

# **Preschool staff relationships with children with language difficulties: a comparative study in Belarusian and Norwegian preschools**

## **Abstract**

The present study focuses on exploring the relationships of preschool staff and children with language difficulties in Norwegian and Belarusian contexts. A qualitative case design was used, and data was gathered through video observations and video-based conversations. Through different approaches — narrative analysis and analysis of narratives — two stories were constructed and then scrutinised for identification of common patterns. Three aspects illuminating contrasting tensions — *initial positioning*, *instructive support* and *nurturing support* — were revealed. The suggestions derived from the results of the study are the following: adequate preparation of preschool staff, as well as the encouragement of a closer dialogue between different practices, are needed to improve the support provided for children with language difficulties in preschool settings.

## **Keywords**

Preschool staff-child relationships, language difficulties, special educational needs practice, comparative study.

## **Introduction**

In the last few decades, there has been an ongoing focus on the importance of relationships between teachers and children in education. Specifically, a good deal of attention has been paid to the quality of these relationships. The research literature indicates that the quality of relationships predicts both the complications and successes of children's language development, as well as their academic, learning, social and behavioural outcomes (Evertsen et al. 2015; Helmerhorst 2014; Pianta 1999; Sabol and Pianta 2012; Sobkin and Fomichenko 2015). Furthermore, children with special educational needs (SEN) may benefit from having positive relationships with teachers in both preschools and primary schools (Pianta 1999; Reite 2016).

Children with language difficulties (LD) in preschools form a case in point. They represent a diverse group that cannot be effortlessly adapted into educational practice. In Norway and

Belarus alike, about 4 to 10% of preschool children, with the majority age of 5-6 have LD as their primary difficulty. This group receives the most attention in terms of SEN assistance (Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus (MOE) 2016; Reiling and Wendelborg 2015).

Several studies have shown that, in addition to problems with various aspects of language, children with LD seem to have low levels of confidence and self-esteem. They may also appear mentally tired or anxious and exhibit either internalising (withdrawal) or externalising (acting out) behaviours. As a result, poor social interaction and communication are issues often associated with LD. This means that children with LD are talked to, addressed and collaborated with less frequently than other children. They may also have greater difficulty forming strong, positive relationships with teachers and peers. Thus, this negative circle may contribute to the hindrance of both interactions and relationships, which can further inhibit adequate language development (Bal 2011; Bishop 2014; Pianta 1999).

Despite the existence of considerable knowledge about the importance of positive teacher-child relationships, paradoxically little research has been conducted in this area to reveal a more in-depth picture of the specific characterisation of relationships between preschool staff and children with LD. At the same time, in Norway and Belarus alike, there is a demand for increased focus on enhancing the quality of relationships and language development in an attempt to make preschools a high-quality arena of development and reduce the growing number of children with SEN (Evertsen et al. 2015; Sobkin and Fomichenko 2015).

Comparison with another country that is rarely included in such studies can provide an entrance to various cultures, as well as in-depth knowledge and an understanding of the uniqueness, sensibility, weaknesses and strengths of other practices. Moreover, comparison can contribute an additional perspective by bringing new experiences and providing enlightenment for our own conditions (Kubow and Blosser 2016; Nazarova et al. 2012). Therefore, preschools in two countries — Belarus and Norway — were selected for the purpose of comparison as examples of how different cultural, political and ideological traditions have led to a diversity of perspectives regarding support for children with LD in preschools. Furthermore, the research-based knowledge that specifically compares Belarus and Norway is sparse. This places the study in a unique position and emphasises its relevance. Striving to avoid ambiguity, the differences and similarities between Norway and Belarus are explained later in the paper. Additionally, the author's background, understanding of preschools and SEN systems, and proficiency in both Belarusian and Norwegian cultures and languages will possibly help to eschew some confusion regarding the concepts and terminology used.

This investigation, which serves as part of a larger study, by a comparison between Belarus and Norway, was aimed at specifically exploring the following question: *What characterises preschool employees' relationships with children with LD, and how are these relationships experienced?*

### **Theoretical background**

In order to widen understanding of the phenomenon under study, the conceptual framework must be clarified.

