PARENT AND STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL REPORT CARDS

by

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Abstract

This study examined parent and student perceptions of the mandated Ministry of Education's formal structured written report card, and garnered parent and student opinion regarding reporting practices that better suited individual needs. Parents and students also expressed thoughts, ideas and concerns related to reporting issues.

The report card is the main form of communication between parents, students and teachers and its purpose is to convey information from the school to parents about a student’s educational progress. Since the report card is a prominent document, this study addressed the questions of: how informative and useful are report cards to parents and students and do they support and encourage student learning?

The findings indicated that the report card offered an acceptable way of reporting to parents and students but it did not meet all the needs of parents and students alike because several suggestions for improvement were voiced by participants. In addition, the data in this study suggest that the report card was effective for average to above average parents and students but not for low achieving parents and students. Good letter grades and comments on the report card adequately supported and encouraged good learners, but tended to discourage low achieving students because no matter how hard they tried, they were rewarded with low letter grades.
Finally, parental involvement and motivation were viewed as necessary components to a child's success at school.
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Chapter 1
Introduction And Context

As a practising classroom teacher in the province of British Columbia, I have been required by the Ministry of Education to prepare formal and informal reports according to a specified structure. It is through my experiences with students, parents, and colleagues regarding these reporting practices that I have become interested in this area. Results of research conducted approximately three years ago on my classroom assessment and reporting practices (Reynolds, 1997) have also encouraged this interest. More specifically, I wanted to become knowledgeable about how parents and students perceived the mandated Ministry of Education’s formal structured written report card.

In British Columbia, provincial regulations for the reporting of student progress have required that parents receive a minimum of three formal written report cards, (consisting of structured written reports and letter grades) and two informal reports each year (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994a). Therefore I am mandated to use ministry definitions regarding formal and informal reporting practices.

Specifically, the Ministry states that a formal report for a student in grades 4 to 7 must:

- include a structured written report that clearly describes student progress in relation to expected learning outcomes set out in curriculum
  a) what the student is able to do
  b) areas in which the student requires further attention or development
c) ways of supporting the student in his or her learning

- include written comments to describe student behaviour, including information on attitudes, work habits and effort
- follow district policy for communicating letter grades to parents
- use Ministry-approved letter grades as set out in the Provincial Letter Grades Order to indicate the student’s level of performance as it relates to the expected learning outcomes for each subject or course and grade. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994a, pp. 5-6).

An informal report for a student in grades 4 to 7 describes student progress, in relation to curriculum, in terms of:

- what the student is able to do
- the areas of learning that require further attention or development
- ways the teacher is supporting the student’s learning needs (and, where appropriate, ways the student or the parents might support the learning).

Informal reports provide an important link between home and school and can be accomplished in a variety of ways such as:

- telephone calls
- interim reports (written or oral)
- conferences (parent-teacher, three-way, student-led, etc.). (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994a, p. 4).

The Ministry of Education has imposed a definite reporting framework on students, parents and teachers. Through informal discussions with colleagues, some have joined me in questioning the value of present reporting practices to parents and students. I have grown increasingly concerned about the vast amount
of time that it takes me to prepare report cards in particular. For at least two
weeks each term, some stimulating lessons and marking are put on hold
while I prepare report cards. My students lose valuable instructional time and
might even wonder why their teacher has lost her sense of humour. The loss of
quality teaching/learning time is an area of concern for me because learning
outcomes must be met by this reporting practice. Therefore, I want to learn how
parents and students value report cards and if loss of instructional time is
warranted. I am curious to know if parents and students feel this reporting
practice results in quality reports.

More specifically, I want to examine whether parents and students find
report cards informative and useful in terms of enhancing learning. I also want to
compare findings with the following statement.

Students benefit most when evaluation is provided on a regular, ongoing
basis. When evaluation is seen as an opportunity to promote learning
rather than as a final judgement, it shows learners their strengths and
suggests how they can develop further. Students can use this information
to redirect efforts, make plans to practice the learning, and establish future

There appears to be a conflict between the Ministry’s philosophy and
intended practice because I view evaluation that results in a letter grade as a final
judgement. That is, a letter grade slots students into particular categories. As a
practising teacher in British Columbia I am required to use the following
approved letter grade categories to describe my students’ performance:
Letter Grades For Grades 4 To 12

A The student demonstrates excellent or outstanding performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

B The student demonstrates very good performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C+ The student demonstrates good performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C- The student demonstrates minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994a, p. 8).

I In Progress or Incomplete. (May be used at any time during the school year). The student, for a variety of reasons, is not demonstrating minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes.

F Failed or failing. The student has not demonstrated, or is not demonstrating, minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade. An F may only be used as a grade if an I has previously been assigned. (Ministry of Education, 1997, Policy Circular Number 97-04).

I am also concerned about the mandatory reporting practice of assigning letter grades because of the discouraging effects they may have on some students. For example, I recall the disappointment of students who have tried hard to succeed but received a low letter grade. From reading Guskey (1994) I learned that a child with poor grades may withdraw from instruction in order to protect
his/her self-image. Guskey (1996) explains that grades have some value as rewards, but no value as punishment. In addition, most students view high grades as recognition of their success and many work hard to avoid low grades. Guskey points out that some students may regard a low mark as irrelevant and meaningless, while others may blame themselves and feel powerless to make improvements. In my classroom practice I have seen the kinds of children Guskey discusses. In these cases I hope to gain insight as to whether the requirement to give a letter grade, which in my opinion categorizes students according to achievement, fails to promote student learning.

From results of research conducted in my classroom (Reynolds, 1997), and from an opportunity in 1994 to interview my students regarding one term's report card, I learned to respect and value parent and student opinions regarding report cards. For example, during the student interviews, students expressed concern about how low letter grades may affect the esteem of some students. Their insightful comments and suggestions helped me realize that students can make useful contributions regarding issues that affect them. Students' opinions offer adults a window into their world and an opportunity to understand their perspectives.

Both experiences have led me to assume that parental, and especially student, perspectives and voices should be heard regarding report card practices. By understanding how parents and students value report card practices, valuable insights can be gained regarding what constitutes an informative, useful report card; one that supports and encourages student learning.
Purpose Of The Study

The purpose of the study is to determine how some parents and students at the grade five and six level in one school regard the Ministry of Education’s mandated report card. More specifically, the purpose is to discover how parents and students value present report card practices by determining if the report card is informative and useful. In addition, I hope to discover if parents and students believe the report card supports and encourages student learning. Finally, parents and students will be given the opportunity to express verbally and/or graphically suggestions for a report card which they believe is informative, useful, and encourages and supports student learning.

Research Questions

My research questions centre around the following issues:

Q1 Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students?
Q2 Does the report card support student learning?
Q3 Does the report card encourage student learning?

Significance Of The Study

I have previously noted that I am mandated by the Ministry of Education to give letter grades and prepare structured written comments according to a specified framework for each of the three reporting periods. Since I am bound by these requirements, I want to garner parent and student opinion regarding several areas of concern to me.
Reynolds (1997) comments that present reporting practices grew out of public pressure that demanded conformity to standards. However, like Reynolds, Seeley (1994) states that grades must be interpreted by all members of a school community in the same way for them to be meaningful. I also believe that there is not a common understanding of what a letter grade means and I hope to gain the perspectives of parents and students regarding this issue. I would like to discover if these groups find that letter grades adequately report student progress and if structured written comments provide useful information regarding student progress. I also want to know if parents and students find that structured written comments give clarity to the meaning of a letter grade.

I frequently hear colleagues question present reporting practices. For example, they wonder if parents understand or even read their structured written comments. Some believe parents and students are only interested in the letter grade. They wonder if the countless hours spent preparing report cards are of value to parents and students. After preparing comprehensive report cards, elementary school teachers are required to hold fifteen to thirty minute conferences two times a year. Since these report cards are comprehensive, teachers often feel they are simply reiterating report card contents at the teacher-parent-student conference. I share these thoughts and wonder if they might be validated through the study.

Another important area of my concern is whether parents and students regard letter grades and structured written comments as supporting and encouraging student learning. I assume that they do for students who perform
well, but I have seen how discouraging letter grades can be for lower achieving students. Furthermore, I am curious as to whether parent and student views regarding report cards as informative, useful, supportive and encouraging of student learning will be similar or different.

Through this study I hope to gain insight into parent and student perspectives regarding the areas of concern previously mentioned. From these perceptions I hope to better understand what parents and students value in a report card so that successful reporting practices can be continued while less successful practices possibly changed.

Limitations Of The Study

This study was undertaken to probe particular parent and student perceptions regarding the Ministry of Education’s formal structured written report card. However, there were several reasons why the findings of this study may not represent the viewpoint of other school populations.

The number of participants was small, twelve grade five and six students and their twelve respective parents. Since the study was conducted on one site, a random sample of the population was not possible. Therefore, the opinions of the parents and students from this study may differ from those of larger and varied sites.

The school in which the study took place is comprised of a large English Second Language population, approximately eighty-five percent. Several students receive English as a second language or learning assistance support. As a result,
the students in this study may vary from the population in general with regards to academic achievement.

The sample of parents and students in this study is unique and not necessarily representative of the general population. The participating parents and students were of different racial and ethnic groups, and the number of years of Canadian residence varied from two years to being born in Canada. As a result, some of the participants' opinions may have been influenced by attitudes and reporting practices from their country of origin. Although the students could communicate in the English language, the parents varied in their communication ability, and some required translation from their children. As a result, there may have been differences in meaning and understanding in the interviews where some translation was required. The majority of the students come from low to middle class families and the parents are, in most cases, members of the working class. Therefore, the parents and students who participated in this study may have different cultural and familial expectations than other parents and students.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

My experiences as a classroom teacher have caused me to become interested in several issues regarding reporting practices and the effects they may have on students. As a result, I have broken the literature review into four sections that reflect my areas of interest; the history of educational change in assessment and reporting practices in British Columbia from 1988 to the present, setting the scene, the push to letter grade and written comments and report cards.

Educational Change in Assessment and Reporting Practices In British Columbia From 1988 to the Present

Educational reform in British Columbia began in March 1987 with the appointment of Barry Sullivan as commissioner of the Royal Commission on Education. He was appointed by Social Credit Premier, Bill Vander Zalm, who had promised a Royal Commission during his election campaign in August 1986. Sullivan's mandate was to examine all aspects of British Columbia's school system. The findings were presented in the report, *A Legacy for Learners* (Sullivan, 1988). Research teams addressed six specific topic areas, schools and society; the learners of British Columbia; curriculum; teachers; finance; and governance and administration, (Sullivan, 1988, p. 4).

In the curriculum topic area, sections 5.D.3.A Grading Practices and Reporting to Parents, and 5.H.1 Evaluation of Individual Students, are of
particular interest to this study because they laid the groundwork for reform in reporting practices. In Grading Practices and Reporting to Parents, the commission found that:

In some schools, and especially at the elementary level, reports to parents consist largely of anecdotal comments by teachers who wish to emphasize each individual student’s progress in relation to past performance, rather than to some external standard or relative ranking... Because of its relatively subjective and idiosyncratic nature, this type of reporting is not useful for comparative purposes of any kind, between students, between classes, between schools, or between districts (Sullivan, 1988, p. 87).

In Evaluation of Individual Students, the commission reported that:

The task of assessing individual students’ performance should remain the responsibility of classroom teachers and they should be kept well informed about the most effective means of evaluating student performance. Teachers should base their evaluations on a multiplicity of evidence such as classroom discussions, project work, interviews, written exercises and tests. Evaluation should be continuous for diagnostic purposes and for determining if achievement goals have been attained. The Ministry of Education should provide guidance on standards and criteria that can be employed in evaluating students’ performance. In addition, teachers should have access to sample evaluation instruments to use as models, enabling them to monitor their students’ progress according to provincial expectations. The standards supplied should be explicit enough to enable the monitoring of individual progress on each of the criteria in curriculum guides, (Sullivan, 1988, p. 111).

The 265 page report was released to the public August 4, 1988 and Barry Sullivan died of cancer on March 21, 1989.

Surprisingly, the conservative Social Credit government responded to the progressive Royal Commission Report by adopting all but two of the 83 recommendations (Crawley, 1995). There are several notions as to why the
government proceeded with the Commission's recommendations but the most likely was that the government wanted to persuade the public that Social Credit cared about education.

"The Socreds had pushed the limits of education bashing," says Charles Ungerleider of UBC. Government polling had revealed that the public was fed up with cuts in education. More importantly, the Socreds found out they could garner as much interest and acclaim—and as many votes—by being positive about education as they would from being negative, (Crawley, 1995, p. 32).

On January 27, 1989, Education Minister, Tony Brummet, released the document called Policy Directions, which heralded the government's official policy response to the Royal Commission. The Education Ministry then, in a matter of six months, re-wrote the school act based on the policies spelled out in Policy Directions, issued a version of the primary program, and wrote a draft framework document laying the foundation for the entire education program, the document that would become known as the Year 2000, (Crawley, 1995, p. 35).

years, came the documents detailing the proposed design of the education program, divided into three distinct phases: Primary (kindergarten to grade 3), Intermediate (grades 4 through 10), and Graduation (grades 11 and 12).

As noted previously, in “A Legacy for Learners”, Sullivan (1988) pointed out that even though evaluation was conducted at different levels: individual, class, school, district, and province, he felt the Ministry should focus evaluation on the individual learner. Standards were to be detailed and explicit to allow for the monitoring of individual progress and evaluation methods used by teachers needed to be broadened. Some of these thoughts were expressed in the following section of the Year 2000: A Framework for Learning document:

Our challenge is to move to a more outcomes focused system, in which judgements about student learning are based more on meeting high expectations and attaining standards and less on performance relative to the group....To develop a system in which all learners can succeed, with effort, requires new ways of organizing for learning. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1990, p. 14).

New ways of organizing for learning required new ways of approaching assessment and evaluation and ultimately, reporting. Prior to the Year 2000, classroom assessments tended to be largely paper-and-pencil tests. In response to Year 2000 directives, educators were encouraged to use a wide range of alternative assessment methods such as observation, self-assessment, performance and portfolio assessments. Collecting information in this way required teachers to use more descriptive and informative reporting techniques (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1992a, p. 14).
For each of the three programs in the Year 2000, Primary, Intermediate and Graduation, there was a requirement of three formal reports and two teacher-initiated, informal contacts with parents (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1990). In addition, reports were to describe student progress and what each student was able to attain in relation to expected learning outcomes. Teachers were asked not to compare one student with another.

The draft document, *The Intermediate Program: Foundations* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1992b) reported that frames of reference were being developed to help teachers make judgements about student performance in a given area. A reference set contained a set of examples and descriptions that illustrated widely-held expectations of student performance at various stages.

