
Teachers' Use of Psycho-Educational Reports in Mainstream Classrooms

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This study investigated how teachers who support children with learning difficulties utilise psychologists' reports in their teaching practice. Previous research has examined teachers' preferences for how reports should be written, rather than how they might be used. Semi-structured, qualitative interviews with 12 teachers (seven primary, four high school and one preschool teacher) were undertaken and followed up with member checks and interrater reliability. Findings suggested that while the teachers valued the recommendations section of the report, they were also interested in other sections, particularly information about the student's background. Simultaneously, teachers used information from reports selectively in relation to their own professional knowledge and in collaboration with other stakeholders. Implications for practice and further research are discussed.

■ **Keywords:** psycho-educational reports, teacher, mainstream, learning difficulties

A major role for school psychologists and counsellors is to administer psychometric assessments for students experiencing learning difficulties and, on the basis of these results, write psycho-educational reports with recommendations. These reports often serve a number of purposes, including determining appropriate diagnosis, accessing disability funding, and providing individualised recommendations to inform the development of effective school-based interventions (Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2016).

Despite the long history of psycho-educational assessment in schools, the usefulness of the accompanying report in assisting teachers to cater for the learning needs of students is unclear, with few studies investigating how teachers use reports in day-to-day teaching (Mallin, Beimcik, & Hopfner, 2012; Pelco, Ward, Coleman, & Young, 2009). The few studies that exist tend to be dated, originate mainly from North America, and are limited to stakeholders' opinions about the perceived usefulness of reports, or focused on how teachers use the recommendations section of the report (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Cornwall, 1990; D'Amato & Dean, 1987; Williams & Coleman, 1982). Without a clear understanding of what happens to

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reports once they are provided to teachers, school psychologists and counsellors cannot effectively determine the validity of their work or structure their reports to assure they have a positive impact.

A Review of Existing Literature

The concern about the incompatibility between psycho-educational reports and instructional practices is long standing (e.g., Cason, 1945). Most studies have sought teachers' opinions on the type of reports and recommendations they prefer and find most useful (Fletcher, Hawkins, & Thornton, 2015; Mallin et al., 2012; Pelco et al., 2009; Salvagno & Teglassi, 1987). Overall, teachers find reports with excessive technical language and professional jargon difficult to read and understand (Bagnato, 1981; Brandt & Giebink, 1968; Pelco et al., 2009; Wiener, 1987), and dislike recommendations that are too general, impractical, or have little relevance to their day-to-day work (Bagnato, 1981; Borghese & Cole, 1994; Hagborg & Aiello-Coultier, 1994; Salvagno & Teglassi, 1987; Wiener, 1985). Other studies have shown that teachers prefer reports with integrated information organised within a thematic and functional framework (Fletcher et al., 2015; Pelco et al., 2009; Rahil, 2015; Teglassi, 1983).

While these findings have been important in identifying how school psychologists and counsellors might write reports that are accessible to teachers, little is known about how, if at all, reports might influence teaching practices (Mallin et al., 2012; Pelco et al., 2009). By improving reports, there is the assumption that the relationship between the report and teaching and learning is a direct and linear process. However, as noted by Pelco et al. (2009), such findings may not 'generalize to real report reading situations' (p. 26).

In addition, existing literature suggests that a range of psycho-social factors influence if, and how, a report will be used. In a Dutch study using reports written for a fictitious student, Pyl (1989) found that teachers drew on their own knowledge and repertoire of activities when generating ideas for assisting the student. The special needs teachers interviewed by Knoetze and Vermoter (2007) described using their own knowledge to plan for a student depicted in a fictitious report. In a survey inviting teachers to rate the helpfulness of different types of information in a report, Salvagno and Teglassi (1987) found that teachers preferred reports that included assessment information on a student's personality, as well as their intellectual functioning. Specifically, they preferred reports where the psychologist interpreted and integrated assessment information and provided examples of how it informed teaching and learning practices. They concluded that this provided teachers with a conceptual framework through which they could develop an understanding of a student's learning profile and how to apply this to practice within the classroom.

