Parents' Perceptions of a K–3 Formative Assessment

Cristina Gillanders, Iheoma U. Iruka, Cindy Bagwell, and Tobi Adejumo

Abstract

From a sociocultural perspective to assessment, this study investigated parents' beliefs about formative assessment. When North Carolina (NC) received an Early Learning Challenge Grant, its Department of Public Instruction was funded to develop a kindergarten entry assessment. The department proposed the development of a kindergarten to third grade assessment that was formative in nature and could be conducted in the context of teaching and learning. Formative assessment is an alternative to large-scale assessment providing a broader picture of children's learning and effectively informing teachers' future instructional process. The present study explored parents' general beliefs about formative assessment and parents' attitudes toward strategies for obtaining family information relevant to this assessment. A total of 152 parents of children attending kindergarten to third grade in eight NC school districts participated in focus groups. Results revealed parents desired to receive more information about their children's learning, behavior, and interests so they could support their children at home. Parents also emphasized the importance of the form in which information about their child is conveyed. Finally, parents demonstrated their willingness to provide information about their child's development and learning at home and to be co-interpreters of the child's participation in school. Findings underscored the critical importance of parents' contributions to understanding children's transformation in school and that assessments that are co-designed and co-interpreted with parents can provide evidence that can deliver meaningful improvement to educational practice.

Key Words: formative assessment, home–school partnership, parents' views of school, home–school communication, parent involvement, family engagement

Introduction

Large-scale assessments have become pervasive in all levels of education as a result of the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(Wei et al., 2015), and the subsequent passing of ESSA. Results from these assessments have high stakes implications for schools and teachers since they are used for accountability purposes. Critics of such assessments have argued that they do not provide an accurate picture of students' learning, competencies, and misconceptions nor effective feedback for teachers to improve their instruction (Trumbull & Lash, 2013). Accordingly, efforts have been made to create assessments that can inform teachers of children's ongoing learning throughout the year and consequently allow them to adjust their instruction. Rather than a score, teachers might find it more useful to have qualitative insight into children's learning (Shepard, 2009).

Formative assessment has been viewed as an alternative to large-scale assessment since it is "a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students' achievement of intended instructional outcomes" (McManus, 2008, p. 3). A critical feature of formative assessment is the use of feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. It is assumed that this process can facilitate changes in pedagogy and in turn yield improvements in learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Most studies on assessment have focused on the perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards formative assessment (e.g., Ahmedi, 2019; Alotaibi, 2019; Sach, 2012, 2015). Absent from research on formative assessment is attention to the question of whether this type of assessment in school can be used to help parents understand their children's learning and, thus, support it at home (Harris, 2015), leaving the answer unclear. Similarly, an assumption underlying formative assessment is that data on children's learning can only be obtained from their behaviors in school and that this data can be interpreted only by the teacher. An alternative perspective is that parents can also provide information about children's learning in contexts outside of school and that they can contribute to the interpretations of children's learning in school. The current study aims to explore parents' beliefs about kindergarten to third grade (K–3) formative assessment and the role parents can play in the formative assessment.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Views of Assessment

Traditionally, student assessment has focused on the current capabilities of the individual. Those embracing sociocultural views of assessment argue that rather than examining the individual in isolation, assessment should involve the notions of interdependence in social contexts (Fleer, 2002). In other words, learning is a social process, with individuals learning from and in conjunction with others. From this perspective, assessment aims to understand children's participation in different sociocultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). As suggested by Gee (2007), "To fairly and truly judge what a person can do, you need to know how the talent (skill, knowledge) you are assessing is situated in—placed within—the lived social practices of the person as well as his or her interpretations of those practices" (p. 364). Thus, to understand children's acquisition of knowledge and skills, we need to comprehend how these abilities are situated in the different contexts in which children participate. "To learn" means to participate more effectively in different communities of practice with the knowledge and skills defined by these communities (Hickey & Anderson, 2007). From this perspective, school assessment becomes limited if it only focuses on children's participation in school. Alternatively, data gathered from the home and community can shed light on children's participation in sociocultural contexts other than the school. After all, education should prepare the individual to be an active participant in the different contexts in which they live.

Because these sociocultural experiences shape children's thinking, a cultural validity perspective should be considered when designing assessments of children's learning. Solano-Flores and Nelson-Barber (2001) have defined cultural validity as the effectiveness in which assessments respond to the child's sociocultural experiences and the ways in which the child interprets the assessment. Cultural validity has become more relevant in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world so that students can display a more accurate demonstration of their competence, ensuring that teachers' instruction is based on children's actual competencies rather than assumed ones. To ensure cultural validity, educators and assessment developers should consider the students' epistemology, language proficiency, cultural worldviews, cultural communication, socialization styles, and the student's life and values (Solano-Flores & Nelson-Barber, 2001).

Since they can adapt to the students' sociocultural contexts and can be used on a continuing basis, formative assessments can be responsive to the issues involved in cultural validity (Trumbull & Lash, 2013). Educators and assessment developers can gain insights into the sociocultural practices that influence cultural validity by learning more about children's lives. Parents can

provide important information on the child's everyday routines in the community. Information provided by parents can aid in the interpretation of children's learning in school as parents have knowledge about the child's individual characteristics and participation in different sociocultural contexts (Fredericks & Rasinski, 1990; Krieg & Curtis, 2017). Furthermore, when parents can be legitimate consumers of their children's assessment data, they can also learn about the discourses used in the schools' communities of practice. As such, parents become important informants and consumers of data.