In the Intermediate program, there were options to formal reporting. For students in grades 4-7 of the program, teachers were given the option of reporting through anecdotal comments or Ministry approved symbols supported by written comments. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1992c, p. 14). The document, *Intermediate Program: Foundations*, provided the reader with a lengthy discussion regarding the drawbacks associated with only using symbols to describe student achievement (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1992b).

While a concise means of communicating student learning is needed, symbols reduce the complexity of the accomplishments of learners, and oversimplification occurs. The symbols may be given overweighted significance; parents/guardians and students may accept them as unchangeable and unquestionable and rate students' abilities accordingly. Using symbols to compare students has the potential for labelling, which may lead to negative effects on learner self-esteem, reduce motivation, and
seriously impede achievement. While the pursuit of a higher symbol may motivate a student, the symbol often becomes the goal, not the learning. The true value of learning becomes extraneous and is lost as attainment of the symbol becomes central. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1992b, p. 118)

I remember many of the discussions, arguments and differences of opinion expressed by the teachers at the school I worked in, as we tried to understand and come to grips with the reporting expectations of the Year 2000. The issue regarding strictly anecdotal comments as opposed to the use of anecdotal comments and letter grades was particularly contentious.

The Social Credit government lost its popularity with voters over allegations of corruption and in the 1991 election, the NDP formed the new government (Crawley, 1995). In addition, although the NDP endorsed the philosophy of Year 2000, and prepared revisions of the Year 2000 and all three programs, several issues over the years interfered with successful implementation.

Suddenly, on September 4, 1993, Premier Harcourt shocked the province with his announcement that “...the report card on Year 2000 is in and it’s failed the grade” (Vancouver Sun, 9.4.93, p. A1). He based his decision to abandon the Year 2000 on a public opinion poll commissioned by cabinet (Crawley, 1995). Apparently the poll’s results indicated the public wanted to improve the quality of education by returning to basic skills and more specific standards. On September 15, Art Charbonneau was appointed Minister of Education.

In November 1993, Charbonneau announced the first of his decisions on education reform in a document called Improving the Quality of Education in B.C.
(British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1993a). The three goals for education were: strong basic skills, a common core of learning and more students graduating. The document noted that schools were responsible for keeping parents informed about their child’s progress and that parents must know exactly how well their child was doing. With regards to evaluation and reporting in grades 4-7 the document stated that:

- evaluation would be based on exams, projects, classroom assignments, and teacher’s observations.
- evaluation would be based on student’s progress towards standards for each grade.

Each year parents would receive 3 structured written reports and 2 informal reports (telephone calls, student-led or parent-teacher conferences, journals). A structured written report was defined as: a clear, complete description of a student’s progress, including any areas of learning in which the student was having difficulty or progressing slower than expected. This would also include an individual learning plan, if necessary, and suggestions as to how parents could support their child’s learning.

- all teachers were required to use letter grades to evaluate student progress, however, school districts would determine how letter grades were communicated to parents. For example, districts could decide to report in conjunction with the structured written reports or alternatively, in parent-teacher conferences. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1993a, p.6).
In December 1993, Charbonneau released the new intermediate program document, *The Intermediate Program Policy* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1993b). In this program, the traditional basics were stressed and standards were emphasized, while *Year 2000* philosophy appeared to be tacked on (Crawley, 1995, pp. 126-127).

In the *Intermediate Program Policy* document, provincial curriculum dictated what students were expected to learn in terms of learning outcomes and these provided the criteria to evaluate and report on student performance. Reporting was to be ongoing and carried out in a variety of ways. Through these means, students and parents were to understand what students were doing well, what difficulties they were experiencing and what might be done to improve their learning. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1993b, pp. 11-12).

The Student Progress Reports section stated that:

All reports would follow specific guidelines that included:
- descriptions of what a student was able to do.
- areas of learning that required further attention and development.
- ways of supporting the student in his or her learning.
- a minimum of three formal reports and two informal reports during the school year.

In Grades 4 to 7:
- teachers were to prepare structured written comments (work habits and effort included) and assign letter grades.
• school districts were to decide how letter grades were to be communicated to parents; for example, letter grades could be included with the written comments in the report card or shared at a parent-teacher's conference.

The Letter Grades and Symbols section stated that:

The letter grades for use in the Intermediate Program on term and final student progress reports were to be A, B, C or the symbol IP. These letter grades were to describe what a student was able to do in relationship to expected outcomes.

A excellent or outstanding achievement in relation to expected learning outcomes.

B very good achievement in relation to expected learning outcomes.

C satisfactory achievement in relation to expected learning outcomes.

IP expected learning outcomes not achieved and further development required.

The symbol “IP” (In Progress) could be used in place of grades. When a student had completed a subject or course, the symbol IP was to be replaced with A, B or C. If IP was used it had to be accompanied by a written comment that gave details of how the student was to be assisted in meeting standards.

In September 1994, Premier Harcourt and Mr. Charbonneau released three concise documents that were geared to parents, *The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Plan* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994b), *Report to Parents* (British Columbia Ministry of Education 1994c) and *Parents’ Guide to Standards* (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994d). For educators four detailed documents were prepared, *Implementation Resource Part 1: Guidelines*


In The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Plan (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1994b) it was noted that evaluation and reporting was based on:

- teacher collection of evidence (portfolios, observations, projects, presentations, paper and pencil tests etc.) that showed what students knew and were able to do.
- the evidence formed the basis for student evaluation and reporting to parents. Evaluation was based on students’ progress towards achieving the expected learning outcomes for the grade.
- reporting procedures were designed to enhance the communication between school and home.
for grades 4-7, reporting included 3 structured written reports and 2 informal reports. Informal reports may include conferences, telephone calls, notes, and "back-and-forth" books. The reports were to describe:

- what a student was able to do.
- areas of student learning that required further attention or development.
- additional ways of supporting students in their learning.
- evaluations of students' work habits and efforts.
- for grades 4 to 12, students were to receive letter grades describing what they were able to do in relation to expected learning outcomes.
- school districts would determine how letter grades were to be communicated to parents of students in Grades 4 to 7. For example, districts may decide to report grades in conjunction with the structured written report or in parent-teacher conferences.

**Letter Grades and Symbols**

A excellent or outstanding performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

B very good performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C+ good performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

C satisfactory performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.
C-  minimally acceptable performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.

**IP** In Progress. The student is making progress, but it has been determined that additional time is required to meet the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade. Guidelines for assigning an IP must be followed. Expectations and timelines must be attached for each assigned IP. (Optional year 1994-1995; required 1995-1996).

**F** Failed or Failing. The student has not demonstrated, or is not demonstrating, the minimally acceptable performance in relation to expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade. “Failed” may only be used as a final grade if an IP (in progress) has been previously assigned.

The government released *Policy Circular Number 97-04* on June 10, 1997, which announced that the use of “IP” in grades 4 to 12 would be replaced with the reporting symbol “I” (In Progress or Incomplete). The reporting symbol “I” was to be used at any time during the school year to alert parents that students were having problems meeting the expected learning outcomes. When an “I” was assigned, students and parents were to be provided with an opportunity to consult with the teacher about the problems the student was having and to discuss possible solutions. Teachers were to be prepared to identify what the problems were and to specify a plan of action so that the student had an opportunity to achieve the learning outcomes. However, it was required that an “I” letter grade be converted to another letter grade before a student’s records were transferred to another school (unless there was an agreement between the principals of the two
schools to defer conversion) and before letter grades were recorded on the permanent record card. In addition, an “I” letter grade could only be assigned if an “I” reporting symbol was previously assigned. The new symbol “I” was implemented beginning of September 1997.

I recall the frustration of my colleagues when Policy Circular Number 97-04 was announced. After being inundated over the past several years with new curriculum and reporting material to digest, and being bombarded with ever-changing Ministry policies, many teachers, myself included, felt overwhelmed with these expectations. According to Butchart (1999) in order to get around this onerous and unrealistic requirement that must accompany the “I” grade, many teachers are denoting the next highest grade (c-) to the lowest possible assessment by simply “dumbing down” their assignments and expectations to a lower common denominator of mediocrity (p. A19).

Since The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Plan is government policy, this is the document I am required to follow when I prepare student reports. So, does the K-12 plan reflect the principles of Year 2000? Crawley, (1995) states that it depends on who you ask. He says that Sandy Peel and Jack Fleming, two former ministry officials who supported the Year 2000 believe most of the principles are still in place. However, Simon Fraser University professors Roland Case and Milt McClaren are two of several people who strongly disagree. Case feels that integration, a pivotal part of the Year 2000, has been tossed out in the K-12 document. Furthermore, he believes that the focus on accountability pressures teachers to cover content.
"Covering the content is seen to be the curriculum and critical thinking is the add on," says Case. "The more explicit the curriculum gets, the more literal and overwhelmed teachers feel about the amount they have to cover.” What follows are tests that are preoccupied with retention of information and facts, which choke intellectual development (Crawley, 1995, p. 137).

I have personally experienced, and witnessed other teachers feel the pressure Case talks about. Teachers with English Second Language and Learning Disabled students in their class worry that they are not able to cover all the intended learning outcomes in the curriculum because these students require more time to learn some concepts. I recall having read about educators being sued because they may not have “covered the curriculum” for a particular subject or grade. It is indeed unfortunate that teachers cannot follow their students’ interests in learning instead of the mandated curriculum. I have seen teachers abandon exciting activities prior to a provincial assessment because they worry about how their students will perform. I do not believe this kind of learning is in the best interests of students. Campbell (1974) expresses these sentiments well when he states, “What a tremendous burden will be removed and what a change worked when we can teach without “evaluating,” when people come to us not for credit but to learn, and where the sole motivation for learning is interest.” (p. 146)

Case (Crawley, 1995) also discusses the issue of tough standards.

The program’s emphasis on tough standards is misdirected, because it’s like raising the height of the bar in the pole vault. People who couldn’t get over it before are not going to improve their performance just because it’s higher. In fact what happens is it often discourages those who could
otherwise get over it. It doesn’t in any way address any of the root causes of what will increase performance. What increases performance is better instruction, better teaching. So if they’re serious about raising standards they’d improve the quality of pedagogy. The irony is...the strategies presented have taken money away from professional development for teachers. It would have been better placed helping teachers become more effective at improving kids’ performance (Crawley, 1995, p. 137).

I, too, am concerned about how discouraging high standards are for low achieving students. These students suffer from low self-esteem and feel that improvement is so illusive that it is pointless to try. According to Young (1998), children who feel unsuccessful in school are frequently those who dropout of the school system.

Research compellingly shows that failing children, especially in the early grades, nearly always leads to discouragement and negative attitudes toward school and learning and dropout. Children whom the system cite as successful rarely drop out. Children whom the system brand as failures usually do (p. A19).

I have seen students like these in my classroom and I know they have already given up. They feel like they cannot get over the bar Case talks about. In my opinion, letter grades have the same effect on these types of students.

**Setting The Scene**

Drummond (1994) states that it is the moral and philosophical issues concerned with assessment that are the most challenging and difficult because they require teachers to reflect on their purposes for teaching and their aspirations for students. Although I had not consciously reflected on these issues, I now
realize that my beliefs about supporting children's learning were at odds with the reporting system I was required to use.

Brandt (1994) says that educators who have used performance based assessment practices tend to seek out alternate forms of reporting. He adds that communicating performance assessment information to parents is not compatible with reporting that requires a letter grade for each subject. When I reflected upon Brandt's remarks, it affirmed for me the frustration I have felt when assigning a letter grade for a compilation of performance based activities.

My concerns regarding the mismatch between performance assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices requiring letter grades are shared by many teachers (Clarridge & Whitaker, 1994; Kenny & Perry, 1994). Stiggins (1994) explains that concerns likely stem from issues that arise with the transformation of one education era to another, “In fact, many believe that schools as we know them are being transformed into an entirely new kind of social institution. Society has begun to demand that schools deliver students who have learned- schools are becoming performance-driven institutions” (p. 20). Stiggins describes this change as moving from an era of quantification where students were sorted and ranked by ability (highest to lowest), to an era of assessing for competence. In order for schools to be considered effective, their students must demonstrate certain competencies.

A need to demonstrate competence was evident in a timely article of the Vancouver Sun (4,11,97). In the article, entitled, “B.C. Has No Idea If Students
Learn," the B.C. government is berated for not having a system in place for gauging if, and how well students are learning by tracking their performance. Education Minister Paul Ramsey is reported saying that the ministry has no means to measure if students are actually learning, yet he concedes that B.C. students rank highly across the country. More recently, parents have spoken out in favour of the province wide accreditation program because they believe it makes schools accountable and thus bolsters the public education system (Steffenhagen, 1999). This emphasis on accountability and setting of provincial performance standards concerns me. Will this lead to performance standards that explicitly rank students? It already has:

Last year, the ministry moved the Provincial Learning Assessment Program in a new direction....The ministry published provincial, district, and school results-and individual student results for the 18 districts that requested them. The ministry planned to continue with this trend toward school and individual student results, in effect shifting the focus of PLAP from program evaluation to the evaluation of schools and even individual students (Chapman, 1999, p. 10).

Unfortunately this practice has escalated with the publishing of Foundation Skills Assessment results for Lower Mainland school districts in a recent newspaper article (Steffenhagen, 2000). To what end? So that some students, particularly the learning challenged can finish their schooling knowing they are failures? Campbell (1974) points out that for some children, all day, every day, they are being told what is wrong with them and their work. He goes on to say that in order to survive 12 or more years of that sort of assault one must develop elaborate defenses for survival, along with hatred, resentment, a need for revenge
and evening the score. Many of our school buildings record the result of this need (p. 145). Even though Campbell’s words are a quarter of a century old, I think they still are current today.

It was gratifying to take note of an alternative perspective on the push for accountability:

Why in the world has The Sun devoted large amounts of column inches to publishing children’s test results in public schools by district?...How do you think those students and their parents feel having their results on a particular test held up for province-wide scrutiny? Is anyone thinking how the morale of children, families and schools with lower than average results is being affected? Shame on everyone involved in this feeding frenzy for the appearance of accountability. If we really want to improve the academic performance of B.C.’s children and youth, we should be making sure our public schools are adequately funded for the job they have to do (Montani, 2000, p. A11).

Although I do not find the repercussions resulting from the competence and accountability thrust to be positive for all students, I still found it useful to become aware of some of reasons behind this push. This has helped me understand why there has been such a demand for high standards, a common curriculum and accountability in education.