A number of studies have found differences in how reports are valued and interpreted across experienced and novice readers (Baker, 1965; Fletcher et al., 2015; Pelco et al., 2009; Pryzwansky & Hanania, 1986). Pelco et al. (2009) found experienced teachers were more able to understand the reasons for a child's difficulties from the information provided in a technical test-by-test report than teachers with less than 10 years' experience. Similarly, Fletcher et al. (2015) found less experienced teachers valued non-technical, theme-based reports more than experienced

teachers. Hagborg and Aiello-Coultier (1994) found few differences in how teachers rated the usefulness of reports, despite variation in report type, reasons for referral, and teacher qualifications and experiences.

The relationship between teachers and psychologists and counsellors has long been noted as an important factor influencing how teachers perceive reports (e.g., Reger, 1964) and continues to be highlighted in recent research. Lawrence and Cahill (2014) found that teachers who consider school psychologists as diagnosticians, as opposed to educators, are more likely to seek assessment services for funding and placement rather than obtain strategies for intervention and learning. Several studies have found that the perceived utility of a report's recommendations is improved if teachers feel they have been consulted and the context in which teaching and learning occurs has been taken into consideration (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Farrell & Care, 2000; Mallin et al., 2012). Other contextual factors that have been identified include limited time and resources, teacher workload, and classroom organisation (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Farrell & Care, 2000).

Although existing literature has highlighted the barriers and enablers of how psycho-educational reports are used, few studies have employed qualitative methodology to examine how teachers might experience and use reports in their day-to-day teaching. The few qualitative studies that do exist are dated and have focused primarily on the recommendations section of the report (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Cornwall, 1990; D'Amato & Dean, 1987; Williams & Coleman, 1982). While existing studies suggest that teachers consider the recommendations section to be the most important component of a report (Brandt & Giebink, 1968; Farrell & Care, 2000; Pelco et al., 2009; Rucker, 1967), there is evidence that teachers also value information from other sections of reports (Affleck & Strider, 1971; Knoetze & Vermoter, 2007; Mussman, 1964; Salvagno & Teglassi, 1987; Teglassi, 1983). Likewise, professional guidelines suggest that the function of a report goes beyond the provision of individualised recommendations. Additional provisions include the integration and interpretation of a student's developmental history with current assessment data, the interpretation and explanation of this history with test scores as they relate to teaching and learning processes, and a statement of diagnosis to enable access to funding and educational placement (APS, 2016; Weiner & Costaris, 2012). In this way, the report provides teachers with an understanding of why a student experiences difficulties in their learning, not just a set of instructions on how the student should be supported.

The broad function of a report in relation to educational practice highlights the valuable information they provide and the importance they potentially have for teachers. However, while studies indicate that teachers value reports, particularly the recommendations section, there is also evidence that teachers do not fully use the information provided in their teaching practice (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Cornwall, 1990; D'Amato & Dean, 1987; Williams & Coleman, 1982).

Conducting assessments and writing a report is an expensive and time-consuming process that requires considerable expertise on the part of the psychologist or counsellor. Moreover, the impact a report can have on the life of a child can be powerful and long lasting (Fletcher et al., 2015). It is important that researchers and practitioners establish an evidence base of how they are used in practice. Multiple methods of inquiry are needed to do so, including those studies that provide teachers

with opportunities to voice their opinions on what is, and is not, of value in psycho-educational reports. Such data will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how reports can be improved to ensure they have meaning and relevance to the people for whom they are written.

The Current Study

The aim of this study was to: (1) understand how, if at all, teachers use reports to inform their teaching of children with learning difficulties within mainstream classrooms; and (2) identify the factors that influence this use or non-use.

