



ARTICLE

Conceptions of school assessment: what do Finnish primary school students think of assessment?

Annuroosa Ämmälä, aammala@ulapland.fi
University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

Outi Kyrö-Ämmälä, outi.kyro-ammala@ulapland.fi
University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

Date Available Online: 21st August 2018



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland

To cite this article: ÄMMÄLÄ, A., and KYRÖ-ÄMMÄLÄ, M., (2018). Conceptions of school assessment: what do Finnish primary school students think of assessment? *Education in the North*, **25**(1-2), pp. 275-294.

Conceptions of school assessment: what do Finnish primary school students think of assessment?

Annuroosa Ämmälä, aammala@ulapland.fi
University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

Outi Kyrö-Ämmälä, outi.kyro-ammala@ulapland.fi
University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

Abstract

This article will describe a study that aimed to define Finnish primary students' conceptions of the purpose of school assessments. With the term 'school assessment', we refer to assessments that individual teachers employ as part of their pedagogy in order to evaluate students' learning processes on the basis of curriculum. We applied the phenomenographic method and gathered the data by interviewing 16 students (aged 10–13 years), from two different schools: a municipal primary school and a Steiner school. We analysed the data using a phenomenographic approach and formed vertical description categories.

According to our study, students recognise the learning promoting, declaratory and external functions of assessment, which form the three description categories and the main results. They find that assessment promotes their learning, stating that it makes them commit to learning and that it guides and motivates them. Assessment also seems to have a declaratory purpose: the students expressed that it offers information about their knowledge level not only to them but also to their parents and teachers. The third description category is the external function of assessment, which arose when the students stated that assessment is helpful for their future working lives, to inform their future employers and schools about their skills and knowledge

Key Words: School Assessment; Classroom Evaluation; Students' Conceptions; Purpose of Assessment; Steiner School; Phenomenography

Introduction

Assessment is the teacher's essential pedagogical tool. It is an integral part of schooling as it is seen to be particularly important for development and quality learning (Wintle and Harrison, 1999). Assessment has been an often-discussed topic in Finland since the reform of the Finnish comprehensive school core curriculum in 2014. Finland has a state-run national curriculum system led by the officials of the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), an independent governmental agency. The Finnish core curriculum of basic education acts as the basis of teaching in every school throughout the country. After the reform, this new national core curriculum came into effect in schools in the autumn of 2016.

The new core curriculum of basic education (FNBE 2014) says that the key factors to a school's assessment culture should be, *inter alia*, encouraging atmosphere, interaction, versatility and support for the whole learning process. The assessment during the school year should be mainly formative, encouraging and guiding, and it should develop the students' skills in self-assessment. It is the responsibility of the organiser of the teaching to define precisely how the school's assessment culture is developed and how both the assessment during the students' studies and the final assessment in ninth grade are practically carried out. Salonen-Hakomäki et al. (2016) discovered that the officials working with the curriculum system reform believed that the main goals of the reform were related to the development of the pedagogy and also, therefore, assessment. They expressed the need to develop assessments in schools to be more versatile and interactive.

Though assessment is a part of the primary school system in Finland, there has been relatively little research on students' conceptions of school assessment (Brown and Harris, 2012). In addition, most of these studies have focused on the conceptions of higher-education students. According to Cowie (2009), students have very little influence on how assessment is carried out at school. Kivinen (2003) even states in his dissertation that Finnish students in particular do not feel capable of influencing teacher decisions on assessments or their methods. However, assessment and feedback have a significant impact on the children's self-esteem and perception of themselves. Studying the subjective perceptions of students, the context of learning and the assessments made by teachers can also be considered in terms of how they can better support the learning function of evaluation (Cowie, 2009).

This is a qualitative study conducted using a phenomenographic approach. The main aim was to learn about students' conceptions of school assessment. To generate a comprehensive and versatile picture, 16 students from two types of schools from the Arctic region of Finland were interviewed. Brown (2004) emphasises that, when studying assessment, we should not only consider what is assessed and how but also why. It's important to find out how the students understand the significance and functions of assessment as this helps the teacher to change her/his own assessment methods to promote

learning (Segers and Tillema, 2011). Peterson and Irving (2008) also state that, while adults, such as teachers and politicians, might be aware of the importance of assessment, the question of whether students understand the reason for assessment should be further investigated. In this article, we focus on the *why*: Why, according to students, are assessments conducted in school? The research question is:

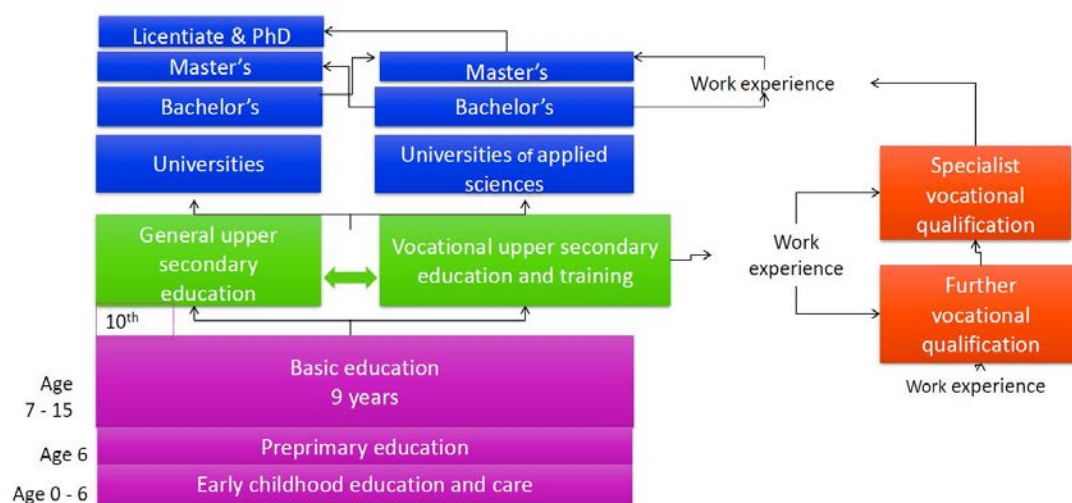
What kind of conceptions of school assessment the primary school students have in two different schools?

Finnish education system

Education is one of the bases of the Finnish welfare society. Finnish educational system offers equal opportunities of education for all citizens, irrespective of matters of residency, sex, economic situation or linguistic and cultural background. It is the main objective of Finnish education policy. Education is provided according to the student's age and capabilities, and in order promote healthy growth and development in the student. (The Basic Education Act, 628/1998.) The Finnish Education system consists of five steps that are described also in figure 1:

1. Early childhood education and care (voluntary)
2. Pre-primary education (1 year, compulsory)
3. Basic education (9 years, compulsory)
4. Upper secondary education, vocational and/or general education (3-4 years)
5. Higher education in universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS)

Figure 1. The structure of Finnish education system (Education in Finland)



The basic education is publically funded, also school materials, school meals, commuting, guidance and consulting as well as health care are provided free of charge. In the education

system, there are no dead-ends preventing progression to higher levels of education. The teachers have pedagogical autonomy. They can decide themselves the teaching methods as well as all materials. Quality assurance of the schools is based on steering and supporting instead of controlling; since the early 1990s there has not been any school inspectors in Finland. The education system relies on the proficiency of teachers and other professionals. The focus in education is on learning rather than testing. There are no national tests for students in basic education. Instead, teachers are responsible for assessment in their respective subjects on the basis of the objectives included in the curriculum. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018.)

In Finland, municipalities provide the most of basic schools, and there are very few private schools. Less than three per cent of each age cohort attend private schools. All Finnish schools, both municipal schools and private schools, are granted the same government funds, and the ministry grants the authorisation for all schools to provide the education. All schools are required to use same admissions standards, the same national core curriculum and to provide similar services. To ensure equality, the government allocates increased central government transfers to municipalities based on special circumstances, and therefore, the schools are relatively identical concerning the students and their backgrounds. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018; Education in Finland). There are e.g. no big demographic or socio-economical differences in households, which students come from. The differences between municipal schools and private schools, including Steiner schools, are related mainly to pedagogy and its practices.

One issue that varies depending the pedagogy is assessment. In municipal schools, assessment is performed in a rather traditional way: by giving grades. In elementary instruction, these are in a written form (e.g. excellent, good), with numeral grades usually coming into the picture after the third grade. In Steiner schools, on the other hand, in elementary instruction, the teacher gives a characteristic statement only to the parents; the children each receive a poem that, in emblematic form, tells them about themselves. After the third grade, the children receive a statement instead of a poem (Paalasmaa, 2009).

School assessment and its functions in Finland

There is no internationally accepted term for assessments conducted in schools, but terms such as “classroom assessment”, “classroom evaluation” and “student assessment” have been used by various researchers, sometimes as synonyms (Black and William, 2010). The concept has varied over time in Finland as legislation has changed and the core curriculum has been renewed (Ouakrim-Soivio, 2015). In this article, we will use the term “school assessment”, since we want it to extensively describe all of the relevant activities on the basis of which evaluative conclusions are made. We didn’t want to use overly specific concepts

since doing so would affect the students' conceptions of the assessment process and its purposes.

Assessment is strongly dependent on time and place: it is understood, conceptualised and implemented in accordance with social interests and applications of its time. During the 50 years of its existence, the rules and procedures of assessment in Finnish basic education have greatly varied. The basic function of assessment has remained quite similar over time, but the assessment practices [...] have varied significantly. Reforms of the curricula have always set new courses for assessment, but the actual change of a school's assessment culture takes time. Schools' assessment cultures will always retain the principles and practices of past decades, and those remnants may result in an underlying hidden curriculum that can even overrule the current curriculum (FNBE, 2016b).

