Recording Support Measures in the Sequential Pedagogical Documents of Children With Special Education Needs

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Abstract

This study investigates the descriptions of support measures in the sequential pedagogical documents (individual education plans or programs and others) of children with special education needs from early childhood education and care to preprimary education. According to previous research, the role of pedagogical work is largely disregarded in these documents, which typically focus on describing children's challenges instead of support measures. In this study, the sequential pedagogical documents (N = 257) of 64 Finnish children were studied for approximately three to six years, and the data were analyzed by investigating the textual and content-related coherence, as well as the linguistic precision, of the descriptions of support. Consequently, four chronological patterns of describing and developing the support measures — missing, repetitious, disorganized, and explicit — were introduced, and the study results emphasize the importance of the specificity and continuity of documentation.

Keyword: Curricula, Assessment, Instruction, Qualitative Methods, Preschoolers, Kindergartners and Early Elementary

Introduction

Drafting individualized pedagogical documents, individual education plans or programs (IEPs), or other pedagogical documents for children with special education needs (SEN) is often considered a key element of a successful, high-quality individualized pedagogical plan (Miller, 2014; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000; Yell & Stecker, 2003). The practices and prerequisites of drafting pedagogical documents in early childhood education and care (ECEC), as well as the required contents of such documents, vary internationally, depending

on educational contexts, educational systems, and the pedagogical documents in question. Typically, pedagogical documents include descriptions of children's strengths, current achievement levels, and challenges, as well as the individualized learning objectives of the pedagogical support (see, e.g., Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Yell & Stecker, 2003).

The practice of drafting IEPs or other pedagogical documents for children with SEN is well established. Consequently, detailed recommendations for drafting these documents have been given. The overall principle and aim of the documents are to elaborate meaningful, suitable, research-based interventions that support children's education (Drasgow, Yell, & Robinson, 2001; Gartin & Murdick, 2005). The main focus should be on planning and support—what adults do with and for children. Consequently, the development of objectives, goals, and methods form the core of pedagogical documents (Poppes, Vlaskamp, de Geeter, & Nakken, 2002), which should indicate specific interventions and measures to support children (Kwon, Elicker, & Kontos, 2011).

From the viewpoint of the effective planning and assessment of children's progress and the efficacy of the support provided, specific descriptions of exact, measurable objectives and support measures (Boavida, Aguiar, McWilliams, & Pimentel, 2010; Christle & Yell, 2010) should be contextualized to children's everyday lives and various learning environments (Boavida et al., 2010; Räty, Vehkakoski, & Pirttimaa, 2018). Additionally, knowledge about children's current achievement levels, situations, challenges, and strengths needs to be explicitly utilized to set goals and formulate appropriate measures (Michinowicz, Mcconnell, Peterson, & Odom, 1995). This kind of documentation is likely to lead to the individualization of practices (Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000) and the meeting of legal and substantive IEP requirements (Christle & Yell, 2010; Drasgow et al., 2001). To achieve these documentation aims, the language used should be specific, observable, and measurable (Rosas, Winterman, Kroeger, & Jones, 2009).

In pedagogical documents, including IEPs, the systematic follow-up and continuing development of support measures play a central role (see, e.g., Wixson & Valencia, 2011). In evaluating children's progress and the effectiveness of support, previous research highlighted constant formative assessment using appropriate data collection techniques (Christle & Yell, 2010). Drasgow et al. (2001) highlight the need for the multifaceted (re)evaluation of children's progress, needs, and support as part of the revision of pedagogical documents. Moreover, the importance of coherence between sequential recordings and documents in which different contents (e.g., children's needs, objectives, and support) are explicitly linked to each other is underscored (Rosas et al., 2009). The revisions, improvements, and changes, as well as the maintained and terminated practices of support, should be explicitly indicated in revised documents (Wixson & Valencia, 2011).

Despite the need for continuity and coherence, earlier research concerning pedagogical documents has primarily entailed the cross-sectional examination of pedagogical documentation methods, while the development of the support measures in sequential documents and the chronological changes made to the contents of these children's documents over the years have been largely overlooked (for an exception, see Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). Moreover, in existing studies, the investigation of the contents and use of pedagogical documents, including IEPs, in early childhood settings is more infrequent than in those related to older children (for an exception, see e.g., Boavida et al., 2010; Kwon et al., 2011; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000). Therefore, to address this research gap, we focus on the descriptions of support measures in the sequential pedagogical documents of Finnish children with SEN in ECEC. This study is based on longitudinal data: We examine the same children's sequential documents and recordings of support over approximately three to six years to ascertain how the recordings of support measures may change over time. The following are our research questions:

Research Question 1: What kinds of patterns of describing support measures can be identified from the sequential pedagogical ECEC documents of children with SEN over the years?

Research Question 2: What kinds of content-related and linguistic features are peculiar to the different patterns of describing this support?

Writing Pedagogical Documents: Current Practices

In numerous studies investigating pedagogical documents, including IEPs, in recent decades, the contents and (linguistic) forms of these documents have been found to be problematic. Generally, pedagogical documents vary remarkably in regard to quality, length, and contents (Karvonen & Huynh, 2007). They typically emphasize the descriptions of children and their challenges, referring only scarcely to pedagogical planning (Andreasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2013; Hjörne & Säljö, 2004; Isaksson, Lindquist, & Bergström, 2007). In the study by Rosas et al. (2009), half of the examined IEPs lacked relevant legal requirements. Zirkel and Hetrick (2017) found that, in particular, the evaluations and revisions of the previous IEPs were insufficiently documented. Moreover, the assessment in IEPs has been reported to be predominantly summative, focusing on the assessment of children's present skills instead of on the development of support (Andreasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2013).