Parents as Consumers and Informants of Assessment

It has been suggested that the positive link between home–school partnership and students' outcomes is due in part to parents being viewed as credible informants of children's capabilities as well as how schools can best meet families' and children's needs (Ma et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2020; Sonnenschein et al., 2014). Previous studies have indicated that home–school partnerships are effective when teachers value the information received from families about factors likely to facilitate or disrupt a given children's learning or engagement (e.g., life event like a divorce, death) or what type of learning environment and interactions may work for a given child (Christenson, 2004; Sheldon, 2003). Thus, while assessment information shared by school staff is valuable to parents and children, it is also critical that parents and families are viewed as informants for assessing children's competencies and areas of improvement (Gillanders et al., 2012), especially in light of parents' roles as their child's first teacher and first and foremost caregiver. Furthermore, the home environment is another setting in which to gather data about children's actual knowledge and competencies.

Critical in this process is ongoing, dynamic, and consistent communication between families and school staff, whereby schools can inform parents of children's learning and parents become informants of children's development and learning in the home environment and community (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014). It is often the case that teachers (and other school staff) and parents differ in their goals for children's learning, and their knowledge on what each one is doing to support children's learning. For example, as a way to ensure their children benefit from all learning experiences, some immigrant families might socialize their children to be respectful and quietly attentive to teacher's instruction in the classroom (Trumbull & Lash, 2013). As a consequence, teachers might mistakenly consider quiet students withdrawn and non-participating. Schneider and Arnot (2018) have argued that in order to truly partner with families, a transactional system of communication needs to exist in which schools and parents do not merely exchange messages but rather arrive at a "mutual assignment of meaning and understanding" (p. 12). In a country that has become

widely diverse over the past century, cultural differences can make communication challenging (Trumbull & Lash, 2013). However, as discussed in Garcia et al. (2016), teachers can vastly improve the process by making intentional efforts to engage in cross-cultural communication to learn and be aware of possible differences in goals that parents have for their children.

Previous research has not shed adequate light on parents' views about formative assessments and parents' beliefs about their roles as consumers and informants of assessments. The implementation of assessments requires stakeholders convinced of the educational value of the assessment. In general, parents value the assessments of learning because they want their children to do well in school (Deslandes & Rivard, 2013). Parents' attitudes towards assessments are important since, first, it is likely that they can influence policymakers on the use of these kinds of assessments at a larger scale (Harris, 2015), and second, because parents can have an important role in informing teachers on children's learning and development. In a review of parents' perceptions of assessment, Harris (2015) found that in 12 studies reviewed parents tended to favor standardized testing. However, Harris also found that simultaneously parents negatively viewed children's anxiety towards standardized testing. According to Harris, it is possible that parents favor standardized testing because this is the traditional form of assessment that they are more familiar with. Likewise, they are probably more familiar and comfortable with letter grades as summary forms of assessment than the types of scores that might be assigned on formative assessments (Culbertson & Jalongo, 1999).

In her review, Harris (2015) also found that parents of children in the lower levels of elementary were keener on using alternative forms of assessment. Previous studies have indicated that parents of children from preschool to third grade could be open to formative assessment. For example, Meisels et al. (2001) surveyed 246 parents of children in K–3 on their reactions to the use of a curriculum-embedded performance assessment (i.e., Work Sampling System [WSS]). Findings indicated that parents preferred a summary of the teachers' observations using this form of assessment rather than report cards. Parents' attitudes towards this form of assessment were affected by teachers' consistent communication about the results of the assessment. In a follow-up study with Greek parents of kindergarten children, Pekis and Gourgiotou (2017) also found positive attitudes towards the WSS. Most parents agreed that this form of assessment provided valuable feedback on children's learning, information about children's potential behavior problems or learning difficulties, and the overall kindergarten program.

In another study, MacDonald (2007) interviewed a group of 25 parents regarding their views of documentation after a group of kindergarten teachers

used it in their classrooms. Documentation involves capturing learning moments through observations, transcriptions, and visual representations of children's learning (Rinaldi, 2001). This documentation process can provoke teachers' and parents' reflection on children's learning and, therefore, guide future instruction. Documentation is "not considered as the collecting of data in a detached, objective, distant way. Rather, it is seen as the interpretation of close, keen observation, and attentive listening, gathered with a variety of tools by educators aware of contributing their different points of views" (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001, p. 125). Moss et al. (2000) stated that "pedagogical documentation plays a role in seeing and understanding children as individuals rather than normalizing children against standardized measures and categorizing some as 'abnormal'" (p. 251). In the MacDonald (2007) study, the majority of the participating parents reported that their children seldom told them about their learning in the classroom before teachers adopted the process of documentation. After teachers began using documentation, most parents indicated that they were better informed about their children's learning and pedagogical approaches used by teachers.

These studies indicate that parents could have a positive attitude towards formative assessment if it were used more widely. However, less is known about parents' views regarding the information that would be useful for them to have in order to support their children in future learning. Parents' views about assessment can reflect parents' beliefs about what is important for their children's development. The scarcity of research on this topic is surprising considering the emphasis that schools place on assessment and the importance of home–school partnerships.

Development of a Formative Assessment Process in North Carolina

Development of a formative assessment for children in K–3 in North Carolina (NC) began in 2012 when the state was awarded a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant. In response to the federal government's invitation to create a kindergarten entry assessment (KEA) that would inform instruction in the early grades, the state proposed creating an assessment that would incorporate the KEA requirements into a broader K–3 assessment. Such an assessment would support the department's emphasis on improving instruction in the early grades.