In Finland, the actions of all schools are guided by the core curriculum of basic education. This is the national framework that municipalities and schools use as a basis when drawing up their own curricula and that also provides the guidelines for assessment in schools (FNBE, 2014). This also applies in all Finnish Steiner schools and there is no longer any special legislation for the Steiner schools only, so they have integrated into the Finnish school system. The national core curriculum is valid in the Steiner Schools as it is with a few exceptions. (Paalasmaa, 2009). In this national core curriculum, the school assessment is currently defined by the Basics of Pupil Assessment in Basic Education, which was created in 1999 to unite and clarify assessment practises and purposes. It, in turn, was based on the Basic Education Act (628/1998) and the Basic Education Decree (852/1998) (FNBE, 2016). The main difference about assessment in these two types of school, is that in Steiner school the students do not get numerical grading until usually grade eight: in the first three grades the teacher only gives written statements about the student's progress to the parents and the children are given a poem that describes them. From the fourth grade these statements are also given to the student himself/herself. (Paalasmaa, 2009). In municipal schools the numerical grading usually begins with third grade, but it is up to the municipality to decide how to implement the assessment in schools precisely (FNBE 2014).

According to the Basic Education Act (628/1998), the functions of assessment are to guide and encourage students' learning and develop their capacity for self-assessment. These functions are the starting points for developing a school's assessment culture. In the new core curriculum of basic education, it is said that the emphasis should be placed on assessment that promotes learning. The key features of the assessment culture developed in schools are the encouraging atmosphere, student involvement and an interactive approach, supporting the student in understanding her/his own learning process, as well as the fairness, ethics and versatility of evaluation, and utilising the information gained through assessment in the planning of teaching and all school work (FNBE, 2014). This kind of learning-friendly

assessment, which gives feedback to students and teachers in order to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student attainment, is called a formative assessment (Black et al., 2011; Crooks, 2001). Most assessment conducted during the school year should be formative in nature (FNBE, 2014). In the study of English, the emphasis on assessment is said to have moved from the assessment of learning to assessment for learning (Segers and Tillema, 2011).

Different functions executed at school are subject to different forms of assessment, but these functions cannot be completely independent of each other in practice. The teacher has great autonomy to choose which meaning to carry out in her/his assessment. In Finland, school assessment has a declaratory function; this is carried out by a summative assessment at the end of the ninth grade. Its function is to define the knowledge level of a student finishing basic education. The assessment also has an important guiding and encouraging function. In the Basic Education Act (1998/852, Section 10), that function is generally called assessment during the school year. It should be based on the student's own learning and growing process, whose aims are derived from the curriculum (FNBE, 1999). Ouakrim-Soivio (2015), who focuses on the assessment questions regarding all-around education in Finland, roughly divides the purposes of assessment into formative tasks, which guide learning, and summative tasks, which sum up learning. Hornby (2003) agrees but adds two more tasks: the certificating task, which enables selection based on qualification, and the evaluative task, which offers participants (e.g., teachers and parents) a way to evaluate the success of the system. Hornby's tasks might not be valid in Finland since the country has no national testing systems or school ranking lists in basic education, and the evaluation of implementation is based on samples (Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2016). Sahlberg (2011) points out that Finland has not embarked on outcome-based education.

Methods

Participants and data collection

The aim of this study was to find out primary school students' conceptions of assessment. This is a quality study conducted using a phenomenographic approach. 16 students from grades 4–7 (aged 10–13 years) from two schools with different assessment cultures were interviewed: 8 students from a municipal school and 8 from a Steiner school, which is a private school. Currently, there are 24 Steiner schools in Finland (Steinerkasvatus, 2018). [...] Because of different assessment cultures of the schools, students who took part in this study, have different experiences in assessment. We wanted to avoid emphasising the effect of the class teacher or students' genders in the results, so students were selected from different classes: we chose from four different classes in the municipal school and three in the Steiner school. From both schools, four boys and four girls were interviewed. The choice of the students was based on random selection, and permission was asked from the students and from their parents. One student chose not to take part in the study, so he was replaced by

another student from the same class and gender. From one point of view, it is important to inform participants, both the students and their parents, about the use of the study and also about the right to refuse to take part in the study (Lewis 2002). All these we explained in the written research permission that we handed out before carrying out interviews. We also guaranteed full confidentiality and anonymity (Lewis 2002).

The data was collected by individually interviewing each student since interviews are the primary source of data in a phenomenographic study. It was important to create questions with open answers so that the students could, as freely as possible, decide where to take the answer (Marton, 1988). As Uljens (1996) has said, in the phenomenographic research process, the interview turns into a well-structured conversation. We wanted the interviews to be based on active listening and to delve as deeply as possible into the students' world of experience, so we did not tightly structure the interviews in advance. The conversation core included the main questions that we based on the research questions, but we did not define the interview too precisely. During the interview situations, it was important for us to create an atmosphere of trust and openness, so the students would feel free to talk about their experiences honestly.

