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Positioning children with special educational needs in early childhood education and care documents

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ABSTRACT

The article critically discusses the practice of describing children's special educational needs (SEN) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) pedagogical documents. Documentation is understood as a form of governance. In current practice, documentation is extensively used in educational institutions. Even when the focus of documentation should be pedagogical, the descriptions of children's SEN commonly describe a child's individual deficits as a source of educational problems. In this study, we used discourse analysis to investigate how professionals position children and construct their SEN in pedagogical documents. The research data consisted of 143 documents on 29 Finnish children. Three ways of positioning children with SEN were identified in the documents: as a problematic child through definitive descriptions, as a multifaceted child through contextual descriptions, and as a learning child through dynamic descriptions. The results highlight the importance of a pedagogical focus and dynamic conceptualisation of SEN in ECEC documentation.

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Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a central role in observing and detecting children's potential problems due to the dominant ideologies of the earliest possible identification of special educational needs (SEN) and early intervention. In the process of pedagogical documentation, observations about a child's situation are collected into documents, such as individual education plans or support plans that are typically drafted for children with educational challenges. Pedagogical documents are intended as pedagogical tools for planning and cooperation with parents and other professionals (for example, Alasuutari, Markström, and Vallberg-Roth 2014; Emilsson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014). The importance of in-depth identification of SEN as a basis for planning effective educational support and meeting the individual educational needs of children is often seen as a key justification for predominant extensive and detailed documentation (for example, Andreasson and Wolff 2015; FNBE 2010; Franck 2015; NRDCWH 2003). Therefore, the descriptions of a child often comprise the core of these documents.

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Documentation practices often go unquestioned even though, through documentation, children's educational challenges are permanently registered in written formal documents. Documentation is often justified by the need to authorise the identification of SEN and to formalise these needs within an institution (Cooren 2004; Prior 2008). Although the process of identifying and recording children's SEN might appear to be a neutral practice, it is nevertheless a process that is founded on the ideas of good and desirable conduct and the future prospects of the child (Miller and Rose 2008; Parding and Liljegren 2016; Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015; Sandberg et al. 2010; Vehmas 2010). In ECEC, especially, the identification of SEN reflects what is considered to constitute a good childhood at a particular time and in a particular cultural context (see Foucault 1977).

Documents continue to direct educational practices after their drafting (Ferraris 2013). They reframe the thinking and the actions of parties using the documents (Hjörne and Säljö 2008), influencing professional decisions and even children's educational careers (Boyd, Ng, and Schryer 2015; Vehmas 2010). Professionals' subjective interpretation of what has been written plays a key role in the process; this is problematic, especially since the lifetime of pedagogical documents is typically long: they follow children during their years in ECEC, are transferred to the child's school and are eventually archived. At the same time, documents can often be revisited and duplicated in an unpredictable manner after drafting (Cooren 2004; Prior 2008). Therefore, these descriptions of children follow them as they grow, learn and change as individuals (see also Cooren 2004).

Despite these concerns about documentation practices, the role of educational documentation is unswerving. Numerous studies have researched documentation in ECEC (for e.g. Alasuutari and Karila 2010; Emilsson and Pramling Samuelsson 2014) and in primary school special education (for example, Andreasson and Asplund Carlsson 2013; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007), and some have investigated children with SEN in the context of ECEC (for example, Sandberg et al. 2010). However, an in-depth analysis of how descriptions of SEN are constructed and how, as a consequence, the child is represented in pedagogical documents continues to be needed.

In this article, we apply a discourse analytic approach based on the idea of discursive psychology¹ (Edwards 2005) to investigate how a child and SEN are represented through documentation. With respect to discursive psychology, we understand that, in addition to purely describing a subject, writing also recreates social reality and certain subject positions (Harré and Moghaddam 2003). Therefore, all definitions, including descriptions of SEN, are always simultaneously descriptive and normalising, as they include value judgements regarding the desirability of, for example, the person in question (Foucault 1977). The study sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do ECEC professionals construct children's SEN in documents?
- (2) How are children with SEN positioned by these constructions?

Pedagogical documents in Finnish ECEC

In Finland, ECEC is provided before compulsory primary education starts in the year a child turns seven years old. As a part of ECEC, children participate in compulsory pre-primary education in the year preceding the start of primary education. Regarding SEN, all children basically have right of access to inclusive ECEC groups, which form the most

prevalent arrangement of education in Finnish ECEC, although a few segregated special groups exist, especially in the biggest cities. This research focuses on the documentation carried out in inclusive groups.