To begin the design process, the NC Department of Public Instruction's superintendent convened a K–3 Assessment Think Tank composed of scholars and researchers to help the state define those skills and understandings that are critical for children in the early grades to know and be able to do. In addition to identifying the key skills and understandings, the K–3 Assessment

Think Tank also recommended that the department utilize a formative assessment process to look at the whole child in a manner that identifies each child's strengths and areas for growth in five learning domains (i.e., cognitive, social–emotional, physical and health, approaches to learning, language). Formative assessment was defined as a systematic process by which teachers gather evidence of student learning in the context of teaching, then use the data to identify students' current level of understanding and adjust instruction to help students reach intended outcomes (Heritage, 2007). To inform design of the assessment, NC public school kindergarten teachers were asked to complete a survey rating the importance of a number of developmental skills, the potential impact of information related to those skills on daily instruction, and the best means of assessing those skills in young children. Findings demonstrated broad support among NC kindergarten teachers for a statewide K–3 assessment and, in particular, a willingness to implement a formative assessment process (Sharma, 2013).

Given the recommendations from the K–3 Assessment Think Tank, as well as support from classroom teachers, the Department of Public Instruction made the decision to design the K–3 assessment to be formative in nature—an observation-based process to be conducted in the context of teaching and learning rather than as a more traditional assessment, administered individually as an isolated event separate from instruction. While formative assessment is most often designed by teachers as a means to gather information related to specific curricular goals and objectives, the assessment designed by the department would focus on constructs associated with success in school and related to the state's instructional goals across the K–3 grade span. Consistent with recommendations from the Think Tank, as well as federal requirements for KEA content, NC's assessment would focus on essential constructs in five learning domains. Constructs determined essential for the grade span from K–3 would include the following: engagement in self-selected activities and perseverance for the approaches to learning domain; emotional literacy, emotion expression, and emotion regulation for the social–emotional domain; fine motor and gross motor for the physical development domain; object counting, mathematical patterns, and problem solving for the cognitive domain; and following directions, letter naming, book orientation, print awareness, vocabulary, writing, and reading comprehension for the language and literacy domain. Using information gathered from a literature review, as well as feedback from teachers, the department planned to develop learning progressions for each of the selected constructs. Because the assessment would be designed as a formative assessment, teachers would not be conducting an individually administered assessment. Instead, teachers would use observation and questioning to gather

information about children's performance during large and small group instruction, as well as center-based learning. The information gathered during instruction would serve as evidence to document children's current levels of understanding. Teachers would then analyze that document using the learning progressions, determining where children are developmentally and what next steps in learning are most appropriate. This information could then be used to plan instruction designed to move each child forward. The department hoped that an assessment designed in this manner would minimize the burden of an additional state-mandated assessment while bringing greater value to the types of assessment data teachers routinely gather as part of the instructional process.

To ensure that the design and implementation of this formative assessment process be informed by stakeholders, the department designed multiple strategies to incorporate input from the field. One such strategy was to gather input from key stakeholders. Recognizing parents' importance in the development of young children, the department sought out information from families as one of the key stakeholder groups. This group was particularly important given the limitations of existing educational research and its bias toward White, middle-class students, as well as the lack of diversity among teachers in the state's early grades in contrast to the population of children and families they serve. The department considered it critical to understand families' beliefs and attitudes towards the formative assessment being created since they believed that parents could provide important information to inform instruction.

Consequently, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- What were the parents' general attitudes and beliefs about formative assessment?

- What were parents' beliefs with regard to the type of information they would like to receive from formative assessment reports?

- How can schools convey this information to parents?

- What were parents' attitudes towards strategies for obtaining family information relevant to the formative assessment?

Method

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine parents' beliefs and attitudes towards the K–3 formative assessment being developed by the NC Department of Public Instruction. This study came about as a partnership between the department and the authors of this article. Recently, more efforts have been made to forge research–practice partnerships which are organized to investigate problems of practice and find solutions (Coburn et al., 2013). As

such, the researchers and personnel from the Office of Early Learning (OEL) at the NC Department of Public Instruction collaborated in the sampling, recruitment procedures, data collection design, interpretation of the findings, and dissemination efforts.

Recruitment Procedures

The department was interested in gaining insight from a large group of stakeholders. Therefore, a sampling framework was developed to select eight school districts, taking into consideration urbanicity, racial/ethnic diversity, region, and socioeconomic status. Representatives from the NC OEL, including the program manager overseeing the assessment design, as well as regional consultants who provide direct support to school district administrators, worked closely with researchers to discuss potential participant schools. Once schools were recommended, NC OEL staff sent a letter to superintendents to provide an overview of the project and its goals and inform them about schools that will be contacted to participate in the project. Regional consultants were copied on these letters, so they knew when superintendents were contacted.

After superintendents were notified, the regional consultants contacted principals of the recommended schools to: (a) provide an overview of the project, (b) determine their willingness to participate in the project, and (c) ask for the name and contact information of a school liaison person who could make initial contact with parents. Consultants followed up the call with an email to the principal confirming the conversation and copied the liaison on the message. Regional consultants also informed the principal of their interest in conducting two focus group sessions per school (i.e., one for Spanish- and another for English-speaking parents) and the type of parents they were looking for: (a) parents of children in K–3, (b) parents who frequently participate in school events or the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and (c) those who might not participate as often in school activities. The research team was interested in finding information from a diversity of parents.

Once the principals were contacted and school liaisons were identified by regional consultants, the liaison's contact information was shared with the project staff to help start scheduling the sessions. The project staff contacted the school liaison and supported them during the participants' recruitment process by discussing strategies for recruiting parents and coordinating the following aspects: (a) the number of participants, (b) possible dates and times, (c) locations for focus group sessions, (d) dinner, and (e) the childcare providers recommended by the school. The liaison was also provided with flyers in English and Spanish to help with recruitment.

Participants

A total of 13 schools in eight school districts in 12 counties (some school districts cross over two counties) in NC participated. While 13 schools accepted participation, two declined due to limited availability of staff who could serve as the school liaison (87% acceptance rate). As a result, we were able to conduct 20 focus groups in 13 different schools (14 in English, 6 in Spanish).