Method

Rationale for the Study

The present study adopted a phenomenological and idiographic approach whereby teachers were given an opportunity to consider how, if at all, they use reports from psychologists and counsellors to inform their teaching of children with learning difficulties within mainstream classrooms.

Context

Children who experience difficulty with their learning in Australian schools are often referred to school psychologists or counsellors for assessment. Schools may have access to psychologists and counsellors as staff members, or through services provided by local educational authorities. In New South Wales, school counsellors are licensed to conduct psychometric assessments. If this service is not available, parents can refer their child to a private psychologist who will usually provide a report to the school.

Generally, psycho-educational reports are written in the format proposed by Sattler (2008), which includes: 'identifying information'; the 'referral question'; a 'background information' section outlining a student's physical, emotional, social and academic development; a 'results' section communicating the results of the assessment; and a 'summary' section, which integrates information from across the report with the psychologist's interpretation of the assessment findings. If required, this section may also include relevant diagnoses. The 'recommendations' section is usually provided at the end of the report.

Participants

Participants were recruited across two Australian states (New South Wales and Victoria) using purposeful sampling within the professional networks of the first researcher. The sampling was designed to recruit teachers from a variety of settings and with different levels of experience in teaching and reading reports on students they had taught within a mainstream classroom. Overall, 20 teachers and 10 school psychologists and counsellors were invited to promote the study within their networks. Final participant numbers included six teachers from New South Wales and six from Victoria. Further demographic information about the sample is included in Table 1.

A snowball method was used whereby participants were asked whether they knew of any other teachers who would be interested in being interviewed.

TABLE 1
 Characteristics of the Participant Sample

Participant	Gender	Years teaching	Current work title	Setting	School type	Self-reported experience of teaching LD students	Reports received	Contact with SP
P1	F	16	Deputy principal	Primary, urban	State	Considerable	10+	More than once a week
P2	F	20	Class teacher	High school, urban	State	Considerable	8–9 cases	Once a week
P3	F	17	Class teacher	Primary, urban	State	A moderate amount	1–4 cases	Hardly ever
P4	F	14	Class teacher, AP	Primary, urban	State	Considerable	5–7 cases	More than once a week
P5	M	20	Class teacher	High school, urban	State	Large amount	8–9 cases	Hardly ever
P6	F	11	Class teacher, LST	High school, urban	Private	Considerable	10+	Once a month
P7	F	20	Deputy principal	High school, urban	State	Considerable	10+	Once a week
P8	F	30+	Class teacher	Pre-school, urban	State	Moderate amount	5–7 cases	Hardly ever
P9	M	15	Class teacher, AP	Primary, urban	CE	Moderate amount	1–4 cases	Hardly ever
P10	F	30+	Class teacher	Primary, urban	CE	Large amount	1–4 cases	Once a week
P11	M	10	Class teacher	Primary, urban	CE	Moderate amount	1–4 cases	Once a week
P12	F	30+	Class teacher, AP	Primary, Rural	State	Considerable	10+	Once a month

Note: AP = assistant principal, LST = learning support teacher, CE = Catholic Education, SP = school psychologist/counsellor, LD = learning difficulties.

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the relevant authorities. Participants were interviewed over the telephone by the first researcher using a semi-structured interview schedule. A number of open-ended questions were formulated, starting with a general question that asked teachers about their experiences of using psycho-educational reports within mainstream classrooms, followed by a series of probing questions designed to gather in-depth information and clarify experiences. The sequence and number of questions varied in relation to the issues and topics discussed with the participants. Sample interview questions included:

- What are your experiences of psycho-educational reports?
- What, if anything, have you found useful in the reports you have read?
- What, if anything have you found unhelpful in the reports you have read?
- If yes, can you give me an example of how a report has informed your understanding of a student?
- What aspects of reports, if any, have you used to inform your planning and teaching of a student with learning difficulties?

If readers wish to view the full interview schedule they are invited to contact the first author.

Demographic information was collected, including details of the participants' experience of teaching children with learning difficulties, reading psycho-educational reports, and frequency of contact with the school psychologist or counsellor.

