

Being a mother of children with special needs during educational transitions: Positioning when ‘fighting against a superpower’

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The aim of this article is to study how mothers of children with special needs understand themselves in educational contexts. Using the analytical concepts of positional identities and figured worlds, we study the different positionings of mothers as their children transition between different school levels. Data were collected through recursive interviews conducted over one year as part of a small-scale study of mothers with a high level of education. The data used in this article were obtained from an informant’s reflections on her role as the mother of a child with special needs from the time he was in kindergarten to his final year in upper secondary school. Her case history illustrates how her positional identities in educational contexts were linked to mutual trust with the teachers and schools. The absence of trust had a significant impact on her ability to fully support her son’s schooling.

Keywords: positional identities, figured worlds, special needs, inclusive pedagogy, home–school cooperation

Introduction

In Norway, the children of parents of a low socioeconomic level are more likely to need special education. In this context, little attention has been paid to families with children with special needs that have higher socio-economic backgrounds (Berg and Nes 2010, 12). According to the Norwegian Education Act §5-1, students have a right to special education if they do not achieve satisfactory learning outcomes and require assistance beyond that provided through ordinary adapted teaching. The allocation of special education should be based on expert assessment. All teaching must follow the principle of inclusion, which holds that all students should participate in the school community. In addition, §1-1 of the Norwegian Education Act states that it is the school's responsibility to initiate and facilitate home-school cooperation to ensure that the student receives appropriate education (Ministry of Education 2007). In Norway, the use of special education show a slight decrease over the last decade; in the 2011/12 school year, 8.6% of all pupils received special education, and in 2015/16, the percentage was 7.8% (Statistics Norway 2018).

Here, we explore how four mothers of average to high socio-economic status with children with special learning needs position themselves during the transition from kindergarten to the last year of upper secondary school. Specifically, we aim to enhance the understanding of mothers' positional identities so that schools can strengthen their partnerships with families to support students' success. To do so, we consider the ways in which parents experience the complex expectations regarding their children's needs during educational transitions over time. Transitions may represent possibilities for change in students' positionings (Roth and Erstad 2016), but, as Berg and Nes (2010) note, it is also necessary to better understand families' positionings in home-school partnerships.

We use the concept of positional identities in figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998) to examine how mothers of children with special needs understand themselves and support their children in educational contexts. The complexity of these mothers' situations in educational settings is informed by our research question:

How can mothers' positional identities be understood, and how do such identities develop during the educational transition from kindergarten to upper secondary school?

The empirical material is based on a study of five mothers of children with special learning needs conducted in a high socio-economic district of an urban area in Norway. They were identified as critical cases (Yin 2003, 40). Their children had received special diagnoses—a combination of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia—and have the right to special education by law (Ministry of Education 2007).

Following Rachel Thomson (2009), we present the biographical longitudinal case history of one mother, Cath, obtained through recursive interviewing with a life history orientation conducted over one year. Cath is mother to a boy named George. He started kindergarten at age one and received special education from his first year in primary school. We investigate how Cath understood herself and how she changed her positionings regarding opportunities and constraints during her son's educational transition. Similar to the other informants, Cath's case illustrates how differences in trust in the kindergarten and other schools influenced her identity formation and, hence, her ability to support George. The findings underscore the importance of supporting positive professional–parent relationships during educational transitions.

Main text

We focus on biographic factors and social interaction, as these are important to the positioning of the parents of students with special learning needs within educational

contexts (Thomson 2009). In a Danish study about parents of bullied children, Hein (2012) found that they often felt positioned as overly protective; that is, the parents—and their parenthood—were associated with their children’s problems. Hence, the way in which teachers position parents may influence how parents’ support their children. A study that was carried out in Budapest, Hungary, regarding parents’ perspectives on inclusive education for children with disabilities found that the burden of advocating for the children was on the family and communication about learning was viewed as one-sided or non-existent (Rice 2018). In a Norwegian study, Amundsen (2017) asked 30 parents of 35 children with ADHD about their impressions regarding home–school cooperation. The parents felt discredited and opposed, especially when trying to talk about possibilities regarding special needs education. In similar cases, several schools have reported parents to child protection services, claiming that they do not understand parenthood. The way schools handle such issues may indicate that they need more knowledge about ADHD. Florian and Spratt (2013) suggest an inclusive pedagogy framework in which teachers are encouraged to view difficulties in learning as dilemmas they must overcome. In this context, they argue that it is important to avoid labelling and categorising students (Florian and Spratt 2013, 121–122).

