Parent Perspectives on Psychological Evaluation Reports: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

This study presents a secondary analysis of qualitative data from Hite (2017), examining parent perspectives on psychological evaluation reports. Thirty-eight parents reviewed paired reports about fictional children—one traditional, one consumer-focused—and provided written comments. Thematic analysis was conducted on 52 comments (some parents commented on both reports). Traditional reports used technical language and test-by-test organization, while consumer-focused reports employed plain language and theme-based integration. A descriptive, semantic thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework identified four themes. For traditional reports, the key themes were *difficult to understand* and *disempowering*. For consumer-focused reports, themes included *accessible language* and *helpful organization and content*. Furthermore, parents often described traditional reports as creating barriers to understanding and participation, while in contrast, consumer-focused reports enabled comprehension and engagement. These findings reveal how parents experience different report formats and how report content can either hinder or enable parent participation in educational decision-making. Combined with decades of research on psychological reports, this analysis has direct implications for school psychology training and practice: replace test-by-test organization and technical jargon with theme-based reports in plain language to better serve children and families.

Keywords: psychological assessment, psychoeducational assessment, psychological reports, psychoeducational reports, school psychology, special education, health literacy

Introduction

National surveys indicate that school psychologists spend considerable time on assessment-related tasks, including report writing (Farmer et al., 2021). Federal mandates (IDEA, 2004) require meaningful parent participation in special education processes and specify that written information, including reports, must be accessible. Nationally, about one in five U.S. adults scores at the lowest literacy levels on the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, making it extremely difficult to read technical texts (Keiper & Rampey, 2024). Research indicates that most traditional psychological reports require college-level reading ability (Harvey, 1997, 2006). The mismatch between mandates for clear language, general population reading skills, and report complexity creates significant obstacles.

Health literacy theory provides a framework for understanding these accessibility challenges in psychological reports. Ratzan and Parker (2000) defined health literacy as "the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions" (p. vi). In educational settings, inaccessible reports prevent parents from understanding their children's needs and advocating effectively, as health literacy theory suggests. When reports use extensive jargon, complex sentence structures, and unfamiliar organizational schemes, parents cannot participate as informed decision-makers (Harry et al., 1995).

Recent experimental work shows that specific writing strategies improve comprehension and readability. Bejnö et al. (2025) found that student teachers rated theme-based, plain-language reports as significantly more readable than traditional formats. Kerwer et al. (2021) conducted two large-scale randomized experiments, finding that replacing technical terms with everyday language improved comprehension more than adding definitions in psychology research summaries.

Evidence increasingly supports accessible report writing, yet many school psychologists still use traditional test-focused formats, and graduate students continue to struggle with report writing (Eriksen & Cormier, 2025; Harvey, 2006). Recent research also demonstrates that consumer complaints about psychologist reports focus on comprehensibility problems (Hale & Brown-Chidsey, 2023; King et al., 2023; Umaña et al., 2020). Hale and Brown-Chidsey (2023) surveyed 349 teachers and administrators and concluded that only one third read psychological reports in their entirety, with reports criticized as too long and difficult to understand. King et al. (2023) identified a disconnect between school psychologists and teachers, noting that reports were perceived as too long, filled with jargon, and containing vague recommendations that teachers struggled to implement.

Teacher perspectives also reveal broader systemic challenges. Lindelauf et al. (2018) found that Australian teachers valued psychoeducational reports when they were accessible and relevant to classroom practice. Similarly, in an experiment with elementary teachers, Pelco et al. (2009) found that theme-organized, lower-reading-level reports received higher ratings than measure-by-measure formats for understanding students and developing interventions.Szulevicz and Arnfred (2024) analyzed recommendations across multiple reports and found evidence of generic, recycled language as well as declining perceived utility.

Parent perspectives on report accessibility remain understudied despite parents' central role as educational decision-makers. Weddig (1984) found that parents struggled to understand and apply information from psychological reports, even those with high levels of education. Rahill (2018) documented both parent and teacher dissatisfaction with test-focused reports that prioritized psychometric data over child understanding and practical guidance.The present secondary analysis extends Hite's (2017) preliminary qualitative findings by consolidating

overlapping categories and clarifying themes through systematic coding and independent peer review.

