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Article

Predictors of Parental Contentment with the Amount of Encouraging Digital Feedback from Teachers in Finnish Schools

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Abstract: The Finnish National curriculum obligates teachers to give parents encouraging feedback about their children's learning and development, the aim being to build a constructive relationship between homes and schools and to encourage close collaboration among all parties. Teachers in Finland nowadays use digital platforms that allow effective online communication. The frequency and quality of such communication vary a great deal. In particular, there seems to be a lack of clarity concerning the amount of encouraging feedback delivered in this way. The focus in this paper is on the extent to which Finnish parents ($N = 1117$) in both urban and rural areas are content with the amount of such feedback. We carried out a logistic regression analysis to predict parental contentment with the amount of encouraging messaging, with the pupil's grade level, parental attitudes to digital communication, as well as parental educational level and gender as independent variables. In sum, parents who were less highly educated, with a neutral-to-positive attitude to digital communication and with a child in lower secondary school were most likely to be content with the amount of communication. These results have both research and practical implications in terms of enhancing the understanding of how best to deliver encouraging digital feedback between homes and schools. Furthermore, it seems that teacher education should focus on communicative competence early on. The current study completes our three-part series of studies on digital home–school communication in Finland.

Keywords: home–school partnership; Finnish schools; encouraging digital feedback; digital communication; teacher education

1. Introduction

According to the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (grades 1 to 9) [1], frequent encouraging feedback from teachers enhances pupils' learning by creating an appreciative and motivating learning environment. Feedback should be realistic, versatile and non-oppressive. Teachers in Finnish schools are obligated to give encouraging feedback to their pupils, and close collaboration between schools and homes is expected. In fact, the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education instructs schools to send parents 'supportive and positive messages about their child's learning and development' [1]. The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding about what constitutes encouraging feedback, and more precisely, to find out what factors predict parental views on the amount of encouraging digital feedback they receive.

Positive feedback propels human actions. It generates the energy and motivation to pursue goals and carry on even in the face of adversity. In particular, encouraging feedback provided by a positive authority could be a true game-changer [2], whereas motivational opportunities may be missed if such feedback is given sparingly. Digital communication (DC) is the most common way of managing home–school collaboration in Finland, offering a multitude of opportunities to share positive messages and to give motivational feedback. However, informative issues seem to dominate the contents of DC [3]. This finding was

supported in our earlier study on parental experiences of DC content: informative issues about the child's studies were considered important, but encouraging feedback was also seen as one of the priorities [4,5].

The quality of any encouraging feedback matters. It should always be focused on the learning process in that non-specified person-targeted feedback could have a negative effect on learning, even if the content is positive [6–8]. Personal feedback such as 'good girl, great effort´ contains little task-related information and is rarely converted into stronger engagement, commitment to learning goals or enhanced self-efficacy [7]. Giving realistic and process-targeted feedback may help to strengthen a pupil's feelings of competence in the learning process [6,9], whereas constant negative feedback may have the opposite effect [10]. These findings are in line with our previous results concerning parental wishes about the content of digital feedback: parents appreciate versatile and realistic feedback on their children's learning, but an excess of corrective feedback could be discouraging [5].

A plenitude of previous studies indicates that collaboration between parents and teachers is effective in fostering the well-being and academic achievements of pupils [11–14]. Consequently, schools should invite parents to participate more actively in their children's studies. Encouraging digital communication could become an essential tool in the home–school partnership. Parental socio-economic background is strongly related to pupil learning outcomes [15]. Teachers should make sure that families lacking the opportunity to participate in their children's studies are engaged in collaboration. Digital communication could offer the tools to make this happen. The international study achievement assessments [16] refer to Mendel's [17] statement: 'Education is power and parents are force´: this is now more relevant than ever. Homes and schools must work together to balance socio-economic and educational inequity.

