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Parents' beliefs about assessment: A conceptual framework and findings from Finnish basic education

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ABSTRACT

The viewpoint of parents has been scarcely studied in classroom assessment research. We address this research gap by examining parents' beliefs about assessment in the context of Finnish basic education (grades 1–9). A socioculturally oriented framework is developed to study the beliefs of parents. With this newly formulated framework, we qualitatively analyse parents' open-ended responses based a large-scale questionnaire study (N = 622). Our findings show that in the low-stakes assessment culture of Finland, parents largely framed assessment through a pedagogical conception that reflects the learning purposes of assessment. A societal conception of assessment was also strongly present, as parents believed that assessment should produce numerical data for the purposes of measurement and comparison. As a major contribution of this study, a six-dimensional conceptual framework for analyzing parents' beliefs about classroom assessment is formulated and tested.

1. Introduction

Learners' and teachers' perceptions, conceptions and beliefs about educational assessment have been studied vastly. However, empirical evidence on parents' perspective of assessment is extremely scarce (Harris, 2015; Harris & Brown, 2016). In this study, we focus on parents' *beliefs* concerning educational assessment. This is noteworthy given the crucial role that parents[1] have in pupils' learning. Parents may pressure teachers to influence their assessment practices (Yan et al., 2021). Parents may push back against assessment policies and implementations by, for example, resisting learner-centred assessment practices, overvaluing numerical data and exams, and undermining formative assessment practices (Harris & Brown, 2016; Ratnam-Lim & Tan, 2015; Yan & Brown, 2021). As Wong and colleagues (2020) note, parents hold political power over assessment. On the other hand, parents may try to guard their children from the negative effects of assessment (see Currin, Schroeder, & McCardle, 2019 for a nuanced discussion on opting out of high-stakes testing). Yet, in assessment, parents are non-professionals. They do not have a formal pedagogical education as teachers do (Poskitt, 2018), and "their beliefs about assessment are arguably confined to what they themselves have experienced when they were students" (Wong, Kwek, & Tan, 2020, 451). However, simultaneously, parents are also experts in their children's education because they know the pupils in ways that teachers do not.

To foster sustainable collaboration between parents and schools, it is crucial to understand parents' beliefs concerning assessment. Parents' perceptions and beliefs about large-scale assessment systems have been studied before (Currin et al., 2019; Freeman, Mathison, & Wilcox, 2006; Mu & Childs, 2005; see Wong et al., 2020 and Yan & Brown, 2021 for policy perspectives), but less emphasis has been given to parents' perspectives on summative and formative classroom assessment (Adie, Addison, & Lingard, 2021). Studies concerning teachers' and other stakeholders' perspectives have started to note the influence of parents on assessment (e.g., Hopster-den Otter, Wools, Eggen, & Veldkamp, 2017). For example, Yan and colleagues (2021) examined the factors influencing teachers' intentions to use formative assessment and implied that parents might indeed have a role in influencing teachers. However, empirical evidence about parents' views concerning classroom assessment is still scarce. A recent review identified a few studies on parents' views on classroom assessment (Harris, 2015). In Hong Kong, Cheng and colleagues (2011) examined parents' education level and time spent with their children in relation to Assessment for Learning (AfL). Ratnam-Lim and Tan (2015) studied parents' perceptions of AfL in Singapore, showing that parents both appreciated lower-stakes

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[1] For the sake of clarity, in this article we refer to 'parents' when discussing all caretakers/guardians who make decisions regarding pupils' education.

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assessment and understood the backwash effect of the high-stakes assessment culture. Kirton and colleagues (2007) studied Scottish primary schools' adoption of formative assessment practices and noted that parents became more cooperative in such an initiative. Finally, more recently, Adie and colleagues (2021) noted that as assessment practices were developed within the whole school community, parents' conceptions of assessment changed towards the ideals of 'Assessment for Learning'. In summary, while some empirical studies on parents have concerned classroom assessment, the literature on the topic is limited. This holds true especially in cultural contexts without high-stakes assessment systems. Arguably, parents' beliefs regarding assessment might differ in low-stakes assessment cultures with more room for Assessment for Learning practices.

To address the research gap concerning empirical research on parents' perspectives on classroom assessment, especially in low-stakes assessment cultures, this study introduces an analysis of Finnish parents' beliefs regarding assessment. The study is based on a national questionnaire that mapped out parents' beliefs (N = 622) with three open-ended questions. Finish basic education offers a fruitful context for the study as there is no high-stakes testing, and classroom assessment is supported by flexible national guidelines accompanied with high teacher autonomy. By focusing on parents' beliefs, we theorise parents' perspectives on assessment within the socio-cultural and -historical contexts in which such beliefs arise. Importantly, we develop Remesal's (2011) sociocultural framework for analysing teacher beliefs about assessment to suit the parent perspective. Formulating this framework is a major contribution for our study, given that while recent empirical studies have started to note the crucial role of parents' perspectives in educational assessment (e.g., Adie et al., 2021), careful conceptualisation of such perspectives is lacking from earlier literature. Furthermore, we supplement earlier studies on early (Lim-Ratnam, 2013; Markström, 2011) and primary education (Kirton, Hallam, Peffers, Robertson, & Stobart, 2007) by analysing the beliefs of the parents of pupils from both a lower (grade 6) and higher (grade 9) level of basic education.

1.1. Parents and educational partnership

Before introducing our analytical framework for parents' beliefs about assessment, we discuss how sustainable partnerships between homes and schools have been conceptualised and studied in earlier research. Overall, it has been noted that teachers and parents need to establish congruence regarding their expectations of children's well-being, development and learning (O'Connor & Daniello, 2019), as parents are indeed part of the whole school community (Adie et al., 2021). Two-way communication is necessary for such partnership, requiring constant interaction to know each other's varying responsibilities and to establish shared views (Atjonen, 2014). Sustainable partnership in assessment must benefit both sides of cooperation and cannot be dominated by either teachers or parents. Although final assessment decisions are made by pedagogical experts, there must be room for respectful discussion and negotiation (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

Reschly and Christenson (2012, p. 67) illustrate a paradox: in order to improve the educational outcomes for students, particular attention must be paid to the actions of the adults most close to students, i.e. teachers and parents. Adults are the key agents in establishing the environment and resources for pupils' learning. School-initiated contacts with families are critical for collaboration (Reschly & Christenson, 2012) as parents may be hesitant to touch upon assessment because it is mainly in the hands of teachers (Sivenbring, 2016). As Cox-Petersen (2011) shows, parents may feel that they are intruding if they ask for clarification. Simultaneously, teachers may think that parents are not doing their share. This might result from insufficient training of teachers in how to collaboratively foster educational partnerships with parents (Poskitt, 2018).