Method

Design and Theoretical Framework

Parents reviewed paired psychological evaluation reports as part of a larger experimental study (Hite, 2017). The current secondary analysis examines parents' written feedback that was provided in the earlier study. A descriptive, semantic thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide and a codebook approach was used. This approach is appropriate for brief open-ended survey comments and enabled the researcher to identify patterns across the dataset..

Coding was primarily deductive—distinguishing responses to traditional versus consumer-focused reports—with additional inductive codes developed from the data. Semantic coding focused on explicit meanings in participants' written feedback.

Participants

The 38 parents who provided written comments for this analysis were drawn from the larger sample of 153 participants who completed the study. Nearly all had previously obtained a psychological or psychoeducational evaluation for their child. Of the 37 who responded to the school-dispute item, 21 reported significant disputes with schools, including recurrent disagreements, formal complaints, or due process hearings.

Educational attainment in the sample was high: 20 participants held advanced degrees, 10 held four-year college degrees, 5 held two-year or technical degrees, 2 held high school diplomas or GEDs, and 1 reported less than high school education. In total, 30 of 38 participants held a bachelor's degree or higher.

The sample was predominantly White American (n = 32), with smaller representation from Asian (n = 2), Black or African American (n = 1), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (n = 1), and Latino/Latina (n = 1) backgrounds.

Materials

Participants reviewed two psychological evaluation reports describing fictional fifth-grade students, one written in a traditional format and one in a consumer-focused format. Both reports were 5–7 pages long and described children with specific learning disabilities and ADHD, both commonly encountered in school settings. Each pair of reports contained identical assessment findings.

Traditional reports (T1 and T2) incorporated features commonly found in practice. These included test-by-test organization, extensive technical terminology without definitions, detailed score presentations with percentiles and confidence intervals, complex sentence structures, and passive voice construction. These reports required college-level to graduate-level reading ability and were classified as "very difficult."

Consumer-focused reports (C1 and C2) contained research-based improvements following Mastoras et al.'s (2011) C.L.E.A.R. framework. Features included theme-based organization integrating findings across measures, plain language with parenthetical definitions for necessary technical terms, behavioral descriptions emphasizing functional implications, active voice and shorter sentences, and summary tables with recommendations prominently placed. Readability metrics placed these consumer-focused reports at a middle-school reading level, classified as "fairly easy." These versions relocated detailed test scores to an appendix, prioritizing narrative interpretation in the main body.

Parent Report Evaluation Scale (PRES)

The PRES is a 12-item measure developed for the larger study. It incorporates items adapted from Pelco et al. (2009). Ten items use 7-point Likert scales assessing the constructs of understanding and utility. Item 11 uses checkboxes to identify helpful report sections. Item 12 provides an open-ended prompt: "Please offer any additional comments about this report, including what was helpful or what would have been helpful." Responses to this final item constitute the data for the present analysis.

Procedure

Data collection occurred through the Qualtrics online survey platform. After providing informed consent and completing demographic questions, participants (N = 249) were randomly assigned to read one pair of reports (T1/C1 or T2/C2) in counterbalanced order. Participants could view both reports while completing the PRES for each. The median completion time was 35 minutes. The study received IRB approval from William James College (Protocol #2017-042). No compensation was provided. From the 249 participants who initiated the study, 153 completed it. Of these, 38 provided qualitative comments analyzed here.

Coding Framework

Initial coding categories were established based on the PRES evaluation dimensions (understanding and utility) and report type (traditional vs. consumer-focused). The author added inductive codes as new patterns emerged from the data.

Researcher Positionality

The author developed the sample reports used in this study and works as a school psychologist writing psychological reports. This dual role provided relevant insider knowledge but also potential bias toward consumer-focused approaches. Throughout the analysis, the author maintained awareness of how professional identity as a report writer might influence interpretation, with particular attention to parent critiques and suggestions for improvement of consumer-focused formats.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis in a descriptive, semantic mode with a codebook approach. Comments were analyzed by report type (traditional: 33; consumer-focused: 19) to identify patterns within each type and differences between them.

Phase 1: Familiarization. The dataset was read and re-read, with notes on emotional tone, salient features, and differences by report type.

