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The educational context in expert assessments. A study of special education documents of children in ECEC institutions

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to critically examine how expert assessment documents describe and assess the early childhood education and care (ECEC) context in reports about a child's need for special educational support. Adhering to a shift towards inclusive education, the focus is on how educational-psychological services assess, or fail to assess for, potential shortcomings in the educational environment. The study is based on in-depth document-analysis of 23 expert assessments of children with 1–10 weekly hours of special educational support in various ECEC institutions in Norway. The analysis outlines five different ways in which expert assessments refer to the educational context: from concealing, separating, situating the child in, accentuating, to critically assessing the ECEC context. The results illustrate how assessments at times refer to the ECEC context in, for example, descriptions of a child's behaviour during routine activities or providing information about the institutions organisational qualities and practices. However, the documents hardly ever discuss potential shortcomings of the ECEC context.

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Introduction

Children with special educational needs are often assessed by several authorities. Special education documents contain information on everything from an assessment of a child's difficulties, planning support measures, to the allocation of resources and accountability. Previous research has shown that special education documents are heavily influenced by behavioural psychology and tend to over-emphasise the individual (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007; Mitchell, Morton, and Hornby 2010; Palla 2018). The strong focus on the individual child within special education has been critiqued and challenged by alternative understandings of special needs and disability that emphasise that special educational needs do not solely derive from the individual child, but also from barriers and shortcomings of the educational setting (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007; Solli 2010; Skidmore 1996). While the notion of inclusive education entails a shift in focus towards improving the educational environment, assessments and documentation of special needs still rely on traditional individual perspectives.

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In Norway, 3,4% of children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions receive special educational support (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2020) mostly due to challenges with language and communication, or socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties (Wendelborg et al. 2015). All children below compulsory school age with special needs have the right to receive special educational assistance (Kindergarten Act 2021, §31). To establish whether a child has special needs, the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) conducts an expert assessment¹ with consent from the parents (Kindergarten Act 2021, §32, §33). The assessment should determine whether the child has a delay in development and learning, and whether the child's needs can be met within ordinary ECEC services (Kindergarten Act 2021, §34). Guidelines emphasise that a child's abilities are related to her or his environment, and expert assessments should examine the ECEC in terms of pedagogy, resources, staff competence, and so forth (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017a, 2017b). The EPS are expected to collaborate and establish dialogue with the ECEC while conducting the assessment (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2020). However, the EPS is criticised for its strong emphasis on the individual child (Nordahl et al. 2018) and the quality of expert assessments (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2020). Policies now call for prioritising EPS's mandate to assist the ECEC with competence and organisational development for early intervention and prevention (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2020). Prioritising system-level changes is in line with the notion of inclusion, and EPS advisors are now expected to include the children's environment in their assessments and guide changes on a system-level (Kolnes and Midthassel 2021).

A systematic review of research reveals that a system-oriented approach is challenging for the EPS, and there is a clear need for more research on expert assessments (Moen et al. 2018). Within ECEC, research on EPS is sparse (Cameron, Kovac, and Tveit 2011), following a general lack in the Nordic countries of research regarding special education and special education documentation in ECEC (Palla 2015, 2019).

In response to a need for more research, this article explores expert assessment documentation of children with special educational support in Norwegian ECEC institutions. A national guideline outlines that expert assessment documents must contain two main parts: assessment and recommendations (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017a). The focus of this article is the assessment, as this forms the basis for recommendations. The aim is to explore how EPS describe and assess the ECEC context, to contribute with new insights to a field insufficiently researched, and encourage system-oriented approaches within expert assessments. Based on in-depth analysis of 23 expert assessments I explore the following research question: *How do expert assessment documents refer to the ECEC context when examining a child's need for special educational support?*

The documents in this study are expert assessments of children 2–6 years of age in various ECECs in a mid-size municipality in Norway. The children receive special educational support due to various difficulties, predominately related to language, socio-emotional, or behavioural issues. The results are presented in five categories, illustrating a continuum where statements in the documents move and mix between concealing, separating, situating the child in, and accentuating the ECEC context, while rarely critically assessing the ECEC context.