Parents' beliefs about assessment foreshadow educational partnerships: developing assessment cultures towards the ideals of AfL requires us to see parents as important colleagues in the quest (Adie et al., 2021). Based on the review of the evidence regarding parents' involvement in children's schooling by Pomerantz and Moorman (2010), the most efficient contribution is made at home as parents support pupils' academic orientation in motivational beliefs, engagement, and performance. Similarly, Cheung and Pomerantz (2012) noted that the more involved parents were in children's learning, the more motivated children were to learn. However, parental involvement in assessment is not always constructive. Parents might become too critical and controlling, especially in exam-driven assessment cultures (Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010; Yan & Brown, 2021). In order to understand and develop parents' positive involvement in educational assessment, there is a need to understand the beliefs they hold about assessment (Adie et al., 2021).

2. Parents' beliefs and conceptions of assessment

Based on an ecological approach, Harris (2015) focused on parents' contradictory beliefs about assessment: parents may wish for assessment to support their child's learning while, at the same time, wishing for more tests and grades. Parents often draw on 'intuitive test theories' (Harris & Brown, 2016), lacking resources to differentiate between different forms and purposes of assessment, leading to overvaluation of 'objectivity'. To prevent the harmful effects of such intuitive test theories, Harris and Brown recommended that parents should be educated to understand assessment through "robust grounds rather than on simplistic intuitions" (Harris & Brown, 2016, p. 65). In the exam-driven context of Singapore, Wong and colleagues (2020) introduced the concept of *parent assessment literacy* as they discussed how promoting such literacy might prevent parents' profound misconceptions about summative and formative assessment: "Parent assessment literacy can also support teachers' efforts to promote student learning in a more holistic manner, beyond the narrow focus on assessment results" (p. 451). Adie and colleagues (2021) noted that by developing learner-centred assessment practices, it is possible to change parents' conceptions of learning and assessment; yet what is lacking from earlier literature is a careful conceptualisation of such beliefs and conceptions.

Foundational aspects of this study originate from Remesal (2011), who refers to Green's (1971) seminal model to define *beliefs* as a set of single and concrete assertions about the perceived reality, without having to constitute 'objective truth'. Following this model, beliefs form broader organised systems, namely *conceptions*, which may present different degrees of internal (in)coherence, centredness, and resistance to change. In contrast with other models of conceptions, for example Brown's (2011) which treats beliefs and conceptions as quasi interchangeable concepts, this proposal promotes a hierarchical conceptual relationship between beliefs and conceptions. Remesal's (2011) theoretical framework of teachers' beliefs and conceptions of assessment organises teachers' beliefs into a two-pole multidimensional scheme, which eventually captures two main conceptions: the pedagogical-regulation conception (aligned with Assessment *for* Learning; AfL) and the societal-accreditation conception (aligned with Assessment *of* Learning; AoL). It should be noted that these two poles do not represent simplistic 'good' or 'bad' views of assessment. While AfL approaches have been emphasised in recent educational research, valuing the pedagogical formative function of assessment, an overemphasis on AoL is often criticised as something to discard and avoid. However, in this model, AoL, that is, the summative-accreditation function of assessment, is considered as a crucial part of any educational system. For example, no matter how much teachers want to emphasise AfL, the schools are always accountable in front of parents and society, and assessment plays an important role in this equation (see Hopster-den Otter et al., 2017; Taras, 2009).

Remesal's bipolar model presents conceptual dimensions gathering beliefs about assessment effects on a) learning, b) teaching, c)

certification of learning, and d) accountability of teaching. Accordingly, beliefs might either complement or contradict each other; this would differ in various sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts where either the pedagogical or the societal-accrediting pole dominates the overall conception of assessment. For example, in Remesal's interview study of teachers, the societal purpose of assessment was overemphasised in secondary schools as compared to primary schools.

Literature on teacher beliefs has highlighted that beliefs about assessment are relatively stable and resistant to change even after professional training programmes (Barnes, Fives, & Dacey, 2015; Graham, 2005). However, it is not impossible to change people's beliefs as "they are subject to influences of the social context in which the individual participates" (Remesal, 2011, p. 474). We share this view in our study about parents' beliefs.

In coherence with the original model, we interpret parents' beliefs and conceptions not only as individual and cognitive attributes, but as context-dependent constructs (Barnes et al., 2015; Fives & Buehl, 2012; Xu & Brown, 2016). Parents have their own experiences of assessment; however, when becoming responsible for their children's education, they enter into a more complex system of relations (Adie et al., 2021). On the one hand, they relate to the teacher as a potential co-educating partner (O'Connor & Daniello, 2019). On the other hand, their

