the NCCA to an interim report, a sixth case study school was added. This school was chosen because of its high incidence of diverse learners, most of whom do not have English as a first language and very many of whom are at an elementary stage in their learning of English. In addition many of their parents do not speak English or have very little English and so it is important to provide evidence of their experiences and perspectives of the reporting process as well as further detail of how schools respond to the reporting needs of these new learners and their parents. Chapter Three presents the findings from the case studies.

The second major element of the study was an on-line survey of a stratified random sample of 412 of the 3292 primary schools in Ireland, conducted in October/November 2007. This survey is

introduced in more detail in section 2.2.2 below, and Chapter Four presents the results of the survey.

### **2.2.1 Case Studies: Data Collection, Data Analysis, Ethics**

For the qualitative element of the study, case study methodology was chosen as it was deemed the most appropriate means of addressing the research focus. The need to obtain the perspectives of diverse groups on several aspects of the reporting process meant that a flexible methodology involving opportunity to capture individual views and extended responses was necessary. It was agreed that case study would provide the necessary flexibility and would allow us to probe pre-determined issues as outlined in our research questions but in addition would enable other issues relevant to participants to emerge (Yin, 1993). A semi-structured approach to data gathering was deemed highly appropriate.

It was also expected that the choice of case study methodology would enable us 'get beneath the surface of policy implementation' to illuminate the lived realities of complex educational situations (Simons, 1996, p. 231). In addition, multiple sources of data were intended to overcome the weaknesses of attending only to the views of one group, say teachers. We sought to give insights into different participants' interpretations and experiences of the reporting process. Semi-structured, audio-recorded group and individual interviews and documents together with the administration of a questionnaire to a national sample (see below) provided a means of enhancing the reliability and validity of the emerging findings.

The case study methodology adopted involved the design, piloting and administration of interview schedules (Appendix 1) to establish the perspectives of all of the following: principals, teachers (including learning support teachers), parents, and pupils. Six schools were

selected to participate in this phase of the work on the basis that they represented various types of school setting: disadvantaged urban, single sex (boys), all-Irish, small rural, mixed/mostly middle class, and a multi-denominational school incorporating a significant ethnic minority proportion. A brief profile of each participating school follows while Tables 2.1 and 2.2 summarise key details of each school and case study participants.

**School A** is a medium sized urban school with disadvantaged status with approximately 200 students. It has 12 mainstream teachers, a HSCL teacher, four learning support (LS) teachers, behavioural support teacher and an early start teacher. It has a large minority of Traveller parents. The principal, four teachers a LS teacher, a Junior Infant teacher, the HSCL teacher and a fourth class teacher) and four parents including a Traveller parent with six children, and three other parents who have had 12 children in school participated in the case study. A focus group was conducted with four children from fifth and sixth classes. The Principal is female and has been teaching for over 20 years. Most of the teachers have been in the school for the past 15-20 years.

**School B** is a large urban school with disadvantaged status. It has approximately 450 students, 20 mainstream teachers and 16 support/special teachers, including a HSCL teacher. It has a large minority of Traveller students (about 70) and one third of the students were either born outside of Ireland or their parents have recently immigrated to Ireland. The focus group with six children from fourth and fifth class was undertaken in June 2007 (6th class students were on a school tour the day of the school case study). The principal is male and has approximately 35+ years teaching (25+ as principal). A small number of teachers have been in the school for the past 15-20 years and the staff has a significant number of recently qualified teachers (i.e. in the last 1-5 years).

**School C** is a large urban boys' school located in a provincial town. It serves families who come from a mix of local authority and private housing. It has over 470 pupils. It has 18 mainstream class teachers, a HSCL teacher, two learning support teachers, and a resource teacher who also supports the small minority of children who come from the Traveller community. The principal, six teachers, a LS teacher, a Junior Infant teacher, the HSCL teacher, second, fifth and sixth class teachers and six parents participated in the case study. A focus group was conducted with 18 children from fifth and sixth classes. The principal, who is male, has approximately 10 years experience in the role and over ten years experience as a class teacher. Most of the teachers have been in the school for the past 15-20 years.

**School D** is a two-teacher rural school, situated in the countryside in a small village and is about 20 miles from the nearest town. It has an enrolment of approximately 50 pupils who all live in the village or surrounding area. Pupils come mainly from a farming background. There are no newcomer children attending the school. The pupils are divided into two classes: junior infants up to second class and third class to sixth class. The school principal teaches the older pupils and the second teacher teaches the younger pupils. The school shares a learning resource teacher with one other school and this teacher works in the school on a daily basis. A focus group was conducted with six children, drawn from fifth and sixth class. The principal, the second teacher and the learning resource teacher were all interviewed separately, because of logistical difficulties in such a small school.

**School E** is a Gaelscoil located in a medium-sized town. It has approximately 240 pupils. It has been in existence for 12 years but is located in prefabricated classrooms while awaiting a new school building. The pupils come mainly from the town and surrounding area, so there is a mixture of children from urban and rural

backgrounds. The staff comprises 12 mainstream teachers and four LS teachers. There are a small number of newcomer children in the school. The principal is female, with 20 + years experience. The pupils' focus group consisted of six children drawn from fifth and sixth class.

**School F** is a medium sized multi-denominational (Educate Together) urban school with a diverse student body typical of schools serving the increasing ethnic mix in Irish society. It has an enrolment of approximately 380 pupils, and a staff of 35. This includes 21 teachers (including LS teachers) and eight Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). The school is located in an area that has experienced rapid local population growth as evidenced by one of the highest increases in intercensal population over the last decade of anywhere in the country. Over one half of the students were either born outside of Ireland or their parents have recently immigrated to Ireland. Over 40 different nationalities and at least 12 different religions are represented among the pupils. The school was set up only six years ago, but many of the teachers have long experience of working in other schools.

**Table 2.2: Summary Profiles of Case Study Schools**

School	School Type/ Setting	Pupils/ Catchment	Principal	Teachers
A	Urban Mixed (i.e. boys and girls) to 1st Class Boys only from 2nd to 6th class	200 Largely local authority housing	Female: 10 years in role	19 teachers 1HSCL; 4 Learning Support, 1 language teacher; 1 Early start
B	Urban Mixed (i.e. boys and girls) to 1st Class Boys only from 2nd to 6th class	450 pupils. About one-third are newcomers, and 70 are Travellers.	Male: 25 years as principal	20 class teachers, 16 support/special teachers, including HSCL teacher
C	Boy School Urban setting Number dropping yearly	450 pupils. About one-third are newcomers, and 70 are Travellers.	Male; 10 years in role of Principal	18 class teachers; 1 home-school liaison; 2 learning support; 1 resource; 1 Travel.
D	Mixed School – rural setting	50 pupils in 2006/7 – pupils come mainly from a farming background	Male; 38 years experience	One other classroom teacher - a female teacher and one (male) resource teacher (SEN) shared with one other school
E	Gaelscoil, mixed, urban	240 pupils, Mixture of urban and rural	Female, 20 years experience	12 class teachers, 4 learning support
F	Educate Together multi-denominational mixed school. Urban setting	380 pupils. Mixture of local authority and private housing. Over 50% newcomer children	Male	Staff of 35, including 21 teachers (including learning support teachers) and 8 Special Needs Assistants

**Table 2.3: Case Study Data Collection<sup>8</sup>**

School	Interview with Principal	Focus Group Interview with Teachers	Interview with Teachers (Individual)	Focus Group Interview with Parents	Focus Group Interview with Pupils	Reflection Sheets (Pupils)	Reflection sheets (Teachers)	Documents
A	Yes	Yes, 4 Teachers in total; 1 Learning support, 1 HSCL, 1 J.I. and 1 4th class	No	Yes, 4 parents, including 1 Traveller; Selected by school and HSCL teacher	Yes, 4 students drawn from 5th and 6th class.	4	4	Sample report; No school policy on reporting.
B	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes, 6 pupils, from 4th and 5th class.	6		
C	Yes	6 from a cross section of classes including infants & 6th	N/A	6 parents selected by the school	18 pupils (all boys) drawn from 5th and 6th classes	18	5	2 Sample Reports; School Policy on Reporting
D	Yes	No	Interview with class teacher and resource teacher	4 parents selected by the school	6 pupils; 3 from 5th and 3 from 6th class	6	Not collected	4 reports of a single pupil over the course of 4 years from JnInf-2nd class; 2 reports (different template) for 3rd and 4th class pupils; one report of a 6th class pupil; enrolment form; school newsletter
E	Yes	Yes	No	No	6 pupils	6		
F	Yes	Yes	No	4 parents	8 pupils, from 5th and 6th class	8		

<sup>8</sup> This focus group was larger than the others. It comprised a whole class group, at the request of the school.

Focus group interviews were carried out with parents, teachers and children in these case study schools and all principals were interviewed. Some one-to-one interviews were carried out with teachers. A semi-structured format was used for these interviews- see Appendix 1. In addition, documentary evidence in the form of sample reports and policies were collected (see Appendix 2). To initiate discussion within the focus groups, mini questionnaires/ reflection sheets were distributed to participants to complete (see Appendix 1). This occurred in the case of teachers and pupils. Fieldwork was carried out and completed in June 2007 in five of the six schools and completed in the final school in November 2007. Table 2.3 summarises the data collection process.

The analytic process took the following format. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. Analysis consisted of the team individually and collectively reading and annotating transcript data and identifying and agreeing (tentatively) the key themes emerging from the evidence. We categorized data into broad analytic themes, based on the research questions and recurring themes in the evidence. The various data bases were scrutinized for extracts that conform to and contradict analytic themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994) while a 'constant comparisons' approach (Silverman, 2000) was applied to further refine the research findings. The involvement of several researchers in a team (as opposed to just one researcher) particularly facilitated this analytic approach. The data collected provides grounded evidence for the identification of robust findings by revealing important aspects of people's experiences of school reporting.

The research team adhered to ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity as well as consent as they accessed schools and participants, and carried out the fieldwork. The notion of consent as ongoing (Simons and Usher, 2000) informed our approach. This

means that, although access was granted and participants agreed to cooperate with the study, we understood consent to allow participants withdraw at any time or to not answer specific questions if they so wished. All participants were informed of the purpose, nature and approach of the study.

In the event it is our judgement that the study brought benefits to those who participated in the case studies. The focus group interviews gave parents the opportunity to talk about their experience of the reporting process and gain greater understanding of the views of other parents. Interviews with teachers gave opportunities to reflect upon their practice and gain insights into each other's views. Similarly, focus group interviews with children provided the opportunity to reflect together on their meanings of reports on their learning and to reflect on the views of their peers. All participating schools will receive a summary report of the findings.

### **2.2.2 Questionnaire Survey: Design, Administration, Data Analysis**

The second element of the study consists of an on-line questionnaire survey to document practices in a way that more faithfully represents practice nation-wide.

The on-line national survey of a stratified random sample of 412 of the 3292 primary schools in Ireland was conducted in October/November 2007. The sample of schools in the survey was selected from the most up-date list of primary schools available from the Department of Education and Science (DES). The complete list was first sorted by category. Three categories were used in stratification: DEIS<sup>9</sup> status (Urban band 1; Urban band 2, Rural, and Not in DEIS),

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<sup>9</sup> DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is an action plan introduced by the Department of Education and Science in 2005 under which schools with high levels of children at risk of educational disadvantage receive additional supports.

gender mix of school (boys, girls, mixed, both boys and girls in infants and girls only from first to sixth class) and school size (<150; 150-300; and >300). One school in every eight was then randomly chosen from the stratified list.

The survey (see Appendix 3) included questions on schools' policies and practices in relation to reporting to parents, as well as background information on the schools themselves to allow this information to be cross-tabulated for sample validation and analysis. The survey comprised a range of items including Likert scale items, Yes/No items and open-ended questions. Based on the research questions outlined in Table 2.1, items were developed that addressed school reporting policies, report cards, parent teacher meetings. The survey was informed by issues that arose in the case study portion of the research (e.g. communication challenges resulting from increased linguistic diversity; prominence of informal reporting practices). The draft survey was piloted on a group of principals from different school types, sizes and disadvantage status. A small number of revisions were made to the survey at this point. Furthermore, two education researchers (one from Ireland and one from the USA) with expertise in school-home communication reviewed the survey items. Due to the fact that the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) was undertaking a survey of schools from mid-September to mid-October, the research team decided to wait until that survey data collection period was over prior to undertaking the reporting study survey from mid-October to early December 2007.

In mid-October 2007, because the DES list does not include email addresses for schools, we contacted the principal in each school selected by phone to tell them about the survey and to ask for a contact email address. If after numerous attempts a school principal could not be contacted by phone, the next school from the same category on the list was substituted. The schools in the sample were

then sent an email (see Appendix 3), repeating and expanding on the information given over the phone. The email outlined the policy context of the survey and noted that the Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) was encouraging principals to complete the survey. It gave a web link to the on-line survey and provided an email contact and phone number if any difficulties arose in survey completion.

We applied a number of strategies to encourage our selected sample of schools to complete and return the survey. Initial phone calls were made to the selected schools to elicit their support in cooperating with the survey and to advise them of the importance of participating. Over the course of a six week period between the end of November and mid-December schools in the intended sample were emailed five times. Where email queries were addressed to the survey team these were answered in so far as was possible. A small number of schools (12) indicated that they had difficulties with access to email but that they would still like to participate. A paper copy of the survey was generated and sent to these schools, and the data was filled in on-line for them by the research team when the hard copies were returned.

Non-respondents were targeted with further emails and in some cases phone calls. The literature (e.g. Sheehan and McMillan, 1999; Hewson, 2003) reports widely differing responses to surveys of this type, depending on various factors including familiarity with the internet, preparatory and follow-up contact, and the perceived importance/relevance of the topic to those targeted. The overall response rate achieved in this case was moderate, at 45% (187 schools). This may have been influenced by the fact that other surveys were being conducted around the same time. Another element may have been unfamiliarity with on-line surveys as a format; at least two schools printed it out from the screen and

returned a paper copy filled in by hand. Some schools also reported difficulties with opening the survey on-line; we were able to resolve this for those who contacted us but others may not have persevered past the initial difficulty.

The website used to host the survey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) is commonly used by researchers in the social and behavioural sciences. It has a number of advantages, not least that it allows responses to be exported and analyzed using SPSS software, which again is the standard package for research of this type. The survey provided quantitative data on reporting practices in a wider selection of schools than could be included in the case studies. The open-ended questions and space for comments added a qualitative element, since they gave respondents an opportunity to give their views on the process of reporting and the uses to which it is put in schools and at home. This enabled the research team to further contextualise the findings from the case studies.

In presenting the survey findings we also discuss these in terms of O'Donoghue and Dimmock's (2002) four propositions, as detailed in Chapter One, section 1.4. The results from the on-line survey are presented in detail in Chapter Four.



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**CHAPTER THREE**

**POLICIES, PRACTICES**

**AND OUTCOMES: ANALYSIS**

**OF CASE STUDY DATA**

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The qualitative case studies yielded a large amount of rich data that shed light on various aspects of the reporting process. Structured to address the research brief, this chapter has two main components. The first part presents an account of school policy and practice on reporting to parents as well as teacher and principal explanations for their reporting arrangements. This is an essential prerequisite to the second part which offers an analysis of how parents and learners experience the reporting process. By attending to parental and pupil experiences, meanings, and interpretations, the second part of the chapter provides insights into outcomes of the reporting policies and practices enacted by schools. Foregrounded in each part are the formal and informal mechanisms that schools use to communicate with parents about individual children's progress: annual school reports and parent-teacher meetings.

### **3.2 POLICY AND PRACTICE: REPORTING MECHANISMS**

In all the case study schools a school report based on a standard template is sent to parents at the end of the school year. This report is designed to offer a summary statement of pupil learning, typically involving a rating from one of the following: 'excellent' 'very good', 'good', 'fair' for each subject of the curriculum and in relation to social development, homework, attendance, and attitude to school.

In addition, formal annual parent-teacher meetings are held towards the end of the first term or the beginning of the second term each year and all our interviews suggest that these are conducted in line with DES guidelines. One of our case study schools holds this meeting in the third term although this practice was being reconsidered by the school at the time of our fieldwork. Other ways of reporting on pupil learning are also used by schools. We elaborate on all these practices below as we focus on how schools compare and contrast in their reporting arrangements.

Further subsections here present information on the use of standardised tests and homework as reporting mechanisms, and the arrangement for dealing with linguistic diversity, while the final subsection highlights policy and practice in relation to parental access to schools.

### **3.2.1 The School Report: Format, Content and Construction**

The evidence presented in this section demonstrates that there is conformity (mainly) across schools in the practice of preparing and dispatching school reports to parents. It also highlights some of the challenges of report production and how schools cope with them. Two themes emerge from our analysis. One is the relatively high level of professional attention to the accounts of learning of pupils with special educational needs. Another is ‘protectionism’ whereby schools seek to protect children, parents and indeed themselves from the potential effects of negative accounts of pupil progress.

Appendix 2 shows sample anonymised versions of typical school reports made available by our case study schools. These are examples of commercially produced standard formats that come in booklets, with carbon copies of the report held by the school for each year the child is in attendance, thus building up a child’s school career history. They are kept by the school for several years after the child leaves.

The school report is viewed as a summative report of a child’s learning. Distributed to parents at the end of the school year, it is assumed to look back and summarise what has been achieved rather than to look forward and identify how to make progress in the future. It is retrospective rather than prospective. Common practice across schools is for teachers to draw on their own observations, notes and formal and informal/class tests that they will have accumulated and administered over the year when compiling school

reports. The following class teacher response is typical of our teacher responses:

*I would keep a notebook with a page for each child. At the beginning of September I would write my observations ... and as time goes on, every couple of weeks, writing another comment or two and I keep that as an informal record .... In first and second class they'd be getting little tests all along. They have a record of their work, what I call a test copy... We have the Micra T and the Sigma T then just before we would make the reports (Class teacher, School D)*

Although they claim to be mindful of standardised assessment results as they compile reports our evidence shows that schools do not report the actual results of such tests in these communications to parents. (We return to this issue again later in the chapter).

Practice on constructing the school report seems to vary somewhat across schools in the case of children with special educational needs. In most cases the report is cowritten by the class teacher and the learning support teacher, based on their respective experiences with the child. The class teacher usually writes the report with the help of the information, profiling and observations that have been carried out by the learning support teacher. In School C, on the other hand, it is usually the LS teacher who fills out the report for the children who attend the special classes but both collaborate about its content. In School D, a small rural school, practice is atypical insofar as the LS/resource teacher also writes a letter to parents at the end of the year identifying activities that parents could do with children over the summer holidays.

It is important to highlight at this point the greater professional attention to describing the learning of children who experience learning difficulties. At least two teachers collaborate about the

account which draws on perspectives pertaining to different learning contexts thus potentially enhancing the validity and the reliability of what it says to parents about their child.

Throughout the interview evidence there were references to how schools balance positive and negative commentary and, in disadvantaged settings in particular, teachers frequently noted how they have to be mindful of the likelihood that parents themselves may have had a negative experience of school. Especially of note in the interviews with the principals was the need for teachers to be realistic about achievement, motivation and behaviour. The following is typical of the responses:

*One piece of advice I always give to younger teachers is to be as positive as you can, but to tell it like it is. Because no parent will ever thank you for covering up for a child. I mean they can legitimately say, the following year, well, I could have sorted this out if I'd known about it. (Principal, School B)*

Less typical in the data was this Principal's addition that *while young teachers are sometimes afraid of parent-teacher meetings, the parent is twice as nervous*. This reveals a view of parents that, as we shall demonstrate, is not entirely supported by the parental evidence. The Principal of another disadvantaged school was equally concerned that teachers should be honest but diplomatic in their report writing and that the annual school reports should display consistency, in both the best interests of parents and their own colleagues. The rationale offered by principals revealed an assumption that school reports should not contain 'surprises' for parents. The following quotation from a Principal show how the content of a school report is assumed to have the power to engage the support of parents or to alienate them:

*Well, I bring it up every year; we discussed it at the last planning meeting day too, about the written reports. It's very*

*important that you be truthful about what you write. I mean it's soul destroying for a teacher, you know, the following year, to meet a parent and hear "Mrs. So and So never told me this" or "Mrs. So and So told me he was the best boy in town and look this is his report". You know you can't do that. If a child has issues the parent must be informed of the issues, but there are ways of being diplomatic about informing parents. And I think it's important to do that, because in an area like this parents have had very negative experiences of schooling themselves. We want an intergenerational move towards more acceptance of school and more belonging. If we start antagonising parents, you know, they're going to get their back up and we lose the good will. We have very good will with them at the moment and we work very well together, and every side has to compromise and try to do their best with the child at heart, you know? (Principal, School A)*

It may be that teachers/schools in their bid to keep certain parents on board or to ensure that parents feel accepted and 'belong,' filter information that they decide might be negatively received by parents ('antagonize') and thus perceive they are protecting parents. However, these decisions/meanings are not necessarily negotiated with parents and may lead to a blandness in reporting practices that provides insufficient detail for parents to act on – a point we will address in the second part of the chapter. Protecting the child and protecting the parent may *inter alia* mean protecting the school.

However, teachers reported that they sometimes apply a more direct approach, judging that some parents take more notice of the school report than what might be said in a parent-teacher meeting, once again revealing the assumed power of the written report:

*Teacher 1: Sometimes you feel that in the informality of the meeting, they are not really addressing things, and that the thing that matters is what is said in the end of year report. ...*

*Teacher 2: That's right, it carries enormous weight. I remember a parent in a state because it had gone down in writing. It did make her sit up the following year. (Teachers, School F)*

Again, principals were more conscious than teachers of obtaining consistency within the report of a single child as he or she progresses through the school and encounters different teachers. They were aware of how teacher competence mediates pupil progress and therefore how what can be reported about a child's learning is bound up with the actual class teacher who is charged with constructing the report:

*Because you have a different teacher writing a report every year and some of them vary...any judgement a teacher makes for instance, on behaviour, is influenced by his or her expectations of the child. So that has to be taken into account as well...One teacher who says a child is very well behaved, it may be because she has very good classroom management skills. Another teacher who says the child is not well behaved, it may be for different reasons. They are very often the things that parents are more interested in as well especially if the child may be having some difficulties in school. For some parents, whether a child is achieving very well in Irish is not top of their priority. But they will pick up on things like behaviour or attitude to school. (Principal, School C)*

In an attempt to address the challenges posed by obtaining consistency and validity in reports of learners' progress as well as to use reports to support pupil learning, one school (School A) has set

up a system where there is a designated day for teachers to study them. This policy decision was informed by the fact that teachers were not accessing their colleagues' reports to inform their teaching and planning or their construction of their own reports. As this school is designated disadvantaged, it has access to resource and support personnel who substitute for teachers while they engage in this learning process. The conversations about improving communication between teachers and parents at staff meetings led to this decision and more importantly to a valuing of the practice. One teacher in the school described how in writing his own reports he used previous reports as a backdrop. As a teacher of a senior class he found it very useful to see a child's progress through the school. He also noted and appreciated the level of detail and information provided in them. Not only did he learn about children's progress he also learned more about his colleagues' work through the inevitable discussion that such designated time allows. All teachers in the focus group found this structure of freeing them up helpful. It is a good example of how schools may need to create additional structures in order for new professional practices and communications to develop. Although all schools have a report booklet and teachers are free to access them, it appears that most teachers do not actually refer to them. Another exception is School F, where teachers report that they regularly consult the reports that are filed in the school office.

Teachers too were wary of 'putting things in writing'. As one said, *we're quite cautious about anything you write down to protect ourselves* (Teacher, School B). Teacher fear of litigation and their reluctance to commit too much in writing about their pupils are consistent with our emerging theme of protectionism. Teachers were keen to emphasise how labels can damage children and how they are careful about the language they use. One principal asks for greater clarity regarding what pupil information should be kept and what precisely

constituted a 'report' and a 'record'. Again fear of litigation would appear to underlie these concerns:

*There's just a lack of clarity I think at the moment. And when individual requests come in, and they don't come in very often, we just have to check each time then .... The Friday Spelling test – those are records as opposed to reports. And they would help a teacher in writing their annual reports and also help giving the oral report in parent teacher meetings. But the status they would have in regards, if somebody came looking for all their reports and records, that's unclear (Principal, School C).*

The Freedom of Information Act was mentioned several times in our interviews with teachers and principals although in fact it does not apply to schools at all. Under the Data Protection Act, however, parents do have the right to see any personal data relating to their children. They also have the right to all assessment information about their children in an intelligible form. Detailed guidance on this along with other aspects of assessment and reporting is detailed in the NCCA's recent publication for schools (NCCA, 2007, p. 95).