In Finland, as in many other countries, pedagogical documents are an essential part of support planning practices in ECEC, and an individualised plan is drafted for each child.² These plans aim to individualise children's education as well as to ensure systematic and target-oriented education for all. The pedagogical assessment of practices as well as documenting the cooperation with a child's guardians are also important aims of drafting pedagogical documents in Finnish ECEC and pre-primary education. Typically, ECEC teachers are responsible for drafting children's pedagogical documents, especially when a child has been assessed as having SEN. However, especially in the case of toddlers and the youngest children in ECEC, these plans are drafted by daycare and home daycare nurses. In inclusive ECEC groups, early childhood special education teachers can either draft the documents themselves or, as is typical, mainly consult and support other staff in drafting them instead of writing the documents themselves.

The composition of children's pedagogical documents varies considerably at different ages owing to the different documents used in pre-primary education and in ECEC. This is a result of differing legislation and curricula between pre-primary education and other ECEC services. The legislation lays down two different systems of SEN identification and support planning: a more specific three-tiered model in pre-primary education, and a more general non-tiered model in ECEC. The three-tiered support system – which is sometimes described as the Finnish Response to Intervention model (Björn et al. 2016) – is employed with specific instructions about the process of identifying SEN. In this system, children can be provided with general, intensified or special support. The three tiers are considered to create a continuum with intensifying and more diverse support. Children's educational needs and the support that has already been provided are assessed before their support is intensified or reduced.

In the three-tiered support system, a pre-primary plan is completed alongside other documents depending on the tier of support. In intensified support (tier 2), additional support planning must be included in the child's pre-primary plan. In special support (tier 3), the pre-primary plan is replaced with an individual education plan. In addition, before support is intensified, a pedagogical evaluation is conducted and a pedagogical assessment or pedagogical statement document drafted (FNBE 2010; NRDCWH 2003; valid at the time of data collection).

In ECEC, norms guiding SEN documentation are indefinable and educational support is usually discussed and documented as a part of the child's individual ECEC plan. However, numerous Finnish municipalities have additionally employed the three-tiered support system in ECEC because it guides support practices in a more detailed manner. As an outgrowth of this, marked differences between municipal ECEC support policies have emerged in Finland. Therefore, while additional pedagogical documents are not required by law in ECEC, they are often drafted in practice.

Documentation and problematising activity

In this article, the process of documenting children's SEN is examined from the perspective of institutional governance. Institutional governance can be described, referring to

Nicholas Rose (1999), as institutional and societal acts and practices that fundamentally aim at securing institutional and societal order, security, health and happiness. In this article, the concept of governmentality is utilised, especially in relation to the notion of problematising activity (see Miller and Rose 2008). Governmentality is a mode of governance conducted by identifying deviant or pathological individuals and ways of being, and modifying them to act in accordance with societal norms and values (Rose 1999). To do this, institutions and societies need first to collect information about such individuals (Rose 1999) and to store this information in a measurable form (Foucault 1977; Miller and Rose 2008). To this end, specific techniques of governance (e.g. documentation) are dedicated to acquiring knowledge of unwanted characteristics and individuals (e.g. SEN and children with SEN in educational institutions).

In educational practices, problematising activity can be understood as the assessment and presentation of children's conduct, learning and development. Children who are considered to be at risk for an undesirable development path or future are documented as having SEN, so that thereafter certain practices such as intervention, support measures or secondments to other locations (e.g. special education classes) can be implemented. The documented information about children with SEN allows the relevant professionals to intervene in these children's conduct: that is, to work towards maximising their capacities, to prevent future problems and, ultimately, to adapt children to societal values and norms (Rose 1999).

Documentation as a practice can consequently be understood as a form of political power: documentation is founded on rationalisations about the desired nature of individuals and individual characteristics, yet it also reconstructs these rationalisations. The assessment of who is represented as problematic or special and with what qualities is founded on social norms and values about what is 'good' and 'desirable' (Vehmas 2010). The idea of the shared truth of things (Rose 1999), that is shared values and norms, is also fundamental to the idea of problematising activities: the current values and norms of our society dictate the identification of a way of being, behaving or developing that needs intervention.