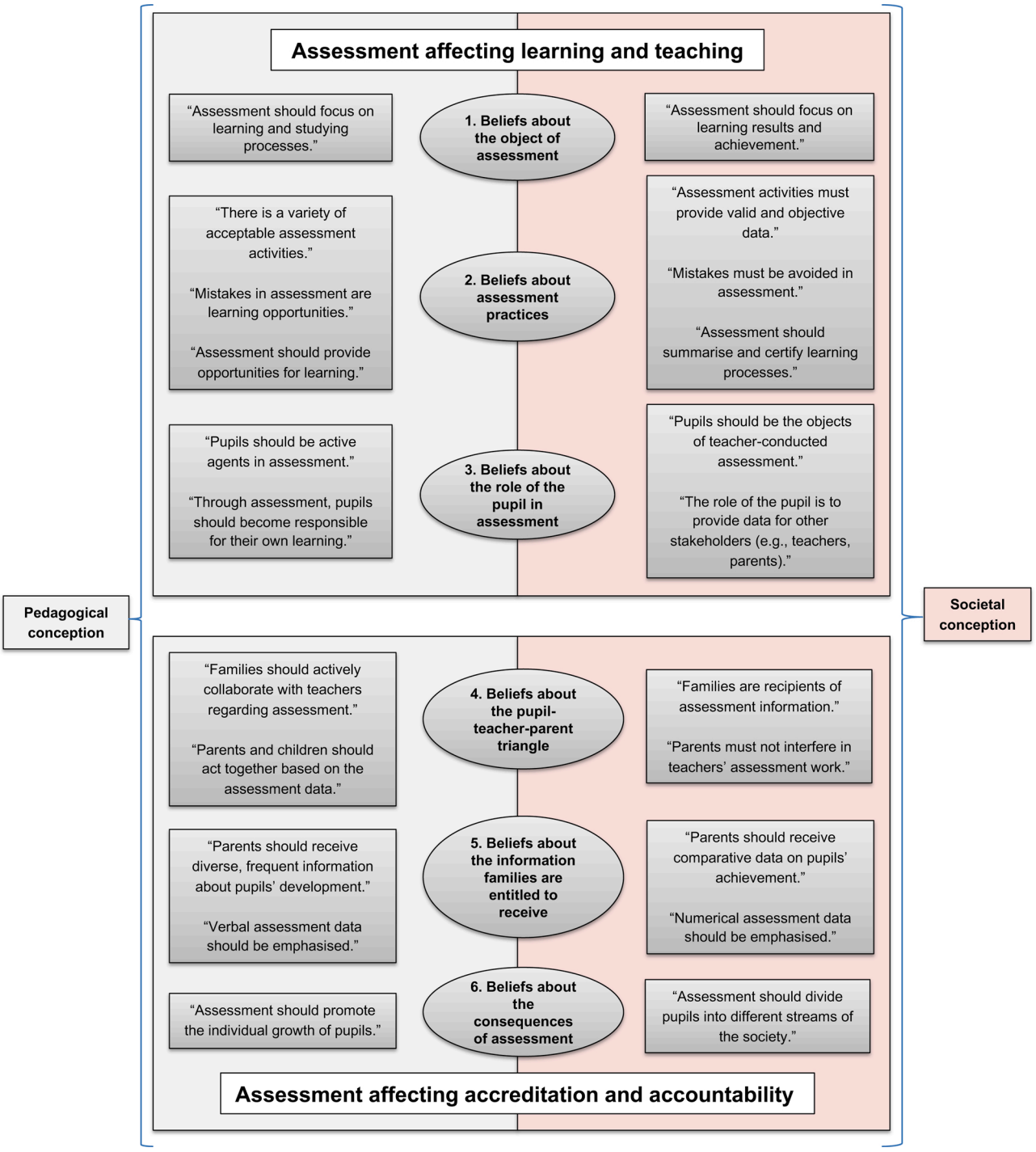

Fig. 1. The proposed analytical framework of parents' beliefs about assessment as a modification of Remesal (2011), with figurative examples provided. See the Findings section for data examples drawn from the dataset of this study.

relationship with their child is transformed as the child develops a new societal role as a 'pupil'. The relationships between teachers, parents and children are not constructed in a vacuum, but in the context of societal expectations, traditions and changes. These socio-cultural and -historical roles and relationships need to be considered while conceptualising parents' beliefs and conceptions of assessment. Consequently, we have adapted the original framework by Remesal (2011). Fig. 1 presents six belief categories of bipolar conceptions (pedagogical to societal). Categories 1, 2 and 3 relate to the original model with respect to the effects of assessment on teaching and on learning processes. Categories 4, 5 and 6 relate to the original model with respect to the certification of learning and accountability of teaching (Fig. 1).

3. Research questions

In this questionnaire study, we empirically identify parents' beliefs about assessment in Finnish basic education (Grades 6 and 9 of comprehensive school, ages 12 and 15).

The research questions were:

RQ1: What beliefs and conceptions do Finnish parents have concerning assessment?

RQ2: Are there differences in conceptions about assessment in relation to children's

- grade,
- parents' educational level,
- and parents' awareness of assessment criteria?

4. Methods

4.1. Generation of data

4.1.1. Context

The data were collected in January–February 2018 in a nationwide project of the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FEEC) that examined views of assessment by principals, teachers, pupils and parents (Atjonen et al., 2019). This was the first time that sample-based large-scale data of parent perspectives on assessment had been gathered in Finland.

In Finland, compulsory schooling lasts for 9 years (7–15 years), including grades 1–9. The decentralised educational system of Finland with the Finnish National Core Curriculum (FNCC, 2014) leaves a considerable amount of autonomy to teachers and local educational authorities to decide on curricula and assessment. There are no high-stakes national exams in basic education. Overall, the assessment culture is largely low-stakes, as pupils' grades have little impact on their later life. Despite this low-stakes culture, the national report by the Atjonen et al. (2019) implied that summative assessment practices (e.g., closed-book exams) still have their strong socio-cultural hold in the Finnish school culture.

The FNCC (2014) obligates schools to establish reciprocal home-school relationships. Schools are asked to inform guardians about their child's progress, studying and behaviour through both summative and formative assessment practices. Parents are consistently encouraged to contact teachers of their children to discuss the assessment, grades and their pupil's progress. Due to considerably unaffected relationships between schools and homes, parents are quite active in constructive discussions.

4.1.2. Questionnaire

The parent questionnaire was designed and led by a team of researchers nominated by the FEEC. The digital questionnaire was kept concise to serve the needs of parents who might not have first-hand experience of assessment. Overall, the questionnaire consisted of six sets of quantitative items, and of three open-ended questions regarding parents' beliefs about assessment. We included the responses for these open-ended questions as our dataset:

Considering your child,

Q1) What do you think is the main purpose of assessment?

