A Pilot Study Aiming to Promote Parents' Understanding of Learning Assessments at the Elementary Level

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Abstract

The new Québec curriculum is different from other curriculum reforms in that it is based on a competency approach, both cross-curricular and disciplinary. It thus means a move from knowledge-based to competency-based assessments which represents a real challenge to parents who may find it hard to understand learning assessments and their child's report card. In this article, the authors focus on a recent effort aimed at piloting workshops to promote parents' understanding of assessments. The article describes two case studies of workshops using an experiential learning approach conducted with parents of kindergarten and 6th grade students. In general, the parents who participated as active learners reported more knowledge and understanding related to school assessment practices. They also felt more equipped for interacting with their children to monitor academic progress. The workshops represent a potentially effective way of communicating with parents regarding learning assessments to help them better understand the evaluation methods used by teachers.

Key Words: learning assessments, competency approach, teachers' evaluation methods, parents, workshops, communication, Québec, Canada, report cards

Introduction

In 2001, the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec (Ministry of Education, Québec; MEQ) started implementing a curriculum reform whose objectives

are success for all, the development of competencies, integrated learning, and evaluation in the service of learning (MEQ, 2001a, 2001b). The former curriculum based on objectives separated knowledge and competencies and did not allow for a global vision of learning. The new Québec curriculum aims to fill these gaps and stands out from other curriculum reforms in that it is based on a competency approach, both disciplinary and cross-curricular, that is intellectual, methodological, personal and social, and communication related. A competency is defined as "a set of behaviors based on the effective mobilization and use of a range of resources" (MEQ, 2001a, p. 4). For example, students who learn grammar rules can show their knowledge through memorization exercises, but they demonstrate their competencies when writing a letter. In the context of learning French as a mother tongue, it is a question of competencies in reading, writing, or oral communication. This shift thus requires moving from knowledge- to competency-based assessments.

Literature Review

Evaluation of Learning in the Québec Education Program

Implementing education reform that stresses the development of disciplinary and cross-curricular competencies demands a renewed evaluation characterized by a new vocabulary and ideas (Scallon, 2004). Learning assessments are based on a judgment regarding knowledge acquired and competencies developed by a student (MEQ, 2002a, 2002b). Several evaluation tools are suggested to gather information necessary to make such a judgment, such as observation checklists, lists with statements that describe a series of actions, self-evaluations on the part of the students themselves, and conferences between the student and the teacher. Using a teacher's logbook, anecdotal records, and the student's portfolio are strongly recommended to record information. The MEQ (2002a, 2002b) has also provided competency levels to guide school teachers in identifying the stages in the development of competencies. The legend used for report cards reflects the judgment regarding the development of competencies: (1) very satisfactorily to (4) with great difficulty, or (A) very easily to (D) with great difficulty.

In short, the whole evaluation process requires tools and ways of doing things that are different from what many parents and teachers have known (Deslandes & Lafortune, 2000; Dodd, 1998; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2000; Swap, 1993). Grade scores and group averages are replaced by qualitative comments. Some of the teachers are resistant to the implementation of the reform in its entirety, alleging that they have to give marks for competencies that, according to them, have not been evaluated (Pineault, 2006). Accordingly, parents often

react negatively to nontraditional practices if they do not understand the issues involved in their children's learning (Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich, 2000; Dodd & Konzal, 1999, 2000; Lewis & Henderson, 1997). Parents are up in arms, claiming the report card that displays letters does not allow them to follow the progress of their child (Bussière, 2006). They also deplore the impenetrable language of school reports. They ask for documents that are clear and precise (Deniger, 2004; Fédération des Comités de Parents du Québec [FCPQ], 2008). It should be noted that criticisms made by both parents and teachers are reported mostly in the French media rather than in research.

In order to overcome these shortcomings, the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (Ministry of Education, Leisure and Sports, Québec; MELS, 2007) revamped the report card in 2007 to include a grade in percentage for each assessed competency, a group average for each subject, and simplified competency labels. These changes seem to maintain ambiguity and confusion regarding the evaluation process; they do not appear sufficient to satisfy parents' requests.

