

## **Teacher Perceptions of Psychological Reports Submitted for Emotional Disturbance Eligibility**

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### **Abstract**

Elementary teachers evaluated a psychological evaluation report with authorship as the independent variable. One-half of the teachers were informed that the report was prepared by a psychologist working within the school district (District), while the other half were informed that the report was done by a psychologist in private practice who contracts with the district (Contract). The teachers completed a 23-item Likert-scale evaluation instrument. The District report was rated higher in certain areas; there were no significant differences regarding overall report quality based on authorship; and, in general, the lowest mean ratings (e.g., adequate recommendations, avoidance of technical language) are consistent with prior investigations.

### **Introduction**

Within the field of school psychology, assessment results, interpretations of data, analyses of strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for educational programming are primarily conveyed in a psychological report. Such reports have much impact regarding determinations of eligibility for special education and decisions about educational placements and services to be received. The manner in which such reports are perceived and understood, especially by the educational personnel who must use them in decision-making and planning, is an important factor to study.

The first investigation in this area was conducted by Mussman (1964) who asked 12 teachers to evaluate 24 handwritten reports of psychological testing for screening purposes, and 13 teachers to evaluate 25 conventional typewritten reports. Mussman's results indicated that teachers preferred an immediate evaluation rather than waiting for a more detailed and comprehensive report, but that all teachers desired both types of reports. The teachers evaluating the conventional report identified the test results and recommendations sections as being most important to them. Concern from both groups was expressed regarding the recommendations or suggestions section. Brandt and Giebink (1968) also found that teachers looked to the recommendations section of the report for usefulness, and preferred reports with concrete, specific recommendations. Teachers also preferred recommendations that were congruent with their own philosophical orientation. In addition to the studies above, it has also been found that the quality of the recommendations are related to the usefulness and meaningfulness of the report (Rucker, 1967; White, Nielson, & Prus, 1984). The degree to which recommendations are specific and appropriate is obviously an important variable affecting teacher perceptions.

The degree of jargon used in reports has been determined as another important variable for teacher perceptions. Rucker (1967) and Shively and Smith (1969) found that the use of jargon lead to miscommunication. Wiener (1985) asked 81 elementary teachers participating in an in-service course in special education to rate three types of report formats: (A) a short-form, one-

page report with jargon used to make the report more succinct; (B) a conventional psycho-educational report format in which information is organized by functional domain and jargon terms are either avoided or defined in text; and (C) a question-and-answer format in which information is not grouped under subject headings, but rather presented in a systematic response fashion to specific questions listed in the referral reason section. The 81 teachers were divided randomly into 3 groups and each group received one of the three report formats. Format A was rated lower than either B or C, indicating that teachers prefer to read long reports that they comprehend than short reports that are less comprehensible. The more explanation and the more the report responds to the referral question, the higher the rating. Wiese, Bush, Newman, Benes, and Witt (1986) directly investigated teacher perceptions as a function of the level of jargon present in the report. Three versions of the same psychological report were randomly assigned to 180 employed and pre-service teachers. The teachers rated the report using the 23-item Psychological Report Evaluation Profile (PREP) developed by the investigators. The only factor affected by the level of jargon was Understanding and Comprehension. Teachers were more satisfied with reports reflecting a low level of jargon.

In general, reports which address the referral concerns well, provide descriptions of the child and interpretations of the data without a high level of jargon, and contain specific and appropriate recommendations, are perceived more favorably by teachers. Another variable which has been investigated, although not as thoroughly as the issues of report organization, recommendations, and jargon, is authorship. Are teacher perceptions affected by who writes the report?

Eberst and Genshaft (1984) had 14 doctoral level and 13 specialist level public school psychologists provide 50 psychological reports for use in their investigation. The 50 reports were divided evenly among 5 disability categories: learning disability, mental retardation, reading problem, behavior problem, and emotional difficulty. Twenty-five reports were written by doctoral level school psychologists and 25 were written by specialist level school psychologists. The reports were randomly assigned to a panel of six educators, consisting of two elementary principals, two elementary counselors, and two elementary teachers. Each rater rated 25 reports using an 18-item Likert-type scale. The F ratio for the variable of degree (doctoral versus specialist) was not significant. Results were further analyzed regarding the interaction of degree and report type. The mean rating of the emotional difficulty (ED) reports written by specialist level school psychologists was significantly higher than the mean rating of ED reports written by doctoral level school psychologists. The raters indicated that the test scores were more clearly interpreted and that recommendations addressed the referral problem more adequately in the reports written by specialist level school psychologists.