Q2) How would you like assessment to be improved in school?

Q3) Finally, I would like to say that… (opportunity for an open statement at the end of the questionnaire)

The background variables for RQ2 were i) school grade of parent's child (either 6th or 9th grade, which are the final grades of lower and upper levels of Finnish basic education), ii) the highest educational level of the parents (separately for two parents, with the maximum of these two coded: higher education, high school, vocational education, basic education), iii) whether the parents had familiarised themselves with assessment criteria (yes/no), and vi) whether the school had informed parents about assessment (yes/no).

4.1.3. Sampling

The data were collected through a multi-stage sampling that started by first sampling randomly from all Finnish- and Swedish-speaking schools of basic education in Finland (grades 1–6, lower level and grades 7–9, higher level). The teachers were then sampled so that they evenly represented six groups of school subjects. In the third phase, the pupils were sampled based on the teachers' discipline. Finally, the parents of these pupils were invited to participate (Atjonen et al., 2019). Given that the evaluation by FEEC holds its mandate in legislation, the response rates for schools were high (75.0–88.5 % depending on the grade). Due to the multi-staged sampling method, no specific data on parent response rate was possible to collect.

4.2. Participants

Overall, the final dataset includes those 622 (61.3 %) of the 1014 parents who replied to at least one of the open-ended questions Q1–Q3. Regarding parents' education, 69 % held a higher education degree, 11 % a high school diploma and 19 % a vocational education qualification. In total, 436 parents (70.1 %) reported having familiarised themselves with the assessment criteria of the school, and 493 (79.3 %) reported that the school had informed parents about assessment.

We sought differences between parents who did not respond to any of these questions and those who responded to at least one of them. The only significant difference between these two groups was parents' educational level: parents with a higher level of education more often replied to the open answers ($\chi^2(3, N = 1014) = 27.20$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .16$). Table 1 summarises the demographic information of the 622 participants.

4.3. Analysis

The analytical process was based on a dialogic, socio-cultural approach. We aimed to produce an adequate interpretation of the dataset using Remesal's model as a reference framework. Therefore, our critical and reflexive evaluation of the analysis process was not based on the traditional understandings of 'validity' and 'reliability' in identifying the only one 'correct answer' from the dataset. Instead, we focused on a strongly qualitative approach that drew on deep meaning-making of the dataset. To ensure our analysis offers an appropriate interpretation of the dataset, the analytical process followed the guidelines of *credibility* (confidence in the 'truth' of the findings), *transferability* (showing that the findings have applicability in other contexts), *dependability* (showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated), and *confirmability* (the findings are not biased by the researchers' motivation or interests) as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). We briefly address three of these guidelines in this section; transferability is addressed as we discuss the findings in their contexts in the Discussion section.

4.3.1. Two phases of analysis

The analysis for RQ1 consisted of two phases. First, a theory-driven

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants.

Gender of child[a]				Grade				Language spoken at home[b]			
Girl		Boy		6th grade		9th grade		Finnish		Swedish	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
296	47.6	322	51.8	312	50.2	310	49.8	536	86.2	78	12.5

a One answer under Other / I would rather not say.
b Two parents reported Sami language, and four were categorised under 'other'.

content analysis was conducted (Schreier, 2012) using the framework of parents' beliefs (Fig. 1). Each parent's responses to the three open-ended questions were read as a unitary whole response. One analysis unit was defined to be an utterance with a single meaning. Often, these units consisted of a sentence or two. A parent's response to all the three questions often comprised two or three analysis units that could be potentially categorised under one or more belief categories. A total of 2107 meaningful units were eventually identified and categorised based on their belief category (1–6). After the general trend of beliefs in the whole dataset was clear, the conception of assessment (pedagogical, social; abbr. PedCon, SocCon) was identified (*credibility*).

The process started with a mutual dialog; three focused data validation sessions were held during the process (*credibility*, *dependability*). At the beginning and middle of the analysis, all three authors jointly discussed unclear parent cases and the shared sociocultural interpretation of the original framework of Remesal (*credibility*, *confirmability*). After the three authors shared an understanding of how to use the coding framework, the first author coded the entire dataset. During the process, the third author, an expert with the original framework, was constantly available for consultation (*confirmability*).

The second phase consisted of an inductive qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to open up the specified subcategories of six main belief categories. The inductive nature of the second phase enabled us to understand the beliefs of the parents after the theory-oriented first phase analysis and thus complemented and enriched the interpretation of the full data set (*credibility*). To offer the readers an opportunity to reinterpret and contest the result of our analysis, we present all the identified themes and their frequencies in the Findings section (*dependability*).

4.3.2. Three parent cases to illustrate our interpretation

Here, we examine the analytical process for three parent cases to illustrate the analytical process (*credibility*, *dependability*, *confirmability*). The first represents a rather strongly societal conception of assessment; the second is mixed; and the third introduces a parent with a strong pedagogical conception of assessment. In the data excerpts, BC refers to belief categories (Fig. 1).

'Encouragement' and 'realism' were largely seen as crucial factors of assessment (see Findings, Table 3). However, a paradox was often seen in parents' societal conception: How could numerical data foster encouragement if the pupil's skills and abilities are *realistically low*? This tension was reflected in the responses by ID249, that were categorised mostly under the societal conception as follows:

Case 1 (ID249)

Q1: To track your own learning and development. (BC1, BC3, PedCon) Numerical assessment is clearer to the child than verbal (BC2, SocCon) and our child would have liked an assessment report before Christmas as well, which shows how the semester went (BC5, SocCon).
Q2: Numerical assessment reports should be returned to be used in school [implying that currently, numerical assessment is not used in the school]. They provide much clearer feedback on the past academic year. (BC5, SocCon)

Another tension identified throughout the dataset was between individualised, verbal assessment and numerical data. Parents largely wanted assessment to inform them about their child's individual strengths and to guide them individually, reflecting the pedagogical conception of assessment (see Tables 4 and 5). However, often the parents drew simultaneously on the societal conception of assessment. To illustrate our analysis of such a tension, we offer the case of ID306, who referred to their 'old-fashioned' (as put ID306 it) beliefs about how assessment should be a numerical data collection process. ID306 wanted assessment to consider their child's attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) individually (PedCon), and believed that the way to produce such assessment was through the use of more numerical and comparable assessment data (SocCon).