Data analysis

We applied this research with a phenomenographic approach. When introducing phenomenography in its current state, Marton (1981) said that its goals are to describe, analyse and understand experiences. The aim is to qualitatively describe the different ways in which individuals experience and comprehend the phenomena and the world around them (Marton 1988). The purpose of the phenomenographic study is, therefore, not to describe the world as such but to describe the way it has been experienced (Marton and Booth, 1997). This is a so-called second-hand perspective since the aim is to describe people's perceptions of the world (Marton, 1981). The ultimate purpose is to reveal all the conceptions that people have of a certain phenomenon and organise them into conceptual categories (Marton, 1988).

Uljens (1996) and Marton (1988) state that there is no exact description or step-by-step method for phenomenographic research and data analysis. It is noteworthy that analysis in phenomenographic research is not based on theory, and the categories have not been decided in advance but are formed during the analysis process. At the first phase of phenomenographic analysis, the material is read through the search for terms corresponding to the research problem and which are, thus, relevant to the study (Marton, 1988). In this research, the analysis was conducted by a single researcher. It was begun by listening to and transcribing the interviews. The data was collected over the year 2016, so the analysis was conducted over time.

In the second phase, the attention moves from the expressions made by the individuals to their meanings (Marton, 1988). First, “meaning units” were formed from the expressions, and then, researchers began grouping them based on their similarities. In this article, we concentrate on the purpose of assessment but also on the “meaning units” of assessment methods and targets. Where we found expressions of good assessments in the interviews, we grouped them together as well. In table 1, we demonstrate the process from expression to “meaning units”.

Table 1. *Examples of how the meaning units were created*

Pupil's expression	Meaning unit
<i>The next time I need to study differently or ...</i> (A girl from the municipal school.)	Assessment of learning from the assessment
<i>It helps you in the future, to get a job.</i> (A girl from the municipal school.)	Assessment's effect on working life
<i>I started to wonder what the feedback included.</i> (A girl from the municipal school.)	Reflection
<i>So you understand where you should start to do better.</i> (A boy from the Steiner school.)	Where to improve

From this “pool of meanings”, the first-stage, lower-level categories were formed. At this phase, meanings are brought together through interpretation based on similarities of the meanings and separated by the justification of differences (Marton, 1988). So, the created “meaning-units” were brought together and the first-stage categories started to be categorised so that they would describe the different kinds of tasks performed by the assessment. The fourth and the final step in the analysis was to try to combine the lower-level categories from the theoretical backgrounds into larger, upper-level categories, i.e. description categories. These description categories are the primary result and goal of phenomenographic research (Marton, 1988). They describe the various ways in which the phenomenon can be understood and also the relationship between these ways (Marton and Booth, 1997). At this point, conceptions arising from the theory were connected to the description categories and descriptive, extensive and definitive categories were formed. They are the main result of this study. In table 2, we concretise the procession of the last two phases of the analysis from the creation of first-stage categories to form the final description categories.

In a phenomenographic study, the number of expressions is not central to the creation of categories, but it is important that the categorical system points out the variations in the perceptions of the material (Marton and Booth, 1997). On the other hand, we thought it would be interesting and important to also point out which categories were emphasised amongst the students. So, in the end, we made a vertical description category system and organised the categories according to their appearance in the students' conceptions.

Table 2. *The third and the fourth phases of the data analyses*

Meaning unit	The lower level category	The description category
Meaning for the teacher	Task to provide information for the teacher	Declaratory task
Knowledge about skills	Task to provide information for the student	
Knowledge about learning		
Knowledge about actions		
Assessment is being performed for the parents	Task to provide information for the parents	
Assessment is being analysed with the parents		
Knowledge for future employer	Task that serves the employees	External task
Assessments effect on the future		
Encouraging	Motivating task	Learning promoting task
Raising confidence		
Areas for improvement	Guiding task	
Assessment that teaches		
Learning from the assessment	Committing task	
Reflection		

Results and discussion

We found 42 references regarding the assessment's tasks in the 12 interviews. From these references, we formed three description categories that describe the purposes of school assessment: learning-promoting tasks, declaratory tasks and external tasks. We present these results in table 3. We found it remarkable that none of the students participating in this study found the assessment to be irrelevant to them. From previous studies, there has arisen a view that students sometimes think that school assessment doesn't matter to them (Peterson and Irving, 2008; Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008; Fletcher et al., 2002). If the assessment is considered to be detrimental to learning or is considered irrelevant, it often goes hand in hand with weak learning outcomes (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2007). Therefore, we think it is positive that this description category doesn't occur in the results of this study.