Joyce Epstein's pioneering work [11,12] on home–school partnership emphasises the importance of shared responsibility among parents, teachers and communities in taking care of pupils' education and development. Epstein's *Theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence* establishes the importance of frequent interaction between schools and homes [11]. It is also pointed out that the more contact parents have with the school and the more involvement in their children's studies, the more likely the children are to do their homework, to succeed in tests and to develop positive attitudes towards school [18,19]. However, it is not only the quantity of contacts that enhances the home–school partnership, but also the quality of communication. Dannesboe et al. [20] showed in a recent study that home–school communication could foster anxiety and feelings of inadequacy among parents if their children were stigmatised as displaying 'constant inappropriate behaviour' [20]. Findings from studies on emotional reactions to digital feedback among pupils confirm that constant negative feedback does not serve a learning purpose, and only causes disappointment, concern and anger [21]. Schools in socio-economically distressed areas in particular seem to be contacting families about difficulties and problems more frequently than about advancements [12]. As Epstein et al. [12] point out, teachers in these areas should carefully consider the communication to make sure that it contains more feedback about pupils' successes. Moreover, negative feedback easily accumulates among pupils with special educational needs [22], who are in the greatest need of encouragement. Thus, there is a need to raise teachers' awareness of the importance of quality in the home–school partnership, and to focus on communicative competence early on in teacher education so as to engage all parents more deeply in their children's studies [23,24].

1.1. The Finnish Context

Finnish compulsory basic education comprises one-year of pre-primary schooling for six-year-olds and nine years of basic education for 7- to 16-year-olds proceeding from the primary (grades 1 to 6) to the secondary (grades 7 to 9) level. Most subjects are taught by one class teacher in grades 1 to 6, whereas a multitude of teachers give instruction in their own subjects in grades 7 to 9 [25]. All teachers have a Master's degree [26], and they are responsible for giving low-threshold support to pupils who struggle in their

learning. The Finnish government has recently launched a reform to extend compulsory and free-of-charge education up to the age of 18, the aim being to raise Finland's general level of education, and to foster equality and non-discrimination [27].

Home–school collaboration has not always been very active in Finland. Teachers were supposed to do their share in schools, and parents to do theirs in the home [28]. There has been extensive discussion in recent decades about the boundaries of responsibility in bringing up and educating children [29]. The revised National Core Curriculum for Basic Education [1] places more emphasis on the role of parents in their children's schooling, obligating them to take an active role in their children's studies during their years of compulsory basic education. Correspondingly, schools are responsible for teaching their pupils, enhancing the home–school partnership and supporting parents on matters concerning their children's studies [1].

At least 95 percent of Finnish schools have a digital communication (DC) platform. One pupil may have several teachers even in grades 1 to 6, and digital platforms have been used to facilitate feedback from all teachers. Indeed, DC has enabled frequent and effective two-way communication and feedback between parents and teachers [4]. In addition to giving feedback, teachers use DC to inform parents and pupils about timetables, exams, events in school and other current issues [4]. In other countries, DC has been shown to offer several benefits in home–school collaboration [30–32]. In Finland, many DC messages comprise predefined 'quick-markings', which are short notes about forgotten items, schoolwork or behaviour-related matters, for example. The selection of predefined quick-markings has been supplemented with positive remarks in many Finnish municipalities because of the public discussion about a negative corrective bias in home–school communication [33]. Pupils are usually given access to a home–school DC platform in the fourth grade, so that they can read the information notices and the teachers' quick-markings. The number and nature of DC messages seems to change in the transition to lower secondary school: it was shown in a recent Finnish study that pupils in grades 7 to 9 were more likely than younger pupils to receive encouraging teacher feedback via DC [33–35].

Gender equality is at a high level in Finland compared to many other countries. Men and women both need to negotiate the work–life balance, and they are supposed to share household chores [36]. The provision of services in the early childhood education and care sector has made it possible for mothers to go to work relatively soon after childbirth. Family-friendly policies further support fathers wishing to take paid family leave [37,38]. Gender equality has also given mothers and fathers the opportunity to share the responsibility for taking care of their children's studies and communication with school.

Digital two-way communication allows schools to give both parents equal opportunities in terms of being involved in home–school collaboration. Digital platforms may also benefit the partnership among parents who cannot easily get to the school or do not wish to talk on the phone [32]. Hence, DC serves to increase equity in home–school communication [12]. This is the case in Finland, too.