In the following, I offer a brief overview of previous research and a theoretical framework for understanding special needs. I also discuss the notion of context before accounting for the methods of this study and presenting and discussing the results.

Previous research

Studies show that expert assessments of school children in Norway tend to focus on children's difficulties and characteristics, with less focus on the school environment (Tveitnes 2018; Herlofsen 2014). While national regulations call for system-oriented practices, an institutionalisation and taken-for-granted tradition of how to write expert assessments appears to inhibit changes (Tveitnes 2018). An over-emphasis on the individual child and perceiving individual deficits as the reason for special educational needs mirrors results from international research on other types of special education documents (e.g. individual education plans (IEP)) (Mitchell, Morton, and Hornby 2010; Rix 2009; Rix and Matthews 2014; Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski 2018; Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007; Palla 2018). In other words, there is a lack of context-sensitive information in documents and reports regarding children with special needs (Røn Larsen 2016). Even when informal discussions among professionals or parents concerning a child's special needs include context, the documents focus on individualistic descriptions of the child (Rix and Matthews 2014; Røn Larsen 2016). Positioning the child as the source of educational challenges is problematic because it can lead to marginalisation of children and an exclusive focus on individual change instead of pedagogical change and responsibilities of adults (Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski 2018). There might, however, be variances and nuances in documentation of children's need for special educational support. For instance, Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski (2018) illustrate how IEPs at times provide multifaceted descriptions of a child in context and describe children's needs as depending on changeable factors.

Context and a system-oriented perspective in special education

Within the fields of special education and disability studies it is common to conceptualise two opposing perspectives regarding special needs (Jortveit et al. 2020; Solli 2010). There is the 'traditional' perspective (also referred to as categorical, individual, or medical perspective) in which special needs are seen as arising from deficits or medical conditions in the child, who should be helped or treated in order to overcome these difficulties. On the other hand, there is the relational or system-oriented perspective where special needs or disabilities are seen as co-constructed by the individual and disabling conditions in society and the environment (Oliver 1990; Skidmore 1996; Jortveit et al. 2020) and where emphasis is placed on dismantling disabling barriers in the environment. A fundamental question is whether to define special needs solely in terms of shortcomings of the individual child or also shortcomings of the educational institution (Isaksson, Lindqvist, and Bergström 2007). The latter perspective maintains that any inquiry into a child's challenges should include the context in which they manifest (Skidmore 1996).

Understanding humans as inseparable from context is not novel, neither is the idea that special education assessments should include and prioritise the relations between a person and his or her circumstances (see for instance Fischer and Rizzo 1974). A growing

emphasis on inclusion has contributed to an increased awareness of the relational or system-oriented perspective. Inclusion implies that society and its institutions must change so that all people can participate on their own terms. To achieve inclusive education, barriers of inclusion must be identified, challenged, and removed (Barton 1997).

When one understands humans as inseparable from context and special educational needs as resulting from potential shortcomings of the educational setting, then an assessment of the educational context is crucial to address the challenges and difficulties that children may experience. Context, however, may include a vast number of elements. Offering a single, precise definition of context is difficult, if not impossible (Goodwin and Duranti 1992). In this article, I rely on Goodwin and Duranti (1992) who draw on Goffmans' concept of *frame* to outline an understanding or use of context and contextualisation. Goodwin and Duranti (1992) explain context as a frame 'that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation' (p. 3). The phenomenon that is contextualised is referred to as the *focal event*. The notion of context can thus be said to involve the juxtaposition of two entities that mutually inform each other; the phenomenon being contextualised (the focal event) and the frame or context in which it is embedded. The focal event will generally be in focus, while the context is seen as the background (Goodwin and Duranti 1992). What counts as context at a particular moment is dynamic, and the notion of context may refer to many dimensions, everything from the larger cultural context to the situational and the cognitive (Halldén 1999). In this study context is limited to the local environment of the ECEC institution as referred to in expert assessments, focusing on organisational, physical and relational qualities of the institution.