Family–School Collaboration and Communication

Numerous literature reviews, research syntheses, and meta-analyses conducted nationally and internationally have stressed the family's influence on children's success in school (Adams & Ryan, 2000; Deslandes, 2009; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Pourtois, Desmet, & Lahaye, 2004). There is also evidence that parental engagement positively influences other factors that lead to achievement, such as school aspirations, motivation to learn, and learning strategy use (Deslandes & Rousseau, 2008; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Heavy, 2000; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Van Voorhis, 2009). This process is a two-way street: parents can aid in their child's learning and provide the school with useful information on how he or she learns, and teachers can help parents understand the factors that influence their child's performance by informing them of their child's progress. Assessment is of great interest and concern to parents, because all parents want their children to do well in school (Dodd & Konzal, 1999). Many view their children's academic experience as an indication of how their lives will turn out (Martinez, Martinez, & Pérez, 2004). Consequently, they may be encouraged, worried, or confused by the information on report cards.

Studies have examined factors that influence parents' motivation to become involved at home and at school (Chrispeels & González, 2004; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Aside from some life context issues (e.g., knowledge, skills, time, and energy), these studies identified three main factors influencing parental motivation: parents' role construction,

sense of self-efficacy, and child and school invitations (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Parents will get involved if they believe that it is a normal responsibility of parenting and that their efforts will make a positive difference for the child. They will also get involved if they receive invitations from their child's teachers suggesting that their involvement is wanted and expected. Some researchers have underlined the importance of parents' conceptions regarding their role in predicting their involvement (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004). Others have suggested adding a new construct to the sets of contributors, for example, parental knowledge of academic standards and tools for checking their child's progress (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001).

At the same time, report cards are generally considered one of the most important communication tools linking schools and families as well as one important aspect of communicating about assessments (Epstein, 2011). How can schools expect parents to participate in monitoring their child's progress if these parents do not understand the evaluation issues at stake in the competency-focused Québec Education Program? In response to these recriminations and in order to better understand the issues surrounding learning assessment for parents, the authors conducted a research program (consisting of 4 studies to date) between the years of 2007 through 2011 which was an extension of their work on school–family collaboration in the context of Québec education reform. The research program was intended to spur innovation within the current education reform, of which evaluation is a central component. The two goals of the research program were to identify parents' needs in relation to learning assessments and to pilot tools or workshops for parents.

A first study (2007–2008) was conducted among 125 French-speaking parents[1] of elementary school children on their needs regarding students' learning assessments, that is, parents' perceptions and understanding of the teachers' practices and of the parents' role in monitoring their children's progress in school. This study was based on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) revised theoretical model of the parental involvement process that includes parents' motivational beliefs, that is, parental role construction, parents' beliefs about the teachers' role and parents' self-efficacy. It was also guided by Martinez, Martinez, and Pérez's (2004) research conducted in Spain on parents' understanding of teachers' assessment approach and parents' knowledge of what teachers assess. For this study, the Fédération des Comités de Parents du Québec (FCPQ), whose members are all involved within the participatory structures in Québec schools, put out an invitation and gave the link to an online survey in its *Action Parents Journal* (FCPQ, 2008). Voluntary participants came from fifteen different regions of the Province. Findings revealed that 64% of responding parents had attended university. Nearly 50% of respondents reported not knowing, not

being informed, and not understanding the methods used by teachers to assess student learning. More than 80% of parents wanted the teacher to discuss with them the activities that had been evaluated in the classroom (Deslandes, Rivard, Joyal, Trudeau, & Laurencelle, 2010).

A second study (2008–2009) examined parents' needs through educators' perceptions of parents' knowledge, role construction, sense of efficacy in helping their child, and understanding of assessment of learning, in conjunction with elements of parents' family life context. Identifying educators' points of view regarding the responsibilities of parents in that matter was perceived as a preliminary step to any process of identifying ways to meet parents' needs. This study, like the previous one, was based on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) revised theoretical parental involvement model. We used a qualitative approach based on three focus groups conducted with educators (*n* = 27) working in two primary schools in low socioeconomic status (SES)[2] neighborhoods. The two schools were invited to participate because of their openness to the curriculum reform and research. The interview protocol was grounded on the theoretical model and the literature review. Once audiotaped and transcribed, the verbatim transcript of the focus groups were coded using L'Écuyer's (1990) mixed content analysis. Findings indicated that the expectations of educators towards parents far exceed those normally expressed, that is, to support the child and to supervise school work. In fact, educators said they expected parents to understand the nature of the child's difficulties and to have a global vision of the learning process. Some perceptions regarding parents seemed to be consensus among the participating educators, while others reflected different positions. Among the common denominators, these teachers felt that most parents living in low SES neighborhoods do not seem to really understand the changes in the assessment methods and the hermetic and complex language often used by teachers as a result of the implementation of the Québec reform in education. Certain educators questioned the willingness or desire of some parents to obtain more information related to learning evaluation methods, and some referred to parents' lack of availability and energy, as well as to a negative vision or perception of school (Deslandes & Rivard, 2011a).