LD is defined in various ways, and terminological confusion complicates any attempt to reach a consensus regarding common terminology (Bishop 2014, 392). LD is a heterogenic multifactorial phenomenon originated by the combined influence of both genetic and environmental factors. LD is related to difficulties with phonological, impressive, expressive and pragmatic aspects of language, seen in the context of children's normal development. LD may also occur together with impaired social interaction and behaviour difficulties. Additionally, LD is more common among children with socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Nevertheless, the question about causation of LD is still poorly understood (Bal 2011; Bishop 2014).

Despite many different definitions and ambiguous causation, the umbrella term LD is used in view of the fact that the term correlates with the understanding of LD in Belarus and Norway. LD refers here to a specific difficulty that is not secondary to another condition (Bal 2011; Bishop 2014). The focus of this study was children with language as their *primary* area of difficulty, connected to expressive capacity, ability to understand and interpret the meaning of words, contexts, social situations and participation in social interaction. A range of children with autism, hearing loss, physical causes, stuttering and multilingualism were excluded from this study.

LD as a diagnosis with specified set of diagnostic criteria is included in the World Health Organisation (WHO) International Classification of Mental Disorders (ICD-10). Both Belarus and Norway use ICD-10 in clinical and SEN practice. However, there is considerable variation and insecurity among clinicians and practitioners with the use of diagnostic criteria, particularly regarding preschool age children (Ball 2011; Bishop 2014; WHO 1992). Therefore, the focus of this study was children receiving SEN assistance due to LD, which is consistent with the official diagnostic criteria.

The meaning of this notion relationships in my context has its roots in varied lines of research within education and psychology and has been conceptualised from different perspectives (Sabol and Pianta 2012; Tetzchner 2012). Kemmis, for instance, positions relationships as a part of the dimension social space, constituting his theory of practice. Relationships are both shaped by and shape the social-political arrangements found in or brought to a site and are either encouraging or constraining — i.e., preschool staff-child interaction (Kemmis et al. 2014).

Looking at the teacher-child relationship at the very proximal level, it can be comprehended as a dynamic, multicomponent, regulatory system that contributes to children's social and academic competencies in preschools. Additionally, it can be described as a product of individual teacher and child characteristics, which mutually influence one another (Sabol and Pianta 2012). Relationships are revealed via patterns, which are formed through the interaction between people over time and across situations. The quality of the interaction is reflected in both what the adult and child are doing, and how it is being done in relation to the other (Pianta 1999, 30). Thus, derived from this definition, a continuum of two main aspects — emotional and instructional — is used to describe relationships between preschool staff and children. To make the notion of relationships correspond with the understanding in both countries, emotional support is interpreted as a positive climate, staff sensitivity and respect for children's perspectives within SEN-sessions. Instructional support involves dealing with adults' abilities to meet preschool students with LD opinions and views, reflect together, give frequent feedback and facilitate learning, so that children's cognitive abilities and language expand (Evertsen et al. 2015; Helmerhorst 2014; Pianta 1999; Sobkin and Fomichenko 2015).

This article focuses on emotional and instructional support within SEN activities that constitute SEN assistance as a statutory right for children having difficulties compatible with LD, in both countries (Code on Education in the Republic of Belarus (CE) Art 14; Kindergarten Act (KA), §19). The activities take place in preschools and can be interpreted as part of a complex system where families, teachers, peers and children with LD are involved in characteristic relationships with one another in different ways. However, the investigation focuses on relationships from preschool staff's point of view, and factors such as families and peers are beyond the scope of this article.

### **The context of the investigation**

In order to reach an insight into the conditions of the Belarusian and Norwegian preschool contexts, basic values, legislative frames, curricula and principles for providing SEN assistance were scrutinised and are presented in the following sections.

### *Belarusian preschool context*

Belarus bases its policy on the creation and improvement of a high quality national education system, and preschool education is among the state's priorities (World Data on Education 2011). Enrolment rates for 5-year-old children are 100% (MOE 2016).

The educational system in the country is regulated through CE (2011), which constitutes the main legislative document. CE is founded on overarching values and principles such as human values, inclusion, human rights, national culture, traditions and orientation towards international standards in education (CE 2011, Art. 124, 125).

In order to provide a more detailed and specific framework for how defined goals are to be realised in practice, *An Educational Program of Preschool Education*, based on the recognition of the intrinsic value of childhood and safeguarding the child as subject, is elaborated (CE 2011, Art. 279; MOE 2012). Based on this program, additional national programs are adopted in the education of children with various forms of disabilities (CE 2011, Art. 279; MOE 2012).