A total of 152 parents of children attending K–3 in eight NC school districts had the opportunity to share their ideas regarding the formative assessment that was being developed by OEL. In Table 1, we present the country of origin and race and ethnicity of participating parents, including their marital status and level of education.

Procedures

The study aimed to gain information about: (a) parents' general attitudes and beliefs about formative assessment, (b) parents' beliefs with regard to the type of information they would like to receive from formative assessment reports and how they would like for schools to convey this information, and (c) parents' attitudes towards strategies for obtaining family information relevant to the formative assessment. The research team developed a set of seven questions specifically designed to respond to the project's questions (see the Appendix for the list of questions). A pilot focus group was conducted in order to test the proposed questions. Three mothers (one Filipino, one White, one South Asian) with children in K–3 in NC schools participated in the pilot. After this initial pilot, minor revisions were made to the focus group questions.

Once the parents were recruited by the school liaison, parents were asked to attend a focus group session in the school. To increase participation in the focus groups, the researchers offered each participant the following incentives: a light dinner, free childcare, and a $20 gift card. The four focus group facilitators, including a bilingual Spanish–English facilitator, were experienced and trained. All facilitators had conducted focus groups before and/or had been data collectors in research projects. The focus group facilitators followed a protocol to conduct the sessions, using a written script to guide them. Before asking the focus group questions, the facilitators asked parents to complete a questionnaire to obtain demographic information. The lead investigators met with the facilitators on several occasions to address questions that emerged as the facilitators conducted the recruitment and focus groups.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participating Parents

Demographics	Percentage
Country of Birth/Origin	
U.S.	62%
Mexico	27%
Puerto Rico	3%
Guatemala	3%
Latin America/Caribbean (e.g. El Salvador, Colombia)	4%
Race/Ethnicity	
White	45%
Latine	34%
African American/Black	19%
Other	2%
Marital Status	
Married/Widowed	76%
Never Married/Single	15%
Divorced/Separated	9%
Education Level	
Less than High School	30%
High School/GED	13%
Some College	12%
AA/AS Degree	9%
BA/BS Degree	21%
Ph.D./M.D./Professional Degrees	16%
English Proficiency	
Speaks very well	66%
Speaks well	9%
Speaks not so well	24%

Note. N = 152

Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. All sessions were audiorecorded with the permission of the participants. Data collectors listened to the audio recordings and wrote summaries of the discussion including sentences and paragraphs relevant to the research questions (McLellan et al.,

2003). The first two authors reviewed the summaries for completeness, asked data collectors for more information if needed, and then analyzed the summaries. The bilingual data collector wrote the summaries of the Spanish-speaking parents' focus groups in Spanish, and these were read and analyzed by the first author who is a native Spanish-speaker.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the first two authors read all summaries written by the focus group facilitators and identified initial themes and codes. A priori codes were created based on the questions of the study and focus group interviews (Miles et al., 2014). Examples of codes were *views towards formative assessment, useful communication, information teachers need to know about family,* and *additional information about child.* Authors coded the participant responses' summaries using the a priori codes as well as other codes that emerged from the data. Based on each focus group's questions, the researchers wrote memos in an effort to refine categories as well as engage in-depth data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Memos were then revised and edited.

Results

The analysis of the data yielded five themes: beliefs about formative assessment; information about the child's performance and behavior; home–school forms of communication; information about the curriculum, child's behavior, and performance; and parents as informants of children's learning and behavior outside of school, each of which we describe in greater detail in this section.

Beliefs About Formative Assessment

After the concept of formative assessment was explained in the interview (see Appendix), the majority of the parents demonstrated a positive view of this process. From the 20 groups interviewed, only a few parents in four groups indicated that the information provided in the assessment would not be helpful. From those who viewed the assessment process positively, they stated that the assessment allowed teachers to identify children's learning styles, to individualize instruction, to determine children's interests, and to observe other areas of development different from academics such as social–emotional development and physical health. The observations teachers provided to parents using this kind of assessment demonstrated that teachers "cared for their children." It also provided information to parents about how their child can learn in different contexts such as home and school. Some parents viewed the formative assessment as an alternative to standardized testing allowing them to have a more complete picture of their children's progress.

A few parents, although not against using formative assessment, wanted more information before deciding if a formative assessment was a good idea. One of the mothers asked, "How are they going to do the testing, and what are they going to do with the results? How are they [teachers] going to cater their lessons? How are they going to use what you get to help teachers to teach children with all those different needs?" Furthermore, a parent asked, "Is it piloted? Is it reliable? Does it have construct validity? How is it actually going to be developed to test what it says it's going to test? Is it based on solid research that is statistically valid?"

Parents who were not in favor of a formative assessment as it was presented in the example expressed concern in terms of the time teachers would need to conduct these assessments. They also indicated that they already knew about this type of information from their observations of the children outside of school. These parents preferred to obtain more information about their children's academic progress rather than social and linguistic development.

Some parents who voluntarily shared that they have children with special needs expressed concern about how this assessment would be applied to their children. One parent hoped that this assessment would help children with special needs be identified earlier. Another parent was wondering how the assessment would be implemented when children were assigned to special needs classes, "Who would conduct the assessment? The regular classroom teacher or the special education teacher?" she asked. Another parent indicated that this kind of assessment would provide additional information about the child's strengths.