Materials and method

The results are based on document-analysis of expert assessments of 17 children (aged 2–6) who receive special educational support, 1–10 hours a week, while attending ECEC in a mid-size municipality in Norway. There are 15 boys and two girls represented in the data. For anonymisation purposes, I minimise references to gender when citing the data and refer to children as 'X' or 'the child'. After receiving informed, written consent by the children's parents, I retrieved the documents from the archive of 14 ECEC institutions during 2019–2020. The study included 23 expert assessments and 26 IEPs (a total of 260 pages). The authors of the expert assessments are several EPS advisors who work in three different offices in the same municipality and two advisors from other municipalities. The professional background of EPS advisors commonly include special education, psychology and social work (Moen et al. 2018). I anonymised the documents upon retrieval. The research project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

By studying manuscripts, one can gain insight into how individuals, institutions, and social settings are represented and represent themselves. Institutions and social settings are to a large extent 'self-documenting' (Coffey 2014). The documents in this study were produced without a researcher's intervention, and the method could as such be understood as 'unobtrusive' (Bowen 2009; Prior 2016). In the process of reading and analysing the documents, however, the researcher interprets and contributes to the construction of meaning (Prior 2016).

While it is common to combine document-analysis with other methods to contextualise the data (Bowen 2009), in this study document analysis is the only method; the documents are both the source of data and the research topic. The importance of focusing on the documents themselves as topic of research relates to how they are not merely 'containers' for words and information; they influence how people interact and perceive others, practice, and how we organise institutions (Cooren 2004; Jacobsson 2016; Prior 2008, 2016). In other words, the assessments in this study are not just summaries of information concerning children and the ECEC; the documents impact how people perceive a child, how they understand her or his challenges and difficulties, and what kind of support measures are allocated. The expert assessments are of particular importance, as they form the basis for legal decisions on whether a child has the right to special educational support, the amount of resources allocated to the ECEC institution, and they are also the basis for IEPs. The content of the documents, how and what is written and represented, is thus of grave importance.

In the analysis of this study, I focused on the first section of the documents; the examination of children's need for special educational support. The analytical approach focuses on the content, in other words, what is 'in' the document (Prior 2016). I used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012) and focused on the meaning of the text. I imported the documents to NVIVO (a qualitative data analysis software) and began generating initial codes based on the exact wordings in the documents. I identified patterns by repeatedly reading and coding the documents. Based on the emerging patterns, I started to organise the data with similar traits in several potential categories, continuously adjusting and (re)considering the categories. After reviewing, adjusting and discussing the categories with colleagues, I ended up with the five main categories presented below.

The process of analysis was inductive, in terms of being driven by the data (Braun and Clarke 2012). In other words, the codes and categories were derived from the content of the data, in a bottom-up approach. However, it is impossible to be entirely inductive (Braun and Clarke 2012), and my theoretical knowledge and perspectives inevitably influenced what elements caught my attention, the coding process, and which patterns I pursued. This is perhaps most evident in my attention to what was missing in the documents and in my choice to include a category that illustrates a breach with the general pattern.

The analysis exposed that the ways in which the ECEC is referred to do not really depend on the challenges attributed to a child. Therefore, the analysis does not delineate or highlight the various reasons for a child receiving special educational support (e.g. language difficulties, behavioural issues).

Limitations of the study

The study is a qualitative in-depth and descriptive study based on a limited number of expert assessments and the results are not attempts at making generalisations. The limited number of girls represented might relate to a well-known gender disparity in special education in Norway (Official Norwegian Report 2019, 3), but also causes the results to inadequately illustrate potential differences related to gender. The categories produced may however be fruitful to apply in further studies as analytical concepts (cf.

Tjora 2018). The analysis is also solely based on what is written in the documents, and do not necessarily represent the overall reflections and understandings of the EPS advisors who authored the documents. Discussions concerning possible consequences of the findings are to be read as reflections based on previous knowledge and research, as an empirical investigation on the use of the documents was outside the scope of this study.