The right to special educational assistance for preschool children is statutory and regulated by Article 14 of CE 2011. Each child's needs are evaluated at a regional centre — *The Correction and Development Training and Rehabilitation Center* (DC) — by psychological, medical and educational assessment.

Belarus offers a variety of options for SEN in preschools: special preschools that serve children with severe disabilities; different types of integrated groups, both attending separate classes and combining separate and regular classes in ordinary preschools; and DC, serving children with multiple severe challenges (CE 2011, Art. 267-268). About 70% of all children receiving SEN assistance are integrated in ordinary preschools (MOE 2016).

The country has high standards regarding structural quality such as qualification requirements and division of responsibilities of preschool staff (Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009). For example, 56.1% of preschool teachers have formal training at higher level. In order to carry out SEN assistance, a specific and relevant professional competence at a high level is demanded (CE 2011; MOE 2016). It is also important to recognise that an attempt to define or explicitly describe the process quality, (e.g., the quality of relationships between staff and children), is

sparse. There is also a lack of research focused on the perception and experience of exactly this dimension (Ibid 2009).

### *Norwegian preschool context*

The Norwegian government acknowledges preschool education as the first step of a lifelong learning process (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (MER) 2006). Consequently, 97% of 3 to 5-year-old children are enrolled in preschools (Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (UDIR) 2016).

KA (2006) is the societal mandate through which all preschools are established and regulated. It promotes equality, appreciation, solidarity and safeguarding the child as subject, and it legislates children's right to participate and codetermine (KA §§ 1, 2 and 3). Norway also has a comprehensive *Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens*, which provides a binding framework for planning, implementing and assessing activities in preschools (MER 2006).

Children who, as stated by expert assessment, need adapted support or education, have a statutory right to special educational assistance (Chapter 5, §§ 19a-h of KA 2016). Parents may individually, or in consultation with the preschool, apply for assessment of their child's needs to the educational and counselling service (PPT) — an independent, expert authority. Based on the PPT's assessment, the preschool owner makes a decision to grant or deny the request for special educational assistance. This assistance consists of individual facilitation and is included as part of the ordinary preschool education.

The Norwegian system is characterised by strong regulation and several well-defined aspects of structural quality, such as staff-child ratios and group sizes. Of the preschool staff, 42% are preschool teachers educated at a high level (UDIR 2016). There are vague formal division in labour between qualified and unqualified staff. Therefore, preschool staff, with or without formal qualifications, carry out SEN assistance. Thus, external expertise (PPT) contributes with counselling in various phases (Engel et al. 2015). The process quality is considered critical and needs to be included in standards and regulations. Strengthening research into process quality is also required (Engel et al. 2015, 57-58).

### **Design and Method**

Following a case design, the data was collected through video observations and video-based conversations, composed as two stories as the content of the purposively selected cases — one from Norway and one from Belarus — and compared (Yin 2014). This comparative approach has several methodological challenges to take into account: achieving linguistic, contextual and organisational equivalence (Backström-Widjeskog and Hansén 2002).

*Linguistic equivalence* concerns identifying and utilising adequate notions and concepts when referring to the same phenomena. This study involved the use of three languages: Norwegian, Russian and English. Collection and transcription of data was done in both Norwegian and Russian (which is the state language in Belarus). The questions in the video-based conversations were carefully translated and adapted to both linguistic concepts. Thus, some issues in identifying adequate and corresponding concepts within three languages arose. Translation of the Belarusian concept *spesialnoje obrazovanije* and Norwegian *spesialpedagogisk hjelp* (both applied to legislation), when compared to each other, highlights the differences in the linguistic concepts *education* (BLR) and *help* (NOR). After discussion with competent colleagues from Norway and Belarus, I chose to translate both the Belarusian and the Norwegian concepts into English as ‘special educational assistance’, with the aim of grasping a common meaning that includes the statutory right to adapted support or education for children who need it.

The second challenge was *contextual equivalence*. The stories in this study belong to different societies and are tightly connected to the specific historical, social, political and cultural surroundings of the preschools (Ibid 2002). Challenges comprised positioning the investigation in contexts which were understandable and comparable. Thus, detailed descriptions of each context are provided.