Rucker's (1967) comparative study showed that experience as a psychologist, teaching experience, age, sex, and major as an undergraduate or graduate had no significant influence on the perceived quality of reports. Andrews and Gutkin (1991) had 60 educators rate a 2-page psychological report with authorship serving as the independent variable. Half of the subjects were informed that the report was authored by a doctoral level school psychologist and the other half were informed that the report was generated by a computer-based test interpretation system. Each rater evaluated the report on a 7-point Likert-scale in four areas: overall quality, credibility, diagnostic interpretations, and level of confidence placed in their judgments of the report. There were no significant differences in any of the four areas.

Except for the Eberst and Genshaft (1984) study, the psychological reports used in the cited investigations were mostly psycho-educational in nature, describing learning disabilities and processing difficulties rather than emotional disturbance. The one study that did include a report of emotional difficulty did show differences as a function of authorship. Thus, reports in the realm of emotional disturbance may be more subject to issues of authorship since more interpretation is often present in such reports. To date, there have been no investigations regarding the place of employment of the school psychologist as an authorship variable. There is a trend within school districts to contract out for services. All of the investigations cited used school psychologists working within districts. Although there is no official data on this subject, it is often heard that

parents and some educators often place differing credibility on "outside" evaluations than on those conducted by personnel within the school district.

The primary purpose of this investigation was to determine if a psychological report submitted for emotional disturbance eligibility would be rated differentially based on whether the psychologist was a district employee or external consultant, and if differences did exist, did other variables such as teaching experience or grade level taught have an impact on perceptions. Prior investigations did not include grade level taught as a variable, and the one study that did address teaching experience (Rucker, 1967) showed no significant difference. The second purpose of this study was to investigate in general the evaluation of the report to determine if the same issues identified in the literature (e.g., recommendations and jargon) would be rated similarly (i.e., lower). While these particular variables were not manipulated in the report, the literature in the area of report evaluation is old and based primarily on psycho-educational (e.g., learning disabilities) rather than psychological (e.g., emotional disturbance) reports; thus, the general evaluation of this report would provide updated information on teacher perceptions of psychological reports.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were 63 elementary school teachers: 22 third grade teachers, 25 fourth grade teachers, and 16 fifth grade teachers. The average years teaching for the entire group was 10.9. There were 23 teachers who had 0 to 5 years of experience, 22 who had 6 to 15 years of experience, and 18 who had 16+ years of experience. The teachers were selected from two Houston area public school districts. The six schools were selected based on demographic characteristics. The average number of students per school was 558. The average percentage for African American, Latino, and Caucasian ethnic groups was as follows: African American=4.9%; Latino=21.3%; and Caucasian=70.7%. The remaining 3.1% represents Asian and Native-Americans.

### **Materials**

Each teacher received a cover letter explaining that the purpose of the study was to evaluate a psychological report. Attached to the 4-page psychological report was a separate colored sheet of paper which identified authorship. Teachers also received a 23-item Likert-type rating scale. The rating scale was developed by the investigators based on a review of scales used in previous investigations and recommended best practices for report writing. It should be acknowledged that this scale was developed by the investigators, and there are no reliability and validity data on the scale. The 23-item scale used in this investigation is presented in Table 1.

### **Procedures**

Teachers were asked at a faculty meeting to participate in a research study investigating perceptions of a psychological report. Participation was voluntary. The teachers who agreed to participate were presented with a packet containing the report and rating scale. The teachers read the report and completed the rating scale in the meeting. The student in the report was a fourth grade male student. The psychological report developed for use in this investigation was judged by two doctoral level psychologists, one who works within a school district as well as one who contracts with a district. The report was found to be an adequate representation of the type of report usually submitted and considered representative of most reports in the field. The report included the following types of assessment sources: individually administered intellectual and achievement measures; standardized parent and teacher rating scales, interviews with the parent, teacher, and student; standardized student completed self-report measures addressing self-concept, anxiety and depression; and projective measures. The report concluded that the student was exhibiting an emotional disturbance due to depressed mood, low self-esteem,

emotional lability, and difficulty with peer interactions. The reports were randomly distributed, and each teacher received the same report with a yellow half-sheet of paper attached to it. The independent variable, authorship, was presented on the colored paper as follows: FORM A: *The ED eligibility report was submitted by Dr. Hill. Dr. Hill is a psychologist who works full-time for the school district.* FORM B: *The ED eligibility report was submitted by Dr. Hill. Dr. Hill is a psychologist in private practice who contracts with the school district to do psychological evaluations.*