Phase 2: Coding. Line-by-line semantic coding captured what parents explicitly stated (e.g., jargon barriers, emotional reactions, practical utility, organizational preferences). A working codebook documented labels, definitions, and criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

Phase 3: Theme development. Related codes were grouped into candidate themes. Given the brevity of responses, themes were presented as descriptive summaries of recurrent topics.

Phase 4: Theme review and consolidation. Candidate themes were checked against coded extracts and the full dataset for coherence and distinctiveness. Overlapping or underdeveloped themes were merged or removed to improve clarity. Negative cases and exceptions were noted.

Phase 5: Definition and naming. Final themes received concise labels and scope statements, and exemplar quotations were selected to illustrate typical and divergent cases.

Phase 6: Report production. Themes were organized into a comparative narrative (traditional vs. consumer-focused) supported by illustrative quotations.

Rigor and transparency. Decisions were documented in an audit trail to support traceability. A psychologist with school and clinically based experiences independently reviewed the coding scheme and theme structure. Multiple rounds of discussion between the author and reviewer led to consolidation and refinement of themes, with discrepancies resolved through return to raw data as needed, consistent with recommended trustworthiness practices in thematic analysis.

Results

Analysis of 33 comments on traditional reports identified two themes: (1) *difficult to understand* and (2) *disempowering*. Analysis of 19 comments on consumer-focused reports yielded two themes: (1) *accessible language* and (2) *helpful organization and content*. Theme prevalence is reported as counts and percentages; individual comments could contribute to multiple themes.

Table 1. Traditional Report Themes (n = 33 comments)

Theme	n (%)	Representative Quotes
Difficult to understand	13 (39%)	"The section with the test results was nearly impossible to make sense of. I had no idea, even with reading the descriptions of the testing what was actually being measured, and how." ; "I completed four years in a doctoral program in ed psych. I have received many reports like this for my son. They are hard for me to understand. They give me very little concrete information about what my son needs. They tend to give a vague diagnosis, but no practical help. I cannot imagine what parents with a high school degree do with such information." ; "This report is almost unreadable by a layperson unfamiliar with the terminology, and is a challenge even to those who have some familiarity with it. I found that the report took much longer to read and was bogged down by the detail which, had it been written in plainer language, would have been extremely helpful." ; "I had a difficult time comprehending the breakdown of tests, scores, index. The scientific type Jargon followed by different percentages seems clumped together. I felt overwhelmed when reading it and was unsure what things meant."
Disempowering	7 (21%)	"Just more of taking away my voice no power to be there for my boy." ; "Second report made me feel extremely uncomfortable, confused and anxious. I did not understand many of the terms used and gave up reading. Seemed like a snooty psychologist wrote it trying to intimidate the reader." ; "This report was a cold, clinical examination of Ruth's educational concerns. I really got the impression that the evaluator had taken Ruth and compared her as a student on a global stage. I as the parent, advocate, mediator or lawyer needs to envision Ruth in the classroom and get as close to

her and the problem as possible." ; "This report is more about the tests than the child." ; "All I ever get from school."

These themes capture both what parents couldn't understand and how that made them feel. The *difficult to understand* theme reflected explicit statements about comprehension challenges. Even parents with advanced degrees described reports as "almost unreadable" and "overwhelming." Technical terminology and score presentations created barriers that left parents uncertain about what the numbers meant and what their children needed. Comments coded as *disempowering* reflected emotional reactions—feelings of being excluded, diminished, or distanced from their child's evaluation. Some parents characterized the reports as "cold" and "clinical," saying they prioritized test data over understanding the child as a learner. These themes often co-occurred.

Table 2. Consumer-Focused Report Themes (n = 19 comments)

Theme	n (%)	Representative Quotes
Accessible language	10 (53%)	"I love this report. Examples are clear and easy to understand. There is way less information to decode. I believe this report would be less intimidating for parents." ; "This one was much more straight-forward – what a relief after slogging through the other one!" ; "This report is the most 'plain language' one I have seen in 12 years of reading my own child's and many other children's eval reports." ; "So much easier to understand. Layman's term" ; "Easier to read and understand for all parents. This version is shorter and uses language parents can understand and explains test results in laymans terms"
Helpful organization and content	9 (47%)	"The first option you provided looked exactly like the report I received. The 2nd option was significantly better for numerous reasons. Topics were categorized in a reasonable way. By breaking up the topics into categories it was much easier to follow." ; "This was a informative report. It expanded on what accommodations would help. Like the talking book. It explained what tests and what the scores reflected clearly. It puts the child back into the report. Where the other report made her sound more like a number/percentage." ; "I liked that all the test scores were grouped together at the end. They were there for support or referral but didn't feel confusing. I did appreciate having the data available. I felt the text was shorter and spoke to a common parent not a professional to another professional" ; "It was helpful to include the testing at the end of this one- I got completely bogged

down in trying to understand that in the middle of the other one, when the numbers themselves were not as important."