In addition to promoting family-friendly policies, the Finnish government has emphasised the goal of *equal opportunities and high-quality education for all*. It has raised the educational level in the country in recent decades. Currently, 32 percent of over-15-year-olds with a Finnish background have a tertiary-level education, and 74 percent of this population has at least a higher-secondary-level education. On the other hand, 12 percent of women and 18 percent of men with a Finnish background only completed lower-secondary education (age group 30 to 34). The educational level has risen mainly as a result of women pursuing higher education: 48 percent of women aged 30 to 34 have a tertiary-level education, the corresponding proportion for men being 33 percent [39]. Moreover, a majority of teachers in Finnish schools are highly educated women [26].

1.2. The Current Study

Digital communication (DC) in Finland has facilitated frequent and effective two-way communication and feedback between teachers and parents [4,5]. However, the quality and quantity of teacher feedback varies a lot, as do parental *experiences* of received feedback [22,32]. The same message may be understood very differently depending on the expectations and overall attitudes to school and digital communication. More research is needed to shed more light on the nature of digital home–school communication and to develop common practicalities.

The current study completes our three-part series of studies on digital home–school communication in Finland. In the first study we used a new, specially designed 14-item digital communication scale [4] to elicit the opinions of parents (*N* = 1123) and teachers (*N* = 118) on digital communication. The second study clarified the wishes of parents and teachers regarding the content of digital messages [5] The current study analyses the responses of parents (*N* = 1117) to questions concerning their contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback.

According to the results of our first two studies, parents and teachers are generally satisfied with the communication, which they perceive as supporting the parent–teacher partnership and providing valuable information on pupil development and study issues. However, the parents felt that the feedback they received about their children was less encouraging than the teachers thought it was. In particular, there was wide variance in the parents' responses concerning *the amount* of encouraging feedback in the DC messages [5]. Thus, there seemed to be discrepancy between the teachers' intentions and the parents' understanding of the message content.

We firmly believe that encouraging digital feedback could enhance the home–school partnership by encouraging different kinds of families to participate more actively in their children's studies [11]. We therefore perceive a need to enhance understanding of the factors that predict parental contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback. In the present study, we define encouraging digital feedback as information about *the child's successes and strengths*, as suggested in the Finnish National Core Curriculum for Basic Education [1]. Specifically, we analyse the explanatory factors regarding contentment with the amount of feedback using the previously extracted factor *Encouraging feedback* as the dependent variable [Digital Communication Scale with a three-factor structure, 4]. Pupil grade level, parental attitudes towards digital communication, education and gender were selected as independent variables.

We addressed the following three research questions to find out which factors predict contentment with the amount of encouraging digital teacher feedback among Finnish parents:

1. How content are the parents of pupils in primary and lower secondary school with the amount of encouraging digital feedback?

2. How content are parents with the amount of encouraging digital feedback depending on their attitudes to digital communication?

3. How content are parents with the amount of encouraging digital feedback depending on their educational level?

2. Materials and Methods

The data collection took place in 2016. The participants were 1123 voluntary, anonymous parents (79.8% mothers, 18.5% fathers, 1.7% did not mention their role) from one urban and one rural city in Finland. We sent an informative email to the educational authorities in the cities, who then delivered invitations to the school principals to participate in the study. The principals forwarded the link to our questionnaire to parents via a commonly used DC platform. The recruitment of particpants is explained in more detail in our previous studies [4].

The questionnaire comprised the digital communication scale and several background variables, also reported in more detail in our previous studies [4,5]. The background

variables in the current study were the pupil's school grade level, the parents' attitudes to digital communication, and parental educational level and gender (see Table 1). The children of the participating parents were in primary (63%) or lower-secondary (37%) school. Overall parental attitude was assessed on a single question: 'What is your first reaction when you receive a digital message from the school?´ The overwhelming majority of parents (84%) reported a first reaction that was not negative (neutral, 15.8%; appropriate interest, 64.8%; and delight, 3.4%). These respondents were categorised as having a neutral-to-positive attitude. Parents with a higher educational level were overrepresented (58%) (Table 1).