Table 3. *Students' conceptions of the purpose of school assessments in this study*

DESCRIPTION CATEGORY (Relative proportion of mentions related to it)	THE LOWER STAGE CATEGORY	MENTIONS (f)	MENTIONS (% of all mentions)
Learning promoting task 57%	Committing task	10	24%
	Guiding task	8	19%
	Motivating task	6	14%
Declaratory task 31%	Task to provide information for the teacher	2	5%
	Task to provide information for the student	8	19%
	Task to provide information for the parents	3	7%
External task 12%	Task that serves the employees	5	12%

Learning promoting purpose

In the vertical description category, we placed the learning promoting task in the highest position as the relative proportion of related mentions is up to half of all the mentions. The result is in line with the new core curriculum of basic education, in which the focus of the assessment is found to be to promote learning (FNBE, 2014). Subcategories of this description category are the motivating, committing and guiding tasks, which all further learning.

Students stated that the assessment makes them more responsible and committed to the learning process. Over 80% of all the mentions in this category came from the students from municipal schools. We describe how we coded the respondents in table 4.

Table 4. *The code system of the respondents*

A Pupil who gave the answer	The code
A girl from the municipal school	MG
A boy from the municipal school	MB
A girl from the Steiner school	SG
A boy from the Steiner school	SB

The following quotations express the students' thoughts (translated from Finnish).

Well, if you get a bad grade, you have to step up and study more. If you get a better grade, then you can be like, "Yes!" (MB)

If you mess up something, you can always make it better. You can fix it and do better if someone lets you know. (SG)

So, with the help of assessment, students can take responsibility for their learning and the outcomes by studying more or asking for help. This can be seen as a positive result; Brown and Hirschfeld (2007) say that students who take responsibility and control their own learning outcomes also gain and learn more. According to their research, students' mathematics results improved if their assessment made them feel responsible and seemed to them like a useful process. They continued their study one year later and found that students' responsibility and regulation of their own activities, as well as seeing assessment as a formative self-assessment, lead to better outcomes (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2008). This is concordant with Brown and Harris's (2012) results. Fletcher (2012) has studied university students' conceptions of assessment, and he thinks that, because of the high-stakes assessments in universities, students feel that the assessment makes them and the whole system accountable.

Peterson and Irving (2008), however, argue that, although students see that the assessment promotes learning, they may not necessarily feel themselves to be responsible for learning. They may instead shift their responsibility to the teacher. The researchers also believe that, although students understand the assessment, feedback and learning loop, they still do not act independently. According to Segers and Tilleman (2011), Dutch students think assessment promotes learning, but they also think that making them accountable through assessment is unfair. This may be because students feel tests can have too great an impact on their future.

In our research, some students also expressed that the purpose of the assessment is to guide their learning without making themselves accountable for that.

Maybe they tell you, even if you think there is nothing to improve, that there really is. (SG)

If you never do your homework, they might tell that you should. (SG)

Assessment gives these students reference material and tells them where to improve and how to act in the future. The assessment doesn't necessarily make the child act in the desired way, but it can guide him. Atjonen (2007), who has repeatedly studied school assessment in Finland, says that the guiding task occurs best in the formative assessment but also in a well-executed summative assessment. She also states that the guiding task will let the student know what their aims should be and how they can be reached.

The motivating and encouraging role of assessment occurred in the answers of the students from the Steiner school. We didn't find any quotes that fit this category in the answers of the students from the municipal school.

So that you are proud that you have done something right. (SG)

If they give you positive feedback, you will feel positive and want to do more. (SB)

From these answers, it can be seen that some students in the Steiner school found assessment to be encouraging and self-esteem boosting. Encouragement is also mentioned in the basics of student assessment in basic education, and the new curriculum mentions an encouraging and motivating atmosphere as a key feature of a viable assessment culture (FNBE, 1999, 2014).

The curriculum of the Steiner school states that the school's assessment culture is learning-oriented and that verbal characterising and descriptive statements are intended to encourage the student. Atjonen (2007) agrees that it is an assessment's task to motivate: when it recounts what the student has accomplished and what s/he can yet achieve, the distance between these two seems less insurmountable and can make the student want to work to achieve her/his potential.

Declaratory purpose

According to some students, assessment is also performed to demonstrate a student's current level of knowledge. According to our interpretation, these mentions accounted for 31% of all the mentions. We named the category "declaratory tasks", which are mostly accomplished at school in the summative assessment (Atjonen, 2007). According to some of the students, the task of evaluation is to provide information to the student herself/himself and to the teacher and the parents. The role of teacher was mentioned in the data twice:

To see what has been learnt—how the student has understood it. (MG)

Teachers. (MB in answer to the question, "Who gains from the assessment?")

In the first quote, the student refers to himself in the third person, so we presume that he is talking from the teacher's perspective. The assessment was also found to give information to parents:

Sometimes, the teacher puts something on Wilma. (MB, speaking of a service for school-home communication in Finland.)

I usually show [my grades] to my mother. (MB)

These students expressed that both they and their teachers inform the parents about the assessments. Most of the mentions in the category of declaratory task referred to the fact that the assessment gives the student knowledge about her/his own learning and skills.