The Push To Letter Grade

Seeley (1994) points out that teachers are encouraged to use many forms of assessment methods to guide instruction and monitor student learning, yet assessment information is to be recorded in a single letter grade. In addition, teachers are given little guidance about how to accomplish this task. From my
standpoint, using assessment data from multiple sources to construct a letter grade is an exercise fraught with contradictions. Parents may prefer the representation of their child’s learning in a letter grade because they have been graded this way themselves. They may even feel they understand the meaning of a letter grade. However, when questioned, many parents realize they do not know what their child was required to do to earn a particular letter grade, nor do they understand the assessment and evaluation practices that the teacher used to construct a letter grade (Reynolds, 1997).

Seeley (1994) also explains that teachers are encouraged to challenge students to complete complex tasks, but for some the result will be low grades. She adds that we need to be cognizant of the effects of poor grades on students. Seeley proposes that an important question is how can grades adequately reflect student progress and effort, yet still encourage and motivate students to persevere? In addition, poor grades may have unintended consequences for children. Like Seeley, Guskey (1994) observes that a child with poor grades may withdraw from learning in order to protect his self-image. Campbell (1974) commented that in order to protect themselves from continued failure, students may exhibit the following behaviours; turning off, non-involvement, don’t-take-a-chance, keep-your-mouth-shut, become a discipline case, have a learning problem, become antisocial or even physically assault people and property (p. 145). Guskey (1996) explains that grades have some value as rewards, but no value as a punishment. Most students view high grades as recognition of their success and many work hard to avoid low grades. However, no studies document that
receiving a low grade will prompt motivation to succeed. Instead, some students may regard the low mark as irrelevant and meaningless, while others may blame themselves and feel powerless to make improvements. In my practice I have seen the kinds of children Guskey discusses. In such cases the requirement to give a letter grade for the report card clearly does not promote student learning.

In addition, Guskey (1994), who feels grading and reporting are not necessary to instruction and learning, discusses the conflicting position teachers are placed in as they participate in this process. Teachers serve as “judge” when they assess students, yet they are “advocates” for children in the learning process. In my practice I have felt the conflict of being required to reward a student’s remarkable efforts with a low letter grade. Moreover, my role as advocate of student learning is compromised by my role as judge and disseminator of letter grades.

Kohn (1994) also questions the reasons for grading students. He suggests that society is concerned about evaluating students “to be able to label them on the basis of their performance and thus to sort them like so many potatoes” (p. 38). This enables educators and other members of society to categorize students into “piles” by ability or whatever reason suits them. Kohn asserts that studies (Vasta & Sarmiento, 1979; Abrami, Dickens, Perry, and Leventhal, 1980) indicate there is little effect on student performance when grading is stringent or lax.

Furthermore, he questions the reliability of grades as an effective means of sorting, citing a study, (Kirschenbaum, Napier, and Simon, 1971), that indicated any teacher may well give a different mark to the same piece of work that was
submitted at two different times. If assessing and evaluating students into categories does not support learning, then why do we bother?

Kohn (1994) goes on to say that a second reason for grading is to motivate students to work harder so that they will achieve at a higher level. However, he mentions that there are “scores of studies in social psychology and related fields” (p. 39) which indicate that people who are promised rewards for doing something, tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to reach the reward. Moreover, they do lower quality work than people who do not expect rewards. More specifically, creativity and higher order thinking skills can suffer with extrinsic motivation. I wonder why the Ministry of Education condones giving letter grades that discourage rather than encourage student learning.

Kohn (1994) says that another reason people feel the need to grade is that students can get feedback to help them learn. In my opinion, a letter grade is empty, in that it does not tell you what you did well, what you need to improve and how you can improve. Categories based on grades are equally empty. In contrast, performance assessment practices provide pertinent information with regards to improving learning.

Kohn goes on to explain that letter grades do not convey what a student has learned. Furthermore, because their meaning is contested, shared understanding of their value is obstructed. Seeley (1994) shares Kohn’s concern for shared understanding. More specifically, she says that grades must be interpreted by all members of a school community in the same way for them to be meaningful. I have learned that teachers, parents, students, and administration differ in their
interpretations of letter grades (Reynolds, 1997). They do not agree on what letter grades mean and how they should be used.

Drummond (1994) raises interesting issues about the inadequacies of formal assessments and evaluations. She points out that these tests tell teachers what the student has failed to learn but little about her/his thought processes or understanding. In addition, she invites us to reflect on whose responsibility it is when a child fails to learn. I think teachers sometimes let the student shoulder the blame. Drummond adds that schools tend to focus on student difficulties rather than on student learning.

Kohn (1994) mirrors Drummond’s concern for the impact of poor performance on student self esteem. In his discussion of “demand” models he explains that students are seen by teachers as workers who are required to do a better job. When students do not do well, the blame is shifted to them because we make the assumption they “chose” to not study or do what we asked. This removes responsibility for learning from teachers and places it onto students. I believe that reporting which requires letter grades falls into the “demand” model because through assessment and evaluation practices students are praised and/or blamed for their work.

In contrast, Kohn explains that the “support” model can be equated with “learner-centered learning” where students are supported in their endeavours. There are no expectations to perform to certain standards. However, improvement occurs as students work through engaging activities in a supportive
environment. Fortunately this kind of learning presently occurs in some public and independently run Montessori schools across the Lower Mainland.

Instead of following a preset, structured curriculum, students are encouraged to follow their own interests, with the help of a teacher who will incorporate different lessons into a project. For example, if you're eight years old and are just nuts about whales, you can study whales until you get tired of it, and the teachers will use that interest to teach you about math...writing, art...as well as science, history and other subjects (Porter, 1999, p. E8).

I believe that through stimulating activities, encouragement, support and detailed feedback on assignments, students will feel positive about learning and experience growth, without the use of letter grades. Assessment, evaluation, and reporting practices are important bridges to learning. Reconceptualization of one must involve the other two.

Written Comments and Report Cards

In a study on motivation that focused on three perspectives; receiving no feedback at all upon completion of a task, receiving only letter grades, and finally receiving only comments, Butler and Nisan (1986) found that:

...50% of the pupils who received no feedback would rather have received a grade, while 78.9% of the pupils who actually received grades would have preferred written comments, and 86.3% of those who received comments were satisfied with this mode of evaluation. Thus most pupils seem to prefer normative information; however, they also prefer over grades the kind of constructive, specific information about competence provided by the written comments. (p.215)
Stewart and White (1976) are of the opinion that a comment in conjunction with a letter grade would be more likely to improve student performance, providing the comments were encouraging and personalized.

Friedman and Frisbie (1995) and Bursuck, Polloway, Plante, Epstein, Jayanthi, and McConeghy (1996) state that comments can supply the detail, explanations and recommendations that a grading symbol alone cannot convey. Wiggins (1994) mirrors these statements but goes on to say that for a report card to be informative, it must be backed up with work samples, rubrics, anchor papers, and commentary. Furthermore, if the report card contains a section for parent and/or student comments, then the teacher may have a better idea about how report information is being interpreted.

I believe that written comments provide an excellent supplement to letter grades by describing areas of strength, areas in need of improvement and suggesting how improvements can be made at the school and home levels.

Although written comments are a useful component of the report card, when combined with letter grade construction, they become an onerous task. I am concerned that the amount of time consumed by this process decreases teaching time for students. A colleague expresses his concern regarding time as well:

I have recently completed the most time-consuming and useless demand of my profession: preparing term report cards. Ever since the mavens of the educational establishment changed the requirements four years ago and imposed the Structured Written Report format, the task-always onerous-has become absurd...By a conservative estimate...the equivalent of 15 teaching days a year just to prepare report cards (Butchart, 1999, p. A19).
In their study, Bachor and Anderson (1994) stated that some teachers reported that anecdotal reporting was a very stressful and time-consuming process, as each report required from 45 minutes to 2 hours to complete. (p. 87)

Furthermore, I wonder if the paper trail parents are required to wade through when reading their child’s report card is appreciated or considered an inconvenience. These thoughts are shared by an educator: ...the hours...spent on report cards, you begin to wonder “what is the value of all this?” when the parents get it and read it in 3 or 4 minutes and put it aside, how pertinent is all that information on paper? (Bachor and Anderson, 1994, p. 88).

In addition, Jeroski (in Davie, 1999) states that the more time we spend assessing and evaluating our students, the less time we have to instruct and the less likely our students will achieve excellence (p. 11).

This conundrum appears to have no easy solution because as teachers in the province of British Columbia we are mandated to prepare time consuming Structured Written Report Cards according to specific requirements, yet at the same time we are expected to provide excellence in education, all in the name of accountability and high standards.

In the final analysis the report card has little to do with the quality of education, but much to do with giving an impression of accountability to a cynical public that has been constantly bombarded with criticism of the public schools. B.C. has had eight ministers of education in the last two decades....one legacy of their collective negativism exists - an ineffective report card that is counterproductive to the fostering of excellence in education (Butchart, 1999, p. A19).
It has been twelve years since Barry Sullivan and his commissioners set out to improve the quality of education. Has all the evidence about how students learn, good teaching, assessment, evaluation and reporting practices been for nought? No, not according to Crawley (1995) who states that Year 2000 principles can be found in bits and pieces scattered across the province because good teachers are not capable of acting like it never happened (p. 138). He goes on to say that even though the government has tried to kill it, the Year 2000 is not dead.

When I reflect on the conundrum I am placed in - believing in much of the Year 2000 philosophy, yet being mandated to follow Ministry of Education reporting policies, I can better understand my frustration with some aspects of the Formal Structured Written Report Card I am required to use.
Chapter 3
Methods of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between learning and reporting, and to explore parent and student perceptions as to whether the Ministry of Education’s formal written report card supports and encourages student learning. The study assumes that the people who are most directly affected by reporting practices are the parents and students, even though the Ministry report card is teacher driven, not teacher-student or teacher-student-parent driven. Therefore, through the study, I wanted to understand and become cognizant about student and parent perspectives regarding the formal written report card and student learning.

To achieve these goals, a qualitative approach to research was used because it embodies a naturalistic-phenomenological philosophy and is concerned with understanding social phenomenon from the participants’ perspective (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). In addition, qualitative research can be described as being multimethod in focus and involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denizen & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). My understanding of student and parent feelings, thoughts and beliefs about the Ministry of Education’s Formal Structured Written Report Card was important to the study.
Site Selection

The site for the study was my workplace, a public school in the city of Vancouver. I selected this school because as a teacher at this school, I was already familiar with the school setting and the cultural and home environment of the participants. Denzin & Lincoln (1994) state that for the qualitative researcher, research is an interactive process shaped by his or her personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and those of the people in the setting (p. 3). This prior knowledge would allow me a richer, in depth understanding of student and parent responses. Equally important, there would be more opportunity for shared understanding of language, terms and issues regarding report cards among all participants. According to Denzin & Lincoln (1994), shared meaning between interviewer and respondent is important for contextual understanding of the interview.

A final reason for selecting this site was because I was someone already known in the school. Even if parents did not know me, at least they knew I was a staff member at the school and someone their child was acquainted with. I felt that since I was familiar to the students and parents at the school, they would be more comfortable discussing personal report card issues with me.

Student and Parent Participants

Since I am an upper intermediate teacher, I invited students and parents at that level to participate in the study because I felt results would be more useful and meaningful to me. In June, I selected six grade five students and their
respective parents and six grade six students and their respective parents to interview in July. It is important to note that these students were not in my class. Student selection was dependent on the following criteria:

a) a range of academic ability (low, medium, high) at each grade level.
b) approximately half boys and half girls from each grade level.
c) both parent and child had to be willing to participate in the study.

I felt it was important to hear the perspectives of students and parents who represented a range of academic abilities to see what similarities or differences there may be among the three groups. I also wondered if there might be differences of opinion based on gender. A formal letter was sent to each family’s home to introduce and explain the study. Following this, I telephoned each family to answer questions and set up an interview time. To ensure parent and student anonymity, all names are pseudonyms.

**Data Collection**

Mertens (1998) states that in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for data collection. In this study, I used primarily the ethnographic technique of interviewing because it enabled me to collect the data I needed through face to face discussions with participants.

Interviewing, according to Fontana & Frey (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings (p. 361). For this study I used informally
structured interviews because they are conversational in nature and would allow me to understand participants’ viewpoints and explore their concerns.

I conducted twenty-four informally-structured interviews with participants over a period of two and a half weeks in July. Twelve interviews were with students while the other twelve were with parents. Interviews were conducted in various locations, according to participant preference. Twelve interviews were held at the school, eight were in participants’ homes, two were in my home and the final two (parent and child) were held at a local shopping mall parking lot! In all cases except two, I interviewed the parent first, followed by the student.

The interviews were taped and lasted anywhere from thirty minutes to one and a half hours per participant. There were eighteen open-ended questions that required responses, however, there was some overlap in the question responses. Interview questions invited expression of points of view because seventeen were prefaced with open-ended language such as “how”, “what”, “if you” or “in what ways.” (See interview questions - Appendix 1). If I did not understand a comment made by a participant I asked for clarification until meaning was clear. Participants sometimes sought verification from me.

I kept a brief field journal during the interview process in which I recorded noteworthy occurrences, ideas, observations and reflections.

Data Analysis
McMillan & Schumacher (1997) describe qualitative data analysis as an inductive process of organizing the data into categories and identifying patterns or relationships among the categories that emerge from the data (p. 501). Analysis begins as soon as the first set of data is gathered and continues on until all data is collected.

I recall from my first interview being aware of emergent key ideas and wondering if they would be similar or different to those found in future interviews. I also wondered if these might become dominant themes. As interviews went on during the two and a half week time period I became aware of recurring, as well as new, beliefs, concerns and issues. I made note of these in my field journal. In this way data analysis was on-going as I conducted my interviews.

Twenty-one of the twenty-four interviews were transcribed because they were particularly rich in information while the remaining three, being less complex, were retained for listening to. Next I recorded each question on the top of sheets of notepaper. Then I read the transcriptions and listened to the tapes, recording the main points of each participant’s responses under each question heading. In the margins, to serve as a reminder, I made notations of concerns and issues that arose. I added any pertinent information from my field diary. In this way I developed an outline of participants’ responses, perspectives, issues and concerns. With the accumulation of the vast amount of information on notepaper, it became apparent to me that I needed to create a framework for analysing participant responses. According to McMillan and Schumacher (1997)
qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing the data into categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among the categories...most categories and patterns emerge from the data, rather than being imposed on the data prior to data collection (p. 501). Using the three main topics I based my interview questions on: Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students? (questions 1-10), Does the report card support student learning? (questions 11-18), and Does the report card encourage student learning? (questions 19-25), I recorded responses, perspectives, issues and concerns onto three sheets of 56cm. x 87cm. paper for the parents and another three for the students. I assigned subject names to, and colour coded recurring themes across all six sheets so comparisons could be easily made. For example, everytime the topic of parent involvement occurred, I made a notation and coloured the heading red.
Chapter 4

Results

To report my findings I used the three general categories that the interview questions addressed: Is the report card **informative** and **useful** to parents and students?, Does the report card **support** student learning?, and Does the report card **encourage** learning? Under each of the three categories I discussed parent and student findings separately, in order to compare the viewpoints of the two groups. Since the interview questions were open-ended and conversational in style, parents and students sometimes elaborated on the questions asked, expressed opinions, voiced concerns and raised issues.