According to Rose (1999), current techniques (e.g. documentation) of problematising certain activities are fundamentally founded on, and aim at realising, the ideal of individuals as free and independent citizens. Children with SEN can be viewed as doubly unsuccessful in meeting these criteria. First, as children are typically considered to be immature and dependent, childhood is seen as the most governed phase of life (see Foucault 1977; Rose 1999). Second, when a child has SEN, which is basically an institutionally problematised state or situation that an individual is deemed to be in (see Rose 1999), governance becomes even more predominant.

Positioning children with SEN in documentation

In her work concerning the governance of childhood and the different orientations of normal and desired children across time, Karen Smith (2012) presents a child's individual responsibility for learning and developing as the most current value related to a good childhood. Based on the work of Jenks (2005), Smith (2012, 28) suggests that in the current neo-liberal 'idea of [the] self-maximising, entrepreneurial subject', children are preferably seen as competent, active and independent individuals. She goes on to identify the distinctive feature of this orientation to childhood as shifting the responsibility for success or failure

from institutions to the children as individuals and demanding that a child independently develops, learns and adapts to societal norms (Smith 2012).

As Smith (2012) also points out, referring to Kampmann (2004), the emphasis on the individual responsibility of the child and the exemption from liability of adults can lead to increased marginalisation of disadvantaged children, such as children with SEN. The descriptions of SEN that present a child as the source of the problem and as responsible are problematic because they orientate pedagogical practice not towards pedagogical change but towards individual change. Adults are absolved of responsibility, and their role in promoting the desired change in a child's situation remains vague.

From the perspective of previous research on documents related to SEN, Smith's idea of a shift from adult liability to child responsibility seems relevant. Documentation should aim at describing the pedagogical liabilities of adults, especially in the case of children with SEN. Although the need for change in a child's situation is a key reason for identifying SEN, descriptions of children with SEN are typically found to construct the child's situation as unchanging and SEN as permanent and, therefore, the needed change as pedagogically unattainable (see Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015). Previous research has suggested that the origin of SEN, the responsibility for the development as well as blame for the situation are often predominantly attributed to the child (for example, Andreasson and Asplund Carlsson 2013; Hjørne and Säljö 2004; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007, 2010; Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015). This appears in the fact that a child's individual shortcomings and deficits are usually described in detail (Andreasson and Asplund Carlsson 2013; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007), whereas descriptions of the educational context as a force behind SEN are often missing (Hjørne and Säljö 2008). As Røn Larsen (2012) has proposed, when a child in an educational institution is defined in documentation as 'special', the child is often presented without reference to the context and its influence behind the manifestation of SEN or as an autonomous actor (see also Parding and Liljegren 2016).

As a result of the problematising of their being and conduct, children with SEN can be seen as positioned in a troubled position, as someone who creates a social challenge in a certain context (Wetherell 1998). Staunæs (2003, 104) describes these troubled subject positions as 'positions that challenge the normativities at stake in certain everyday contexts of lived experience'. In other words, children with SEN become presented as problematic individuals via the use of language. In documents, the troubled position of a child with SEN is constructed with the aim of pointing out the undesirability of the child's situation and to justify the need to normalise the child (see Mitchell, Morton, and Hornby 2010). The predominant convention of describing children's SEN as permanent, stable and independent of contextual factors also leads to the permanent, stable positioning of a child. This is a somewhat debatable line of thinking, as fluctuating between being positioned as, for example, able or unable and competent or incompetent is an essential feature of humans, and especially of being a child (Danforth and Naraian 2015).

Method

The research data

The research data comprise part of a broader data collection of pre-primary-aged children's pedagogical documents. The documents were collected at the end of the pre-primary year in

May 2016 from 19 classes in four Finnish municipalities. The municipalities and pre-primary education classes were selected by applying the principle of maximum variation in the sampling to obtain as diverse a data-set as possible (Patton 2015). Therefore, the selected municipalities differ in size and geographical location. Moreover, the pre-primary classes differed in their locations within the municipalities.

In this study, the data are drawn from the pedagogical documents of 29 children assessed as having SEN and who received either intensified or special support during their pre-primary year. No pre-existing diagnostic categories were used to select the children. The documents comprise all of the pedagogical documents on the aforementioned children, thus covering their educational history from the time they entered ECEC to the end of their pre-primary year (see Table 1). As described earlier, due to variation in municipal documentation practices, the composition of the documents differs markedly. The total number of documents was 143, although the number of documents per child varied from one to 11. On average, the documents cover a period of three years, although this varied between one and six years as some children had only participated in the compulsory pre-primary year and others had up to six years of history in ECEC. On average, the children had been defined as having SEN at the age of five, with a range from three to six years old.