The third study's (2009–2010) objectives were to develop and pilot some tools for parents. School teachers from one of the above-cited low SES schools believed many parents lacked strong interest in the evaluation of learning and had limited time and energy, so the teachers favored the development of simple tools such as leaflets characterized by the use of clear and simple language. Based on the framework of Epstein's six major types of parent involvement, this study concerned mainly *Type 1: Parenting* and *Type 4: Learning at Home* and aimed at giving information to parents and helping them to develop their

skills on how to assist children in preparing for academic assessments (Epstein, 2011). A working committee consisting of three teachers involved in each of the learning cycles (1st cycle: grades 1 and 2; 2nd cycle: grades 3 and 4; 3rd cycle: grades 5 and 6) participated in the creation of a pamphlet for their respective cycles. On each one, there were definitions of the concepts "knowledge" and "competency," illustrated with examples relevant to each of the learning cycles. A few short quiz-like questions asked parents to indicate whether they referred to knowledge or to competency. A correction key was printed in small size letters at the bottom of the page. The back explained the ABCs of the report card or the questions most frequently asked. After a validation process with parent members of the school governing board, the teachers distributed the pamphlets and a questionnaire related to the evaluation of the tool at the first meeting with each cycle group's parents (total of three groups) at the start of the 2010–2011 school year. A total of 13 parents completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis, and six of them joined a discussion group in response to the invitation that appeared at the end of the questionnaire. The topics covered in both the questionnaire and the discussion group included the usefulness of the pamphlet tool, the way that school grades are calculated, exchanges with their child's teacher, and support of their child's schooling. All of the participants (three discussion groups) said that they now understand the difference between "knowledge" and "competency." They wanted to know more about grades, such as whether they came from evaluations or classroom observations. Others saw a lack of transparency in the percentage allocated to each component of the competency considering the grades appearing in the report card. Participating parents felt more able to ask the right questions of the teacher (Deslandes & Rivard, 2011b).

The above three studies served as a background to a recent study that is related to the second objective of our research program, that is, to improve parents' understanding of assessment with a pilot workshop based on two case studies conducted during the year 2010–2011. The following section of this article focuses on the findings that emerged from that fourth study. Challenges that lie ahead are then discussed. It is important to note that all of the conducted studies had first received university ethics committee approval.

Pilot Study on Parents' Understanding of Learning Assessment

In this fourth and recent study, two female teachers (two cases) working in the same rather low SES rural school volunteered to design and offer pilot workshops (objective two of the research program) to their kindergarten and 6th grade students' parents, respectively, in order to better equip them in

supporting their children in the learning evaluation context and in monitoring school progress and difficulties. The goal of this particular study was thus to preview workshops for parents. The school where the study took place had 322 enrolled White and French-speaking kindergarten to Grade 6 students. In 2010–2011, the socioeconomic environment index (EEI)[2] of the school was 6/10, with a score of 1 representing a well-off school and a score of 10, a very poor school. The kindergarten teacher retired in 2012 after 32 years of teaching, while the 6th grade teacher had been teaching at the elementary level for about 14 years at the time of the study.

Theoretical Framework of the Two Case Studies

This fourth study builds upon the experiential approach of Kolb (1984) which postulates that experiential learning is based on two processes: action and reflection. Experiential learning involves more than the acquisition of knowledge or understanding of a phenomenon; it requires ownership of experience that is revealed in personal choices showing a change in behavior or in action. This process allows for self-reflection on past actions. In other words, the learner transforms experience into knowledge, expertise, and skills. This type of study is also well suited to better understand the complexity of learning assessment. In the current study, parents were invited to experience teaching–learning situations designed according to the competency approach to curriculum and in light of the contents and knowledge required by the Québec Education Program (MEQ, 2001a). The Québec competency-based reform calls for more active parent participation. Parents' role as learners stands out as important in the *Pedagogical Renewal*. In other words, parents should be seen as lifelong learners. However, the majority of parents were exposed to a limited number of diverse teaching and assessment methods in their traditional classes during their childhood. Indeed, parents' beliefs in relation to learning in school are the result of their personal history—their past school experiences and their family life context and socioeconomic status (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005) They develop mental models of what a child should learn and how it should be done. According to Dodd and Konzal (1999), some parents may be open to the introduction of nontraditional teaching and evaluation strategies, while others may resist the introduction of new ones. Perrenoud (2000) argues that a teacher must show great competency and be assertive in order to gain the support of parents who initially seem rather reluctant to his/her pedagogical approach. In what follows, we present two case studies that were guided by the experiential approach.