Information About the Child's Performance and Behavior

In addition to learning about parents' views on formative assessment, it was important to explore parents' views of the current ways in which parents received information about their children's performance and behavior. School assessment should not only yield information about children's academic development but also their social and emotional skills. Parents in all the focus groups reported receiving some sort of information regarding their child's behavior and academic performance. However, the consistency, quality, timeliness, and positivity of the information they received varied across schools and families. Some parents reported that they received timely and helpful information. One parent stated that the teachers tell them "how much [their child] is learning, their progress, and how much they improve." Other parents also received information about their child's academic progress, such as reading scores. A group of Spanish-speaking parents reported that, in addition to the report card, they received a note in Spanish from the teacher giving more specific information

about their child's needs so they can provide support at home in these areas. Some parents reported receiving strategies to reinforce reading lessons, as well as strengths and weaknesses, progress, issues that need work, and achievement of daily expectations and longer-term benchmarks.

Parents were also receiving information about their child's behavior through a color rating system that allowed a parent to gauge the extent to which their child was behaving appropriately throughout the school day, such as whether the child was on task for a majority of the day. For some Spanish-speaking parents, this system was sometimes confusing because different teachers used different colors to rate children's behaviors and because the different colors used were not clearly explained to parents.

While many parents acknowledged receiving information about their child's behavior, especially regarding problem behavior, the parents stressed the value of also receiving some positive information about their child. As stated by one parent, "Other than the regular progress report, I do not really receive performance or grade information, and the behavioral information shared is typically negative." Similarly stated by another, "Teachers are quicker to give you the negative rather than positive." Parents also wanted to know more about how their children behaved compared to their peers, including whether they were experiencing any challenges with their peers (e.g., bullying).

Not only did parents want more information about their child's behavior, but they also sought more information about their child's learning progress. For example, they wanted more specific information about their child's strengths and areas in need of improvement with specific clarity about the grading system, especially for children in the lower grades (i.e., second grade and lower). They also wanted to get more information about any changes as early as possible and before testing and grades are released.

Forms of Home–School Communication

In order for parents to learn from the findings of the formative assessment, a system of communication between the school and home should be in place. Parents reported that their child's teachers use a variety of communication media to connect with them, including emails, phone calls, texts, newsletters, websites (e.g., classroomdojo.com), Facebook, daily journals, notes, and parent–teacher conferences. They find all these means of communication useful and helpful in staying connected with the teacher and informed about their child's learning and behavior. However, parents reported that the type of communication chosen should be aligned with the information that will be shared with the parent. One parent shared that "emails are great, text if it is a little more important, and if it's a phone call you know it's really important."

Differences among and within schools were found on the frequency and means of communication with all parents. In one particular school, a group of Spanish-speaking parents complained that they never received any communication despite trying to communicate directly with the teacher on several occasions. They only received report cards which did not provide, according to their view, enough information about their child's progress. In another school, a Spanish-speaking mother described how she visited the school almost every day, yet she did not find out about her daughters' lack of progress in reading until she received the report card three months into the year. In contrast, in a couple of schools where focus groups were conducted, a group of White and African American parents reported receiving prompt and timely information from their children's teacher, including daily reports through journals or notes. In one instance, a parent reported that she received daily information through face-to-face communication with her child's teacher as she volunteered frequently at the school. One father noted that he received "constant communication [about his child with disabilities] regarding the effectiveness of the strategies put in place, medication adjustments or changes, and what is working and what is not working in the classroom."

There were instances where parents within the same school reported varied communication with their child's teacher. In one focus group of White parents, one mother reported receiving weekly behavior communication regarding if her child was on "Gold" or not; yet another parent reported never even knowing about that "Gold-Silver" system of rating behavior until she tutored once in the school. In another focus group of primarily White mothers, one mother said her child's kindergarten teacher rarely sent curriculum information. It's mostly "things like bring in snack." But another mom said she talked to her son's teacher every day at drop-off and got face-to-face information about what he will be doing each day.

The majority of parents noted that one-on-one, especially face-to-face, was the preferred method of communication with teachers. Meetings between teachers and parents should happen early in the year and with sufficient time for the parent to feel comfortable sharing private information with the teacher. Many parents suggested that information should be gathered more than once and potentially two to three times per year from families as things change during the school year. Parents of color stressed the importance of gaining information from families "as often as necessary" including on a monthly or quarterly basis. Phone calls were also seen as an appropriate way to communicate, especially specific information about a child. However, they also understood that teachers were busy and could not necessarily find time to meet with parents as needed. Therefore, some identified parents, especially African

American and Spanish-speaking parents, made it a priority to visit the school and classroom to see how things were going—not necessarily to volunteer, but to see how their child was experiencing school and interacting with their teachers and other students: "Sometimes my child tells me something, and I check on him so he sees that I care about school. I want to build a relationship with the teacher. I want to try to fix it, figure it out, help." Being in the school and observing the classroom provided them with the opportunity to have conversations with their child's teacher. However, for some Spanish-speaking parents, it was a challenge to communicate with the teacher, especially if there was no one in the school who could work as an interpreter. Often the English as a Second Language teacher served this function.

Furthermore, parents liked electronic communication because their busy work schedule and lives may not allow them to take long phone calls or visit the schools, but parents advised teachers to use discretion in the kind of information they sent electronically. A few Spanish-speaking parents indicated that emails with specific information about the child reflected that the teacher was more attentive to the child's individual needs. Yet, for some parents, communication via email was not an option if the teacher did not write in Spanish.

In particular, parents were seeking ways for teachers to be responsive to their inquiries (e.g., how their child was performing academically in relation to other children and grade level, what factors went into how their child was being graded, how to read grade reports and test results) and to get up-to-date information about their child. Some parents, primarily White parents, reported taking the initiative to communicate with their child's teacher through notes and daily agendas, as well as volunteering in the classroom to "see what the teachers are struggling with." They were open to a variety of ways of communication, with some parents being more comfortable with electronic and web-based forms of communicating while others preferred face-to-face or phone calls.