The third complication was related to the question of how to establish *organisational equivalence*. Challenges related to understanding the organisation of both preschool systems, as well as ways to administer SEN assistance and their comparability. By focusing on detailed descriptions of the preschool and legislative systems in both countries, I have tried to identify characteristic features constituting the organisational structures.

### ***Engaging participants for the cases***

Preschools in both countries that offer special education support for children with LD were contacted by phone and e-mail. Those who had experience from the relevant field of practice and were interested in the project were given further information — both oral and written —

about the investigation. Ten individuals, five from different preschools in each country, gave their written consent to participate. Guided by the aim of the study, I chose one individual from each country among those ten, for a total of two. Some rough criteria for selection were established: participants had to be female, since preschool teaching is mainly a female profession both in Norway and Belarus (Engel et al. 2015; MER 2016), around the same age and with approximately the same level of education. They had to have experience with working full time in public preschools serving children with LD, as well as responsibility for planning and carrying out SEN activities for these children.

Despite the fact that the participants represented different social, political and ideological contexts and various traditions, two female preschool employees — one from each country — aged between 40-50, were followed up with regarding their work with five-year-old boys with LD receiving SEN assistance. The participants were university-educated: the Norwegian woman was educated as a preschool teacher with one year of further specialisation in SEN, and the participant from Belarus was educated as a SEN teacher with specialisation in preschool education. Both had similar work tasks and working experience.

Criteria for selection of children were also established: the children had to be five years of age and male, due to the higher prevalence of LD for boys than girls (Bishop, 1997). Children had to have either Norwegian or Russian as their first language. The boys had to have all aspects of development on normal course, but experiencing specific LD with weak vocabulary and comprehension. They had to be enrolled in educational and counselling services, had to have received SEN assistance and should have participated in SEN activities — both individually and within groups. Thus, one boy from each country was chosen among children with whom the female participants worked.

### *Video observations*

The data sample was initialised by video observations. Observable SEN activities in both countries were organised both as individual and group sessions. The groups were about the same size in both countries: approximately 4-6 children were enrolled in each. However, the groups' sessions in Belarus consisted of children with similar difficulties and needs. In Norway, sessions were individually adapted to the difficulties and needs of one particular child, but they also included other children without SEN.

After three weeks, and three group and three individual sessions with each participant, a saturation of collected data was reached and generic features were identified (Kvale and



Brinkmann, 2009, 129). No technical problems occurred through the whole observation period, and the quality of all recordings was satisfactory.

### *Video-based conversations*

In an attempt to gather the perspectives of the preschool staff on the data and validate the researcher's interpretations of observed SEN activities, the next step was returning data to the field for comments and discussion (Knoblauch et al. 2006).

Derived from the research question, 20 video scenes with Belarusian and 18 with Norwegian participants were considered as relevant. This selection was made in connection to Pianta's (1999) theory describing relationships, and scenes enclosed showing emotional and instruction support were of particular interest. These video scenes chosen were used as a base for conducting video-based conversations.

Each conversation was carefully planned and adapted according to the participants, to ensure that it made sense for them. The conversations, to the extent it was judged reasonable, were conducted in the same way in Russian in Belarus and in Norwegian in Norway. While watching the selected video together, employees were asked to assume what was happening, how they would describe it and how they would explain and understand it. They were also asked to describe several other examples from similar situations. Each conversation lasted about one hour, for a total of approximately two hours of audio recording.

### *Transcription*

Video observations and video-based conversations were transcribed into text in the respective languages, with the aim of preserving accuracy and sufficiency. First, the orchestration of material environments, organisation of events and SEN activity phases were transcribed. Further, verbal interaction was provided, so the non-verbal signals (a small portion of them) that accompanied the verbal interaction — eye contact, movements, touch and cadences — were noted in parentheses.

### *Analysis*

The analysis was developed in accordance with Polkinghorne's approaches, *narrative analysis* and *analysis of narratives* (1995, 5). Through narrative analysis, collected data were configured into two stories, as the content of the cases — one from Belarus and one from Norway. The concepts story and narrative are used interchangeably by Polkinghorne and signify a

combination of succession of incidents and actions into a unified episode that expresses human experience (1995, 7). Experiencing relationships from the employees' points of view was not possible simply through observing instructional and emotional support, and, in some cases, had to be deduced from verbal statements. Therefore, in constructing the stories, the focus was on added data elements with participants' own reflections of special events, actions and their understandings and experiences of relationships, situated in the specific settings (SEN activities). In creating the stories, I returned to the original data and examined each element's connectedness to the other and to the whole to make sense of context. The next step, in line with the analysis of narratives approach of Polkinghorne (1995), was to scrutinise and compare stories in order to identify common aspects across these. This process was, to some extent, guided by theoretical perspective revealing relationships (Pianta 1999).

