

How can a report card facilitate assessment for learning?

Abstract

While the report cards are issued to students in every academic year, does it help students learn better? Or does it allow parents to know how they can facilitate their kids' learning in school? This paper begins with elucidation of the various functions of a report card. Perception of parents about the report card is examined to understand if there is any gap/discrepancy between the proposed functions and the perceived ones. While the report card serves various functions, it is argued that one main purpose of classroom assessment, amongst others valued by both parents and students, is assessment for learning. To reach this goal, a report card should be designed to provide useful information that helps parents facilitate their kids' progression in their studies.

Keywords: parents' involvement, report cards, assessment for learning,

Introduction

Accurate communication of students' progress in school between teachers and parents is necessary and crucial to students' learning. Parents, especially those have children studying in elementary schools, should be kept informed of their children' behaviour, attitude and learning so that they know how to cooperate with the school. In addition, parents have the right to know information of their children in school. Common approaches of communication include report cards, homework, notes from teachers, phone calls from teachers and regular parent-teacher meeting. Among these approaches, the most common and formal form of communication with parents is the distribution of report cards. A parent-teacher meeting is often scheduled on the same day or after a report card. The report card serves as a topic of discussion in the face-to-face meeting for parents and teacher. Practices of the meeting vary widely among schools. Parents are expected to participate in the meeting in some schools. In other schools, it may be optional for parents to join. Only students with low academic achievement or a behavioural problem are expected to meet the teacher. Report card is the only mechanism which all parents or guardians would probably receive. Therefore the design of a report card is essential as it transmits the message of students' progress to parents. The first purpose of this paper is to study evidence from existing literature if the report card is able to transmit a clear message from teachers to parents.

In addition to the function of communication, the report card serves for administrative purposes of keeping students' promotion or retention in grade and awards. It keeps track of a summary of students' progress in school annually. The value of report card in the

perspective of students varies depending on his or her achievement. High academic achievement students tend to be motivated by a report card while low achiever seems to be anxious with it. The quest for an informative design of a report card is necessary so as to provide useful information for both students and parents to facilitate learning. There are different types of report cards ranging from simple design to sophisticated one. A simple design may only include a brief summary of students' performance in school while a narrative one have detailed, written accounts of what students learnt in class and comments of students. It has been indicated in the literature that there is much room for improvement in the area of report card (Goodman & Hambleton, 2004) How do parents perceive the role of report card? Do they have any expectation from the report card? This introduces another purpose of the paper. That is to study if the current design of a typical report card in Macau primary school facilitates the communication of students' progress in school.

The next section summaries the field of grading, grade reporting and grade interpretation. It addresses the first purpose of the paper and sets out the scene for the design of a report card. In section 3, a typical report card used in Macau primary education is provided for comparing with the evidence located in the literature. Parents' perception on the role of report card is projected as another source of reference for the design of report card. The final section concludes the need of a better design of report card which facilitates the transmissioin of students' progress in school from teachers to parents.

Literature review of report card: Preparation and Interpretation

Student's academic achievement in terms of grade or scores occupies the largest area in a report card. Preparation of grade in the report card is the work of teachers. Do teachers have a clear understanding of the grading policy of report card? Do they grade student's work appropriately? Teachers tend to use a number of factors like achievement, effort, behavior, attitude, compliance and ability to grade students' work (Cizek, 1996; Pilcher, 1994). This practice is quite common among teachers. Different teachers use different factors in different proportions to students' grade. This approach has been criticized for its validity as summaries of students' academic achievement of content knowledge of a subject for communication purposes (Allen, 2005). This is because it muddles the transmission of message from teachers to parents. In addition to academic result, a grade carries the meaning of a student's effort, attitude or even behaviour. It does not match with the caption in the report card. Therefore, the message that parents perceive varies with that of teachers. Parents may consider the grade as students' academic performance or mastery of content knowledge. That is they mainly associated grade

with students' achievement. An old remark by Waltman (1994) 'A typical report cannot carry enough information to ensure clear communication' is still appropriate to describe the current situation (Allen, 2005). Report cards per se probably should not be relied on as an effective vehicle for communicating to parents regarding children's specific competencies. Accurate information of student's academic progress is strongly suggested to put in the report card (Friedman & Frisbie, 1995, 2000).