Case 2 (ID306)

Q1: Assessment of a special child (ADHD) should consider the child's own condition. (BC1, PedCon) […] The knowledge that you have progressed in your studies, even if the grade might not tell you so, is a good thing. (BC2, BC5, PedCon) As an old-fashioned parent, I do like rating in numbers, so I can compare grades between siblings. (BC1, BC5, SocCon)
Q2: The starting point should be the individual's learning/progress in written assessment. (BC1, PedCon) Numerical assessment should also be included, as numbers show exactly how well the pupil knows the required level of the subject. (BC1, BC5, SocCon)
Q3: Assessment needs to be clear and, in that sense, numbers need to be kept involved in assessment. They prove the real level of learning. (BC1, BC5, SocCon)

The beliefs of our third parent case were coded solely under the pedagogical conception of assessment. ID103 discussed the dialogic and versatile nature of assessment that AfL promotes. ID103 noted that assessment should offer pupils more diverse ways to demonstrate their competence:

Case 3 (ID103)

Q1: The child learns to recognise their strengths and areas for development and learns to further develop them. (BC1, BC3, PedCon) Assessment guides the child's perception of themselves, their skills and abilities, and encourages them to move forward. (BC1, BC3, PedCon)
Q2: More diverse ways of demonstrating competence should be available. If something is assessed as good, or otherwise, the pupil should be able to understand what that means in practice. (BC2, BC5, PedCon)
Q3: Informal and in-process assessment should have a clearer place as part of assessment. Assessment is intended to be a learning situation and a guiding element. I have always found it strange that guidance (i.e. assessment/grade/etc.) is given only when the process is over, as is often the case today (e.g. a test number at the end of a course does not guide learning in that course at all). (BC2, BC5, PedCon)

5. Findings

RQ1 is answered by i) introducing the general overview of the theory-driven content analysis and ii) introducing the findings of the

thematic analyses. Furthermore, we iii) introduce three cases from the dataset to illustrate the seemingly contradictory nature of parents' beliefs. RQ2 is answered through iv) Chi square testing of how the conceptions were distributed in terms of the background variables.

5.1. General overview: findings from the content analysis

In total, 1458 analysis units were coded under the pedagogical conception and 649 under the societal conception (Fig. 2). 'Assessment practices' was the most common belief category.

5.2. Examining the belief categories: findings from the thematic analysis

Parents' beliefs about the object of assessment (Table 2) almost exclusively concerned assessment of pupils. Classroom assessment was largely seen as a process in which the pupil was the object of assessment practices.

What differentiates the pedagogical and societal conceptions was the final target of assessment – whether it concerned pupils' fluid and dynamic features, such as metacognition, strengths and development (PedCon), or whether assessment was targeted at pupils' final learning results or states (SocCon).

Only a few examples were identified where parents called for assessment of objects other than pupils. For example, 12 parents wished that teachers' "competence as a teacher" (as put by ID295) would also be assessed. This idea was promoted by ID220:

> What should be assessed is teachers' assessment literacy. Not everyone has the same skills as innovative teachers. Some will assess exactly how it has always been done. In other words, teachers' skills should be updated, and at the same time the school community should have common rules, and everyone should hold to these rules. (ID220)

Beliefs about assessment practices was the most commonly identified belief category (Table 3):

For the parents with a largely pedagogical conception of assessment it was important that their child would be considered holistically in assessment. Diverse assessment practices were described to enable such a goal. Such accounts promoted assessment as a socio-emotional process that should foster pupils' encouragement, motivation and inspiration. The societal conception was also represented. 49 parents explicitly called for an assessment culture focused more strongly on grades and exams. Such accounts reflected intuitive test theories (Harris & Brown, 2016) as teacher-conducted exams were discussed through notions of validity and reliability:

> My view may be old-fashioned, but I think there could be more exams, vocabulary check-ups, quizzes and other forms of exams. This way the pupil and the parents would gather data on the development of learning more quickly. Perhaps the children would be inspired to study harder as they would know they are under constant surveillance. (ID46)

The parents largely understood pupils as the object of assessment, as conducted by teachers (Table 4). Strongly connected to the first belief category, the third category highlighted whether the pupil was described as an active agent in their own learning (PedCon) or as a passive receiver of assessment (SocCon):

Even though parents rarely named self-assessment as an assessment practice by using exactly this word (*itsearviointi* in Finnish) (Table 3), they often conceptualised pupils actively in relation to assessment. According to those parents, assessment should teach pupils to recognise their own strengths and weaknesses and to monitor their own performance and their study strategies: "Assessment raises awareness of your own learning and about areas for development." (ID75) Seven parents emphasised that pupils should have an active role in co-designing assessment practices:

> Children are under continuous monitoring by different self-assessments and measurements at school. Based on children's rights and equal treatment, children should be given the right and

Table 2
Parents' beliefs about the object of assessment.