In previous research, the quality of the objectives in particular seems to have been studied thoroughly, and this is likely because their significance has been highlighted (e.g., Christle & Yell, 2010; Drasgow et al., 2001). However, in these studies, the objectives elaborated in pedagogical documents have been found to be generally poor in quality, especially concerning their measurability (Michinowicz at al., 1995; Rakap, 2015; Rubler, McGrew, Dalrymple, & Jung, 2010; Sanches-Ferreira, Lopes-dos-Santos, Alves, Santos, & Silveira-Maia, 2013). This is presumably because they were written in an imprecise and inadequate manner (Ruble et al., 2010; Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013). The objectives are

typically broad, vague, and abstract (Boavida et al., 2010; Drasgow et al., 2001; Michinowicz et al., 1995; Rakap, 2015; Yell & Stecker, 2003), and their development is not documented systematically (Espin, Deno, & Albayrak-Kaymak, 1998; Yell & Stecker, 2003). The number of objectives is typically high, possibly leading to problems with monitoring the children's progress (Boavida et al., 2010). In the study by Boavida et al. (2010), it was found that higher-quality objectives (regarding measurability and functionality) were more likely related to autonomy skills. Moreover, the objectives of children with disabilities were more likely high-quality than the objectives of children without disabilities. However, in Rakap's (2015) study, such differences were not found.

The descriptions of the interventions and support measures are studied less frequently than other document contents. Earlier studies show that the descriptions of individualized instruction are not documented systematically (Espin et al., 1998; Yell & Stecker, 2003) and that the connection between learning objectives and instruction planning is weak or nonexistent (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Ruble et al., 2010). Additionally, support measures are described predominantly using imprecise language and exclude the specific allocation of responsibilities related to the provision of support (Rubler et al., 2010; Räty et al., 2018). Methods are also focused on efforts to improve children's skills instead of on environmental, organizational, or pedagogical aspects of support (Isaksson et al., 2007).

Few researchers have analyzed pedagogical documents based on a longitudinal design. Studying the sequential IEPs of children with autism from kindergarten to Grade 9, Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010) found that approximately 50% of the annual goals in IEPs were repeated in sequential documents. This repetition occurred approximately two or three years in a row, depending on the objectives, although goals could be repeated up to nine years in a row. They also found that younger children —those in kindergarten—had fewer adaptations than those in the upper grades, whereas teachers reported comparatively less

frequently on children's progress in later grades. However, teachers in inclusive settings reported progress more often than those in non-inclusive settings.

To summarize, the clear discrepancy between theoretical understanding and actual practice regarding high-quality pedagogical documents is evident. Yell and Stecker (2003) describe how, at its worst, "the IEP, in effect, becomes a procedural compliance exercise with little or no relevance to the teaching and learning process" (p. 74). Moreover, there is a danger that pedagogical documents act primarily as administrative rather than pedagogical tools (Andreasson, Asp-Onsjö, & Isaksson, 2013) or aim primarily to meet legislative requirements without having an educational value (Christle & Yell, 2010; see also Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000; Yell & Stecker, 2003).

Method

Setting

In this study, we investigate the pedagogical documents drafted in Finnish ECEC. Finnish ECEC consists of services for children from birth to 6 years of age and preprimary education (4 hours a day) in the year preceding compulsory comprehensive school. Both ECEC services and preprimary education are founded on the Nordic Educare model, based on which teaching, education, and care (while parents work or study) are daily interlinked activities that are provided in one location (either kindergarten or family daycare) (see Onnismaa & Kalliala, 2010).

All children participate in compulsory preprimary education at the age of six. However, regarding other ECEC services, the participation rate of Finnish children is relatively low compared to the international rate: Only 74% of 4-year-olds participated in ECEC in 2015, whereas the average for OECD countries was 87% (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). In addition to being compulsory, preprimary education is also free of charge, but other ECEC services are subject to charge

(maximum payment: €290 per month). However, the charges are reduced gradually based on family income and whether the family has many children, and low-income families are released from payment entirely. In 2016, this reduction applied to 18% of families (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017).

Regarding the arrangements for educational support in Finnish ECEC and preprimary education, a shift toward the application of response to intervention (RTI) ideas (see Buysse & Peisner-Feinberg, 2013) and the three-tiered pyramid model (see Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010) has occurred in recent years. Since 2010, the RTI model has been applied in Finnish primary and preprimary education as an administrative framework for providing support (regarding the Finnish RTI, see Björn, Aro, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2016). In this model, three tiers of educational support—general (tier 1), intensified (tier 2), and special (tier 3)—are presented. The Finnish system emphasizes open-to-all educational support, which is a prerequisite-free provision that is granted instantly once children's needs are identified (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Finnish National Board of Education, 2018). Therefore, from the first tier, instant pedagogical and instructional rearrangements are available in children's own ECEC classes in keeping with the ideas of the earliest possible intervention and preventive support.

However, due to the differing legislative bases, in the Finnish ECEC, the role of RTI and the tiered model is unestablished. Preprimary education is regulated by the Finland Basic Education Act (628/1998) and the core curriculum for preprimary education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), which indicate the use of Finnish RTI explicitly. However, other ECEC is regulated by the Early Childhood Education Act (540/2018) and the core curriculum for early childhood education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2018), which fails to define the exact ways in which educational support should be provided. Therefore, regarding the application of RTI, the Finnish educational system currently reflects

the international situation: It is said to be more established in primary and secondary school than in early childhood settings (The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), & National Head Start Association (NHSA), 2014).