While all respondents were aware of litigation issues, teachers also expressed something of the professional struggle over the wording, seeking to faithfully represent pupils' approach and achievements. One teaching principal exemplified how he deliberated about how he describes pupils, bearing in mind how parents share the report with their children:

*I'd say there is a lot of discussion when the children go home. That's where you would want to be careful too, that you don't let a child down. But you still have to be fair. You know, I can remember writing a sentence about one child, 'it is about time that Joe realised that charm is not an excuse for hard work.' And then I revised it, 'no, that's too hard, that's too hard'.*

*And you go back sometimes and you say, you are inclined sometimes to hit, but it's not an opportunity to get your own back. You know, it's an opportunity to evaluate and see what you can do. But you do, I always feel fierce guilt writing reports, because I say, 'I should have done better', not the child should have done better. (Principal, School D)*

In similar vein another principal reflected on the potential enduring consequences for individual children's lives of overly negative comments:

*I think these days teachers have to be very careful in what they write about the children, it's held against them for life really. I would always tell the teachers, if you have something terrible to say, make sure you bring the parents up in advance and say look, I am going to write this, but really I am trying, this is why I am doing it. But I would not be in favour of teachers writing very derogatory comments, I wouldn't allow that, because these children have a difficult enough life out there, it's not fair on them. This could be held against them. (Principal, School A)*

The evidence presented in this section about the practices of schools as they construct annual reports of individual pupil learning attests to the perceived power of reports to impact on parents and children and to impact on schools themselves. It may be that the format of the typical report which requires teachers to summarise achievement through a tick and a very brief phrase colludes in pushing towards a protectionism that may not benefit all parties in the educational enterprise. Absent inevitably from such accounts will be more direct evidence of achievement and indications of progress over the year. The NCCA's Report Card Templates (still in draft form) go some way towards supporting a more detailed and specific account of a child's learning (NCCA, 2007)

The next section presents insights into policy and practice on the annual parent-teacher meeting.

### **3.2.2 The Annual Parent-Teacher Meeting: Format and Timing**

The parent-teacher meeting has the potential to offer both a summative and formative account of children as learners. On the one hand teachers claim to summarise a child's progress while, on the other hand, they say that they highlight aspects that need attention in these meetings, identifying ways in which parents can support their child's learning at home. Thus, assessment *of* and *for* learning can be addressed. As above, the notion of the enhanced validity of reports about pupils with special educational needs is sustained. Further themes are accessibility of meetings for parents and assumptions of one-way communication underlying reporting practice.

Four of our case study schools have one formal parent-teacher meeting annually in November. One school, a small two-teacher rural school, offers this annual event in the summer term after parents receive the school report. Yet another holds its parent-teacher meetings in February. November is popular with schools because this is a time when teachers have acquired a good understanding of their pupils as learners and they are assumed to be in a position to offer informed judgements about their curricular strengths and weaknesses, as well as aspects like commitment, enthusiasm and general behaviour. This timing allows parents to act on the information during the remainder of the school year.

The general pattern described by our research participants for these meetings conforms to DES guidelines. In four of our case study schools parents are allocated a time slot of about 10-15 minutes on a particular day during which they would meet with the class teacher to discuss their child's progress. The multi-denominational school F,

however, differed from the norm. Here parent-teacher meetings are held in the early morning (beginning from 7.30 a.m.) as well as in the afternoon over a period of several weeks, with teachers seeing only two or three parents per day. Parents are offered a choice of times, to allow both parents to attend. Not surprisingly, this is one of the few schools that report a high level of attendance by fathers as well as mothers. School E, a Gaelscoil, also offers parents the option of an early morning meeting if this is the only time that suits them.

In one school the parent-teacher meeting follows soon after parents receive the annual school report and the latter then forms a starting point of the meeting in this school, with parents tending to take the school report along to the meeting. In other respects the meeting in this school is in line with those in the other schools in the study:

*First of all really look at the report that has gone home, which gives us a starting point and then I have my own little notes written down. Anything extra that I want to say and I also ask the parents if they have any concerns or anything they want to discuss. With some parents, 5 minutes would do and other parents would need longer, for one reason or another because maybe they have more concerns about the child or maybe they're just more talkative, that they may take up more time than that. We try and keep it around the 10 or 15 minutes. (Class teacher, School D)*

Teachers in School E commented that the meeting helps to remind them of what the children are expected to do at home and how to help them. They also to help teachers to find out more about their pupils. Several teachers mentioned that they show parents examples of the children's work in the parent-teacher meeting. As one said: *It is good for the parents to see something concrete* (Teacher, School E).

In the case of children with special educational needs parents may have two separate meetings with the class teacher and the resource teacher. Our evidence shows that in the case of separate meetings, colleagues share, discuss and moderate their judgements about the child's progress in advance. At least one school, however, has recently adopted the practice of the resource teacher and class teacher meeting the parent(s) together to ensure that parents obtain a more coherent view of the child's progress:

*Now, in the last few years we've changed the system in the sense that if a child is involved with the resource teacher, the resource teacher sits in on that meeting as well. Because there is no point in a parent going to one meeting and be told one thing and then going down the corridor to be told something different. (Principal, School A)*

This is in line with our earlier claim of greater professional attention being brought to bear on reporting on the progress of children with special educational needs. It would be reasonable to expect that such joint attention to describing the learning of these children would enhance the trustworthiness for parents of what is reported and the recommendations offered. How parents view this close attention and monitoring will be of interest in the next main section of the chapter.

In all except one school (School F) respondents noted that it is mothers, rather than fathers, or mothers and fathers together, who attend these meetings, despite both parents being invited, and in some cases, actively encouraged to attend. Teachers in School F schedule the parent-teacher meetings in the early morning as well as the afternoon to allow both parents to attend if at all possible. It can happen that parents have little or no English, or are not generally available, so that the parent-teacher meeting is the only opportunity

to communicate with them. The school encourages both parents to attend, particularly in view of the high number of newcomer families, where there are different levels of fluency in English and perhaps also different views of gender roles:

*And I do always prefer both parents to be here. Especially with the kids who come from other countries where, sometimes the women's views are as important as the dad views, so. And then you'll see the dad saying things like, you know, you never told me. And I am thinking, I bet she did. So it is great that they can hear it, straight from the teacher. And that there is no, the mum trying to say it. You know, that this is what the teacher says, because then you are addressing the head of the house*  
(Teacher, School F)

Children themselves do not accompany their parents to these meetings although as we will show later some children expressed an interest in attending them.

Our evidence points to the fact that the annual parent-teacher meeting functions as a mechanism for passing on information to parents and identifying ways in which they might support their children as learners. It is mainly a one-way system of communication from the teacher to the parent. This is represented in the next quotation from a focus group interview with teachers in which they seemed unanimous in the view that parents did not always appreciate the function of the parent-teacher meeting:

*I also think that parents have a misconception of what parent teacher meetings are as well. I would find them as a form where I am talking and I am saying where the areas, you know, are good and the areas that need more improvement. And they might bring up an issue of something that happened in the yard two weeks ago. It's not the place for it, like. They*

*need to make an appointment separately for that and come in.*

*Parent teacher meetings aren't, for me, for that kind of thing...*

(Class teacher, School C)

The annual parent-teacher meeting seems to be an event that is in practice geared more to the transmission of assessment information from teachers to parents than a discussion in which both parties participate equally and negotiate ways forward for learners. This does not mean of course that other opportunities are not afforded for more interactive, two-way communication. Our evidence shows that schools consider the parent-teacher meeting to be a special event with a distinct purpose of *telling* parents about their child's strengths and weaknesses and of identifying ways in which they might support the school's work with their child. The very limited amount of time allocated to each parent contributes to this perspective and practice.

### **3.2.3 Standardised Tests, Homework, Class Tests**

What role do standardised assessments play in reporting practices? In addressing this issue further information emerged about other reporting mechanisms that schools use in communicating with parents about children's progress. This section analyses evidence on these aspects. The main finding of significance here is the variation across policy and practice even within schools. Such variation is to be expected as, beyond the obligations set nationally that all schools should compile a school report for each child and conduct a parent-teacher meeting annually, schools are expected to decide how best to report on pupil learning. From 2007 (DES Circular 0138/2006) schools are also obliged to assess their pupils using standardised assessments at least twice during a pupil's time in primary school and to report the results to parents.

Practice in our case study schools shows that teachers already conform to the new requirements in relation to conducting

standardised testing insofar as they conduct such tests. In the case of pupils from first to sixth classes in the primary school, these assessments are typically based on tests such as the Drumcondra Primary Reading and Mathematics tests (Education Research Centre 2007) and the Micra-T and the Sigma-T (reading and mathematics tests, Mary Immaculate College 2007) which are standardised and norm-referenced as well as curriculum-related. However, reporting practices of the results is not the same across schools. While schools said they inform parents of assessments carried out during the school year, typically around May, these results are sometimes communicated to parents only when they request them and it seems that no school forwards the actual scores of standardised tests to parents. Rather the results are interpreted or made intelligible by teachers and then communicated orally to them rather than including them on the annual school report. Teachers claim to be mindful of test results when compiling their report.

Pupils in some senior infant classes are assessed in basic reading and mathematics skills using standardised tests (e.g. MIST) for diagnostic or screening purposes, in order to identify children who need learning support. These results are interpreted by teachers and communicated to parents verbally, but again practice varies. In some cases results are routinely given verbally at parent-teacher meetings, in others they are available only *if the parent asks to see them*. Where the test results signal that the child is having difficulties, this is likely to trigger a request for a meeting with the parents and then results and their implications are discussed.

Parents of children who undergo psychological assessments may have several additional formal meetings with the school, specifically in relation to giving consent for the conduct of assessments and in relation to interpreting the results and their pedagogical implications including the development and implementation of Individual

Education Plans (IEPs). Moreover, regular updates, written and oral, are offered to parents of pupils who attend Resource, LS or Special Classes. Schools also tend to request meetings with parents of pupils who have behavioural difficulties and reports are sometimes prepared to support these meetings. Here again, our evidence points to greater levels of reporting in relation to children experiencing learning and/or behavioural difficulties. There is also evidence of greater levels of communication between parents and teachers about younger children than about older children.

Formal reporting arrangements and practices in primary schools have to be understood within a context of informal contact with parents about their children's learning and development. There are several other practices which function as communications with parents about their children's learning in school and participants in the research commented on these in the interviews we conducted. Homework would appear to be a significant vehicle for on-going communication with parents about pupil progress. The principal of our small rural school described his approach to offering feedback to his learners on their work:

*Now another way too would be homework, that I would correct and make comments on the homework And if I were particularly pleased or angry with someone I would say 'I need daddy or mammy to sign that'. So that they have seen what it is that I am particularly annoyed with or particularly pleased with. Because you do praise as well as the other. So that's another way of reporting to parents. (Principal, School D)*

A large disadvantaged school (School A) presents the reporting process as an integrated one, as ongoing and evidence-based, and not easily separated in the teachers' practice from assessment and recording. It also reveals the use of class tests as vehicles for

communicating progress. Here teachers explained how they send home

class spelling test results and how parents are expected to sign homework notebooks/sheets every week indicating that they have seen them. Class mathematics tests occur every month and these results too are sent home. This practice starts early in the child's schooling. This kind of ongoing communication is then part of the evidence base that informs parent-teacher meetings in this school. In School A, a homework sheet rather than a journal is sent home each week to tell parents of children in infant classes what work the children are doing:

*In infants we give out a homework sheet at the start of the week ... And the rest is an A4 sheet, and the bottom then, we always give a little note, like days coming up or that kind of thing. And then we always might stick in, like we are doing this rhyme this week or if you want to do it at home, or if we started writing or we area doing this letter this week.*

(Teacher, School A)

School E, a Gaelscoil, also uses *leabhair notaí cumersáide* or 'communication journals' to send messages to parents, a practice more prevalent in the lower than in the upper end of the school. Once again parents sign these communications regularly. Homework notebooks or journals and 'test copies' that parents are required to sign thus act not only as a communication channel from school to home, but as a way for teachers to ensure that parents are checking on homework. They may also have space for parents to add a comment or a note to the teacher.

While test copies largely give feedback on academic progress, journals may have comments on behaviour. Some schools also have formal systems to promote 'good behaviour' which are shared with

parents. In School B, a large urban school, a star system designed to promote good behaviour (e.g. coming to class on time, good discipline) was in school-wide operation. It is based on extrinsic motivation and behaviour modification through the accumulation of a maximum of three 'stars' per day. Stars are recorded on the child's 'star booklet' and is completed daily and made available to parents. School F has a 'Star of the Week' award, presented at assembly to children who have made a special effort or have been noticed doing something special in class or in the yard. Because it is linked to behaviour rather than academic achievement, it is open to all children. The teacher (not necessarily the class teacher) sponsoring the award tells the assembly why this child has got the award. One parent described the moment that her child (who has special educational needs) got the award as *a very proud moment in a parent's life* (Mother, School F).

In addition then to the annual school reports and parent-teacher meetings, schools report to parents about their children's ongoing learning and participation in school through more informal mechanisms particularly homework notebooks. These more informal mechanisms have the potential to reveal something of the process of children's day-to-day learning, to indicate to parents the focus of their children's learning in school as well as their success in that learning. Policy and practice in relation to the extent to which and the format in which schools report the results of standardised tests will likely display more convergence in the near future as the new guidelines become disseminated and the DES requirement for standardised testing is implemented by schools.

### **3.2.4 Dealing with Linguistic Diversity**

Four of our schools were catering for at least some children whose first language was not English and at three of these schools very many parents had very little or no English, making for particular

challenges when it came to parent-teacher meetings. Schools had devised a range of creative policies and practices for addressing the obvious challenges, including, in particular, eliciting the support of community members who could mediate between teachers and parents. To illustrate, the Principal of School B described their access to community members as assistants as translators for parent-teacher meetings:

*One of our Vietnamese helpers, Mr. X, he's a retired professional, who speaks Vietnamese and Chinese and he will come sometimes to meet with the parents and he'll interpret and translate. ... One of our language support teachers that we took on is Polish, well she teaches English obviously, but she is very, very useful with Polish parents. And also, she has better than school Russian. So she can communicate with the Latvian, Lithuanian and Russian families. ... She was at a parent teacher, infant meeting today, so she has been very useful.*

The focus group interview data from the teachers in this school and in School F highlighted the scale of the challenges involved in communicating with parents who don't have sufficient English. In the case of a parent in another school, it was only when someone who could speak her own language came to work there that she was able to express her anxieties about how her child was doing in the school; previously the teacher admitted interpreting her lack of interaction with the school as a lack of interest.

Teachers in School F have made a list of all the languages in which different members of staff have some degree of competence, it translates the main school notices and information into seven languages, and is in the process of applying, together with a cluster of other schools in the area, for funding for professional translators.

Currently they rely on teachers, other staff members and older children to translate, but they are aware that this is not always possible or appropriate. Even with translators teachers still find communication difficult with some parents. Over 50% of the children attending the school are newcomers, and some of their parents have little or no English. Teachers here say that although they make every effort to communicate, they are often not sure whether a parent has understood what they say.

Even when teachers and parents apparently share a common language, other difficulties may arise. Written reports are of little use to a parent who does not read the language in which it is written, though they may have reasonable oral fluency. They are even more problematic for parents with literacy difficulties, who may not even be able to read notes sent home by the school. Some of the schools in the study had Traveller families where the parents themselves were attending literacy classes and the teachers were aware of this and were careful of the language they used in reports. Teachers in several of the schools mentioned that they make an effort to communicate orally when they are aware that parents have difficulty accessing written information.

There is also the question of how far a shared understanding exists between school and home, and how reports are interpreted. Teachers in School B reported that they have to be careful in how they mention issues of discipline to some parents, in case the parent reacted by physically punishing the child. Different cultural norms in respect of physical punishment and in the way adults and children interact with one another were also mentioned in School F. Parents' own experience has often been with a very different school system and their understanding of the curriculum, the role of the school and of the teacher has been shaped by this. Teachers in School F say that they sometimes have to 'sell' outings or trips to parents as being

related to an academic subject such as English or History rather than as contributing to the children's social development, which they feel is not seen by some parents as a legitimate or important part of the work of the school.

### **3.2.5 'Open Door' Access for Parents**

The formal reporting mechanisms noted so far happen in the context of informal sets of relationships between teachers and parents that, according to school staff, involve very regular encounters and opportunities for teachers and parents to talk about the children's lives and learning. Before progressing to an analysis of how learners and parents experience the reporting process, it is important to highlight how schools represent their policies and practices in relation to parental access.

Nearly all interviews conducted with principals and with class teachers included reference to the significance of regular contact on an informal basis with parents, especially with parents of children in Infant classes and children who attend learning support or special classes. Our evidence points to the claim on the part of all 6 case study schools that an 'open door' policy with regard to parents is in operation. Staff members tend to present their schools as places that are easily accessible to parents and they present themselves as people who are in regular contact with them.

Typically teachers claim that they have access to parents as they drop off children in the mornings and as they come to collect children at the end of the school day and this offers an opportunity to liaise with parents about issues arising on a day to day basis that concern children's learning and development in the broadest sense. One principal of a large city school (School B) which was designated 'disadvantaged' noted: *there's informal contact with parents every day and the parents and teachers talk freely practically every day.* In School F, both

teachers and parents were in agreement that this regular informal contact takes place with those parents who bring their children to school themselves, although they pointed out that in many cases, both parents work outside the home and children are brought or collected by childminders.

Teachers in several schools mentioned the practical difficulties of talking to parents during a normal school day; one respondent, a teaching principal in a small school, gave as the greatest challenge in reporting *dealing with parents who arrive unannounced when you have a class of over thirty pupils waiting to be taught*. Practical difficulties such as these certainly seem to influence what ‘open door’ means in different schools.

In School A, a large urban school which is designated disadvantaged, ‘meeting in the corridor’ was frequently referred to by teachers as a way of keeping in touch with parents and keeping children ‘on track’ especially with homework. The school has a HSCL coordinator, and parents are often in the school for classes and other activities, so that they meet teachers regularly. Teachers say that ‘there is an approachable atmosphere in the school’, and they appreciate the backup that the HSCL coordinator gives: *If you have a problem getting in touch with a parent or you find it difficult to get in touch, you can go to the HSCL coordinator and she very often has an extra piece of information or she knows the family personally*.

Teachers typically felt that feedback to parents during the year was more effective if it was oral rather than written, a view that made them see frequent, informal face-to-face contacts with parents as more relevant and obviously more immediate than say a written end-of-year report. This applied both to communicating about issues of behaviour and attendance and to making parents aware of the importance of supporting children’s learning at home, monitoring

homework and so on. Informal, oral communication is assumed to help to ensure that messages are communicated accurately. Several teachers also claimed that oral reporting is perceived by parents as less threatening.

Informal contacts are also used in some schools to follow up on parents who do not, for one reason or another, attend formal meetings. Teachers in School A for instance report that this makes a difference to attendance, especially in the case of traveller parents whose attendance at meetings they monitor and encourage.

In School A day-to-day informal meetings and more formal end-of-year reporting or the more formal annual parent-teacher meeting are represented as integral elements of the working relations schools and parents evolve over the primary school years:

*In the Infants, if an issue arises, we would report it verbally to the parent at the door because we meet them every day on a daily basis and I believe if there is some issue that has arisen, the parents should know immediately. In relation to the older children, we find that parents don't come to school as much as they would do when their children were younger, so we would report at the parent teacher meeting...or we would have class meetings as well in September, where the class teacher would meet the parent and outline maybe the do's and don'ts of the year. If there are any issues, they explain the procedures of how to come up to the school and how to address those issues. ..But we would have a fairly open door policy in relation to parents; we want parents to communicate with us. We need parents as much as they need us. And sometimes they give us very vital pieces of information that could help us to help the child. So they do come and they meet and we are very lucky to have a home school liaison teacher as well who would facilitate an awful lot of those meetings. (Principal, School A)*

As well as the view that they are ‘open’ to parents, our evidence from teacher and principal interviews signals the significance of two-way communication between parents and teachers in relation to understanding the contribution of both parties in the child’s development. Our teacher and principal interviewees were indeed sensitive to the desirability of a dialogic approach with parents rather than subscribing to the view that communication is one way, from teacher to parent. As one observed:

*You (the teacher) are not the person who is the only repository of knowledge. That parents have such a huge amount of knowledge to give, it mightn’t be academic knowledge, and that sounds patronising now, but what I mean is that they are the teachers, the original teachers. (Principal, School D)*

In general, teachers claimed to value on-going communication with parents that enabled them to know about what was going on in children’s lives that might be affecting their ability to learn. The LS teacher in School D was particularly conscious of the need to be aware of the home environment:

*It’s only when somebody talks and you listen to see the kind of person they are. And I think that’s really useful ...knowing the environment they’re going back to try and achieve these things. And it’s important for me to take account of that because it means, one of the spin off reasons would be that more work needs to be done in school. It cannot always, perhaps, be achieved at home, even if parents are willing. And so it’s important to take account of that in any plan drawn up for the child. (Resource teacher, School D)*

The class teacher in the same school also acknowledged the feedback from parents, and was willing to change some of the ways she did things as a result:

*Sometimes you find out things about the children that you weren't aware of. found out this year that quite a few of the children were stressed about their spelling tests on a Friday, and I hadn't been aware of that. It was never meant as, it was a very small, very little test, but I wasn't aware, it was several parents that said to me that the children were anxious to get all their spellings right. If they get all their spellings right, they get a sticker. So I thought, maybe I shouldn't be giving them a sticker, if it's putting stress on people. So next year, I decided if they get them all right, they wont be getting a sticker, because it's putting pressure, counting how many stickers they have in their copy. And that was something that was kind of a revelation to me this year. (Teacher, School D)*

These responses indicate that schools feel that there is a 'general accessibility' of school staff to parents. Whether parents' experiences of contact with schools is as 'open door' or always as positive as the above account suggests is the theme of the next section.

### **3.3 OUTCOMES OF THE SCHOOL REPORTING PROCESS: PARENTAL AND LEARNER EXPERIENCES**

This second part of the chapter attends to the outcomes and impact of the school reporting process in that it documents how the various players experience it. Firstly we present and analyse the evidence paying particular attention to the learner perspective. Then we foreground parental experiences of the process identifying several key themes specifically the following: the nature of information on offer by schools; the frequency and timing of parent-teacher meetings; and, variation in parental perspectives according to school raising class as a possible mediator.

### **3.3.1 The Learner Perspective**

Interviews were held in each school with a focus group ranging in size from four to eighteen pupils. The children were mainly drawn from fifth and sixth classes. The number of newcomer children varied from one school to another, depending on the school population. For example School B, a *Gaelscoil* had only a few newcomer children enrolled, while School F had over 50% newcomers. This was reflected in the composition of the focus groups.

As a means of getting children to think about report cards and parent teacher meeting, we asked children to complete a reflection sheet (see Appendix 1) with two questions prior to discussing their experiences of report cards and what parents say after parent teacher meetings. In most cases, children felt happy (11 children) or OK (11 children) about the report cards and parent teacher meetings. Two children indicated that they felt unhappy about the outcome of report cards and parent-teacher meetings. Were this pattern to be reflected in a larger sample it raises questions about providing opportunities for children to not only talk about their positive experiences, but also their negative perceptions.