The data gathering followed the ethical rules and principles of social scientific investigation (see, for example Christians 2011). The research collaboration was first negotiated and teachers of pre-primary classes were contacted through the heads of the regional ECEC service provision. Research approval was sought from the appropriate authority in each municipality and teachers at the pre-primary classes were personally informed about the project. Guardians were given a letter about the research with a request for informed consent. Both the teachers of pre-primary classes and the children's guardians were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point.

Analysis

In the study, the discourse analytic approach applied was based on the ideas of discursive psychology (see Edwards 2005). This approach offers a useful starting point for researching the social process of constructing SEN in pedagogical documentation. By investigating language in a detailed manner with discourse analysis, it is possible to reveal the consequences of problematic social practices (e.g. the practice of documenting children's educational needs) on the textual level. Moreover, the revelation of problematic practices, such as the

Table 1. Research data.

Document type	<i>n</i> (<i>N</i> = 143)	Purpose
ECEC plan	64	Planning for early childhood education Obligatory for all children attending ECEC before pre-primary
Pre-primary plan	24	Planning for pre-primary education Can be drafted for all children Obligatory when child receives intensified support
Plan for intensified support	22	Planning intensified support
Individual education plan	8	Planning special support Obligatory when child receives special support Replaces the pre-primary plan
Pedagogical assessment	23	Evaluating and justifying the need for more intense support
Pedagogical statement	2	Evaluating and justifying the need for special support

Note: Names of the documents presented in FNBE (2010) and NRDCWH (2003).

present pedagogical documents, through deconstruction of the language used in them, enhances the possibility of changing them.

Our focus was on ECEC professionals' constructions of SEN and the positioning of a child in these different constructions. Therefore, we first examined all those sections of the documents with subtitles that either directly or indirectly indicated that the section would present a description of the child. Second, we limited the data to descriptions where the child was presented as not being able or skilful in something or where something related to the child was presented as a concern or as an issue that needed to be overcome. The children's documents were written using ready-made forms in either paper or digital form; these, again, varied notably between the municipalities. Regardless of the form, the focus in the examined pedagogical documents was clearly on describing a child: such descriptions typically accounted for the majority of the text in a document.

During careful, multiple readings of the documents, three features emerged that were of especial significance concerning the construction of the challenges the children presented: the nature of SEN as either an individual or environmental matter, the permanence of SEN, and the allocation of responsibility for overcoming SEN. It was obvious that these differing perspectives on writing also produced different images of the child, and hence positioned children differently.

When the differences of these three perspectives were studied further, the concept of positioning was applied in the analysis, following the idea of discursive psychology (Edwards 2005). The concept of positioning is produced to describe the relational responsibilities, rights and duties that a child is described as having at a certain time and in a certain situation (e.g. in a specific written description) This is important as positions are not permanent but changing and constructed in social relations with other people (Harré and Moghaddam 2003). According to Foucault (1977), the positioning of a person is based on negotiation about what is considered institutionally and culturally normal and abnormal. Positioning is always a social process, and the concept of positioning is relational to the context in which the positioning takes place (for example, Harré and Moghaddam 2003). In our case, the context is ECEC practices.

In the analysis, we identified three child positions in the data. These positions were the outgrowths of different kinds of SEN constructions. On the one hand, children were strongly constructed as problematic individuals through direct descriptions of them and their deficits or needs. Yet the descriptions occasionally focused on presenting the child in his or her context, and thus offered a more context-dependent presentation of the foundations of SEN. The third perspective focused on descriptions of development and change in the child's situation. In addition to overall constructions of SEN, we performed a detailed analysis of linguistic features. Our aim was to identify the linguistic features that positioned the child in a specific way and illustrated different SEN constructions. This linguistic analysis included, for example, examination of word choices, sentence structures, tenses, causal relations and the semantic roles of the actors. The analysis was conducted based on the ideas of discursive psychology (Edwards 2005).

Positions of a child in the documents

Three child positions were identified in the pedagogical documents: problematic child, multifaceted child, and learning child. These positions rely on differing ways of describing and

constructing SEN. Although the positions are reported here separately, in the documents a child is typically multiply positioned. The following extracts have been anonymised by assigning each child a pseudonym.