We use the concept of positional identities and figured worlds (Holland et al. 1998) to understand the mothers of children with special learning needs in educational contexts. In this study, positional identities are understood as dynamic entities in and of social interactions between people in different contexts; through social interaction, individuals can position, form and understand themselves as persons. Urrieta, Jr. (2007) argues that identity is constituted by the labels people place on themselves and others. Labels, like being a smart person, are especially visible in educational contexts. In this

article, we investigate how mothers understand themselves and experience positioning and labelling by teachers during their children's educational transition.

Holland et al. (1998) argue that individuals inhabit many incoherent self-understandings and changeable identities, including positional (experienced) and figured (self-made) identities, which are performed in social contexts called figured worlds. These worlds are 'socially produced, culturally constituted activities' (Holland et al. 1998, 40–41) where people come to produce new self-understandings conceptually, materially and procedurally. These 'identities in practice' (Holland et al. 1998, 171) are formed in relation to socially organised, historically situated spheres of activity within which practices are embedded. Furthermore, identity is not bound by prescribed categories such as gender or ethnicity. Rather, it is negotiated and socially produced in situ. Therefore, in figured worlds, people 'figure who they are' and produce personal and social identities through the negotiation of positional identities (Holland et al. 1998, 128). Urrieta (2007, 111) stated that when they are positioned, people engage less in self-making, instead focusing on accepting, rejecting or negotiating the provided identities. In addition, positioning can reveal how social interactions contribute to the formation of persons as positions and sites of identity as well as to the development of their own understanding of themselves (Holland and Leander 2004). In response to present positionings, people can act upon experiences in social interactions and figured worlds to reform their identity as 'acts of the moment' (Holland et al. 1998, 139) (see Vågan 2009).

We are interested in how mothers negotiate different experienced positionings and labelling, how they respond and position themselves accordingly. Specifically, we use the concepts of positional identities and figured worlds to analyse the tensions between the positionings mothers experience in educational contexts and the constraints they face due to their family situations, the schools in which their children are enrolled and current

sociocultural norms. We are especially interested in identifying mothers' positional identities when they move between their families' figured worlds and the figured worlds of kindergartens and schools during their children's educational transitions and the impact of this on mothers' self-understanding and response to positioning. Cath serves as a representative mother, and we use her case to investigate the interplay between different positionings that influence mothers' trajectories and parent-professional relationships.

Materials and methods

This study is based on recursive interviews and critical reflection fieldwork conducted from 2016 to 2017 in a mid-sized town (about 30,000 inhabitants) in Norway (5.2 million inhabitants). Our fieldwork involved studying mothers who had relatively high educational levels (MA) and who had children with special education needs. We contacted pedagogic counsellors for special education at two upper secondary schools, who put us in contact with four mothers who joined the survey. Their children were students in the final (3rd) year of upper secondary school. This small sample is not representative of the whole group of mothers of children with special needs. Rather, it enables exploration of how the concept of mothers' positional identities in an educational context can influence parents and their children's educational trajectories.

In order to analyse parents' self-understandings of tensions related to their positionings in the educational transitions, we used Thomson's (2009) method-in-practice to construct case history narratives. Each narrative is categorised based on topics identified from the data on mothers' self-understanding of their positioning to investigate parents' individual biographical perspectives and social practice in educational contexts with a longitudinal data set.

The case reveals Cath's reflections and experienced identity positions based on identification of thematic sequences in a longitudinal raw data set. The (recursive) analytical process involved several inductive stages in which analyses of sequences in previously interpreted data led to new interpretations or supported understandings (Thomson 2009).