In order to report these results I first discussed responses to the interview questions followed by a sometimes lengthy discussion of opinions, concerns and issues voiced by the participants. Furthermore, where appropriate, I discussed the results in terms of either the relevant literature on reporting or my own experience with report cards. Finally, I have preceded each interview question with a chart that organizes the findings from the research questions and presents dominant themes that arose from the interviews.
Summary of Results

Interview question # 1

*Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to interview question # 1.</th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt positive about the report card and described it as informative and useful.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Found the report card to be satisfactory with regards to being informative and useful, but felt the inclusion of particular topics would improve the report card.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Topics desired for inclusion in the report card to make it more informative and useful.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentages.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Checklists, providing improvements given.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakdown of subjects such as Language Arts into smaller components with a letter grade assigned for each.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison of child in relation to other children in class, district and province.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (school only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More positive comments needed to raise self esteem.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More emphasis on reporting of behaviour, social skills, effort.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansion of written comment section (strengths, weaknesses).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reporting concerns/issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concern</th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of letter grades not always clear.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of self esteem resulting from low letter grades.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students?

The viewpoint of parents

The majority of the parents felt positive about the report card and described it as useful, helpful, informative and detailed, providing it contained a discussion of the students' areas of strengths and weaknesses in the structured written comments section. Esther commented that she often referred back to the report card as a reminder of what her son needed help with (Inter, 8, 7.99) while Anita reported that the report card gave her a good idea of how her daughter was doing in school, what she needed help in and what she was doing well in (Inter, 11, 7.99). In general, all parents appreciated a report card that pinpointed what their child did well, suggested ways their child could improve and ways that they could support their child. Parents described this type of report card as clear and easy to understand (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 4, 7.99; Inter, 5, 7.99; Inter, 12, 7.99).

I like it in the sense that there are strengths and weaknesses and that gives us more of an idea of what areas to concentrate on, so that way I find it very helpful. And it's clear with pinpointing strengths and weaknesses and letter grades. It's also easy to understand (Inter, 1, 7.99).

Sue pointed out, however, that the quality of this section depended on the teacher because some included more detail and individualized student comments than others in their reporting to parents and students (Inter, 2, 7.99).

Some parents specifically mentioned that they did not find a strictly anecdotal report card, the kind students' received in primary grades, as useful and informative as an intermediate report card, which contained a strengths and
weakness section in the structured written comment area (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 2, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99). Sue said that anecdotal report cards contained too many euphemisms which resulted in parents wondering what the teacher was trying to tell the parent.

I notice this child centered philosophy around where you build his self esteem and they assume that the child reads the report card where there are a lot of euphemisms, I find, maybe not so much in my child’s report card, but in some of my other friend’s report cards, it’s like what are they trying to tell me, you know, what are they saying (Inter, 2, 7.99)?

She went on to say that because the teacher tried to word the report card in a nice way, this resulted in the parent not really sure if progress and behaviour were satisfactory. She went on to say that knowing the negative aspects of her child and not just the positive was important.

Over the past several years report cards have tended to become verbose and lengthy. For quite some time I have wondered if parents valued this enough to warrant the time it took to compose them. Helen commented that she was not in favour of primary style anecdotal reports because they were like an essay and took more time to read (Inter, 1, 7.99). Elsie pointed out that if an intermediate style report card was too detailed and long, parents who did not have time or English language ability may miss important information (Inter, 4, 7.99).

Well first of all when I first get this report card, from my own point of view I have to really read it through. It’s not something at a glance, as a parent I would say I do pay attention and I want to know what’s going on so I will read it, every single note and newspaper, anything, I will read it very carefully. I think some other parents, if they don’t have a lot of time or language skill to read it, I don’t know, they might be missing some
important factors contained in it because it does require a thorough reading (Inter, 4, 7.99).

In addition, parents who worked closely with their children did not appreciate an overview (see glossary) because they were aware of what the students were learning (Inter, 2, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99). Parents valued a report card that was concise, yet informative.

Some of the parents interviewed had students in a class where the teacher used a checklist based on the Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOS - see glossary) taken from Integrated Resource Packages (IRP - see glossary). There were tick marks to indicate student progress based on excellent, good, satisfactory or needs improvement. Parents were not in favour of this type of reporting because it did not explain clearly enough where the child was, what the problem was nor how the parent could help (Inter, 3, 7.99; Inter, 6, 7.99). Furthermore, Pam commented that the checklist did not allow for a positive comment on a low achieving child, only check marks to say he was satisfactory. She said she liked report cards with distinct areas of strength and areas in need of improvement sections better because this style of reporting ensured that children saw good comments about themselves and not only negative comments.

It’s important to identify the students’ strengths and weaknesses so that you’ve got some good parts and some bad parts, because when even the child is reading it, he feels okay, I’m not all bad, I’ve got some good points about me (Inter, 6, 7.99).

I noticed that parents who were aware of their child’s progress on an on-going basis and/or those whose children did well in school, tended to feel it
was important for the teacher to include a section on areas to improve, complete with details about how this could be accomplished (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 2, 7.99; Inter, 3, 7.99; Inter, 4, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99). In this way the report card became a source of feedback to parents enabling them to learn about their child’s weaknesses as well as strengths (Inter, 3, 7.99). As Elsie commented, “A good detailed, well-written report card helps parents learn about their child” (Inter, 4, 7.99).

Mary and her husband Jack, as well as Nancy, are recent immigrants from Asian countries and were accustomed to the use of percentages on their children’s report cards. Both wished percentages could be included on their child’s current report cards. They all commented that a letter grade offers a wide perspective of a student’s performance while a percentage is precise (Inter, 3, 7.99; Inter, 10, 7.99). Mary and Jack felt a percentage would give them a clear idea of their daughter’s weak areas so that they could support her efforts to improve, while Nancy explained that because the letter grade has a wide range, if a student makes a small improvement or little improvement, it was hard to tell. She felt it was more meaningful to students to see how much they had improved. Furthermore, both families suggested that both letter grades and percentages be used on the report card so that a student could see, for example, exactly what percentage of an A they had achieved. Nancy expressed these views by commenting, “I have an opinion; it would be good if there were both letter grades and a percentage, so that a student could see exactly what percentage of an A they have, or how close they are to passing. So this way it is more clear” (Inter, 10, 7.99).
Mary, Jack, and Nancy were also accustomed to large subject areas such as Language Arts being broken down into smaller segments such as reading, writing and poetry, for example, and a percentage being awarded for each section. They felt this further helped parents and students clearly identify strong and weak areas in a particular subject category. I can recall a time when I had to award letter grades to each section of a large subject area and it was, at times, a frustrating experience because I believed in a holistic rather than fragmented approach to learning.

Parents viewed letter grades and structured written comments that described a student's strengths and weaknesses as useful and informative, however, there were varying opinions as to which of the two was most useful and informative. Some parents commented that for themselves or other English Second Language speakers, letter grades provided the clearest picture of a child's performance because understanding written comments could be difficult for them (Inter, 4, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99; Inter, 9, 7.99). Jan, for example, said she found letter grades most useful and informative because she could not read English and relied on her husband to translate written comments for her (Inter, 9, 7.99). She stated, "The marks are easiest for me to understand and the written part my husband reads it for me and tells me what it says, for me reading is slowly, very very slowly, so he transfers it for me and I read it after" (Inter, 9, 7.99).

Helen, on the other hand, liked letter grades because she equated them to percentages and felt she knew the value of her daughter's letter grades in percentages based on her own report cards in the past (Inter, 1, 7.99). This
comment accords with Seeley (1994), who stated that parents may prefer the representation of their child’s learning in a letter grade because they have been graded this way themselves and they may even feel they understand the meaning of a letter grade.

Sue commented that she found letter grades useful because with only comments you couldn’t tell if a child had an A, B, or C+, however, she viewed letter grades and comments as a partnership because she also felt comments were needed to explain letter grades (Inter, 2, 7.99).

Other parents felt that comments were more important than letter grades because they provided parents with the information needed to help their child improve (Inter, 4, 7.99; Inter, 6, 7.99; Inter, 10, 7.99).

However, some parents realized that they did not know the meaning of a letter grade. When asked if he liked letter grades, Tony replied, “Well, I do, but that’s one thing I’m not too sure of, the grading, different systems maybe.” “The teacher says you’re doing good, but when you see the report card it says C+ or C-, I mean that doesn’t really tell us how good or bad the student is” (Inter, 5, 7.99).

Elsie showed her uncertainty about letter grades when she said, “A teacher might have an own judgement of an A, do you go by a fixed percentage or how does it work—I guess in high school you might be more strict into how you actually can give an A or B or things like that” (Inter, 4, 7.99).

Sue had a lot of questions regarding the meaning and construction of letter grades. First of all she said:
Well you know it’s nice that you have the letter grades, and also the written part too, and these letter grades are they subjective with each teacher or, what I mean is, if someone has an A, is it because he has an A in regards to his class or an A in when you also compare it to other kids in other classes in other schools, that’s what I’m not clear about (Inter, 2, 7.99)

Later in the interview she mused,

“What does an A actually mean, maybe they could have something there explaining what is expected for someone to get an A in Language Arts or an A in Music. I don’t know if this is true but I’ve heard some people say in order to get an A in Music you have to be in choir, you have to be in all this stuff, I don’t know, is this true?...it may be nicer to have what each one of those letter grades mean, I mean how do you attain the letter grade”?

In her study, Reynolds (1997) also discovered that many parents do not know what their child was required to do to earn a particular letter grade, nor do they understand the assessment and evaluation practices that the teacher used to construct a letter grade.

Kohn (1994) suggested that society is concerned about evaluating students “to be able to label them on the basis of their performance and thus to sort them like so many potatoes” (p. 38). This enables educators and other members of society to categorize students into “piles” by ability or whatever reason suits them.

The need for comparison of an individual student to a larger group as well as self comparison was evident in this study. Elsie stated that her child’s report, though informative and detailed, did not tell her how her son compared to others in the class, his grade level and against others in B.C. (Inter, 4, 7.99).
Sue commented that most parents knew how bright or not so bright their child was, therefore, she wanted to know how her child was doing in relation to other children in the class and the district (Inter, 2, 7.99). Since her son was about to enter high school, she was concerned with standards and wondered if the school was above or below most schools in standings. To carry this line of reasoning further, Sue commented, “I would like to know how well my child is doing in relation to his intelligence...and how well my child is doing in relation to other children.” Her motivation for this comparison was effort, since she felt parents should know if their child was working to his/her potential. She suggested the report card have an effort section where marks such as E, to indicate excellent, were awarded to indicate how a child was doing in relation to his capability.

Jan, on the other hand, felt that since the report card was a record and would be kept by the family, parents and students could compare individual performance from term to term and year to year. This would enable families to see if progress was being made or alert them to the need for extra study (Inter, 9, 7.99).

Other topics needing more emphasis on the report card in order to be informative and useful to some of the parents were behaviour and esteem. Helen and Tony felt the report card covered mostly academic issues and they wanted to hear more about the emotional sides of their children. Respect for the teacher, how the child was behaving, how the child got along with classmates and if the child was stable were important concerns to them (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 5, 7.99).
The teacher should be letting the parents know how she’s doing academically and emotionally I believe, and this is what we want to know from the point of view of a teacher, how is she getting along with her friends and her other school mates and does she respect the teacher? I think the report doesn’t cover the emotional side, it’s more the academic side and knowing more about the emotional would be helpful (Inter, 1, 7.99).

Pam felt strongly that positive comments were a must on the report card to raise self-esteem, especially for low achieving children (Inter, 6, 7.99).

The viewpoint of students

Most of the students interviewed generally felt positive about the report card and found it informative and useful. Several students particularly liked the structured written comment section which described a student’s areas of strength and areas in need of improvement. For example, Ron reported that he liked the design of the report card and he, along with Neil and Kelly, especially liked the areas of strengths and weaknesses section (Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 18, 7.99; Inter, 15, 7.99). Candy said she felt good about the report card because she tried her best and got good marks (Inter, 23, 7.99). Furthermore, Candy liked reading about what she did well and the areas she needed to improve.

Joan and Jeff found the combination of structured written comments and letter grades helpful (Inter, 24, 7.99; Inter, 22, 7.99). Joan explained why she liked the report card:

I liked it when the teachers gave us a comment so if you need to improve on something you could improve on it cause the teachers would write it
down. The report card tells us how we are on our letter grades and it explains this on the back, what our letter grades are and then the comments help us (Inter, 24, 7.99).

Jeff, accustomed to percentages in his country of origin, added that he wished percentages were placed beside the letter grade.

Ann described written comments as, “The written part is like more, it gives you more description and you can see what you’re doing good in and it gives you more detail and it tells you specifically how you’re doing good in it but the letter grades they just tell you the letter, like A” (Inter, 13, 7.99). Ann, who generally received good grades, went on to say that students used letter grades for comparison purposes:

They feel they are in competition with other kids and if they don’t get the same kinds of grades as the other people they feel discouraged or encouraged...if some kids are doing bad and they compare it with another kid they might feel they’re not doing well and they might lose self-esteem and stuff, but kids who do well when they compare it (grades) with other people, they feel they’re good students (Inter, 13, 7.99).

Ann described the report card as “cool.”

Although Alex did see value in the written comments section, he found this section “too wordy” and felt people looked only at letter grades because the words were too hard to understand (Inter, 16, 7.99). Tom preferred letter grades to comments because, “If you do really bad in a subject it clearly tells you, and grades are probably really a good thing because they encourage me to do better...and that’s what people need these days” (Inter, 19, 7.99).
When asked how he felt about the report card Bob said, “It’s fine, not bad, it’s not that good, it’s just okay” (Inter, 14, 7.99). He complained that, “They don’t really tell you what you have to do to improve on, they just tell you what you got and they don’t really tell you why you got that mark.” He added that sometimes the letter grades he received on his report card were a surprise, “Sometimes you just know you’re doing well because you get good marks on your papers and stuff and sometimes when you get mixed marks you’re not really sure.” Bob, a good student like Ann, said his favorite part of the report card was letter grades because he could easily see how many A’s he had, and that he sometimes compared his marks with other students.