Problematic child in definitive descriptions

Positioning a child considered to have SEN as a problem is the most dominant construction in the ECEC documents. This is evident both quantitatively and in its way of appearing independently of any other positioning. A problematic child is described through definitive descriptions that construct the child's SEN as factual and relatively stable or even as an outcome of permanent individual deficits. The descriptions are characterised by the use of the present tense and expressions that suggest certainty and neutrality.

Extract 1: Kim's (six years) pre-primary plan

challenges in concentrating and paying attention, is restless in the pre-primary class
challenges in controlling the use of physical strength, manifests in e.g. rough manners towards friends

many challenges in social skills: playing with friends does not work without the help of an adult
Kim has challenges in respecting his friend's personal space and he comes too close to his friend while queuing, playing and in other situations, he pushes, blows in his friend's face or hugs too roughly to get his friend's attention

easily blames friends in conflict situations (-)

action continues after a while as it was, even if the adult intervenes (an adult must intervene dozens of times a day)

on the one hand, Kim doesn't want to harm his friends, but the skills of being with friends are lacking

tolerance of disappointment needs strengthening

In Extract 1, the SEN are described in the present tense by means of a list, written in short, factual sentences without any explicit reference to the child as a subject (e.g. 'problems in concentrating and attention'; 'tolerance of disappointment needs to be strengthened'; 'is restless in the pre-primary class'). The child is thus de-subjectified by documenting his SEN mainly as something separate from himself. Even when the child is presented as a subject (e.g. 'Kim has challenges in respecting his friend's personal space'; 'Kim doesn't want to harm his friends'), he is positioned as an actor who is unable to do or be what is expected from him.

In the extract, the abnormality of Kim's characteristics is produced by directly classifying them as shortcomings. This is done either through negative word choices (e.g. 'challenges in controlling the use of physical strength'), by quantifying the undesirable conduct (e.g. 'hugs too roughly'; 'the skills ... are lacking'), by emphasising the need for practice or support (e.g. 'an adult must intervene dozens of times a day', 'tolerance of disappointment needs strengthening') or by using negations (e.g. 'does not work'). When the descriptions emphasise the need for practising or adult support, they do not discuss the child's challenges and SEN directly, but include these euphemistically as part of the description of pedagogical measures. Nevertheless, the meaning of the deontic modal expression 'an adult must intervene' is strong and implies the difficulty the child presents from the viewpoint of the institution. As for the use of negations, unfulfilled expectations of development were disclosed, accompanied by the norms that should be followed at a certain age. For example,

the sentence ‘playing with friends does not work without the help of an adult’ constructs an expectation that playing should already go well independently.

It is also noteworthy that the descriptions of SEN are constructed using interpretative phrases. In phrases such as ‘many challenges in social skills’ or ‘tolerance of disappointment needs strengthening’, SEN are professionally categorised and defined by the use of nominalisation. In extreme cases, interpretative judgements describe SEN as permanent and as a cause of the child’s deficiencies or inability. In Extract 1, interpretative phrases occur at both the beginning and the end of the extract and seem to frame the purely descriptive everyday examples in the middle of the text. The purely descriptive sentences, such as ‘he pushes or blows in his friend’s face’, are used to concretise Kim’s actions and justify the interpretative descriptions and categorisations. Additionally, the interpretative phrases can also be based on documents provided by other professionals, on the reporting of someone’s talk or on other intertextual sources, as in Extract 2:

Extract 2: Amy’s (four years) pedagogical statement document

F79.9 Unspecified intellectual disability

G82.3 Dystonia tetraplegica

(-)

In different activities and situations, attention is paid to the position of Amy’s head and middle body. At meals, attention is paid to oral motor skills.

In Extract 2, intertextual information about Amy’s formal diagnoses heads the description. Thus, professionals in the educational institution define Amy’s SEN by presenting the medical diagnoses constructed by medical professionals. This is followed by examples of what requires to be monitored in everyday activities with Amy. Therefore, the professional categorisation of Amy’s SEN is justified with reference to another professional’s interpretations of the situation.

Such definitive descriptions focus on children’s developmental deficiencies or culturally undesirable behaviour by associating a child’s being and actions with negative features. The causes of unwanted characteristics are attributed to the child, whose SEN are produced as an objective fact and pre-existing phenomena. The constructed stability of the situation is emphasised by pointing to the unchanged intensity of the child’s problems after differing attempts to intervene in them professionally. The language used is simultaneously descriptive and normative.