Results and discussion

Expert assessments consist of two main parts: assessment and recommendations (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017a). The analysis and results below focus on the assessment. Based on consent from the parents, the ECEC personnel are often the ones to contact the EPS and request an expert assessment. In this study, the assessments were based on meetings between EPS advisors, parents and ECEC personnel, pedagogical reports from the ECEC, test-results, EPS's observations² and sometimes reports from external experts. After gathering this information, the EPS advisors write the expert assessments; deciding what and how information is (not) included.

With the outset to answer the research question 'How do expert assessment documents refer to the ECEC context when examining a child's need for special educational support?' results are presented and discussed in the following five conceptual categories:

- (1) *Concealing the ECEC context* relates to statements in which characteristics and difficulties are attributed to a child with little or no reference to the ECEC context.
- (2) *Separating the ECEC context* illustrates statements describing the ECEC context in a separate section, without relating it to the challenges or difficulties in question.
- (3) *Situating the child in the ECEC context* refers to statements in which a child's behaviour and challenges are described in context, usually during a routine-situation in the ECEC institution.
- (4) *Accentuating the ECEC context* are instances in which the ECEC context is described in terms of support measures provided for a child.
- (5) *Critically assessing the ECEC context* refers to statements in which the ECEC context is assessed and related to a child's need for special educational support.

Similar to other studies, the expert assessments in this study show an alternation between contextualisation and decontextualization (cf. Heiskanen 2020). The documents thus include statements related to all the first four categories outlined above, whilst shifting and mixing between them. The fifth category, however, was only present in a couple of documents, thus representing a break with the general pattern, while at the same time illustrating the possibility for including critical assessments in expert assessments.

By developing and employing these five conceptual categories, some elements and patterns in the documents become highly visible, while other elements risk being oversimplified or ignored. The analysis should therefore be read as *one* possible way of interpreting the documents, not the *only* way. The empirical extracts are translated from Norwegian by author.

Concealing the ECEC context

Describing the individual child stands out as one of the main purposes of the expert assessments. The challenges and need for special educational support are in several instances attributed to the child without referring to the context. Statements in this category decontextualise the child, hence concealing the context.

Although descriptions would commence with positive characteristics and interests, focus quickly shifted towards describing the child's challenges. In several documents this would include statements portraying the child as having or being deficient or delayed in some way. E.g.: 'The ECEC has registered that there are holes in X's development in regards to socio-emotional functioning, play and well-being', 'X has delayed language skills', 'X has difficulties expressing himself verbally', 'X has challenges related to social interaction with other children', 'X is very delayed both in terms of language and socially'. These statements portray the child as deficient or as having shortcomings by comparing the child to pre-defined norms and standards for 'normal' development. Reports from various tests³ further portray children as deviating from age-appropriate development:

'X is 4,2 years old when conducting the BVPS [British Picture Vocabulary Scale], which is a test for language comprehension. X's age equivalence score is 3 years old.

On the language-comprehension part X receives 3 test points. This means X is 2 standard deviations below the average for children X's age. If one compares this with children 3 years of age, X's score is average. In other words, X is approximately 6 months behind in regards to language comprehension' (Test: Reynell Developmental Language Scales)

The extracts illustrate how test-results position the child as deviating, while providing no details about the context in which the difficulties manifest. The use of standardised tests can as such be said to mirror a traditional individual perspective often found in special education documents. While positioning a child as deviating ensures that the child receives special educational support; it also positions the child as someone to be 'fixed' with risk of segregated support measures.

The category 'concealing the ECEC context' illustrates how expert assessments decontextualise and attribute shortcomings exclusively to the child, with no mentioning of the context. In this manner, the child and the ECEC context become disconnected. Although the next category includes descriptions of the ECEC institution, these statements also portray the ECEC context unrelated to a child's challenges.

Separating the ECEC context

Elements of the ECEC context are in several instances described in a separate section, unrelated to the need for special educational support. Information on organisational qualities commonly consisted of a few sentences or a small section, as a backdrop. E.g.:

Unit-based ECEC institution with nine children aged 1-3 years. Manpower: one pedagogical leader and two assistants. The unit is at times divided into smaller groups. In the fall X will start in a unit for children aged 3-5 with 20 children and 3 adults.