In addition to the national legislation and regulations governing ECEC and preprimary education, municipalities in Finland are obligated to localize the national curricula at the municipal level by designing local curricula, which are normative within particular municipalities. In these local policy documents, the multiple municipal directions can be set (e.g., whether to also apply the RTI framework to ECEC), and the national regulations are elaborated in detail (e.g., specific forms of pedagogical documents are provided). Finnish ECEC services including preprimary education are increasingly arranged in an inclusive manner. For example, in 2016, only 8% of Finnish municipalities reported that they had segregated ECEC classes for children with SEN (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017).

In Finnish ECEC, the drafting of pedagogical documents has a long tradition, and the practices are governed by laws, curricula, and municipal regulations. As contrary to international practice, in Finnish ECEC, every child, irrespective of SEN, has an individualized pedagogical document. The aim of these documents has traditionally been to take into account children's individual strengths, interests, and opinions in planning high-quality general ECEC. An individualized pedagogical document called *an ECEC plan* is drafted for children under 6 years of age. This practice has been outlined in the ECEC steering policy document since 2004 and has been mandatory by law since the 2015 legislative reform. In preprimary education, the law obligates the drafting of *a preprimary plan* for children with SEN, although it is enabled for all children. In practice, all children in

preprimary education typically have individualized preprimary plans, as municipalities have made it a mandatory component of the local curricula.

ECEC and preprimary plans typically include the planning of educational support at the general level. However, when intensified or special support is provided, additional pedagogical documentation is conducted. According to the laws and curricula, in tiers 2 and 3, children's preprimary plans need to be either (a) completed with additional support-centered contents or separate attachments (plans for intensified support) when children receive intensified support or (b) replaced entirely by support-focused pedagogical documents, when children receive special support (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016).

In other ECEC services, the practices of documenting the educational support of children with SEN vary. In some municipalities, the RTI model with three tiers is implemented, and then the abovementioned practices of preprimary education are typically followed. However, the practices can also be followed partially, for example, using an individual ECEC document to plan support for all children, even though the RTI model and three tiers are used as the administrative framework. In the municipalities in which the RTI model with tiers is not implemented in ECEC, the individual ECEC plan is typically used universally.

ECEC teachers are generally the ones who draft the documents. In preprimary education, the ECEC teachers with preprimary education qualifications draft the pedagogical documents used in their preprimary classes. Furthermore, in other ECEC services, when children have SEN, early childhood special education teachers typically participate in at least the planning of children's support and the drafting of documents. Additionally, family daycare nurses, in cooperation with ECEC teachers or early childhood special education teachers, draft pedagogical documents for children in family daycare.

There seems to have been a rapid turnover of writers of children's pedagogical documents over the years. In Finnish ECEC and preprimary education, children typically experience multiple transitions and other structural changes in their ECEC classes during their years in early childhood education services. Because of the predominant practice of arranging ECEC based on age groups, children in kindergarten can, for example, move into new groups at the beginning of new terms as they grow older. Moreover, staff can also change classes. In both cases, the educators who write the children's pedagogical documents may also change. According to the data collected for this research, the same educator had not usually written more than two sequential documents for the child. Therefore, each child's pedagogical documents had typically been written by at least two educators.

Sample

The research data were collected from 23 Finnish preprimary education classes during the 2015–2016 school year. According to Gobo (2011), social research typically focuses on "the social significance of the sample instead of a statistical logic" (p. 2). Therefore, as Finnish municipalities have a great deal of independence in localizing regulations related to pedagogical writing (e.g., making drafts of certain documents mandatory and providing forms of pedagogical documents), purposive sampling was used to achieve the maximum variation (Patton, 2015), considering the municipalities and the preprimary education classes within them. The selection criteria for municipalities included varying pedagogical practices in arranging educational support for children, geographical locations, and sizes. Consequently, five Finnish municipalities participated.

The ECEC administrators in the municipalities selected the participating preprimary classes. The researcher instructed the administrators to seek participating classes from different parts of the cities and municipalities to achieve the most diverse data possible. They were also instructed to take into account the geographical locations of the classes and the

potential variations in the children's socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, administrators were asked to invite classes that, to their knowledge, varied in regard to their pedagogical practices. As a result, 23 preprimary education classes participated with a variance of one to ten classes per municipality.

For preprimary education classes, we applied two kinds of sampling techniques. In ten of the participating classes, all the children were considered participants, irrespective of their SEN. However, because the specific purpose of the study was focused on the documentation of support measures, in 13 classes, we asked only the children who had identified SEN (either intensified or special support, tiers 2 and 3) to participate. Patton (2015) describes this kind of selection as *group characteristics sampling*, which is aimed at a "select specific information-rich group" (p. 267). Consequently, we collected the pedagogical documents of 108 Finnish children receiving either special (tier 3, $n = 8$), intensified (tier 2, $n = 21$), or general support (tier 1, $n = 79$). In this sample, the number of children receiving either intensified or special support is purposefully overrepresented, approximately 27% of children in total. In Finnish ECEC, only 7% of children received either intensified or special support in 2016 (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2017).

We followed the ethical guidelines for data collection (Christians, 2011), which include protecting the anonymity of the children and municipalities throughout the course of the study. We requested written research permission from the municipal authorities and written informed consent from the children's guardians. We also informed these guardians and the teachers of the preprimary classes about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In 10 of the 23 classes that participated, we requested research permission from all the guardians, irrespective of the children's identified SEN. In the other 13 classes, we requested permission solely from the guardians of the children with SEN (intensified or special support) to enable the collection of sufficient data about these children.

