I sit in my office at home adrift in student portfolios, videos and audiotapes, pages of anecdotal comments, checklists, and rating scales, books-full of conference notes, and files of students’ self-evaluations. Yet here I sit, staring at the blank screen, trying to think how I will relay the information about each student to his/her parents. Words and phrases swirl inside my head, but I can’t manage to formulate even an opening sentence.

—Marianne McTavish, 1992: 64

I, too, have mixed feelings about report card writing. On one hand, it allows me the time to think carefully about each child. On the other, it is incredibly time consuming. While you might assume that thinking about each student individually would be a given for teachers, it is actually a luxury because there simply isn’t enough time in a day to think about each student in the ways that they deserve. But, the amount of time report card writing takes is overwhelming. Each report card can take up to two hours to write and with twenty-two or so students in a primary class, time spent on reports adds another forty hours or more to the work week. Furthermore, unless time is put aside to meet with parents, there really is no guarantee that either the parent or the child understands the report card in any meaningful way, and that too takes time.

Uninspired by the typical report card writing process, I began to ask myself questions about report card writing in particular, and assessment and evaluation practices in general. I wondered why, for example, if assessments and evaluations “drive” teaching and learning—and I believe that they should—the reporting process remains so disconnected from the day-to-day lives of students. I wondered why, if report cards are supposed to be about students, students are often absent from the construction of them. I also wondered what parents thought of report cards. And I wondered if parents have an adequate sense of who their child is as a learner.

Assessment and Evaluation—A Social Justice Issue

What disturbed me most about the standard approach to the report card process was that many students, even primary students, showed anxiety and fear as report-card time neared. They were afraid that they wouldn’t receive a “good” report card and that trouble would follow. I was surprised because I write report cards with a student’s strengths uppermost in my mind and because I believe that report cards should essentially describe a student’s learning, not pronounce a moral judgment on their character. I realized that part of their trepidation was due to being left out of the process. They felt report cards were “done” to them, in a way that’s similar to the patient who undergoes a battery of medical tests and waits for the diagnosis. Like the medical model that excludes or minimizes input from the patient—the very person the tests are all about—the typical report card process does the same to the student. The student, like the patient, moves from being the subject to the object as reports are written. The doctor declares the state of the patient’s health, sometimes without asking the patient how she or he is indeed feeling, just as the teacher writes about a student’s progress (or lack of it) without even asking the student to express an opinion about their own learning experiences.

Exclusionary assessment and evaluation practices may be examples of poor pedagogy, but since these practices also prevent students and their parents from participating, it becomes an issue of fairness and opportunity, placing it in the realm of social justice. Exemplary teachers have called for more student involvement in assessment and evaluation during the last decade or so, but few have framed it in terms of social justice.

Social justice issues in the educational arena have mostly been about equity funding and opportunity for poor and minority students, and deservedly so. However, if social justice is about fairness, equity, opportunity, and freedom from oppression, then much of our teaching practice could be scrutinized.
through the social justice lens. And, unfortunately, the way most teachers learn to approach assessment and evaluation leaves the student, who is in the spotlight, right out of the picture.

I was fortunate to have joined a school staff that was also contemplating similar kinds of questions, looking for alternate ways to report to parents. We wanted a format that included and involved both students and parents. We believe that students take greater responsibility for learning if they are involved and included in assessing and evaluating their own work. We believe that if students are consistently involved in assessment that they become conscious of themselves as learners. They begin to realize their own strengths, understand their own learning, and set their own goals. This is true whether they are in Grade 1 or Grade 12.

Judy Taylor (1999), a Grade 2 teacher who hesitantly agreed to try student-led conferencing, a process that involved leadership by the student, was initially concerned that her students would not be able to explain their work to their parents. After observing her students conduct conferences with their parents, her worries evaporated. She summarizes, “What we learned from this experience was that not only can second-graders conduct parent conferences, but they can do it far more effectively than we!” (p.80).