Current ECEC services: X goes to a unit based ECEC institution with 35 children and 5,8 adult resources. The unit has an apprentice this year. They have a permanent age-division during projects and on fieldtrips.

The unit has a total of 25 four-year olds, divided in two groups within the same area. On X's group they are 12 children, 8 boys and 4 girls. The unit is all together 2-3 hours a day, otherwise they are divided, both in terms of time inside and outside, fieldtrips and lunchtime.

These extracts provide some general information about the organisational qualities of the ECEC context, as well as briefly mentioning the daily practices of the unit. This type of information can be vital for understanding a child's behaviours, needs, abilities, and how to best support the child. Descriptions of organisational qualities have the potential of uncovering barriers or shortcomings in the educational institution, as for instance the size of a child-group or number and competence of personnel. Although expert assessments should examine these issues as per policy (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017a), the EPS do not comment, assess, or relate the organisational qualities to a child's need for special educational support.

Materials and physical elements of the ECEC are rarely mentioned in the documents, and not in any instance is the outdoor environment described or assessed. This despite research emphasising the importance of the physical environment of the ECEC in terms of children's development, learning, play, and well-being (Løkken and Moser 2012; Nordtømme 2012; Sando and Sandseter 2020).

Presented separately, the organisational and physical qualities are not used to interpret the focal event (the child) (cf. Goodwin and Duranti 1992). Instead of contextualising the child, the organisational and physical qualities are detached from the child and his or her need for special educational support. In contrast, the following category describes the child situated in the ECEC context.

Situating the child in the ECEC context

In several instances, the expert assessments describe a child during everyday life or routines. In other words, descriptions that situate the child in the ECEC context by referring to specific situations (play, mealtimes, transitions, organised activities, child-gatherings and so forth). E.g.

'The ECEC feels X easily becomes insecure in the child-group and/or when an adult moves or leaves the room. X has for longer periods of time been crying a lot, mainly upon arrival and in transitions.'

'[X is] Particularly restless in transitions and during meals. When resting X needs an adult to stay with him until he falls asleep. Still some challenges with participating in organized activities over a longer period of time, particularly activities that demands language and social skills.'

'During play with other children X often has a clear plan and is not very open for suggestions from others. If changes occur or things do not go as planned, X can react by throwing things, yelling loudly or crying. X is concerned about rules and finds it very difficult that the seating arrangement isn't predetermined for the afternoon meal.'

'Child-gatherings with the whole group becomes difficult for X. X loses attention easily. Ends up wandering about.'

In these extracts, one can detect an assumption that the child's challenges are related to specific situations, producing a more varied image of the child (cf. Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski 2018). In contrast to decontextualised statements (the first category), the descriptions include the situation in which challenges manifest (Skidmore 1996). However, the extracts above also illustrate a lack of details concerning the context, as they predominately focus on evaluating the child. In contrast, the following extract illustrates one of the most detailed description given:

Child-gathering: X stays seated but fairly quickly starts laying behind the half circle surrounding the pedagogical leader who is reading a book. X looks like he is doing his own thing and cannot seem to get much of what is being read. X looks up to the pedagogical leader from time to time, and when it is time for clapping X quickly joins in. X does not sing along but participates in the movements. [...] When the reading starts again X ends up laying behind [the group] on the floor. During the farewell song, X repeats after the others, and is very interested in the beginning, only to fade out again.

This detailed description brings forth nuances and shifts in the child's actions related to the context. The description provides clues on what works well for the child (clapping, joining in on the movements in songs), and what does not (pedagogical leader reading a book). Situating the child in context may produce dynamic, nuanced descriptions and attribute less blame to the child (cf. Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski 2018). However, the observation above does not describe the actions of the pedagogical leader (other than as reading), other children, or potential materials used. Similar to previous research, the focus is set on a child's performance in a specific situation, with no or little reference to other people (Rix and Matthews 2014). Assessing the pedagogical leaders' conduct in more detail could for instance lead to questions or reflections on the adult's ability to ignite children's excitement and involvement.