The average interview length was 61 minutes. The audio files of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. To maintain confidentiality, all names were omitted from the transcripts. Member checks were undertaken, where transcripts were emailed to participants with the invitation to change or delete any aspect of their transcript they believed to be incorrect, or identifiable, or to add anything they considered important (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis

A thematic analysis was employed, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process. While the study was situated within the context of existing literature, developed coding categories reflected the content and meaning of the data itself, rather than interview schedule questions or existing literature. The first stage of analysis was a detailed review of the data through transcription and rereading. The main researcher made notes about the initial responses found in the transcript and used journalling to facilitate a reflexive approach to analysis. Individual transcripts were then coded by labelling phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Labels were taken directly from the text and coded using a coding system to group sections of the transcripts according to themes and differences. Interview extracts were tagged accordingly to participant number (e.g., P1 = participant 1). Codes from the individual transcripts were then collated into a preliminary thematic map of the data. Through processes of revision, interrater reliability (where two transcripts were

analysed by a fellow researcher and then discussed with the main researcher), peer debriefing and reflexivity, themes were further refined to provide a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the data.

Results

Participants described a variety of ways in which they used psycho-educational reports to inform their teaching of students within their classrooms, but also noted concerns and reservations. Three interrelated themes, with various subthemes, were identified:

How specific sections of the report are used: results section, students' background information, recommendation section.

Translating reports to teaching and learning practices: teacher pedagogy, teacher experience.

The importance of collaboration: drawing on the collective expertise of all stakeholders, evaluation and modification.

How Specific Sections of the Report are Used

Most participants used the recommendations section to develop planning, and also indicated that they found information provided in the assessment results section and student background information section to be useful.

Results section. Nine participants referred to the results section as a determinant of subsequent intervention planning, including funding applications. For example, P4 said:

So I guess the first thing I really want to know ... have you done a report, what's the outcome ... is there mental health, yes we can do a mental health sign-off and a disability confirmation ... or yes, there's a speech problem, no there's not ... so what are we going to do for funding?

Four participants described using the results to map curriculum and pedagogy to the student's cognitive ability: 'So if the report outlines a certain level of cognitive functioning ... that gives you a bit of a framework to start off with and then you adjust up and down to see whether that's an appropriate one' (P2).

Two participants described using the results section for accountability purposes: 'We've had the child tested, and that's been reinforced, no longer anecdotal, now we've got some data to support it' (P7).

The results section of the report was also valued because participants were interested in seeing whether the results confirmed their own understanding of a student's learning difficulties. When results were aligned, participants felt validated in their concerns and reassured about the need for intervention. Conversely, when the results differed, participants expressed frustration and concern: '... sometimes you know that a student finds work difficult and yet the psych report shows that

generally he is a fairly average functioning student and you start to wonder, okay, so why are they struggling so much . . . It really is an imprecise science' (P6).

At these times, one participant suggested: 'So often I have found these reports have been wrong. They haven't been shown to be valid' (P5).

While nine of the participants were interested in assessment results, four also described the difficulty they had in understanding this section. Some sought to overcome this by examining the summary section and, where possible, consulted with the psychologist about the meaning of the scores and descriptors used.

Students' background information. Seven participants valued the background information of the report as it provided insight into a student's emotional and psychological functioning:

But I think that's where it's really useful, it's to identify those things that aren't overt. Because if a student's coming through with an intellectual disability or who has a vision impairment or who has a hearing impairment, that's quite obvious . . . but mental health is quite different because often things are, they can be hidden and it's not as easy to match strategies. (P2)

Six participants used this section to build relationships with students and parents: ' . . . the best way to build a relationship with the child, for the child to feel very comfortable and safe in your classroom is for you to do steps 1, 2 and 3 and the counsellor can provide us with the information' (P2).