Amanda, a student who tried hard but tended to get average to below average grades, talked about the disappointment students sometimes feel upon receipt of their report card, “It depends, I mean sometimes people get C’s and C-’s and stuff and they feel disappointed but the rest (of the report card) is pretty good” (Inter, 17, 7.99). Like Bob, she expressed confusion about how her letter grades were constructed, “Sometimes when you get papers that are half good, usually at the beginning of it it’s easier and you get good grades and then after you get, you know, sort of between and then after when you see (the report), it’s like why did I get this when I was getting pretty good grades?”

Sally, a low achieving student, expressed outright fear about the report card, “I feel scared, if I get a bad mark then I’ll be scared, in the future like what’s going to happen to me” (Inter, 21, 7.99)? She went on to say these feelings have
intensified as she has moved up the grades because, “I’m getting older and it’ll get
more scary, then I’ll be in high school then I don’t know what will happen next.”

When asked what they did not like about the report card five students
responded with “nothing” (Inter, 21, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 23, 7.99; Inter,
24, 7.99; Inter, 17, 7.99), however, concerns such as no percentages (Inter, 22,
7.99), too many hard words or terms (Inter, 16, 7.99; Inter, 15, 7.99), “gloomy”
appearance of report card (Inter, 14, 7.99) and not enough feedback from teachers
were mentioned (Inter, 14, 7.99: Inter, 18, 7.99). In addition, four students said
one letter grade to summarize a large subject area such as Language Arts, for
example, was not adequate (Inter, 13, 7.99; Inter, 15, 7.99; Inter, 16, 7.99; Inter,
19, 7.99). Kelly explained:

In Language Arts I got an A and so I am good at that but there are a lot of
things included in Language Arts, I don’t know which one I am good at,
because if you get an A right, you don’t have to be good at everything to
get an A (Inter, 15, 7.99).

Students suggested breaking down this subject into reading, writing, spelling, for
example, and assigning a separate letter grade for each. One student felt an
overall letter grade should also be included.

Several students felt the combination of both structured written comments
and letter grades formed a useful combination that made the report card clear and
easy to understand (Inter, 18, 7.99; Inter, 23, 7.99; Inter, 13, 7.99; Inter, 22, 7.99;
Inter, 20, 7.99). Ron explained that, “There were letter grades, and behind the
letter grades (back of report card), there was a satisfactory or unsatisfactory
remark, and then there’s those comments, then you know how well you’re doing, what you need to improve on and what you don’t” (Inter, 20, 7.99).

Bob liked letter grades because they were an easy reference for himself and he read over the comments with his parents (Inter, 14, 7.99). Sally preferred letter grades to comments because she had difficulty understanding written comments (Inter, 21, 7.99). Joan explained this situation by saying, “It is how the teacher has written it (comments), and if it has a lot of words that are really hard to pronounce and then it’s hard to read it and then it’s hard to understand as well, it depends on how your reading level is” (Inter, 24, 7.99).

Three students who had received a report card with a checklist based on Intended Learning Outcomes and letter grades, said the checklist was clear to them, but the problem was there were no suggestions given for how improvements could be made (Inter, 15, 7.99; Inter, 17, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99).

It’s clear and easy to understand with the ticks because there’s a huge list and you can tell automatically what you did, if you’re trying to improve in math or something you can go down to mathematics or that subject and find out if you did well on it. Actually it doesn’t make how to improve very clear, because like with the ticks, they can’t tick he improved in this (Inter, 19, 7.99).

Students commented that the report card was useful and informative because it helped them learn about themselves by telling them what they did well, what required improvements, and in several cases, how they could improve. Joan explained this as, “I can do a lot of stuff and like for each of my letter grades I always have improving because then I try even harder than I used to” (Inter, 24,
07.99). She went on to say she found both letter grades and comments encouraging “because the letter grades, I want to make my parents happy, as well as grow up and be something, so then my letter grades are important to me as well as my comments, then I can know what to improve in.”

Ann reported that although written comments contained a lot of useful information, they were not useful for comparison with friends or your last report card (Inter, 13, 7.99). She went on to say letter grades were useful for tracking her progress by comparing her letter grades to those of friends, other years and other terms. She found letter grades useful to monitor her standing in the class and to determine if she was a good or average student.

Generally, students felt the purpose of the report card was to inform students and/or parents about how the child was progressing at school, what they did well and what needed improving (Inter, 13-24, 7.99). Some students were motivated to use report card information to improve themselves:

I think that the way we have strengths that we’re able to do, I like that because then it tells us what we can do and when it comes to the thing that we need to improve in, it tells us what we need to improve in, so then it’s easier for us and then for letter grades, it tells us what kind of standing we’re in right now (Inter, 24, 7.99).

Other students felt parents needed to be alerted to their child’s progress through the report card, so appropriate action could be taken:

It (report card) should be for parents to know how their kids are doing and what they need improvement on cause usually kids don’t tell their parents they need help, they usually want to sit down and watch TV or play, well it’s much better for the parents to know, that way they can cut out the TV
or anything and make them study, like sit by them, walk by a few times and say do you need help, like help them through it (Inter, 17, 7.99).

Students had several recommendations to make regarding changes to the report card that would make it more informative and useful to them. The most popular recommendation was expansion of the structured written comment section (Inter, 14, 7.99; Inter, 15, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 24, 7.99). Alex and Tom felt a breakdown of large subject areas such as Language Arts into smaller components, with a letter grade assigned to each, would be more beneficial than one overall letter grade (Inter, 16, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99). Alex also thought a checklist would be useful while Jeff recommended the addition of percentages (Inter, 22, 7.99). Sally felt stickers with descriptive words in a border that matched the comment section would help students understand the meaning of the comments (Inter, 21, 7.99). Finally, Ann suggested that language in report cards of students who had difficulty understanding written comment text, be simplified (Inter, 13, 7.99). In addition, she commented that there should be equal strengths and improvements sections to help raise the self-esteem of low achieving students. She felt their parents would be proud of them for having many positive comments.

In conclusion, the report card was informative and useful to parents and students, however, it did not meet all the needs of these groups. There were several topics mentioned by parents and students that they wished were included in the report card. The inclusion of percentages, for example, would make the present report card more informative and useful to parents and students.
Summary of Results

Interview question # 2

Does the report card support student learning?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to interview question # 2.</th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt the report card supported student learning by describing student progress, complimenting</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student achievement and providing suggestions for improvement.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt a more personalized reporting process would better support student learning needs.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequently receiving low letter grades was not supportive.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issues regarding supporting student learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student learning could be better supported with more communication between home and school</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between the three reporting periods.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental involvement was viewed as essential in supporting a child’s learning.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student self-motivation was viewed as important to learning.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Does the report card support student learning?

The viewpoint of parents

In general, parents felt that letter grades and comments on the report card supported student learning by describing a student’s progress, complimenting the student and providing suggestions for improvement.

For some parents, letter grades adequately supported their child’s learning (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 9, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99) while for many others written comments provided the information needed for learning. Elsie said that it was through the comments that she learned what her son could improve on (Inter, 4, 7.99) while Tony explained that for him, it was the strengths and weaknesses section that told him what his daughter had learned or needed to learn (Inter, 5, 7.99).

Only if it is written that they have done good or not, otherwise it is very hard for me to figure out if they have learned something on the report card itself... like if it says they have demonstrated good grade in this particular subject or she is improving in mathematics, unless they tell me that, then I won’t know just by looking at the grade, or even the checklist, I won’t be able to find out (Inter, 5, 7.99).

Other parents expressed these thoughts as well (Inter, 3, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99; Inter, 11, 7.99; Inter, 12, 7.99).

Nancy explained that for her, letter grades and comments together helped parents understand what students had to improve and learn when she said, “The letter grades tell us how he is doing and the comments tell us what the child is
learning at school, if he did something well and how the child must improve” (Inter, 10, 7.99).

High or good letter grades and positive comments also served as ways to compliment students for work well done (Inter, 2-6, 7.99; Inter, 9-12, 7.99). Esther commented that her son’s report card was very supportive because it noted areas of strength and most important of all, the improvements were worded in a positive way (Inter, 8, 7.99). She went on to say that, “Children benefited more from a positive, constructive manner than a critical manner.”

Pam and Cathy both felt their sons’ learning needs could be better supported through a more personalized reporting process (Inter, 6-7, 7.99). Pam suggested that when the report card was issued, the teacher should hold a one-on-one meeting first with the child, then with the parents. In this way, the child could see that the teacher cared and the teacher could explain to the student why he/she received the letter grades and comments given. Pam felt this approach would help the child feel more involved with the contents of the report card. I once had the opportunity, during school time, to discuss individually with my students the contents of one term’s report card and from this experience I realized that my students benefited from the kind of one-on-one experience Pam relates. Motivationally it is meaningful, but as a practicing teacher, the lack of time becomes an issue.

Tony suggested that his daughter’s learning could be better supported if there was more communication between home and school between the three formal reporting periods Inter, 5, 7.99). Pam and Esther were also of that
opinion and added that there should be weekly or bi-weekly communication between home and school so that plans made for improvement were acted upon (Inter, 6, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99).

When asked who the report card was intended for, seven parents said for the parent and child while five said for parents. However, when asked who it should be intended for, eight said the parent and child while four said for the parents. Two of the parents believed that the report card should be written for them and not the student because they felt parental involvement was extremely important. Helen stated that parental involvement was a must in a child’s education. In her eye, parents played a major role in a child’s life by supplying them with a role model and in that regard, parents must show their kids they are interested in and supportive of their learning. She concluded by stating that parents are a child’s guiding light (Inter, 1, 7.99). Tony expressed that in order for parents to be able to support their child’s learning, they needed to learn, through the report card, “What the kid is doing in the school, what they need to improve on, what they need to do for the kids to improve and what they are doing good at.” He felt it was very important for parents to help their children. He added that unfortunately, some parents did not spend enough time with their children and when the report card came, they looked at it, put it away and did not use the information to help their children (Inter, 5, 7.99).

Sue, who believed the report card should be written for her son and herself, also pointed out the importance of parental involvement, however, she went a step further and related it to student motivation, “Oh, I think all of it
(motivation) definitely starts at home because I cannot imagine how these kids could go to school and have their homework consistently not done every time, it depends on the parents if the kids are going to care” (Inter, 2, 7.99). She also commented that the educational, economic and social status of parents made a difference:

I think it depends on the economic and social status of those parents, because if those parents were well educated themselves they would expect it from their kids, and they can tell, they can read letter grades, and if they have the finances they could just, that’s why so many immigrant children go to all these after school classes, so I think it depends on the parents own economic and social and educational background (Inter, 2, 7.99).

When asked, in what ways does the report card help your child learn, Sue responded that she did not know if it helped her child, a high achieving student, learn, unless he received a grade that was only satisfactory. She felt this letter grade would inspire her son to work harder because he did assume some responsibility for doing well (Inter, 2, 7.99). However, the amount of self-motivation her son, Bob, had seemed to depend on who was in his class. If there were some bright students, Bob worked harder, but if there were lower achieving students in the class, Bob did not apply himself as much. Sue commented that as a child, she loved to learn, enjoyed the learning process and competed against herself, not others in the class. Bob, on the other hand, Sue felt, did not compete against himself nor did he push himself as far as he could go. She concluded by saying, “It seems a lot of the kids in the class don’t care, so it’s hard to get him motivated.”
This reminded me of a newspaper article in which students visiting the PNE Playland were asked to respond to the question, “If there was one thing you could change about school, what would it be?” Students with beaming smiles responded with comments such as, “Take out science and make the school year shorter ‘cause it’s so long. I hate science.” Or, “There would be no homework. I like gym and lunch.” Finally, “Less homework. I hate homework and I hate school. I do like PE and science, but no homework.” (Vancouver Sun, 8.16.00. p. C7). Perhaps these are some of the students Sue was talking about.

On the other hand, Kelly, the daughter of Mary and Jack, fortunate to have supportive parents, also appeared to be a self-motivated child. Her parents reported that she had asked them to enrol her in after school French classes because being a recent immigrant to Canada, she felt she was behind in her understanding of the French language (Inter, 3, 7.99). Furthermore, whenever Kelly experienced learning difficulties she chose to discuss the matter with her parents so that they could help find solutions to her problems. In this regard, she resembled Sue who described herself as loving to learn.

It appeared that cultural differences may affect motivation and parental involvement as well. Elsie stated that education was an important part of the Oriental culture and that Oriental people wanted their children to learn well, do well, be able to do something and get a good job. She went on to say that Oriental people emphasised the report card and grades. Good letter grades were very important to her and her family (Inter, 4, 7.99).

The viewpoint of students
Students generally felt that comments and letter grades supported student learning by describing progress, complimenting achievement, and explaining what needed to be improved.

Six students felt that the structured written comment section best explained what they had learned or not learned (Inter, 13, 7.99; Inter, 16, 7.99; Inter, 18, 7.99; Inter, 21, 7.99; Inter, 22, 7.99; Inter, 24, 7.99). For example, Jeff reported that structured written comments, “Tell me advice, like I should read more. Or comments may say to improve English, I should work on Language Arts. Letter grades don’t tell me what I have learned or not learned” (Inter, 22, 7.99). Alex reported that, “It (comments) explains what you have learned by showing how the child is doing, and shows the focus areas which tell the parent what they have not learned” (Inter, 16, 7.99). He went on to say that letter grades were not as useful because they did not explain how a child could improve.

For some students, structured written comments and letter grades informed them of what they had learned or not learned (Inter, 14, 7.99; Inter, 15, 7.99; Inter, 17, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99). Simply stated, Kelly remarked that, “Well you can see it (what she learned/did not learn) from the marks and from what the teacher has written” (Inter, 15, 7.99). Only one student, unhappy with the written comments he received, felt letter grades informed him of what he had learned or not learned:

Through the grades I get, like the written part doesn’t explain that well what you’ve...it explains what you have learned and haven’t learned but it doesn’t explain how you’re doing very well...like they should give more
comments like if I was really really good at Science or Math, I would like a little more credit than they usually give (Inter, 19, 7.99).

Most students said that the report card provided compliments to them through letter grades and written comments, thereby, supporting their learning (Inter, 13-16, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 22-24, 7.99). For example, Ann explained the benefit of receiving a compliment on the report card:

Say you improved in one term and you feel good about yourself and that’s a compliment, also if the teacher writes down comments saying you’re doing very well in so and so subject, and like Mr. Smith (principal) always wrote down a compliment and I think that always encourages the child, even if they’re not doing very well. They try to say something good about them and their work, which I think can compliment the child so they feel okay, I’m doing good in this, I can improve in this and so they want to get more compliments so they work harder which I think is a good way to get started (Inter, 13, 7.99).

Joan discussed how both the comment and letter grade complimented the student:

They (teachers) tell us if we’ve done our work in an excellent way, in a very good way in our report cards and the letter grades compliment you too because if you’ve read them (description of letter grades) on the back and know what they mean, then you’ll know how they’re complimenting you (Inter, 24, 7.99).