In general, pupils were very able and willing to express their opinions on matters relating to reporting of their progress to their parents. Aspects of the reporting process were important events in the lives of the pupils, such as when their parents receive the school report. They expressed strong emotions of fear, anxiousness and curiosity before the report is due and then depending on its nature, emotions of happiness, disappointment, etc. when the report is read. Partly this is because of the anticipated reaction of their parents:

*When I get my report card, it's very nerve wrecking and when they say don't open the card, I feel like I really want to know what's in it, because if I know what's in it, I will know what*

*to feel about it when my mum and dad open my report card. So sometimes, when I go outside, I take a quick peek at the report card to see if I did well. At times is might say that I am really good at lots of things and then say that he does this thing too much or he does a thing that isn't really what your parents would like. And when you get home, you might feel a bit like, Oh my God, what am I going to do, my mum's going to kill me, oh I'm doomed. And you don't feel like, happy.*  
(Boy, aged 12, School F)

The same child says that he likes to have a look at it before giving it to his parents so that he can anticipate their reaction. Another child in the same group doesn't open hers:

*If it was bad I'd be nervous all the way home- my mum and dad wouldn't be happy if I opened it and they'd be in a bad mood then* (Girl, aged 11, School F).

More usually however, the opportunity to look at the report does not arise, and children depend on their parents to tell them, or not, what it says. While they can generally predict what kind of responses they will get, they are still apprehensive. Sometimes they are pleasantly surprised:

*I don't think I'm very good at art, but I got a good mark at art this year. And I never knew I was any good at art at all.*  
(Boy, School D)

Generally the report helps to confirm what the children already know about their own progress in learning:

Interviewer: *Who do you think the cards are written for then? Are they for parents do you think?*

Child 1: *Parents I think, yes. It's to show them how you are getting on at school.*

Child 2: *You would know yourself anyway how you are doing. You would know if you were finding Maths easy or hard or whatever. Interviewer: There are no big surprises, so, in these report cards?*

Children: *No.* (Interview with children from sixth class, School E).

The children felt that they had a good idea in general about how they would score in most subjects, as when this class took part in an exercise where they drew up their own mock report cards:

*We had to write what we would give ourselves out of 10 for different things. It was pretty much the same as what the teacher gave.* (Child, sixth class, School E)

It is clear that receiving a report from school is a significant event for pupils. Their reactions suggest that they take seriously the grades they receive and the comments made by teachers about their behaviour. They would however like reports to concentrate more on the positive:

Boy 1: *Oh, there's not much on the things you're good at.*

Boy 2: *Yes, there is like loads on what you need to work on, but there's not enough on what you're good at.* (Children's focus group, school B)

Pupils would like more detailed information about their progress in individual subjects with a view to working on areas of difficulty:

*I'd like to have a report where you know exactly, like say in a subject, there are loads of little things, like maths or Irish, you know exactly where you're failing and where you're going well. So you don't just have, Ok there's your mark, you don't know what's after going wrong in the mark.* (Boy, School D)

They perceive that certain domains of competence currently on report cards do not address all those areas of competence they recognise in their own experience and would like acknowledged and valued more explicitly by schools – and by implication – reported to parents. They felt that the school report should give a more rounded picture of themselves, their achievements and personality. They would like more detailed information on things they are good at, and they would definitely like more detail on sports, drama, art or music:

Child1: *Sport should be on it. PE is not the same as sport*  
(School C)

Child 1: *One thing that I'd definitely change about the reports, I'd add drama into it.*

Child 2: *Yes.*

Child 1: *And that's not just because (teacher's name) told me if there was, I'd get a good mark.* (Children's focus group, School D)

Boy 1: *Also a personality column I think*

Interviewer: *And what would go down there?*

Boy 1. *Like if you were shy, if you were helpful*

Boy 2: *Enthusiastic – things like that should be on it*  
(Children's focus group, School C)

Some pupils wanted more detailed information on areas such as attendance in order to explain the reasons for their rate of attendance. Often there are one or two report cards per year and the idea of increasing the number was welcomed by pupils as long as it did not involve more tests.

For some pupils part of the school report experience involves a social comparison including teasing, being compared with other family members, being rewarded (or not). This question of rewards came up especially in discussion with the children from School B, where the

majority of the children looked forward to tangible rewards for a good report:

Child 1: *I got money and clothes*

Child 2: *I got a new phone; I got a track suit and loads of money*

Interviewer: *That's when you got a good report card?*

Child 2: *Yup. If I get a bad one...If I got a bad one I'd get sent to bed* (Children's focus group, School B)

Similarly the discussion between parents and their children after the annual parent-teacher meeting is associated with strong emotions on the part of the children. They see the parent-teacher meeting as similar in function to the report; it was described by one child as *like a report in talking*. Both report card results and feedback to children via parents after parent-teacher meetings have a noticeable emotional and affective dimension:

*My parents wouldn't be happy if I got Good or Very Good- that's a bit ordinary- they want me to get Excellent all the time* (Boy, aged 12, School F)

*My mum would be sad if I didn't improve in subjects* (Girl, aged 11, School F)

Waiting to hear what the teacher has said about them at the parent-teacher meeting is equally nerve-wracking.

Girl1: *I feel like I'm going to have a nervous breakdown!*

Girl 2: *You feel like you're going to die!*

Interviewer: *Why? Do you not know what to expect?*

Boy 1: *Most of the time you do...*

Boy 2: *I thought I was doing bad in a subject but my teacher didn't say anything, just I was improving* (Children's focus group, School F).

Some children would like to be present at the parent-teacher meeting: Some pupils were not in favour of attending but they wanted to know what was discussed and considered this to be connected to their learning. About half the pupils interviewed expressed a desire to attend the meetings and felt that they would benefit from participating in the discussion. They would also like to have some input into what is said:

*Child 1: The teacher just says what you're good at and then what you need to get better at whatever. And if you were in along with your mother you would hear*

*Child 2: You could explain things about yourself*

*Child 3: I would say put an extra 2 minutes on to each one so the children can come in*

*Child 1: They (parents) don't tell every tiny bit of information so we should be allowed to go in to hear what is being said about you (Children's focus group, school C)*

Views of the children in School D were more ambivalent:

*Boy 1: I'd love to go to the parent teacher meeting to know what the teacher thinks of you really and like sometimes my parents would forget something what he told ya. You wouldn't know what it's all about, what, if you're talking too much or you're too giddy or like that*

*Girl 1: I would and I wouldn't because you're kind of nervous to go down, to see if you're falling behind or, and if you get a low mark or anything. And I would because sometimes your parents leave out some of the good parts and they have to get the bad parts into ya so you can ... (improve)*

Parent-teacher meetings thus have an informational function but also serve in many cases a regulatory function in relation to application to

schoolwork and behaviour in school. It was very clear that such reports influence how pupils see themselves as learners and how they perceive their strengths and weaknesses. The children in the focus groups (who were all at the upper end of the primary school age range) would like to know exactly what is reported orally about them. They also would like to see the reports written about them. They suspect (with some justification) that teachers may say things to their parents that do not appear in writing. It is also clear that they would like more input themselves into the reporting process.

It is worth noting some continuities and discontinuities with the school evidence on policy and practice presented earlier as well as some implications that arise from the evidence from learners. Firstly, it would seem that many children can fairly accurately predict their teachers' evaluations of their learning, thus confirming the stance adopted generally by schools that there should be 'no surprises' (for parents). Yet, children voiced the desire for more information that would help them know what to do to improve hinting at their wish for greater specificity than they currently obtain. They also wish for a more comprehensive reporting in terms of topics covered (e.g. sport) and areas of development covered (social aspects). Just how intellectually and emotionally significant reports of their learning are to children themselves may well be under-estimated by schools. It is likely that children would welcome and benefit from the opportunity to discuss such reports (whether school report or substance of parent-teacher meeting) with their teachers. Such conversations might usefully occur in the context of the more recent impetus for 'assessment for learning' in Ireland (NCCA, 2007). What is clear is that learners are eager to participate earnestly in discussions of their learning, to have the opportunity to negotiate targets for their future achievement, and to reflect on factors influencing their learning. Taking account of this evidence could involve schools in greater attention to the purposes of reporting, particularly, the twin

assessment purposes of assessment *for* and *of* learning and their implications for school reports of pupil learning to parents.

### **3.3.2 Parents' Access to Information about their Children's Learning**

One of the overarching findings from our interviews with parents was the appreciation of access to schools and teachers at times and in ways that fitted with their availability and concerns, although from their perspective, not all schools exhibited such accessibility. Further, our evidence points to social class as a possible influencing factor in understanding parents' ability to access teachers. We also document the variation in parental perspectives by school which highlights the potential impact of class on outcomes. We develop these points in what follows and highlight their implications for future policy and practice.

#### **3.3.2.1 Parental Appreciation of Informal Contacts**

Informal contact varies within the schools and between schools. As we already noted informal contact is most pronounced at the junior and senior infants level. As children progress through the school informal contact often changes unless schools create other formal structures for communicating with parents as in the case of School D which has a bi-weekly newsletter and a specific slot for parents to add/receive notes in children's journals. Parents report great satisfaction with both these methods of reporting and actively look for notes from teachers. They say that this gives them a great sense of trust and knowledge of the workings of the school. In addition, they actively look for these communications as indicated by these parental responses:

*He's (Principal) brilliant that way, no matter what kind of activities or what was going on, there was a newsletter. Now you might get it a week after from you own child, like. It's*

*gone to the stage where you would be rooting in the bag looking for something in it. (Parent, School D)*

*There's very few weeks that go by that you don't have a note home over something. Just to say something is going on or, you know, or what it is. No matter how small it is you have a note. And they have a set part of their folder, like my boy is only 6, 6 1/2 and they have a separate part of the folder for notes there for the mothers to look, rather than having the children, you know at that age they wouldn't be telling you. (Parent, School D)*

School F (a school with a large diversity of cultures and 40 languages) places particular emphasis on openness and informality, and this is endorsed by the parents in the focus group:

*Parent 1: You just walk in and you feel so welcome. There is never anybody to say 'What are you doing at this time?' You just walk up to the teacher and you are getting feedback and can talk to them any time. Which I find is really good, because if you have any concerns about your child, you can just address it then and there. And so the teachers are very approachable and it's like a good appraisal of where your child is lacking, and where they are doing well.*

*Parent 2: Yeah, well mostly if there is a difficulty, of course. But you know that they are very, very open and whenever you have problem, you can go and talk to them. So, if you really have some concern, you can go to them. It is nothing like every week, like you are allowed only on a weekly basis or monthly. It is very open for every day. And the principal is very approachable as well.*

Parents reported being extremely satisfied with the reporting process at this school with one parent saying that the school report in particular was “100% right” and a fair reflection of her child:

*Parent: Yeah, I think it is absolutely great and I feel like, when I see they have different categories, like say, excellent, good and fair. And then they have a subject on the right so they mark excellent, good and fair, you know in a computer way. But what I find, when I see the report card I really know that they are 100% right. Because you know your child. Like my child is not good in music and when I see the report card it is marked fair, because I know he is not very much into music. So I think the report card is very general and absolutely a reflection of what they are. So very, very happy with them. ....Ok, so this is a matter of interest like in music. Mostly he gets in music, Fair. But that is not his interest, I just, well, I can't push him. But other is computers, he is not technical, he is more sporty so the computer he gets Good. So I would go with that and say look, you have to do that, kind of thing. And I help him with it. Like the next time I talk to him, like the next time I want Excellent in computers as well, you are not good. So that is what I will just, when I see, I know that he is not big into computers that so my intention is to work with him to improve the report he gets. (Parent Interview, School F)*

This parent of two boys in third and fifth classes, who is from India originally and living in Ireland for the last seven years, uses the report to motivate her child to do better. She makes a judgement about what she focuses on: ‘computers’ and what she lets go: ‘music’. She has confidence in the report’s accuracy in measuring her child’s progress and in her ability to support his progress. It is clear that she understands that effort rather than ability will make for improvement.

The teachers in this school seem to be well aware of the impact of what they say to parents. As one teacher in the focus group observed, *The parents care so much about their kids' progress that the words are burned into their brains once they've read them.*

Overall there is considerable satisfaction expressed by parents in this school. They have confidence in the school's reporting mechanisms and feel the school could not be doing more to make them feel welcome and to build confidence in their children. They mentioned the weekly test copies and the weekly assembly where 'Star of the Week' was announced. In addition all the parents in the focus group spoke of the intercultural environment that has been developed. In the focus group, three of the four parents were from other cultures, two from India and one from Pakistan, although none of them were newcomers, having lived in Ireland for 7, 10, and 12 years.

Interestingly in this school instead of a Parent Association there is a Parent-Teacher Association.

The informal mechanisms were clearly very important for them. These included the monthly parent coffee mornings, the daily meetings as they dropped off their children, the food fair and other intercultural events. The principal and his approach to parents and children was particularly noted:

*Parent 2: I think in Ireland, principals are more approachable like 'John'<sup>10</sup> is, you know you can walk up to him. Kids, you should see the way kids react to him. He is a god, and he is so popular. I have never seen any principal that popular.*

*Parent 3: I remember the first time I meet John, the Principal, the school was open, it was John the first time I met him, one of the kids stopped him and hugged him after summer holidays. The child came in, gave him a big hug and handed him a card, 'I missed you John'. I stepped back, I had never*

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10 Not the teacher's real name

*met John before and I looked at him and I thought, wow, isn't that a lovely relationship. And in the winter months, when they were out having yard time, he'd run the kids all around the school. They would chase him and it was to keep warm and be healthy.*

When asked by the interviewer what could be improved about reporting, the following response was offered:

*Parent: Again, like what you said, it is like complaining about an almost perfect situation. But sometimes when they get good reports I am thinking, maybe I need to hear more about the negative things. You know, in some ways, which is great for the child, but I would like to hear more about the areas they are not doing so well. We do get to hear about it, but generally it is like 'no, it is very good', you know.*

### 3.3.2.2 Variation across Parents: School and Class Influences

However, not all parents were so fulsome in their praise with a noticeable variation across parents by school. There is a marked difference between parents' views in School A and B (disadvantaged status) and Schools C and D (which could largely be characterised as middle-class) and where parents were unanimously positive in their accounts of the reporting practices they experience. Parents in School F as just noted are enthusiastic in their satisfaction. In School D there is a general consensus that teachers are intimately aware of children's learning needs and a constant communicating occurs between home and school. *You know yourself, if you have a problem, you can walk down to the teacher now this minute and she'd come out and talk to you. You're not wasting her time ...it's small things.* (Parent, School D)

Lareau's (1987) research is telling at this stage. Her research focussed on the differential participation practices of parents in a middle-class

school and another working class school. Both schools had explicit open-door policies and valued parent participation. However, she clearly found class differences in parents' ability to intervene on their children's behalf. Middle class parents were very comfortable actively intervening on academic issues whereas working class parents when they did intervene did so on non-academic issues and were clearly uncomfortable in discussing academic issues with teachers.

In School D it is clear that parents feel very comfortable monitoring and checking on their children's work and progress and have confidence in both their own reading of this work and in their interventions in school. School D, a rural two-teacher largely middle class school where the principal has intergenerational knowledge of the children and their parents, has a strong ethos of parent communication and respect that is structured formally through biweekly newsletters and journal notes to parents on a daily basis. Not only is there ongoing informal contact on a daily basis with all class levels but there also is a structured formal way of keeping in touch with parents through bi-weekly newsletters. There is also a space in the student's journals specifically for parent communication. In the following quotes from two parents there is a strong sense that these parents are confident in the reporting practices of the school. What is also striking about these parents is their sense of their own responsibility and ability to monitor their children's progress.

*You'd see yourself if there was a problem...well personally if I had a problem I'd just come in then and ask. You know, does he need this or is that ok, but I can see it every evening with like the homework coming home. In his writing in books and how he's getting on. (Parent, School D)*

This parent feels very comfortable in coming in and meeting the teachers. There is a sense that she is monitoring closely her child's

progress and feels it is her job to do this. The same sense of monitoring and keeping on top of children's progress is evident in another parent's response below:

*And they give them all their own little tests, they're there on the bottom of the copy, it's up to the parents to check that and see what kind of progress they're doing. I mean everything is down there in black and white in front of you. You know where they got 20% or 50%, that's actually in their copies as well when they come home apart from the tests that they do for the parent teacher meeting. (Parent, School D)*

This confidence is in marked contrast to parents in both School A and B which are both disadvantaged schools. Parents from both schools raise issues around reporting practices. Although both these schools value and have developed many enlightened policies in reporting practices which parents acknowledge and appreciate, there are still differences in the school's experience of what they do and in the parents' experience of the schools' practices. It is also important to add that there are within-school differences that the focus groups illuminated with different teachers giving slightly different messages. The main issues can be discussed under the following headings: a) parent-teacher meetings and the quality of information, b) fear of disturbing teachers' work, and c) variability within schools.

### **3.3.2.3 Parent-Teacher Meetings and the Quality of Information**

In many of the schools there is a consensus that the time available for the parent-teacher meetings is inadequate. The parent-teacher meeting (once a year in Oct/Nov) in both disadvantaged schools is viewed as rushed, and the information received is perceived as not helpful to them becoming helpful to their children. Those parents, in particular, expressed a desire to have more time with teachers and to

obtain more constructive information about how to support their children's learning:

*They could do one or two meetings in the year. Because the meeting is quick, about 5 minutes, so you're only getting a quick look at homework copies. If you're child is good enough, 5 minutes is fine, I have some where you would need 1/2 an hour. (Parent, School B)*

*I think there should be 2/3 of them a year. I find in October, November they've only just started school – so they still haven't got to know the child and what their capabilities are. They tell you in October but you don't know how well he's done in February. (Parent, School A)*

There is a general dissatisfaction with the structure and frequency of meetings in School B. Parents talked in the focus group of trying to manage the parent teacher meetings and one describes rushing around to different prefabs to meet teachers with younger children in tow and then having to queue for long periods. In addition they then have a very unsatisfactory meeting.

*Parent 1: Yeah, we did have one parent teacher meeting, but I was in and out. You queued for 1/2 an hour and were in and out in 5 minutes. And it was general, ok this, ok that. It really didn't give much, but there are so many in the class. But it would be good if you could do this with her, maybe to help reading, etc. I have no experience, I didn't know what to do with her, how to help her. 5 minutes of information isn't enough.*

*Parent 2: No. I was there for 3 or 4 minutes and it didn't give me any extra information. I know what she does, but not how to help her. (Parents, School B)*

This contrasts in particular with the experience of parents in School F, which conducts its parent teacher meetings over several weeks and allocates each parent a specific time slot, and with School D which is a small 2 teacher school. One gets a sense of large classes and few resources in School B:

*Parent 1: Yes, what you could do. I know time is very limited, there are a lot of pupils, that maybe each parent could sit down on their own day and have a 1/2 hour and get the information about what parents could do. To learn more about their day. Especially when it is your first child, you don't know how it all works.*

Parents in Schools A and B interpret the parent-teacher meeting as a forum in which to receive help from the teacher in order to help their child progress. They feel they did not get this kind of help. The meetings are perceived as too rushed and too short.

In School E there is a sense that there has been quite a lot of thought put into the quality of information parents receive about the working of the school, the school curriculum, and teaching approaches. There is a 'communication journal' which is used by parents and teachers for communicating notes about children's progress as well as events in the school. In addition there is a meeting at the beginning of the year to communicate to parents about the year and what the children will be learning.

*There is a meeting in September or early October for each class teacher and parents. Various aspects of school life are discussed- schoolwork, homework, the work scheme in question for each particular class, how subjects are taught (e.g. at infant level, how the teacher will go about teaching Irish), code of dress for school and sports etc. If parents have any questions, they can ask the teacher at this meeting. The meeting usually takes place*

*in the evening, around 7 or 8 o'clock so that both parents have the opportunity to come if they so wish. (Parent)*

In School A, the Traveller parent suggested that such a meeting would be very helpful for parents. The meeting described above does not assume that parents are familiar with the curriculum, teaching approach, content and so on. Research strongly emphasizes the need for quality information about teaching and learning to be communicated to parents (NCCA, 2006, 2007). In addition, AfL learning cultures focus on creating the learning conditions that improve student learning and engagement. In so doing students/parents get the kind of information that makes clear the incremental steps that students/parents/teachers can take to reach higher cognitive levels of educational engagement and outcome. Some of our parent interviews indicate that parents would welcome and benefit from greater levels of constructive feedback about their children, especially feedback that would direct them in very specific ways towards how they could support their child's learning.

#### 3.3.2.4 Fear of 'disturbing teacher's work'

In several of the schools, there was a difference in perception between parents and teachers regarding the perceived 'openness' of the school. In most schools, parents of children in the infant classes have the greatest daily contact with the school. Parents in School A for example felt that with younger children they had more informal contact. As children got older and especially if they had more than one child, they were less likely to be dropping off their children and therefore they missed the ongoing informal contact with teachers where they could get a sense of any problems or issues with their children. Even though parents said that there was 'an open door policy' in the school (a term that both principal and teachers used also) and they were constantly told by teachers and principal to come

to discuss any problems they had, they felt constrained by their feeling that they would be 'interrupting' or 'disturbing' the teachers. In this regard one parent in School A would welcome more scheduled meetings rather than be expected to initiate meetings herself:

*You want them to approach you rather than you going up to the school, you don't want to be prodding all the time 'how is my child doing?' If they brought that out from themselves a couple of times a year. (Parent, School A)*

In School A, which has a large minority of Traveller parents and which is very aware of the needs of Travellers, the Traveller mother used the verb 'disturbing' to describe how she would resist coming into school to address issues with the teachers.

*If you run into the teachers in the corridor they might say 'X is doing very well' and you might have a conversation for a minute or two, ...you don't want to have to come up to the teacher, you don't feel like you're **disturbing** the class if you're going up. (Emphasis added)*

Traveller parents' reluctance to attend parent teacher meetings may be interpreted by teachers as Travellers not being interested in school. This Traveller mother represents her own and other Traveller women's reluctance as stemming from something different. Later on in the focus group she addresses the fact that the report card comes in written form even though many of the Traveller women she knows have literacy problems.

*If the children were not up to speed, see a lot of the children will be coming from the Traveller community, where I am coming from myself, and a lot of parents can't read or write, so if there's reports going home, they can't read it anyways like.*

In addition, she talks about the fact that literacy problems were not picked up in another school with Travellers and then children dropping out of secondary school because of it:

*Because even girls in St X's at the other school, not this school, and touch wood, not mine. But the girls went through the whole primary school. And when they did their assessments in 6th class for the secondary, they weren't ready for it... Never picked up and like I have nieces who went up to secondary school, went to primary school, they were two years in secondary school, they fell out because they couldn't read from senior infants (Traveller parent, School A.)*

It was interesting in this focus group how settled parents were supportive of this Traveller parent's honestly saying it from her own community's point of view. One mother was clearly critical of this school's practice and viewed it as 'degrading':

*Because I think the school knows the parents that can read and can't read, you know. Don't they? ... So, I mean, maybe they should bring them in, instead of sending this. I mean that's, it's degrading to a person, to an adult that can't read as well. 'Why are they sending me these things, they know I can't read?'*

Although this Traveller parent was talking of a neighbouring school it brings an interesting perspective to the practice of sending report cards home to parents who do not read or write. In the case of parents with literacy difficulties schools need to consider how they accommodate their reporting needs. They may need to find ways of helping parents access the information in other ways.

In School B parents' ability to approach school if they have a problem or issues regarding their children's participation or

engagement with school is mediated by the physical constraints of having other younger children to take care of and not being able to visit the school for the informal meetings with teachers. They also are constrained by their children in senior classes apparently not wanting *mammys and daddys coming in* (School B).

The interpretation that they may be disturbing the teacher may be a cultural/class issue and is an issue raised in previous research (Connell, 1982; Lareau, 1987). Connell coined the term of working-class parents being 'frozen out' of school decision-making. Is there some way that these schools are inadvertently 'freezing out' parents or giving them unintentional messages about disturbing them?

Following is an excerpt from an interview in School A:

Interviewer: *So do you feel you get enough information about your child as a learner?*

Parent 1: *I think from discussing it here, we're actually not.*

Parent 2: *No, looking in hindsight, we're not. Unless we go and ask the questions ourselves.*

Parent 3: *Which you holdback doing, because you have this thing, 'oh, here she comes again'.*

Parent 2: *That's it.*

Parent 3: *And everybody fears that.*

In this excerpt it is implied that parents perceive that schools depend on them having the ability to 'ask the right questions'. However, working-class, poor and newcomer parents may not have the cultural knowledge to ask the right questions about their children's progress, learning and the decisions being taken that impact on future chances for learning. For the most part middle-class parents who have navigated school successfully have the cultural and social capital to be able to advocate, support, and challenge school procedures that do not make sense for their child as we already noted in chapter 1 (see

especially Lareau, 1987, Lynch, 2002). Schools need to be cognisant of this in the kind of information they give to parents and the assumptions they make about parents' ability to access and use information that will impact on a child's learning progress.