Participant 2 clarified what she meant by 'steps 1, 2, and 3' by describing how she used information from the counsellor to develop effective communication strategies with students, such as being mindful of the content and tone of her language, when to push a child academically and when to give them time out, and how to facilitate meaningful dialogue with a student about their learning. Conversely, participant 5 felt that reading a report was counterproductive: 'I need to find my own way to get through to the child . . . As long as I am sensitive to their needs, as long as the parents have confidence in me, I would find that sort of thing would be much more useful.'

While three of the participants reported that the psychologist was particularly skilled in gaining insight into the child's background, one participant felt there were limits as to how well a psychologist might 'know' and understand a child and his or her family:

. . . you know people will put on a bit of a face when they come in for that interview but deep down they are probably scared out of their wits of the psych as parents because they have learning difficulties themselves. The school has been able to build trust over time. (P12)

Recommendations section. Eleven participants valued the recommendations section, particularly when the recommendations were of a practical nature:

So yeah, the practical strategies are really good . . . they'll often give practical strategies, they might say this is a weakness, sometimes they'll say this is what you can do about it sort of thing, these are ideas. That's where it is most useful. There's no point saying, well he needs to do this blah, blah, blah, but not give any practical ideas. (P8)

At the same time, participants reported using recommendations selectively. For some, this was because they found that not all recommendations were effective: 'I received a list of different strategies from the psychologist saying try this, do this, that sort of thing. I found some of them worked and some of them didn't, but it was good to have the strategies' (P11).

Translating Reports Into Teaching and Learning Practices

According to those interviewed, the likelihood that they would implement the recommendations was not just determined by the report type or quality — that is, the type of recommendations included, or the style and clarity with which the report was written. Contextual factors also influenced their use, such as the resources available in the school and the needs of the other students in the class. While the study examined the extent to which demographic factors influenced teachers' use of reports, no significant patterns were found in the data. For all participants, a significant factor determining how a report would be used was their own pedagogical style and knowledge on how best to cater for students with learning difficulties, accrued from their experience as classroom teachers.

Teaching pedagogy. Eleven participants described the difficulties they had delivering an individualised program while meeting the needs of other students in their class: 'I think the counsellors probably have a view like, they see one child at a time whereas a teacher thinks of a whole group of children all at the same time' (P3).

Rather than reject the recommendations, four participants described specific classroom management strategies that assisted the implementation of the recommendations. For example, three primary school-based participants grouped students of like ability into groups, sharing aide time among students, and linking students to more able peers or 'buddies'. One of the high school-based participants described the challenge of adapting the psychologist's recommendations in a way that enabled students with reading difficulties to access the same curriculum as that of their peers.

Responses indicated that the participants' teaching pedagogy influenced preference for specific versus generalised recommendations. For example, four participants expressed concern that the reports and recommendations were often generic in nature and that they would prefer them to be more specific by including details about students' cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and processing skills, and how this information related to learning goals for the classroom. One high school classroom-based participant, with additional responsibility for special education across the school, stated: 'So often they look very similar. I try to differentiate mine [recommendations developed from the report to give to classroom teachers] very much but I think the psychologists report sometimes looks very similar even though the students . . . [are] so different' (P6).

At the same time, three participants indicated that they also wanted general recommendations because they wanted to use the recommendations as indicators or 'starting points' for their planning: 'Some of them [recommendations] were quite finicky, quite small, and you just had to think, now how best can I use this information to make it work in my classroom' (P10).

Four participants reported difficulty in implementing specific recommendations because they were concerned about catering for the social and emotional aspects of learning in a group setting:

So we may not necessarily follow [the psychologist's] recommendation to the letter because we know other things in terms of that child, so that child doesn't feel they're being isolated, they're not being treated as a dummy by the other kids in the class. It's also about the self-esteem and resilience of that child too, and they want to be part of their class, kids want to be in the class with their mates. (P7)

Teachers' experience. Knowledge and experience influenced the extent to which the recommendations were taken up, or not. Despite valuing the recommendations section, participant 8 said:

Some of the recommendations ... I've actually not put into place because ... I know how to deal with the child, not better, but I've already sort of seen that behaviour and I know how to deal with it and so I've skipped their recommendations and done what I feel is the best thing.