Data Collection and Analysis of the Two Case Studies

The qualitative case study format was used in the study. This type of approach is appropriate when one wants to understand a phenomenon in depth and has little data on it (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2003). As the two teachers working in the same school but different grade cycles used a somewhat different approach, we present the findings of each of the two cases separately.

The two teachers gave an invitation letter to parents who were present at the first meeting with their group of students' parents at the start of the school year (2010–2011). If the parents were absent, the letter was sent home through the child's communication folder. In the letter, the teacher invited parents to a two-hour meeting after school, scheduled at 7:00 p.m. on October 13, 2010 in the students' classrooms, during which parents would go through some learning situations that their children would also experience during the school year. The letter stated that the workshops would be followed by a period of discussion and exchanges and that coffee and prize drawings would be offered. The workshops' evaluation questions were prepared by the two involved teachers in collaboration with the two researchers. For the two case studies, each of the **60-minute group discussions that followed the workshops was audiore-**corded and then transcribed by two first degree university students who had been trained accordingly. All participants had given their written consent beforehand. The analyses were conducted by a master's degree student also well trained in using the NVivo software and based on L'Écuyer's (1990) mixed content analysis, meaning that it was grounded on the sections of the interview protocol while letting new categories emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The two researchers responsible for the study were involved in the validation process. In reporting the findings, we purposely chose to highlight the themes or categories that appeared of particular relevance to participants and that could possibly guide teachers in future development of similar workshops.

Kindergarten Level Case Study

Participants. Out of the 16 parents at the kindergarten level who had been invited to participate in the workshops, exactly seven parents (1 male, 6 females) of four boys and three girls showed up the night of the event. Four parents were from traditional families (i.e., two biological parents), and three were from nontraditional families (single parents and stepfamilies). Every level of schooling (i.e., elementary, secondary, vocational, collegiate, and university levels) was represented. Almost all of the participants had a two-child family (see Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Kindergarten Children's Parents

Partici-pants	Participants' Gender	Level of Schooling	Family Structure	Family Size	Child's Gender
1	F	Collegiate	Traditional	2	M
2	F	Elementary	Traditional	2	M
3	F	Vocational	Traditional	2	F
4	F	Secondary	Stepfamily	4 & more	F
5	F	University	Stepfamily	2	M
6	F	Vocational	Single-parent	2	F
7	M	University	Traditional	2	M

Description of the Workshops. At the beginning of the meeting, the teacher asked parents to form teams of two or three individuals. The teacher provided them with the necessary material and explained how the workshops would be conducted. Four 15-minute workshops were offered. They were based on mathematics, art and emergent literacy, science, and music. The first workshop, based on mathematics, required parents to build a maze with provided blocks and to place a toy little boy at the entrance and a toy car at the end. In the second workshop, parents were asked to read the story of the fox and the crow; to identify the characters, the setting, and the action that was going on; to draw these elements with felt pens; and to write the title of the story at the top and his/her name at the bottom-left of the page. The third workshop was related to sciences. Parents were requested to choose one of the two suggested assumptions (floating or sinking) of seven different objects (e.g, dice, pen, straw) when they were put in a glass of water. They also had to calculate the number of correct answers they obtained. In the fourth workshop, parents had to illustrate on a sheet of paper a musical phrase that included short and long sounds, soft and loud sounds, slow and rapid sounds, to play it, to modify it if they did not like it, and to ask a friend to play it using very simple musical instruments that were provided by the teacher. At the end of the four workshops, the teacher looked back on each workshop to see how it had gone for the parents and to identify, according to participating parents, which competencies of the Québec Preschool Education Program had been targeted. She recalled to the parents that the Program fosters the development of six interrelated competencies (see Table 2). She also told them that each workshop offered an opportunity to develop several of those competencies (see Table 3 for a synthesis of the workshop contents and the targeted competencies).