### **3.3.3 Variability within Schools: Children with SEN**

In the first section of the chapter it emerged that children with special educational needs experience greater levels of scrutiny and closer checks on the validity and reliability of assessments than their non-SEN peers. This greater attention was also evident in the parental interviews with parents who had children experiencing learning difficulties expressing greater satisfaction with their schools' reporting practices. This contrast was evident within School A and School B. This variability may be linked to the fact that children who are receiving learning support have more access to teacher's time and more resources in the form of learning support/resource teacher availability. In the following excerpt two parents have clearly different interpretations and experiences of school contact and reporting. Mary (not her real name) feels she does not get enough information because her child is not viewed as having problems. Kate whose child receives learning support feels she has plenty of information on her child's progress. They have different experiences of teacher availability and information received from school:

*Mary: Different teachers do different things*

*Kate: Different teachers yeah...*

*Mary: Although I think if a child isn't having any problems you wouldn't hear as much. So you would like to hear how good a child is doing as well as*

*Kate: I have heard plenty now. I haven't found that they didn't inform me.*

*Mary: I mean they are very approachable. I meant don't get*

*me wrong there. On an even keel that there's no complaints  
and nothing to worry about you wouldn't hear as much.*

In this excerpt Mary is clearly not satisfied with the quality of the information *I don't think they give a grade or anything – they just tell you their progress.* One gets a sense that a parent with a child on 'an even keel' or average child may not be getting as much specific information on progress as they would wish for. This school has a sophisticated process of tracking children's literacy/numeracy skills but in this effort the 'average' child may not be tracked as closely which this parent is picking up on. Kate whose child is receiving learning support feels she has plenty of information and access to help.

Another parent in School A described her son's teacher who has made himself available to parents every morning from 8.20 to 8.50 and has communicated that to them. This formal structure initiated by the teacher provided her with enough encouragement to come into the classroom space without any fear of 'disturbing the teacher.' This structure explicitly advocates and invites parental involvement:

*The other way is if there is ever any problem with a child in the school, the teacher will let you know that he wants to have a word with you, either at, Michael's teacher now, in particular, has informed me now that he is available every morning if I have a query or if I want to ask him anything. He's in the office at about 20 past 8, so I can go into him from 20 past 8 until 10 to 9, any morning of the week if I have any worries or...*

Similar issues on frequency of reporting and what is in the report are raised in school B. There is also some evidence of differences between teachers in the quality of the information given and different parents' ability to ask for a meeting with teachers. One

parent who has been in the school for 12 years feels very confident about asking for a meeting. The other parent believes that these meetings should happen for all parents. It is clear that these schools depend on parents to be able to ask for a meeting and to be able to raise the kind of questions that they need to raise in terms of their children's progress.

The meanings of parents' experiences and schools experiences of contact with school may diverge somewhat in terms of purpose, content and effectiveness. The 'open door' policies of schools and their reliance on 'oral informal contacts' may be insufficient to build the kind of reciprocal learning partnerships between parents and teachers that research demonstrates is an essential aspect of improving educational outcomes for students. In particular, it may be insufficient for low SES parents (Ryan, 1999, Epstein, 1996). Other research shows that most schools do not know the goals parents have for their children nor do they understand what kind of information is useful for parent in helping their children engage in learning (Epstein, 1996). These 'corridor' or 'on the run' conversations are most likely insufficient contexts for unpacking the meanings, goals, and needs of parents in becoming advocates, supporters, and partners with teachers in improving educational outcomes for children.

### **3.4 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

We will discuss the implications and recommendations arising out of the evidence presented in this chapter (and in Chapter 4) in more detail in Chapter 5. At this point we summarise the main findings from the case study data.

#### **3.4.1 Policy and Practice**

There is much conformity across the practice of preparing and dispatching school reports to parents with all our case study schools

adhering broadly to DES guidelines in relation to school reports and parent-teacher meetings.

Schools devote a relatively high level of professional attention to the production of accounts of learning of pupils with special educational needs and parents of these children seem to experience greater contact with schools and there is evidence that they are satisfied with their school's reporting arrangements.

The evidence presented attests to the perceived power of written reports to impact on parents and children and to impact on schools themselves. Schools seek to protect children, parents and indeed themselves from the potential effects of negative accounts of pupil progress. Teachers perceive the annual parent-teacher meeting to be a more significant reporting event than the school report since the former offers the opportunity to identify ways in which parents might support their child's learning.

Although mindful of standardised assessment results as they compile reports, schools do not usually report the actual results of such tests in their reports to parents either verbally or in writing. Practice on the use and reporting of standardised testing varies according to school and within the levels of the school with teachers in infant classes more likely to draw on evidence arising from observations and screening inventories and teachers of older pupils more likely to draw on standardised assessments.

The annual parent-teacher meeting, which typically occurs late in the first term, functions as a mechanism for passing on information to parents and identifying ways in which they might support their children as learners. It is mainly a one-way system of communication from the teacher to the parent. Some schools adopt highly flexible scheduling for these meetings to encourage both parents to attend to

facilitate working parents to come to the school. Parents are very appreciative of this initiative.

Schools identify linguistic diversity as a major challenge for them in the context of reporting to parents about their children's progress.

Schools tend to present their schools as places that are easily accessible to parents ('open door') and they present themselves as people who are in regular contact with them.

### 3.4.2 Outcomes and Experiences

Many children can fairly accurately predict their teachers' evaluations of their learning, thus confirming the stance adopted generally by schools that there should be 'no surprises' (for parents) in school reports.

Children voiced the desire for more information that would help them know what to do to improve hinting at their wish for greater specificity than they currently obtain. They also wish for a more comprehensive reporting in terms of topics covered (e.g. sport) and areas of development covered (social aspects).

How intellectually and emotionally significant reports of their learning are to children themselves may well be under-estimated by schools. The arrival of the school report and the occurrence of the parent-teacher meeting constitute important and vivid 'reporting episodes' in the lives of children.

It is likely that children would welcome and benefit from the opportunity to discuss such reports (whether school report or substance of parent-teacher meeting) with their teachers. Such conversations might usefully occur in the context of the more recent impetus for 'assessment for learning' in Ireland (NCCA, 2007). What is clear is that learners are eager to participate earnestly in discussions

of their learning, to have the opportunity to negotiate targets for their future achievement, and to reflect on factors influencing their learning. Taking account of this evidence could involve schools in greater attention to the purposes of reporting, particularly, the twin assessment purposes of assessment *for* and *of* learning.

One of the overarching findings from our interviews with parents was the appreciation of access to schools and teachers at times and in ways that fitted with their availability and concerns. Where schools adopted flexible and parent-friendly approaches to scheduling of meetings participation and satisfaction were both greater.

Our evidence points to social class as an influencing factor in understanding parents' ability to access teachers. There is a noticeable variation across parents' perceptions by school with parents from middle class backgrounds appearing to be more able to access the information they need about their children than their less well off peers in 'disadvantaged' catchments. For middle class parents the 'open-door' policy claimed by schools was not so problematic.

Even when schools adopted highly encouraging and flexible mechanisms for enabling parents communicate with teachers about their children's learning, parents themselves felt that they were unsure or unclear about how to support their children's learning.

Parents expressed uncertainty about the meanings of terms like 'fair' and the meanings of grades and numbers suggesting that they need greater opportunities to engage with teachers about their children's progress and in particular to have greater access to evidence and exemplification to indicate levels of achievement. They would appear to need more opportunities to consider the meanings of terms and numbers especially as these are used in school reports.

Most parents would appreciate more time and more flexible scheduling of parent teacher meetings with greater detail about how they might intervene to support the work of the school in promoting their children's learning.

While our evidence shows that very many parents value the opportunities they currently get to participate in dialogue with schools about their children's learning, there are challenges and implications that merit the attention of policy makers and schools. There are also related issues arising from the children's interviews. The main issues for consideration are:

- The limited opportunities some parents perceive they have for sustained and meaningful discussion with teachers about children's progress, particularly in relation to steps they can take to help their children.
- The desire on the part of children for greater participation in discussions concerning their learning.

Chapter 5 will discuss these challenges and their implications. The next chapter presents and analyses the quantitative data deriving from the questionnaire survey.



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**CHAPTER FOUR**

**SURVEY OF PRIMARY**

**SCHOOLS' REPORTING**

**PRACTICES - RESULTS<sup>11</sup>**

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<sup>11</sup> Dr. Elena Papanastasiou and David Dungalvin were additional authors on this chapter: Conway, Hall, Rath, Murphy, Papanastasiou, Dungalvin and McKeon.

## **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

*Maintaining reports as a meaningful part of school community life without over emphasis on them and not creating a situation where children and parents are comparing notes and creating a notion that standards of achievement in report cards are the ultimate goal in a child's school life. In simple terms creating a situation whereby the information is accessible to parents and teachers but not in any way a priority in the child's mind as part of school life. (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*I have found that having an open approachable and non-judgmental attitude is vital to proper relationships with parents. This is extremely important as its puts all reporting in a positive context (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*I would like reporting to concentrate on what a child can do and how we can help the child to move forward - perhaps setting targets for further learning. I would happily eliminate the grades and scores and would welcome reporting on the lines of a continuum (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

The above three quotations from school principals completing the online survey each point to important aspects of reporting. All three emphasise the principals' understanding of reporting in the context of the wider goal of schools in promoting children's learning. The first quotation, in particular, illustrates and the complex tensions inherent in schools' reporting practices vis-à-vis the need for transparency and communication between parents and teachers on children's progress in learning, yet mindful that report card results,

and related reporting practices, ought “not be in any way a priority in the child’s mind as part of school life”.

As we noted in the previous chapter, while there was considerable overlap in case study schools reporting practices, there was also considerable diversity in the ways in which schools undertake reporting to parents. In a similar fashion, the findings in this chapter point to a range of common practices but also to the diversity of practices. In reporting the survey findings, we discuss them in the context of relevant literature research and policy literature. In particular, we note findings that pertain to issues raised in key legislative and policy documents over the last number of years on assessment in primary education in Ireland, that is, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007); *Assessment in Primary Schools* (NCCA, 2005) and *Primary Curriculum Review* (NCCA, 2005). Specifically, in developing a school assessment policy, the NCCA has noted that, “schools must be guided by various legislative requirements” (2007, p. 95). Relevant legislation, as of late 2007, is as follows (NCCA, 2007):

- the Education Act (1998)
- the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003)
- the Equal Status Act (2000)
- the Education (Welfare) Act (2000)
- the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (2004)
- the Freedom of Information Acts (1997, 2003)

In presenting the survey findings, we also discuss these in terms of O’Donoghue and Dimmock’s (2002) four propositions’ developed

out of a study on school reporting to parent in Western Australia (as discussed in Chapter One). The four propositions provide a helpful set of reference points in that they address key aspects of reporting at the level of the school as a system, that is, leadership, learning, school communication and professional development. Following this introductory section, the report outlines findings of the nationally representative survey of primary schools under the following five headings:

- School reporting policies
- School practice on reporting: recording, report cards and other written communication
- School practice on reporting: parent-teacher meetings
- Reporting and learning: school composition and parental involvement
- School practice on reporting: Successes, challenges and priorities.

## **4.2 PROFILE OF SCHOOLS COMPLETING SURVEY**

### **4.2.1 Sample: Intended and Achieved**

A probability sample was used in this study. A probability sample is based on random selection, that is, a process which assures that the different units (schools in this case) from the population 3,292 schools in the country had an equal probability of being chosen. The use of a stratified random sample allows us to make inferences about the population based on the sample. That is, it can be said with 95% certainty that a particular figure (plus or minus the margin of error) is the case for the entire population of primary schools (Fowler, 2001). If the intended sample had been achieved, the margin of error would be plus or minus five percentage points. Since the achieved sample was 45% of the intended sample, the margin of error is plus

or minus eight percentage points. As such, 45% return represents a moderate response rate. Typically, mail surveys result in return/response rate of approximately 30%. Thus, the online survey proved moderately effective in terms of response rate given that 187 (45%) of the 412 schools selected in the stratified random sample out of the 3,292 primary schools completed the survey. As we noted earlier, this sample was derived from a database of primary schools available on the DES website (last updated in 2006 and the most up to date accessible data on primary schools). Like any social survey the current study has limitations. First, the study has a limited sample size. Second, the response rate is moderate. Third, the survey itself focused on a particular set of questions related to schools reporting to parents about children's learning in primary schools. Consequently, it is not possible to examine some relationships that may exist between aspects of teaching, learning and school's communication with parents about their assessment of children's progress in school.

Of the 187 schools that responded to the survey, 157 (84%) fully completed the questionnaire. Of those 187, 171 schools (92%) provided some information on school background (section 1). As such, 16 schools completed survey questions sections 2-7 and did not provide any information that allowed the research team to categorise these schools in terms of size, DEIS status or the school's location (the three stratification criteria), and other demographic data that could be used in comparing schools' responses to questions with another. A number of other schools - up to 24 on some questions - did not answer portions of the school profile questions. In reporting survey results at a descriptive level by item, we decided, in so far as possible, to use data provided by all 187 schools in response to each question to the extent that all schools responded to individual questions. However, where we undertook comparisons between how types of schools responded to particular items, we used data that allowed us to make comparisons between schools on relevant

demographic information. As the number of schools responding to various questions differs, we indicate the relevant sample data with tables, figures and related text in this chapter and elsewhere in the report. For example, if one hundred and seventy one schools responded to a particular question, we indicate this with n= 171 in the relevant table, figure or text.

**Table 4.1: Intended Sample vis-à-vis Population Data<sup>12</sup>**

STRATIFICATION	NUMBER SAMPLE	NUMBER POPULATION	% SAMPLE	% POPULATION
DEIS Urban Band 1	9	77	2%	2%
DEIS Urban Band 2	11	89	3%	3%
DEIS Rural Band 3	45	365	11%	11%
Not in DEIS	346	2761	84%	84%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>3292</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Enrollment <150	214	1700	53%	52%
>150 & <300	153	1235	37%	38%
Enrollment >300	44	357	11%	11%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>3292</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Boys	31	248	8%	8%
Girls	31	253	8%	8%
Mixed	349	2791	84%	84%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>3292</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>12</sup> Abbreviations used in the tables are as follows: n = number / count / frequency; M = mean / average; Max = maximum; Min = minimum; SD = standard deviation.

**Table 4.2: Intended and Achieved Sample**

STRATIFICATION	INTENDED SAMPLE	ACHIEVED SAMPLE	% INTENDED	% ACHIEVED
DEIS Urban Band 1	9	9	2%	5.9%
DEIS Urban Band 2	11	7	3%	4.6%
DEIS Rural Band 3	45	26	11%	17.0%
Not in DEIS	346	111	84%	72.5%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Enrollment <150	214	94	52%	55.6%
>150 & <300	153	51	37%	30.2%
Enrollment >300	44	24	11%	14.2%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Boys	31	12	8%	7.1%
Girls	31	17	8%	10.0%
Mixed	349	140	84%	82.8%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>411</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

#### 4.2.2 Sample: DEIS status and enrolment

Of the schools that responded (n=153) to the question about DEIS status, almost three quarters (72.5%, 111 schools) were not in the programme. The remaining 42 schools (27.5%) were in the DEIS programme and comprised of 9 Urban Band One, 7 urban Band Two and 26 Rural schools. As such, in terms of DEIS status (see Tables 1b and 2), the achieved sample over represents DEIS schools (16% in population and 27.5% in achieved sample) and under represents non-DEIS schools (84% in population and 72.5% in population). In terms of enrolment numbers in three categories (< 150, > 150 and < 300, > 300) the achieved sample slightly over represents small schools (52% in population and 55.6% in achieved sample for schools with less than 150 students), slightly under represents medium size schools (37% in population and 30.2% in achieved sample for schools with greater than 150 and less than 300 students). After consultation with an experienced survey statistician, given that the proportions in achieved and intended samples for the three stratification categories

were not that different, we decided not to utilise post-stratification weighting.

### 4.2.3 Sample: Language of instruction, school type and student diversity

Tables 1c, 1d and 2 and Figure 1 provide some additional information about the responding schools. For example, most schools were located in a rural (59.8%) rather than urban areas (40.2%). English (see Figure 1) is the language of instruction in 89% (n=167) of schools that responded, with Irish-medium Gaelscoileanna (5.4%) and Irish-medium Gaeltacht (6%) schools comprising the remainder. Nine out of ten schools (91.4%, 149 schools) are vertical (i.e. Junior Infants to 6th class), with the remainder comprising of Junior Schools (1.8%, 3 schools) and Senior Schools (6.7%, 11 schools) respectively. In relation to the number of students in the responding schools (n=170), the survey results are based on more than 27,000 students, 17,000 families, 350 traveller students and 1,900 students designated with special education needs (SEN). Finally, the majority of responding schools had a greater number of teaching (91 schools) rather than administrative (76 schools) principals.

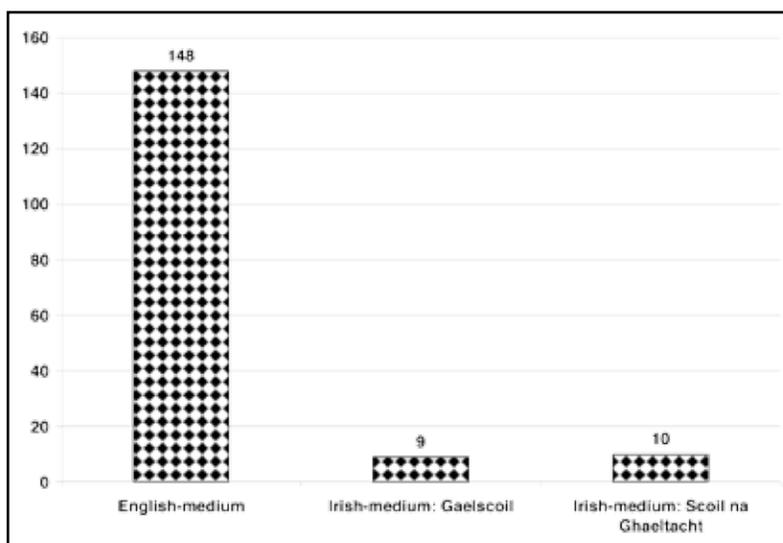
**Table 4.3: Location, language of instruction and student age range: summary data on achieved sample**

Classification	%	%
School location (n=169)	40.2 Urban (n=68)	59.8 Rural (n=101)
Language of instruction (n=168)	89.1 English (n=148)	5.4 Irish-medium: Gaeilscoil (n=9) 6.0 Irish medium: Scoil sa Ghaeltacht (n=10)
Age range (n=163)	91.4 Vertical school, i.e. Junior Infants to 6th class (n=149)	1.8 Junior School (n=3) 6.7 Senior School (n=11)

**Table 4.4: Number of student and families in achieved sample schools**

	Totals	By sub-group
Student numbers in sample schools	27,777 (n=170)	13,312 = Boys (n=160) 13,222 = Girls (n=162)
Families in sample schools	17,361 (n=159)	5.4 Irish-medium: Gaelscoil (n=9) 6.0 Irish medium: Scoil sa Ghaeltacht (n=10)
Number of Irish traveller students in schools	350 (n=165)	1,046 = No of families "who have difficulty communicating in English" (n=164)
Number of students designated with SEN	1,854 (n=161)	

**Figure 4.1: Language of Instruction**



Given the changing demographic structure of Irish society, it is not surprising that this is reflected in the students enrolled in the sample schools that provided relevant information. The changing ethnic make up of schools evident in the sample is important in beginning to understand some of the challenges schools may face in communicating with an increasingly diverse student body for schools in many parts of the country.

A number of trends are noteworthy (see Table 3). First, the vast majority of schools (84%, 139 out of 165) reported that 90% or more of their students are Irish. Second, about one in eight schools had 10–25% student population of ethnicities other than Irish (i.e. 10–25% Other). Third, almost 4% of schools (1 in 20) had more than 25% of students from ethnicity other than Irish, and all these schools (3 with 26–50%; and 3 with greater than 50%) are located in urban settings. Fourth, it is in urban settings that schools have the higher proportions of students from ‘other ethnicities’.

When asked to respond to the question: Please list the three largest ethnic groups in school in order 1, 2 and 3 (e.g. Irish, Polish, Nigerian), schools provided evidence of the current diversity in Irish primary schools with 36 different ethnicities noted by responding schools. The most frequently nominated ethnic backgrounds were: Polish (50 schools), English (25 schools) and Nigerian (18 schools).

### **4.3 SCHOOL REPORTING POLICIES**

*A whole staff course is needed. A school policy should probably be drawn up. Need for caution on over reporting for fear of future litigation. ‘The less said’*

(School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

*I would like more standardised assessment practices in this school. I can see that I need to do some work in discussing reporting with teachers.*

(School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

*Happy with what we are doing*

(School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

One of the distinctive changes in educational policy landscape in Ireland over the last decade has been the expectation that schools articulate policies in written form in relation to key aspects of school life. For example, the 1998 *Education Act* required schools to specify policies on a range of matters including how they cater for students with learning difficulties. Furthermore, the most recent ten-year social partnership agreement (*Towards 2016*) has highlighted the “importance of quality in schools, of school self-evaluation and of the role school development planning plays in both, is central to *Modernisation in the Education Sector* (SDPS website). In this context, schools have been and are developing written policy statements on a range school practices. The NCCA’s *Assessment in the Primary School* (2007, p. 66) handbook for schools notes that under the 1998 Education Act schools are required to prepare a school plan:

*The School Plan is a statement of the educational philosophy of the school, its aims and how it proposes to achieve them. It deals with the total curriculum and with the organisation of the school’s resources...* (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 8)

In the section on policy, principals responded to five questions about school policies and practices:

- Our school has a written policy statement on the use of report cards (Yes/No)
- Our school has a written policy statement on parent teacher meetings (Yes/No)
- Storage format of Report Cards
- For how long does your school store copies of the written report cards issued to parents

- Induction of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) vis-à-vis reporting policies and practices

### 4.3.1 Written policies

*Written policies on reporting and parent-teacher-pupil meetings.*

*Review of report card.*

(School Principal, Response to question about areas that school would like to prioritise vis-à-vis reporting practices)

Key findings in this section in relation to school policies (n=141) are organised under the following headings: written policy statements, storage of report cards and induction of newly qualified teachers (NQTs).

### 4.3.2 Written policy statements

- **WRITTEN POLICY STATEMENTS:** A majority of schools two thirds (67%) of schools have a written policy statement on parent-teacher meetings, whereas a minority, that is just over a quarter of schools (28%), reported that they have a written policy statement on the use of report cards.

### 4.3.3 Storage

- **STORAGE OF REPORT CARDS:** Almost all schools (99%) keep a paper copy of report cards, and 86% of these are stored by class group. Similarly, 83% also keep an individual cumulative record. Less than one in ten schools (9.6%) store report cards electronically.
- **STORAGE DURATION:** Almost half (43%) of schools keep report cards until the student is 21 years old. About a third (30%) of schools keep this information until the student leaves post-primary school, and less than a fifth (18%) keep records until the student leaves primary school.

In relation to written policy statements, there is a considerable difference between the number of schools with a written policy for parent teacher meetings (two in three schools) compared to those that have a written policy for report cards (just over one in four schools). The matter of how long report cards and the extent to which a more detailed pupil file are stored raises a range of policy and logistical matters. The NCCA has noted in its guidelines on primary school assessment (2007) that “schools store this information safely to facilitate access to it by former pupils at any stage until their twenty-first birthday” (p. 80) as this information could be requested by schools under the Data Protection (Amendment) Act, 2003. The finding that less than ten per cent of schools store report cards electronically raises the question as to how new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) might best serve the different phases of schools’ reporting functions from generating report card templates, sharing reports with designated colleagues in and outside of the school as a long term storage and their retrieval of report cards. In the context of teachers’ and schools’ role in gathering evidence to support reporting, the material gathered as part of a pupil file (e.g. class teacher’s notes, samples of student work and previous report cards).