According to the curricula for ECEC (Finnish National Board of Education, 2018) and preprimary education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016), pedagogical documents should be revisited, at the very least, once a year or whenever children's needs require it. In practice, documents are typically drafted at the beginning of fall and assessed at the end of spring. However, the pedagogical documents of children with SEN are typically revisited more often than those of children without SEN. In the research data, the frequency with which the pedagogical documents were revisited varied substantially, as some children's documents were revisited up to five times a year, while others were revisited only once.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to investigate the patterns of writing about support measures for children with SEN. Research data were selected from the broader data set (n = 108) according to the following criterion: The child had at least two years of documented history in ECEC, i.e., there were two pedagogical documents drafted in ECEC and preprimary education (typically, an individual preprimary education plan and ECEC plan, or substitute documents). This criterion was applied to obtain longitudinal data.

A second purpose was to investigate the descriptions of the support measures for children receiving either general, intensified, or special support. An additional criterion was applied to the data set with at least two years of documented history in ECEC: The child had learning, behavioral, or developmental challenges, which were described in the document drafted during the preprimary year. To be identified as long-lasting, such challenges needed to have been mentioned in at least one pedagogical document prior to the start of preprimary education. Challenges varied from more severe, wide-ranging developmental difficulties, such as an intellectual disability or particular language impairment, to more specific and milder challenges, such as holding a pencil properly or resting peacefully during naptime. An

officially diagnosed condition was not required, as this is not a prerequisite for receiving educational support in Finland.

The final sample consisted of 64 children's pedagogical documents (n = 257). Approximately 72% (*n* = 46) received general support (tier 1), approximately 22% (*n* = 14) received intensified support (tier 2), and approximately 6% (*n* = 8) received special support (tier 3) during their preprimary year. The number of documents studied per child varied from 3 to 10, with the average number per child being 4 (mean 4.02). The data are presented in Table 1.

After identifying all cases of challenges in each document, we identified the recordings of support measures, pedagogical practices, and their related assessments. Each child's individual challenge formed a separate case, such that the challenge was the basic unit of analysis. Challenges were analyzed in sequential documents. For example, if a child was described as having challenges with (a) vocabulary, (b) proper pencil holding, and (c) self-regulation in the preprimary year, the descriptions of support measures, objectives, and evaluations regarding each of these challenges was studied as one case. The descriptions of measures, assessments, and evaluations written in any parts of the documents by ECEC professionals were included. The writings of parents, children, or individuals other than ECEC professionals were not included in the investigation.

We found 164 separate cases of continual challenges in the children's documents. The number of challenges per child varied from one to eight and averaged three. The most typical challenges related to socioemotional (39% of the cases) and motoric (20%) issues, followed by challenges of attention and concentration (16%) and language (15%). Other challenges related to self-help skills such as eating or toileting (6%), sensory impairments (2%), cognitive functioning (2%), and mathematical readiness (2%).

Data Analysis

The documents can be investigated using various methodologies and approaches (Bowen, 2009). In this study, we based our analysis of the differing patterns of writing about children's support measures on the key ideas of discursive psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and text linguistics (Halliday, 2013). In discursive psychology, reality is understood as being socially constructed through language (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). As Halliday reiterates, "language is patterned activity," especially regarding the meanings it creates (2013, p. 56). The intensive case analysis of the sequential recordings of each child's challenge revealed three distinct features of the writing: (a) whether there were any descriptions of support in a child's sequential documents, (b) whether the support measures were changed from one recording to the other, and (c) whether the recordings presented a coherent picture of support planning over the years.

To investigate the differences in greater depth at both the content-related and linguistic levels, we applied two concepts of text linguistics to the analysis (Halliday, 2013). First, we investigated the coherence of the written information in the recordings. Coherence is a vital element of communicative text (De Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981), and it can be constructed using linguistic features, such as referencing and linking words (e.g., *thus*, *since*, and *in order to*). For example, we investigated how specifically the measures were justified in the recordings and whether they were revisited later. Additionally, we focused on the relationships between sequential recordings with respect to content (e.g., including the same kind of support practices) and the abovementioned linguistic features that created coherence. Second, we continued the analysis by investigating the level of linguistic precision of the descriptions (i.e., the vagueness or elaborateness of the descriptions and resulting specificity of the information they offered).

Based on the observed features, the first author followed the ideas of the constant comparison method (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000), creating the initial

categorization based on the preliminary observations of the data. All three authors discussed, negotiated, and revisited the initial categories before deciding on the final categorization (see Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). The final categorization, including four patterns of developing support measures, was constructed by comparing the initial categories with various data extracts and other potential categories (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981). After arriving at a common view regarding the final categories, we continued the analysis by categorizing all 164 identified cases of challenges. The first and last authors both analyzed 66% of the individual cases of challenges by coding the continuity of the support measures for each case into the final pattern categories. In 94% of the cases, the authors achieved a clear consensus on the categorization of the support measures. Regarding the remaining 6% of cases, the researchers discussed the cases and concretized the criteria for the categorization in detail to decide which pattern the continuity of the support measures in question represented. For the remaining 34% of the data, the first author independently conducted the analysis and categorization, without any need to clarify the criteria for categorization.

Results

Four patterns of either disjointed or interlinked descriptions of support in sequential pedagogical documents were found: *missing, repetitious, disorganized,* and *explicit*. The key characteristics of the patterns, as well as the proportions of the cases they cover, are presented in Table 2. Next, each pattern is illustrated with a single chronological example from the data, demonstrating the key characteristics of a particular pattern relating to both research questions. In the examples, the children's names are replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Pattern 1: Missing Descriptions of Support

Missing descriptions of support refers to the recordings (and sometimes, complete documents) in which the descriptions of support are lacking entirely. In total, 29% of the

studied cases were categorized as *missing* descriptions of support. In particular, the recordings that were aimed primarily at assessing a previously written plan (typically, recordings at the end of the ECEC year) lacked the descriptions and revisions of support measures, and included only the descriptions of children and their situations. Extract 1 shows this type of *missing* support in three sequential recordings of Samuel's documents.