I can see how I have learnt. (SG)

It tells you about your own knowledge, how you are doing. (MG)

Assessment tells these students what they can do and what s/he has learnt. Zeidner (1992) found out almost 30 years ago that the students saw that their grades were primarily intended to determine their achievements. Brookhart and Bronowicz (2003) found that the common aspect of students' conceptions was that all students' comments referred to their own needs. The purpose of the assessment is to provide information about a student's achievement and progress both to the student and her/his caregivers. This is because, for the assessment to be encouraging, both the student and the caregivers have to know how the learning and growth have progressed towards the goals set (FNBE, 1999). Peterson and Irving (2008) note that the students see another purpose of assessment to be to inform the parents, and the communication between home and school happened effortlessly over the web. Atjonen (2007) states that teaching is based too much on external motivation. For many students, the most important factors are good grades and the opinions of their parents or others. They think that internally-motivated students can really enjoy studying and learning, so the school's assessment culture should aim for that.

External Purpose

As the last description category, we present the external task. We defined the external task so that it is not directly related to the student's school attendance; the assessment is done for something else—in this case, the student's future employer. Other researchers have also found that students think that the assessment has the purpose of measuring the school's profitability, but we did not find references related to that (cf. Brown and Harris, 2012; Brown et al., 2009). This may be because, in Finland, schools are not compared to each other. Five entries related to the external task were founded, and here, we present three of them:

*Well, you can get good grades when you apply for a job when you are grown.
(MG)*

Well, when you apply for work when you are grown up, they might not know what you are good at and what you are bad at, so that if you are bad at maths ... then you [are not able to] go to work somewhere where you need maths. (SB)

The quotes show that some of the students understand that even the assessment in primary school has a purpose after basic education. According to them, one of the purposes of assessment is to give the employer information on what type of employee the student might be. In addition, the student herself/himself needs to be assessed in order to apply for a job.

Several previous researchers have gained similar results studying students' conceptions. In the study by Peterson and Irving (2008), the students stated that assessments inform their future employer of their abilities and help them to avoid bad jobs. And although in the study of Brookhart and Bronowicz (2003), students always linked the assessment tasks to themselves, they also noted that assessment is important for getting on with their studies and employment. According to Harris et al. (2009), students associate the purpose of evaluation with the future, such as money, work and university studies—although only 4% of all entries were linked to this. Also, in a national, New Zealand-based study of the assessment concepts of upper secondary school students, it was found that the students felt that assessment was relevant to the future and job availability (Brown et al., 2009).

Conclusion

According to our study, the students' conceptions about tasks of assessments are versatile. They seem to think that, besides them, assessment also has meaning for their parents, teachers and future employers. It also appears that a school and its assessment culture influence how the students define the purpose of assessment: the municipal school students emphasised the committing task, and the Steiner school students emphasised the motivating task. The students from the municipal school had a clearer view of how they could, through assessment, commit themselves to the learning process. Studies show that students who control their own learning by taking responsibility also receive and learn more, so this can be seen as a positive task (Brown and Hirschfeld, 2007). Self-regulation has been seen as important for learning; it can be even more significant than IQ (Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). Perhaps it is easier for the students in municipal schools to recognise and benefit from assessment since they have more tests and use numeral grades.

On the other hand, only the students from the Steiner school talked about the motivating task of assessment. We wonder, if the assessment in the municipal school does not encourage or motivate the students, or is this task maybe covered under the other tasks. The same national core of basic education curriculum guides the teaching and assessment in both schools, so it seems the role of teacher is magnified when s/he turns the written curriculum into action. From the results of this study, we can conclude that maybe the teachers in Steiner schools can use assessment more effectively for motivation than the teachers in the municipal school. It would be interesting to investigate, whether there is something in the personal and professional identity of teachers in Steiner schools that makes them use the assessment in

this way, and whether the municipal schoolteachers are able to educate more independent and responsible students.

Also, references to the external task were not balanced between the two schools: We found only one mention from the students of the Steiner school. According to the results of this research, the students have a clear view that assessment in primary school serves not only themselves but also the economy and society. Perhaps we can conclude that the teachers should emphasise strongly who the assessment is for. Torrance (2017) states that, in the race to the top or even to the safe middle class, we are all victims of increased competition salience. Interestingly, competition is often seen as desired and even necessary. Teachers make tests and students participate in the hope of possible rewards. The value of tests and ratings is supported by several actors in the field of assessment according to their own interests: teachers use them for control, students and parents due to the capital they give and the knowledge that they provide. However, this need for evaluation often raises the fear of failure (Torrance, 2017).

We also wonder if primary school students need to fear or be concerned about their future, and how this affects students' welfare. When the learning outcomes and grades are placed in an influential position, the effects can be seen early. According to the school health survey of National Institute for Health and Welfare (2000/2001–2015), school fatigue has been growing in recent years, even in basic education. In 2015, approximately 16% of girls and about 12% of boys reported experiencing fatigue and feelings of inadequacy and inability as students. The stress of school seems to lie heavier on the shoulders of girls than of boys and assessment is seen to promote this stress.