The lack of coherence in the beliefs about grades held by parents and teachers sheds light to the design of report card. Grading practice should match with the purpose of assessment. Grade should be assigned to students' academic achievement only. Non-academic factors should be separately marked in the report card (Allen, 2005; Guskey, 2006; Winger, 2005). If this is not the case, clear description should be provided in the report card to guide the interpretation of score or grade.

A review of current approaches for reporting student-level results on large-scale assessments conducted by Goodman and Hambleton (2004) identifies both the problematic and promising features of report cards. Their work provides helpful tips on designing of a student report card. They found that current reports had the problem of using technical terms in the report card, too much irrelevant information and small sized text or numeric displays. If they are to be understood easily by their intended audiences, organization of information into different components using headings and other devices such as box is important. Heading may be phrased in the form of key questions. Multiple presentations of results using numbers, graphics and narrative texts are beneficial to address differences in the information processing models of parents. Regarding the type of information needed, they suggested comparative information about how students perform in relation to the standards or other students is promising. Diagnostic information in written interpretations of student's specific strengths and weaknesses is another type of information highly recommended. Goodman and Hambleton (2004) suggested to provide personalized diagnostic information to both students and parents. Interpretative guide is another type of information which is necessary in a report card. It adds meaning to the intended users of report card. For examples, describing the expected level of performance on a test through well-defined performance levels helps parents to understand the meaning of score.

As a summary, grade in the report card perceived by parents may not completely match teachers' intention. Grading practice operated by teachers deserves the attention of parents when they are interpreting information in the report card. Another issue located in the literature is about the design of report card. Even though the design of report card is often beyond the power of teachers, they fill in the contents of report card. The design

of report card should facilitate the communication of meaning through various resources. These include proper organization of data, clear interpretative guides and appropriate formats of score representation etc. The goal is to achieve a clear understanding of the grading policy by parents, teachers and other teachers which is essential for the communication of students' progress through report card. (Cizek, 1996; Waltman & Frisbie, 1994)

A typical report card used by Macao primary schools

In Macao primary education, almost all schools use the same or similar format of report card shown in Figure 1. A summary of an individual student's progress in school is recorded in one page of A4 size paper. In the report card, there are student's basic information such as name, student identification number, class etc. Student's academic achievement in different periods of the academic year occupies the largest area in the report card. Student's academic result in terms of weighted composite scores are indicated in the report cards. It records students' coursework and examination scores. The weight for coursework and examination varies among schools.