Table 1. The recoding of the parental background variables.

1. Child's grade level 1st to 6th *7th to 9th*	⟹	1. primary school *2. lower secondary school*
2. Parental attitude to DC a. neutral b. appropriate interest c. delight *d. concern* *e. irritation*	⟶ ⟶	1. positive/neutral *2. negative*
3. Educational level a. lower secondary education or less b. upper secondary education c. lowest level tertiary education *d. bachelor or equivalent level* *e. polytechnic education* *f. university*	⟶ ⟶	1. lower education *2. higher education*
4. Gender		1. female *2. male*

The respondents could choose not to answer any specific question. Only six of the original 1123 participants did not respond to every item of the encouraging feedback factor, and they were removed from the study. Thus, the final number of participants was 1117.

In the current study, we followed the guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity [40] with regard to participant selection, data collection, and the analysis and interpretation of the results.

Data Analysis

In our previous study [4], we found three items from the 14-item digital communication scale that were loaded on the *Encouraging feedback* factor, which were rated on a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree somewhat, 3 = agree somewhat, 4 = strongly agree). In that particular study, the 1117 parents responded to the three items as follows: *I get enough information about my child's strengths M* = 2.44, *SD* = 0.98; *I get enough information about my child's successes M* = 2.72, *SD* = 0.98; *The teacher's digital communication is encouraging for my child M* = 2.77, *SD* = 0.95. For the whole *Encouraging feedback* factor, *M* = 2.62 and *SD* = 0.97, indicating wide variability in responses [4].

To identify the strongest predictors of contentment with the amount of encouraging feedback, and in order to conduct the subsequent logistic regression analyses, we dichotomised the scores of the *Encouraging feedback* factor using the median (2.67) as a cut-off point. Those with a factor score of 2.67 or less were assigned to group 1 (43.7%), the others to group 2 (56.3%). We similarly dichotomised the background variables (see Table 1).

First, we carried out a decision tree analysis (DTA) to give us initial information about the chosen independent variables. DTA is used in the preliminary investigation of data for finding appropriate groups of variables and predicting future observations [41]. In this