I also wanted to move away from a philosophy and practice that considers the teacher as the sole expert in a child’s education. I recognize the authority that we have as teachers, but I did not want this authority to intimidate either parents or students. Instead, I view the child’s learning and education as a shared responsibility that actively involves the participation of the student, their family, and the school staff. I believe that involving the students and their parents in the assessment and evaluation process helps to democratize or "flatten out" the traditional hierarchy that was based on assumptions of “teacher knows best.” In a study, reported in Educational Leadership (1989), that examined the relationship between schools and families, Jane Lindle concludes,

All families, regardless of socioeconomic status, have similar preferences about the nature and the conduct of school communications. The responses of parents to questions about their contacts with school reveal that they view “professionalism” on the part of teachers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, or principals as undesirable. Parents mentioned their dissatisfaction with school people who are “too businesslike, patronizing, or who talk down to us.” (p.13)

Friendliness and welcoming attitudes may put parents at ease and set a good tone for a school, but I wanted to put real social justice concepts into practice. I began looking at different reporting models. Since I wanted parent participation and student involvement in the actual writing of the report card, I needed a different format than the student-led conference. While students are bursting with pride as they show their parents their work, and parents are equally proud of their children when they do, there is little time available at student-led conferences for meaningful or informative conversation that includes all three partners: the teacher, the parent, and the student.

When Carol-Ann Carlson (1993-94), a Mission, B.C. teacher asked parents at her school what they thought they needed to be in place for good communication about children’s progress, parents responded that they had participated in student-led conferences in the past and wanted more from the teacher. They felt there was “room for more teacher commentary” (69).

With that very clear comment from parents in mind, I understood that I needed to implement some kind of hybrid format that allowed students to first show parents their work and then have students and parents meet with me, the teacher, to discuss it. It seemed to me that this just made plain common sense for parents to want to have a conversation with the adult who spends at least five hours a day with their child!

I remembered hearing about “three-way conferences” when I was a student teacher. I thought the idea was intriguing yet daunting. In this format, the student first showed their parents their schoolwork, then they met with the teacher, and together all three parties wrote the report card on a laptop computer. I decided to try implementing this format but without modern technology—I was sticking to pen and paper!

Three-Way Conferences in Action
Essentially, my three-way conferences look like this: the student demonstrates key concepts learned throughout the term, leading her or his parent(s) through a variety of centres or stations which involve “hands-on” demonstrations. For
example, at the Math station the student shows, with base ten blocks, how to regroup, adding and subtracting large numbers. At the Literacy station, the student completes a Morning Message, thereby demonstrating spelling and editing skills. The student passes and stops the soccer ball at the Physical Education station, moving through the stations, and sharing work from all of the content areas. At the Art station, students share work that they have previously assessed themselves. All of these demonstrations are deliberately planned to show parents concepts and skills that were introduced to their children throughout the term. These demonstrations typically take half an hour. When the student is finished showing and sharing, the student, the parents, and I meet to discuss and write the report card.

The report card is written on an 8.5” x 11” template here. As we discuss the student’s academic and social development, I write down the salient points we have agreed upon. We each sign the report card when the discussion and writing is complete. It is then given to the principal who also signs it and writes a comment about the student’s learning. The report card is photocopied and the original is given to the students and parents. This completed three-way conference process, including the demonstrations, takes about an hour to complete.

I have conducted these kinds of conferences for the past three years and find the process, as many other teachers have declared it, worthwhile and valuable. Don Konso, (1992-93), a B.C. primary teacher who was initially reluctant to organize conferences in which the child assumes leadership, came away from his experience with the process feeling heartened. He states, “Observing the conferences strengthened my appreciation for the parents and the importance of their involvement in their children’s education” (48).

Other teachers and researchers echo Konso’s sentiments. Barry Ricci, (2000), a principal at a Rhode Island school, reports that parents also feel that these three-way conferences are worthwhile (54). A parent involved in a similar kind of conferencing testified that they are able to get a “picture of my son as a learner that would not be possible from merely a report card, a portfolio viewing, or a typical conference” (54).

Rumination, Reflection, and Finally, Action Research!

Even with the increased participation afforded by the new, shared report card development process, as each reporting period came to a close, I had a niggling feeling that something was missing. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I was left with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. I decided it was time to explore this uneasiness.

Through much discussion with my peers and periods of mulling and reflection, I decided that the problem I was wrestling with was a lack of “parent talk.” Parent contributions were minimal during the discussions and hence their ideas were not being recorded in the report card. The students, not surprisingly, tended to contribute more than their parents. Was it because the conversation and the report card were about them and their work? Was it because the children had rehearsed the demonstrations in class? Was it because they had previously assessed their own work and were better prepared to speak about it?

More questions plagued me, especially concerning the parents. Were parent contributions few because parents deferred to me because they saw me as the sole authority? Did they not feel that their contributions were valuable or insightful? Were the parents not receiving enough information prior to the conference to feel sure about their role or how to participate in the process? Was it because of the way I facilitated or conducted these conferences—was I too formal—too informal? Was the gap between the home and school so wide that parents felt disconnected from their child’s school experiences?