Teaching experience was important because it had enabled participants to develop their own set of strategies, or 'toolkits', that assisted them when developing intervention plans to support children with learning difficulties. Four participants reported that previous psycho-educational reports had helped them build up these ideas and resources:

And she might give a handout of some research, some strategies, and everyone files it away and then you know you've got something on working memory ... or processing ... delay in speech ... you think oh, I've got something on that. (P4)

The Importance of Collaboration

Drawing on the collective expertise of all stakeholders. Nine participants suggested that educational outcomes for a student were likely to be improved when the psycho-educational assessment and subsequent intervention planning drew on the expertise of all stakeholders, including the psychologist or counsellor, classroom and specialist teachers, parents and students. They said they found reports to be most useful when they were able to discuss the findings and recommendations with the psychologist:

The counsellor does have a vital role, but it has to be a partnership, it can't be that they've got the answers and you just go thank you and see you later. It's that continued relationship and reflection ... the power is in the collective and the conversation. (P1)

This partnership also involved using collaborative processes to discuss the report recommendations to ensure their validity when used within the context of the classroom:

... we meet afterwards, we can go through that and so they can maybe say, oh well, do you want to try this instead or okay, we understand that. So the more we discuss it and have meetings about it, the better understanding we get of the child and change

the strategies because what strategies may work at home may not work in a group of twenty children. (P8)

The importance of incorporating the expertise of parents was also noted:

... psychologists might only see the child for an hour and a half and do testing, ... parents actually live with the child so we all have different perspectives I think. And also we have different rapport with the child, we have a different relationship and a behaviour that the psychologist might not see, we might see at the preschool or the parent might see at home. (P8)

One participant described discussing the report with the students themselves:

So the child feels that they can turn round and say yeah I really struggle with this, or I just don't get that, or the teacher talks too quickly for me, and they give too many, giving me too much information or asking me to do more than one thing at a time. (P7)

Evaluation and modification. Collaboration and consultation with the key stakeholders was also valued as a means of reviewing the effectiveness of the recommendations and modifying the educational intervention developed from the report. Collaborative processes and systems varied from setting to setting. Some participants drew on the expertise available in the school:

You've got to bring them back into the Learning Support Team process to say, well, how is it going? Because if it's not working out, then we need to strategise again, or it is working, okay where are they now? What are their needs now? (P1)

Others sought to modify the recommendations through direct and ongoing consultations with the psychologist:

... because I have such a good relationship with my counsellor, I can frequently check in with her and be giving her updates on what's happening, or what I've done, what I haven't done, what's worked, what hasn't worked, and she may elaborate on her recommendations. (P4)

However, while the opportunity to engage with the psychologist was welcomed by most of the participants, it did not always occur. Four of the participants said that they had infrequent contact with the psychologist who wrote reports for their school.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to (1) understand how, if at all, teachers use psycho-educational reports to inform their teaching of students with learning difficulties within mainstream classrooms; and (2) identify the factors that influence use or non-use. While there was some variation in how teachers used reports, such as the value they gave to the report information and the extent and quality of interaction with the school psychologist or counsellor, these differences occurred across the sample and did not appear to be systematically associated with demographic factors. For example, although the majority of participants reported using information from the background information section of the reports they had read, this was particularly

important to three teachers. While two of these participants were high school teachers from low socio-economic areas, the third participant was an early years teacher from a relatively high socio-economic area. Similarly, while a private high school teacher emphasised the importance of the results section to her planning, teachers from all educational settings reported interest in the results. Only one of the teachers did not value or use reports, and this was associated with personal beliefs about the relevance of standardised assessment to teaching and learning rather than the context in which he taught. These findings contradict existing studies that suggest teachers' opinions about reports are influenced by social factors (e.g., Farrell & Care, 2000). However, they are consistent with Hagborg and Aiello-Coultier (1994), who found few differences in how teachers rated the usefulness of the reports they had read, despite variation in report type, reasons for referral, and teacher qualification. It is possible, as suggested by Hagborg and Aiello-Coultier (1994), that variation is less likely to occur in a sample of experienced teachers when inquiry is focused on understanding teachers responses to actual reports written for real teaching situations.

