

**FAMILY-SCHOOL COLLABORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF LEARNING  
ASSESSMENT PRACTICES AND COMMUNICATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of the study is to examine family-school collaboration in terms of parents' appreciation of the school report card and their knowledge and understanding of teachers' role and assessment practices. Exactly 125 parents of elementary level students, all members of the Provincial Parents Committee completed the questionnaire and answered a semi-opened question. Results revealed that the more the parents know about the teachers' assessment methods, the more they understand them. The more they are satisfied with the methods and agree with the results, the more they perceive the school report cards as being clear, understandable and useful in monitoring their child's progress. Such findings suggest that parents and teachers need to do more work together in developing workshops on assessments of disciplinary and cross-curricular competencies and on the understanding of report cards and assessment results that are being reported.

## CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A large number of literature scans, research syntheses and meta-analyses conducted nationally and internationally have emphasized the influence of the family on children's success in school (e.g., Adams and Ryan, 2000; Deslandes, 2005; Fan and Chen, 2001; Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Jordan, Orozco and Averett, 2001; Pourtois, Desmet and Lahaye, 2004). On one hand, parents can assist in their child's learning process and provide the school with useful information on how he or she learns. On the other hand, teachers can help parents understand the factors that influence their child's performance by informing them of his/her progress.

Assessment is a topic of enormous interest and concern to parents because all parents want their children to do well in school (Dodd and Konzal, 1999). Many view their children's academic experience as an indication of how their lives will turn out; they are consequently encouraged, worried or confused by the information on report cards (Martinez, Martinez & Pérez, 2004). The past debate surrounding the choice of report card model in Quebec reflects the complexity of learning assessment and communication to parents within the implementation of the education reform begun in 2001. The objectives of the Quebec Education Program include success for all, the development of competencies, integrated learning and evaluation in the service of learning (MEQ, 2001). The new Quebec Curriculum is thus based on the development of disciplinary and cross-curricular competencies. These new ways of learning call for new ways of evaluating. Parents are sometimes hostile to these new non-traditional methods because the latter ones differ from what they are familiar with (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson and Henrich, 2000; Dodd and Konzal, 1999, 2000). Report cards are considered the most important communication tool linking schools and families (Epstein, 2001). Many parents, however,

complain they have difficulty understanding the information on report cards because it's too complex (Deniger, 2004; Kay, Fitzgerald, Paradee and Mellencamp, 1997; Martinez, Martinez and Pérez, 2004).

How can schools expect parents to be involved in checking their child's progress if they do not understand the evaluation issues at stake in a competency-based Education Program approach? Various approaches have been proposed for finding solutions to this problem. Some authors have suggested adding certain factors (Chrispeels and Rivero, 2001) to other variables that explain the motivation for parental involvement, that is, parents' understanding of their responsibilities (parents' role construction), parents' beliefs about teachers' role and parents' self-efficacy (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins and Closson, 2005; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2004, 2005; Deslandes and Rousseau, 2007; Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler and Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). To our knowledge, no studies in Québec have yet examined family-school collaboration in terms of parents' appreciation of the school report card and parents' knowledge and understanding of school assessment practices. The information that will emerge is of paramount importance within the current Quebec education reform where evaluation is a central component of the curriculum. It will shed light on what parents need to know and to understand in order to better communicate with the teachers and to better monitor their child's progress. A better understanding of the new report card will undoubtedly foster greater continuity between family and schools.

### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The study aimed to analyze Quebec parents' perception of their child's report card at the elementary level. Specific questions were as follows: (1) What is the parents' appreciation of their elementary child's report card? (2) To what extent do individual and family characteristics, parents' motivational beliefs to be involved in checking their child's academic progress and

parents' knowledge, understanding and satisfaction with the teachers' assessment practices predict parents' appreciation of the child's school report card?

## METHOD

### Participants

Exactly 125 parents of elementary level students, all members of *Fédération des comités de parents* (FCPQ) completed the questionnaire. Those parents are considered to be *leaders* because they were involved within the participatory structures in Quebec schools. Seventy-six percent of them were females and 85% lived in traditional families. About 28% had attended Cegep (postsecondary years, after high school) and 64%, university. Nearly 30% of their children had learning difficulties, while 24% succeeded well and 46%, succeeded very well.

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### Measures

Demographic measures. *Respondents' educational background, family structure and children's school achievement* (4-point scale, 0-has important difficulties to 3-succeeds very well). All of the measures were translated in French, adapted in the Quebec context and validated by parents from the FCPQ. The answers were on a 4-point scale, 0-complete disagreement, 3-complete agreement). Parents were also asked whether it was important or not to know how well their child was doing compared to other children in the same grade at school (Williams, 2007; dichotomous item: yes/no). Likewise, they had to answer a 4-item scale about their source of information regarding academic assessments (William, 2007; alpha = 0.60).