Information About the Curriculum, Child's Behavior, and Performance

Several parents reported wanting to know more about textbooks and curriculum so they could help their child link the school learning to their home lives. One mother eloquently stated that "you can take an everyday thing and apply it to the science of their learning, and it makes more sense to them than in the classroom. They want to see something and how it is applied rather than just reading it in a textbook." Parents also reported that getting information about the curriculum and class lessons would be another way of strengthening the home–school communication and assessment. In addition to specific

curriculum, parents also would like to get more frequent and timely information about daily classroom lessons and activities. One particular subject area noted by several parents was in mathematics as they felt they were unable to help their child without having strategies and instructions from the teacher. One parent suggested a class for parents to learn math the way it is currently being taught so they can help their children; another suggested a video tutorial. In essence, parents wanted as much information as possible so they can help their children at home, as exemplified by this statement from one parent, "Just explain it to me. Once I figured out that's what they were doing, then we worked on it at home."

Similarly, other parents reported that they received information about school and classroom activities and events. A few reported they received a weekly packet and schedule of classroom lessons and activities, which they found to be useful in helping support their child's learning and understand their needs. This is exemplified by one mother talking about the weekly sheet she received from her child's science and math class in which the teacher relays "this week we'll be reading these books. Then I can ask my daughter to tell me about the book she read at school. It's right there, and I know exactly what she's done."

Parents stressed the importance of getting more information about their child's learning and performance, including more detailed information about their child's learning style, what motivates their child when learning, and what strategies and tools they can use to help their child reach their potential. Further, parents wanted to get information as soon as possible about when their child was struggling.

Parents also wished to gain more information about their child's behavior, and this was especially the case for African American and Spanish-speaking parents. As clarified by one parent,

> If my son doesn't tell me he's done something wrong, I won't know. The teacher says it's not a big deal and won't call, but I would like to know… because if he did something not right I want to help and work with him….The only way I can help is if I know.

In addition to children's problem behavior and adjustment to school expectations, parents wanted to receive positive information about their child. However, they also desired to know when something occurred at school (e.g., child hurt by another child) and how the school handled it or when their child was pulled out of the classroom. In addition, several Spanish-speaking parents also wanted to know if their children were eating well in school since they recognized that nutrition was important for learning.

Parents expressed the need to understand better how to interpret the letter grades being assigned to their children in second grade or lower. Parents did

not feel that the grades helped them to understand what their child knows or does not know because it is class specific. In the same vein, parents wanted more information about the state standards and implications for children's learning and expectations. It was suggested that a website with "how to" or "new term vs. old terms" would be helpful to explain how state standards have changed lessons.

Parents as Informants of Children's Learning and Development Outside of School

In 17 of the 20 groups, parents stated that they agreed it was important for the teacher to know some information about the family. In the other three groups, parents were not so convinced that this was necessary. Parents named the following aspects as important for teachers to find out about: (a) family size and birth order of the child; (b) family routines, cultural values, and traditions; (c) discipline styles in the home; (d) major family events (e.g., birth of a sibling, parents military deployment, family member death, etc.); (e) marital relations (i.e., divorce); (f) socioeconomic status, parents' type of employment and level of education; (g) parents' work schedule and availability for volunteering and helping children with homework; (h) child's disabilities, health, personality traits, and social skills; and (i) language use at home.

Although these parents acknowledged the importance of teachers obtaining information about the family, they also recognized that it might make some families uncomfortable. As one parent described, "Honestly, the more information you know about the family, the more help you can give kids who may not be getting extra help at home. I know some people who have issues at home feel like it's none of their [the teacher's] business, but I feel like it's a huge part." In effect, some parents believed that what was really important for the teachers to know was about the child's "personality traits" rather than learning about the family. This information was important for children's performance in school. They also believed that the previous teacher could provide more valuable information about the child's "learning style."

A group of African American mothers agreed, without being probed, that in some instances schools asked information that was often used to the children's disadvantage. Based on some family information, some teachers tended to stereotype about the child's learning. One mother stated, "You want the teacher to know everything, but depending on the teacher, you don't want them forming an opinion." Furthermore, a father indicated that he would be willing to answer questions depending on "how deep the question is." A mother added, "it's supposed to be for the benefit of the child at school…so it shouldn't go that deep if it's going to benefit education at school."

According to the Spanish-speaking mothers, teachers should know about important events at home such as death in the family, divorce, or if the child was complaining at home about bullying in school. They also indicated that in some instances revealing information about the family can give them "*vergüenza*" [embarrassment], especially if there were issues related to deportation and marital status.

Parents in several groups indicated that an important prerequisite aspect of revealing family information was if parents felt that they trusted the teacher. Parents should not feel forced to share the information. As a father stated,

> It comes down to how the person asking the question comes at you... if you come at me with respect, I'll give you the information you want, but come at me disrespectfully... I want to be treated how you want to be treated.

One Spanish-speaking mother also indicated that once teachers have this information it should be used with sensitivity. In her case she had told the teacher that her husband had died, and the teacher had said to the child, who wanted to make a Father's Day card, not to do it because she didn't have a father. Parents agreed that the family information should be kept confidential, so it was not detrimental to the child and family.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore parents' ideas about formative assessment. In general, parents had a positive view towards the formative assessment process. Data obtained through a formative assessment process could provide information that was timely, that allowed individualized instruction, and that revealed children's performance and behavior in school to parents.