Jeff illustrated the usefulness of comments:

Usually the comments tell us if we are doing a good job, like if someone makes a very good diagram of an Innuit igloo the teacher will mention this igloo in the comments. Getting only an “A” won’t tell about the igloo, so parents won’t know how well the student did on the igloo (Inter, 22, 7.99).
In the report card, there were various ways in which students were alerted to the improvements that needed to be made. The areas of focus section was mentioned most frequently by students as being helpful (Inter, 16, 7.99; Inter, 18, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 22-23, 7.99), and a low letter grade indicated improvement was needed in that subject (Inter, 15, 7.99; Inter, 17, 7.99; Inter, 21, 7.99). Joan explained how comments and letter grades informed students of areas in need of improvement:

It (comments) tells us our goals that we need to improve in, like our work and then it’ll always tell us how we need to improve, and then if you understand the letter grades, if you got like a C- or something like that then you would know that you have to improve on that subject (Inter, 24, 7.99).

However, Sally, a child who usually had several improvements that could be made, commented that she often felt her, “smartness was going away” (Inter, 21, 7.99).

Several students felt the report card was intended for, and should be intended for the student and parent because their parents, who were supportive of their learning, needed to be aware of their progress in order to help them with assignments (Inter, 13-14, 7.99; Inter, 16-17, 7.99; Inter, 23, 7.99). Bob explained that, “It (report card) should be for the child, so then they know how they’re doing and if they have to improve, and for the parents, you know, to know if they have to help their child” (Inter, 14, 7.99).
Neil and Candy reasoned that the report card was intended for, and should be intended for the parents because the parents should know how well the student was doing at school, and not for the students, because students got marks back at school and already knew how they were doing (Inter, 18, 7.99; Inter, 23, 7.99).

Joan, a self-motivated child, felt the report card was intended for, and should be intended for students because, “If students read all of it, they will find out their strengths, what they need to improve, what goals they need to set, and then maybe they’ll get better marks” (Inter, 24, 7.99). In addition, Bob and Tom, commented that receiving a low letter grade inspired them to do better (Inter, 14, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99). For example, Tom stated that, “If I get a low letter grade, this inspires me to do better. If I get lower than a B, I will try to improve on the subject.”

Students felt different components of the report card helped them learn in different ways. Some thought that both letter grades and comments were important; while others felt that only the comments were important. Finally, some thought only letter grades were important. Four students commented that both comments and letter grades on the report card helped them learn (Inter, 13, 7.99; Inter, 17, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 23, 7.99). Ann explained that:

The main thing about it (report card) is so that they (students) get an idea of how they’re doing in it and what to work harder in, and the areas of strengths and areas to focus on gives you an idea of how you’re doing and your strengths, that’s part of the compliments and it gives you an idea of how you’re doing in your subjects and the weaknesses, it gives you an idea of what to work harder in. Letter grades help you too because say if you studied really hard for a Science test and you did well, then you had
another one and you did really bad, you could think about the study techniques you used for both of them and you can improve in that (Inter, 13, 7.99).

Some students identified structured written comments as the most useful tool in the report card to aide learning (Inter, 15-16, 7.99; Inter, 18, 7.99; Inter, 22, 7.99). Alex described his reasoning about structured written comments as, “It helps you learn by telling you your focus areas, and how you can improve so I can ask my parents to help me practice” (Inter, 16, 7.99).

A few students felt letter grades alone helped them learn (Inter, 14, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99; Inter, 21, 7.99). Bob and Tom, both good students, felt low letter grades motivated them to work harder, however, Sally preferred letter grades because she felt she could understand them better than written comments.

To conclude, the report card supported student learning by informing students about their progress, complimenting their achievements and informing them about improvements that could be made. The report card served as a tool to inform parents, especially those involved with their child’s education, about student progress. Finally, the report card served as a tool for self-motivated students to self monitor their performance.
### Summary of Results

**Interview question # 3**

*Does the report card encourage student learning?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response to interview question # 3.</th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt receiving a low letter grade would provide the encouragement needed to work harder in order to improve the letter grade.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt the offer of dinner out would provide the encouragement needed to raise letter grades.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt intense conferencing and increased communication (weekly or bi-weekly) would improve letter grades.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly felt that student self-motivation and parental involvement were the key to encouraging student learning.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt structured written comments encouraged learning because they provided detailed information about the child.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt structured written comment section did not encourage learning because there were not enough suggestions for improvement.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Issues/concerns regarding the type of report card a low achieving student should receive in order to encourage learning.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># of parents</th>
<th># of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Felt a low achieving student should receive the same report as other students so that they would not feel singled out, it was fair to everyone and the truth about progress be known.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt the report card was not adequate for encouraging the learning of low achieving students and suggested changes.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt strongly that parental involvement was extremely important in encouraging low achieving children to learn.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Does the report card encourage student learning?

The viewpoint of parents

The majority of parents felt that letter grades and comments adequately encouraged a student to learn. When asked how do letter grades encourage your child to learn, several parents believed that if their child received a low letter grade that would inspire them to work harder. Helen, Elsie, Cathy and Anita, all parents of students who achieved good grades, said students looked forward to letter grades and if their children did not receive good grades, then they would be motivated to try harder in the next term (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 4, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99; Inter, 11, 7.99). For example, Elsie stated, “Well for him letter grades are important because he knows an A is excellent, so if he gets a C, then he will feel, hmmm, I didn’t do as good as last term, and he can see that difference in the grades and recognize he needs improvement” (Inter, 4, 7.99).

Denise felt that if her daughter, Joan, saw that other students received better grades than she did, that would encourage her to learn, because it was important for Joan to receive good letter grades in order to please her parents (Inter, 12, 7.99). Similarly, Mary stated that if her daughter, Kelly, did not receive an A letter grade, then the lower letter grade was a signal to her to work harder (Inter, 3, 7.99). Jan was the only parent who said she hoped to encourage her daughter, Sally, to put more effort into her learning by the promise of dinner out if she received good letter grades (Inter, 9, 7.99).

Pam said she liked letter grades because they were a part of tradition, and because she assumed they were based on percentages, she felt she understood
their value. Therefore, she felt she could pinpoint her son’s progress and, if letter grades were low, plans to improve learning could be implemented (Inter, 6, 7.99).

You know what, it’s been years and years since letter grades have been part of the report card...so I think even as a parent I’m used to seeing, you know you think your child is at a C+ level, that’s not bad, or this is a C-, he’s learning below 50% so actually I have to admit I do like the letter grades. If there was no letter grades and just comments, that exactly maybe doesn’t pin it because after all when they do the marking it is based on percentages and so forth, and ya, I have to admit I do like the letter grades...I guess it (letter grades encouraging a child to learn) depends how we communicate that with the child, if we communicate, oh okay, this month you got this report card and you got a C-, let’s see if we can move you up to a C and this is how much you need to improve, by 10%, work a bit more harder next term, maybe that will get them to think, oh I just need to push myself another 10%, that’s not a whole lot, so maybe it would encourage students to push themselves a little bit more (Inter, 6, 7.99).

Pam went on to say that it was particularly important for one-on-one meetings between the student, teacher and parent when letter grades were low. She expressed again the importance of increased communication through weekly or bi-monthly meetings as well.

Nancy and Esther reported that a low letter grade was embarrassing to obtain, therefore, receiving this type of grade could provide the motivational impetus needed to improve learning in the next term (Inter, 10, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99).

In Tony’s view the answer to the question, do letter grades encourage student learning was, “If a student is satisfied with a C, then they might not do much about it. Or another student may say I could have done better than a C and at least try harder” (Inter, 5, 7.99). He added that it also depended on the parent,
and that responsibility for good letter grades lay with both parents and students. Furthermore, parents needed to sit down with their child during homework time, not let them watch TV while working, and make their child study one hour a day. In addition, parents must do more than look at the report card and file it away. They must enlarge the improvements needed section and hang it on the fridge or in the child’s room to remind the parent and child to keep working on improvements.

Structured written comments were viewed by some parents as encouraging learning because they provided detailed information about the child that a letter grade alone could not provide (Inter, 3, 7.99; Inter, Inter, 4, 7.99; Inter, 5, 7.99; Inter, 9, 7.99; Inter, 10-12, 7.99). Nancy stated that, “Comments from the teacher are very important to children, they will know what they must practice; maybe read more, write more or listen to more English” (Inter, 10, 7.99). Esther reported that since structured written comments were composed in a positive and constructive way, the child would be encouraged to learn more from this positive approach than from a nagging negative one (Inter, 8, 7.99). Helen said she discussed the areas for improvement section with her daughter and then focussed on them for at least a month (Inter, 1, 7.99).

We look at the areas of strengths and areas to concentrate on, the goals to achieve section, I usually like to discuss it with my kids, I like to sit down and show them this is what you need to concentrate more on. We focus on it for a month or two but then you start to back off because it’s hard to follow through from term to term (Inter, 1, 7.99).
Sue and Cathy reported that although it was nice for their sons, both good students, to receive positive comments, the boys had not received enough suggestions for improvement (Inter, 2, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99). In addition, Cathy’s response as to whether structured written comments encouraged learning was, “It depends on the comments that are on the report card and whatever drives parents to get the kid working on the area in which he got C-.” She implied that both the quality of structured written comments and parental involvement had important motivational roles to play in a child’s progress.

Parents had varying viewpoints regarding the kind of report card a student who experiences academic difficulties should receive. Anita, Denise and Jan were of the opinion that all students should be treated equally and receive the same report card because otherwise they may feel singled out, different or picked on (Inter, 9, 7.99; Inter, 11, 7.99; Inter, 12, 7.99).

Helen, Nancy, Cathy and Elsie felt a low achieving student should receive the same report as other children because it was important for them to know the truth about their progress (Inter, 1, 7.99; Inter, 10, 7.99; Inter, 7, 7.99; Inter, 4, 7.99). Furthermore, children needed to know where they stood. For example, Nancy stated, “It would be bad to give a different report card because it would discourage the child from learning and keep them from facing the truth” (Inter, 10, 7.99). Helen added that noting achievements on the report card, no matter how small, were necessary to encourage low achieving students.

Tony, Pam and Esther both stated that a report card every three months was not frequent enough for a student with difficulties and suggested that contact...
between home and school occur every two to three weeks (Inter, 5, 7.99; Inter, 6, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99). Pam stated that parents of low achieving students should be more involved with their child and needed to assume some responsibility for their child’s progress:

This year I’ve gotten him a tutor, actually for my three children because I realized I was working two double shifts so I guess I can’t blame the teacher or the child, I need to give myself some blame too, that we need to be more involved with our children’s lives, with their homework and so forth, giving them that one hour (Inter, 6, 7.99).

Cathy and Mary were both of the opinion that a change in reporting style would not benefit a low achieving student because they were not receiving family support. Cathy stated that, “The kid who gets C- ‘s obviously is not getting a lot of help at home. It won’t matter what kind or type of report is sent home, it won’t matter anyway, the parents won’t be all that concerned” (Inter, 7, 7.99). Mary stated that, “It really depends on the family too. I know with some parents, they don’t care what the child gets, maybe they don’t even spend time with their kids and encourage their kids to learn, so I think the kind of report doesn’t really matter, it depends on the family” (Inter, 3, 7.99). Mary went on to say that in Hong Kong, if there was a problem with the child, parents were asked to come to the school to discuss the problem, and seek solutions. It was expected that parents assumed some responsibility for their child’s progress. The kind of report card used was not important.

Tony also felt the family played an important role in a child’s progress and stated that, “Well, maybe it’s not just the student, I mean you have to look at the
family as a whole, maybe a little too far, but I think that’s where the problem lies, it’s not really with the students if the same thing happens over and over again. Maybe we should check into the parents and what’s happening at the home, are the parents helping the kids in any way at all” (Inter, 5, 7.99)? Tony went on to say he did not find report card conferences useful because what he heard from the teacher was basically what he already knew from the report card. He described conferences as “rushing to work through the motions,” but not learning anything of value regarding his daughter. I understand what Tony has expressed because I have frequently felt that I have simply reiterated report card contents during conferences. I have often thought about alternate ways of conferencing with parents and students that may be more meaningful.

Sue commented that for some students, it didn’t seem to phase them if they received C- or C letter grades, in fact it seemed like a badge of honour to receive those grades (Inter, 2, 7.99). Guskey (1994) states that a child with poor grades may withdraw from learning in order to protect his self-image. Perhaps the children Sue talks about are hiding their feelings of inadequacy by pretending they do not care.

The viewpoint of students

Generally, students thought the reporting practice of assigning letter grades and preparing structured written comments encouraged them to learn. For students, the letter grade acted as a signal for acceptable or unacceptable progress.
Joan explained that, “If you understand them (letter grades), they’ll help you, like if you get A’s and B’s you’ll know you’re at a good level right now, like you’re learning really well, if you get lower marks then you know you have to improve” (Inter, 24, 7.99).

Several students had already established acceptable standards for themselves and indicated that if they received a letter grade lower than an A or B, then they would work harder (Inter, 13-16, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99). For example, Alex reported that letter grades encouraged him to learn because, “We (students) feel comfortable with A’s but C-’s encourages us to practice” (Inter, 16, 7.99), while Bob commented, “I like getting A’s and B’s and if I get anything lower I’ll work harder” (Inter, 14, 7.99).

Kelly described the pride she felt when she received an A, “If you get an A, you will be really proud, I’m going to try really hard and get an A next time too” (Inter, 15, 7.99). Finally, Ann commented that letter grades encouraged her to learn for two reasons, comparison and competition. She found it useful to monitor success by comparing letter grades received to methods of study used, “Say you studied really hard for a science test and you did well, then another science test came up and you did really bad, so you know what you did the first time so you can improve in that” (Inter, 13, 7.99). Ann described how comparing her letter grades to other students encouraged her to learn, “If that person gets better grades than you, you feel like I’m just like this person, I have the capability to do just like that person, so I can do that too”.

For other students, receiving a C or C- reminded them that greater effort was needed (Inter, 20, 7.99; Inter, 23, 7.99). For example, Candy commented that, “If I get a C, I try to improve, I listen more, I pay more attention. It’s important for me to do well” (Inter, 23, 7.99). Perhaps, Jeff summarized the situation best when he said, “Some kids don’t need the mother or father to tell them to do their homework or do something. The kids that work by themselves, without their mother or father, when they see the report card and get C-, they say, oh my, I’m going to work more” (Inter, 22, 7.99).