Overall, findings indicated that participants regarded the primary function of reports as a vehicle through which additional funding and services for students could be accessed. However, results also showed that participants did use reports to inform their teaching practice. As with previous research, participants reported valuing the recommendations section of reports (Farrell & Care, 2000; Mallin et al., 2012). In contrast to the few studies that examined teachers' use of recommendations, almost all of the participants said that they used the recommendations to develop interventions and to adapt teaching and learning practices (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Cornwall, 1990; D'Amato & Dean, 1987; Williams & Coleman, 1982). However, they often regarded recommendations as 'starting points' or 'indicators' of the direction their educational planning should take.

In addition to the recommendation section, participants used the results and background information sections of reports to assist planning. At the same time, however, reports were considered as just one source of information about a student. Similar to Messiou's (2002) conceptualisation of inclusive education, teachers utilised and considered the information provided about a student in relation to other pieces of information available to them, including their own teaching and learning knowledge, pedagogical style, existing assessment data, and the views of other stakeholders in the assessment process.

The factors influencing the translation of reports into teaching and learning practices were similar to those in previous research, such as the need for recommendations to be practical and relevant (Bagnato, 1981; Wiener, 1985), and concerns regarding the over-use of jargon and technical language (Pelco et al., 2009). A major factor influencing how reports were used was the participants' pedagogy and teaching experiences. The role of teacher knowledge and experience when interpreting reports has been highlighted by other studies (D'Amato & Dean, 1987; Knoetze & Vermoter, 2007; Pelco et al., 2009). However, in the current study, these factors appeared to be a critical and a seemingly inevitable component in how teachers translate reports into practice. For example, the processes the participants employed when reading and using reports were similar to those used by adult learners when faced with new information (Merriam, 2010) and echo the

frameworks professionals use when applying theory to practice (Fox, 2003). Rather than passively accept what was written in the report, participants in this study appeared actively engaged as self-directing and independent thinkers, integrating the findings of the report with other sources of information and accommodating the recommendations to what they believed would be the best teaching and learning practices for the student concerned.

This decision-making process was reflected in the different value participants assigned to specific versus general recommendations. Some participants reported that there had been times when they had found a recommendation to be too specific and difficult to implement in their classrooms. Instead, they preferred general and open-ended recommendations because it enabled them to draw on their own reserve of tried-and-tested methods in a way that suited the needs of the classroom and their personal teaching style. These findings contrast with much of the existing literature that suggests teachers have a preference for specific rather than general recommendations (Bagnato, 1981; Wiener, 1985). It is possible that by focusing on the actual practice of teachers and the processes they employ when using reports, this study provided a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of preferences.

An active engagement with the report was also reflected in participants' use of the results and background information sections, consistent with previous studies (Knoetze & Vermoter, 2007; Mussman, 1964; Salvagno & Teglassi, 1987). Using these sections is again indicative of an active engagement with the report as a whole, and is aligned with contemporary ecological models of assessment that assess students within the context of their school, home and community (Bartolo, 2010; Bell & McKenzie, 2013). In the current study, participants described the background information as important because they wanted to gain insight into the student's cultural context and how this affected their learning. They also described using the background information to build strong teacher-student relationships and positive relationships with the student's family.