Multifaceted child in contextual descriptions

When a child is positioned as multifaceted through contextual descriptions, a varied image of SEN is produced by proportioning these needs in relation to different situations and environments. Children’s needs are described as depending on changeable factors that are either internal (e.g. state of mind) or external (e.g. physical environment, available support). Thus, the descriptions typically consist of conditional claims that inform a reader about how SEN vary according to place and circumstances.

Extract 3: Mary’s (five years) ECEC plan

In unusual situations, like during holidays,³ when different groups of children have been combined, Mary might feel distressed and insecure and her behaviour can become restless and adult-challenging. During the autumn break, Mary had ‘a temper tantrum’ in a dressing situation.

Extract 4: Joe's (four years) pedagogical assessment document

Joe is self-directed in everyday routines, once he gets started. His concentration and attention easily flag, especially in a big group. Sensitive to external stimuli. Focusing on assignments demanding concentration is difficult. Concentration is better in activities in which one can let off energy. Impulsiveness is shown especially while playing.

Extract 5: Mark's (seven years) individual education plan

Concentration span is short, especially when Mark doesn't understand the language. Picture support, quick drawings and support signs help with understanding.

Extracts 3 and 4 show how various external factors are viewed as having a significant effect on the child's SEN. In Extract 3, unusual situations are presented as the cause of negative emotions (anxiety and insecurity) in the child and, therefore, as the reason for restlessness, defiance and temper tantrums. Similarly, in Extract 4, being in a large group, external stimuli and inappropriate assignments and activities are said to weaken the child's concentration. Therefore, in these extracts, the child's problems and difficulties are assumed to be dependent on environmental and contextual issues. For instance, the last line of Extract 4 categorises impulsiveness as one of Joe's ways of behaving, but limits this characteristic to a specific context, play. Similarly, in the last line of Extract 5, the list of various pedagogical methods which support the child's understanding constructs overcoming SEN as a shared responsibility and as the shared project of the adults and child.

The contextual descriptions construct a multidimensional and context-dependent image of children and their SEN. At the same time, because the context is acknowledged as influencing a child's situation, SEN become a shared issue and, at least to some extent, an environmental question. While the contextual descriptions consider the child's educational environment as a potential source of SEN, instead of seeing them only as internal issues, the descriptions partly normalise the categorisation of the child as deviant. In addition, the descriptions specify the child's situation by emphasising the context-based variations in SEN and by illustrating them in more detail.

Learning child in dynamic descriptions

When a change in the child's situation is reported to have happened, using past tense descriptions, or when such a change is anticipated in goals, using a future tense, a child becomes positioned as a learning child. Then, the focus is either on past–present comparisons of the child's behaviour, skills or SEN or on the pedagogical aims set for the child. The descriptions typically illustrate active learning and progress by the child that indicate positive change. Despite this tendency, a child's SEN are constructed as part of the child's internal characteristics.

Extract 6: Susan's (five years) intensified support plan

Susan has developed very significantly during autumn 2014. Getting dressed has become much easier and hardly any temper tantrums have occurred. Susan also clearly tolerates unpleasant sensations better, such as clothes that feel unpleasant or, for example, doing her hair up in a ponytail. However, challenges in sensory integration still exist, but they stand out mainly, for example, in auditory sensations or when things feel unpleasant in some other way.

Extract 7: Noah's (seven years) pedagogical assessment

Noah is motorically restless and bodily control is still being practised.

Fine motor skills are being practised.

Linguistic skills are good as far as vocabulary and concepts are considered, the *r* phoneme is being practised.

Social skills are being practised (speaking instead of assaulting).

Good self-esteem is being developed, tolerating disappointments is being practised. Attention, concentration and cognitive control are being practised.

Taking care of oneself is being practised (staying dry).

In Extract 6, the main focus is on the child's learning results and their evaluation and comparison with earlier situations (e.g. 'the child has developed [-] very significantly'). The desirability of such changes is expressed through positive comparative adjectives (e.g. better, easier) and verbs (e.g. developed). The use of intensifying adverbs (e.g. much, clearly, significantly) further emphasises the extent of positive changes. Temporal information on when the change occurred (e.g. 'during autumn 2014') may also be given.