Table 2. Québec Preschool Education Program Competencies

Number	Label of the Competency
C1.	To perform sensorimotor actions effectively in different contexts
C2.	To affirm his/her personality
C3.	To interact harmoniously with others
C4.	To communicate using the resources of language
C5.	To construct his/her understanding of the world
C6.	To complete an activity or project

At the participants' request, the teacher described their child's typical day in school and explained some of her teaching strategies. For example, she said: "I use a lot of cues with children; we do physical exercises in the morning, and at the same time, I work on their body image and their overall motor skills" (Competency 1). She went on to say: "In kindergarten, children do not always sit at the same place, as it is an opportunity to socialize and make new friends. It's just on the rug that they always have the same place, because it's easier and it avoids many arguments." She added that she teaches songs, some expressions in English, and she organizes fine arts activities, free games, and table games. She then gave an example of a teaching strategy: "Children, four at a time, drew together some trees. To do so, they had to come to my work table called the 'square table.' They then learned to follow directions." She also explained how she collected observation data on each of the students: "I have a small folder. I make an effort to focus on a particular child at a time. Remember that I spend the whole day with them; I know them, they change but not that much." To the parents' surprise, she said she gives mostly Bs and Cs but rarely As on the report card.

Evaluation of the workshops. After the workshops, participating parents were invited to respond to three open-ended questions using the focus group method (see Appendix A). The questions were about their understanding of the teacher's learning assessment methods, of their child's report card, and about the possibility of offering similar workshops in the coming years. Content analysis led to the coding of statements into five themes or categories: (1) difference between the two constructs, knowledge and competency; (2) academic assessment; (3) parents' self-efficacy; (4) evolution of the development of the child; and (5) knowledge of the child's daily routine at school (see Table 4).

Table 3. Contents of the Workshops at the Kindergarten Level

	Objectives	Materials	Targeted Competencies
1	• To build a maze using the provided blocks and placing the toy little boy at the entrance of the labyrinth and the toy car at the end	• Wooden blocks • Lego little boy • Toy cars	Mathematics C3. To listen to the others' ideas C5. To understand what a labyrinth is C6. To understand, execute, and complete a task
2	• To read a story • To identify the characters, the setting, and the action that is going on • To draw those elements with felt pens • To write the title of the story at the top and his/her name at the left-bottom of the page	• The story of the fox and the crow • Sheets for drawing • Felt pens (limited in number in order to oblige the participants to share)	Art and Emergent Literacy C2. To get organized and to show autonomy C3. To be able to negotiate and to share C4. To write some words C5. To retain the information C6. To understand, execute, and complete a task
3	• To write one's name at the top of the sheet • To propose a hypothesis by placing a red X in the appropriate case • To test the hypothesis (experimentation) • To put a green X in the case corresponding to the obtained result • To check if the hypothesis is confirmed • To write down at the bottom of the sheet the number of right answers	• Tray filled with water • Various objects • Instruction sheet covered with plastic • Red and green pencils	Sciences C2. To store the material C3. To listen to what others say C4. To write his/her name at the top of the page; to write the number of correct answers C6: To understand, execute, and complete a task
4	• To create a musical line and play it • To change it if desired • To ask a friend to play it	• Cards indicating different musical symbols (long and short sounds; soft and loud sounds; slow and fast sounds)	Music C2. To store the equipment C3. To listen to the others, taking turns C5. To distinguish different sounds and recognize the symbols C6. To understand, execute, and complete a task

Table 4. Distribution of Parents' Comments at the Kindergarten Level

Themes	# of Comments	Examples
Differences between knowledge and competency	6	We can really see the competencies they have to develop, and the things they'll have to do during the school year.
Academic assessment	6	I was wondering how the assessment was done. I had my answers. The majority of students will get Bs and Cs. It is a good thing that we know it before receiving the report card.
Parents' self-efficacy	10	If they have difficulties, we'll know more on how to help them.
Evolution of the development of the child	7	Since my daughter started kindergarten, she has improved a lot.…This is because of her new friends.
Knowledge of the child's daily routine at school	3	My son does not talk much. When I ask him what he did at school, he never remembers. It is interesting to see our child's learning class environment and to hear about a typical day at school.

The parents' comments showed that they understood the difference between knowledge and competency. One parent said: "We now know exactly which competencies they have to develop during the school year." They also understood that the teacher assesses competency attainment level mainly through classroom observations. Some even wondered how the teacher managed to really focus on one child at a time and arrive at a clear-cut evaluation that really reflects the level of competency development by the student. Parents indicated it would be easier for them to understand their child's report card. They admitted that for them, a C in the report card represented a poor performance. Being informed ahead of time before receiving the child's report card prevented any bad surprises. They also said that they felt more capable to intervene if their child is having difficulties. Furthermore, many parents expressed pride in their child's higher level of autonomy: "Just having an agenda and being responsible for it." Some appreciated being informed of their child's typical schedule during a school day. In short, participants thought that absent parents could also benefit from the workshops and that the formula should be repeated.