While teacher knowledge and experience were major factors influencing if, and how, reports were used, participants preferred to develop teaching and learning practices for students in collaboration with the psychologist and other key stakeholders. This is gratifying, given that previous research has indicated teachers' use of recommendations increases when they and other stakeholders are consulted (Borghese & Cole, 1994; Farrell & Care, 2000; Knoetze & Vermoter, 2007). In the current study, collaboration with the psychologist or counsellor also allowed participants to clarify the meaning of the report, and allowed them to integrate the report with their own knowledge, along with information from other educators, parents, and at times, the students themselves. This was important to the participants because it enabled them to build a more robust and comprehensive understanding of a student's difficulties and how best they could be supported. Similarly, other research suggests a student's learning difficulties are best supported through a collaborative, problem-solving approach with multidisciplinary teams (Gillmore, Miller, & Ward, 2015; Knoetze & Vermoter, 2007; Mainwaring, 2015).

The importance of consultative and collaborative practice when conducting psycho-educational assessment is outlined in contemporary assessment policy and guidelines (see, e.g., APS & Speech Pathology Australia, 2014). It is therefore surprising that most of the teachers in this study recalled discussing the report's

information and recommendations with the psychologist or counsellor only once the report was completed. Borghese and Cole (1994) found that while information from teachers was often incorporated in reports, teacher involvement in formulating the associated recommendations was minimal. More recent studies conducted within an Australian setting have also noted that collaboration during an assessment does not always occur between key stakeholders (Gilmore, Miller, & Ward, 2015; Mainwaring, 2015). The findings in this study provide some evidence to suggest that consultative practice does not extend to the writing of the report and the formulation of the recommendations.

The findings from this study suggest a number of strategies that could be used by psychologists and counsellors to increase the likelihood of their report being used by experienced teachers. First, psychologists and counsellors should tailor their reports more specifically to the context in which it is to be used, by consulting and collaborating with teachers when writing and delivering the report. This would enable psychologists and counsellors to identify whether teachers value information beyond the recommendation section, and how this information could best be written to inform educational planning. It would also provide an opportunity to identify whether teachers prefer prescriptive recommendations, or whether they also want general recommendations that allow them to draw on their own professional knowledge and methods of supporting children with the difficulties identified. Second, psychologists and counsellors should work in partnership with teachers when developing and implementing individual learning plans from the report. This will enable psychologists and counsellors to evaluate the effectiveness of their report and to ensure they are interpreted accurately and used by teachers in the way intended.

Limitations and Future Research

While the study benefits from hearing the experiences of a range of teachers from a variety of settings, it is possible that not all of the factors influencing their experiences were captured within the transcripts, or from the demographic data collected. For example, although the study sought information about the frequency of contact with the psychologist or counsellor, the quality of contact was not determined. The type and quality of reports read by participants, the reasons for referral, and the type of psychologist who wrote the report, were also not identified. Additionally, although there was variation in the number of reports read, all participants in this study were experienced teachers, ranging from 10 to more than 30 years' service.

Further research is required to explore how less experienced teachers use reports. Given the importance of collaboration and consultation between school psychologists and teachers in the assessment process, future studies examining psychologists' experience of this process when writing and delivering psycho-educational reports would also be beneficial. Finally, the perspective of other stakeholders, especially students, should be sought regarding the effectiveness of psycho-educational reports.

Conclusion

This study investigated teachers' use of psycho-educational reports in the context of day-to-day teaching. Findings suggest that teachers use the recommendations

section, but also information provided in other sections of the report, to inform teaching and learning practices within mainstream classrooms. Although there was variation in the emphasis participants gave to the different sections of the report and how they used report information in the context of their practice, these differences did not appear to be systematically associated with demographic factors, such as school setting, experience of reading reports, or frequency of contact with the authoring psychologist.

Furthermore, while the information provided in psycho-educational reports was important to participants, they regarded it as only one source of information. In this way a report was used as a working document that teachers actively and collaboratively engaged with while reading and translating the information and recommendations to the unique needs of their students, classrooms and schools, alongside their own frames of reference and pedagogical style.

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