It was necessary to ethically and critically reflect on the implications of the participant relaying information to the researcher based on mutual trust. We found that they wanted to talk about challenges their children faced in kindergarten and school as well as positive experiences. The informants' names, residential areas and other personal information have been anonymised, and the mothers approved the contents of this article prior to publication. We followed the National Research Ethics Guidelines for Social Sciences, Law and Humanities (National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities 2016).

Results

George's parents split up when he was about six years old. He stayed with his father for one week and then with his mother for one week, and both of his parents lived in the same part of the town. Cath said she was attentive to George's need for academic and social follow-up in school but that George's father was of the opinion that George should be able to manage more on his own. However, the parents accepted that they had different opinions. George was diagnosed with ADHD in the first year of primary school. He was given a personal assistant and was part of a small group that received special attention and funding for tuition.

Kindergarten: Feeling positioned as a good mother

In the first interview, Cath was asked to describe George:

C: George, he is caring, in the sense that he is thinking a lot, but he has trouble phrasing, so he is often misunderstood. He does not say what he wants before he is confident and has the time. (...) He has been like this since he was born.

Cath said that George's language problems initially created problems in the kindergarten, and the staff reported these problems to the child welfare centre:

C: The kindergarten began to worry. They, among other things, expressed their concerns to the health centre without talking with us [...] we felt we were blamed.

After that, the relationship between George's parents and the kindergarten staff improved:

C: We approached the department leader and the manager; they immediately understood that they should have informed us. They were sorry.

Cath described the good aspects of cooperation with the kindergarten:

C: I felt that both George and we were understood, and that we were a team.

I: Can you explain?

C: It was just like the kindergarten valued and saw both George and me. We had a regular contact person who welcomed us every time. I felt valued as a mother.

I felt that they liked George and respected his behaviour. They seemed to care.

Based on these excerpts, we can see that the tensions felt by the parents originated from feeling positioning as neglectful parents. This made Cath take a proactive position in order to improve the communication with the kindergarten about George's special needs, these special learning needs also seemed to worry the parents in the family situation. When the staff openly admitted their mistake and positioned George's parents as having insight into his situation, Cath seemed to feel trusted. When

Cath felt trusted, she could position towards cooperating with the kindergarten in a positive way.

Primary and lower secondary school: Feeling positioned as an overprotective mother

After kindergarten, George started a combined primary and lower secondary school.

Cath described how the meetings with staff at that school were different from those with kindergarten staff:

C: I remember I was attending a lot of school meetings about George, thinking that they would not our best. I got an impression that we were counterparts, not partners. After a couple of meetings [...] I had to bring a co-worker because I felt I had to fight for George's rights and to make them understand George's problems. [...] School viewed George through his diagnosis; they told us to follow up homework [...]. I felt that school was only interested in a diagnosis and viewed me as an overprotective mom.

[...]

C: These meetings contained little passion; it was just exchange of information. I was always moody and exhausted after these meetings.

Cath felt that she was positioned differently by the school staff than the kindergarten staff:

C: Can you please elaborate on the transition from kindergarten to school?

C: I felt alienated in school. [...] George became just one of many. [...] I lost contact with the other parents and teachers.

[...]

I: In school, I felt I was stigmatised as a mother because I was often worried on his behalf. George was diagnosed [due to ADHD] as a tiresome student, and I

felt they thought I was an overprotective mother. He was not acknowledged for his efforts. [...] I felt lonely.

These excerpts indicate that the broader implications for Cath seemed to be that George's ADHD diagnosis prevented a good communication and cooperation between home and the school. Cath approached the school in a proactive way, but in contrast to the kindergarten staff, the school seemed to lack the tools to establish a good communication for building trust. Consequently, Cath responded by taking (partial) responsibility for George's education.

Cath recalled parent meetings and homework to illustrate her experiences regarding George's schooling:

C: It was terrible. [...] I felt I had to sit and defend myself. Among other things, the need for an assistant in the classroom setting became a big issue at a parent meeting. Yes, it must be said that George has had many assistants, and one of them entered discussions with some of the girls in the class. These girls, 13–14 years old, can be quite argumentative and stir up things a bit.

[...]

C: Homework has been laborious and emotional. Laborious because he needed help with everything, but when we talked about the text, he managed well [...]. We continued like this every day for 10 years. [...] He had to work much more than the others. [...] I always doubted how much I should push him. The dual role of being a mother and a 'teacher' was confusing for me.