Sixth Grade Level Case Study

Participants. Of the 22 parents of Grade 6 students, three of them responded positively to the invitation. Because the participation was on a voluntary

basis, there was no way of knowing nonparticipants' reasons for not showing up. The participants were female, mothers of two girls and one boy. They had different schooling backgrounds (i.e., elementary level, vocational at the secondary level, and collegiate level) and came from diverse family structures with three or more children.

Table 5. Characteristics of Sixth Grade Children's Participating Parents

Partici-pant	Gender	Level of Schooling	Family Structure	Family Size	Child's Gender
1	F	Vocational	Traditional	3	M
2	F	Elementary	Stepfamily	4 & more	F
3	F	Collegiate	Stepfamily	3	F

Description of the workshops. The parents participated in four workshops (see Table 6 for a synthesis of the workshop contents and the targeted competencies). The first workshop included a 6th grade student's written text containing several grammar and spelling mistakes. Parents were asked to make corrections using a self-evaluation checklist that every student must use in class and that is based on the targeted curriculum competency "To write a variety of texts in French." Then the teacher explained her own evaluation checklist and the links between her evaluation and the letter that appears on the child's report card. In fact, each letter corresponds to a range of scores, for instance the mention of "satisfactory" leads to a B, which in turn corresponds to a score ranging between 80% and 90%. Every rating has its own set of criteria, very well described within a grid. The second workshop required the parents to read a text and to answer questions using the worksheet on reading strategies employed by students in the 6th grade classroom. The third workshop was on mathematical skills using a worksheet with problem-solving strategies usually used in class. In the last workshop, parents were invited to make a puzzle according to provided instructions. The targeted competency was "to work in cooperation with others using effective working methods." After each of the workshops, the teacher described her own way of evaluating and the final rating that appears in the student report card.

Table 6. Contents of the Workshops at the Sixth Grade Level

	Objectives	Materials	Targeted Competencies	Discussion Topics
1	To read a student's text and make necessary corrections using a zero fault grid, dictionary, and grammar book	Text written by a 6th grade student	To write a variety of texts in French	Correction grid and explanations about the score on the report card
2	To read a text and to answer the questions using reading strategy cards	Text and questions to answer	To read a variety of texts in French	Correction grid and explanations about the score on the report card
3	To use problem solving skills and to describe the approach using the provided problem solving sheet	Problem solving sheet	To solve mathematical problems, to reason with concepts and to communicate using the mathematical language	Correction grid and explanations about the score on the report card
4	To make the puzzle in accordance with the given instructions	Mixed puzzle pieces	To work in cooperation with others using effective working methods	Description of the team work: climate and efficacy

Evaluation of the workshops. The evaluation at the 6th grade level of the workshops as a whole was conducted in the same way as the one at the kindergarten level. The group interview protocol was composed of four questions (see Appendix B). The coding of the verbatim transcript was done with the assistance of NVivo software. The analysis, which was based partly on Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (2005) model, led to the emergence of five themes or categories: (1) understanding of the concepts of knowledge and competencies; (2) way of calculating the score on the report card; (3) parents' self-efficacy in intervening in their child's schooling; (4) parental responsibilities and challenges regarding their child's schooling; and (5) reasons linked to the low level of parental involvement in the workshops (see Table 7).

Just as in the kindergarten level case study, the participants said they now understood the distinction between the two concepts, knowledge and competency. One parent said, "It's like two things, but they are both needed in order to meet challenges." They also became aware of the important role of the teacher's observation notes and of the descriptive grids in the evaluation of

learning. A participant declared, "…now, I know that I'll have to pay attention to the evaluation grid that was used. It is a good thing I came tonight." However, some participants said that they still find it hard to assist their child in his/her learning: "Everyday's homework is not easy for me; it has been a long time since I got out of school." Another added: "In order to help, I need a dictionary, and yet it remains hard for me." Another one continued: "Being a parent is challenging." Several comments emerged as explanations for the low rate of parental participation in the workshops. They were mostly stated in terms of lack of time and energy and especially fear of being judged. One mother acknowledged: "I admit…I thought of not coming, but I decided…after all, I'm an adult." They think that the term evaluation is perceived as threatening by many parents; they suggested that in the future, any invitation sent to parents should not contain such a term that carries negative connotations. Finally, they deplored the constant changes in the Québec education system and the burden and the challenges associated with monitoring the performance of school children as parents.