The category 'situating the child in the ECEC context' illustrates how children's challenges are contextualised. However, the lack of details and assessment of the activity, the environment and actions of people surrounding the child leaves potential shortcomings and barriers unidentified. The following category may also include elements of situating the child in context, but there is a crucial shift in focus as the main purpose becomes describing support provided by the ECEC.

Accentuating the ECEC context

The expert assessments include information on how the ECEC institution has accommodated and supported the child. I have called this category *accentuating the ECEC context*, denoting how the practices of the ECEC are emphasised in the descriptions. E.g.

X reacts strongly to changes and may become very frustrated. The ECEC makes an effort to make the days predictable with regular routines, something X profits from. The ECEC also tries to stay ahead so that X is always prepared for what happens next and to changes.

The ECEC has received guidance from the author [EPS advisor], and has worked with support measures in both small groups and in everyday situations related to concept-development, alternative and supplementary communication, as well as describing comments during play

and other situations in the ECEC. Despite this support, the development of spoken language has been slow.

The ECEC has divided the children in smaller groups and worked on interaction skills. In periods, an adult has followed X closely. Activities in smaller groups has not contributed to the desired development [of the child]. Intense adult support has contributed to calmer meal-time and “child-meetings”. X plays more often with others and is less involved in conflict. The ECEC does not have the resources to continue with such support within the ordinary program.

These extracts illustrate how support measures of the ECEC are described by referring to organisational elements (e.g. smaller groups, intense adult support, predictable routines), as well as more pedagogical elements (e.g. alternative and supplementary communication, describing comments during play). Several descriptions are somewhat vague (e.g. tries to stay ahead, worked on interaction skills) and do not provide any detail of how the support is carried out. Referring to previous support measures is helpful to explore what has worked in the past (or not) and hint towards solutions for the future (cf. Heiskanen 2020), and as such may invite system-level changes. However, only describing support measures focuses one-sidedly on the positive contributions of the ECEC and does not address potential shortcomings of the institution. To bring forth these aspects, it is necessary to critically assess the ECEC.

Critically assessing the ECEC context

Although several of the categories outlined above illustrate how expert assessments refer to the ECEC context, they also illustrate a lack of critical comments or assessments towards the ECEC. A critical assessment entails exploring how elements in the ECEC context may *contribute* to challenges and difficulties or create barriers for inclusion. There are nevertheless a couple of statements that illustrate the possibility for EPS advisors to assess the ECEC institution. E.g.

EPS gets the impression that varied table activities are largely facilitated in the ECEC unit, and that there is less focus on child-initiated play. It is therefore recommended that further work with X be more focused on role play/fantasy play.

This extract can be read as a firm critique of the ECEC unit since role-play and child-initiated play is one of the most highly valued and most vital parts of the Norwegian ECEC tradition. Other critical statements are more implicit as illustrated in the following observation report:

X then stays seated with an empty look staring at the wall, before an adult observes the situation and gets him back to dressing himself. There are many children in the wardrobe at the same time, and a lot of noise.

Information about the wardrobe situation in the last sentence (many children, a lot of noise) provides a description of the context that enables a better understanding of the child’s challenges with dressing himself. In other words, the context provides a better understanding of the focal event (the child’s challenges) (cf. Goodwin and Duranti 1992), and provides clues on what measures should be initiated.

In one of the expert assessments, parents comment on the positive development of their child due to more stability in the ECEC unit, while at the same time subtly relating the

child's challenges with language and behaviour to previous instability and changes in the ECEC:

Parents say that the child's ECEC unit has previously been unstable due to absenteeism among personnel. The spring of 2018 was experienced [by the parents] as a stable period for the child in terms of the unit's personnel. It was at this time the child's language developed very well and X now demonstrates the ability to do verbal imitations.

The parents say that the child previously would act out, but this improved during a more stable time in the ECEC. With the change of the pedagogical leader, there was more acting out again, but this has improved since.