Extract 1: Samuel

4 years 2 mon	What the child is practicing: Seeking attention is strong: "look," "look"; would not be willing to wait for others to watch or for their own turn to speak Agreements: Practicing good manners. *(ECEC plan)*
5 years 2 mon	Observations: The need for an adult's attention is great, sometimes seeks other children's attention by fooling around. What the child is practicing: showing and controlling one's emotions (anger provokes kicking, hitting, spitting), malicious pleasure (down arrow), intentional laughter, giggling in situations where it's inappropriate (down arrow). Agreements: Showing and controlling emotions. *(ECEC plan)*
6 years 0 mon	Observations: Making contact: pushing others, blowing, "kicking" with the foot -> seeking attention. *(Preprimary plan)*

In Extract 1, in three records written during a 2-year period, Samuel is described as having various challenges regarding social skills. The records include objectives and descriptions of the situation; however, the descriptions of what adults do with and for Samuel to help him overcome the challenges are missing. Descriptions of actions (e.g., "showing and controlling of one's emotions"; "malicious pleasure") and agreements with parents (e.g., "showing and controlling emotions") describe the objectives for Samuel without describing adults' roles in promoting the achievement of objectives. It is notable that although support is mentioned in

the two later recordings, detailed descriptions of Samuel's individual difficulties are included every time the plan is revisited.

Pattern 2: Repetitious Descriptions of Methods

Repetitious descriptions, as opposed to *missing* ones, do illustrate a plan for support. However, the descriptions are brief, nonspecific, and repeated almost identically from one recording to another. This type of writing was the most dominant, as 41% of the studied cases were categorized as having this pattern. The key features of the *repetitious* pattern of describing support are illustrated in Extract 2, in which Emma's seven sequential recordings from an almost 5-year period are presented. In every record, Emma is described as having challenges related to her tendency to withdraw from social situations in ECEC.

Extract 2: Emma

1 year 9 mon	Observations: Shyness in new situations. Is wary of new people; however, gets used to them quickly and trusts adults. Objectives/measures: Is encouraged to play with others. Is allowed to take her time to know them. *(ECEC plan)*
2 years 3 mon	Observations: Is still shy toward new adults, but becomes more and more lively all the time. Is also a bit shy in new situations. Objectives/measures: Is encouraged to play with others. *(ECEC plan)*
4 years 4 mon	Measures: Encouragement and cheering when needed. *(ECEC plan)*
5 years 2mon	Observations: Participates in playing with others, but sometimes drops to the background in a big group. Sensitive, but tearfulness has decreased. Cautious in new situations. Objectives/measures: Is cheered in order to encourage her to play with others. *(ECEC plan)*
5 years 4 mon	Evaluation: Does not take a back seat anymore, even in a big group. Also plays in a group other than the one her sister is in. In conflict situations,

comes and tells an adult about being “wronged.” Cries less and less frequently. Has gained more courage, although sometimes shy in certain situations—e.g., singalong gatherings with the entire daycare center. Measures: Is encouraged to also participate in unfamiliar situations. *(ECEC plan)*

6 years 2 mon Observations: Observes. *(Preprimary plan)*

6 years 6 mon Evaluation: Everything okay. *(Preprimary plan)*

In Extract 2, similar descriptions are repeated yearly without changing the content or developing the approach remarkably (e.g., “is encouraged to play with others,” “is encouraged,” and “encouragement and cheering when needed”). Support is mentioned briefly using vague expressions (“is encouraged,” “is allowed,” and “is cheered”) and a maximum of two sentences. Recordings do not specify what should actually be done with Emma or how professionals should work concretely to help her participate. Similarly, the recordings contain no explicit justification for approaching withdrawal with encouragement. In the last two recordings, the descriptions of support are missing completely. Support is also described without contextualizing it Emma’s situation, such as what does encouragement means to her alone, in the group situation, or in the types of unfamiliar situations that Emma faces. Consequently, the manner of implementing the support remains unclear.

Linguistically, the connection between sequential recordings is lacking, as the evaluation of the planned support (mainly, encouragement) is not illustrated. In its entirety, the situation for Emma seems to remain quite stable. Emma is described as having withdrawn from the age of 1 year and 9 months. However, at the age of 6 years and 6 months, the situation has changed remarkably (i.e., “everything okay”). In the last recordings of Extract 2, the efficacy of the support is presented implicitly and evaluated when Emma is described as moving in the desired direction regarding her development and learning (e.g., “does not take

a back seat anymore, even in a big group," "plays in a group other than the one her sister is in," and "has gained more courage, although sometimes shy in certain situations—e.g., singalong gatherings with the entire daycare center"). Consequently, the slightly revisited plan for helping Emma participate is introduced ("is encouraged to also participate in unfamiliar situations"), and in that plan, the word *also* implies a change: From that point onward, encouragement will be provided in new situations. However, the object of the evaluation is Emma and changing her. The need for encouragement becomes justified primarily by Emma's actions, not by the need to improve the support.