#### **4.3.4 Induction of new teachers**

- **INDUCTION OF NQTs:** The majority, that is almost half of the schools (44%), reported that they utilise informal processes to induct NQTs in relation to school reporting policies and practices. Approximately a quarter (22%) induct NQTs about reporting primarily using written documentation and just over a quarter (29%) of schools use a designated teacher mentor to induct NQTs.

**Table 4.5: Induction for newly qualified teachers (n=141)**

	Rank	%	N
Informal information provided to NQTs by other teachers	1	55	103
Teacher designated to mentor NQTs re. reporting and parent-teacher meetings	2	36	67
Written documentation for NQTs about school's reporting policies and practice	3	30	56
Other	4	4	8

Three forms of communication are widely used in informing NQTs about reporting practices. Nevertheless, in relation to each mode of communication, a significant number of schools do not utilise these in the induction of NQTs.

In summary, research has highlighted the ways in which school leadership (see for example O'Donoghue and Dimmock, 2002) can and ought to play a key role in promoting a school-wide rather teacher-to-parent approach to reporting practices. Indicative of the school-wide dimensions of the school-wide dimension, is the issue of long term storage of report cards, which in light of the NCCA's 2007 guidelines on assessment, presents a challenges not alone for schools but system-wide in terms of the type of support, that is, technical advice on using ICTs for reporting as well as guidance on developing a school strategy for archiving and managing reporting data over an extended period (including guidelines on destruction of data beyond an identified time point).

#### **4.4 SCHOOL PRACTICE ON REPORTING: RECORDING, REPORT CARDS AND OTHER WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

This section of the survey asked schools to respond the following six questions:

1. What information (i.e., teacher notes, results of teacher made tests) does your school keep as part of each child's record of progress/achievement? (Tick all that apply)

2. What information does your enter onto each child's report card?  
(Tick all that apply)
3. Does your school provide written reports of children's progress to parents?
4. What information do teachers currently report to parents in the written report? (Please tick all relevant boxes)
5. What format is used on report cards? (Tick all that apply)
6. When are report cards sent to parents (Tick all that apply)

This section is organised under the following headings: recording, provision of report cards, report card content, when report cards are sent home and school practices to promote consistency in report cards and enhance parent understanding.

#### **4.4.1 Recording**

Key findings related to current recording were as follows:

- **RECORDING:** Schools reported that the teachers record a considerable range of information about children's achievement, learning and development.
- **RECORDING:** The information recorded by schools for internal use in school is similar across the majority of schools and class levels from Junior Infants to 6th class (see Table 4.6).
- **RECORDING EMPHASIS:** What schools record varies by topic (behaviour, attendance...etc.) rather than by class level (see Table 4.6). The majority of schools reported (between 55% and 75% depending on topic) that they record information about a range areas of children's learning and development: social and personal development (53-55% approx., 98 and 105 schools depending on class level), behaviour (60% approx., 111 to 118 schools

depending on class level), areas of learning difficulty and results of standardised tests (55–65% approx., 101–124 schools). Fewer schools (about 50%) record a mark of grade in each subject area between 1st and 6th class and a smaller number (approx. 25%) do so for Junior and Senior Infants. Results of more formal tests of student learning, that is, grades/marks based on teacher made tests as well as results of standardised tests, are typically recorded by three quarter of schools from second class onwards.

In light of the recent NCCA guidelines on assessment for primary schools, existing recording practices are of interest in that they provide a basis for informing professional development to support recording of various aspects of student learning and development across the primary education system. While almost all the recording categories provided were chosen by the majority of principals, nevertheless there are a significant number of schools that appear not to record information on a range of aspects of student learning and development. Accepting that a variety of evidence, based on valid and reliable recording, forms a necessary but not sufficient condition for quality use of report cards and good parent teacher communication, it would appear that there is scope for some schools to strengthen their recording practices.

**Table 4.6: Information kept as record of child's development achievement**

	Junior	Senior	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Social & Personal Development	101 56%	98 55%	98 55%	103 58%	104 58%	104 58%	103 58%	105 59%
Behaviour	113 63%	111 62%	111 62%	117 65%	118 66%	119 67%	119 67%	118 66%
Attendance	135 75%	131 73%	134 75%	141 79%	142 79%	141 79%	140 78%	140 78%
Grades or marks for each subject taught in each curriculum area	42 24%	46 26%	68 38%	76 43%	86 48%	88 49%	89 50%	90 950%
Areas of learning difficulty	101 56%	113 63%	118 66%	125 70%	126 70%	126 70%	125 70%	124 69%
Comments of learning, SEN, or resource teachers	85 48%	100 56%	108 60%	114 64%	115 64%	120 67%	118 66%	118 66%
Results/marks/grades of standardised tests (e.g. Drumcondra, MICRA-T, SIGMA-T)	61 34%	98 55%	133 74%	141 79%	143 80%	142 79%	141 78%	140 78%

#### 4.4.2 Provision of written report card

*Parent teacher meetings are invaluable. The report cards leave too much open to interpretation e.g. for me writing 'excellent' means a child has done the best they can. For others it means the results are excellent. I would much prefer report cards to have room for explanation rather than ticking a box which is why I prefer not to use the cards.*

(School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

*Discussion with parents is better than written reports unexplained.*

(School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

- **DOES YOUR SCHOOL PROVIDE A WRITTEN REPORT?:**  
Five out of six schools (84%) provide a written report with just under one in six (16%) of schools that responded to this item reporting that they did not provide a written report of children's progress to parents. One hundred and fifty two schools (152 with missing data from 35 schools) responded to this item.
- **RURAL v URBAN DIVDE IN REPORT CARD PROVISION:** Cross-tabulation of location and whether schools send report cards home or not indicated that rural schools are significantly less likely to do so than urban schools ( $\chi^2 = 6.09$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). That is, one in four rural schools do not send a report card home, compared to one in twelve urban schools. Conversely, three out of four rural schools send a report card home compared to eleven out of twelve urban schools.

The vast majority of schools provide written report cards to parents. However, a significant minority do not. From the perspective of the number of children in primary schools (based on DES figures for 2005/06), 16% of schools corresponds to 75,000 students. Taking into account the margin of error (plus or minus eight points), we can estimate that between 8% and 24% of parents, that is, the parents of between 37,500 and 112,500 children may not be receiving report cards. These parents' lack of access to written report cards on their children's progress in school limits their opportunities to actively engage in their role of supporting children as learners, as well as their capacity as citizens to fully engage with and utilise an important public service in society. Furthermore, from the child's perspective children whose parents do not receive a report card miss out on an important 'reporting episode' in the dynamic relationship between schools, children and parents. As we noted in the context of the case study interviews with children, they recalled the arrival and reading of report cards in vivid detail and for many children the advent of

the report card home brought recognition (e.g. from parents, grandparents), affirmation and rewards (e.g. trips, toys, clothes...etc.). As noted in the two quotations opening this section, some schools who do not complete report cards may provide other opportunities for parents to hear about their child's learning and development and engage with teachers in supporting the learning process. It seems that some schools (as indicated in the first quotation above), given what they see as the limitations of unexplained report cards to convey important issues to parents, may have decided to focus on parent teacher meetings and other school-to-home communication as the focus of their reporting practices.

#### **4.4.3 Report card content**

*Sometimes it is far easier to report a weakness orally. Teachers are very slow to write about a child's weakness.*

(School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

- **REPORT CARD CONTENT:** The majority of schools (more than 2 in 3) reported that they communicate information on report cards in three areas of children's learning and development: social and personal development, behaviour and attendance (see Table 4.7). Fewer schools (between 33% and 50%) communicate on the report card about marks/grades in each curriculum area. Similarly, in relation to communicating on the report card about standardised tests a smaller number of schools, that is, one in three schools do so (approx. 33%).

**Table 4.7: Information entered on child’s report card (count & percent)**

	Junior	Senior	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Social & Personal Development	110 62%	110 62%	113 63%	120 67%	119 67%	118 66%	118 66%	117 65%
Behaviour	114 64%	115 64%	118 66%	124 69%	126 70%	126 70%	125 70%	125 70%
Attendance	110 62%	111 62%	113 63%	120 67%	121 68%	121 68%	120 67%	120 67%
Grades or marks for each subject taught in each curriculum area	46 26%	50 28%	63 35%	73 41%	85 48%	86 48%	86 48%	86 48%
Areas of learning difficulty	92 51%	98 55%	106 59%	111 62%	114 64%	114 64%	113 63%	113 63%
Comments of learning, SEN, or resource teachers	42 26%	52 29%	58 32%	64 36%	63 35%	64 36%	62 35%	64 36%
Results/marks/grades of standardised tests (e.g. Drumcondra)	30 17%	41 23%	57 32%	63 35%	62 35%	64 36%	64 36%	64 36%

Report cards exhibit a strong similarity across class levels in with more schools including information on social-personal development, behaviour, attendance and areas of learning difficulty than in relation to more formal report content such as marks/grades, tests results as well as comments from teachers other than the class teacher. The pattern of report card content evident here suggests that there is scope for great use of narrative and numerical summaries of student learning and achievement on report cards. Broadfoot (1990), in critiquing the use of vague terminology on report cards and the lack of links to standards (also see O’Donoghue and Dimmock, 2002) noted that report cards often are couched in language and phraseology that has a high ‘fog rating’.

#### 4.4.5 When are report cards sent home?

**Table 4.8: When schools report to parents using the written report (frequency)**

	During School Year		At End of Year		By Appointment	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Progress in subjects or curriculum areas	47	26	113	63	43	24
Social and personal development	46	26	109	61	43	24
The child's strengths as a learner	54	30	105	59	40	22
Areas of learning difficulty	62	35	107	60	55	31
Areas of particular achievement	54	30	100	56	35	20
Children's active participation in class work	51	29	104	58	37	21
Difficulties related to homework completion	56	31	89	31	55	31
Results of standardised tests	30	17	42	24	54	30
Ideas to help parents support their child's learning	53	30	69	39	51	29
Child's own input or comments	51	29	14	8	18	10

- **TIMING OF WRITTEN REPORTS CARDS:** Most information is given to parents at the end of the year. School reports appear to be sent to parents at the end of the year with the greatest frequency. Report cards are twelve times more likely to be sent at the end of the school year than mid-year. The exception is standardised test results which are given by appointment (this was evident also in the case studies). This is supported by results in Table 4.7 which indicate that standardised tests are included on report cards by about a third of schools.
- **REPORT CARD FORMAT:** In terms of the type of report card, approximately two out of three schools use a commercially produced report card and the remaining one third (except for a 1-2% depending on class level) use a school-produced report card.

That the end of the school year is the time when report cards are sent supports the hypothesis that they are primarily summative rather than formative in function and intent. That is, if report cards are sent in late June to parents they are likely to create context for parent-child communication that is more retrospective than prospective. Furthermore, unless the child has the same teacher the following year it is unlikely that parents/guardians or children will have an opportunity to interact with the class teacher on issues noted in the report card. In relation to report card format, we have included examples of commercially- and school-produced report cards in the Appendix 2.

#### **4.4.6 Communicating about and supporting understanding of report cards and standardised tests**

*CONSISTENCY IN THE USE OF GOOD, FAIR ETC. Good attendance means the child lost between 5-10 days all year. 70% + equals excellent. This means that there will be consistency between the teachers. (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*We use comments and not grades and differentiating between excellent and very good can be very problematic for us if all teachers don't buy into the agreed criteria!! (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

- **STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING SHARED MEANING:**  
Almost two thirds of schools (62%) employ procedures to support grading consistency. Of these strategies, all staff meeting and agreeing on terms used in the report card occurs in 45% of schools. In a small number of schools teachers meet at class level to discuss this (8%), and some have a school document which outlines terms that should be used in report cards (10%). The issue of shared meaning was one of the key issues raised by

teachers, principals and parents in the case studies. In this section of the survey, schools indicated that the majority employ at least one procedure to support the development of shared meaning in relation to terminology on report cards. Nevertheless, a significant minority of schools so not have any procedure to support the development of shared meaning. As such, there appears to be scope for schools to strengthen this aspect of reporting practice as it is at the core of professional judgement component of assessment (Harlen, 2006). The NCCA's recent assessment guidelines provides a context in which teachers may have greater opportunities to develop shared meaning as they draw upon a range of assessment evidence from across the continuum of assessment from child- to teacher- led assessment tasks (p. 13).

- **HELPING PARENTS UNDERSTAND STANDARDISED TESTS RESULTS:** Almost two out of three schools (62%) reported that teachers discuss results of standardised tests with parents at parent teacher meetings, and just under two out of five (37%) also reported that learning support, SEN or resource teachers might also discuss tests results with parents (see Table 4.8). In less than quarter of schools principals discuss tests results with parents.

**Table 4.9a: How does your school help parents understand standardised tests (tick two)**

	N	%	Rank
Class teacher talks to parents during parent teacher meeting	126	62	1
Learning Support/SEN/Resource Teacher talk to parents	73	37	2
Principal talks to parents	36	24	3
Report includes a note or table explaining tables	13	19	4
Note or explanation on school website	0	1	5

Two key principles noted in the NCCA 2007 guidelines on assessment for primary schools vis-à-vis reporting standardised tests results was that this be undertaken in the context of other evidence about the child’s learning and that it be reported in an intelligible manner. The communication of such test results in an intelligible manner implicates both narrative and numerical summaries of student achievement (NCCA, 2007, p. 62). The recent publication of support material for parents vis-à-vis interpretation of standardised tests in the context of their child’s progress more broadly as a learner is likely to change the nature of conversations for all involved in discussing standardised tests (see NCCA leaflets for parents about reporting on standardised tests – available online at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)).

- **INFORMATION ABOUT TEST RESULTS:** The majority of schools indicated standardised test results are explained verbally at parent teacher meetings by the class teacher (62%) (See Table 4.9). STEN scores and percentiles are used by 41% and 30% respectively with standard scores (16%), written notes (9%), raw scores (7%) and used much less frequently.

**Table 4.9b: What kind of information is shared and how does your school help parents to understand standardised tests?**

	N	%	Rank
Verbally at PT meetings	125	67	1
STEN	77	41	2
Percentile	56	30	3
Standard scores	30	16	4
Written	16	9	5
Raw score	14	7	6

**Table 4.9c: Overview of concepts associated with standardised test scores**

NAME OF SCORE	WHAT THE SCORE MEANS
Raw score	This is a simple count of the number of items for which the child has supplied correct answers. It is of little use in reporting on a child's performance.
Standard score	Standard scores are transformations of raw scores, and usually range between 55 and 145, with an average of 100.
Percentile rank	The percentile rank indicates the percentage of the relevant class or age group which has scored equal to or lower than this child's score. It does not mean the percentage of test items the child answered correctly.
Sten score	Sten scores are a ten-point scale with 1 representing the lowest category and 10 the highest. These are derived from standard scores.

SOURCE: NCCA, 2007, p. 61

- **USE OF STUDENT JOURNALS/DIARIES FOR REPORTING:** seven out of eight schools (87%) of schools reported that teachers use student journals or diaries to report to parents.
- **USE OF BEHAVIOUR REPORTING SYSTEM:** Two out of five schools (42%) operate a behaviour reporting system.

Cross-tabulations indicated that there was not a statistically significant relationship between schools that employed a behaviour reporting system and schools' DEIS status (coded as in DEIS or not in DEIS) ( $\chi^2 = 1.46$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.23$ ). However, cross-tabulation indicated that there is a significant relationship between the use of a behaviour reporting system and school location ( $\chi^2 = 4.62$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Whereas one in two urban schools employ a behaviour reporting system, only one in three rural schools do so. Allied with the earlier finding that urban schools are significantly more likely to send a report card home (see section 4.4.2), it appears that there are significant differences in some key aspects of reporting practice between urban and rural schools. Specifically, urban schools are more likely to utilise two formal written reporting procedures (sending

report cards home and behaviour reporting system) compared to rural schools. This difference is hard to explain but may be due to the fact that most rural schools are smaller than urban schools and informal reporting channels may be stronger in such settings.

- **SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT REPORTING SYSTEMS:** When asked how much they agree on a scale of 1 to 5 with the following statement; ‘overall, we are pleased with our current policies in reporting to parents’ most schools strongly agreed.

#### **4.4.7 Linguistic diversity and reporting to parents**

- **COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS WHOSE FIRST LANGUAGE IS NOT ENGLISH:** When asked on a scale from 1 to 5 (strongly agreed) how they agreed with the following statements: ‘In this school, the parents of ‘new’ immigrants provide a significant communication challenge since their first language is not English’ most teachers agreed ( $m = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ).
- **COMMUNICATING WITH IMMIGRANT PARENTS WHOSE FIRST LANGUAGE IS ENGLISH:** When asked on a scale from 1 to 5 (strongly agreed) how they agreed with the following statements: ‘In this school, the parents of ‘new’ immigrants provide a significant communication challenge since their first language is not English’; and ‘In this school, even when parents of ‘new’ immigrants speak English, communication challenges often arise due to differences in dialect and idiomatic use of English’ most teachers agreed ( $m = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ).
- **STRATEGIES USED TO COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS WHO DO NOT SPEAK ENGLISH:** A substantial number of schools ask a primary aged student to communicate and the majority as another parent/adult from that community to

communicate, as can be observed in Table 4.10 in terms of most frequently used strategies with requesting parents or another adult speaking that language to act as an interpreter as the most frequently used strategy followed by asking children (of primary age) to translate.

**Table 4.10: In order to improve communication with parents who do not speak English the school has in the past year used the following strategies**

	Rank	N
Asked a parent or other adult from that language community who speaks English to translate	1	54
Asked student (of primary age) from that language community who speaks English to translate	2	32
Asked student (of post-primary age) from that language community who speaks English to translate	3	7
Ask an Irish-trained teacher who speaks one or more required languages to assist in communicating with parents	4	7
Ask a non-Irish trained teacher who speaks one or more required languages to assist in communicating with parents	5	6

#### 4.4.8 Fostering parental involvement

As noted earlier, we included items on how schools promote parental involvement in children's learning as a means of understanding reporting practices in this wider school context.

- COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS: A range of practices for involving parents are employed by over 90% of schools: schedule individual meetings with parents of students who are having difficulty learning in school; give families information on how to contact their child's teacher at school; Regularly assign students homework that requires them to talk with a family member; offer parents or students library books to use at home; Inform parents and students of progress and problems in student diary/journal. Scheduling individual meetings with parents is

perceived as the most effective way to share information with parents and involve them in their child's learning ( $m = 3.86$ ). Least effective are workshops organised for parents during the daytime/school hours ( $m = 2.28$ ). Also, considered very ineffective are requests to parents to tutor/support students in the classroom ( $M = 2.32$ ).

**Table 4.11: Ways in which school shares information with and promote parental involvement**

	% used	M
School provides information leaflet to all families on school policies and practices	57	3.67
School and/or Parents' Association produces newsletter for families	84	3.48
Organise after school/evening meetings for parents on the primary curriculum and learning expectations	46	2.94
Conduct workshops for parents on curriculum areas and expectations during the daytime or school hours	17	2.28
Schedule individual meetings with parents of students who are having difficulty learning in school	99	3.86
Give families information on how to contact their child's teacher at school	97	3.66
Issue certificates of achievement for students to take home that recognize their progress	66	3.33
Request parent to tutor/support students in the classroom	19	2.32
Invite parents and the community to school for student awards	46	2.89
Offer parents or students library books to use at home	96	3.60
Regularly assign students homework that requires them to talk with a family member	93	3.54
Offer videotapes on learning (e.g. literacy) that families can view at school or at home	49	2.94
Offer students and families curriculum-related activities learning activities/clubs after school	42	2.86
Involve parents of different backgrounds in various home-school activities	54	3.04
Organise visits to school by members of wider community	89	3.54
Inform parents and students of progress and problems in student diary/journal	96	3.70

SOURCE: Sheldon and Epstein, 2005 Note: 0 = not at all effective / very effective = 4 3.70

#### 4.4.9 Satisfaction with and redesign of report cards

This section of the survey asked schools to respond the following items their satisfaction with and ideas for re-designing report cards.

- **SATISFACTION WITH REPORT CARDS:** teachers are satisfied with current report cards
- **REPORT CARDS:** input by learning support/SEN/resource teacher should be included in report cards
- **TEACHER SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT REPORT CARDS:** When asked on a scale of 1 to 5 (very satisfied) to indicate their level of satisfaction with current report cards, most teachers gave a positive response ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ).
- **REDESIGNING REPORT CARDS:** When asked to indicate what themes would schools include if designing report cards, most felt strongly the space for input by learning support/SEN/resource teacher should be included. Also, as can be seen from Table 4.12, many felt that space for student comment or an online version would not be utilised.

**Table 4.12: Themes your school would include if you were designing report cards for parents?**

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Space for student comment	131	0	4	1.85	1.147
Space for parent comment	134	0	4	2.45	1.161
More space for comment on areas such as art, PE, drama	137	0	4	2.63	1.007
Space for input by learning support, SEN or resource teacher	140	0	4	3.36	.787
Create an online version that parents could check on the web	132	0	4	1.69	.974

Note: 0 = never include / 4 = always include

## **4.5 SCHOOL PRACTICE IN REPORTING: PARENT-TEACHER MEETINGS**

*The contact between school and home is critical to the development of the child. The time for it is a critical issue as it must not take from teaching time. Sending written reports without face to face follow up contact with parents is not very effective. (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*As we are a small school we find that we see the parents each day and are therefore able to talk to them in an informal manner about their child. Thus the parents are always well informed to how their children are doing at school both socially and academically. (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*Meetings much more effective than written reports. (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*No appointment no meeting - Due to our increased pupil numbers and in an effort to avoid the erosion of class teaching time (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

*Most parents are generally positive when they receive reports from the teachers. Parents know that the teachers have the best interests of the children at heart and would like to see them achieve their full potential. Parents are generally receptive to constructive comment by the teachers. (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)*

This section of the survey addressed the following issues:

- Whether children are included when meeting with their parents at parent-teacher meetings
- Who attends parent-teacher meetings
- Evaluation of how parents respond to hearing about aspects of their children's learning and development at parent-teacher meetings

#### **4.5.1 Parent-teacher meetings: Who and when?**

- WHO ATTENDS PARENT TEACHER MEETINGS: it is mothers rather than father or both parents that attend parent-teacher meetings.
- SHOULD CHILDREN ATTEND PARENT-TEACHER MEETINGS: A minority of schools (8%) thought that children should participate at parent-teacher meetings.

Not surprisingly, it is mothers rather than fathers alone, or both parents that attend parent teacher meetings. This finding points to often taken for granted cultural dimensions of school-home dynamics in which mothers (more so than fathers) are involved in the emotional care work vis-à-vis children's learning and development in school. As O'Brien (2007) notes, based on her study of mothers supporting their young adolescents in the transition from primary to post-primary education, "mothers, irrespective of their differences, are subject to a moral order of care that necessitates the performance of a great deal of emotional work" (p. 159). As such, while we in this report tend to use the term parents vis-à-vis the micro-politics of reporting (as the education field does typically), yet most of the reporting to parents is in fact reporting to mothers – especially in the case of parent-teacher meetings.

**Table 4.13: Who usually attends parent-teacher meetings?**

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Mother attends	148	3	4	3.99	.116
Father attends	147	1	4	2.97	.619
Both parents attend	150	1	4	2.83	.689
Grandparent attends	142	1	3	1.58	.633
Pupil attends with parent	145	1	4	1.50	.800

Note: 0 = never, 4 = always

#### 4.5.2 Principals' views of parent reaction to parent-teacher meetings

*That some teachers won't tell the negatives. Tend to be 'too nice' to avoid conflict. Some parents only want to hear the good news. More parents won't accept that 'their child' can misbehave. 'Show me the evidence'!* (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

*Occasionally parents are very reluctant to accept the possibility that a child may have a particular difficulty. In a small community there can be fear of a stigma attaching to this and the child being identified as being different.* (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

*Ensuring that parent kept informed without alarming them in cases where child has severe educational needs. Getting time with the few parents who make decision not to visit the school.* (School Principal, Response to open-ended item on survey)

**Table 4.14: Parents' reactions to hearing about different aspects of their child's learning and development**

	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Hearing about their child's social and personal development	150	3	5	4.25	.695
Hearing about child's strengths as a learner	149	3	5	4.64	.510
Hearing about child's learning difficulties	148	2	5	3.57	.800
Hearing about their child's progress in subjects or curriculum areas	150	3	5	4.28	.687
Hearing about ideas to help their child learning	148	0	5	4.36	.739
Hearing about difficulties related to homework completion	148	0	5	3.55	.890
Hearing about their child's contentment at school	149	0	5	4.43	.799
Hearing about their child's active participation in class work	149	0	5	4.46	.712

0 = very negative / 5 = very positive

- PARENT RESPONSE AT PARENT-TEACHER MEETINGS:**  
 Parents respond positively to information shared concerning their child's learning and development, even if this information is negative. When at the meeting, Table 4.14 indicates that most parents respond in a positive fashion about all information shared concerning their child's learning and development ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 0.51$ ). Parents respond least favourably to hearing about difficulties related to homework completion ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ).