### *Ethical considerations*

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study. Signed consent forms for participation were received, and parental permission was obtained regarding videotaping the children. Confidentiality was secured by excluding aspects that increased the possibility of recognising the participants in the respective stories.

### **Findings**

The two cases incorporating the individual experiences of the two preschool employees regarding relationships with the LD children are presented in the following sections.

#### *Norwegian case – Oda's story*

Oda, between 40-50, from Norway, had been a preschool teacher for 12 years at the time of the study. She had been educated for and worked in another profession for many years, until she discovered she wanted to do something new and earned a degree as a preschool teacher, followed by a specialisation in SEN.

At the time of the study, Oda was working in a public preschool, which had, in total, 120 children. Her main responsibilities were planning, carrying out SEN assistance and following up with preschool children with LD. One of the children was Per, a five-year-old healthy child with all aspects of development on normal course, but with a weak vocabulary and language comprehension compared to his peers. Per was smiling, active, engaging and social, but he did not always understand what was said to him. He could be reluctant to participate in play and other social interactions. He received SEN assistance requiring language stimulation — that is,

training memory, vocabulary and understanding — both within an inclusive group and alone together with Oda.

Observations revealed that Oda and Per frequently became involved in several negative interactions, where usually Per either refused to enter the activity, suddenly left the situation or just screamed, *'I hate all this.'* SEN activities with Oda seemed to follow a random concept. She started several sessions by asking children what they wanted to do, thereby giving them opportunities to make suggestions. Per seemed to want to be involved, but he struggled to express his wishes clearly. After several attempts, without getting Oda's timing for hints and encouragement, he got distressed and angry and left the room. Per was also given tasks that he seemed unable to handle. The ongoing activities were sporadically assembled. Oda would read a fairy tale in Norwegian dialect without explaining the difficult vocabulary, or she would offer to play a language game with the children without ensuring the game was suitable for the Per's language level. Per was reluctant to engage in these tasks. Oda appeared to be calm. She smiled and often made eye contact with Per, saying, *'Stay tuned, Per!'* She also clapped him on the shoulder and commended him frequently for his efforts, saying, *'So well! So clever you are!'*

Oda was asked to comment on these situations. She expressed uncertainty and despair reporting concerns and sounded tired and weary: *'I find it challenging to deal with this person, perhaps, he takes up too much space (...) he acts out... yes...all of a sudden doesn't want to do it anymore! I try to let him do it the way he wants to, I also give him positive feedback, no, it's quite difficult.'*

Oda carefully conveyed a feeling that this issue is the most exasperating and prevents her from doing a good job. Simultaneously, she voiced a strong wish to expand and enhance relationships with these children. She claimed that she looks for ways to be engaged with them and to provide a great deal of care to them because, she said, *'They really need a lot of this.'* Oda reported that care for her means *'stroking child's hand gently, that one sees the child, casts a glance on them, gives them a hug, or just touch them gently like that ...'*

Oda claimed that children are a big part of her life, and she loves her job, but, by her own admission, her work is challenging, especially regarding relationships with the LD children: *'Yes, it's always difficult (...) they wrangle a lot (...) they have trouble to be understood and especially to understand (...) and with nonverbal for that matter (...) they make so much like abusive stuff...'*

### *Belarusian case – Lida’s story*

Lida, from Belarus, is a SEN teacher in her 40-50s. She had also worked in another profession for some years before she earned a SEN teacher degree and started work in preschool 12 years prior to the start of the study.

At the time of the study, Lida was working in a public preschool with approximately 120 children. Her responsibilities were mainly to serve children with LD, plan activities, provide SEN assistance and follow up. Lesha, a five-year-old healthy boy, with normal development in general, was one of her students. His difficulties mainly encompassed poor vocabulary and language comprehension. The boy seemed to be happy, active, social and involved, but he was sometimes hesitant about connecting with peers. He received SEN assistance somewhat akin to Per’s, both within the group for children with LD and alone, together with Lida.