Parents' motivational beliefs to be involved in checking the child's progress -*Parents' role construction* (adapt. of Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1999; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2004, 2005;

Martinez et al., 2004; 4 items; alpha = 0.60).-*Parents' beliefs about teachers' role* (adapt. of Deslandes and Rousseau, 2007; 5 items; alpha = 0.77). -*Parents' self-efficacy* (adapt. of Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1999; Deslandes and Bertrand, 2004, 2005; 5 items; alpha = 0.74).

Parents and children's academic assessments. -*Parents' understanding of the teachers' assessment approach* (adapt. Martinez et al., 2004); 6 items; alpha = 0.78). -*Parents' knowledge of what teachers assess* (Martinez et al., 2004); 9 items; alpha = 0.90). -*Parents' knowledge of the subject evaluated and reasons for evaluation* (adapt. of Williams, 2007; 3 items; alpha = 0.69).-

*Parents' satisfaction with the assessment approach used by teachers and the assessment results* (Martinez et al., 2004; 2 items).

Parents' level of appreciation of the report card. (1 item; 3-point scale, 0-the report card was not clear and understandable to -2 the report card was very clear and understandable (Deslandes, Gosselin and Nadeau, 2007).

Qualitative data were also collected regarding the reasons for which the report card responded or did not respond to parents' expectations. The results are however reported in another article (Deslandes, Rivard and Joyal, 2009).

## **Procedures and analyses**

All data used in this study were collected from survey respondents by means of questionnaires in December 2007 and January 2008. It is important to note that the survey was conducted after the Ministry of Education' request to produce report cards involving not only descriptive results but also grades and group average scores for each discipline. Questionnaires were placed on a limited access website that had been advertised by the FCPQ. In fall 2007, just before our study began, the Quebec Ministry of Education responded to parents' complaints about the report card by changing legislature and requesting teachers to simplify the formulation

of competencies, to convert competency degree of development into numbers and to include the group means in the report cards.

## **RESULTS**

### **Parents' appreciation of the report card**

Over 21.6% of the parents described the report card as being not clear and not understandable while 24% of them described it as being very clear and very understandable (see Table 1). Almost 54% of the parents felt that the report card was fairly clear and understandable, mentioning need for more precision. As for the other measures that were also available, exactly 82% of the respondents said that it was important to know how their child was performing compared to the others in the same grade. Nearly 62% and 91% of the parents were in agreement respectively with exchanges with other parents and with the school as sources of information on academic assessment. Only 28% considered newspapers and media as relevant sources of information. Descriptive statistics of the measures are illustrated in Table 2.

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### **Predicting appreciation of the school report card**

Data were analyzed using the hierarchical regression procedures of SPSS Windows, release 13. Table 3 shows the correlation matrix for the variables included in the study.

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First, three family and individual characteristics (i.e., respondents' educational background, family structure and children's school achievement) were introduced as a block and forced into the regression equation, explaining 5.8% of the variance in parents' appreciation of the report card,  $F(3, 121) = 2.49, p < .06$  with school achievement as the only significant predictor ( $\beta = .22, p < .05$ ). Then, three parents' motivational beliefs (i.e., parents' role construction, parents' beliefs about teachers' role and parents' self-efficacy) for checking children's academic progress were forced into the second block and explained another 13.3% of the variance  $F(6, 118) = 4.66, p < .001$ , with one significant predictor, parents' self-efficacy ( $\beta = .36, p < .001$ ). Finally, the third block made up of four variables concerning parents' beliefs, understanding and satisfaction with respect to teachers' role and assessment approach (i.e., parents' understanding of the teachers' assessment approach, parents' knowledge of what teachers assess, parents' knowledge of the subject evaluated and reasons for evaluation and parents' satisfaction with the assessment approach used by teachers and the results) explained 15.7 % of the variance  $F(10, 114) = 6.09, p < .000$ . The final equation (total  $R^2 = 34.8\%$ ) yielded a three-variable model including the following predictors: parents' understanding of the teachers' assessment approach ( $\beta = .25, p < .01$ ); parents' beliefs about teachers' role ( $\beta = -.22, p < .01$ ) and parents' satisfaction with the assessment approach used by teachers and the assessment results ( $\beta = .20, p < .04$ ).