When asked why some students appeared to be self-motivated while others were not, students responded with a variety of opinions. Candy said, “They don’t want to learn as much as other kids, they don’t try as hard as other kids and they don’t care about school. Maybe their parents don’t tell them it’s wrong and that they should work harder” (Inter, 23, 7.99). Joan commented:

Well it depends on the kids because if you’re not going to work then you’re not going to get good grades, like Sam in our class didn’t work that much and it was really hard for him as well. I think it comes from the family as well, cause then if he just hangs around at home then I guess the family...like my parents always have to check with me if I have homework and if I don’t then we go to the playground, but my parents will always check before we go, then I guess Sam’s parents, like I’ve seen them at the playground lots of times. I guess his parents don’t really ask him, right, and if they do then he probably tells them that he doesn’t and he actually does...I guess Sam, he couldn’t understand it (work) and he didn’t ask his parents for help and maybe his parents wouldn’t give him the help (Inter, 24, 7.99).
Bob responded with, “Sometime they just say well elementary school doesn’t matter, it’s just high school that matters. Sometimes they don’t care cause they’re just used to low grades” (Inter, 14, 7.99).

Finally, Neil described another kind of student when he said:

If you get a not very good letter grade you feel dumb and stuff and you want to try again. If you get a better letter grade and a good letter grade, you feel wow, I can do this and you can go on to some kind of good education stuff (Inter, 18, 7.99).

My concern rests with the students Neil talks about who, no matter how hard they try, cannot obtain a better letter grade. In a discussion about letter grades and how they make students feel, Ann relayed a conversation she had with a fellow student, “This person, and I won’t say who, they didn’t feel good about it (letter grades) because they felt that’s their standing and they can’t do anything better than that because they’re on that level” (Inter, 13, 7.99). In addition, Sally reported that letter grades did not encourage her to learn, they made her feel like giving up, “If I get a C- or C on my report card, I’d go like, I try really hard, maybe I should just give up” (Inter, 21, 7.99).

There were various ways that structured written comments encouraged students to learn. For Kelly, seeing more comments in the strengths section than the needs to improve section made her proud of her accomplishments, and in that way, encouraged her to learn (Inter, 15, 7.99). Several students felt that comments encouraged them by describing what their strengths were, what they needed to practice, how they could do better and how they could maintain a good
standing (Inter, 13, 7.99; Inter, 16-18, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7, 99; Inter, 22-24, 7.99).
Ann, for example, stated, “The strengths and weaknesses comments tell you what you are able to do and then it gives you areas to work in, and that encourages you by telling you what you’re good in and what you should do to improve” (Inter, 13, 7.99).

Although comments were beneficial to most students, Bob and Tom did not find them useful (Inter, 14, 7.99; Inter, 19, 7.99). Bob’s reasoning was that he did not receive enough suggestions for improvement and Tom felt that comments were simply summaries of the letter grades.

However, Sally reported that structured written comments were discouraging for her because she always had so many improvements that needed to be made, “This is like you need more improvement, then I try to get improvement but then it keeps on saying needs more improvement, then I feel like I should give up” (Inter, 21, 7.99).

When asked what kind of report card students who were experiencing difficulties should receive, students responded with a variety of ideas and opinions. Some felt that these students should get the same report card as everyone else so they would not be made to feel different from other students, it would be fair for everyone if all students received the same report and because they should know how they’re doing in relation to others (Inter, 23, 7.99; Inter, 24, 7.99; Inter, 20, 7.99).

A few students felt a hard line approach was needed. Neil suggested that these students needed to have a whole page devoted to how they could study, what
areas should be studied, be required to do extra work over the summer and finally, be reminded not to be lazy (Inter, 18, 7.99). Tom felt that the students who experienced difficulties should receive a “little bit harder” report card than other children and, “If they’re not disabled they should be worked twice as hard because they’re the ones who are idiots that clearly aren’t working their entire life” (Inter, 19, 7.99). He went on to say that, “If they don’t work through life, if they’re being treated easy for their entire life...they won’t be able to get a job when they grow up, they really won’t care about their job, they really won’t care about what they’re doing in life”. Perhaps Tom assumed these values from a family discussion regarding the qualities of a good work ethic.

Alex felt that students who experienced difficulties needed to know that they were not doing well so they could practice, and they needed parents to help them set goals such as doing homework first before playing (Inter, 16, 7.99). He added that they should have a different report card than other students, for example, one with a short description of focus areas and a checklist on what they needed to improve on.

Bob commented that the kind of report card a child received depended on if they cared about doing well or not (Inter, 14, 7.99). He added that, “If they don’t care, they should get a different one that tells parents how they are working, gives more information on like getting parents to make them try harder because they’re just not very good students.” Finally, Bob suggested that the language used to describe letter grades may be the reason why some some students did not try hard:
I think they don’t really mind because when it says C, C demonstrates satisfactory, they think it’s just average, well C is just average so it doesn’t really matter, I’m just average. They’re like happy with C+ because it says the student demonstrates good performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade (Inter, 14, 7.99).

Three students were concerned about how students who generally received low letter grades must feel, and suggested changes to the report card that might increase self esteem. Kelly noted how discouraging it must be for a student to continually receive a C letter grade when she said, “It’s like everytime I get a C, it’s like why should I learn anymore, I just get a C anyway” (Inter, 15, 7.99). She suggested, “a special report card in which comments would encourage that kid to study harder” was needed. Jeff commented that kids who tried hard and still obtained a C- grade may feel upset and give up (Inter, 22, 7.99). He suggested two different report cards may be a solution with the parents receiving the “real” report card while the student received a special type of letter grade that made them feel “normal.” In addition, they should get mostly kind comments. Ann reported that, “I think they should get the same one (report card) so they don’t feel left out from the other children but they should be listed on the level of thinking that they can do, like their capability” (Inter, 13, 7.99). She added, “They should be graded A or B on how good they were, if they’re trying their best and what level they are in their capability.”

Amanda, a lower achieving student, showed she understood the frustration of students whose efforts were not always rewarded by high letter grades:
I think some kids they want to get good grades but they don’t want to try cause they think when I try it comes out of my head, I try and I stand there for hours and I hardly learn anything and for kids who get good letter grades they probably spend some time in one hour or they play and after they come back they study. But other kids they’re worried, like oh, I can’t do this and I’m frustrated and I don’t want to tell my parents or else I’m going to sit here for probably a long time. We’re probably going to do this long talk over and over each day so that’s why some kids don’t want to do it and some kids who get good letter grades, their parents usually don’t care, they let them do anything (Inter, 17, 7.99).

When asked what kind of report card a child who experienced difficulties should receive, Amanda went on to say that a letter explaining techniques for improvement in a particular subject should accompany the report card of these types of children. When asked if those students should receive letter grades Amanda responded:

If they want to show it to their parents, yes it’s discouraging but it’s nice for them to get letter grades cause if if they get a letter they feel like, oh I’m dumb, like you know I’ve got learning disabilities, they’ll probably feel that but if they get a report with letter grades like regular kids do, they’ll probably be more comfortable than getting a letter and thinking that they have learning disability (Inter, 17, 7.99).

When the interview was over, Amanda volunteered a final comment that once again hinted at the frustration some children experienced in their struggle to achieve excellence:

Sometimes when kids like want to study, like they want to get good grades, their parents they don’t really find time to sit down with their child to study. They usually are caught up in work or housework or anything else, they don’t bother taking time, like probably a day off or something and sit down with their children and study with them or sometimes when parents are not educated they should at least try to study or get them a tutor if they can’t teach their own child cause they can’t just sit around and let
their child fail. They should at least get a tutor if they’re not so bright (Inter, 17, 7.99).

Sally, a student with learning difficulties, felt the present report card was not encouraging to students who generally received letter grades of C or C-. In its place she recommended two report cards, one for the parent and the other for the child, “They should have a separate piece of paper like one for the parents and one just for the students. The parents would go like this, the child’s doing poorly and needs lots of improvement and then the child you just need a little improvement” (Inter, 21, 7.99). Sally felt the parent should receive a report card that told them exactly how the child was doing, even if progress was poor. However, Sally noted that if the child read the report card and saw how badly their progress was, they would lose confidence. Sally went on to say that for a child who got a lot of C and C- letter grades, it was better to eliminate letter grades because, “If you get like C- or F, it’s like oh my gosh, I’m getting really bad and then all of them (the students) lose all the confidence, actually just give up” (Inter, 21, 7.99). She felt the report card should contain only comments because they were gentler than letter grades.

In conclusion, the report card adequately encouraged student learning for the majority of students. Parents and students felt that letter grades enabled students to monitor their progress while structured written comments supplied encouragement and advice. However, the report card tended to be discouraging, rather than encouraging, for low achieving students because no matter how hard they tried, report card letter grades and comments were constant reminders of
their inadequacy as learners. Finally, student self motivation and parental involvement were identified by some parents and students as important components of any child’s learning, and the report card acted as an informational tool to report progress.
Chapter 5
Conclusions And Discussion

The Ministry of Education's formal structured written report card is the main form of communication between parents, students and teachers. Freidman & Frisbie (1995) commented that schools rely heavily on report cards when communicating with parents about students' performance in school and that the purpose of report cards was to convey information from the school to parents about a student's educational progress. According to the Ministry of Education (1994b), the mandated new reporting procedures as outlined in The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Plan were designed specifically to provide clear, complete and enhanced communication between school and home. Since the report card is a prominent document, this study addressed the questions of: how informative and useful are report cards to parents and students and do they support and encourage student learning?

Conclusions

Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students?

Generally, parents and students were satisfied with the report card and found it to be informative and useful in terms of reporting a student's progress, informing parents about what the student learned, pointing out areas of strength, those in need of improvement, and ways improvements could be made. However, the report card was not perfect because parents, and students made several
suggestions regarding changes to the report card that would make it more informative and useful to them. For example, Helen thought it was important to have detailed knowledge regarding her child's emotional development, and although this information did appear on the report card, the topic was not covered in the depth she felt was needed. She stated that report cards placed an emphasis on reporting academic progress and this left little space for comments regarding a child's emotional status (Inter, 1, 7.99). Furthermore, Mary, Jack, Nancy, Jeff and Kelly felt the addition of percentages on the report card would enhance their understanding of student progress because this would enable them to know if the letter grade received was at a high or low level (Inter, 3, 7.99; Inter, 10, 7.99; Inter, 22, 7.99; Inter, 15, 7.99). If, for example, the child received an A letter grade, but the percentage received was on the low end of the A percentage scale, then this would provide a signal that further study was needed.

**Does the report card support student learning?**

Several parents and students felt the report card supported student learning by describing student progress, complimenting the student and providing suggestions for improvement. However, once again, the report card was not without faults because changes that supported student learning were suggested by parents and students. For example, Pam was adamant that a one-on-one conference between a low achieving student and the teacher regarding the report card would be more supportive of the student than present reporting practices (Inter, 6, 7.99). Pam felt this provided the teacher with the opportunity to
personally explain to the student why particular letter grades and comments were awarded, and then plans for improvement could be discussed together. She felt this method would better support a student’s learning by providing for the child a better understanding of their progress, helping the child feel involved in their learning and showing the student that the teacher cared about him/her.

**Does the report card encourage learning?**

Parents whose children received average to good letter grades and comments, and those students who received average to good letter grades and comments tended to view the report card as encouraging learning. The letter grades and written comments verified for them that they were successful at learning and encouraged them to continue their efforts. If these students, received a low letter grade they had the ability to improve the letter grade, providing they were self-motivated. On the other hand, to low achieving students, the report card was not a source of encouragement, but rather a constant reminder of their inadequacies as learners. Parents of low achieving students did not speak about the report card in terms of encouraging learning, instead they suggested alternate ways of reporting that they felt would provide more encouragement for their children than present reporting practices. For example, Tony, Pam and Esther, parents of students with learning difficulties, felt that increased communication between home and school was necessary in order to provide the encouragement their children needed to learn (Inter, 6-7, 7.99; Inter, 8, 7.99). They felt a
conference was needed approximately every three weeks in order to monitor student goals and progress, and to keep their children's interest in learning active.

Discussion

The report card

The Ministry of Education's mandated structured written report card certainly offers an acceptable way of reporting to parents and students but it is not meeting all of the needs of parents and students alike. This is because there is not one "right" kind of report card given the varied needs of all parents and students. Individuals in these groups have different needs, comprehend grading and reporting in different ways and have different depths of understanding of the education system. Yet, every student in British Columbia must receive the same style of report card in order to fulfill the requirements of the mandated Ministry of Education's structured written report card. This places teachers in an interesting conundrum. On the one hand, teachers are discouraged from making the assumption that all students are similar, and instead, are encouraged to treat students as individuals with differences in learning rates and styles. In The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Plan (1994b) one of the Principles of Learning states that, "People learn in a variety of ways and at different rates" (p. 1), and that during the Intermediate years (grades 4-7), "Students need flexibility in classroom organization and methods of instruction in order to meet the challenges of these critically important years in the school system" (p. 4). Yet on
the other hand, there are no allowances made for student individuality or preferences with regards to the kind of report card that would best suit the learning needs of individual students.

Seeley (1994) explains that teachers are encouraged to challenge students to complete complex tasks, but for some the result will be low grades. She adds that we need to be cognizant of the effects of poor grades on students. Seeley proposes that an important question is how can grades adequately reflect student progress and effort, yet still encourage and motivate students to persevere? In addition, poor grades may have unintended consequences for children. Like Seeley, Guskey (1994) observes that a child with poor grades may withdraw from learning in order to protect his self-image. Campbell (1974) commented that in order to protect themselves from continued failure, students may exhibit the following behaviours; turning off, non-involvement, don’t-take-a-chance, keep-your-mouth-shut, become a discipline case, have a learning problem, become antisocial or even physically assault people and property (p. 145).

Generally speaking, the data in this study suggests that the mandated Ministry of Education’s structured written report card was effective for average to above average parents and students but not for low achieving parents and students. Good letter grades and comments on the report card adequately supported and encouraged good learners to continue doing well, but tended to discourage low achieving students because no matter how hard they tried, they were rewarded with low letter grades and suggestions for improvements. During each reporting period, the cycle of high achievers feeling positive about themselves and low
achievers feeling humiliated was perpetuated. Young (1998), discussed the effects of the reporting system on students:

Research compellingly shows that failing children, especially in the early grades, nearly always leads to discouragement and negative attitudes toward school and learning - and dropout. Children whom the system cite as successful rarely drop out. Children whom the system brand as failures usually do (p.A19).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement was seen as an important component to a child’s success. Parents of students who performed well, and high achieving students tended to mention the necessity of parental involvement more frequently than other parents and students. Parental involvement was described as a must in every child’s education and it was a parent’s responsibility to show children they cared about their learning and academic progress. Unfortunately, not all children interviewed benefited from this special parent-child partnership. In some cases parents did not know the English language well enough to assist their children, others worked during the times their child was at home and some simply did not wish to commit the time needed to support their child academically.