During the observation, Lesha showed several signals indicating his uncertainty in situations with Lida. When he was asked to answer a question or to do something, he seemed to become quiet and withdrawn. This was reflected in his body language: he blushed and turned his eyes away. If he had questions, he twisted nervously and raised and hid his hand several times.

It was clearly observed that Lida had an established routine for the SEN-sessions. She started by presenting the idea, which was clearly thematised and pre-defined. In addition to giving well-timed, clear verbal instructions and feedback, Lida guided the children through the activity, at times repeating, *‘Pay attention here. We have to work properly.’* She was also highly responsive, generally verbal and avoided physical proximity. Lesha showed a tendency to be attentive to instructions; he would quickly do what was expected of him, and he showed courtesy to Lida. Within sessions, questions related to the particular theme with which the children were working were asked: *‘Which animals have we met? What kind of clothes do we need to have on in winter?’* Lida seemed to expect specific answers, and, when Lesha’s answers did not match these expectations, she became less engaged and noted, *‘Yes, but...’*

When Lida was asked to explain these situations, she voiced a feeling of confidence and expressed the belief that a *‘teacher is a source of children’s support, and should be able to teach children appropriately...well, I have to see the results, you know (...) we are working on results.’*

Lida declared that she loves her job. She went on to say that the job is not overwhelming, since children with LD are *‘open and eager to interact.’* She revealed, smiling, that *‘Forming*

*relationships with [the children] is non-problematic at all, and there is little reason to believe otherwise.'* Lida determined that *'The highest point of good relationships for me, when the child understands that he needs all this we working on, because soon he starts at school and will be more successful if his language is beautiful and correct.'*

### **Emerging common aspects**

Through the analysis of narratives process, three common aspects, each illuminating contrasting tensions, were identified in the cases: *initial positioning*, *instructive support* and *nurturing support*.

#### ***Initial positioning***

The first aspect was evolved inductively and concentrates on the view of how preschool employees experience their own positions in establishing positive and functional relationships with LD children.

Both participants revealed a strong sense of commitment to their jobs, responsibilities and the children they were serving. As illustrated in both stories, the high ideals of preschool staff relate to building positive relationships. Through reflection, Oda realised that her work is complex and challenging, especially concerning establishing and maintaining relationships with LD children. Her experience related to initial positioning was coloured by uncertainty, negativity and descriptions characterising the children's inadequacy and inability to function during interaction. Lida, who showed a strong focus on work as multifaceted and compound, voiced a similar view as Oda, but she, compared to Oda, expressed the belief that the establishment of relationships with LD children is not problematic, and depicted children's engagement, positive attitudes, enthusiasm and willingness to interact.

In sum, Belarusian and Norwegian cases revealed tensional initial positions. Based on how the representations were experienced through the two stories, it seems that the Norwegian employee was distinctly and steadily oriented towards insecurity and, to some extent, fixed initial positioning, exemplified as follows: *'It's always difficult.'* In the Belarusian story, Lida's accumulated feelings and beliefs about her relationships with children with LD were clear and positive but reflected a narrow-minded position limited by the fact that she was focused on results rather than the process.

### *Instructive support*

Another aspect was developed in connection to the theoretical concept linked to Pianta (1999). It focuses on how preschool staff offer concrete instructive support to children with LD in order to cope with SEN tasks, pointing them in the intended direction and guiding them through SEN-sessions.

Both participants were actively involved in their interactions with the children, and both work with the same goal of improving children's language skills, learning and mastery. Support, as defined by both Oda and Lida, refers to adapting, provisioning, explaining, suggesting and varying approaches to instruction, as well as providing feedback to meet the children's needs and prerequisites.

In the story of Oda, the open approach in which she asked Per what he wanted to do, was used. It seemed that instructive support was a more peripheral task for her, and the child himself was carrying most of the responsibility of choice. As the story illustrated, this led to uncertainty regarding the aim of the SEN activity. In addition, timing for hints was lacking. The tasks did not seem to be adapted to Per's skills and prerequisites and were therefore experienced as unmanageable and insurmountable. This caused the child to repeatedly fail after trying to carry out these tasks. Therefore, Per often experienced frustration and was rarely able to master a task. Oda voiced a strong focus on establishing closeness and a well-functioning relationship with Per by giving him praise, but the praise seemed to be linked to Per's efforts towards the tasks he did not comprehend, and he was therefore forced to attribute low performance to his difficulties.