## **4.6 REPORTING AND LEARNING: SCHOOL COMPOSITION, PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE INVOLVEMENT AND SCHOOL EFFICACY**

### **4.6.1 Reporting, learning and school organisational practices**

In order to address the question as to 'how are school organisational practices (e.g. Reporting and parental involvement among many

others) related to each other and to prediction of principals' perceptions' that their school can impact student learning, the interrelationships between a range of observed and latent variables were analysed. In order to contextualise this analysis, we draw on the now extensive literature on efficacy which links perceptions of individual and collective efficacy with student learning (Bandura, 2000). Teaching efficacy represents consequential beliefs teachers and principals hold individually and collectively about the extent that they can impact student learning. As such, in this study its use provides an important conceptual and methodological link to student learning.

Ross et al (2004), drawing on recent studies of collective efficacy in schools, define collective teacher efficacy as 'teachers' perceptions that they constitute an effective instructional team, capable of bringing about learning in students" (Goddard, Hoy and Hoy, 2000, p. 480). As such, efficacy in the context of teachers or other educators' work can be conceptualized as perceptions about the impact of teaching on student learning. They cite previous research which has demonstrated that a school staff with a strong sense of collective efficacy is likely to generate high student achievement (Goddard, Hoy and Hoy, 2000). Ross et al's study of 2,170 teachers in 141 elementary schools used structural equation modelling to examine the antecedents of collective teacher efficacy. Their study found that prior student achievement in grade 6 mathematics predicted collective teacher efficacy, and that school processes which promoted teacher ownership of school directions (shared school goals, school-wide decision making, fit of plans with school needs, and empowering principal leadership) had an even stronger influence on collective teacher efficacy than prior student achievement. Ross et al's study is significant in that it points to the central role played by school processes (of which we might hypothesize parental involvement strategies as well as reporting practices are a part) in collective teacher

efficacy. For the purposes of this study on reporting, the choice of principals' perceptions of school efficacy as outcome variable allowed us to analyse relationships between schools' composition, school's strategies to promote parental involvement, schools' perceptions of the effectiveness of these involvement and related reporting practices and principals' perceptions of school efficacy. In assessing principals' perceptions that their schools can impact student learning we included 12-item (see Survey: Section 6 Impact on Learning) collective efficacy measure which has in previous studies demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach alpha > 0.90) (Goddard, 2002). In our study the Cronbach alpha for the 12item scale was more moderate at 0.75 but nevertheless sufficiently high to treat it as a scale. Measures of parental involvement were based on items in two 16-item questionnaires (see Survey: Section 5) used by Sheldon and Epstein (2005). The parental involvement questionnaire has sixteen items on parental involvement and effectiveness of these parental involvement strategies. In our study the Cronbach alpha was moderate but acceptable in both instances (0.64 for the Involvement; and 0.72 for Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Parental Involvement Strategies).

#### **4.6.2 Structural equation models**

For the purpose of this analysing the relationships between reporting practices and wider parental involvement in this study, the data were analyzed with the use of the structural equation modelling software AMOS 16. Structural equation modelling (SEM) is a statistical technique that can be used in theory development because it enables researchers to both propose and test theories about the interrelationships among variables in multivariate settings (Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides, 1990). The use of such models is especially helpful since it allows simultaneous examination of multiple relationships without the concern of inflated alpha estimates. Some

additional advantages of SEM include the reduction of measurement error by including multiple indicators per latent variable, the ability to acknowledge and model error terms, as well as the ability to concurrently test overall models rather than individual coefficients. The structural equation model was analyzed with the maximum likelihood estimation. The maximum likelihood estimation was preferred to that of the generalised least squares estimation since it leads to less biased parameter estimates and more accurate fit indices (Olsson, Foss, Troye, and Howell, 2000).

The first step in examining the results of the SEM analyses includes the examination of the fit criteria, to determine whether the hypothesized model fits the data. The eight fit indices were taken into consideration were those of the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ), the chi square divided by the degrees of freedom ratio ( $\chi^2/df$ ), the Normed Fit Index (NFI), the Relative Fit Index (RFI), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The cut-off criteria for the fit indices were based on Hu and Bentler's cut-off criteria (1999) (Table 1).

With the exception of the Relative Fit Index (RFI=0.808), which was below 0.90, the rest of the indices fit the data quite well. More specifically, the chi-square statistic was non significant ( $\chi^2_{28}=30.668$ ,  $p=0.332$ ) indicating that there were no significant differences between the data and the model. The  $\chi^2/df$  also indicated a good fit since its value was less than 2.5 ( $\chi^2/df=1.095$ ).

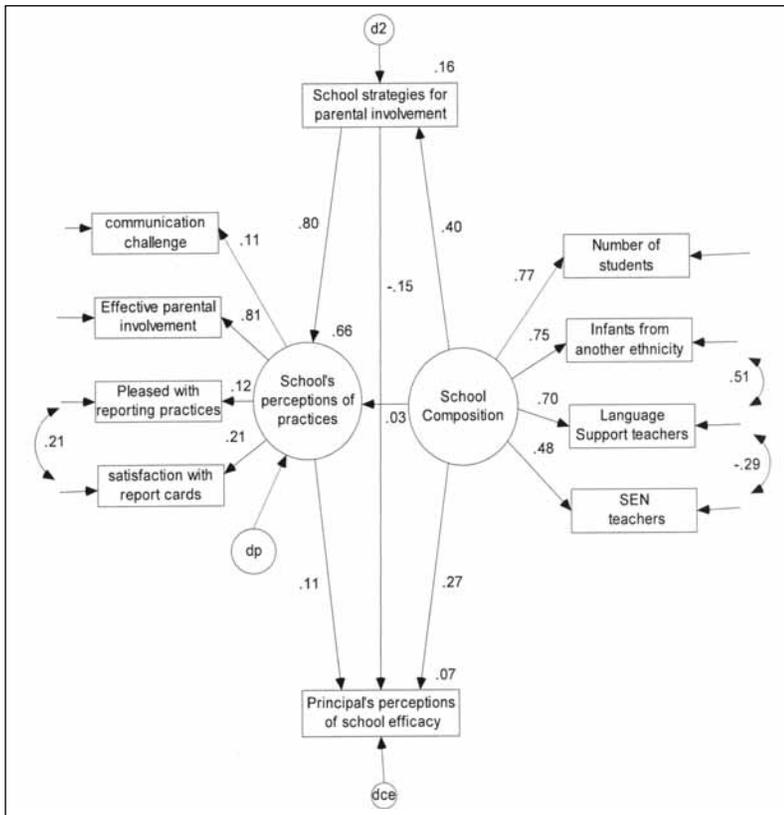
The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA=0.023) had a good fit since according to Hu and Bentler its values were equal or less than 0.06. The Normed Fit Index (NFI=0.902), the Incremental Fit Index (IFI=0.991), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI=0.990), as well as the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI=0.980) had all

desirable values since indices whose values fall between 0.90 and 0.94 indicate a good fit, while indices equal or higher than 0.95 indicate a very good fit.

**Table 4.15: Fit indices of the structural model**

	Values
$\chi^2$	30.668 (p=0.332)
$\chi^2/df$ ratio	1.095
CFI	0.990
IFI	0.991
NFI	0.902
RFI	0.808
TLI	0.980
RMSEA	0.023

Since the fit of the model has been established, the parameter estimates can then be examined and interpreted. The standardised parameter estimates of the model are presented in Figure 4.2 below. These parameters indicate the amount by which each endogenous (dependent) variable would change for every standardised unit of change of an exogenous (independent) variable. In addition, the numbers located on the top right side of each endogenous variable reflect the proportion of the variance of that variable that is explained by the model ( $R^2$ ).



**Figure 4.2: Influence of school social composition, parental involvement perceptions of effectiveness of parental involvement strategies and reporting on principals' perceptions of school efficacy**

The standardised and unstandardised regression weights, along with their standard errors are presented in Table 4.16. According to this mode, only 7% of the variance of the principal's perception of school efficacy were explained. This small percentage was mainly explained by the 'school composition' latent variable ( $\beta=0.275$ ,  $p=0.20$ ). This indicated that schools which had larger numbers of students, including infants from other

ethnicities, as well as more language support and SEN teachers were more likely for their principals to indicate higher levels of school efficacy. The school composition variable also helped explain 16% of the variable 'school strategies for parental involvement'. So again,

schools with larger compositions (larger numbers of students, including infants from other ethnicities, more language support and SEN teachers) were more likely for their principals to indicate that the schools have more strategies for parental involvement ( $\beta=0.401$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). In turn, schools with more strategies for parental involvement had higher levels of 'school's perceptions of practices' ( $\beta=0.802$ ,  $p=0.208$ ).

Some of the correlations from this model that were also statistically significant are the following; principals who reported that they were pleased with the school's reporting practices were also satisfied with the school's report cards ( $r=0.213$ ,  $p=0.016$ ). Also, as expected, schools that had a larger intake of infants from other ethnicities also had more language support teachers ( $r=0.514$ ,  $p=0.013$ ). Finally, schools with more language support teachers had fewer SEN teachers ( $r=-0.287$ ,  $p=0.002$ ).

The model presented in Figure 4.2 also includes three other paths that have no statistical significance based on the results of this dataset. First, the school composition has no effect on the school's perceptions of practices. Second, the 'school's perceptions of practices' have no effect on the principal's perceptions of school efficacy. Finally, the results show that the 'school strategies for parental involvement' variable also has no effect on the principal's perceptions of school efficacy. Therefore, overall only 7% of the variance of the 'principal's perceptions of school efficacy' is accounted for by the specific model. Consequently, different types of variables should also be examined in order to determine the variables that can help explain school efficacy.

**Table 4.16: Standardized and Unstandardized path coefficients**

			Standardized estimates	Unstandardized estimate	P-value
School composition	→	SEN teachers	.484	1.000	*
School composition	→	Number of students	.765	91.095	0.000
School composition	→	Intake of infants of another ethnicity	.750	5.414	0.000
School composition	→	Language support teachers	.697	.646	0.000
School's perceptions of practices	→	Pleased with reporting practices	.122	1.000	*
School's perceptions of practices	→	Effective parental involvement	.812	72.663	.208
School's perceptions of practices	→	Satisfaction with report cards	.207	2.121	.223
School's perceptions of practices	→	Communication challenge	.108	1.566	.417
School's perceptions of practices	→	Principal's perceptions of school efficacy	.133	5.855	.758
School strategies for parental involvement	→	School's perceptions of practices	.802	.022	.206
School strategies for parental involvement	→	Principal's perceptions of school efficacy	-.148	-.212	.628
School composition	→	Principal's perceptions of school efficacy	.275	.945	.020
School composition	→	School's perceptions of practices	.025	.002	.852
School composition	→	School strategies for parental involvement	.401	.966	0.000
Measurement error (pleased with reporting practices)	↔	Measurement error (satisfaction with report cards)	-.287	-.481	.002
Measurement error (other ethnicity infants)	↔	Measurement error (language support teachers)	.514	2.277	.013
Measurement error (language support teachers)	↔	Measurement error (SEN teachers)	.213	.106	.016

\* The paths for which no p-value is included are the paths which were set to 1 for creating the scale of the latent variables.

The structural equation modelling analysis, as we noted earlier, provides a means of analyzing the inter-relationship of numerous variables simultaneously. Given that the reporting as practice emerged as a process closely linked and experienced by parents as part of their overall relationship with schools, analysis of school composition, parental involvement strategies, perceptions of effective parental involvement and reporting strategies and their potential impact on principals' perceptions of school's efficacy (i.e. potential impact on student learning) facilitated analysis of links between dimensions of reporting of relevance to educational policy. In the context of understanding reporting in the wider context of school-parent communications a number of insights from the model are noteworthy. First, the non-significant relationships in the model are important to note. Thus, the lack of significant relationship between the latent variable 'schools' perceptions of effective parental involvement strategies' (which contributed to three reporting variables, albeit a small contribution) raises questions about the extent to which parental involvement exerts an influence on principals' beliefs that schools can influence student learning. We might also hypothesise that the lack of influence from perceptions of effective strategies (which included reporting variables) to school efficacy may indicate that reporting does not play a part (at least currently) in informing principals' beliefs about school efficacy, that is, their perceptions that schools can impact student learning.

With the advent, what the NCCA has termed, a 're-visioning of assessment' (2007, p. 6), which will have implications for reporting practices, it is possibly or even likely that over time perceptions of effective parental involvement (including reporting) might exert stronger effect on individual and collective teaching efficacy of teachers and principals. Second, the statistically significant relationships (between school composition and involvement strategies; between involvement strategies and 'schools' perceptions of

involvement and reporting strategies’) point to the wider set of factors and school dynamics outside of reporting practices that exert important and more powerful influences on learning and particularly on efficacy beliefs. Third, as we noted in Chapter Four, this survey focused on a particular set of variables related to reporting and parental involvement cogniscent that other wider influences on efficacy (e.g. as we noted earlier re Ross’s 2004 study) exist that themselves may exert a more powerful impact on individual and collective efficacy. Finally, given the summative function and intent in reporting practices in Irish primary schools (e.g. report cards being sent home at the end of the school year provides little opportunity for their use in a formative manner) it is not that surprising, one could argue, that influence between reporting practices (as part of the latent variable ‘schools perceptions of involvement strategies’) and efficacy might not be strong.

## **4.7 REPORTING PRACTICES AND POLICIES: SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**

It is interesting to compare the findings from the case study schools with those from the final section of the on-line survey, which allowed respondents to bring up issues of concern and to add their own comments. Many similar themes and concerns emerged to those that emerged in the case studies, along with some additional ones. For example, the issue of resources and the actual cost of producing school reports, both financial and in terms of time, came up in the survey. Additionally, in some schools, the report cards are added to the book list, so that parents have to bear the cost.

### **4.7.1 Successful aspects of reporting: Views of principals**

One hundred and forty two (n=142) principals responded to the opened ended question: *What do you think is the most successful feature*

*of your school's reporting practice?* A frequent comment, similar to those in the case studies presented in Chapter Three, was the importance of open and regular communication with parents, so that nothing in the end of year report came as a shock to the parents. Newsletters and homework journals were mentioned frequently as an important means of communication between home and school. Schools were especially conscious of their partnership with parents of children with special educational needs, in drawing up IEPs and in following up on these. The majority of principals referred to their school having an 'open door' policy, although evidence both from the survey itself and from the case studies shows that this have a very different meaning in different settings. In summary, from the perspective of principals the open, positive and ongoing nature of communication between the school and parents is viewed as the most successful dimension of reporting to parents as illustrated by the following selected quotations:

*That the teachers are always available to meet with parents to discuss their child's progress. We have established a good rapport with them.*

*Constant communication between school and parents*

*Teachers and parents willing to communicate and meet regarding their children*

*Individual meetings with parents and regular contact with parents.*

*Parent-teacher meetings and meetings by appointment either by parent or teacher.*

*We have a lot of contact with parents. We usually have 100% attendance at PT meetings.*

*An open door policy re parents contacting, vice versa, re. pupils' difficulties. Availability of teachers to talk through problems and give advice where possible.*

A significant minority of principals mentioned the importance of the arrangement via an appointment system. As illustrated in the following quotation (typical of many made in this section of the survey), as evident in the case studies also, many schools appear to have a certain predictable pattern in place with regard to how reporting is enacted over the school year:

*All parents have the opportunity to speak with the class teacher early in the year at PT meeting. They also receive a written report at the end of the school year. A meeting is possible with every teacher provided an appointment is made.*

The actual or potential role of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) was not mentioned often by principals; nevertheless the following quotation illustrates the way in which ICTs provide new means of reporting to parents albeit in the context of the use of conventional means of communication such as homework notebooks and parent teacher meetings:

*Regular dialogue is encouraged outside of formal report card and formal PT meeting. Good communication systems, homework notebook, telephone and email*

#### **4.7.2 Challenging aspects of reporting: Views of Principals**

One hundred and thirty three (n=133) principals responded to this opened ended question: *What is/are the greatest challenge(s) your school experiences in relation to reporting to parents?* A number of key challenges were reported by principals, and these can be summarised under the following headings:

- Mediation of written reports and results of tests
- Managing the reporting process from a school perspective
- Parents issues: Demands on their time and active participation by parents

### Mediating written reports and results of tests

*When you have to inform them that their child has learning or behavioural or social difficulties*

*It is often very difficult to know how much of the information which is relayed is actually being taken on board. This can vary greatly according to the educational and social awareness of the parents.*

*Putting results in context regarding child's ability rather than entry requirements to a preferred second level school. Teachers are sometimes asked to change previous reports for secondary school, e.g. Change 'very good' to 'excellent'.*

In relation to mediating written report cards including results of tests principals noted a number of key challenges as follows:

- Ensuring that parents and teachers reach a common understanding of the terms used.
- Various difficulties – language, cultural differences, education level of parents, the use of jargon, possible misunderstanding of grades or terms used– does “excellent” refer to effort, progress or results of tests?
- Explaining terms used in reporting on standardised tests, e.g. STEN score

- Importance of face-to-face meetings to eliminate possible misunderstandings and to get the parent's perspective.
- Development of IEPs involves parents from early stages of planning for student learning and keeps them informed of progress

### Managing the whole process of reporting from a school perspective

- Report card format, time demands and shared meaning –finding time to compile reports,
  - deciding on the format of the report
  - written/oral, pre-set form, teacher or school generated,
  - ensuring consistency between teachers in use of terms like *Good, Fair*.
- Administration; time, cost (of printing, posting, processing) retaining/storing reports.
- Legal requirements/fear of litigation.
- Reporting on Standardised tests - understanding results, STEN scores etc. Deciding whether or not to report child's place in class.
- Inputs- from parents, from SEN/ resource teachers, from children.

### Parents' issues: Demands on their time and nature of participation by parents

*Lack of parental interest due to social issues*

*Availability of parents to meet. Parents not reading newsletters, notes, comments in journals.*

*Members of the travelling community do not attend meetings. Help from Visiting Teacher sought and used. Members of the new communities from EU and Non-EU countries find it difficult to understand results and the Irish school system in general.*

- Parents' difficulties in attending meetings- timing, cultural/ personal alienation or apparent indifference to child's progress at school.
- Ensuring/facilitating follow-up by parents of issues raised.
- Parents not reading notes, newsletters, reports (or teachers unsure whether they do or not).
- Parents comparing results. Pressure on children to achieve high grades.

A common theme expressed by principals was the importance of teachers meeting parents face-to-face, and of ensuring that parents understand what written reports mean. Schools also faced a number of policy decisions on reporting: Who has an input into the report card? What format will be used? Is there consistency across the school?

#### **4.7.3 Priorities in developing reporting practice: Views of principals**

*User-friendly downloadable administrative package for all schools to include electronic storage of 'report card'.*

*Feedback suggests that all parties are satisfied with reporting practice.*

*Greater consistency in and understanding of grading 'Excellent', 'Very Good' etc.*

*A consistent language across the levels*

*Personally, I think two parent/teacher meetings in the year would be very useful - one in the first term to explain the plan for the year and the other around Easter to evaluate.*

*We would like to develop a more comprehensive report card.*

*I would like to prioritise the reform of our school report system*

*Sending out children's reports at least 4 weeks before summer holidays and given parents an opportunity to discuss any issue that may arise regarding their child.*

*Develop a personalised formal report form for the school rather than the Folens/Fallons version. Include some of the criteria that was highlighted in the survey. Pupil comment, parent comment etc...*

129 principals responded to the open-ended question: what would you like to prioritise in developing your school's reporting practice? These 129 comments mainly focused on three themes (mainly the first two themes)

- Development of shared meaning and consistency in terminology
- Improving the structure and 'streamlining' assessment and reporting practices including changes to report cards, arrangements for parent teacher meetings
- Provision of input by others in addition to the class teacher e.g. SEN teacher, students.

## **4.8 CONCLUSION**

In concluding this chapter on the survey component of this study, we want to emphasise the range of challenges identified in relation to reporting including, in particular in relation to two aspects of communication: (i) communication with increasingly diverse families, and (ii) as well as difficulties of ensuring key terms are understood on report cards and in relation to standardised test results. Both of these issues are likely to provide increasing challenge in the future as the school population becomes more diverse and assessment practices development (NCCA, 2007) and reporting practices in turn change based on new approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. As the NCCA noted in the opening chapter of *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools*, the 1999 Revised Primary School Curriculum addressed assessment in general terms (NCCA, 2007, p. 8). The 2007 guidelines sought to provide more specific direction grounded in recent developments in relation assessment policy and research, to inform the entire assessment cycle – including reporting.

The online survey about reporting to parents in primary school, based on a stratified nationally representative sample (45% response rate), provides an overview of schools' current practices and perceptions vis-à-vis reporting across different types of schools. The survey component of this study illustrates the commonality as well as the diversity of practices; the challenges faced by schools addressing needs of diverse students and families; and strategies employed to address reporting on a school wide basis. Among the main findings of the survey are the following:

- Two out of three schools have written policy on parent teachers meetings, whereas as one in four has one on use of report cards.
- The overwhelming majority of schools keep records of a range of topics related to children learning and development.

- The overwhelmingly majority of schools provide written report cards about children's progress to parents although surprisingly almost one in six do not provide written report cards.
- Almost half of schools keep report cards until its students are twenty-one years of age, one in three do so until student is eighteen and one in five do so until student leaves primary school. In light of recent legislation on reporting responsibilities of schools, there is a need to provide schools with both policy guidance in this area, and technical support to create appropriate records management processes in place.
- Most schools provide written report cards to parents about children's progress at the end of the school year:
  - Three out of four rural schools provide a written report card to parents whereas eleven out of twelve urban schools do so. As such, there was statistically difference between rural and urban schools.
- Where standardised tests results are communicated to parents this is typically undertaken in person by the class teacher and sometimes also resource, SEN and/or learning support teacher rather than via written report on these tests on the report card.
- Schools with students whose parents do not speak English and who speak a different dialect of English pose a significant communication challenge for schools.
- In schools that draw on the translation skills of those in the community, they typically draw on parent/adult from that linguistic community and also a primary age pupil from that community.

- There are statistically significant differences between rural and urban schools in relation to two aspects of reporting: (i) rural schools are less likely to send a written report card home; and (ii) urban schools are more likely than rural schools to utilise behaviour reporting system.
- In a structural equation model of key variables in this survey, there were significant relationships between (i) school composition and parental involvement strategies, (ii) parental involvement strategies and latent variable 'perceptions of involvement and reporting strategies'; (iii) and school composition and principals' perceived school efficacy. Based on these findings, reporting practices (as currently organised) do not influence principals' perceptions of whether their school can have an impact on student learning (school efficacy).
- The vast majority of schools thought that children views should not be included on report cards nor did they think that children should be included in parent teacher meetings.
- Principals identified three areas in which they thought reporting practices were especially successful: ongoing, open-door policy and practice in relation to communication with parents.
- Principals identified three areas in which schools face challenges in relation to reporting: (i) Mediation of written reports and results of tests; (ii) Managing the reporting process from a school perspective; and (iii) Parents issues: Demands on their time and active participation by parents.
- In seeking to ensure some clear communication in relation to the meaning of key terms used on report cards by schools, teachers and also SEN/learning support teachers supplement the report card with communication at parent teacher meetings.

As we noted in Chapter One and the Introduction to this chapter, O'Donoghue and Dimmock (2002) developed propositions for enhancing reporting practices pertain to four domains, which we think are key to enhancing reporting practices: leadership, learning, communication and teacher professional development.