Parents' comments about consumer-focused reports emphasized different themes. Instead of describing barriers, parents identified specific features that helped them and expressed relief. These features included: plain language using "layman's terms," categorical organization that made information easy to find, and placement of technical data at the end rather than embedded throughout. Parents explained that these features enabled them to understand the information and apply it to educational decisions. Some noted that the reports felt written for parents rather than for communication between professionals. The *helpful organization and content* theme included frequent mentions of specific structural elements and thematic categorization that made reports easier to follow.

Discussion

As health literacy theory suggests, when information demands exceed individual capacities, this reflects poor information design, not limited individual ability. Applied to psychological reports, technical writing prevents parents from understanding their children's needs regardless of education level.

Accessible reports reduce cognitive burden, allowing parents to focus on children's needs rather than decoding terminology. Parents described feeling relief when reading consumer-focused reports after finding traditional reports difficult to understand.

Several parents noted that traditional reports reduced children to numbers and percentages. Consumer-focused reports, in contrast, "put the child back into the report." Even organizational choices can humanize or dehumanize. Theme-based organization integrates findings around functional areas and retains a whole-child focus. Other comments praised features such as placing scores in appendices, enabling parents to find actionable information rather than search through pages of technical data. Parents' observations suggest that report format does more than aid comprehension. It shapes how parents understand their child. When parents cannot construct a coherent picture of their child from fragmented test data, this compromises their ability to advocate for appropriate services.

Practice implications. School psychologists can implement accessible report writing immediately by following evidence-based writing principles. Research demonstrates that five writing rules substantially improve report readability: (1) write at a middle school reading level, (2) replace technical jargon with plain language or provide definitions, (3) organize content thematically rather than test-by-test, (4) use concrete behavioral examples, and (5) place detailed scores in appendices.

Systemic changes are also needed. Graduate programs should teach consumer-focused methods from the start and require readability checks on all assessment reports. Programs should also build parent-feedback opportunities into assessment courses. Communication skills are as important as assessment competence, yet research suggests such training is not widespread (Eriksen & Cormier, 2025; Harvey, 2006). Together, these practitioner actions and systemic changes ensure report writing meets both research standards and IDEA requirements for accessible parent communication.

Limitations

Participants reviewed standardized reports about fictional children rather than their own, which likely reduced emotional reactions and the perceived importance of decisions. Because follow-up interviewing was not possible, outputs are best interpreted as descriptive summaries appropriate for qualitative research. However, comments were brief and optional. Given the brevity of responses, themes described recurrent patterns rather than deep narratives. Systematic coding, category consolidation, and transparent documentation ensured analytical rigor. Recruitment through advocacy-oriented online channels produced a sample that was predominantly White, highly educated, and experienced with school disputes and therefore findings may not generalize to families with different backgrounds or to multilingual contexts.

Future Directions

Future research should examine parent perspectives using methods that allow deeper exploration, such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups. This research needs more diverse samples, such as families from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, multilingual contexts, different disability types, and broader geographic regions. Studies examining how report format affects family-school relationships could also clarify if and how accessible written material shapes partnerships. Future research should also examine the relationship between consumer-focused report and actual parent participation in educational decision-making in practice.

Conclusion

Report format profoundly shaped parent experiences. Parents described how format affected their understanding and their ability to participate meaningfully in educational decisions. Traditional reports created two obstacles: comprehension difficulties and disempowerment. Consumer-focused reports supported engagement through accessible language and thoughtful organization. These findings support training and systems changes that prioritize communication as central to competent school psychology practice. Accessible reports enable parents to participate as informed decision-makers.

Data Availability

De-identified data and the mock report examples (traditional & consumer-focused), along with the author's original doctoral research (Hite, 2017), are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF): https://osf.io/eukh2/

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