I realized I could not “second guess” what parents were thinking or feeling so I decided to ask them some of these questions directly. Specifically, I wanted to know if parents wanted to become more involved in this process and if so, how to encourage and facilitate that involvement. Consequently, I developed the research project that I report on in this paper.

School Demographics

Our school is located in a working-class neighbourhood in Maple Ridge. We receive supplemental funding because we are classified as an inner city school. I conducted my research with Grades 2 and 3 students (ages seven, eight and nine), and their parents.

Data Collection Methods
I asked parents and students to complete separate questionnaires. The parent questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions. I asked the children four questions—and also open-ended. I felt that going “straight to the source” and asking parents and children to complete questionnaires was the most direct way to receive information from them (see Appendix for a copy of the questionnaires). There were twenty-one children in my class. Nineteen of the children’s parents attended conferences. Fifteen out of nineteen parents completed questionnaires and fourteen out of nineteen students returned questionnaires.

The Parent Questionnaire

Not all parents answered each question, however, overall, the parents’ responses to the survey are interesting and thoughtful. It was evident after reading their responses that the majority of parents value the three-way conference process. Parents believe their involvement is important to their child’s learning. I was pleased to read the parents’ positive comments, but since I wanted to understand the “parent experience,” I needed to examine their responses more systematically.

I knew that I needed a way to organize the data that was simple and straightforward. I decided to create three categories that classified their answers as: favourable, unfavourable, or suggestions. The results of this form of categorization are contained in Table 1, below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question (precised version)</th>
<th>Favourable</th>
<th>Unfavourable</th>
<th>Suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts/feelings about contributing to report card?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important/beneficial is parent involvement in report card writing? Why?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How prepared are you? What helps/hinders your preparedness?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What would help you feel more prepared?</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What barriers limit your contributions?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think/feel about the teacher’s conduct during the conference?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What changes would you make to increase involvement/benefit?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional comments</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The eight questions I asked parents can be divided into three groups. The first group asked parents how beneficial they thought and felt their contributions to the report-card writing process were. Responses included:

- It gives your child a feeling of importance as well as showing him/her that communication between parents and teachers is crucial to their learning.
- As a fulltime working mom, I feel that this was wonderful and gave me some idea of how my child’s daily school life is going, and felt my input was appreciated.
- I feel that being involved in the conference is important. However the only part of the report-card writing that I think the parent should be involved in is the setting of goals.

The purpose of the second group of questions was to find out how prepared parents felt for the conferences. Responses included:

- Reviewing my child’s report card that was sent home prior to the conference helped me in the preparedness.

(Note: I have used preliminary report cards on two occasions. The purpose of these is to prepare parents for the conference by giving them background information about their child’s progress. These reports
mostly reflect self assessments the children have completed about their learning in literacy, math, and social responsibility).

- Viewing the stations with my child helps prepare me for the report card writing.
- I do not feel prepared for this part of the conference. I want the teacher to tell me what and how my child is doing at school.

The last group of questions asked parents to identify barriers that hindered their participation and to suggest ways to improve the conferences. Their answers included:

- I felt very much involved and wouldn’t change a thing. My child felt very involved as well.
- The stations were a great idea.
- I think the report cards are a bit too general. I would like to see some sort of grading system to see where they fit in.
- Not feeling knowledgeable enough.
- Getting a basic report card before hand so you can have questions ready.

A Snapshot of Parent Responses

Most parents appreciate the opportunity to discuss and contribute to their child’s report card. Specifically:

- Some parents feel more confident than others about contributing to the three-way process.
- Parents who feel prepared or knowledgeable have a good understanding of their child’s day-to-day school life.
- Parents who feel less prepared need more information about their role and what is required of them when they come to the table to discuss their child’s progress.
- Parents feel it is useful to receive the preliminary report before the three-way conference.
- Some parents prefer to have the report card written by the teacher and want to write only the goals together.
- Some parents want time alone, without their child, with the teacher to discuss their child’s progress.
- Parents feel that the teacher conducts herself appropriately and facilitates the conversation effectively.

Student Questionnaires

I gathered limited information from the students’ questionnaire. All fourteen of the children stated they felt “good,” “fine,” “great,” or “cool” about contributing to their report card. Many of them indicated that they felt proud when they took their parents to each station and showed them their work.