Table 1: Rating Scale for Evaluating the Psychological Report

Grade level taught_____	Number of years teaching_____			
<i>Please rate the report by answering each of the following items. Please circle your answers.</i>				
1. The author of the report is qualified to write the report.	Not Qualified	Somewhat Qualified	Qualified	Very Qualified
2. The diagnostic conclusions in the report are supported by the data presented.	Not Supported	Somewhat Supported	Supported	Supported Very Well
3. The report provides useful information for the management of behavior.	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
4. The report provides useful information to make classroom modifications.	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
5. The data contributes to understanding of the child.	Does Not Contribute	Contributes Somewhat	Contributes	Very Contributive
6. The report is free from contradictions and inconsistencies.	Not Free	Somewhat Free	Free	Very Free
7. The report avoids the use of excessive technical language.	Does Not Avoid	Somewhat Avoids	Avoids	Avoids Very Well
8. The report provides useful information for parents.	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
9. The report provides useful information for designing IEPs.	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful
10. The report contains sufficient information.	Not Sufficient	Somewhat Sufficient	Sufficient	Very Sufficient
11. The report is clear and easy to understand.	Not Understandable	Somewhat Understandable	Understandable	Very Understandable
12. The recommendations are realistic.	Not Realistic	Somewhat Realistic	Realistic	Very Realistic
13. Interpretations of the test results are clear.	Not Clear	Somewhat Clear	Clear	Very Clear
14. Issues concerning the referral have been discussed.	Not Discussed	Somewhat Discussed	Discussed	Discussed Very Well
15. The report provides adequate recommendations.	Not Adequate	Somewhat Adequate	Adequate	More Than Adequate Very Credible
16. The information in the report is credible.	Not Credible	Somewhat Credible	Credible	Very Credible
17. The conclusions in the report are clear.	Not Clear	Somewhat Clear	Clear	Very Clear
18. The report documents how interpretations and conclusions were reached.	Not Documented	Somewhat Documented	Documented	Documented Very Well
19. The report describes student characteristics in clear behavioral terms.	Not Clear	Somewhat Clear	Clear	Very Clear
20. To what degree do you agree with the conclusions in the report.	Not in Agreement	Somewhat in Agreement	In Agreement	Highly In Agreement
21. The report is well written.	Not well Written	Written Somewhat Well	Written Well	Written Very Well
22. Rate the overall quality of the report.	Not Good	Somewhat Good	Good	Very Good
23. Rate the overall usefulness of the report.	Not Useful	Somewhat Useful	Useful	Very Useful

## Results and Implications

Initially, the data were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA for the independent variable of Form (A=District; B=Contract). The dependent variables were the individual items on the rating scale. Due to interest in whether there would be differential ratings of the District versus Contract report based on Grade Taught (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>) and Years of Teaching (0-5; 6-15; 16+), a 3-way ANOVA was also applied for data analysis. Since the investigators were conducting a great number of analyses, the Bonferroni method was applied when applicable. In addition, mean ratings of each item for the entire sample of teachers were generated to determine the general perception of the report.

### Main Effects

There was one significant main effect for Form on Item 11 ( $F(1,62)=5.94, p<.05$ ; Effect size based on Eta Squared=.089;  $n=32$  Form A &  $n=31$  Form B). Item 11 is: *The report is clear and easy to understand*. Ratings were higher ( $M=3.13, SD=.61$ ) for the report identified as the District report as compared to the Contract report ( $M=2.71, SD=.74$ ). One implication of this finding is that teachers may perceive contract psychologists to include terms that are not educationally relevant, and they are more readily able to accept such terms from district psychologists.

There were no significant main effects for grade level taught. This may be due to the sample involving only three elementary grades (3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>).

There was one significant main effect for Years of Teaching on Item 15 ( $F(2,62)=4.17, p<.05$ ; Effect size based on Eta Squared=.12). Item 15 is: *The report provides adequate recommendations*. Post hoc analysis indicated that teachers with 16+ years of experience rated the item higher ( $M=3.0, SD=.59$ ) as compared to teachers with 6-15 years of experience ( $M=2.45, SD=.67$ ). There were no significant differences for the group of teachers with 0-5 years of experience ( $M=2.57, SD=.59$ ). There was a significant interaction on this item and implications will be discussed below.

### Interactions

There were three significant 2-way interactions for Form x Years of Teaching on the following items: Item 9 ( $F(2,62)=4.26, p<.05$ , Eta squared=.13), Item 15 ( $F(2,62)=3.53, p<.05$ , Eta squared=.11), and Item 18 ( $F(2,62)=4.63, p<.05$ , Eta squared=.14). Item 9 is: *The report provides useful information for designing IEPs*. IEP refers to the Individual Education Plan or Program designed for the student. Post hoc analyses revealed that teachers with 6-15 years of experience rated the report identified as the District report higher ( $M=3.11, SD=.33$ ) than the Contract report ( $M=2.46, SD=.78$ ). It may be that when designing an educational plan, this group of teachers is more receptive to information from a within-district psychologist. Item 15 is: *The report provides adequate recommendations*. Post hoc analyses revealed that teachers with 6-15 years of experience rated the report identified as the District report higher ( $M=2.89, SD=.33$ ) than the Contract report ( $M=2.15, SD=.69$ ). It should be noted that both ratings are low. One implication is that while this group of teachers did not feel recommendations were adequate, they tend to be more accepting of recommendations by a psychologist from within the district. Item 18 is: *The report documents how interpretations and conclusions were reached*. Post hoc analyses revealed that the 6-15 year group rated the report identified as the District report higher ( $M=3.22, SD=.44$ ) than the Contract report ( $M=2.54, SD=.88$ ). The 16+ group rated the report identified as the Contract report higher ( $M=3.57, SD=.53$ ) than the District report ( $M=2.73, SD=.79$ ). One implication of these findings is that teachers with 16+ years of experience may have more confidence in the ability of the contract psychologist to document his/her conclusions, while those with 6-15 years of experience are again more accepting of in-school psychological personnel.