Some parents stated that in their countries of origin, parents were expected to assume more responsibility for their child’s progress than in Canada. If the child was not performing well, the parents were expected to attend a problem solving meeting at the school to discuss solutions to their child’s problems with
school staff. Perhaps this method of encouraging parental involvement has some merit.

Motivation

In this study, parents and students discussed the importance of motivation and how it plays an important role in a child's success at school. High achieving students appeared to have higher levels of motivation than lower achieving students. In some instances, parent encouragement helped students achieve at high levels. How much effort a student chose to put into a subject depended on the level of self-motivation possessed, and which letter grade was desired.

However, for students such as Sally and Amanda, even though they tried hard to receive good letter grades and comments, their only reward was another negative report card (Inter, 21, 07.99; Inter, 17, 07.99). Guskey (1996) explains that grades have some value as rewards, but no value as a punishment. Most students view high grades as recognition of their success and many work hard to avoid low grades. However, no studies document that receiving a low grade will prompt motivation to succeed. Instead, some students may regard the low mark as irrelevant and meaningless, while others may blame themselves and feel powerless to make improvements. As Sally explained, this process made her feel like "giving up".

In the document, Intermediate Program: Foundations (1992b), the Ministry of Education acknowledged that the use of symbols for communicating student progress may be detrimental to a student's well-being:
While a concise means of communicating student learning is needed, symbols reduce the complexity of the accomplishments of learners, and oversimplification occurs. The symbols may be given overweighted significance; parents/guardians and students may accept them as unchangeable and unquestionable and rate students’ abilities accordingly. Using symbols to compare students has the potential for labelling, which may lead to negative effects on learner self-esteem, reduce motivation, and seriously impede achievement. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1992b, p. 118)

In The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education Plan (1994b), a document practicing teachers are mandated to follow, an intermediate student requirement, was, “To develop social and personal skills, good work habits, confidence, sense of self-worth, and understanding of the value of physical and emotional well-being” (p. 4). The apparent contradiction of policy statements between government foundation documents and policy on reporting practices has possibly resulted from the push for accountability movement. On the one hand, the government of B. C. acknowledges the individuality of the child, yet on the other hand, it is attempting to satisfy the electorate’s call for standards and accountability by “one size fits all” reporting policy.

In the final analysis the report card has little to do with the quality of education, but much to do with giving an impression of accountability to a cynical public that has been constantly bombarded with criticism of the public schools. BC. has had eight ministers of education in the last two decades....one legacy of their collective negativism exists - an ineffective report card that is counterproductive to the fostering of excellence in education (Butchart, 1999, p. A19).

And I might add, counterproductive to supporting and encouraging all students in the province.
Comparison of groups

Parents and students tended to have similar views regarding most reporting issues, however, a few differences were noted. For example, parents were quite adamant that they did not like the checklist in the report card but students liked the checklist because it did not require a lot of reading and progress was evident at a glance. Larger numbers of students than parents felt that one letter grade for a large subject area such as Language Arts was not adequate, and that these large subject areas should be broken down into smaller segments with a letter grade assigned to each. Finally, students seemed to be more concerned and attuned to the feelings of low achieving students and how the report card made them feel than parents were.

There were marked differences in the perceptions of high achieving parents and students and low achieving parents and students. During each reporting period, the cycle of high achievers feeling positive about themselves, while low achievers felt loss of self-esteem was perpetuated. High achievers saw the report card with rose colored glasses while low achievers saw the report card with grey colored glasses. High achieving students loved to count their A’s and compare marks with other students, while low achieving students dreaded report card day and the embarrassment it caused.

Parents of high achieving students were concerned about standards, where their child placed when compared to other students in the class, other classes of the same grade in the school, district or province. This was not a concern to parents of low achieving students. These parents understood that comparing their
child against other students was not an issue. Perhaps the push for “standards”
and “accountability” stems mainly from parents who already know their child,
fares better than most but enjoy having this fact verified at the expense of low
achieving children. Case (Crawley, 1995) also discusses the issue of tough
standards.

The emphasis on tough standards is misdirected, because it’s
like raising the height of the bar in the pole vault. People who couldn’t get
over it before are not going to improve their performance just because it’s
higher. In fact what happens is it often discourages those who could
otherwise get over it. It doesn’t in any way address any of the root causes
of what will increase performance. What increases performance is better
instruction, better teaching. So if they’re serious about raising standards
they’d improve the quality of pedagogy. The irony is...the strategies
presented have taken money away from professional development for
teachers. It would have been better placed helping teachers become more
effective at improving kids’ performance (Crawley, 1995, p. 137).

Average to high achieving students displayed confidence and a desire to
use information in the report card as an aide to improving learning independently,
while lower achieving students had no confidence in these areas and tended to rely
on others to help them achieve the same goal.

Recommendations

Recommendations to the Ministry of Education

The Ministry of Education should change the reporting policy to allow
more flexibility in methods of reporting to parents and students. It is clear that
present report card procedures are not supportive or encouraging to low achieving students, therefore, alternative methods of reporting should be permissible. For example, parents interviewed have suggested that these children would be better served through one-on-one conferencing and/or conferences held approximately every three weeks throughout the year. The Ministry should provide the extra time needed by teachers to conference with these families. As one parent commented, if a student improves from a C- to a C, then the extra conferencing was worth it.

The Ministry of Education should be less concerned with the requirement of every student receiving the mandated structured written report card and more concerned about respecting individual preferences for reporting styles by allowing choice in report cards. Parents, and especially students, should be given the option of selecting the mandated report card or being permitted to choose an alternate report card in order to better meet individual learning needs. Shifting the focus from comparing students to supporting and encouraging individual student learning is needed.

In a study, Waltman & Frisbie (1994) stated that:

All the care taken by teachers to develop and use high-quality assessment tools and use defensible grading procedures may be for naught....No matter what the quality of the grades might be, the communication with parents was full of noise. Improved assessments or better grading practices will not improve the communication. It appears that the typical report card cannot carry enough information to ensure clear communication. It too needs a transformation. (p. 240)
The Ministry of Education should conduct a province wide survey of the parents and students who are presently enrolled in schools to determine what features they value in a report card. Then, based on the results, new report cards and/or reporting procedures should be developed that will better meet the learning needs and styles of the various individuals in our schools.

Recommendations to the school district

To show support for flexibility in report card use, the school district should lobby the Ministry of Education to initiate a province wide survey of school age children and their parents to identify what these groups value in a report card that is informative, useful, and supports and encourages individual learning. The school district should ask the Ministry of Education to develop new reporting procedures based on survey results. They should request that parents and students have a choice in selecting the form of reporting that best meets the needs of the various students and parents in the district. Additional conference time should be provided for teachers of students and parents who require frequent conferencing.

The school district should implement a program that would inform parents about the academic and emotional benefits of becoming involved with their child’s education. Materials printed in various languages regarding the importance of parental involvement should be given to parents and workshops for parents presented in various languages should be held. Several multicultural
school-home workers should be available to provide support for parents and to act as a liaison between school and home.

The school district should investigate and develop a pilot project to investigate the usefulness of implementing a plan of action that could be put into place when students continually do not perform well. Problem solving meetings between parents, the student and school personal could be organized regarding possible solutions. Extra funds should be made available to purchase special materials or provide specific programming for the student.

**Future Research**

Through further research this study could be replicated in other areas of the district or even the province to see if the findings are generalizable. As well, a larger scale survey of all of a school’s parents and students, or a sample of a district’s parents and students could be conducted. It would be useful to discover if low achieving students in other parts of the district or province are discouraged, rather than encouraged, by the mandated Ministry of Education’s structured written report card.

Further research could identify effective and varied ways of communicating student progress to parents and students, so that everyone’s requirements are met in a manner appropriate to their needs. Emphasis should be placed on determining a system of reporting that encourages rather than discourages low achieving students. Implementation support to teachers must be developed to ensure success. Since the writing of report cards is already a time
consuming and burdensome process, teachers must be granted more time free
from teaching responsibilities to prepare report cards that effectively meet
individual parent and student needs. Additional conference time should be granted
throughout the year to accommodate those parents and students who would benefit
from more frequent conferencing.
References


In your view. (2000, August, 16). *The Vancouver Sun*. 


School system gets a failing grade. (1994, September 4). *The Vancouver Sun*.


Appendix A

Research Questions
&
Interview Questions
Research Questions

My research questions centre around the following issues:

Q1 Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students?
Q2 Does the report card support student learning?
Q3 Does the report card encourage student learning?

Interview Questions

I intend to explain to students and parents that a formal structured written report card is the kind that is issued to students from grades 4-7. I will also have a blank formal structured written report card as an example.

Interview questions for, **Is the report card informative and useful to parents and students?** are:

- How did you feel about this report card?
- What did you like about this report card?
- What did you not like about this report card?
- How was the report card clear and easy to understand?
- What did you learn about your child from this report card? (for parents).
- What did you learn about yourself from this report card? (for students)
- What do you believe the purpose of a report card should be?
• What changes would you make to this report card to make it more useful and informative for you?

• If you could design a report card for your child what would it look like? If possible, please use paper to help show what you mean. (for parents)

• If you could design a report card for yourself, what would it look like? If possible, please use paper to help show what you mean. (for students)

Interview questions for **Does the report card support student learning?** are:

• How does the report card explain what you have learned/not learned?

• How does this report card compliment your child for work well done? (for parents)

• How does this report card compliment you for work well done? (for students)

• How does this report card explain what you need to do to improve?

• Who do you think the report card is intended for and why?

• Who do you think the report card should be intended for and why?

• In what ways does this report card help your child to learn? (for parents)

• In what ways does this report card help you learn? (for students)

Interview questions for **Does the report card encourage student learning?** are:

• How do you think letter grades encourage your child to learn? Can you tell me why? (for parents)
• How do you think letter grades encourage you to learn? Can you tell me why? (for students)

• How do structured written comments encourage your child to learn? Can you tell me why? (for parents)

• How do structured written comments encourage you to learn? Can you tell me why? (for students)

• What kind of report card should a student who is having difficulties receive?

• If you could design a report card that encouraged your child to learn, what would it look like? Why? If possible, please use paper to show what you mean. (for parents)

• If you could design a report card that encouraged you to learn, what would it look like? If possible, please use paper to show what you mean. (for students)
Appendix B

Report Card
INTERMEDIATE PROGRESS REPORT

Grade 4 5 6 7
Reporting Period:
TERM 3

(PLACE LABELS HERE)

1) Structured Written Report

Number of inserts included □

2) Letter Grades (Explanation on reverse)

Language Arts □ Social Studies □ Other □
Mathematics □ Physical Education □
Science □ Art □

Final Grade for Year

Language Arts □ Social Studies □ Other □
Mathematics □ Physical Education □
Science □ Art □

Assigned to Grade □, June 199□

Teacher's Signature ____________________________ School Administrator's Signature ____________________________
To enable students to reach their intellectual, social, aesthetic and physical potential in challenging and stimulating settings which reflect the worth of each individual and promote mutual respect, co-operation and social responsibility.

IN THE INTERMEDIATE YEARS, STUDENTS:

- study language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, information and computer studies, applied skills, physical education and fine arts.
- develop their ability to solve problems, think critically, and make decisions
- develop social and personal skills, good work habits, confidence, sense of self-worth, and understanding of the value of physical and emotional well-being

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parents have a crucial role to play in the education system and their child(ren)'s progress. Regular involvement and communication with your child's school are encouraged. This can be in many ways, including parent-teacher conferences, parent meetings and school consultative committees.

This Report Includes:

1) Structured Written Report:
   - what the student is able to do
   - areas requiring further attention or development
   - ways of supporting the student's learning
   - comments on student behaviour, attitude, work habits and effort

2) Letter Grades:

   A  The student demonstrates excellent or outstanding performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.
   B  The student demonstrates very good performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.
   C+ The student demonstrates good performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.
   C  The student demonstrates satisfactory performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.
   C- The student demonstrates minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade.
   I  In Progress or Incomplete. (May be used at any time during the school year). The student, for a variety of reasons, is not demonstrating minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes.
   F  Failing or Failed. The student has not demonstrated, or is not demonstrating, the minimally acceptable performance in relation to the expected learning outcomes for the course or subject and grade. An F may only be used as a grade if an I (In Progress or Incomplete) has been previously assigned.
   SG Standing Granted. (Can only be used on final report). Although completion of normal requirements is not possible, a sufficient level of performance has been attained to warrant, consistent with the best interests of the student, the granting of standing for the course or subject and grade. This symbol can be used in such cases as serious illness, hospitalization, late entry or early leaving, but may only be granted as the result of an adjudication process authorized by the administrative officer in charge of the school.
   W  Withdrawal. (Can only be used on final report). According to board policy, the administrative officer in charge of a school may grant permission to a student to withdraw from a course or subject. This may be done on the request of the parents, or when appropriate, the student.
   TS Transfer Standing. (Can only be used on final report). Transfer Standing may be granted by the administrative officer in charge of a school on the basis of an examination of records from an institution other than a school, as defined in the School Act. Alternately, the administrative officer in charge of a school may assign a letter grade on the basis of an examination of those records.
Appendix C

Report Card Design
1) Structured Written Report

Should include comments on areas to work on ie how to improve grades.

2) Letter Grades (Explanation somewhere of grades)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language Arts</th>
<th>Math</th>
<th>Science</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Physical Education</th>
<th>Art</th>
<th>Music</th>
<th>Career and Personal Planning</th>
<th>Others</th>
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<th>Effort</th>
<th>Second Report Card</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Effort</th>
<th>Final Report Card</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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Language arts:
- reading level
- spelling
- punctuation

Mathematics:
- division
- addition
- subtraction
- multiplication

L. A  
P. E  
Math  
Art  
French  
Science  
Music  
S. S  

average  
very good  
impro.
### Math

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<td>2) Number Operations</td>
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<td>3) Problem Solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>4) Division</td>
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</table>

#### Letter Grade

- **A**

#### Exceed Expectation

- ✓

#### Needs Development

#### Family Participation

#### Language Arts

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<td>Subject</td>
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<tr>
<td>A) Econ.</td>
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<tr>
<td>B) Geog.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C) Pol. Sci.</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
SCHOOL STUFF

CHILD'S NAME

REPORT CARD

SCHOOL INFO

GRADE ASSESSMENT

(COVER PAGE)
Glossary

Integrated Resource Package - Contains the provincially prescribed learning outcomes, suggested instructional and assessment strategies, and provincially recommended learning resources. It is intended to assist teachers in delivering the prescribed curriculum (Victoria, 1995, p. 1).

Overview - An insert that accompanies the report card. It describes what was taught in each subject during the term (author).

Prescribed Learning Outcomes - The learning outcomes are prescribed by the province and describe what students are expected to know and do at a specific grade (Victoria, 1995, p. 4).