Pedagogical conception (N_{units} = 261)	Societal conception (N_{units} = 109)
The pupil as the object; more specifically, what should be assessed is:	
• metacognitive skills (93) • strengths (81) • development (68) • diversity of pupils (26) • skills and knowledge, rather than factors such as gender (15) • the pupil as a whole (14) • activity and productive struggle (10)	**The pupil as the object**; more specifically, what should be assessed is: • competence (38) • level of ability (34) • learning results (13) • weaknesses (5) • grades (4)
Other objects of assessment:	
• the teacher (12) • pupil groups (1) • the school (1)	

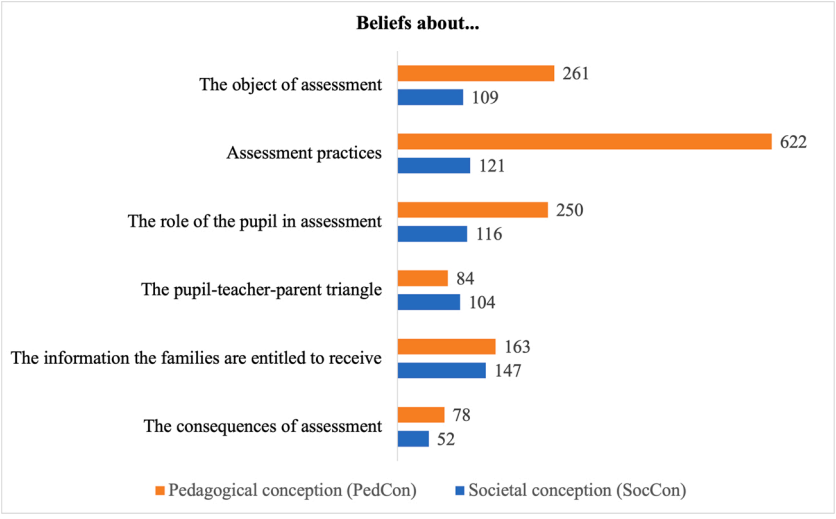

Fig. 2. Overview of the coded units.

Table 3
Parents' beliefs about assessment practices.

Pedagogical conception (N_{units} = 622)	Societal conception (N_{units} = 121)
Assessment and motivation; assessment should be • encouraging (211) • motivating (40) • supportive (14) • inspiring (9) **Assessment and pupil diversity**; assessment practices should • see pupils as individuals (42) • consider pupils' special needs (18) • acknowledge different ways of learning (6) **Assessment should:** • be realistic and/or honest (52) • be fair and/or just (43) • be guiding (23) • reward work well done (7) • teach pupils to learn from their mistakes (4) • have clear assessment criteria (32) • include diverse forms of assessment (22) • challenge the exam-driven assessment culture (21) **Feedback practices**; pupils should receive • positive feedback (39) • constructive feedback (33) • feedback on their development (12) • continuous feedback (15) **Assessment methods** should be diverse: • dialogic assessment (20) • self-assessment (15) • continuous assessment (9) • oral assessment (9) **Metacognitive skills**; assessment should • support learning skills (25) • teach pupils to set objectives (22)	**Assessment as measurement**; assessment should be • valid (44) • comparable (12) • one-dimensional, as diverse assessment methods confuse pupils (3) **Assessment methods** should: • focus more on the importance of grades (49) • focus more on exams (10) • demand more of pupils (4) • only focus on skills and competence and nothing else (4) • foster surveillance (3)

Table 4
Parents' beliefs about the role of the pupil in assessment.

Pedagogical conception (N_{units} = 244)	Societal conception (N_{units} = 116)
Assessment should teach pupils to • recognise their own strengths and weaknesses (101) • track their own development (55) • self-assess their own skills (49) • develop their own study skills (38) • set their own goals (30) • take responsibility for their learning (13) Pupils should have **opportunities to co-design assessment practices** (7)	**Through assessment, pupils receive information about** • their skills and knowledge (83) • what they should do to develop (19) • their weaknesses (4) **In assessment, pupils are** • data collection points (11) • comparable data points (7) • surveilled (3)

obligation to assess teachers' actions as well. […] Teacher education has already taught reflexive, continuous self-development, and continuous reflection should be a part of schoolwork and a part of teachers' lifelong learning. […] It is confusing that even though modern pedagogy aims at student-centred schools, the truth is that the child reacts mostly based on top-down rules and regulations offered by adults, only to please the adults. (ID238)

Instead, the societal conception portrayed pupils as rather passive objects of assessment processes (Table 4). In such processes, pupils' main role was to provide data, often through summative assessment processes: "Assessment should offer realistic information about abilities. It should not be an educational method or a punishment for bad behaviour" (ID562). In such data collection processes, pupils had no active role, as assessment was described to be conducted by experts.

The fourth belief category concerning the pupil-teacher-parent triangle was the only category in which the societal conception dominated the pedagogical conception (Table 5):

Most often, assessment was depicted by the parents as a unilateral process: the teacher collected data on the pupils and then informed the parents. A 15-minute meeting with the teacher once a term (autumn, spring) was considered by many parents to be sufficient. The parents were typically not accustomed to taking part in assessment: "More responsibility could be given to parents. We haven't really been concerned with assessment." (ID395) Many parents thought that the partnership should go beyond information sharing (PedCon) and that parents should be more aware of the purposes and practices of assessment: "Not all parents understand these things. It would be good to open up the mysteries of assessment to parents." (ID266) ID104 discussed the importance of educating teachers about assessment partnership:

> Teachers' readiness to engage in assessment conversations needs to be developed further. In these discussions, it would be good to 'assess' the teacher's work as well. I would compare assessment conversations with the development discussions at workplaces, that are more clearly interactional and develop the relationship in a bidirectional way. (ID104)

Parents' beliefs about the information they are entitled to receive through assessment are listed in Table 6:

Parents' societal conception regarding assessment information revealed a close association between assessment and grades. A total of 114 parents explicitly wanted to only receive numerical data (SocCon). The belief was justified by arguing that numerical data is easy to understand and compare. Interestingly, parents with a largely societal conception of assessment associated numerical assessment data with the assessment of older pupils. This belief was based on the view that verbal assessments are better suited to younger and thus more vulnerable students:

Table 5
Parents' beliefs about the pupil-teacher-parent triangle.

Pedagogical conception (N_{units} = 78)	Societal conception (N_{units} = 101)
High-quality **assessment conversations** should happen between • the parents, the pupil, and the teacher regularly (23) • the parents and the teacher (13) • the parents and the pupil (4) **Parents' responsibilities**; parents should: • be involved in assessment practices (17) • participate in reflection on teacher's assessment practices (12) **Assessment should be a common form** of care between the triangle (5)	**Assessment should offer unilateral information** from the school to the parents (73) • this information should only concern grades (20) **Parents' responsibilities**; parents: • cannot know how assessment is done – they are not the ones going to school (21) • should not be involved in assessment, that is the teacher's job (7) • do not need to be informed about assessments when pupils are achieving well in school (3)

Table 6
Parents' beliefs about the information they are entitled to receive.