Based on this, Cath felt she had to stand up for George and again felt positioned outside the group of parents. Again, Cath took a proactive position. However, the school did not appear to assume responsibility for the situation or try to shape the dialogue into a more positive one.

Upper secondary school: Taking the position as an insufficient mother

The final interviews concerned George's last year of upper secondary school, when he was a student in the general studies programme. Cath believed that this programme was difficult and that George would probably not pass his Spanish course and hence not receive a diploma. She felt guilty about what she might have done wrong during George's schooling:

C: I was never sure whether I or we did the right things. I can feel guilty when I think about it.

When asked about George's future, Cath expressed concern:

C: I am very worried. I think I have supported him too much regarding school—given him too much assistance.

I: Does he say anything about it himself?

C: Yes—and he does not yet know what he wants to do. I may have made him more helpless. He has lost faith in school and in himself. On difficult days, he might say, 'what will I ever become?' On other days, he says he will study the next year. [...] Either way, he will need much help.

[...]

C: He goes to a psychologist once a week. Without having all the details about what they talk about, I think it is about the feeling of not managing [...] I'm glad he has someone other than just me to talk to. It is a relief to me.

At the end of the interview, Cath was asked to describe how she felt about being the mother of a child with special needs in general:

C: I am well educated in pedagogics and have worked as a teacher for many years. Nevertheless, I felt I had to fight against a 'superpower' [school].

Based on these excerpts, we can see that Cath has contemplated her position as George's helper and wondered if she made the wrong choices, leading to worry about his future.

Discussion

In this study, we used recursive interviewing to document how a mother of a child with special learning needs understands herself and how she felt she was positioned in educational contexts (Holland et al. 1998). The concept of figured worlds allowed us to explore how mothers imagine themselves when shifting positions. We showed how transitions can shed light on the contradictory positions mothers experience in the figured worlds of kindergarten and school, focusing on the importance of these positionings for George's educational trajectory.

The tensions Cath felt while supporting George in school were crucial to her sense of self. When George was in kindergarten, although some challenges arose, Cath felt that she was supported in meeting her son's needs. However, throughout George's time in primary, lower and upper secondary school, Cath felt disempowered due to the schools' lack of ability to support her role as a parent; in kindergarten, she was positioned as a capable parent, but later she was positioned as an overprotective mother. In general, we found that mothers with relatively high socioeconomic status seem to take educational responsibility for their children. Cath, for example, served as an assistant during George's schooling, perhaps in response to the school's positioning. However, it seems that the school did not communicate with Cath about how staff could assist her, in line with §1-1 of the Education Act (Ministry of Education 2007). Thus, similar to the other mothers in this study, and despite being a pedagogue, Cath felt that advocating for George's special needs was useless. The interviews showed that Cath was hesitant but conscious of her

developing sense of self. She exhibited introspection, asking whether she could have done things differently.

Our study confirms the findings of Berg and Nes (2010, 12), showing that the parents of children with special needs find that cooperating with schools can be challenging and that, in general, families are responsible for advocating for their children (Hein 2012; Amundsen 2017; Rice 2017). In our study, we found that the cooperation between parents and kindergarten gave positive results when the kindergarten focused on building mutual trust and positive relations. From this, we suggest that the knowledge transfer meetings between kindergarten and school should entail exchange of information about how kindergarten worked with relations.

Our study provides schools with insights into the importance and implications of how they position mothers. For example, when Cath felt trusted, she could position towards cooperating with the kindergarten in a positive way. In school, when Cath felt that George's ADHD diagnosis prevented a good communication and cooperation with the school she responded by taking responsibility for George's education. For school, the way forward may be to draw on Florian and Sprats (2013) views on inclusive pedagogy where teachers are encouraged seek new approaches to support all children. In this context, their argument about avoiding labelling and categorising students with special needs is important. Categorising and labelling "ADHD" students may hinder teachers to draw on parents' involvement in and wish to assist their children in improved learning in school. Teachers must be aware that categorisation and labelling of students may lead to a less fruitful home-school cooperation.

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