### Mean scores

The mean ( $M$ ) and standard deviation ( $SD$ ) scores for each item, ranked in order from highest to lowest, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Rank order of items by mean score

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
5. The data contributes to understanding of the child.	3.24	.64
2. The diagnostic conclusions in the report are supported by the data.	3.21	.63
1. The author of the report is qualified to write the report.	3.11	.74
22. Rate the overall quality of the report	3.08	.79
16. The information in the report is credible.	3.05	.63
21. The report is well written.	2.98	.79
12. The recommendations are realistic.	2.94	.64
17. The conclusions in the report are clear.	2.94	.80
6. The report is free from contradictions and inconsistencies.	2.92	.70
11. The report is clear and easy to understand.	2.92	.70
19. The report describes student characteristics in clear behavioral terms.	2.89	.81
10. The report contains sufficient information.	2.87	.75
23. Rate the overall usefulness of the report.	2.87	.75
18. The report documents how interpretations and conclusions were reached.	2.86	.82
20. To what degree do you agree with the conclusions in the report?	2.84	.68
3. The report provides useful information for the management of behavior.	2.83	.73
4. The report provides useful information to make classroom modifications.	2.83	.73
9. The report provides useful information for designing IEPs.	2.83	.73
14. Issues concerning the referral have been discussed.	2.78	.75
15. The report provides adequate recommendations.	2.65	.65
13. Interpretations of the test results are clear.	2.60	.87
8. The report provides useful information for parents.	2.49	.69
7. The report avoids the use of excessive technical language.	2.41	.85

Based on the mean for each item, those items receiving the highest ratings indicated that the report was credible, contributed to understanding of the child, and that the diagnostic conclusions were supported by data. In general, the teachers indicated that the author was qualified and that the report was of high quality. The items receiving the lowest ratings indicated that the report used excessive technical language, did not provide clear information for parents, and did not provide a clear interpretation of test results. The teachers also felt that issues concerning the referral were not thoroughly discussed and that recommendations were not completely adequate.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the degree to which report authorship would result in differential teacher perceptions of report quality. Of the 23 variables rated, there was only one main effect for authorship which indicated that teachers rated the District report higher than the Contract report regarding its clarity and understanding. Thus, in general, there were no major differences in the ratings of teachers based on whether the report was authored by a psychologist employed within the district or a private practice psychologist contracted by the district to perform the evaluation. Item 22, which was a specific item regarding the overall quality of the report did not yield a significant main effect ( $M_{\text{District}} = 3.16$ ,  $SD = .67$ ;  $M_{\text{Contract}} = 3.0$ ,  $SD = .89$ ). The perception that school personnel may place more credibility on a report written by a district psychologist as compared to a private practice contractual psychologist was not supported in this investigation, and one plausible reason for this is the overall evaluation of the report being of high quality.

There were no significant effects obtained by grade level taught. However, this may be due to the use of a limited grade level sample. In this study, only three elementary grades (third, fourth, and fifth) were represented. Future studies may wish to investigate whether teachers in elementary, junior high, or senior high schools rate psychological reports differently.

The one variable that did covary with Form is Years of Teaching. In general, teachers within the 6-15 year range rated the report identified as the District report significantly higher on a few items. These items related to using the report to design IEPs, providing adequate recommendations, and documenting how interpretations and conclusions were reached. Visual inspection of the means indicated that for all items this 6-15 years experience group of teachers rated the district report higher. Teachers within this experience level may rely more heavily on information in a psychological report for educational planning, and are in general more receptive to this information when it is given by a within-district school psychologist. Another consideration for interpretation is that in order to have more equal numbers between the three teaching groups, the middle group (6-15) may be a bit broad. Future investigations using years of teaching as a variable may wish to have narrower ranges (i.e., 0-5, 6-10, 11-15, etc.).

The mean scores for the items indicate that the report was rated more negatively (i.e., lower) in the areas of providing adequate recommendations and avoiding the use of technical language. These two areas have been identified in previous investigations as important contributors to perceptions of psychological reports. While teachers may rate a report high in quality regarding its ability to establish eligibility, the report may still be rated poorly in its utility. School psychologists should strive to produce reports which are equally effective in serving both purposes.

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