Pedagogical conception (N_{units} = 162)	Societal conception (N_{units} = 146)
Parents should receive: • verbal assessment comments only (38) • continuous comments about daily school work (31) • verbal and numerical assessment together (26) • information about assessment criteria (20) • less numerical data (11) • information already during the learning process (7) • understandable and explicit information (5)	**Parents should receive:** • only numerical marks (114) • grades in final reports (24) • less verbal comments than now (23) • numerical data during earlier school years than now (23) • test results (18) • comparative data (10)
Disciplinary differences • no grades from practical and arts subjects are needed (19)	

> It is a bad idea to use only verbal assessment for higher grades in ordinary schools. It might be a good idea in special education. (ID463)
>
> A grade is worth a thousand words to both the child and the adult. (ID36)

At the same time, the majority of the parents strongly believed that verbal comments should be used to foster the development of their child (PedCon). The current assessment cultures were rarely explicitly challenged: only 11 parents believed that there is an urgent need to reduce numerical data in assessment. Interestingly, 19 parents pondered whether expressive arts or practical subjects should be assessed by grades. For example, parents stated that "physical education should motivate children to continue their sport hobbies also in adulthood, and this excitement should not be killed by assessment" (ID27) and "it is useless to offer bad grades that discourage children's willingness to continue doing cooking, crafts, and arts as a hobby, for their own enjoyment" (ID315). Such beliefs entailed that, with the assessment of academic subjects, discouragement, displeasure and amotivation were not issues to be concerned about.

Finally, parents' beliefs about the consequences of assessment are reported in Table 7:

The pedagogical conception was reflected in parents' belief that assessment should foster the personal growth of their child. Lifelong learning was mentioned by many: "We should aim at using more self-assessment and peer-assessment. We should use assessment that fosters the key skills of lifelong learning." (ID93) On the other hand, 52 parents believed assessment should be used as an external motivator:

> I think assessment, grades in practice, is the main motivation for pupils for their schoolwork. It is utopian to think that pupils would become inspired by all subjects, or that the teacher's encouragement would be enough to support pupils. A teenager does not care about the teacher's opinions. But bad grades make one feel ashamed, so one tries to avoid them. (ID115)

Table 7
Parents' beliefs about the consequences of assessment.

Pedagogical conception (N_{units} = 78)	Societal conception (N_{units} = 52)
Assessment should foster • constructive self-image and -efficacy (39) • lifelong learning (30) • internal motivation for studying (9) • the joy of learning (4) • the recognition of special needs (5)	**Assessment should** • foster external motivation for studying (24) • prepare for future studies and working life (15) • enable the division of students based on their abilities (12)

5.3. Comparison of conceptions (RQ2)

We answered RQ2 with Chi square comparisons. To reduce the bias by long responses, we coded each parents' responses to each of the belief categories with a binary coding (yes/no for each combination of a belief category and a conception). A score for each parent's pedagogical and societal conceptions was calculated by summing the number of these codes.

In terms of the *child's grade* (6th and 9th grade), there was no statistically significant difference between the distributions of parents' pedagogical-formative conception of assessment ($\chi^2(6, N = 622) = 10.19, p = .12$) or the societal-summative conception ($\chi^2(6, N = 622) = 11.39, p = .08$). The same held true for *parents' educational degree*, both in terms of pedagogical ($\chi^2(18, N = 622) = 18.91, p = .39$) and societal ($\chi^2(18, N = 622) = 14.00, p = .73$) conceptions.

No difference was found in terms of *whether parents had familiarised themselves with assessment criteria* either in terms of the pedagogical ($\chi^2(6, N = 622) = 8.36, p = .21$) and the societal conception ($\chi^2(6, N = 622) = 8.94, p = .18$). In terms of *whether the school had informed parents about assessment criteria* (yes/no), there was no difference for parents' pedagogical conceptions ($\chi^2(6, N = 622) = 4.06, p = .67$). However, in terms of the societal conception, there was a difference ($\chi^2(6, N = 622) = 21.34, p < .01$) with a moderate effect size (Cramer's V = .19). This finding was confirmed with a *t*-test ($M_{yes} = .80$, $SD_{yes} = 1.18$; $M_{no} = .1.15$, $SD_{no} = 1.40$; $p < .01$).

6. Discussion

In this study, we have examined parents' beliefs about assessment in Finnish basic education through a large-scale questionnaire study. Our study supplements earlier empirical (e.g., Ratnam-Lim & Tan, 2015) and policy-oriented (e.g., Wong et al., 2020; Yan & Brown, 2021) investigations in test-driven assessment contexts, offering much needed empirical evidence on parents' beliefs regarding classroom assessment (Adie et al., 2021; Harris, 2015; Harris & Brown, 2016) with respect to decentralised, low-stakes assessment systems.

According to our findings, the parents largely understood assessment through the pedagogical conception that, overall, aligns with the ideal of Assessment for Learning (Table 1). Such a conception creates a fruitful ground for developing educational partnerships between schools and homes. This finding shows that in a low-stakes context for assessment, such as in Finland, parents might not overvalue numerical data or resist assessment innovations, contrary to what earlier studies in test-driven contexts have suggested (Harris, 2015; Ratnam-Lim & Tan, 2015). Our findings represent not only the assessment culture but the overall school culture of Finland, as no such competitive school and after-school activity markets exist as noted in earlier investigations in Hong Kong and Singapore (Wong et al., 2020; Yan & Brown, 2021). Thus, we are reminded of the socio-cultural and -historical premises for parents' beliefs about assessment.