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## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Our findings indicate that over 75% of the respondents do not fully understand the school report and assessment results that are being presented in the report card. We find that the more the parents understand the teachers' role and their assessment methods, the more they are satisfied with the assessment approach and the results, the more they perceive the report card as being clear, understandable and useful in monitoring their child's progress. There are negative relationships between parents' perceptions of the report card and their beliefs regarding the teachers' role in explaining assessment procedures, methods and activities and in guiding to target their child's strengths and weaknesses. This simply suggests that when parents encounter ambiguities in the report card, they greatly rely on teachers for more complete and in-depth information. This finding is in accordance with the very high percentage of parents (91%) who consider the school and the teachers as the main source of information in regard to the report card. As reported by Martinez et al. (2004), parents whose children are having difficulties in school are less satisfied with the report card. It is the same with low self-efficacy parents. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in the present study, parents whose children did not receive as high scores may have rated the report cards as less clear and readable for factors other than the difficulty in understanding what was being communicated. Of major interest in this study is the result regarding highly educated parents' need for more detailed information than the one provided by the school report card. That finding is further substantiated by comments made by parents: "...the school principal and the teachers do not really know how to explain the report card" (PBU153-102); "I think the report card contains a lot of information, but the latter does not allow me to get an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of my child" (PBU020-102). If highly educated parents require more information, it becomes even more critical to assist parents with lower educational level. The results suggest that the school report card must be improved to

become a better communication tool school between schools and families. Parents usually value report cards to help them to follow their children' school progress, that is, to be able to judge what is right or wrong (Martinez et al., 2004, 2007).

This study has some limitations. For example, it applies mainly to the situation prevailing in the Province of Quebec (or other countries having a similar situation as described in the introduction) with respect to the implementation of an education reform in a competency-based Education Program approach. Future studies should take a closer look at the secondary level. Moreover, the sample represents parent "leaders" and thus, the results cannot be generalized to all the parents with children in the school.

The study has several implications for practice. It seems that parents and teachers (homeroom and specialist teachers such as physical education, or arts teachers) need to do more work together in developing workshops on assessments of disciplinary and cross-curricular competencies and on the understanding of report cards that will be integrated in a parent involvement education program aiming at enhancing parental involvement and parent-teacher communication. Research has shown that when parents participate in assessments, then their investment in their child's education becomes more profitable and family-school communication is higher (Martinez et al., 2004, 2007). Given that the system of reporting assessment results had recently changed in Quebec when the study was conducted, it would be interesting to determine if these beliefs and concerns still persist. New knowledge and new strategies related to parent-teacher communication in the context of learning assessment practices will contribute to improve pre-service and in-service teacher training.

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Table 1

Individual and Family Characteristics

Variables	%
<b>Gender of Respondent</b>	
Female	78.4%
Male	21.6%
<b>Family Structure</b>	
Traditional Families	84.8%
Non Traditional Families	15.2%
<b>Respondent's Level of Education</b>	
Secondary Level or Lower	8%
CEGEP Level (college)	28%
University Level	64%
<b>Gender of the Child</b>	
Female	44.8%
Male	55.2%
<b>Child's Level of Schooling</b>	
1st cycle	36.8%
2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle	32.8%
3e cycle	30.4%
<b>School Achievement</b>	
Has some learning difficulties	30.4%
Succeeds well	24.0%
Succeeds very well	45.6%

Table 2

## Means and Standard Deviations of the Variables Under Consideration

Variables	M	SD
Parents'		
Role	2.29	.52
Construction		
Self-Efficacy	2.04	.55
Beliefs about	2.63	.43
teachers' role		
Understanding	1.89	.49
of the teachers		
assessment		
approach		
Knowledge of	2.05	.50
what teachers		
assess		
Knowledge of	1.69	.58
the subject et		
reasons for		
evaluation		
Satisfaction with	1.80	.64
the assessment		
approach and		
results		
Level of	1.02	.68
appreciation of		
the report		

Table 3  
Correlations Among the Studied Variables

Variables	Role construction	Self-efficacy	Beliefs about teachers' role	Understanding of assessment approach	Knowledge of what teachers assess	Knowledge of the subject and reasons for evaluation	Satisfaction with the assessment approach and results	Level of appreciation of the report
Parents'								
Role construction	1.000	.23**	.49***	.32***	.25**	.23**	.12	.01
Self-efficacy		1.000	.06	.37***	.26**	.44***	.41***	.38***
Beliefs about teachers' role			1.000	.29**	.21**	.09	.08	-.12
Understanding of assessment approach				1.000	.32***	.37***	.47***	.38***
Knowledge of what teachers assess					1.000	.35***	.41***	.26**
Knowledge of the subject and reasons for evaluation						1.000	.49***	.32***
Satisfaction with the assessment approach and results							1.000	.45***
Level of appreciation of the report								1.000

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Parents' level of appreciation of the report card ( $N = 125$ )

Variables	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1			
Children's school achievement	0.33	0.13	.22*
Step 2			
...Parents' self-efficacy	0.44	0.11	.36***
Step 3			
Parents' beliefs about teachers' role	-0.35	0.14	-.22**
Parents' understanding of the teachers' assessment approach	0.34	0.13	.25**
...Parents' satisfaction with the assessment approach and results	0.22	0.11	.20*

**Note.**  $R^2 = .06$  for Step 1 ;  $\blacktriangle R^2 = .13$  for Step 2 ( $ps < .001$ );  $\blacktriangle R^2 = .16$  for Step 3 ( $ps < .001$ ).  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .