

Reporting Student Achievement Against National Standards: Discussion Paper on Reporting to Parents Examples

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Abstract

This paper is written in response to recent developments in the New Zealand Education sector. National achievement standards have been introduced and with their introduction the debate about how best to report student achievement against the standards has arisen.

A number of reporting examples have been developed by the Ministry of Education which demonstrate possible ways of achieving an effective reporting process. This paper examines the literature about student learning and the factors that impact on learning and then critiques the proposed models against the literature. This paper further suggests improvement to the proposed examples of reporting.

Section One: What do we know about factors that affect student learning?

Relationships, motivation and self efficacy

In recent times much research has been carried out in relation to what makes a real difference to student achievement.

Studies suggest that students who have a positive, secure relationship with their teachers are engaged more highly in their academic work (Stipek, 1998). Relatedness is one of three basic human needs, along with feelings of competence and self-determination (Connell & Wellborn, 1991 cited Stipek, 1998: 155). Research by Connell and Wellborn (cited in Stipek, 1998: 156) showed that student's feelings of relatedness to their teachers and classmates are strong predictors of their cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement in classroom activities.

For low achieving students, Hill and Hawk (2000) argue that the relationship between teacher and student is a prerequisite for learning. Low achieving students will not be motivated and will not succeed unless they have a positive relationship with their teacher. This has implications for the relationship between parent and teacher. If parent and teacher do not have a positive relationship what impact might that have on the student teacher relationship?

Gipps (2002) argues that in an open communicative relationship, communication is oriented towards understanding and respecting the perspectives of others. A positive relationship includes teachers demonstrating an understanding of the worlds of the students, that is, the worlds of home, church, school friends and work. Positive relationships also include respect, fairness, optimism, participation

and reciprocity (Hill & Hawk, 2000). This concept is reiterated by McCaslin and Hickey (2001). In a sociocultural analysis, attribution and efficacy theories inform the emergent interaction of motivational dynamics, which are the “stuff” of identity (McCaslin & Hickey, 2001: 245).

Self-efficacy is also a key indicator of success (Bandura, 1986; Stipek, 1998; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Schunk, 2001). The concept of self-efficacy is defined as a belief that you can learn and that you are capable of improvement (Hill and Hawk, 1996; Bandura, cited in Stipek, 1998: 41; Schunk, 2001: 143). Self-efficacy affects student’s behaviour, thoughts and emotional reactions (Stipek, 1998).

Students seek out activities and situations which they judge themselves capable. Students who have high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to set higher goals (Locke & Latham, 1990, 1994; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992 cited in Stipek, 1998:43) choose more difficult tasks (Sexton & Tuckerman, 1991 cited in Stipek, 1998: 43), and persist longer with tasks (Schunk, 2001:127). Students with lower self-efficacy become anxious and preoccupied with feelings of incompetence and are concerned with the notion of failure (Stipek, 1998:43).

Stipek (1998) and Schunk (2001) argue that it is the interaction between self-efficacy and the environment that is of critical importance in changing a student’s self-beliefs and therefore increasing the level of self-efficacy. As students work on tasks and are made aware of their progress towards their learning goals self efficacy levels are changed. Progress indicators “convey to students that they are capable of performing well”, which enhances self- efficacy for continued learning (Schunk, 2001: 127).

Linked to self-efficacy is the notion of locus of control. Rotter (cited in Stipek, 1998:58) states that internal locus of control refers to the belief that events or outcomes are contingent on one’s own behaviour or on a personal characteristic, such as ability. External locus of control is identified as factors beyond an individual’s control, such as the quality of the teacher. Paris, Byrnes and Paris (2001) believe that children construct beliefs about the control they can exercise in their environments. Outcomes are both desirable and achievable or unobtainable based on their beliefs, and this contributes directly to their theories of ability and effort (Paris, Byrnes & Paris, 2001). Independent goal setting and motivation are unlikely if students do not possess beliefs that they can control their actions to achieve their own goals (Johnston & Johnston, 1985 cited in Paris et al, 2001).

Students are motivated by success and intrinsic motivation is a key factor in becoming a lifelong learner. Learners who see their success or failure as a result of factors within their own control are more likely to be successful than those who attribute success or failure to external factors (over which they have no control) (Hill & Hawk, 2000).

If students are to see themselves as in control of their learning, they must be encouraged to participate in the educative partnership. They must have some control over and participate in decision-making about their learning and what and how information about their learning is shared with parents. Parents and teacher must have an understanding of the importance of the student’s role in the partnership.

The extent to which students see themselves as in control of their own learning is a powerful determinant in the motivation of students to learn. However, it is also critically important for students to know how to succeed in their learning (Hill and Hawk, 1996).

Goal setting, feedback and self assessment

The setting of challenging and attainable goals has a direct impact on motivation and self esteem of students (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Assessment Reform Group, 1999: 7). Achievement is enhanced to the degree that students, parents and teachers set and communicate appropriate, specific and challenging goals / learning intentions(Hattie, 1999: 2). Schools that develop effective partnerships with students and parents find ways in which parents can support and encourage their children and provide parents with practical help (Bastiani, 1993). Stipek (1998) argues that goals which are distal (long-term goals) are important for students to keep in mind but they may be difficult to monitor in terms of progress towards meeting them. Proximal goals (short term goals) or learning intentions may provide the opportunity to make a task seem more manageable, which, in turn, can serve to raise self-efficacy.

It follows, therefore, that if setting and communicating appropriate, specific and challenging goals enhances learning, involvement of parents in knowing and supporting the goals set must further enhance the educative partnership between teacher, student and parent.

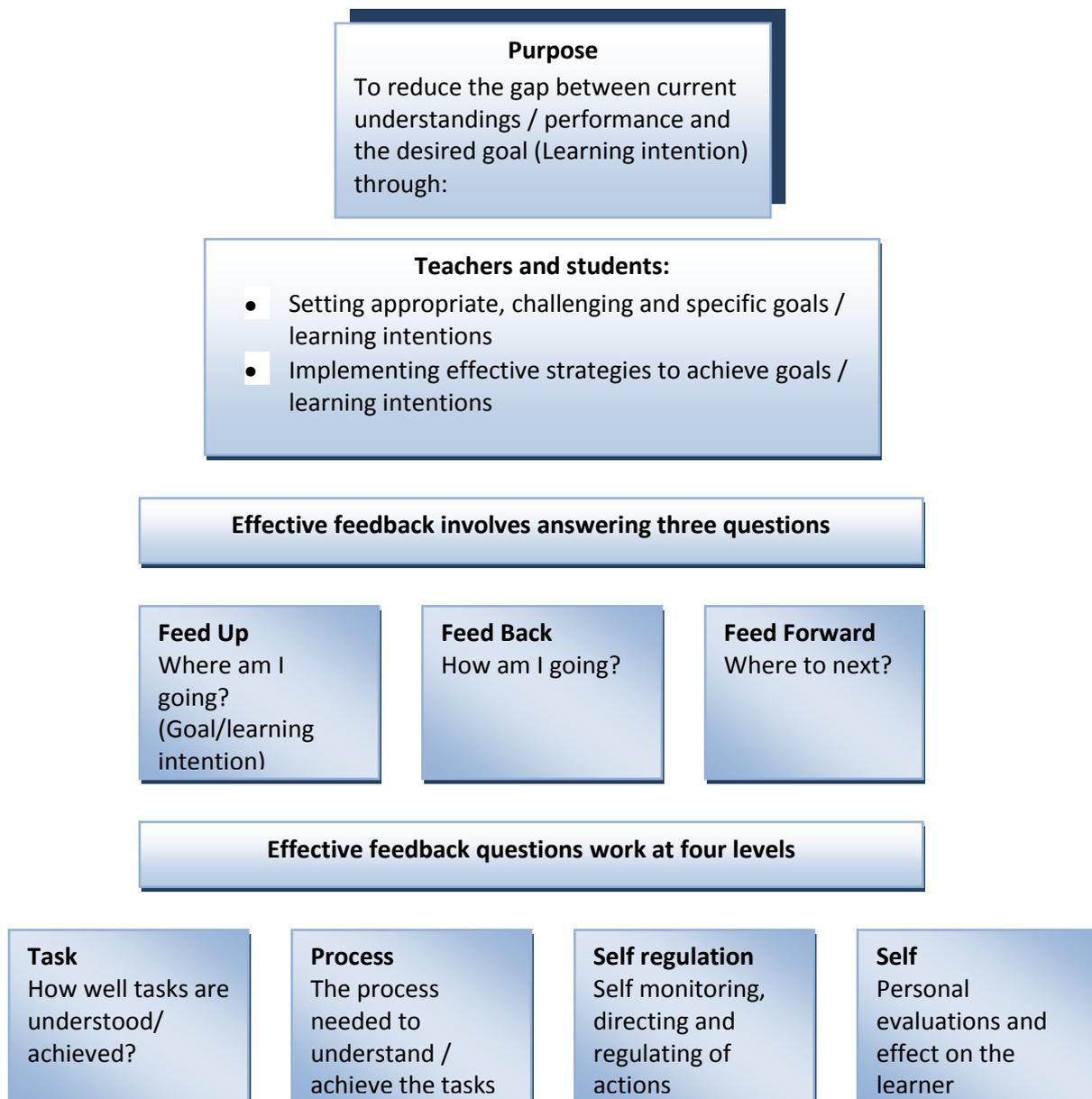
Appropriate, challenging, and specific goals or learning intentions inform students about the type of performance to be attained. This enables the student to direct and evaluate their actions accordingly (Hattie, 1999: 11, 2009). Clarke (2001: 25) argues for making learning intentions (or targets) visible to students. Clarke (2001) interviewed 72 students and asked if their teachers had shared or discussed targets with them. Most students indicated that this was not the case even though teachers in these classrooms did share targets or goals verbally. Teachers were then asked to write the targets or goals up for students to see. The difference in student perception of targets and goals was significant. Students indicated that they looked at the success criteria and that reminded them about what they were supposed to be doing (Clarke, 2001; Clarke, Timperley & Hattie, 2003). In other words the visual cues supported student's understanding of the task and provided the scaffolding to succeed within the learning experience or task.

Effective teachers set appropriately challenging goals and then structure situations so that students can reach their goals. Critical to successful achievement of learning goals/ intentions and tasks is the notion of feedback and feed forward. Achievement is enhanced as a function of feedback (Hattie, 1999: 2, 2009). Providing information that assists students understand their learning and to identify what directions the student might take to improve learning. Feedback allows students to set reasonable goals and to track performance in relation to those goals which, in turn, allows them to make adjustments to their actions, effort and directions. Hattie (2009) argues that effective feedback answers the following questions:

- Where am I going? (Learning intentions/goals/success criteria)
- How am I going? (self assessment and self evaluation)
- Where to next? (progression, new goals)

Hattie (2009) suggests that feedback is not ‘the answer’ to effective teaching; rather it is one powerful answer. Diagram 1 indicates a framework from which feedback can be considered. Diagram 1 is adapted from Hattie (2009, Fig 9.9, p. 176)

Diagram 1 Model for feedback (Hattie 2009)



A combination of effective instruction and feedback is most effective (Hattie, 1999, 2009; Schunk, 2001). The development of parents’ understanding of these important factors affecting student learning would provide a platform for partnership. Parents need a clear understanding of how different types of feedback can either positively or negatively affect learning.

Feedback is powerful but the self-strategies that students develop can alter the interpretation and consequences of feedback. Providing feedback to students is not enough because the way students interpret information is a key to developing positive and valuable concepts of self (Hattie, 1999). While it may be the teacher who provides the feedback, it is the student who must take the next step in their learning. Thus it follows that actions which will raise the level of achievement of students will involve the student in decision making rather than being “passive recipients of feedback from the teacher” (Black & Wiliam, 1999: 9).

Inclusion of the students in decision-making demands a rethink of the traditional relationship between teacher and student, which traditionally, has been hierarchical. It has been a relationship where the teacher sets the tasks and determines how performance should be evaluated. However, an alternative approach is to negotiate tasks and how those tasks will be assessed. Negotiated assessment and self-assessment involves the student in discussing and negotiating the terms and outcomes of the assessment (Gipps, 2002: 77). Self assessment is the process of reviewing a past experience, seeking to remember and understand what took place and attempting to gain a clear idea of what has to be learned and achieved (Towler & Broadfoot, 1992: 137, cited in Hill, 1999: 34).

Students should be encouraged and taught to evaluate their own work and to monitor their own progress (Stipek, 1998). Evaluating their own work allows students to develop a sense of their own competency and also develop strategies to guide their efforts for improvement (Stipek, 1998).

The effectiveness of self-assessment and self-management of learning has been shown to improve with age, experience, intelligence, academic achievement and the quality of instruction (Paris & Cunningham, 1996; Swanson, 1990; van Krayenoord & Paris, 1997, cited in McAlpine, 2000:2). Developmental improvements in self-assessment allow students to rely less on adult evaluations of their work. Student assessment is fundamental to the development of intrinsic motivation and autonomous learning. Self-assessment supports students ‘learning how to learn’ (van Krayenoord & Paris, 1997, cited in McAlpine, 2000: 2). Through self-assessment teachers and students become more like partners in the learning process. Collaboration is the key to successful self-assessment techniques in the classroom (Bourke & Poskitt, 1997).

How might self-assessment partnerships between teacher and student be extended to include parents? Self-assessment results could be recorded qualitatively through descriptions for example, in students’ work books, portfolios, records and journals, or quantitatively through rating scales, inventories and questionnaires (McAlpine, 2000).

F. Biddulph, J. Biddulph and C. Biddulph (2003) argue that there are various forms of educational partnerships operating in schools, not all of which are effective. Those partnerships which are poorly designed, based on deficit views, and not responsive to the needs of families can be ineffective and even counterproductive. Programmes which are effective respect parents and children, are socially responsible, and are responsive to families and the social conditions that shape their lives (Biddulph et al., 2003:172).

Waller and Waller (1998: 4) refer to the ideal parent-teacher relationship as being a sharing of expertise. That is, a full sharing of knowledge, skills and experience between teacher and parent.

Dawson and McHugh (2000: 122) develop this concept further by arguing that a genuine curiosity about how a child learns and develops both socially and emotionally, if explored by teachers and parents together, would enrich the educational experience for everyone.

The teacher-student-parent relationship can be best described as the “power of three” (Coleman, 1998, cited in MacBeath, 2000: 143). MacBeath (2000) describes this power of three in relation to a triangle with student, parent and teacher at each apex. Each of the sides of the triangle is represented by a plus or minus which denotes the positive or negative nature of the relationship. If more than one of the sides is denoted with a minus sign the power of the educational partnership diminishes almost entirely (MacBeath, 2000:143).

Bastiani (1993) defines partnership in relation to overlapping and distinctive emphases. An effective partnership will involve a sharing of power, responsibility and ownership. A degree of mutuality is necessary. Mutuality is characterised by a process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue. Responsive dialogue implies that action occurs as a result of dialogue. Shared goals and a commitment to joint action in which parents, students and professionals work together provide a sound foundation for effective partnership (Bastiani, 1993).

Reporting student achievement

In a study conducted by Taylor (2004) parents and teachers in three case study primary schools in New Zealand were asked to identify the key purposes of reporting. Parents and teachers identified their key purposes of reporting. The parents and teachers were in complete agreement. Key purposes in order of importance were:

- Finding out how to help the child with their learning
- Finding out how teacher and parents or caregiver could work together to support the child’s learning
- To be informed about whether the child is making good progress
- To be informed about whether the child is working hard
- To be informed about whether the child’s achievement is commensurate with children of a similar age

These purposes go straight to the heart of partnership. In each of the case study schools, policy documents omitted the first two purposes listed above. Given that these two purposes are the most important (as identified by parents and teachers) and they have the potential to strengthen the partnership between parents and teachers, schools must consider ways that they can achieve these purposes within their policy statements (intent) and their procedures (actions). Linked to partnership are the educative theory concepts of developing student self-efficacy, locus of control and motivation. These concepts are aligned with actions such as goal setting, setting challenging tasks, feedback and feed forward. Developing reporting processes should incorporate these concepts and may start with the questions:

- How does what we report and how we report contribute to a student’s self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation and knowledge about their own learning?

- How does what we report and how we report contribute to parents' and caregivers' knowledge about how to support their child's learning?
- How does what we report and how we report contribute to a teacher's knowledge about how to support the child's learning?

These key questions provide a context for examining potential practices that result in raised student achievement within the framework of effective partnerships.

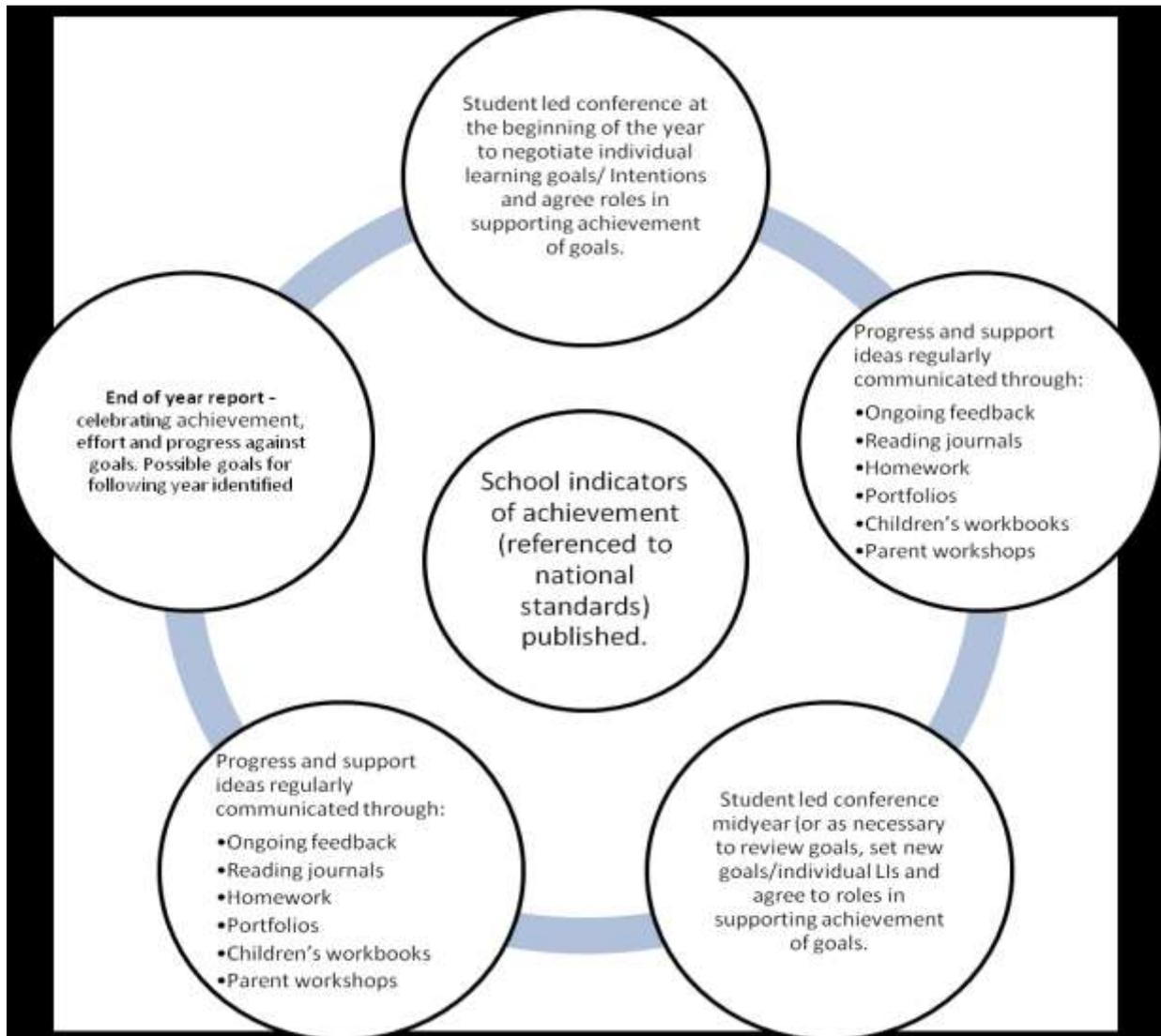
Table 1 indicates a reporting process that addresses the questions identified above. It indicates the processes, factors, function and expected outcomes of effective reporting practices.

Table 1 Reporting process

Underlying principles	Process	Key factors	Outcome
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Involves and benefits students – self efficacy, locus of control and motivation - Contributes to parents' and caregivers' knowledge about how to support their child's learning - Contributes to a teacher's knowledge about how to support the child's learning - Supports teaching and learning goals - Is planned and communicated - Is suited to purpose - Is valid and fair - Celebrates the achievement and progress made by the student 	Beginning of year student led conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by the student ▪ Informed by achievement data ▪ Goals are challenging and achievable ▪ Goal setting and plan written 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Everyone is clear about: ▪ What the learning goals / intentions are ▪ Their role in achieving learning goals / intentions
	First six months – plan in action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Effective teaching and learning ▪ Regular feedback to student ▪ Student self regulating ▪ Regular communication and feedback to parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The student is able to evaluate their own progress based on feedback / feed forward ▪ The student self monitors and regulates actions based on feedback
	Mid year student led conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Led by the student ▪ Informed by achievement data ▪ Goals are reviewed, reset and a plan is written 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Everyone is clear about: ▪ Achievement and progress to date ▪ What the next learning goals /intentions are. ▪ Their role in achieving learning goals / intentions
	End of year report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written by the teacher and the student ▪ Recognises that the audience is the family and extended family ▪ Identifies possible goals for the following year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Families are able to celebrate all of the successes of the year

Diagram 2 provides a possible model for effective communication between teacher, parents and student. It takes components of Table 1 and captures them into a cycle of reporting. The model is based on findings from research undertaken by Taylor (2004).

Diagram 2: Cycle of Communication in Reporting Student Achievement Which Demonstrates Educative Theory and High Level Partnership



Section Two: How do Ministry of Education examples of reporting align with educative theory?

Reporting To Parents Example: The Proposed Process

Sample Learning Plan

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| • First Six Months | Goal to be achieved |
| • Mid-year meeting | Discuss first six months and make plan for second six Months |
| • Second Six Months | Goal to be achieved |
| • End of year | Report to parents and child
Meet to discuss last 12 months and make a plan for the following year |

This process includes the concept of goal setting and reviewing progress towards meeting goals. However, it is not clear although perhaps it may be assumed, that the student is present and actively involved in the goal setting and review of progress. Without the student's active presence this process may not necessarily contribute to the student's self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation and knowledge about their own learning. To set goals and develop an action plan at the end of the year may not be timely. It may be more appropriate to set goals at the end of the year but write the action plan at the beginning of the following year including the child's new teacher in the process. The use of language such as 'report to parent and child' does not capture the essence of student and teacher sharing and celebrating achievement and progress with the parents.

Sample of Your Child's Progress

Maths Summary of Progress

Next steps

At school

We will be helping Manu....

At home

You can support Manu's maths by...

This process includes information about what the teacher and parent will do to support Manu. There is no statement about what Manu will be doing to support his own learning. This does not necessarily contribute to Manu's self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation and knowledge about his own learning.

Example Reporting

All examples use the terminology:

- Well above the standard
- Just above the standard
- At expected standard
- Just below the standard
- Well below the standard

It is assumed this terminology has been used as a way to ensure parents are in no doubt about how their child is achieving compared to a national standard. However, in a study conducted in 2004 by Taylor it was found that in schools that used terms such as exceeded the standard, met (the standard), did not meet standard, causing concern, parents interviewed felt their children labelled 'causing concern' and 'not meeting the standard' were discouraged. Parents of children who were 'causing concern' said that this method of reporting was not a helpful way to refer to their child's achievement and effort because it did not identify a way forward and labelled the child a failure.

I know my child is struggling at school. I talk to the teacher all the time and she helps me with stuff I can do at home. I don't need a report coming home the end of the year telling me that my child isn't meeting the standard. I want it (the report) to be something I can share with his Grandma and we can feel proud of what he has done (Parent, School B).

An examination of the literature on self-efficacy may provide some insight here. Self-efficacy is defined as the belief you can learn and that you are capable of improvement (Bandura, 1986; Stipek, 1998; Hill & Hawk, 2000; Schunk, 2001). If children do not believe they can learn they can become demotivated. Being told that 'you do not meet the standard' or that 'you are causing concern' is at odds with the notion of developing a child's self efficacy, particularly if this is reported year after year on the end of year report. However, the tension as identified by Timperley et al. (1999, 2002) is the need for honesty. An analysis of reports in School B from Taylor (2004) case study may provide an insight into reporting which is honest and which provides a way forward. In School B the junior school report did not use grading terms for reporting reading, rather they used a continuum, which identified the reading levels matched to the year level of the student. Parents, caregivers and teachers all commented positively on the approach of using a continuum for identifying achievement.

Table 1 is a replication of School B's continuum for reporting reading. The teacher places a tick in the appropriate box for the achievement of the student.

Table 1: School B Reading Report Continuum¹

YOUR CHILD								
Expected Reading level	Magenta	Red	Yellow	Dark blue	Green	Orange	Light Blue	Purple
Year level	Year One				Year Two			

The use of a continuum such as the one in Table 1 allows parents, caregivers and student to see exactly what reading level their child has achieved, what the next reading level will be (goal orientation) and how their reading level relates to their year group (comparison to age group). This approach does not use the terms 'not met', 'causing concern'. By removing these terms there may be less likelihood of affecting parent and student motivation and lowering of self-efficacy. The interpretation of the continuum should be supported with a statement about effort and progress towards meeting the goals identified at the midyear interviews (self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation). By also including a formative aspect to written reports, a section for possible future goals could provide a basis for parent, caregiver, student and new teacher to develop goals at the beginning of the following year.

End of year reports should be seen only as one part of a full reporting process, a reporting process that has the student at the centre supported by their teacher and parents. End of year reports should be a celebration of learning that has occurred throughout the year. Any achievement issues related to 'not meeting standards' should already be well understood by parents and therefore to what extent do issues need to be highlighted on the end of year report? . A good question to ask of an end of year report is; will this report further develop this student's self-efficacy, locus of control, motivation and knowledge about their own learning? If it achieves this then it will serve its purpose well. If it does not achieve this then the report may have to be redesigned until it meets those criteria. I suggest the examples provided thus far need further improvement.

¹ Colours on table link to colour wheel used in New Zealand junior reading programmes and which identify level of difficulty of text.

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