Beliefs about assessment practices most often represented the pedagogical conception of assessment (Table 5): the pedagogical conception was more common in all but one of the belief categories. However, the societal conception of assessment was still strongly present in our dataset. This is an interesting finding given that Finland offers a low-stakes context without national exams and school inspections. Even then, parents' beliefs often drew on the idea of assessment as a numerical data collection process, guided by the educational purpose of Assessment *of* Learning. What Harris and Brown (2016) characterised as intuitive test theories was evident in the parents' beliefs about pupils as targets of assessment (Table 4) and the pupil's role as that of a measurable object (Table 4). First, our findings imply that such a view,

based on unilateral transmission of numerical information, reveals a contradiction (see Harris, 2015). The case of ID306 offered an example of how, in such a situation, 'old-fashioned' assessment (the word used by ID306) can be seen as the preferred solution for supporting students' well-being. Since parents are non-professionals in assessment, it is not surprising that their beliefs about practical aspects of assessment would not align with their ideals (Poskitt, 2018; Wong et al., 2020). Our findings imply that such occasions do not simply draw on contradicting beliefs, but *conceptions*, since the latter may include beliefs of different degrees of centredness and importance (cf. Green, 1971; Remesal, 2011). Second, we emphasise that the societal conception, as reflected in parents' responses, reflects the overall assessment culture in Finland where an overemphasis on summative assessment practices has been reported despite the low-stakes assessment culture (Atjonen et al., 2019). This finding reminds us about the deep, socio-cultural, -political and -historical roots of educational assessment that need to be considered while analysing individuals' beliefs regarding assessment.

We examined differences between parents' conceptions of assessment in terms of four background variables: i) the grade of the child (6th or 9th grade), ii) the educational background of the parents, iii) whether the parents had familiarised themselves with assessment criteria, and iv) whether the school had informed parents about assessment. The only statistically significant (yet moderate) finding identified was that parents who had not been informed by the school about assessment criteria reported the societal conception of assessment more than parents who had been informed. This finding highlights the importance of school-initiated, educational practices for supporting parents' understanding of assessment (Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010; Reschly & Christenson, 2012), and how such initiatives may even shift parents' beliefs and, then, conceptions (Adie et al., 2021; Harris, 2015). Future research could consider how parents' assessment literacy could be supported in various educational contexts by supporting parent to become aware of their own beliefs and conceptions concerning assessment (see Wong et al., 2020). Importantly, our findings regarding RQ2 showed that in low-stakes assessment contexts where assessment can be aligned with AfL purposes, no clear divisions were formed between parents in terms of the background variables. Instead, parents homogeneously drew mostly on the pedagogical conception.

Earlier research on parent-school partnerships has promoted the importance of collaboration and flexible flow of information (Atjonen, 2014; Kirton et al., 2007) without domination of any of the participants (Cox-Petersen, 2011; Sivenbring, 2016). It has been noted that sustainable development of assessment cultures is based on communal practices between the schools and families (Adie et al., 2021). Our findings revealed that even in the context of Finland, parents' conceptions concerning the pupil-teacher-parent triangle, and the information flow within, were largely societal-oriented (Tables 5, 6). Such beliefs might restrict the formation of sustainable educational partnerships even in contexts without stressful national exams or large educational markets for comprehensive education (Cox-Petersen, 2011). To succeed, educational partnerships need to disrupt the division of different stakeholders in assessment as 'insiders' and 'outsiders'; such a process would require influencing parents' beliefs and conceptions about assessment as a unilateral process (Atjonen, 2014; Poskitt, 2018). As ID104 noted in our study, and as Reschly and Christenson (2012) have emphasised, this requires not only one-sided education of parents (Harris, 2015; Wong et al., 2020) but community-driven practices through educational partnerships. Developing formative assessment or Assessment for Learning requires carefully designed practices that include the whole school community and address the deeper conceptions all stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, parents, policy-makers) have about assessment and learning (Adie et al., 2021). Educational partnership could widen conceptions of assessment beyond the belief that pupils are the sole object of assessment, towards seeing also parents' and teachers' actions as assessable – and thus open to discussion, tracking and development.

In addition to the empirical findings, our major contribution is a theoretical framework for analysing parents' beliefs about assessment (Fig. 1; Remesal, 2011). No earlier framework has been developed for studying parents' beliefs regarding assessment, and we have shown that the framework was suitable for a rigorous qualitative analysis. In an earlier literature review, Harris (2015) called for further understanding of parents' beliefs to help educators to come up with more effective forms of assessment; our model answers this call. Being socioculturally grounded, the framework enabled us to analyse parents' beliefs with their possible contradictions in relation to their sociopolitical contexts. Future research could, of course, test and develop the framework in different contexts. The model is suitable for indirect investigation of parents' beliefs, as was the case in our study. Future interview studies could also utilise the framework by asking parents directly about each of the six dimensions. The model is also of value to action-based research design. Making beliefs visible and explicit might enable reflection and *change* in teachers' beliefs about assessment (Graham, 2005) – the same holds true for parents' beliefs, and further conceptions and assessment literacies.

Our approach has its limitations. While the questionnaire design enabled us to see the 'big picture' of parents' beliefs in Finland, deeper data would be needed to further understand parents' beliefs. Deeper data would also be required to use Remesal's (2011) original continuum of conceptions rather than the simplified bipolar model we utilised for our purposes. The focus on one specific cultural context is an obvious limitation of our study. Future research could utilise comparative approaches to understand parents' beliefs about assessment in various cultural contexts. Also, future studies could widen the repertoire of background variables (e.g., socio-economic status, family size). Finally, we note that our sample was highly educated, and only two participants spoke a language at home other than the language of schooling. Thus, one needs to be careful while transferring our findings and implications to other educational contexts and communities; one should be careful about interpreting our findings to represent 'all parents' even within Finland.

We have offered a snapshot of parents' beliefs based on a national sample in Finland. Reflecting on the contemporary literature on AfL, we suggest that research on school-home partnerships should search for novel approaches. Parent involvement in assessment could reach beyond transmission of information through innovative, digital assessment designs by developing the assessment literacies of all stakeholders. Developing such partnerships requires deep understanding regarding the stakeholders' beliefs and conceptions; thus, more empirical data is needed on parents' perspectives of assessment.

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