Among the areas where we note recommendations in the final chapter of this report growing out of this chapter are the following: (i) Leadership (policy formulation; records management: storage, security, timing of report cards and the role of ICTs in storage); (ii) Learning (student involvement and voice in the reporting process; cultural diversity vis-à-vis newcomers, urban v rural differences in reporting practices; (iii) School communication (frequency of report cards; PT meetings); and (iv) Teacher professional development (issues noted above in relation to leadership, learning and communication all have implications for teacher professional development.

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**CHAPTER FIVE:**  
**SUMMARY AND**  
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

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## **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter begins with a summary of the main findings of the case studies and survey and it then goes on to draw out the implications and recommendations for policy and practice in light of recent developments in primary assessment policy<sup>13</sup> (NCCA, 2005; NCCA, 2006; NCCA, 2007).

## **5.2 FORMAL REPORTING POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

1. All our case study schools have clear procedures in place for reporting to parents although not all have a written policy. The questionnaire survey shows that approximately one in four schools (28%) of schools have a written policy on the use of School Reports and approximately two out of three schools (67%) have a written policy on parent-teacher meetings.
2. A School Report is prepared for each child in our case study schools and sent to parents annually towards the end of the school year. They tend to follow a standard commercially-produced format and contain a space for a brief comment in relation to every subject of the curriculum, other aspects of learning and schooling, specifically social development, attendance, homework, and general attitude to learning. Teachers say that they draw on a wide range of information in writing their reports, from their own observations in class to results of assessments, including standardised tests, and homework. The thrust of this evidence is confirmed by the survey in relation to recording and report card content. Of significance in the survey however is that while 5 out of 6 schools reported that they do send written report cards to parents approximately 1 in 6 schools<sup>14</sup> reported that they do not

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13 NCCA (2005). Reporting children's progress in primary schools: Background paper. Dublin: Author. NCCA (2006). Draft Report Card Templates Overview: Information for Schools. Dublin: Author. NCCA (2007). Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools. Dublin: Author

14 As noted above there is a margin of error associated with this estimate. Due to the lower than hoped for response rate, the margin of error is plus or minus 8 points.

provide parents with a written report. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant difference between rural and urban schools in provision of report cards. Three out of four rural schools provide a written report card to parents whereas eleven out of twelve urban schools do so. In terms of the type of report card, approximately two out three schools use a commercially produced report card and the remaining one third (except for a 1-2% depending on class level) use a school-produced report card.

3. Teachers and principals are very concerned to represent children's learning positively and honestly in school reports and in meetings with parents. This is captured by the expression of one principal, 'nothing should come as a surprise'. Teachers and principals expressed their concern of the potential negative impact on children of critical reports. They are also wary of writing down their interpretations of children in too much detail, preferring to discuss issues in face-to-face settings. The majority of schools keep school reports for many years after pupils have left the school. Over 2 in 5 schools (43%) store report cards until the child is 21 years of age (consistent with NCCA's 2007 assessment guidelines for schools, p. 80), one third of schools store report cards until the child has left post-primary education and one in five schools keep report card until the child leaves primary school.
4. All six case-study schools arrange a parent-teacher meeting annually, typically in the middle of the Autumn term. One school schedules this meeting in the summer term after the school report has been sent out and this then provides a focus for the meeting. The standard format is for teachers to be available on a particular afternoon/evening and for parents to be offered a slot of about 15 minutes during which they, usually the mother, has a one-to-one meeting with the child's teacher/or with the learning resource teacher if the child has special educational needs. Some schools

are more creative in seeking to accommodate parents making themselves available to meet with parents from 7.30 every morning for several weeks. Teachers report that this practice increases the incidence of fathers' attendance at meetings and it is highly appreciated by parents.

5. Teachers are clear and unanimous about the purpose of the annual parent-teacher meeting: it is to inform parents of their children's progress, to communicate their learning strengths and weaknesses, and help in identifying ways of supporting their child's learning at home. While they are sensitive to the need to engage with what parents think is important, our evidence generally suggests that teachers operate this forum as one in which they are in telling and explanation mode and parents are listening. The short time frame for these meetings would seem to focus minds on progress from the teacher's perspective. The impression our evidence gives is that other, more informal occasions are assumed to cater for issues that do not pertain directly to children's progress.
6. Teachers and principals perceive that parents are the main audience for the School Report and, while they are kept in school and are accessible to teachers, they do not typically consult them when they get new children/class.
7. For schools a major challenge to effective reporting practice is perceived to be linguistic diversity or more specifically the fact that increasing numbers of parents and children do not have adequate English to participate fully in the reporting procedures. This is confirmed by the questionnaire data where principals reported that parents who do not speak English or who may have difficulty communicating in English agreed or strongly agreed that this represents "a significant communication challenge".

While schools in our case study sample vary in the scale of this challenge and in how they are addressing it, a common response is the use of community members as translators.

8. The range of languages spoken by parents of newcomer children is perceived by responding principals as providing a significant communication challenge for schools. In responding to this communication challenge schools rely mainly on two strategies: to ask a parent or other adult from that language community who speaks English to translate (just under a third of schools) and/or to ask a student (of primary age) from that language community who speaks English to translate (1 in 6 schools)

### **5.3 OTHER REPORTING MECHANISMS**

9. Schools also use and value a range of other ways of reporting to parents including homework journals/diaries (2 out of 3 schools), tests (e.g. weekly spelling tests) and 2 out of 3 schools report that they use a behaviour reporting system (e.g. star system for discipline). There was a statistically significant difference between rural and urban schools in the use of behaviour reporting system. Two in three urban schools employ such a system, whereas only one in three rural schools do so. One multi-ethnic school's exceptional approaches to involve and communicate with parents about children's learning include bi-weekly newsletters, coffee mornings, food fairs and other inter-cultural events. In addition, all our case study schools define themselves as operating an 'open door' policy in relation to parents, meaning that they are regularly accessible to parents and have frequent conversations with parents informally as they bring and collect children to and from school. The latter was reported as being especially the case for children in the early years of school and for those with special educational needs.

#### **5.4 REPORTING ON STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS**

10. While schools do administer a range of tests and assessment procedures, typically reading assessments in infant classes and standardised tests (i.e. Drumcondra Achievement Tests, MICRA-T or SIGMA-T) in middle and upper levels, schools tend not to forward assessment information in the form of test results to parents. Most schools interpret the results of assessments, particularly standardised assessments, and communicate their interpretations to parents in parent-teacher meetings. The case studies and the survey show that results of standardised tests tend to be given to parents only by appointment. When results are communicated to parents this is done typically by the class teacher in 2 out of 3 schools, by the learning support or resource teacher (1 in 3 schools) and by the principal in 1 in 6 six schools.

#### **5.5 OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCES: LEARNERS AND PARENTS**

11. School reports and parent-teacher meetings are very significant events for learners, their occurrence engendering a wide range of emotions from anxiety to excitement and from pride to disappointment. No child interviewed was indifferent. Our evidence confirms the deep interest children have in their own learning, many expressing the wish to attend and contribute to the parent-teacher meeting. Most expressed mature views about what they believe is absent from or inadequately detailed in the current reporting structure, namely, sport, drama, music and art. Some pupils expressed an interest in having more information about how to improve their learning.

12. Children deemed to have special educational needs (SEN) experience higher levels of assessment and are reported on in more detail and more frequently than their peers not so specified. Parents of children with special educational needs have more contact with schools about their children's progress

13. Our evidence points to more variation among parents than among teachers/schools in how they interpret their opportunities to find out about their children's learning and in their general satisfaction with the process of reporting. There is also more variation across parents.
  
14. While many parents we interviewed expressed the most positive views about their experience of school reports and meetings, particularly those in one multi-ethnic school, others are less satisfied and do not experience their schools as quite as accessible as the schools describe and perceive themselves to be. Our data suggests a class divide here with parents associated with schools serving middle class catchments being very much more satisfied about their understanding of their children's progress than their counterparts associated with schools serving lower socio-economic groups. Many of the latter parents (and some of the former) expressed uncertainty about the meaning of terms on school reports, of test results and generally of curriculum and assessment issues. They are more reluctant to question teachers and seek clarification on issues, seeing themselves as potentially disturbing teachers' work by seeking such help. They are also dissatisfied with the timing and amount of time allocated to parent-teacher meetings feeling that they are too infrequent, too short and not sufficiently flexibly scheduled.
  
15. Teachers are clear and unanimous about the purpose of the annual parent-teacher meeting: it is to inform parents of their children's progress, to communicate their learning strengths and weaknesses, and help in identifying ways of supporting their child's learning at home. While they are sensitive to the need to engage with what parents think is important, our evidence generally suggests that teachers operate this forum as one in which they are in telling and explanation mode and parents are

listening. The short time frame for these meetings would seem to focus minds on progress from the teacher's perspective. The impression our evidence gives is that other, more informal occasions are assumed to cater for issues that do not pertain directly to children's progress.

16. While teachers acknowledge, to some extent, the problematic of sharing meanings of evaluations of children's learning, parents are more concerned than teachers about the lack of common understandings. The survey results show that schools have some strategies in place to address this issue: some 45% claim to have staff meetings to agree terms used in the school report.
17. Analysis of the survey data suggests that reporting practices (in the context of current practice in assessment and reporting) do not influence principals' perceptions that schools can impact student learning. Situating reporting practices in the context of the model of parental involvement, school composition and learning and indicates principals in schools with large numbers of students as well as more SEN students and language support teachers, with higher intake of students from another ethnicity were more likely to indicate (i) higher levels of parental involvement (ii) have higher expectations that their school could impact student learning.

## **5.6 DISCUSSION**

Overall, the evidence suggests that schools adhere broadly to DES guidelines on reporting and good practice. Nevertheless the evidence points to areas that merit further development: consistency in assessment, recording and reporting practices; more involvement of parents and learners in the assessment and reporting processes, and a stronger emphasis on the formative functions of reporting.

In this discussion we note key overarching themes: discontinuities, participation formats and equity. The discontinuities between the schools' 'open door' policy of parental accessibility and parents' experience of accessibility to school meanings of learning success, failure, achievement, progress stem fundamentally from inadequate opportunities available to some parents to get on the inside of those constructs and make them their own in the context of their particular school's practices. How can parents, as interested, caring people, but also as outsiders to the routines and practices of the school, come to know and understand, at some meaningful level, the practice of assessing and evaluating learning that goes on in school? What are they to make of such terms as 'good', 'excellent' etc and how are they to interpret a phrase like 'improving' on a report card when they have little or no access to the language/terminology, practices, routines, models, criteria, or exemplars that might support their negotiation of meanings? In addition, how can they use such understandings and constructions to support the education of their children, in partnership with the school - the rationale put forward for the practice of reporting on children's learning to parents in the first place?

As our evidence showed, some parents cope with such issues much better than others and unsurprisingly they seem to be the ones whose cultural capital is aligned and attuned to the practices of the school. This is not new; previous research has demonstrated exactly this over and over. Such parents are more likely to have experienced themselves as successful in school, to have been able to exploit the resources of the education system to enhance their and their children's status, wealth, and symbolic capital (including negotiating powers) in the world. Their life experiences equip them to be able to negotiate their meanings in the school-home enterprise of reporting, to have their issues and concerns addressed, and so to develop even

further continuities between what is valued at home and what is valued in school.

The annual parent-teacher meeting with its very structured (perhaps rigid) participation format, heavily dictated by the constraints of time limits the dialogue that can take place about a child's achievements and weaknesses. To open up their practices, to give access to the culture of assessment and judging success in learning, parental understanding of comments, grades, etc. and their significance and relevance have to be considered. Such understandings can't be assumed to be easily read off from Reports sent to parents at the end of the year, nor can a learner's progress be adequately described to all parents in one brief encounter once a year. This is recognised, at one level, by the emphasis teachers place on ongoing, informal contact with parents but simultaneously denied, we suggest, by the assumption that it can be done on the run in moments stolen on corridors at the beginning or end of the school day.

We suggest that many parents would appreciate and benefit from more regular contact with schools during which they have the chance to see and discuss samples of children's assessed work annotated perhaps with reference to the context of its production, to discuss the meaning and partiality of marks and grades and the contexts of assessments as well as their outcomes. Having insights into the processes of assessment evidence construction and the criteria against which work is judged would support parents in becoming more competent in participating in reporting event on their terms. Rubrics, portfolios, profiles, evidence in a variety of modes, mini case studies of a learner's trajectory, and other exemplification material are all features that could be used in dialogue with parents about children's learning, the intention being to provide them with props and supports for understanding accounts

of achievement, portrayals of where learners are, where they need to get to, and crucially, elaborations of how to get there.

Schools and teachers that share such practices and experiences with parents, and indeed with other school staff develop communities of assessment practice, but such schools also need to be supported by a whole-school policy as well as the broader policy context nationally (Hall and Harding, 2002). Previous research in the Irish context on parents' understandings of assessment highlighted their (unjustified) faith in the results of objective tests – faith in number- and their dubiousness on the other hand about teacher 'opinion' (Hall and Kavanagh, 2002). In the absence of exemplars and some concrete exemplification of teachers' professional judgements about learners' progress, parents are thrown back on the test as the only point of evidence and as a measure in which they can have some faith. If assessment *for* learning is to be meaningful for learners and parents then it is likely that creative ways of capturing learning will have to be applied and shared with them and among teachers themselves.

At a practical level, how might one explain the divergence in perspective across teachers and parents? We would suggest that teachers feel themselves as open and available to teachers because they are in contact with parents so frequently, in many cases on a daily basis. However, they may be in regular contact with just a selection of parents and many teachers may only have contact with teachers through the annual parent-teacher meeting and the school report, which given their current format, are likely to be inadequate to enable the kind of negotiation of meaning that would extend their capacity to understand their children's learning, let alone support it. Schools need to be much more vigilant regarding parents who may feel peripheral to it and who may as a result marginalise themselves further by not availing of what is currently on offer.

## **5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS**

As we noted in Chapter One, O'Donoghue and Dimmock (2002) advance four propositions for enhancing reporting practices. These pertain to leadership, learning, communication and teacher professional development. Together these support the identification of recommendations that emerge from evidence from our case study and survey data and point to the need for a multi-pronged approach to addressing the key issues. It is not simply the domain of one group e.g. individual teachers or even continuing professional development. Rather it involves system as well as more local interventions and teacher education as well as physical resource input.

1. A key recommendation emerging from the evidence is that parents need more opportunities to negotiate the meaning of accounts of their children's learning. Terms like 'fair' and 'excellent' and assessment results need to be better interpreted and contextualised for parents so that meanings are opened up and better understood. *We recommend that policy makers and school leaders consider the necessary school structures and professional contracts that would enable greater parental participation in assessment and reporting.*
2. A key finding was that a small but significant minority of schools do not send written report cards home. As such, parents of children in those schools are missing out on an opportunity to learn about their children's progress in school. *We recommend that all schools be required to send a written report card to parents.*
3. *We recommend that schools should send a mid-year Report to parents about their children's learning and that this Report that would provide the basis for learner and parental conversation and commentary.* This would ensure that School Reports serve a formative (as well as a summative) purpose.

4. *We recommend that Whole School Evaluations explicitly attend to the reporting dimension of school policy and practice.*
5. *In light of the strategies adopted by schools (asking parents, other adults of primary age children to translate) to communicate with parents who either do not speak English or have difficulty communicating in English, we recommend that guidelines be developed, and where necessary additional resources beyond those currently available be provided, to support schools in such work.*
6. *With reference to the new emphasis on assessment for learning and on the increased emphasis on assessment and reporting more generally, we recommend that schools have the opportunity to engage in within-school, across-school, and especially within-level/class professional dialogue about evaluations of children's learning. We also recommend that schools have the opportunity to develop exemplars that would support the production of narrative accounts of children's learning that are trustworthy. Such initiatives could offer a way of extending shared perspectives about what constitutes 'excellent' etc. achievement in various curricular areas.*
7. *In the context of policy expectation that schools utilise standardised tests to assess students (DES/Circular 0138/2006)<sup>15</sup> we recommend that further guidance be provided that supports teachers (class, special needs and resource) and principals in communicating the results of such tests in a meaningful manner in the context of other evidence of student learning and achievement.*
8. *In the light of the demands for assessment data recording and storage, we recommend that robust and reliable record storage systems be developed to support school's ability to record, store and retrieve assessment data for different audiences and purposes.*

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**A P P E N D I X   O N E**

**T H E   C A S E   S T U D I E S :**

**I N T E R V I E W   S C H E D U L E S**

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## **Interview Schedule: Principal**

### **Reporting to Parents in Primary Schools**

#### **Introducing the study and yourself, and assuring confidentiality**

Thanks very much for participating in this work. This is a study of the ways schools report to parents about their children's learning. It is concerned with the views and experiences of a range of people including parents, children and teachers. It is funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment – a body which advises the Government about teaching and learning. It is being conducted by University College Cork. My name is xxx.

Interviewing is one method we are using to understand the way schools report on children's learning to parents and we are particularly interested in principal's views.

All the information we collect is confidential. This means that all participants are rendered anonymous and neither they nor the schools to which they send their children will be identifiable in any reports of the study. Real names are not used in analysing or reporting the findings of the study.

We anticipate that this interview will last no more than 30-40 minutes. If you are willing I would like to audio record it.

#### **Background Information (for research team only)**

Interviewer:

Date:

Name	School
No of Children in School	No of Special Needs Child.
No of Immigrant Children	No of Traveller Children
Total Number of Teachers	
Mainstream Teachers	Support Personnel
Number of other Teachers	Length of time in Position

### **Your Experience of Reporting to Parents.**

1. Can you give me an overview of the school's policies regarding reporting on children's progress to parents?
  - Parent-Teacher meetings and their frequency
  - Parent-teacher meetings and their format
  - Timing of meetings
  - Oral reports –frequency and format
  - Junior and Senior students
  - Written reports – is there a template for school reports – how was this generated – has it changed over the course of your leadership?
  - School policies around reporting to parents –any documents available and have they changed since you took up your role as principal
2. To what extent do you think this reporting to parents, influences, if at all, children's learning?
  - Assessment practices
  - Parent-teacher –student involvement in learning
3. What are the issues/concerns around reporting that you engage with in this school context?
  - Diversity of parents/students
  - Quality
4. How do you monitor the effectiveness of the reporting arrangements in this school?
5. Have you made any new developments/changes in the way reporting happens over the last years?
6. What do parents do with school reports?
  - a. do they share them with children?
  - b. do they discuss them with other parents
7. Is there anything else you think is important about how schools report to parents?

*Thank the interviewee for her/his time and co-operation and remind her/him that all the information they have given you is confidential.*



## Teacher Interview Schedule

### Reporting to Parents in Primary Schools

#### Introducing the study and yourself, and assuring confidentiality

Thanks very much for participating in this work. This is a study of the ways schools report to parents about their children's learning. It is concerned with the views and experiences of a range of people including parents, children and teachers. The study was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) – a body which advises the Government about curriculum and assessment – and is being conducted by a research team from the Education Department at University College Cork (UCC). My name is \_\_\_\_\_.

Interviewing is one method we are using to understand the way schools report on children's learning to parents and we are particularly interested in the views of teachers.

All the information we collect is confidential. This means that all participants are rendered anonymous and neither they nor the schools to which they send their children will be identifiable in any reports of the study. Real names are not used in analysing or reporting the findings of the study.

We anticipate that this interview will last no more than 30 minutes. If you are willing, I would like to audio record it.

#### Background Information (for research team only)

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name	School
No of Children in School	No of Special Needs Child.
No of Immigrant Children	No of Traveller Children
Total Number of Teachers	
Number of mainstream classroom teachers	Support Personnel (SNAs...etc.):
Number of other Teachers (Learning Support,...etc.)	Length of time in your Position

## **Your Experience as a Teacher Reporting to Parents**

1. **Stories about informal and formal reporting to parents**
  - a. Can you tell me about how you report informally to parents by way of an example or two?  
As an \_\_\_\_\_ teacher, how do you see this process?
  - b. Can you take me through the process of preparing and writing reports to parents by way of an example?  
As an \_\_\_\_\_ teacher, how do you see this process?
2. **Reporting and learning:** To what extent do you think this reporting to parents influences, if at all, children's learning?
3. **Arrangements for use of report cards:** Can you give me an overview of the school's arrangements regarding report cards on children's progress to parents?
  - Parent-teacher meetings
    - Frequency, Format, Timing
  - Oral reports
    - Frequency, Format, Timing
  - Junior and Senior students?
  - Written reports:
    - Is there a template for school reports? How was this generated?
    - Has it changed over the course of your time in this school? If so, how?
  - School policies around reporting to parents:
    - Any documents available? Have they changed since you started working in this school? If yes, how?
4. **Guidelines and supports for using report cards:** At the school level, what kinds of guidelines and supports are there for teachers in preparing report cards for parents?
  - Are reports standardized and uniform throughout school
  - Support for teachers in reporting to parents
    - staff meeting discussions re. objectives, improvements, legislation etc. – staff development days, etc.
  - Have you ever evaluated how the school reports to parents?
    - Feedback from parents? Other Teachers.

- School Development Planning and reporting to parents
  - Has a Whole School Evaluation (WSE) commented on school's reporting practices and policies? If yes, how?
  - How are new teachers inducted into school policies?
5. **Reporting about different types of students:** Talk to me about the way you report to parents of different types of students?
- Parents of immigrant students, Parents of traveller students, Special Needs Parents of SEN students
6. **Recent PT meeting:** Tell me about a recent parent teacher meeting?
7. **Use of PT meetings:** How useful is the whole process of meeting with parents at parent-teacher meetings?
8. **Wrap up:** Is there anything else you think is important about how schools report to parents?

*Thank the interviewee for her/his time and co-operation and remind her/him that all the information they have given you is confidential.*

## **Parent Interview Schedule**

### **Reporting to Parents in Primary Schools**

#### **Introducing the study and yourself, and assuring confidentiality**

Thanks very much for participating in this work. This is a study of the ways schools report to parents about their children's learning. It is concerned with the views and experiences of a range of people including parents, children and teachers. It is funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment – a body which advises the Government about teaching and learning. It is being conducted by University College Cork. My name is xxx.

Interviewing is one method we are using to understand the way schools report on children's learning to parents and we are particularly interested in parents' views.

All the information we collect is confidential. This means that all participants are rendered anonymous and neither they nor the schools to which they send their children will be identifiable in any reports of the study. Real names are not used in analysing or reporting the findings of the study.

We anticipate that this interview will last no more than 25 minutes. If you are willing I would like to audio record it.

#### **Background Information (for research team only)**

Name:

School:

Number of children you have in the school and their classes:

Interviewer's Name:

Date of interview:

#### **Your Experience of Receiving School Reports about your Child/Children**

1 How does the school keep you informed about your child's learning?

- tell me about the information you get, tell me about your most recent experience.
- any written reports?
- any oral reports?
- when do you get this information?

- how frequently?
  - parent teacher meetings and their format and frequency?
2. Do you find that school reports tell you what you need to know about your child's progress in school?
    - do you get a chance to discuss the content of school reports with the teacher?
    - do you get to influence what goes on written reports?
    - do you understand the reports you get?
    - if not, do you ask the school, other parent ...?
    - do you get enough information about your child as a learner and about goals for your child's learning?
    - what else would you like to know?
  3. What do you think are good ways of helping you understand how your child is progressing in school?
    - what do you see as the benefits of school reports?
    - do you see any disadvantages or problems with school reports in your experience?
    - would you like to see any changes in the ways used to report on your child's learning?
  4. What do you do with the school reports?
    - do you show it to your child?
    - do you discuss the contents with your child, with anyone else?
  5. Is there anything else you think is important about how schools report to parents?

*Thank the interviewee for her/his time and co-operation and remind her/him that all the information they have given you is confidential.*

## **Interview schedule: Parents of non-English speaking children**

Introduction to the study and yourself, and assuring confidentiality

It is worth considering translating this section if there were a large number of parents from one minority group in the school, e.g. poles .

Otherwise it is very important that the time is taken to communicate the main points. There is the possibility that parents may feel there would be adverse repercussions for their child/children if they expressed negative opinions, etc.