study, according to chi square values, DTA showed the order of importance of the background variables related to contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback, thereby facilitating the formulation of a hierarchy of predicting variables (Figure 1).
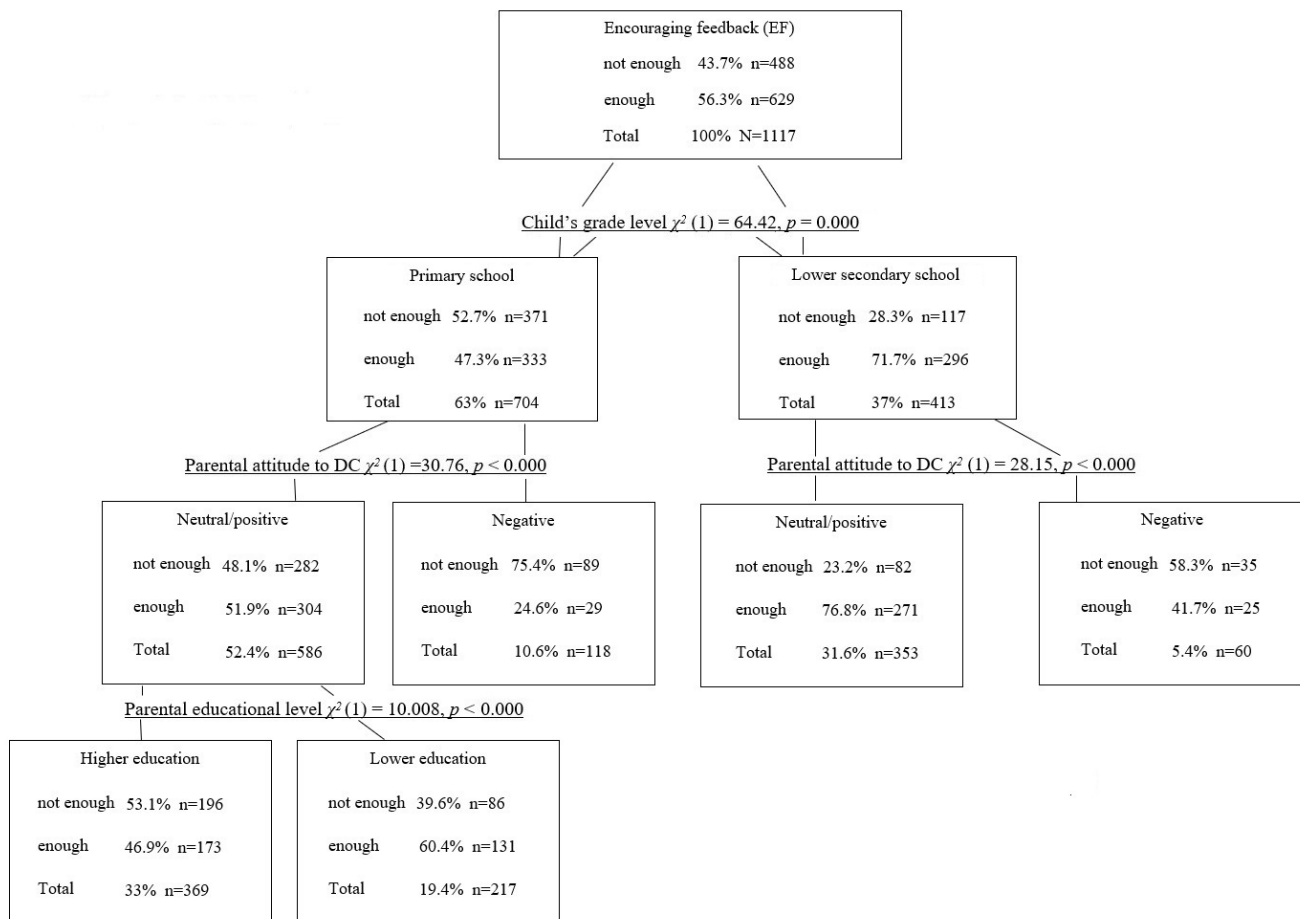

Figure 1. Decision tree showing the order of variables predicting parental contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback.

Following the initial DTA analysis, we carried out a binary logistic regression analysis with forward stepwise selection to establish the predictive power of each independent variable in detail. We calculated the odds of belonging to group 1 (not receiving enough encouraging digital feedback) or group 2 (receiving enough encouraging digital feedback) in the presence of the four background variables.

3. Results

The decision tree analysis (DTA) revealed the order of the predicting variables (Figure 1). The most significant predictor was the grade level of the pupil: having a child in lower-secondary school increased the probability of belonging to the group of parents who were content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback. The second most significant predictor was the overall attitude to digital communication: having a neutral-to-positive attitude was related to being content with the amount of feedback. The third predictor was parental education: being less highly educated was related to being content with the digital feedback. Parental gender was not significantly related to being content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback.

The binary logistic regression analysis confirmed the results of the DTA (Table 2). The model fitted the data well, $\chi^2 (3) = 136.97$, $p < 0.000$, correctly classifying 63.9 percent of parents who were content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback and 65.6 percent of parents who were not. The overall percentage of correct classifications was

64.6. The ROC curve evidenced a tolerable goodness of fit, $W = 0.69$, $SD = 0.016$, $p < 0.001$, $CI(0.95) = 0.66–0.72$. Nagelkerke's pseudo R^2 was 0.16.

Table 2. Logistic regression analysis predicting parental contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback.

Measure	B	Wald χ^2-Test	p	OR	95% CI	for OR
Child's grade level	1.02	53.83	0.000	2.76	2.10	3.62
Parental attitude to DC	−1.34	53.65	0.000	0.26	0.18	0.37
Parental educational level	−0.50	14.32	0.000	0.61	0.47	0.79

Note. Parents $N = 1117$.