As seen in Lida's story, she had a large amount of control over what approaches to use and how to put them into action. This view can thus be seen as emphasising systematically planned and explicitly defined processes, where the activities chosen were adapted to suit Lesha's specific needs. Thus, by stepwise verbal instructive support, frequent corrections of faults and well-timed verbal feedback, the child was guided through the tasks. Hence, Lida displayed strong convictions of what a child should need or be engaged in, and there was less room for spontaneity. Her questions were mostly closed, and she seemed to be looking mainly for the 'right' answer. It was clear that Lesha's emotional and physiological reactions could be interpreted as insecurity and anxiety about completing the given tasks well enough. Thus, the child's desire to participate seemed to be muted.

In sum, this aspect pinpoints tensional profiles in the way of instructive support. The Norwegian story portrays a situation in which unclear follow-up instructions were provided, and random and obscure verbal feedback was given. The Belarusian story appears to support an opportunity for stimulating children's language through clear verbal instructions and feedback, which facilitates the understanding of tasks.

### *Nurturing support*

The final aspect was empirically founded, but in close connection to the theory (Pianta 1999). It linked to emotional support such as caring, building up trust and closeness, which contributes to positive relationships with LD children.

Both participants recognised the need to care for the children. Oda pointed out that emotional proximity is the most important to offer to children. She talked extensively about physical and nonverbal closeness. Among signals that often accompanied her expressions were a calm voice, quizzical cadences, frequent eye contact with Per, touching his hand, arm, or shoulder, giving him a hug or taking him on her lap. As noted earlier, relationships are important to Oda, but they may be too important. She appeared to be very emotionally supportive — almost intrusive. She was not always able to read Per's signals accurately and respond appropriately based on these signals. Displaying an attempt to protect Per from being defeated, this kind of support appeared as unsynchronised and inaccurate, making the child indignant because it seemed inappropriate in these situations.

Lida's actions and comments suggest that she believes caring is reflected in her ability to teach children appropriately and make them understand the importance of their efforts within activities. She repeatedly revealed that Lesha has to be active on his own part and try to do his best. Lida talked with a clear, determined voice and used ascertainment cadences. She also indicated she wanted Lesha to listen with a look towards him and through her posture. The right answers were confirmed with a smile and nod, indicating admiration and acceptance. In contrast, Lida's facial expression changed and her tone of voice became less engaged when the child gave incorrect answers or made spontaneous suggestions. The child's compliance and correct answers garnered appreciation and approval. Lida recognised that, to some extent, Lesha did not spontaneously seek her out, perhaps because she was too concerned with maintaining emotional and physical distance and focusing on establishing authority in relation to him, which seemed to reduce her ability to see and hear the child's signals.

To summarise, this aspect exposes clearly observable tensions in experiencing support of the emotional kind in the two stories. The nurturing support in Norway followed a tighter physical and nonverbal closeness, while, in Belarus, a more distant pattern dominated.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The findings revealed three common aspects, each characterised by the expression of tensional relationships — *initial positioning*, *instructive support* and *nurturing support* — experienced by the preschool teachers selected for the cases.

From a narrow perspective, without considering the contextual aspects, the findings emphasise two different personalities — those of Oda and Lida. Adults' individual features and interpersonal skills may influence their ability to read children's signals and needs appropriately when instructive and nurturing support is given (Pianta 1999; Khitruk 2003). Another possible explanation may be linked to teachers' expectations and experiences, formed as certain positioning (Pianta 1999). In the case of Oda and Lida, negativism and restrictedness on the other side of the spectrum, determination, positivism and openness guide their behaviour towards children and ways of supporting them. Children, in turn, contribute to these expectations by passivity, conformity and noncompliance, or vitality, development and feelings of belonging. However, mutually reinforcing expectations in different ways gives either positive or negative circularity in the quality of relationships formed in both the present and future (Pianta 1999; Khitruk 2003; Reite 2016; Sobkin and Fomichenko 2015).