### **Questions:**

1. Tell me about how the school has informed you about your child's learning/progress?
  - Tell me about the information you get, tell me about the most recent experience?
  - Any written reports? How often? How helpful are these?
  - Are there informal opportunities for you to meet your child's teacher to discuss her/his progress? How helpful are these?
  - Did you get the chance to attend a Parent-teacher meeting? What was that experience like for you?
  - Does the teacher communicate with you using a school journal? If so, how helpful is this?
  - Do you get enough information about your child's progress?
  - What else would you like to know?
  - Do you receive sufficient information about the learning goals for your child for the level they are at?

### **Challenges for non-English-speaking parents**

2. Tell me about any difficulties you have understanding
  - School reports
  - Comments in school journals
  - Comments in copies
  - Face-to-face discussions with teachers/school principals

3. Cultural differences.

- From your experience what was the most helpful in the way the school informed you about the school and your child's progress. How does your previous experience compare with this experience here in Ireland?
- 

Follow on with questions 3, 4 and 5 from Parent Schedule.

## **Interview Schedule for Focus Group with Children**

### **Reporting to Parents in Primary School**

#### **Introducing the study and yourself and assuring confidentiality**

Thanks very much for participating in this work. This is a study of the ways your school reports to your parents about your learning and the progress you are making. In this study we will be talking to young learners, some parents and teachers. This study is funded by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment – a group of people who advise the Government about teaching and learning. It is being done by University College Cork. My name is xxx.

Interviewing is one of the methods we are using to understand the way schools report on children's learning to parents and we are particularly interested in your views as young learners.

All the information is confidential. This means that the identity of those who participate, like yourselves, will remain unknown to those reading the report of the study.

This interview will not last longer than 25 minutes, approximately. If you are willing to agree, I would like to record the interview.

Background information (for research team only)

Names:

School:

Class:

Interviewer's Name:

Date of Interview:

Begin interview with pupils completing short form with two questions:

*When you get a school report how do you feel?*

*When there is a parent-teacher meeting how do you feel?*

## **A. School Reports**

Tell me about getting your school report.

1. What kind of information is there on the report card?
2. How do you feel about getting school reports?
3. Tell me about what happened when your last report arrived home.
4. Did you discover anything about yourself? Did it change how you see yourself?
5. Do you chat to your friends about your reports? Do you find this helpful?
6. If you could design a school report to tell your parents about yourself, how would you change the school report?
7. How could school reports help you better learn in school?
8. How do you think the teacher decides on what to write in the school report?

## **B. Parent-teacher Meetings**

1. Do you attend parent-teacher meetings? Would you like to? Would it help you with your learning?
2. Do you find out about what is discussed at parent-teacher meetings?
3. Have you any ideas about how schools could communicate better with your parents/guardians about your learning?

*Thank you for talking to me – it has been very interesting.*

## Reflection Sheet for Focus Group with Children

Please draw a circle around the 'face' that best describes how you feel about each sentence

1. When my school sends a report card home I feel....



2. When my parents read my report card and talk to me about my learning in school I feel....



*Thank you for completing this sheet.*

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**A P P E N D I X 2:**  
**E X A M P L E S O F**  
**R E P O R T C A R D S**

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## REPORT CARD 1

(Identifying details have been removed from these reports)

**SCHOOL REPORT ON PUPIL**  
SCHOOL YEAR \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_  
Pupil: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of attendances: *Excellent*  
Conduct: *Very good. Inclined to be a bit talkative*  
Social Developments: *is a very pleasant person and mixes quite well. She works to the best of her ability and is always very polite, helpful and well mannered. She is popular & very kind to others.*

Aspects of the curriculum	Marks	Class Average
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE	<i>Excellent</i>	
IRISH (a) oral	52	53
(b) reading		
(c) writing		
ENGLISH (a) oral	52	53
(b) reading		
(c) writing		
MATHEMATICS (a) mastery of concepts	48	65
(b) computational skills		
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES		
History	47	
Geography	62	51
Elementary Science	63	56
ART AND CRAFT ACTIVITIES	48	60
MUSIC	65	50
	80	55
		57

GENERAL REMARKS: *Keeps a good result good work and ignore other people if they are talking in class! Ask if you are unsure of anything. Keep up the good work.*

Signature of Class Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**SCHOOL REPORT ON PUPIL**  
SCHOOL YEAR \_\_\_\_\_

School: \_\_\_\_\_  
Pupil: \_\_\_\_\_

No. of attendances: *Excellent*  
Conduct: *Excellent*  
Social Developments: *is working well and is not afraid to let the class know if she does not understand something. She gets on well with her classmates and while she sometimes is on her own at break time she is also of an outgoing nature.*

Aspects of the curriculum	Marks	Class Average
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE		60
IRISH (a) oral		
(b) reading	58%	
(c) writing		
ENGLISH (a) oral	58%	62
(b) reading		
(c) writing		
MATHEMATICS (a) mastery of concepts	50%	67
(b) computational skills		
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES		
History	44	64
Geography	44	58
Elementary Science	absent	70
ART AND CRAFT ACTIVITIES	55 (55)	58
MUSIC	54	60
	55	61

GENERAL REMARKS: *Not very pleased to see working hard. I think her confidence is at present and she is a good deal better at expressing herself. doing well as*

Signature of Class Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

## REPORT CARD 2

Name _____		Senior Infants		Date _____	
<b>Teacher's Report</b>					
<p>Is a good steady worker. She has made good progress this year. Her reading has come on well and she likes writing her own new sentences and so on. Maths are no problem to her. She is a lovely polite girl and gets on well with everyone.</p>					
Signed _____		Teacher		Principal	
<b>Personal and Social Development</b>	<b>Ex</b>	<b>VG</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>See Report</b>
Self-confidence			✓		
Attitude to school		✓			
General behaviour		✓			
Attitude to other pupils		✓			
Involvement in school activities		✓			
Use of library/books		✓			
Homework — written		✓			
Homework — other than written		✓			
Attendance		✓			

School Curriculum	Ex	VG	G	F	See Report
<b>Religious Education</b>		✓			
<b>Gaeilge</b>		✓			
Listening _____					
Speaking _____					
Reading _____					
Written Work _____					
<b>English</b>					
Listening _____		✓			
Speaking _____		✓			
Reading _____		✓			
Written Work _____		✓			
Spelling _____					
<b>Mathematics</b>					
Number _____		✓			
Other Strands _____		✓			
Problem-solving _____		✓			
<b>S.E.S.E.</b>					
History _____					
Geography _____					
Science _____		✓			
<b>Arts Education</b>		✓			
Visual Arts _____					
Music _____					
Drama _____					
<b>Physical Education</b>		✓			
<b>Social, Personal and Health Education</b>		✓			

**REPORT CARD 3 (A)**

SCHOOL REPORT ON PUPIL  
SCHOOL YEAR 2006

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School: \_\_\_\_\_  
Pupil: \_\_\_\_\_ class 5th

---

No. of attendances: \_\_\_\_\_  
Conduct: cf main reports  
Social Development: \_\_\_\_\_

---

Aspects of the curriculum	Marks	Class Average
RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE	<i>Excellent</i>	
IRISH (a) oral	<u>75%</u>	<u>69</u>
(b) reading		
(c) writing		
ENGLISH (a) oral	<u>70%</u>	<u>64</u>
(b) reading		
(c) writing		
MATHEMATICS (a) mastery of concepts	<u>80</u>	<u>68</u>
(b) computational skills		
SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES		
History	<u>71</u>	<u>51</u>
<i>Germán</i>	<u>60</u>	<u>62</u>
Geography	<u>63</u>	<u>60</u>
Elementary Science	<u>63</u>	<u>61</u>
ART AND CRAFT ACTIVITIES	<u>64</u>	<u>64</u>
MUSIC	<u>75</u>	<u>54</u>

---

GENERAL REMARKS: cf main reports

---

Signature of Class Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## REPORT CARD 3 (B)

Student.

Attendance;

Very Satisfactory. is seldom absent and gives timely notice if he has to be away.

Application:

works well and lately I see a closer attention to subjects and a questioning attitude which is very welcome. There is a big improvement on the daydreaming aspect and his results reflect this also. He is inclined to give that bit more in answering and is a bit more aware of his own responsibility in learning. His work is neat and well presented.

Behaviour:

In class: Apart from an annoying tendency to talk a good deal-and quite loudly! is very well behaved in class. He is well mannered, obedient and biddable. If the teacher leaves the room, continues with his work as if supervised. He is not afraid to ask a question or voice an opinion and always does so politely. There is still a touch of the day-dreamer there but he has improved a great deal. If given a chore to do he sometimes finds it hard to remember especially if there is football going on at the same time!

Breaktime:

is very popular and mixes very well. He is kind to the younger children and willing to help if they have a problem. He is seldom involved in the arguments in the school yard or on the field as he has a placid even temperament. He enjoys all kinds of sport and is a generous player.

Recommendations:

is doing well. I would like him to realise that he has a lot of potential and can do very well academically if he puts his mind to it. I hope he keeps up the good work and he should do very well in 6<sup>th</sup> class.



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**A P P E N D I X 3 :**  
**T H E S U R V E Y**  
**C O M P L E T E D**  
**B Y P R I N C I P A L S**

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## **School Survey Form:<sup>16</sup> For Completion by School Principal**

### **1. THE SURVEY**

The purpose of this survey form is to create a picture of your school's reporting practice, as part of a systematic random sample of primary schools being undertaken by the research team from UCC commissioned by the NCCA. This information will help the UCC research team to write a report for the NCCA on current practices in relation to reporting to parents in primary schools. Results of this survey will be presented in aggregate form, that is, overall statistics on how schools as a whole responded to survey questions will be presented. Individual schools will NOT be identified in reporting the survey results.

### **2. GENERAL INFORMATION ON YOUR SCHOOL**

1. School Roll Number:

2. School Address:

3. Position held in school:

Teaching principal

Administrative principal

4. Student Population:

Number of Students

Number of Boys

Number of Girls

Number of Families

5. Location of Your School

Urban

Rural

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<sup>16</sup> For ease of reading, this is a Word version of the questions included in the on-line survey. Sample pages from the survey as it appeared on-screen are given at the end of this appendix.

6. Age Range of Your School:

Junior School

Senior School

Vertical School (all classes to sixth)

7. Gender Mix of Your School:

Boys only

Girls only

Mixed

Junior Mixed / Senior Boys

Junior Mixed / Senior Girls

8. Language of Instruction

English-medium

Irish-medium: Gaelscoil

Irish-medium: Scoil sa Ghaeltacht

Other (please specify)

9. School Support Programme (DEIS):

Urban Band 1

Urban Band 2

Rural Not in the Programme

10. Ethnicity of families whose children attend school (Tick one only)

90%+ Irish

10-25% Other ethnicity

26-50% Other ethnicity

50% Other ethnicity

11. What was the infant intake for your school in September 2007?

Total intake of infants

Intake of infants from other ethnicities

12. What is the number of Irish traveller students in your school?

Number

13. Please list the three largest ethnic groups in school in order (e.g; 1.Irish, 2. Polish, 3.Nigerian)

First

Second

Third

14. Estimate the number of families who have difficulty communicating in English?

Number

15. What is the number of students in your school with a formal special education needs (SEN) designation?

Number

16. Number of teachers in various roles (Please insert number)

Class Teacher

Special Educational Needs Teacher (e.g. Learning Support/Resource)

Language Support Teacher

Home-School Liaison Coordinator

Resource Teacher for Travellers

### 3. CURRENT RECORDING, COMMUNICATING AND REPORTING PRACTICES

1. What information (i.e., teacher notes, results of teacher made tests) does your school keep as part of each child's record of progress/achievement? (Tick all that apply)

	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Social and personal development								
Behaviour								
Attendance								
Grades or marks for each subject taught in each curricular area								
Areas of learning difficulty								
Comments of learning support, SEN or resource teachers								
Results/Marks/Grades of Standardised Tests (e.g., Drumcondra)								

2. What information does your school enter onto each child's report card? (Tick all that apply)

	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
Social and personal development								
Behaviour								
Attendance								
Grades or marks for each subject taught in each curricular area								
Areas of learning difficulty								
Comments of learning support, SEN or resource teachers								
Results/Marks/Grades of Standardised Tests (e.g., Drumcondra)								

3. Does your school provide written reports of children's progress to parents?

Yes

No

4. What information do teachers currently report to parents in the written report?

(Please tick all relevant boxes)

	During School Year	At End of Year	By Appointment
Progress in subjects or curriculum areas			
Social and personal development			
The child's strengths as a learner			
Areas of learning difficulty			
Areas of particular achievement			
Children's active participation in class work			
Difficulties related to homework completion			
Results of standardised tests			
Ideas to help parents support their child's learning			
Child's own input or comments			
Other (please specify)			

5. What format is used on report cards? (Tick all that apply)

	Infants	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
DES							
Fallons							
Created by class teacher							
Created by school							

6. When are report cards sent to parents (Tick all that apply)

	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
End of Year								
Mid-Year								
Other								

**4. CURRENT RECORDING, COMMUNICATING AND REPORTING PRACTICES (contd.)**

1. Does your school have any procedures in place to help teachers ensure consistency in their use of evaluative terms like 'excellent,' 'good,' etc?

Yes

No

2. If yes, please indicate the procedures (Tick all that apply)

Teachers meet at class level to agree terms used in report cards

School has written document describing terms used in report cards

Whole staff discuss and agree terms used in report cards

Other (please specify)

4. How does your school help parents to understand terms such as 'excellent,' 'very good,' ...etc? (Tick all that apply)

Class teacher talks to parents at parent teacher meeting

Learning support, SEN or resource teacher talks to parents

Principal talks to parents

Report includes a note or table explaining scales

Communication through written comments on homework and class work

Note or explanation on school website

Other (please specify)

4. Do teachers currently discuss the results of standardised tests with parents?

Yes

No

5. If YES, what information is shared?

Written form

Verbally at PT meeting

Raw scores

Standard scores

STEN

Percentiles

Other (please specify)

6. If YES, how does your school help parents to understand standardised tests?  
(Tick the two that most accurately characterises how yours addresses this issue)

Class teacher talks to parents at parent teacher meeting

Learning support, SEN or resource teacher talks to parents

Principal talks to parents

Report includes a note or table explaining scales

Note or explanation on school website

7. Does your school operate a behaviour reporting system and communicate the outcome to parents? (E.g. Star system)

Yes

No

8. Does your school use student diaries/journals for reporting to parents?

Yes

No

9. To what degree do you agree with each of these statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
In this school, the parents of 'new' immigrants provide a significant communication challenge since their first language is not English					
In this school, even when parents of 'new' immigrants speak English, communication challenges often arise due to differences in dialect and idiomatic use of English					

10. In order to improve communication with parents who do not speak English the school has in the past year used the following strategies (Tick all that apply)

Asked a parent or other adult from that language community who speaks English to translate

Asked student (of post-primary age) from that language community who speaks English to translate

Asked student (of primary age) from that language community who speaks English to translate

Ask an Irish-trained teacher who speaks one or more required languages to assist in communicating with parents

Ask a non-Irish trained teacher who speaks one or more required languages to assist in communicating with parents

11. To what degree do you agree with the following statement?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
Overall, we are pleased with our current policies in reporting to parents					

12. Please elaborate on any ways in which your school shares information with parents?

	Yes	No
School provides information leaflet to all families on school policies and practices		
School and/or Parents' Association produces newsletter for families		
Organise after school/evening meetings for parents on the primary curriculum and learning expectations		
Conduct workshops for parents on curriculum areas and expectations during the daytime or school hours		
Schedule individual meetings with parents of students who are having difficulty learning in school		
Give families information on how to contact their child's teacher at school		
Issue certificates of achievement for students to take home that recognize their progress		
Request parent to tutor/support students in the classroom		
Invite parents and the community to school for student awards		
Offer parents or students library books to use at home		
Regularly assign students homework that requires them to talk with a family member		
Offer videotapes on learning (e.g., literacy) that families can view at school or at home		
Offer students and families curriculum-related activities learning activities/clubs after school (e.g. homework clubs will fall under this – may not necessarily involve parents or even teachers)		
Involve parents of different backgrounds in various home-school activities		
Organise visits to school by members of wider community		
Inform parents and students of progress and problems in student diary/journal		

13. If yes, rate its effectiveness. If no, rate its potential effectiveness

	Not Possible in this School	Unhelpful	Somewhat helpful	Very Helpful
School provides information leaflet to all families on school policies and practices				
School and/or Parents' Association produces newsletter for families				
Organise after school/evening meetings for parents on the primary curriculum and learning expectations				
Conduct workshops for parents on curriculum areas and expectations during the daytime or school hours				
Schedule individual meetings with parents of students who are having difficulty learning in school				
Give families information on how to contact their child's teacher at school				
Issue certificates of achievement for students to take home that recognize their progress				
Request parent to tutor/support students in the classroom				
Invite parents and the community to school for student awards				
Offer parents or students library books to use at home				
Regularly assign students homework that requires them to talk with a family member				
Offer videotapes on learning (e.g., literacy) that families can view at school or at home				
Offer students and families curriculum-related activities learning activities/clubs after school (e.g. homework clubs will fall under this – may not necessarily parents or involve even teachers)				
Involve parents of different backgrounds in various home-school activities				
Organise visits to school by members of wider community				
Inform parents and students of progress and problems in student diary/journal				

## 5. IMPRESSIONS AND ASPIRATIONS

1. Impressions of the report cards school use at present:

	Very Unsatisfied	Unsatisfied	No Opinion	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Our level of satisfaction with current report cards is...					

2. Please indicate which themes your school would include if you were designing report cards for parents?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Opinion
Space for student comment					
Space for parent comment					
More space for comment on areas such as art, PE, drama					
Space for input by learning support, SEN or resource teacher					
Create an online version that parents could check on the web					

3. Do teachers involve/include children when meeting with their parents at PT meetings?

Yes

No

4. Who attends parent-teacher meetings?

	never	rarely	sometimes	often
Mother				
Father				
Both parents				
Grandparent				
Pupil with parent				

5. Please indicate your evaluation of how parents respond to hearing about aspects of their children's learning and development at parent teacher meetings

	Very Negative	Negative	Mixed	Positive	Very Positive	Very Positive
Very Positive Hearing about their child's social and personal development						
Hearing about child's strengths as a learner						
Hearing about child's learning difficulties						
Hearing about their child's progress in subjects or curriculum areas						
Hearing about ideas to help their child learning						
Hearing about difficulties related to homework completion						
Hearing about their child's contentment at school						
Hearing about their child's active participation in class work						

6. Our school has a written policy statement on use of report cards

Yes

No

7. Our school has a written policy statement on parent teacher meetings

Yes

No

8. Storage Format of Report Cards:

	Yes	No
Paper copy kept		
Electronic/digital kept		
Reports are stored by class group		
Cumulative individual record, i.e. all reports are stored for individual students		
Other (please specify)		

9. For how long does your school store copies of the written reports issued to parents?

(Tick appropriate box)

Until pupil leaves primary school

Until pupil leaves post-primary school

Until child is 21 years

Other (please specify)

10. Induction for Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) (tick all that apply)

Written documentation for NQTs about school's reporting policies and practice

Teacher designated to mentor NQTs re. reporting and parent-teacher meetings

Informal information provided to NQTs by other teachers

Other (please specify)

## 6. IMPACT ON LEARNING

1. How true are each of these statements for your school?

	Untrue for all	Untrue for most	True for some	True for most	True for all
Students' home life and family background provide so many advantages the students here are bound to learn					
Teachers in this school are able to get through to difficult students					
Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students					
Teachers in this school really believe every child can learn					
If a child doesn't want to learn teachers here give up					
These students come to school ready to learn					
Students here just aren't motivated to learn					
The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn					
Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety					
Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems					
Overuse of alcohol and drugs in the community make learning difficult for students here					
Teachers here don't have the skills needed to produce meaningful student learning					

## **7. SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PRIORITIES**

1. Is the Board of Management involved in decisions about reporting to parents?

Yes

No

If yes, how is the Board of Management involved in decisions about reporting to parents?

2. What do you think is the most successful feature of your school's reporting practice?

3. What is/are the greatest challenge(s) your school experiences in reporting to parents?

4. What would you like to prioritise in developing your school's reporting practice?

5. If you wish, please comment on any other aspect of reporting to parents

**THANK YOU FOR COMPLETING THIS SURVEY!**

## On-line Survey Sample Pages

**School Survey Form: For Completion by School Principal**

**1. School Survey Form: For Completion by School Principal**

The purpose of this survey form is to create a picture of your school's reporting practice, as part of a systematic random sample of primary schools being undertaken by the research team from UCC commissioned by the NCCA. This information will help the UCC research team to write a report for the NCCA on current practices in relation to reporting to parents in primary schools. Results of this survey will be presented in aggregate form, that is, overall statistics on how schools as a whole responded to survey questions will be presented. Individual schools will NOT be identified in reporting the survey results.

**2. General Information On Your School**

**1. School Roll Number:**

**2. School Address:**

**3. Position held in school**  
 Teaching principal  
 Administrative principal

**4. Student Population:**  
Number of Students   
Number of Boys   
Number of Girls   
Number of Facilities

**5. Location of Your School**  
 Urban  
 Rural

**6. Age Range of Your School:**  
 Junior School  
 Senior School  
 Vertical School (all classes to sixth)

**School Survey Form: For Completion by School Principal**

**4. What information do teachers currently report to parents in the written report? (Please tick all relevant boxes)**

	During School Year	At End of Year	By Appointment
Progress in subjects or curriculum areas	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social and personal development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The child's strengths as a learner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Areas of learning difficulty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Areas of particular achievement	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Children's active participation in class work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Difficulties related to homework completion	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Results of standardized tests	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Means to help parents support their child's learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child's own input or comments	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**5. What format is used on report cards? (Tick all that apply)**

	Infants	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
DOI	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Letters	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Created by class teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>						
Created by school	<input type="checkbox"/>						

**6. When are report cards sent to parents (Tick all that apply)**

	Junior Infants	Senior Infants	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th
End of Year	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Mid-Year	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>							

**School Survey Form: For Completion by School Principal**

**2. Please indicate which themes your school would include if you were designing report cards for parents?**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	No Opinion
Space for student comment	<input type="radio"/>				
Space for parent comment?	<input type="radio"/>				
More space for comment on areas such as art, PE, drama	<input type="radio"/>				
Space for input by learning support, SEN or resource teacher	<input type="radio"/>				
Create an online version that parents could check on the web	<input type="radio"/>				

**3. Do teachers involve/include children when meeting with their parents at PT meetings?**

Yes  
 No

**4. Who attends parent-teacher meetings?**

	never	rarely	sometimes	often
mother	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
father	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
both parents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
grandparent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
parent with parent	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## Email to Principals: Invitation to Complete Survey

Dear Principal,

Click on link on line below to complete and submit online survey:

[https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=39qaZqzjo0jPOdxvVPaBYA\\_3d\\_3d](https://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=39qaZqzjo0jPOdxvVPaBYA_3d_3d)

\*\*\*\*\*

Dear Principal,

Following up on our phone call to you/school secretary earlier this week, we are now sending you the online survey as part of an NCCA-commissioned study on *Reporting to Parents in Primary School*.

We would greatly appreciate your completing the online survey. It will take 15-20 minutes of your time to answer the questions. Each school that fully completes the survey will be entered in a draw for a laptop computer.

Please complete your questionnaire in the next few days. Because only a relatively small number of schools are being surveyed (i.e. we are using a stratified random sample), your response is very important to us. That is, as we are only surveying 412 of 3292 primary schools each school's response is vital in developing an accurate profile of how schools report to parents nationally. In this context, the IPPN encourages principals to complete and send back the survey.

Your answers will, of course, be strictly confidential. Individual schools will NOT be identified in reporting the survey results.

If you have any difficulty accessing or completing the survey, or would like to speak to the research team please contact Dr. Paul Conway: [pconway@education.ucc.ie](mailto:pconway@education.ucc.ie)

Thank you in advance for your time and effort.

Paul

UCC Research Team on NCCA-commissioned study: *Reporting to Parents in Primary School*  
Prof. Kathy Hall, Head of Education & Study Director Dr. Paul Conway, Dr. Anne Rath,  
Dr. Rosaleen Murphy and Ms. Jacinta McKeon