Next, we report the results in line with our research questions.

1. How content are the parents of pupils in primary and lower secondary school with the amount of encouraging digital feedback?

According to the initial DTA, the background variable that produced the biggest statistically significant differences between the groups as an explanatory factor for parental contentment on the amount of encouraging digital feedback was the pupil's school grade (Table 2). Parents whose children were in lower-secondary school were more content (72%) than those with children in primary school (47%). The logistic regression analysis revealed an odds ratio (OR) of 2.76 for parents of lower-secondary pupils. In other words, the parents of children on the lower-secondary level were 2.76 times more likely to be content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback than the parents of pupils at primary school (Table 2).

2. How content are parents with the amount of encouraging digital feedback depending on their attitudes to digital communication?

The DTA revealed a further split in both parental groups (with children at primary or lower-secondary school), depending on whether they had a neutral-to-positive or a negative attitude to digital communication. This variable was the second strongest predictor of contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback. Parents with a negative attitude were more likely to claim that they did not receive enough positive feedback (75% and 58% of those with children in primary and lower-secondary school, respectively). According to the logistic regression analysis (Table 2), parents with a negative attitude were less likely than their counterparts with a neutral-to-positive attitude to be content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback (OR 0.26).

3. How content are parents with the amount of encouraging digital feedback depending on their educational level?

The third most significant splitting variable was parental educational level. Parents on the lower levels (with a neutral-to-positive attitude to digital communication and having children in lower-secondary education) were more likely to be content (60%) with the amount of encouraging digital feedback than parents with a higher-level education (47%). Regression analysis (Table 2) confirmed that parents in the latter group were less likely to be content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback than their less-highly-educated counterparts. (OR 0.61).

4. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate the factors that predict parental contentment with the amount of encouraging digital feedback in communication between homes and schools. This investigation completes a three-part series of studies on digital home–school communication in Finland. The first study identified the content that parents and teachers wanted to communicate with the help of digital tools [4], whereas the second one explored the quality of the feedback that was given and received via these tools [5].

The results of the current research reveal that of the explanatory variables we applied, the factor that best predicted parental contentment was the pupil's grade level,

with parental attitude to digital communication in second place, followed by parental educational level. Parental gender did not have a statistically significant effect.

In sum, parents with a lower educational level, a neutral-to-positive attitude to digital communication and with children at lower-secondary school are the most likely to be content with the amount of encouraging digital communication. We discuss the possible explanations for these results below in line with our research questions.

Our findings indicate that the parents of pupils in lower-secondary school are more content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback than their counterparts with children in primary school. This result is in line with those reported in a previous Finnish study about pupils´ receiving more encouraging feedback in lower-secondary school [33]. Pupils at lower-secondary school are taught by several teachers; hence, the chance of receiving encouraging feedback is higher than in the (mainly) one class teacher system in primary school. Thus, an individual teacher's feedback and communication practices do not play as big a role. Although the workload of Finnish teachers in terms of teaching hours is among the lowest in the OECD countries [42], stress and burnout rates have increased. This is a recognised trend affecting the educational field in many countries [43,44]. Having to constantly give digital feedback may, to some extent, affect how they manage their working hours, work-related stress and well-being [5,44]. This may be particularly salient among class teachers who tend to be the only feedback providers for the entire class.

It seems that teachers in the higher grade levels have mastered the skill of providing encouraging feedback by digital means, which could be interpreted as an attempt to motivate and engage students in the face of growing learning demands. Pupils in higher grades have access to personal digital feedback from the teacher. Well-given direct feedback may promote positive emotions and motivate the learning process [2,6]. Hence, the provision of encouraging feedback to pupils at lower-secondary schools may stem from a desire to target the feedback directly at the pupil. Active parental support is a prerequisite when pupils are entering a more independent phase in their studying [12]. It requires more home–school collaboration and could enhance digital home–school communication.