Table 7. Distribution of Parents' Comments at the Sixth Grade Level

Themes	# of Comments	Examples
Differences between knowledge and competency	6	I understand that in order to develop a competency, there must be acquired knowledge first.
Academic assessment	7	Assessment through observation… that is interesting, even reassuring. When observing, the teacher sees things… It is very detailed; the grids help us to understand.
Parents' self-efficacy	5	I understand better. We receive a lot of information at the beginning of the school year, but we do not take the time to read everything.
Parental responsibilities and challenges regarding child schooling	5	We're here for our child and his education. Assessment is essential in education.
Reasons linked to the low level of parental involvement in the workshops	12	The word "evaluation" is scary to parents. Some parents feel they are being judged.

Discussion

The studies conducted within this research program provide a starting point for understanding the many challenges surrounding family–school communication in the context of learning assessment. Findings from the first study revealed rather well-educated parents' need to be better informed of the teachers' assessment strategies and to discuss with their child's teacher the workshops that were evaluated. Results from the second study showed consensus among educators regarding low SES parents' lack of knowledge and understanding regarding changes in learning assessments that are part of the main implications of a competency-based approach. However, there were divergent points of view among educators with respect to low SES parents' desire to know more about evaluation strategies. These led to prioritizing different approaches in helping parents to become better able to grasp the concept of evaluation that underlies the current Québec Education Program and to better monitor their child's academic progress. In the third study, some teachers chose to provide information to their students' parents through pamphlets, whereas in the fourth study, others thought of workshops in which parents were involved as learners. Some participating parents in the third study considered leaflets as a first step toward a better understanding of Québec's Policy on the Evaluation of Learning (MEQ, 2003a) and that other support measures should follow. The parents who participated as active learners in the fourth study workshops reported more knowledge and understanding related to school assessment practices. In general, they also felt more equipped for interacting with their children to monitor academic progress and to discuss it with their child's teacher. Unfortunately, parents were not asked to reflect any further on the experience they had gone through.

At the end of this research program, and especially following the completion of the fourth study, two points retained our attention: the low level of parental involvement in the workshops, and the context of ambiguity and controversy that currently prevails in Québec surrounding school reform and assessment of learning. Only about half of parents responded positively to the teacher's invitation at the kindergarten level, and only 11% of parents did so at the grade six level. Those small numbers, especially at the 6th grade level, give pause as to how much in general can be gleaned from this research. The whole might be considered a pilot.

There are several explanations for the low level of parents' participation in the workshops, all equally plausible. Such findings remind us inevitably of the life context elements as they are discussed in the revised model of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005). These include the socioeconomic status of parents in

addition to their knowledge, availability, and energy, as well as the family culture that encourages parental involvement (or does not) and that is colored by parents' past school experiences. Also included are parents' self-efficacy and parents' role construction. Participants also mentioned the burden of family responsibilities and parents' fear of being judged or evaluated by their child's teacher. Is it possible that this vulnerability is accentuated by a low level of schooling that often prevails among parents from rather low SES backgrounds? Indeed, we understood that in such a context, the invitations sent to parents should avoid terminology with depreciative connotation like the words workshop and evaluation. The use of neutral and inviting terms represents an additional challenge for teachers who want to assist parents through active involvement in curriculum workshops. As a promising avenue, it might be worth thinking about having parent leaders with previous relevant training conduct the workshops with other parents. This suggestion is in line with Cunningham, Kreider, and Ocon's (2012) work on the positive effects of parent leadership programs with regard to parents' general leadership, communication skills, and parental involvement. It is also in the same vein as other research findings (e.g., Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley, 2011) that show the importance of training in building knowledge and empowering parents. Another possible explanation could be associated with parents' understanding of their role in relation to the evaluation of learning. During discussions with parents, some have indeed indicated that they relied on teachers when it came to evaluation of learning. Their concerns were more associated with monitoring homework. A last explanation could have to do with grade levels—that fewer 6th grade students' parents, as compared to kindergarten students' parents, were involved is not surprising given that parental involvement in schooling decreases as the child gets older (Deslandes & Cloutier, 2002; Epstein, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Overall, the use of simple information tools seems appropriate as a first step with all parents, not just those with low SES. Information tools and workshops are a few of many ways that schools can use to remedy the current confusion regarding assessment.