Unlike previous studies that found that parents favor standardized assessment (Harris, 2015), in this study most parents had a general positive attitude towards formative assessment as it was described in the focus groups. As in previous studies (Deslandes & Rivard, 2013; MacDonald, 2007; Meisels et al, 2001) parents demonstrated an interest in learning more about their children's learning and development. Their curiosity for their children's learning in school was not limited to academic development but also extended to their child's social and emotional development, learning style, behavior in school, and interest areas. Parents were interested in this information so that they can better support their children's learning at home. Most parents, especially those who were African American or Spanish-speaking, found it useful to receive both positive and negative information about their child's behavior in class. Parents also revealed that they wanted to receive information about what is expected in

each grade level and how the expectations in the state standards might be similar to or different from previous standards. Some parents also indicated that they had trouble understanding the meaning of the current assessment system. Schneider and Arnot (2018) identified a similar issue in a study of immigrant parents in the United Kingdom. During parent interviews, the researchers observed that parents lacked understanding of the United Kingdom's schools' assessment system and which was not necessarily related to parents' level of education or years living in the United Kingdom.

Results from the focus groups suggest that the type of information received from the formative assessment reports is as important as how this information is communicated to parents. Teachers used different means of communication, and parents believed that the means of communication should be aligned with the type of information shared. The majority of parents emphasized that timely, one-on-one communication, especially face-to-face, was the preferred method of communication with teachers. In particular, parents preferred a communication method that provided an opportunity for them to inquire about how best to support their child's learning and behavior and also allowed the teacher an opportunity to learn more about their child. Using a transactional model of communication, parents and teachers could arrive at common understandings about children's learning and ways to support it (Schneider & Arnot, 2018). Findings also revealed that, according to the participants, there was a lot of variation among schools on the forms and frequency of communication parents received.

The majority of parents believed that obtaining information about the family was important for teachers. Some of the aspects they considered critical were family's cultural traditions and values, language used in the home, child's social skills outside of school, family's socioeconomic status, and major events in the child's life. Some parents were concerned if information about the family would be detrimental to the child. Parents emphasized the importance of developing trust between teachers and parents so that the parents felt more at ease with providing such information. In general, parents believed that some information could be gathered through surveys and questionnaires, but other information should be gathered through personal contact early in the school year and throughout.

These findings reveal that parents understand that children's home and community sociocultural contexts are as important for children's lives as schools and that teachers cannot have a complete view of the child if they do not have information about these contexts. Parents demonstrated a sociocultural view of assessment (Fleer, 2002; Gee, 2007) as they reflected on notions of interdependence of the social contexts of home and school. Interestingly, parents'

responses demonstrated an intuitive notion that they can become informants about children's participation in these contexts. At the same time, they seek to be co-interpreters of children's participation in school so that they can support them and provide scaffolding.

Implication for Practice

This study aimed to understand parents' beliefs about the assessment of their children's learning. Their voices as reflected in this study can be useful for schools as they consider alternative forms of assessment. According to the findings in this study, parents are open to formative assessment. It is clear from the results from the focus groups that designers of formative assessment need to plan for the content and form of the assessment, and also the means by which teachers will communicate with parents about formative assessments. In a similar state education reform implemented in Quebec, Deslandes and Rivard (2013) conducted a series of workshops to promote parents' understanding of competency-based assessments. The authors relayed that after parents attended a series of experiential assessment workshops, parents reported more understanding of the new assessment practices. Similarly, Meisels et al. (2001) discovered that parents rated the WSS more positively when they perceived teachers were willing to use this type of assessment and when school staff was available to answer questions. As found in the present study, parents expressed concern that this type of assessment could be too burdensome for teachers. Furthermore, parents had many questions about how this kind of assessment could be implemented that could be answered by school personnel communicating often and consistently.

Considering that teachers have many competing demands for their time, it is critical that they ask all families at the beginning of the year the best mode of communicating so that their efforts are efficient and effective. Some of the information that should be communicated includes: (a) general school information (e.g., events, activities, changes), (b) classroom level information (e.g., tests, curriculum, staff updates), and (c) individual child information (e.g., performance, behavior). In addition to inquiring about preferred mode(s) of communication, teachers should ask families for feedback and updates during the year. Depending on the school population, some of this additional information will need to be translated into different languages. It will be also critical to create opportunities in which both teachers and parents engage in meaning making and that the communication is transactional rather than one-sided (i.e., from school to parents; Schneider & Arnot, 2018).

More information about general instructional practices and curriculum (including changes) should be communicated with parents embedded within the

formative assessment process, as well as children's interactions with peers and teachers. Documentation as conceived in the Reggio Emilia approach, an early childhood education approach originated in Italy that encourages hands-on creativity and self-expression, is a move in this direction (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). Parents can also contribute to the process of documentation (Birbili & Tzioga, 2014). Another promising approach is the Learning Stories framework as described by Carr and Lee (2012). Learning Story, a socioculturally oriented framework, is an alternative multimodal narrative assessment that involves collaborative telling and retelling stories of children's observed learning episodes and experiences (Carr & Lee, 2012). This bicultural framework empowers children's individualized learning pathways, coordinates families' multiple perspectives of their children's learning expectations, and documents teachers' self-reflective instructional practices. These approaches to assessment aim to understand the complexity of the transformation that occurs as children learn, and at the same time, are necessary for informing teaching. As Fleer (2002) indicates,

> Documenting individual test scores, then compiling test scores into sets of results for classrooms, schools, and finally an entire system does little to inform how teaching practices must change for the improvement of outcomes. Worse still is the unquestioning faith that the current assessment tools can adequately document the complexity of the transformation that occurs through learning. (p. 115)

Alternative forms of assessment such as these also inform parents of social and linguistic aspects of the child's development and communicate to parents that these areas are equally important for learning. In this way, being better informed about their child's progress, parents can be more effective and intentional in supporting children's learning in school (Sonnenschein et al., 2014).