In the few descriptions that contain negative evaluations of children's situations, the magnitude of the still existing SEN is undermined through the adverbs (e.g. hardly any; a bit). In addition, the evaluation may be followed by a positive characterisation. This is the case in Extract 6, where the negative assessment, 'the challenges in sensory integration still exist', is followed by the specifying and neutralising contextual description 'but they stand out mainly, for example, hearing sensations'. Especially, the use of the conjunction 'but' between the negative and the contextual sentences emphasises the progress over difficulties that has been made. In other words, the difficulties are not presented as an overall phenomenon but as restricted to a specific situation.

Whereas the descriptions in Extract 6 refer explicitly to the child and her SEN, the utterances in Extract 7 relate to these needs indirectly by describing pedagogical aims that imply the existence of SEN. The extract starts with a definitive description of Noah's restlessness and continues with indirect descriptions of his SEN and deficiencies in skills by describing his practising or developing in eight different developmental areas. The use of the passive voice (e.g. 'Fine motor skills are practised') removes the responsibility from the text; in other words, the actors who are practising or developing these skills remain unclear. On the other hand, the passive voice also creates an image of overcoming SEN as a shared process – as something which is carried out together, even though the responsibility of training and developing is, in the end, left to the child. Shared responsibility is sometimes represented by indicating professionals or even by naming the one who acts.

Dynamic descriptions typically construct the child as an active participant in training and practising skills. In these cases, a child is positioned as a learner, and SEN is constructed as an issue subject to temporal change that can be overcome with active pedagogical work. The location of the responsibility of these actions, however, varies. Because the passive voice is typically used in descriptions, with no mention of any specific actor supporting the child, responsibility is also obscured. Occasionally, by describing his or her actions, the child is positioned as the only one responsible for training and practising, and hence SEN is constructed as something the child is responsible for overcoming. Moreover, while the child is positioned in a positive light as a learner, he or she is also presented as an object of constant evaluation.

Discussion

This study investigated the SEN constructions and positioning of children with SEN in their pedagogical documents. The results show that the professional descriptions positioned children in three subject positions and constructed SEN in three ways: a problematic child constructed through definitive descriptions, a multifaceted child constructed through contextual descriptions, and a learning child constructed through dynamic descriptions. Table 2 presents a summary of these findings.

The results revealed some tensions between the three different types of SEN constructions. First, in accordance with earlier studies (for example, Andreasson and Asplund Carlsson 2013; Hjärne and Säljö 2004; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007; Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015), the children with SEN were typically positioned as problematic in the documentation. This means that SEN were fundamentally constructed as an individual matter and as a child's deficit in a very evaluative manner throughout the documents. In addition, the responsibility for overcoming SEN was attributed to the child (see Smith 2012). This was most typical in the definitive descriptions, but was also more implicitly presented, to some extent, in contextual and dynamic descriptions. To some extent, this function was an outgrowth of the starting point of the documents, which was to categorise (or referring to Miller and Rose [2008], to problematise) the child and her or his situation after it had been defined as undesirable (see also Cooren 2004; Parding and Liljegren 2016). This way of identifying the challenges facing children through documentation is a powerful act because it implies that these challenges are permanent, and internal, and draws a distinction between ordinary needs and special needs. This division into ordinary and SEN is controversial, however, because it has its foundation in subjective value judgements regarding ways of conduct and being that are good and desirable instead of in indisputable facts about the child (Vehmas 2010).

In the studied documents, categorisation was produced, especially through interpretative writing, which included professional judgements or assessments of the child's state that went beyond pure observations. This kind of interpretative writing was thus normative and constructed SEN as an objective reality as well as a permanent fact (see Vehmas 2010). However, when a child was narrated in purely descriptive terms, using contextual descriptions or dynamic descriptions of actions, less blame was usually attributed to the child. These descriptions typically presented everyday examples of children's activities through sentences with a subject-predicate structure. However, in the documents these pure descriptions were subordinated to interpretive constructions: interpretations were presented as the initial arguments in either the opening line of the text or later on. The role of descriptive writing was to add information and to complete the description. Therefore, interpretations also directed the reading of descriptive writing.

Second, in contrast, children with SEN were commonly presented as individuals with situationally varying needs and characteristics through contextual descriptions. SEN were constructed as conditional, fluctuating and environment-relational, not only as a child's internal states. Occasionally, children were positioned as active learners through dynamic descriptions, yet they were nevertheless presented as objects of constant evaluation. In this respect, the results of this study differ somewhat from the previous documentation research, according to which reflections on professional practices and environmental influence are totally lacking in pedagogical documents which, instead, foreground predominantly

Table 2. Key characteristics of the three description types.