Pattern 3: Disorganized Descriptions of Support

In a *disorganized* pattern, support is typically described in a precise and unambiguous manner. However, this is not as systematical feature as the linguistic features in the other patterns are as the supportcan also be unambiguous and general. The *disorganized* features of documenting support were found in the 17% of the cases studied. Unlike the previously presented patterns, the descriptions of support change over the years. However, the connections between sequential recordings are absent, and the logic of changing the support practices, methods, and/or agreements is missing at both the content and linguistic levels. Therefore, the *disorganized* pattern gives an incoherent view of support from the viewpoint of continuity. This appears in the following recordings of the third extract, in which Sebastian is described as having diverse challenges related to socioemotional well-being and behavior.

Extract 3: Sebastian

2 years 9 mon	Objectives: Methods for showing one's emotions are practiced—is guided to say, "Now I feel angry." Agreements: Naming of emotions is practiced—e.g., teddy bear cards. *(ECEC plan)*

2 years 11mon	Objectives: clear boundaries, consistency. Agreements: consistency; respecting others; waiting one's turn and sharing things; equity. *(ECEC plan)*
4 years 0 mon	Evaluation: It is important to pay attention to the environment; adult support is important for Sebastian; green and red anger cards are used to support the showing of one's emotions; setting boundaries is important -> gentle positive guidance; Sebastian is supported in regulating his own boundaries. *(ECEC plan)*
4 years 6 mon	Observations: He might test adults, and therefore, it is good that the group has good rules, as well as clear and consistent practices. It is, therefore, important that an adult is near and gatherings are motivating to Sebastian. For him, small-group activities are particularly good because there are fewer children. *(ECEC plan)*
4 years 9 mon	Evaluation: Sebastian is able to concentrate better in the group gatherings; every now and then, he is reminded of the thumbs-up practice when he has something to say. *(ECEC plan)*
5 years 9 mon	Observations: Daily transitions, waiting, and supervised situations are difficult; hard to concentrate. Objectives: Help with concentration during small-group activities. Sebastian is cheered and motivated to participate. Agreements: an adult participates in playing in order to prevent the play from going wild. *(ECEC plan)*
6 years 0 mon	Objectives: Nice memories and relationships with friends, and the ability to concentrate will improve. Methods: is trained daily by proceeding to one instruction at a time if needed; personal, quiet working space (with adult support). *(Preprimary plan)*

6 years 2 mon Follow-up: Transition to lunch with a special assistant and another boy and sitting next to an adult. *(Preprimary plan)*

6 years 4 mon Follow-up: A lot of personal support for calming emotions and/or improving alertness. *(Preprimary plan)*

In this extract, Sebastian's recordings illustrate how the connections between various recordings are weak, both within a single recording and between recordings. The recordings bounce from one matter to the other, due to the manner of changing the support measures and describing varying agreements without explicitly assessing their efficacy or citing earlier recordings. Other cohesion is also lacking. For example, new support measures are often introduced (e.g., teddy bear cards in the first recording, red and green anger pictures in the third, and a special assistant in the eighth) but are not revisited. In fact, practices in the preceding recording are typically not mentioned again after they are introduced. Therefore, information about whether the newly introduced methods are meant to accompany or replace the previous ones is missing.

Similarly, when the assessment is written, it typically focuses on introducing new and changing methods (e.g., "green and red anger cards are used to support the showing of one's emotions" and "transition to lunch with a special assistant and another boy and sitting next to an adult"). The actual assessment of the functionality of the support measures and the justifications for new ones is typically lacking. As with the previous types of writing, the aim of the assessment is sometimes to evaluate the child as an individual in different learning environments (e.g., "Sebastian is able to concentrate better in the group gatherings"). The *disorganized* characteristics are also evident when Sebastian's challenges are described. At the age of 2 years and 9 months, Sebastian is described as having challenges related to naming emotions. Thereafter, the main challenges seem to be his lack of concentration and sometimes, his ability to identify, understand, and control emotions. The challenges and

objectives are, therefore, described differently in sequential recordings without defining the reasons for changing them.

Although the connections and coherence of the writing are typically missing at both the content and linguistic levels, the linkage between different kinds of information is implied at times. In Extract 3, at the age of 5 years and 9 months, the description, “adult participates in playing in order to prevent the play from going wild” implies the goal of the support: to prevent playing from becoming wild. At the age of 4 years and 6 months, the linkage between observations (“he might test adults”) and practice (“and, therefore, it is good that the group has good rules, as well as clear and consistent practices”) is described. Similarly, the descriptions vary according to how they contextualize where or when a certain support measure is provided. While some expressions define the place of the support (e.g., “transition to lunch with a special assistant”), others remain very general regarding the descriptions of practices (e.g., “help with concentration during small-group activities”) and omit the child’s individual situation and group context from the planning.

Pattern 4: Explicit Descriptions of Support

In the *explicit* patterns, support is evaluated and developed systematically. The pattern is the most infrequently found category, however, as the features of *explicitness* in documenting support were identified in only 13% of the cases studied. In *explicit* patterns, the recordings refer to the preceding recordings and documents that are cited *explicitly* sometimes. Descriptions are typically detailed, contextualized, and linguistically unambiguous. They are also often precise, even though the precision varies. In the fourth extract, we evaluated and developed the support planned during a period of 2 years and 5 months for Anna, who has sensory integration challenges.