Research Leads to Action

I had an inkling of what some of the barriers that hindered parent participation in the construction of student report cards were, yet it was the parents—and rightly so—who articulated them. When teachers at a school in southern California wished to increase the involvement of Chinese-speaking parents, they decided to survey the parents to identify barriers (Constantino, Cui, Faltis, 1995). They found that the involvement of Chinese parents increased dramatically as they conducted their study and intervened to remove the barriers they identified through the process. They conclude that, “By opening the channels of communication and providing an environment that was non-threatening to both parents and teachers, interest and participation elevated to new levels” (50).

Although my research is quite different, my goals are similar. I value the participation of the students’ parents as the students learn and grow. I also believe, as the researchers at the California school did, that in order to discover the barriers that affect a specific group, the researcher must start with the group itself. Those whose voices have been quieted must have the opportunity to speak and to be heard. I therefore decided to implement the following changes, based upon the parents’ suggestions:

- Inform parents about the three-way conference process in September when parents and teachers meet for Input Conferences.
- Revise the letter I send to parents explaining three-way conferences to clearly delineate their role.
- Continue to send home preliminary report cards before the three-way conferences take place. Attach a template on which parents and students
can write comments, questions, and goals. This template will be brought to
the three-way conference.

- Remind parents that they can request a meeting with the teacher at any
time during the school year.

Essentially, my research demonstrates that there is widespread approval for
three-way conferences and for parent contribution in this process amongst
parents and students. Students and parents both want to be involved in
determining what is written on report cards. The three-way conference process
addresses the social justice principles of fairness and opportunity. Instead of a
reporting process that is “done” to children, three-way conferences allow both
the learner and their parents (guardians or whomever) to become an integral part
of the process of drafting the report card. The student’s and the parents’
perspectives are taken into consideration and valued during the reporting
process.

Therefore, it’s a participatory and “negotiated” process, rather than one in
which I, exerts sole authority as the teacher “expert.” I believe that if
assessment and evaluation becomes a more inclusive and participatory process,
it becomes a fairer process too. It reaffirms that students and their parents have
a real role to play in assessing and evaluating student development.

I hope that by implementing the suggestions I got from parents during this
study, the three-way conference process will become more inclusive, more
participatory, and that both students and parents will feel that their contributions
are a valid and integral part of describing student progress.

Postscript—One Year Later

Much can happen in a year and a half. Our union, the B.C. Teachers Federation,
and the group representing school boards were in negotiations for a new
collective agreement. After a time, the government chose to rescind collective
bargaining and imposed a legislated agreement. Many gains negotiated
previously by the union were lost, leaving teachers feeling bitter and
disillusioned. In response, teachers cut back on some of the “extra-mile” work
they voluntarily perform.

I decided to scale back my three-way conferences in a way that I believe doesn’t
demean the integrity of the process. Students still lead their parents through
demonstrations, showing them their work and completing hands-on activities. I
still meet with parents but for fifteen minutes instead of half an hour. The chief
difference between this conference and the ones I’ve previously organized is
that I now write most of the report card. However, I do not include the goals.
Instead, the report card is sent home before the demonstrations and the
conferences take place. Self-assessed work by the students is also sent home.
I also include a letter asking parents to discuss the report card with their child,
and to come to the conference with goals for the next term in mind. I include a
template for them to record goals, as well. The parent(s), the student, and I
subsequently discuss the child’s growth and set and record new goals at the
conference. The report card is then given to the principal who comments and
signs it and the original is given to the parents and students.

How do I feel about this process? Students, parents, and I still have the ever-
important conversation about the student’s progress. We all participate.
Students and parents come to the conference with a focus. Parents seem more
prepared. It also shortens my “extra-mile” meeting time by about ten hours. In a
time when teachers are asked to do more for less, time is important.

How do parents feel about my revised conference process? I would need to
engage in more action research to find out! Nevertheless, I know that most
parents want to be involved and contribute to their child’s conference. I know
this because all of the parents of my students accompanied their child to the
demonstrations and the conference. Most parents came to the last two sets of
conferences with some, if not all three goals, written down. Students are still
very excited about the conferences and are proud to show their parents their
learning.

As a teacher, I benefited immensely from conducting action research, if for no
other reason than because the research I did was directly connected to my
practice as a teacher. It allowed me to reflect upon an important part of
assessment and evaluation and to engage students and parents in the process of
making change.

I will most likely stay with the three-way conference process unless I can find
or design another format that encourages just as much or more parent
and student participation. This practice fits with my belief that assessment and

evaluation should not be “done” to children, but rather should be participatory, democratic undertakings.

References


About the Author

Susan Croll is a teacher in Maple Ridge. She recently completed her Master’s of Education at the University of British Columbia.