The controversy in Québec surrounding the implementation and application of the education reform, with learning assessment at the heart of complaints among parents and in the media, is hardly conducive to collaboration between schools and families. While adjustments and corrective actions have already been taken by each of the successive ministers of education in office since 2001, doubts related to the benefits of reform appear to persist. There is reason to believe that shattering titles in the popular media such as "School reform. A grim portrait" (Dion-Viens, 2011) or "A clear report card…that lacks clarity" (Cardinal, 2010) are contributing to the fertile ground in ambiguity.

Also contributing is the lack of consensus among academics involved in teacher training and among practitioners from the field of practice. After the recent implementation of the unique provincial report card by the Québec education minister, there still seems to be discontent among some teachers' unions (Breton, 2012). In short, we may wonder if we are not witnessing media manipulation of public opinion. Before making a hasty judgment on the drawbacks of the curriculum reform, we should wait for the publication of the evaluation study of the reform. So far, it seems that the preliminary results show a rather grim portrait based on teachers', students', and parents' perceptions. Certainly, the academic performance of students having learning difficulties has not improved. However, some authors call for caution and suggest the possibility that the reform was not fully implemented in classrooms (Dion-Viens, 2013). To our knowledge, it is the first and only systematic approach that has been taken to assess the effects of the reform since the beginning of its implementation (Larose & Duchesne, 2012).

Conclusion

What do parents need to understand? From a report card overloaded with information and criticized by many parents, the MELS has moved to a report card that contains a minimum of information.[3] We favor the latter format, being clear and concise, as requested by parents. Too much information may cause confusion. Moreover, learning assessment falls within the teachers' expertise. It corresponds to one of the competencies in the list of professional competencies developed by the MELS. Similarly, to involve parents and inform them is another competency expected of teachers. Various well-known communication devices and strategies can be used to promote effective work with parents, including parent–teacher conferences, electronic mail, phone messages, memos, and evaluation copies or the child's portfolio sent home with his or her strengths and weaknesses being identified. However, the report card is still one of the main ways of communicating about assessments. Workshops represent another way of informing parents regarding learning assessment in order to help them in understanding evaluation methods used by teachers. Our findings show that such workshops are worth replicating elsewhere. However, we may wonder whether it is realistic to expect a significant number of parents to commit to learning about assessments. It is possible that a low level of parental involvement in such workshops reflects some discomfort or uneasiness on the part of parents towards the evaluation process.

We believe it is urgent that the MELS carries the torch to show leadership and consistency and paves the way for clear and precise assessment of

learning. The education minister must try to gather parents, educators, teachers unions, scientists, and students around a common vision of knowledge and of functional and enabling competencies linked to academic assessment. We are convinced of the merits of the approach deployed in this research program and of the need for preservice and in-service teachers' to be trained in these areas. Only when the blur surrounding learning assessment methods is dispelled will we be able to move forward to promote and further develop family–school communication and collaboration to support student success.

Endnotes

[1] Québec is the only province in Canada with a predominantly French-speaking population (about 80%). According to Statistics Canada, Censuses of population, 1971–2006, referred to in the Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Official Languages, *The vitality of Quebec's English-speaking communities: From myth to reality* (retrieved from http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/SEN/Committee/403/offi/SubsiteMar11/Report_Home-e.htm, pp. 5–6), only 8% of the population declares that their mother tongue is English. For the 2011–2012 school year, the MELS reported that 10% of elementary level students were attending Anglophone schools (MELS, 2011).

[2] In Québec, a socioeconomic environment index (EEI) is calculated by the Ministry of Education (2003b). A third of the EEI calculated represents the proportion of parents who are unemployed, while two-thirds correspond to the proportion of mothers who did not graduate from high school.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol at the Kindergarten Level

1. How did these workshops help you to understand our approach in terms of observation and assessment of children's development and learning?
2. Will it be easier for you to understand your child's report card? Explain.
3. Should we repeat the workshops next year? Explain.

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol at the Sixth Grade Level

1. Did and to what extent have these workshop activities that your own child will experience during the year helped you to understand the difference between "knowledge" and "competence"?
   a) Yes/ No; b) Explain.
2. Do you know by now a) where your child's grades come from? b) How academic assessment is done? c) What strategies or evaluation methods we are using in class?
   a) Yes/No ; b) Explain.
3. Do you feel more comfortable and more knowledgeable about your child's learning assessment?
   a) Yes/No ; b) Explain.
4. Do you feel better equipped to assist your child in his/her learning?
   a) Yes/No ; b) Explain.