Child's position	Description	Child	Linguistic features	Reference point	Fictional example	Nature of SEN	Permanence of SEN	Main function
Problem	Definitive	Passive	Factuality Evaluativity	Interpretation	Speaking is very difficult for Tim Tim needs support in communication	Individual	Permanent	Categorise
Multi-faceted	Contextual	Active	Conditionality	Observation	Tim says few words when playing. When he is tired or confused he speaks only a little	Contextual	Fluctuating	Specify Neutralise
Learning	Dynamic	Active	Temporality Evaluativity	Interpretation	Tim's speech has developed significantly Tim is training to vocalise consonants	Individual	Changeable	Assess

deficit-centred and de-subjectifying descriptions of children's SEN (for example, Andreasson and Asplund Carlsson 2013; Hjørne and Säljö 2004; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007; Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015; Røn Larsen 2012). All in all, contextual descriptions contain less categorisation of a child as a problem and point to the influence of the environment as well. Therefore, they approach the identification and manifestation of SEN as a social process. In line with the ideas of the social model of disability (for example, Oliver 2013) and inclusive education (UNESCO 2009), the influence of the environment in creating and maintaining children's challenges needs to be included in the examination of SEN without requiring categorisation (see also Danforth and Naraian 2015; Røn Larsen 2012).

The results additionally highlight one of the most explicit ideologies in the documents: the expectation of an independent child who overcomes difficulties without adult help. The child, in other words, develops, learns and grows. This finding is in line with what Smith (2012) identified as the current emphasis on independent, responsible child subjects. The ideal of independent change was perhaps most noticeably present in definitive descriptions that positioned a child as a problem. These descriptions indicated no professional responsibility for the desired change. However, the ideal was also apparent in other types of descriptions. The development of a child's situation was typically described as a change in the child's culturally desirable behaviour and ways of being in the institution, such as learning not to disturb others, instead of as a change in, for example, a child's personal well-being or satisfaction. In other words, the desired change was described as individual adjustment. It is indeed stated that the identification of SEN often aspires to overcome professional problems, not the child's (Hjørne and Säljö 2004). The current practice of documenting SEN in pedagogical documents can be verbalised, in line with Karila and Alasuutari (2012, 21), as one that mainly describes how a child should change or what he or she should learn in order to meet institutional criteria; it is not a practice that documents how a child should be supported.

Descriptions orientate pedagogical practice

The key function of the child descriptions in pedagogical documents is to offer a pedagogical starting point for planning. Therefore, as definitive writing predominates and SEN is constructed as a child's individual issue, it is fair to question whether the current practice of describing children with SEN is a suitable way to construct a base for planning support. Different kinds of descriptions regarding children with SEN also influence the orientations of pedagogical practice. If SEN are created as stable and unchanging, there is a risk that they are simultaneously understood as unsupportable, especially if they are constructed as disabilities consequent on a child's personal characteristics or permanent state (see Pihlaja, Sarlin, and Ristkari 2015). Because the significance of environmental arrangements and pedagogical practices are typically dismissed, the child easily receives the blame for the situation and is positioned as responsible for self-change (see Smith 2012), even in cases where it is pedagogical practices that should be re-evaluated and developed.

Therefore, the focus in writing pedagogical documents needs to shift from the examination of children's individuality to the identification of children's responses to pedagogical interventions and suitable support. In this way, the child is not positioned as the one responsible for adapting. Despite children's impairments or syndromes or whether they have been included in other diagnostically constructed categories, SEN are a separate case: the

relationship between an individual and the environment it is always cultural, contextual and fluctuating (see also Franck 2014). From this pedagogical perspective, it is important that the fluctuation of SEN in different contexts, social situations and times, and in response to the different inner states of a child, is identified before a document is written. When this pedagogical emphasis is adopted in writing, the resulting descriptions will create a more complete and multidimensional image of the child and usually offer more detailed information about children and their needs.

Notes

1. Discursive psychology, according to Edwards (2005), typically approaches the research subjects as psychological entities from the point of view of language. Discursive psychology has its origin in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis.
2. The drafting of an individual ECEC plan became mandatory in Finland in August 2015, although the individual ECEC plan was already an established practice. Also in compulsory pre-primary education, the individual pre-primary plan is an established practice and mandatory if a child has been referred for SEN.
3. During the school holidays in Finland, daycare group arrangements concerning the composition of staff and children, physical environment and routine are usually subject to temporary changes.

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