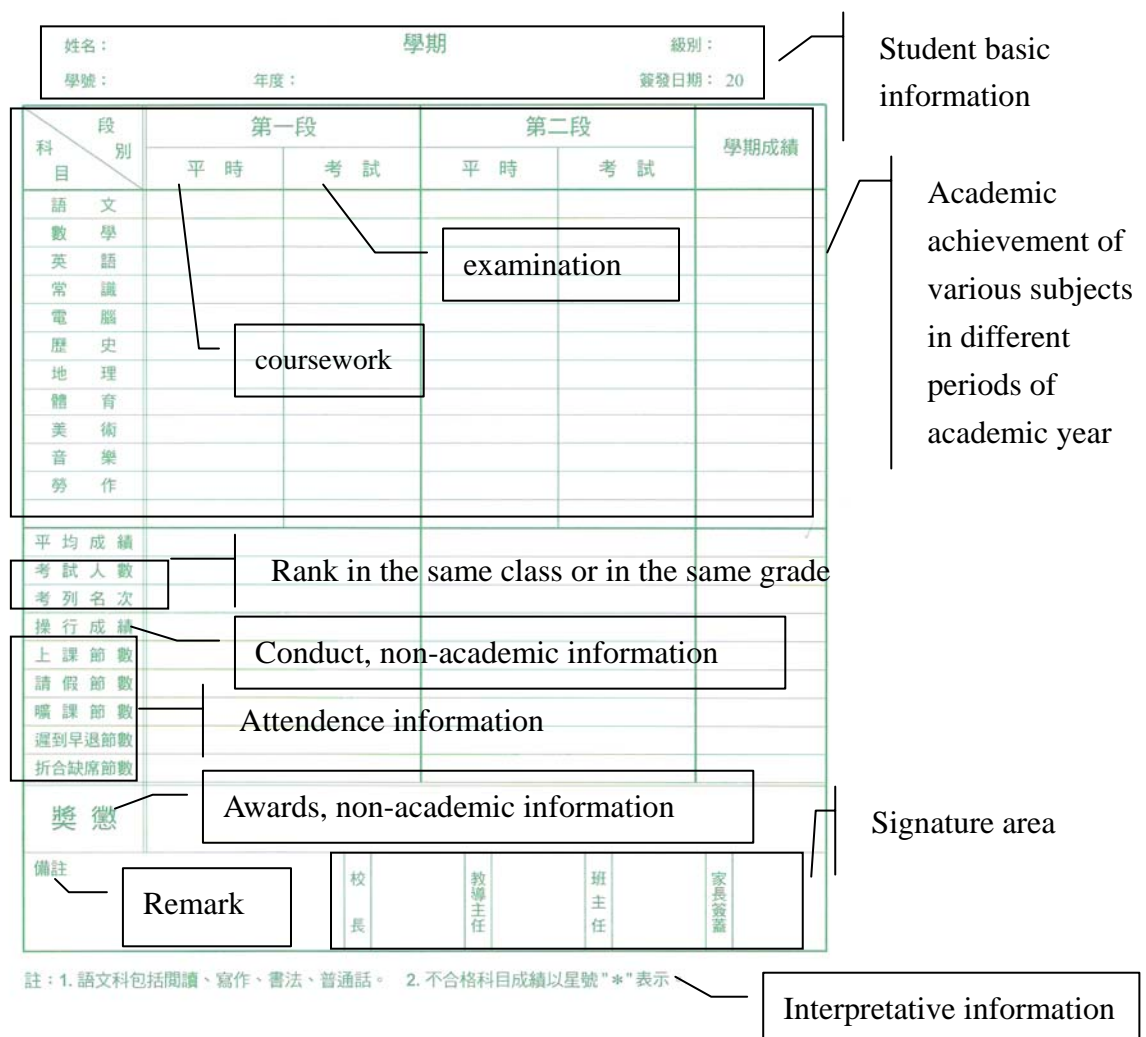


Figure 1. A typical report card used by many schools in Macao primary education

Many schools also compute a student's overall scores and compare it with other students in the same class or same grade so that a position is given to a student in the rank field of the report card. Other information such as attendance record , non-academic information of conduct and awards are also provided.

Information shown in a typical report card provides a concise summary of an individual student's performance in school. It does not describe strength and weakness of student in a specific subject domain. Parents may just know that their child is weak in mathematics if his mark in Mathematics is low. Assuming that the grade is valid, this message is too vague for parents to make any decision. They have no idea of which area of mathematics that their child has difficulty. Referring to Figure 1, it can easily be noticed that space for written comments of student is limited which disable teacher to write more about the student. Such information mean much more to parents and students.

In order to find out how parents in Macau perceive the function of report card, a questionnaire is designed to obtain parents' knowledge of the value of report card and their expectation. Parents' perceptions are used to locate gaps and discrepancies in their interpretation of grade and to improve the design of report card. A constructed-response question is designed to seek parents' suggestion on the report card. Questionnaires are collected from 96 parents who have kids studying in primary schools. Descriptive statistics of collected data are studied using statistical software.

Parents' perception on the role of report card

Analysis of collected data shows that more than half of responded parents have a positive attitude towards the report card of their children. They indicate a clear understanding of the content in the report card and are aware of the meaning of scores. They know their children's life in school which includes their conduct, awards or any improvements. All these seem to show that parents are quite satisfy with the information shown in the report card.

However, the percentage of parents who agrees in knowing students' learning attitude, strength and weakness, personal and moral development is obviously smaller than that of students' academic achievement. One third of the parents do provide explicit suggestions with respect to the information provided in the report card or the practice of grading and reporting. Among these suggestions, the percentage of parents requesting teachers' written comments about their children is the largest. They hope teachers to provide more information about the strength and weakness of their children. These

suggestions echo with the results collected through the statement of parents' belief on the value of report card. These results imply that parents want to have more information from the report card regarding the study of their kids so that they know how to facilitate their children's learning.

Conclusion

Even though the perception of parents in Macau primary schools on the role of report card is quite positive from the collected data . They do point out for the need of more diagnostic information. This implies for the need of a revised version of report card design. In addition, the current practice of grading and reporting should be under review for a better communication of students' progress in school from teachers to parents or even to students to teachers. One suggestion by parent is to provide a space in the report card for student to reflect on his or her own learning. Design of report card is one step which facilitates assessment for learning. The practice of grading and grade interpretation should follow in order to have a maximized effect on students' learning.

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