Broadening perspective, teacher-child relationships may also be explained as the result of the influence of the socio-cultural context in which Oda and Lida work. Different contexts seem to generate conceptually different views of how relationships with children are formed and maintained.

In Belarus, prevailing political governance and traditions have caused a convergent and standardised societal culture, triggering a perception of servility, obedience, conformity, uniformity and dependence on authorities. Requiring focus on results and preparation for school, the ambition is to identify and understand disability while concentrating on child's difficulties, thus endeavouring to treat it (Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009). However, one of the strengths of this system is that it is well-functioning, highly formalised and sustainable. This approach may presumably maximise learning and cognitive attainment. The benefit of this is the provision of a high level of instructive-oriented support with regards to enhancing academic outcomes and improving skills in particular areas. The consequence has been that development



of relationships, if at all considered, is therefore judged from the perspective of training and treatment, and emotional warmth and closeness tends to be restricted.

This also means that a hierarchical structure characterises the relationships in which the staff position themselves over the children. As such, children with SEN are not always seen as equal, competent, potential resources and as contributing and creating subjects, but as receivers of prescriptions of regimes. This one-sidedness in the relationship contributes to an increase in asymmetry, and adult dominance may lead to the risk of violating the child as an active meaning-making subject, inhibiting his freedom to self-organisation and the mutual equality between an adult and a child (Khitruk 2013; Sobkin and Fomichenko 2015; Starzinskaja 2011; Vargas-Baròn et al. 2009).

Compared to Belarus, the Norwegian ambiguous ideological and political jurisdiction and traditions have precipitated understanding of societal culture as divergent, multifaceted and heterogeneous. Striving to be centred on normalisation, freedom and the interest of children's rights to codetermination, there appears to be a move from a specialised to a general pedagogical approach. At the same time, learning and academic outcomes are assumed to be closely woven with caring, and a child should be given an opportunity to gain experience on his or her own. The repercussion has been that a fragmented, personally-orientated and ambiguous way of providing SEN assistance has become prevalent. Nevertheless, these approaches expand a strong focus on a nurturing approach in terms of involving emotion and personal commitment and support, but tend to lack sustainable instructional maintenance (Hennum and Østrem 2016; MER 2006; Reite 2016).

Such heterogeneity mirrors the hierarchical structure between children and staff in relationships, where a common status seems to be shared. As such, preschool staff may risk losing the right to lead, define and determine a child's free expression. This instability in the adult's position can give rise to relational instability, which can lead to the child with SEN experiencing difficulty regulating and organising him- or herself as an equal, active and meaning-oriented subject (Havstad and Øvreeide 2011; Hennem and Østrem, 2016; Pianta 1999).

Through a comparative approach, the results of this study contributes to the research literature in that they offer a both narrow and wide perspective on preschool staff's relationships with children with LD. As the purpose was to access rich descriptions and deepen the understanding of the phenomenon being studied, this investigation was limited to a small and homogeneous

set of participants and children with one particular kind of difficulty (LD). The study was also carried out in two narrow and specific contexts via SEN-sessions. Therefore, broader generalisability of the results was affected. Thus, several methodological discussions are necessary, and limitations have to be determined.

As far as it was possible, participants' own words and expressions were used, and their interpretations of the phenomenon were foregrounded. It was possible for the researcher to influence different situations and the outcomes of the process. However, from the position of the author, who is familiar with both contexts, the preschool systems and all languages involved, it could be implied that the requirements of achieving contextual, linguistic and organisational equivalence were met, and findings reflect and describe the realities in an appropriate way. This study was validated through the use of multiple data sources, by checking the results with participants and discussing the study at seminars. Furthermore, an attempt was made to inform the reader about the research process in detail.

In conclusion, a number of suggestions for consideration can be made. First, focus on the professional development of preschool staff would benefit by being facilitated through a relational lens, making continuous efforts towards the development of teachers' relational-emotional and interpersonal skills. Secondly, for the enhancement of process quality, particularly for children with LD, increased emphasis should be placed on the improvement of preschool staffs' competencies with regards to children's emotional needs and the specialised instructional techniques that are pertinent when working with them. Finally, in order to deepen the understanding of the complex role of teacher-child relationships, a closer dialogue between different practices is a matter of course. Thus, this study can be seen as an initial attempt to invite a dialogue aimed at introducing new aspects into the discussion of improving preschool settings to support children with LD.

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