Paalasmaa (2009) states that Steiner schools are said to present a humane curriculum as an answer to this focus on competition and performance, in which, in addition to the development of knowledge and thinking, the development of emotions and community are also emphasised. In this, verbal evaluation and a strong long-term student-teacher relationship are essential. According to this study, it seems that maybe the students in the Steiner school are a bit more protected from this stressful side of assessment since only one of them mentioned its external purposes. Still, assessment in all schools eventually includes the final assessment in the ninth grade, which compares the students at a national level for studies after the basic education (FNBE, 1999).

Some notions and limitations should be considered when analysing the results. First, the analysis was performed by only one of the writers, which may decrease the credibility of this study. Still, we must emphasise that the study's goal was not to find the absolute truth, and the results are ultimately only the researchers' interpretation of the different ways that others have experienced the phenomenon. In a phenomenographic study, the researcher is also

seen as a learner involved in the research process (Marton and Booth, 1997). We also presented the analysis in detail with examples to increase the findings' credibility. Second, the number of participants in this study was rather small. A larger sample could increase the generalisation. On the other hand, we chose students from two different school cultures, which increases the study's credibility. In addition, especially in Finland, we can assume school assessment to be almost the same in every school since we have a nationwide curriculum to ensure it (FNBE, 2014). Sandberg (2000) also argues that it can be said that, after about 20 interviewees, the variability of conceptions stagnates so that new ideas no longer appear. We also noticed that, when analysing the last interviews, new perspectives no longer arose.

After this new core curriculum has set in and the reformed assessment culture has been affecting schools for some time, it would be interesting to research how the conceptions of the students have changed or whether they have changed at all. This kind of study would also show whether the teachers follow the new curriculum or if the new assessment culture exists only on paper. Compared to the previous assessment culture, in the new one, during the school year, the assessment should be predominantly formative and guide learners with feedback to observe and structure their own learning and find different ways to achieve the set goals. The student should, therefore, know what s/he is going to learn, what s/he has already learned and how to promote her/his own learning and improve her/his performance (FNBE, 2014). For purposes of learning and development, studies should be conducted to find out what kind of assessment practices the teachers use to achieve progress. Our study also can't answer the question of how the students' conceptions affect their perceptions about themselves and their learning, but we agree with Segers and Tillema (2011) that research on conceptions of assessment should be taken further to shed light on that. Finally, our research is limited to students in Finland only, but it would be useful to explore in detail how students in different countries conceptualise assessments to find the factors that, for example, affect the students' thinking in the curriculum level – and see if the conceptions perhaps are universal.

References

ATJONEN, P. (2007). *Hyvä, paha arviointi* [Good and bad assessment]. Helsinki: Tammi.

THE BASIC EDUCATION ACT, 628/1998.

THE BASIC EDUCATION DECREE, 852/1998.

BLACK, P., and WILLIAM, D., (2010). Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan* **94** (1), 81–90.

BLACK, P., WILSON, M. and Yao, S-Y. (2011). Road maps for learning: a guide to the navigation of learning progressions. *Measurement: Interdisciplinary Research and Perspectives*. **9**(2–3), pp.71–123.

BROOKHART, S., and BRONOWICZ, D., (2003). 'I don't like writing. It makes my fingers hurt': students talk about their classroom assessments. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*. **10**(2), pp.221–242.

BROWN, G., and Harris, L., (2012). Student conceptions of assessment by level of schooling: further evidence for ecological rationality in belief systems. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology*. **12**(1), pp.46–59.

BROWN, G., and HIRSCHFELD, G., (2007). Students' Conceptions of Assessment and Mathematics: Self- Regulation Raises Achievement. *Australian Journal of Educational & Developmental Psychology*, **7**, pp. 63–47.

BROWN, G., and HIRSCHFELD, G., (2008). Students' conceptions of assessment: links to outcomes. *Assessment in Education: Principle, Policy & Practice*. **15**(1), pp.3–17.

BROWN, G., PETERSON, E., and IRVING, E., (2009). Beliefs that make a difference. In: MCINERNEY, D., BROWN, G. and LIEM, G. eds. *Student perspectives on assessment: what students can tell us about assessment for learning*. Charlotte, NC: IAP, pp.159–186.

BROWN, S. (2004). Assessment for learning. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. (1), pp.81–89.

COWIE, B. (2009). My teacher and my friends helped me learn: student perceptions and experiences of classroom assessment. In: D. MCINERNEY, G. BROWN and G. LIEM, eds.

292 Education in the North, **25**(1-2) (2018), <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/eitn>

Student perspectives on assessment: what students can tell us about assessment for learning. Charlotte, NC: IAP, pp.85–106.

CROOKS, T., (2001). The Validity of Formative Assessments. British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Leeds, September 13–15, 2001.

DUCKWORTH, A., and SELIGMAN, M., (2005). Self-discipline outdoes IQ in predicting academic performance of adolescents. *Psychological Science*. **16**(12), pp.939–944.