State efforts to move from standardized assessments to formative assessment should consider the different stakeholders who will benefit from the information provided in the assessment. Rather than providing one form of assessment, state efforts should focus on creating guidelines for formative assessment design as well as implementation. Given the current emphasis on standardized assessments, it is critical that states plan and oversee the delivery of professional development focused on implementing formative assessment with fidelity, including a particular emphasis on strategies proven to be effective for engaging families in the assessment process. Likewise, teacher preparation programs should include experiences for prospective teachers that include knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to partner with families in assessment and to value parents' desire to be involved in their children's learning regardless of

their background (Mehlig & Shumow, 2013). We recognize that these strategies would entail great efforts for teachers and administrators who are already overwhelmed with competing responsibilities. However, findings from this study reveal that parents can be willing allies in the assessment process and that their contributions can be critical to understand children's transformation. Assessments that are co-designed and co-interpreted with parents can provide evidence that can deliver meaningful improvement to educational practice. Therefore, we should not squander such a valuable resource.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations to the study. First, although the researchers described to the school the criteria for participant recruitment, it is not possible to determine if the parents who responded and represented the resulting convenience sample consisted primarily of those who frequently participate in school events or the PTA. Had we thought of doing so, we could have asked parents in the focus groups at the outset whether they had participated in school activities before. Thus, there is no claim that participants were representative of the parent population. The study, however, was not aiming to generalize the perspective here described to the majority of parents in NC but rather to understand some of the various perspectives that parents might have towards formative assessment. As with any such study, findings can point to additional questions or refined methods for future research.

Another limitation of the study is that the lead investigators did not conduct the focus groups directly, and it was not possible to transcribe the recordings because of funding restrictions. To minimize the impact of these limitations, the investigators reviewed all summaries provided by focus group facilitators and asked them to provide additional information and clarifications as needed.

Finally, since most parents have little experience with formative assessments, an example was provided in the focus group to gain insight on parents' perspectives towards these kinds of assessments. It is possible that parents' responses might be limited to the formative assessment example in the focus group and not to other forms of formative assessment. Further research should be conducted to determine parents' perspectives to different kinds of formative assessment.

At this time when there is a call to transform education to meet the needs of all children, especially children of color who have historically been left behind, it is important that assessments (and other educational tools) are culturally grounded and strengths based. By incorporating the sociocultural wealth of children through families' voices, we can better meet the needs of children in the learning environment.

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Cristina Gillanders is an associate professor in early childhood education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. Her research focuses on the development and learning of dual language learners, emergent literacy, parents' beliefs and practices, and home–school partnerships, as well as preparing early childhood education teachers to work with minoritized children and families. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. Cristina Gillanders, 1380 Lawrence Street, Denver, CO 80204, or email cristina.gillanders@ucdenver.edu

Iheoma U. Iruka is a research professor in the Department of Public Policy and founding director of the Equity Research–Action Coalition at FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Dr. Iruka is engaged in projects and initiatives focused on how evidence-informed policies, systems, and practices in early education can support the optimal development and experiences

of children from low wealth and marginalized households and communities. She is working on strengthening antiracist, antibias, and equitable research, practices, and policies to ensure the excellence and well-being for young diverse learners, especially Black children and their families.

Cindy Bagwell recently retired from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, where she served as the K–3 Education Project administrator responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of a kindergarten entry assessment, which is now part of a K–3 formative assessment process. Dr. Bagwell also served as the project director for an Enhanced Assessment Grant and led a consortium of nine states in the enhancement of NC's K–3 Formative Assessment Process, making it applicable to varied state contexts. With over 30 years of experience in education, she has taught, served as a district administrator, and worked as a state-level consultant, where she coordinated the development and implementation of North Carolina's first early learning standards and oversaw the creation of preschool and kindergarten demonstration classrooms and play-based assessment centers.

Tobi Adejumo is a PhD candidate in early childhood education in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Colorado Denver. Her teaching and research interests lie in the ecocultural contextualization of immigrant children's early childhood experiences, immigrant parents' early care, education, or school readiness practices and beliefs, and immigrant parents' advocacy and school involvement. She is also a research and policy associate at the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at the University of California, Berkeley.

Appendix: Focus Groups Questions

1. Teachers use different ways to communicate to parents how their child is doing in school. What have you found most useful? (Probe for means of communication, i.e., frequent text messages, parent–teacher conferences, phone calls, notes for home, report card, etc.)

2. What kind of information have you received about your child's performance or behavior in school that has been most useful?

3. What else would you like to know about your child's behavior or performance?

4. The OEL is working on a formative assessment that would help teachers learn more about the child's learning and development so that their teaching is more in tune with the child's needs. A sample of one of the areas they will explore is how children listen and use language (read example). Let me read you an example.

   A kindergarten teacher has been reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears with her class during circle time and decides to use the children's interest in the story to learn more about the children's development in the areas of listening and speaking. After reviewing the story, the teacher asks the children to imagine that the three bears decided to move to a new part of the woods so that Goldilocks couldn't find them. She asks the children to work together to build the

three bears a new house in the block area. As the children work together to build a new house for the bears, the teacher observes them working and listens to their conversation. Throughout the work time, the teacher listens, observes, asks questions as needed, and records the conversation by making notes about each child's use of language, such as how the children express their ideas, take turns in conversation, and stays on topic.

In this example, the teacher will be looking to see how children express their thoughts, how much they stay on topic, and if they allow other children to take turns during the conversation. Would you like to receive this kind of information from your child's teacher? If so, please let us know why.

5. In order for teachers to get a more complete picture of the child's learning and development they would need to gain some information from the family. What kind of information do you think it is important for the teachers to know about the family?

6. What would be the best way of gaining this information? (Probe for in person, through a website, text message, completing forms, phone call, homework, etc.)

7. When would be the best time for schools to gain this information from families? (Probe for at beginning of the year, end of the year, every month, etc.)