Extract 4: Anna

4 years 4 mon	Strengths and needs: Dresses by herself, but is attentive about clothing—that it not be tight, etc. *(ECEC plan)*
5 years 0 mon	The main challenge: challenges in dressing situations. Support measures at home: dressing situations become calmer when Anna herself chooses clothes from two options. Methods: Anna can choose between two options, if this is possible; Anna is cheered on by others to dress by herself; she can readjust the clothes if they are tight; pictures as a help in dressing situations; anticipation of what needs to be worn; adult support and guidance in dressing situations. *(plan for intensified support)*
5 years 7 mon	Evaluation: Anna has developed very significantly during autumn 2014. Getting dressed has become much easier, and hardly any temper tantrums have occurred. Anna also clearly tolerates unpleasant sensations better, such as clothes that feel unpleasant or doing her hair up in a ponytail. However, challenges in sensory integration still exist, but they stand out mainly in auditory sensations or when things feel unpleasant in some other way . . . Support measures have been sufficient and, for Anna, effective and practical; so, it will be of benefit to also continue using them in the future . . . We have noticed some functional practices in Anna's group that are worth continuing. Dressing situations: dressing situations need to be calm. Not too many children in the hallway . . . (continues) *(plan for intensified support)*
6 years 0 mon	Evaluation: When considering Anna, attention still needs to be paid to sensitive sensations—e.g., when getting her clothes on; what feels good, what doesn't. Anna is a sensitive girl in other respects as well. Reassessment of the situation in autumn 2015 . . . Innings 2014/2015 has gone magnificently for Anna. Putting clothes on goes nicely. Intensified support is

	continued until autumn holiday 2015, after which the need for it (if any) is assessed. The situation has also calmed down at home. *(plan for intensified support)*
6 years 4 mon	Main challenge: sensory defensiveness. Methods: practicing emotion skills . . . choices are given, and putting on uncomfortable clothes is not forced on Anna; anticipating challenging situations is important. *(plan for intensified support)*
6 years 7 mon	Evaluation: emotion skills have strengthened, and sensory defensiveness has not been especially visible in everyday life in familiar environments and among familiar adults and children. *(plan for intensified support)*

In this extract, support is developed systematically in sequential recordings. According to the description, at the age of 4 years and 4 months, Anna "dresses by herself, but is attentive about clothing." At the age of 5 years, the support measures are related to situations in which Anna is expected to dress herself (e.g., "Anna can choose between two options, if this is possible"; "she can readjust the clothes, if they are tight"; "pictures as help in dressing situations"; and "adult support and guidance in dressing situations"). Additionally, support is both evaluated and justified explicitly by illustrating how "support measures have been sufficient and, for Anna, effective and practical; so, it is of benefit to also continue using them in the future," and indicating that "we have noticed some functional practices in Anna's group that are worth continuing." The efficacy of the support is evaluated by referring to the changes in Anna's behavior within a certain specific period ("Anna has developed very significantly during autumn 2014"). Anna's challenges are specified in relation to the specific context within which they appear (e.g., "however, challenges in sensory integration still exist, but they stand out mainly in auditory sensations or when things feel unpleasant in some other way").

In *explicit* descriptions of support, information about children's situations is utilized as evidence to evaluate the efficacy of support measures instead of evaluating the children only. In addition to evaluating past and present situations, the future is explicitly planned, and the prospective reevaluation of Anna's support is scheduled ("intensified support is continued until autumn holiday 2015, after which the need for it [if any] is assessed"). The accomplishment of set goals is also described *explicitly*: at the age of 6 years ("putting clothes on goes nicely" and "the situation has also calmed down at home") and again at the age of 6 years and 7 months ("emotion skills have strengthened, and sensory defensiveness has not been especially visible in everyday life in familiar environments and among familiar adults and children"). This kind of *explicit* writing increases the coherence of the text, as it connects the components of a single recording and the earlier recordings at the content-related and linguistic levels.

Extract 4 is also an example of the elaborate and unambiguous way of describing support measures (e.g. "Anna can choose between two options, if this is possible"), although more vague and imprecise descriptions are included as well (e.g., "adult support and guidance in dressing situations" and "practicing of emotion skills"). The agreements and evaluations regarding support and Anna's home situation are also described (first, "dressing situations become calmer when Anna herself chooses clothes from two options" and later, "the situation has also calmed down at home").

Discussion

In this research, cumulative pedagogical documents were studied, based on a longitudinal design. We aimed to identify the patterns of describing support measures in sequential documents and the content-related and linguistic features that are peculiar to these patterns. In the analysis, four chronological patterns of describing the support measures over the years were found: *missing* (29%), *repetitious* (41%), *disorganized* (17%), and *explicit* (13%). The

findings show that with the exception of the last pattern (*explicit*), the development, justification, and validation of the support measures systematically over time was lacking in 87% of the cases, and the descriptions of support were imprecise, incoherent, or nonexistent. However, when support was carefully revisited, further defined, and/or regenerated, and its efficacy was assessed in sequential recordings, as was done in the last pattern of *explicit* descriptions, the child's documents exhibited a coherent continuity.

The sequential descriptions of support were most typically *repetitious* (41%), meaning that recordings of children's support remained more or less the same. It is noteworthy and alarming that in 70% of the cases (both the *missing* and *repetitious* patterns), children's support measures and interventions were not developed over the years. Kurth and Mastergeorge (2010) suggest that this may be due to numerous underlying factors, including the possibility that teachers have made an informed interpretation of the contents as being valid and meaningful over time. However, it is possible that the contents are not evaluated systematically, despite their continued use. As children's support should be developed systematically, the main benefit of the *disorganized* pattern, compared to the *missing* and *repetitious* ones, is the active development of support measures and interventions. This suggests that the development of the *disorganized* pattern might be deliberate. However, when support measures are changed randomly without fitting them *explicitly* to children's needs and assessment data, it is impossible to say whether these coincidental changes to support measures are any better than stagnant measures that remain the same for years, especially if they have been decided consciously.