These extracts illustrate how parents relate the in/stability and changes in the ECEC unit to the child's behaviour and language. Instead of seeing the challenges as exclusively belonging to the individual, they introduce a more relational understanding of the challenges. However, the parents' perspective is not followed-up in the rest of the document. In line with previous studies, parents' perspectives are often inconsequential when included in special education documents (Heiskanen, Alasuutari, and Vehkakoski 2018). The EPS then refrains from making any critical statements or question towards the ECEC institution, even when the same document reports the following observation:

It is observed that the child reacts with great frustration several times, among other things when struggling during own play, when X does not get a desired toy or when X cannot pull his pants down when going to the toilet. X does not seek help or comfort from staff and the pedagogical leader says that this happens throughout the day.

The child's lack of seeking help and comfort from ECEC personnel prompts questions concerning adult-child relations and trust. Despite this observation and the parents' comments, there are no traces of EPS directing critical questions or comments towards the ECEC. Whether or not the EPS critically discussed these issues in other arenas, but refrained from writing about them in the document, is outside the scope of this study. It is worth noting that previous research found that EPS advisors experience contrasting expectations, in which teachers maintain an individual perspective and want expert assessments to obtain resources, while EPS has a mandate to uphold a system-perspective (Kolnes and Midthassel 2021). Such contrasting expectations may make it challenging for EPS advisors to communicate critical reflections and shortcomings (cf. Kolnes and Midthassel 2021).

Final discussion

The categories outlined above depict a continuum on the extent to which context is considered and assessed. In the first two categories (concealing and separating the ECEC context), statements detach the child and the ECEC context as if they are unrelated. The child becomes decontextualised and attributed deficiencies, while organisational and physical features of the ECEC become briefly summarised without assessing for potential shortcomings. Thus, the first two categories adhere to a traditional and individual perspective of special needs. However, as illustrated in the third category, expert assessments do at times describe and assess the child situated in context. Such contextualised descriptions have the *potential* to facilitate a system-oriented approach

but need to be followed-up with an assessment of the educational context. In similar manner, there is a clear lack of assessing and questioning the quality of support measures described in the fourth category. Instead, the assessments portray the ECEC as the 'solution', while the 'problem' belongs to the child. The third and fourth category can as such be said to include elements central within a system-oriented perspective, since the child becomes contextualised and support measures are described as influencing the child. Nevertheless, without more detailed descriptions and critical assessments of the ECEC context, shortcomings are still attributed solely to the child, which is characteristic of a traditional individual perspective (cf. Jortveit et al. 2020; Solli 2010).

The fifth category (critically assessing the ECEC context) relates to a system-oriented perspective; approaching challenges as co-constructed by the individual and the educational environment (cf. Jortveit et al. 2020; Solli 2010). Despite a few traces of critical comments, the expert assessments in this study illustrated a clear lack of statements concerning shortcomings in the ECEC context. While critical reflections may be present during meetings and discussions (Rix and Matthews 2014), it is essential to include them in the formal assessments since documents not only report on social reality; they influence perceptions, practices, and decisions.

A system-oriented approach within expert assessments can have positive implications for EPS's practices and ability to assist ECEC institutions on professional and organisational development. In-depth knowledge of the ECEC's capacities and shortcomings would better equip EPS advisors to guide system-level changes and suggest tailored recommendations to improve the educational environment, thus reducing the need for segregated measures and creating an inclusive ECEC setting that is adapted to a child's needs. The results of this study illustrate that the expert assessments do refer to the ECEC context in various ways, and I argue that this could illustrate a potential for system-oriented approach that needs to be further developed. At the same time, there is a lack of critically assessing the ECEC context and continued over-emphasis on the individual child in the assessments. As such, I suggest that the EPS commit more fully to a system-oriented perspective and document potential shortcomings of the educational environment in expert assessments.

Notes

1. In Norwegian: 'Sakkyndig vurdering'.
2. EPS predominately reports having observed a child one or two times during everyday life in ECEC, without specifying the number of hours.
3. 15 of the 17 children were reportedly tested with one or more standardised tools. Most used tests were: Reynell, Ages & Stages Questionnaire and Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF). As well as mapping materials developed in Norway, such as Alle Med and TRAS.

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