Overall, there are fewer face-to-face meetings and less printed communication from teachers in lower-secondary school than in primary school, meaning that almost all messaging is DC-based. Furthermore, expectations of receiving encouraging feedback may be higher among parents whose children are younger and less independent [5]. It seems that even if these parents were frequently given encouraging feedback about their children's achievements, more than half of them wanted to have more of it digitally.

Parents with an overall negative attitude to digital communication were less content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback than those with a neutral or positive attitude. This result seems obvious, but what lies behind it is more complicated. The optimal home–school partnership involves the exchange of realistic, positive information concerning the child's achievements and development [12,45]. Parents who receive multiple notes from school that are purely informative or even negative may interpret all messages accordingly. Being constantly reminded of the child's misbehaviour and learning difficulties may be burdensome and perceived as stigmatising [4,20]. Almost every class in Finland has students with special educational needs, and negative feedback easily accumulates among them [22]. Care should be taken in such cases to carry out appraisals and give extra encouragement to ensure that the home–school partnership remains respectful and positive, even in the face of obstacles [20].

Finally, our findings indicate that highly educated parents are less likely to be content with the amount of encouraging digital feedback they receive than their less highly educated counterparts. This may be attributable to the greater demands on the highly educated. They may have higher expectations, and their own experiences may influence what they consider to be a sufficient amount of encouragement form teachers. Parents who were accomplished in their own studies probably received good feedback during their school years, and probably wish the same for their own children. The positive effect

on learning outcomes and attitudes towards school among pupils with highly educated parents is well-known [39,46,47].

5. Implications

Our study findings have multiple research implications. First, the quality of encouraging feedback should be explored in detail, not only the amount. It would be beneficial to build experimental research designs to find ways of delivering personalised positive feedback time-efficiently by digital means. It would also be worth developing enriched programs for active home–school messaging using visual materials. This would be of particular value in communication with families who do not speak the same language as the teacher. Controlled interventions using innovative digital technologies could help to improve home–school collaboration among families with special needs.

We reported in our previous research [4] that parents perceived the feedback they received from teachers about their children as less encouraging than the teachers thought it was. Further research should be conducted to explore teachers' views on their feedback practices and the factors related to it. One contributory factor may be the heavy workload of teachers as well as time-management challenges. Digital platforms should be improved to offer more predefined positive options regarding digital quick-markings [33]. This concrete improvement could ease the daily workload of teachers and guide them in giving more encouraging feedback. However, teachers should not be left alone: practices related to home–school digital communication and feedback should be negotiated on the school level. Furthermore, teacher education should include courses on digital communication to ensure that future teachers acquire the necessary knowledge and competences to exploit the special nature and potential of online messaging. Parents, in turn, should be invited to reflect on their role in digital parent–teacher communication: communication is a two-way channel that should build respect in both directions.

Last but not least, digital communication could promote educational democracy. Most parents have the desire to support their child's studies actively, even if they find it difficult to attend parents' evenings and other meetings in the school. Digital communication may lower the barrier to participation and strengthen the idea of striving towards common goals in supporting pupils in their studies and their lives [4,5,12].

No study is without limitations. There was a gender bias in the current study, most of the respondents being mothers. This is in line with previous studies on the home–school partnership [18,32]: it shows that even though task sharing has become more effective in Finnish families, mothers are still the primary communicators regarding home–school issues. Furthermore, the questionnaire was provided only in Finnish, meaning that non-native speakers probably did not respond. Nevertheless, we are happy with the high number of both urban and rural participants in our three-part study [4,5]. As a methodological limitation, the use of dichotomised variables could be perceived as simplifying the data. However, the purpose of the current study was to build a general picture of the factors affecting parental views on encouraging digital feedback. Future studies will reveal more fine-grained information on how such feedback is experienced by a variety of parents, and on the kind of messages that are really understood as encouraging and as supporting pupils.

Our data was collected before the COVID-19 crisis, as a result of which digital communication was almost the only way of exchanging messages between schools and homes. The extent to which these exceptional circumstances will affect communication in the future remains to be seen. In any case, training is needed to guarantee that all teachers have good enough communication and digital skills to collaborate effectively with families of all kinds.

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