The results of this study confirmed what is known currently about varying, inconsistent, and vague documentation practices (see, e.g., Karvonen & Huynh, 2007; Ruble et al., 2010; Räty et al., 2018; Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013) and about focusing on describing children instead of pedagogy (see Andreasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2013; Hjörne & Säljö,

2004; Isaksson et al., 2007). Moreover, the connections between children's needs, objectives, methods, and evaluations were unclear typically, which coincides with previous research findings (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Ruble et al., 2010).

The vague practice of documenting support measures is problematic in several ways, as the reader must interpret how to implement the support concretely. Exact expressions of measures (e.g., "a little object in hand to play in shared gatherings") direct pedagogical practices more carefully and univocally than vague expressions (e.g., "support for attention and concentration"). When the descriptions of support are predominantly missing or lack systematic development, the actual aim of the pedagogical documents regarding the planning of systematic support measures is left unrealized. Consequently, the possibility to exploit the benefits of pedagogical documents is missed (see also Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Moreover, in keeping with the principles of RTI (see Buysse & Peisner-Feinberg, 2013), the reliable evaluation of support and children's learning is difficult when objectives and methods are described ambiguously (see also Michinowicz et al., 1995; Räty et al., 2018). In the studied documents, when any evaluation was documented, it focused predominantly on the assessment of an individual child without explicitly evaluating the efficacy of the support measures or using evaluation data to revise objectives and measures. This observation coincides with the previous research findings, which have shown that the evaluations are the weakest parts of the documents (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017) and that educators tend to document mainly summative and detached assessments of children (Andreasson & Asplund Carlsson, 2013).

Study Limitations

We investigated in depth the patterns and characteristics of written records about support measures of children with SEN. However, the characteristics of the design and the research context may limit the transferability of the results. The data included the documents (N =

257) of 64 children with SEN, which may be considered a small sample. Additionally, due to the significant variance in the practices of providing ECEC services, all municipal and class-related variations in practices are unlikely to be included in the data. To meet these limitations, our sampling method aimed to collect sufficient data to capture the known variations in the phenomena of interest. According to Gobo (2011), such an approach can be defined as highlighting the "social significance of a sample" (p. 2). In keeping with the discourse analytical tradition (see, e.g., Edwards & Potter, 1992), the document data used in this study are naturally occurring, which is understood as a feature that increases the reliability of the results because the researcher has not influenced the contents of the data.

In addition, the Finnish context needs to be taken into consideration when discussing the transferability of the results; this includes the Finnish integrated model of providing both education and care in ECEC settings, the prerequisite-free provision of educational support, and universally-drafted pedagogical documents. It must also be noted that Finnish ECEC and preprimary education are based on an internationally divergent implementation of RTI (e.g., Finnish RTI as an administrative framework versus United States RTI as a specific instruction for supporting children; see Björn et al., 2016). Despite these limitations, the study can offer new insights into documenting support measures in sequential pedagogical documents related to early intervention and RTI practices in Finland, the United States, and internationally.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Based on these results, it is questionable whether the studied documents meet the overall aim of pedagogical documents—that is, to develop meaningful, suitable, and research-based interventions and support for children. In general, the results highlight the need for more profound discussion and internalization of the key aims of pedagogical documents. This need has been indicated in several other studies over the years yet remains relevant today (e.g.,

Andreasson et al., 2013; Rosas et al., 2009). In particular, the missing descriptions of support seem to reflect the fundamental idea of describing a problematic child as the initial aim of the documents. Therefore, pedagogical documents turn into reports or statements of children's problematic situations. As Andreasson and Carlsson state (2013, p. 62), "It is hard to see how children could benefit from these descriptions of their shortcomings and failures." Conversely, other patterns that include pedagogical planning, especially the *explicit* type, reflect the understanding of a pedagogical document as a plan and as an instrument for making agreements and taking responsibility for systematic support. In such cases, the connection between the evaluation of the child's progress and the revision of the plan are closely interlinked (see, e.g., Etscheidt, 2003). Based on intervention studies (e.g., Boavida, Aguiar, & McWilliams, 2014; Poppes et al., 2002; Pretti-Frontczak & Bricker, 2000), it has been found that when educators are trained to write appropriate IEPs, the quality of the contents increases; therefore, training for educators should be considered.

In studying pedagogical documents, the unpredictability of their later use needs to be taken into account. This means that although the documents orient educational practices, they are also realized in practice by the professionals who use them (see also Yell & Stecker, 2003), resulting in practices and documented plans that are not automatically similar. Further research is needed into how documentation and the actualization of planned support are interconnected with children's learning and development. Previous research has given some indicators that the link between documentation and the practice of supporting children is typically weak (see, e.g., Kwon et al., 2011; Lynch & Beare, 1990; White, Garrett, Kearns, & Grisham-Brown, 2003). When written documents are investigated, there seem to be inconsistencies between theory, recommendations and the actual documentation practices, and this disconnect can also be found in everyday ECEC practices and the support offered to children with SEN.

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Table 1. The Research Data.

Name of the document	n
ECEC plan	172
Preprimary education plan	48
Preprimary education plan including planning for intensified support	11
Additional plan for intensified support	18
IEP	8

Note. $N = 257$

Table 2. Four Chronological Patterns of Developing Support Measures in Pedagogical Documents Over the Years.

Chronological pattern	Simplified description of content	Key linguistic feature	Coherence	Number of cases (*N*=164)	% of cases
1 Missing	No descriptions	-	-	48	29
2 Repetitious	Unchanging support	Repetitious word choices, generic utterances	Relatively clear	67	41
3 Disorganized	Unconnected yet changed support	Lack of linking words, inconsistent word choices	Lacking	28	17
4 Explicit	Systematically developed support	Argumentative writing, specific utterances	Clear	21	13