EDUCATION IN FINLAND. (n.d.). *Finnish education in a nutshell*. Ministry of Education and Culture. Finnish National Agency of Education. Available: http://www.oph.fi/download/146428_Finnish_Education_in_a_Nutshell.pdf [Date Accessed: 24th March 2018].

FINISH NATIONAL AGENCY OF EDUCATION. (2018). *Key figures on early childhood and basic education in Finland*. T. Kumpulainen, ed. Reports and surveys 2018:3. Available: http://www.oph.fi/download/189770_key_figures_on_early_childhood_and_basic_education_in_finland.pdf [Date Accessed: 24th March 2018].

FINNISH NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION. (1999). *The basics of pupil assessment in the basic education*. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.

FINNISH NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION. (2014). *Core curriculum of basic education*. Helsinki: Finnish National Board of Education.

FINNISH NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION. (2016a). *Current policies for pupil assessment*. Available: http://www.edu.fi/perusopetus/oppilaan_arviointi/ops2004/oppilaan_arviointi_opintojen_aikana [Date Accessed: 7th January 2018].

FINNISH NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION. (2016b). *Assessment of the student over the past decades*. Available: http://www.edu.fi/perusopetus/oppilaan_arviointi/artikkeleita/oppilaan_arviointi_menneina_vuosikymmenina [Date Accessed: 7th January 2018].

FLETCHER, R., MEYER, L., ANDERSON, H., JOHNSON, P., and REES, M., (2012). Faculty and students' conceptions of assessment in higher education. *Higher Education*. **64**(1), pp.119–133.

HARRIS, L., HARNETT, J., and BROWN, G., (2009). "Drawing" out student conceptions: using pupils' pictures to examine their conceptions of assessment. In: MCINERNEY, D., BROWN, G., and LIEM, G., eds. *Student perspectives on assessment: what students can tell us about assessment for learning*. Charlotte, NC: IAP, pp.58–83.

HORNBY, W., (2003). Assessing using grade-related criteria: a single currency for universities? *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, **28**(4), pp.435–454.

KIVINEN, K., (2003). *Assessing motivation and the use of learning strategies by secondary school students in three international schools*. PhD Thesis, University of Tampere.

LEWIS, A. (2002). Accessing, through research interviews, the views of children with difficulties in learning. *Support for learning* **17**(3), pp.110–116.

MARTON, F., (1981). Phenomenography: describing the world around us. *Instructional Science*. **10**(2), pp.177–200.

MARTON, F., (1988). Phenomenography: a research approach to investigating different understandings of reality. In: R. SHERMAN and R. Webb, eds. *Qualitative research in education: focus and methods*. Lontoo: Falmer, pp.141–161.

MARTON, F., and BOOTH, S., (1997). *Learning and awareness*. MAHWAH, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HEALTH AND WELFARE. (2000/2001–2015). *School health survey: mental health*. Available: <https://www.thl.fi/fi/tutkimus-ja-asiantuntijatyo/vaestotutkimukset/kouluterveyskysely/tulokset/tulokset-aiheittain/mielenterveys> [Accessed: 9th January 2018].

OUAKRIM-SOIVIO, N., (2015). *Oppimisen ja osaamisen arviointi* [Assessment of learning and competence]. Helsinki: Otava.

PAALASMAA, J., (2009). *Omassa rytmissä: Steinerkoulun idea ja käytännön sovellukset* [In the student's own rhythm: the idea and practical applications of Steiner school]. Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus.

PETERSON, E., and IRVING, E., (2008). Secondary school students' conceptions of assessment and feedback. *Learning and Instruction*. **18**(3), pp.238–250.

SAHLBERG, P., (2011). The fourth way of Finland. *Journal of Educational Change*. **12**(2), pp.173–185.

SALONEN-HAKOMÄKI, S-M., SOINI, T., PIETARINEN, J., and PYHÄLTÖ, K., (2016). The way ahead for Finnish comprehensive school? Examining state-level school administrators' theory of change. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, **48**(5), pp.671–691.

SANDBERG, J., (2000). Understanding human competence at work: an interpretative approach. *Academy of Management Journal*. **43**(1), pp.9–25.

SEGERS, M., and TILLEMA, H., (2011). How do Dutch secondary teachers and students conceive the purpose of assessment? *Studies in Educational Evaluation*. **37**(1), pp.49–54.

STEINERKASVATUS. (2018) *Steiner Education*. Available: <https://peda.net/steinerkasvatus/kjp> [Date Accessed: 24th March 2018].

ULJENS, M., (1996). On the philosophical foundations of phenomenography. In: G. Dalla'Alba. and B. HASSELGREN, eds. *Reflections of phenomenography: toward a methodology*. Göteborg: Acta univeritatis Gothoburgensis, pp.103–128.

WINTLE, M., and HARRISON, M., (1999). *Coordinating assessment practice across the primary school*. New York: Routledge.

ZEIDNER, M., (1992). Key facts of classroom grading: a comparison of teacher and student perspectives. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, **17**(3), pp.224–243.

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study.