

What do children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties think about themselves in early childhood?

The aim of this study was to discover what kind of perceptions young children in need of social, emotional, and behavioural support have about themselves. The interest was especially in social and emotional self-perceptions. For this study, ten children attending Finnish early childhood education and care were interviewed in spring 2016 and the material was analysed by using thematic analysis. Several developmental characteristics, typical for children aged 4-7 years, were found in the analysis such as general positivity of self-perceptions. However, the children's perceptions also included atypical and negative features which manifested in various ways. Based on these features, four self-perception types were formed to describe the levels of positivity and negativity as well as the different features typical for each child and for each self-perception type. The results and possible explanations of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties (SEBD), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Self-Concept, Self-Perceptions

Introduction

In educational psychology, a positive self-concept has been valued as a desired outcome for child development (Marsh and Craven 2006; Marsh and Martin 2011). In addition, research on the self-concepts of young children has been considered important as the early childhood is seen as essential for the development of a positive self (Marsh, Ellis, and Craven 2002). The existing literature defines self-concept as an individual's comprehensive view of the self (Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton 1976) which includes, for example, perceptions of relationships, experiences, roles, beliefs and identities (Gore and Cross 2014). In some literature self-concept is also called self-perception and is used to describe domain specific self-beliefs (Jacobs et al. 2003).

As noted by Klein (2012), the concept of *self* may well be the most widely used and the least understood concept. In recent years, there has been a shift from self-esteem and global self-concept (unidimensional models) studies to more dimensional models of the self. In line with extensive previous research, the self is seen as a multidimensional and domain specific construction, which contains, for example, a self-concept of social skills (see e.g. Jacobs et al. 2003; Marsh and Craven 2006; Marsh and O'Mara 2008). Researchers interested in the social dimensions of self, have targeted their interest for example in children's perceptions of their teacher and peer relationships (see Leflot, Onghena, and Colpin 2010; Verschueren, Doumen, and Buyse 2012). As the children grow, their self-concept is seen to become more differentiated or increasingly abstract in construction (Harter 2006; Shavelson et al. 1976). The growing evidence supports the view of Marsh et al. (2002) that even young children, approximately age 4 ½-8 years old, may possess multidimensional self-concepts (Marsh and Craven 2006; Verschueren et al. 2012). In line with these results, Verschueren et al. (2012) have noted, that young children can provide important information about themselves.

The theoretical framework of this study, combines social and developmental psychology. By doing this the study combines the influence of social environment, child development, and the development of the self. In his work James (1948) highlighted the importance of social environment and interaction to the formation of self. In the footsteps of James, Mead (1955) suggested that the child's self is formed based on other people's attitudes towards the child and to each other in the social situations in which the child is involved. Even though the views of others about the child can affect the child's self-concept, according to Tice and Wallace (2005), the self is an active construction which chooses and shapes the environmental feedback offered by others. The stage at which the child is in their cognitive

development, greatly influences the perception of self that the child is capable of producing (Harter 2012).

In Finland, early childhood education and care (ECEC) constitute a significant developmental environment for children under school age. The *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education* (Finnish National Agency for Education 2016/ 2018, 54), provides guidance for educators as follows: *Early childhood education ensures that each child experience acceptance as an individual and as a member of the group. Encouraging the child and giving him or her opportunities to feel successful, supports the development of child's positive self-concept.* However, according to previous studies, educators' perceptions of children with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)¹ have a negative tone (see Male 2003; Pihlaja 2008). When children internalize people's opinions (Dunne and Moore 2011; Harter 2012), it may lead both the child and the people around them to unknowingly maintain and increase the social, emotional, and behavioural challenges (Pihlaja 2008).

Self-perceptions of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties

The permanence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) has been highlighted in many studies (Briggs-Gowan and Carter 2008; Goodman and Goodman 2009; Morgan, Fargas, and Qiong 2009). Under school age children identified having SEBD are in some cases, seen to face difficulties also in their early adolescence (Pihlakoski ym. 2006). The SEBD has been connected to weaker academic performance, lower social competence, and psychiatric disorders later in life (see e.g. Gresham et al. 1999; Hofstra, van der Ende, and Verhulst 2002; Kauffman and Landrum 2009; Reid et al. 2004). There is also some indication

¹ In this study, we use the concept of social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties as in Finland the concept of socio-emotional difficulties is used to refer emotional and behavioural difficulties.

that the social-emotional behaviour assessed in pre-school-aged children has a long-term impact on the young adults' perceptions of themselves (Hotulainen and Lappalainen 2011). Thus, taking into account the stability and effects connected to SEBD, as well as the notion that self-beliefs can be a 'powerful motivators for future behaviour' (Jacobs et al. 2003, 34), it is essential to pay attention to the development of self-perceptions of children with SEBD.

Only a few studies have concentrated on investigating children who are seen to have SEBD and their perceptions of self. The findings of these studies are conflicting, as there are results showing that the participants have significantly low self-concept scores related to externalized or internalized behaviour (Coplan, Findlay, and Nelson 2004; Henricsson and Rydell 2004; Maras et al. 2006; McGrath and Repetti 2002), and results suggesting that the self-concepts of these children are overall positive (Gage and Lierheimer 2012). Some studies have found no connection between internalized behaviour and low self-perceptions (Evans 1996; Gresham et al. 1999; Henricsson and Rydell 2004). On the other hand, studies also suggest that children with externalized behaviour tend to over-evaluate their abilities (Hoza et al. 2002). In the field of special education self-concept studies the interest has also been on learning difficulties connected to behavioural difficulties. In these studies, the groups with behavioural problems are seen to have more negative social self-perceptions than the group without behavioural difficulties (Tabassam and Grainger 2002).

The context of the study: Finnish early childhood education and care

In Finland, every child has the right to participate in ECEC, this right starts when the parental leave ends and the child is approximately 10 months old. ECEC is mostly arranged by municipalities and organized in public kindergartens, and is guided by local curricula which are based on the *National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (2016/ 2018)*. In Finland, ECEC is inclusive by nature as early childhood special education is part of ECEC; this means that most special educational needs can be met in ordinary groups in kindergarten

(Pihlaja, Rantanen, and Sonne 2010). There are only a few groups, so called integrated special groups, where most of the children show typical development and some of the children have special needs. In the so called special groups all the children have special needs. Both of these groups intended for children with special needs are located in ordinary kindergartens (Pihlaja et al. 2010). In these special groups, the number of children is smaller than in ordinary groups, approximately 8-15 children with a special education teacher, one kindergarten teacher and one or two practical nurses. In ordinary groups intended for 3-6-year-old children, there are usually approximately 17-24 children with a kindergarten teacher and two practical nurses. The educational qualification of kindergarten teachers is usually a Bachelor of Arts in early childhood education, which is a university degree, or a Bachelor of Social Services/ Social pedagogue, which is a degree at the university of applied sciences. The practical nurse education confers a 2.5-year secondary vocational education. (see Kindergarten Teachers Union in Finland, LTOL; Pihlaja et al. 2010.)

Method

Participants and sampling

The research was conducted as an interview study and the material was collected from the kindergartens of two municipalities in Southern-Finland, during the spring 2016. First the municipalities were contacted and after gaining the permissions for the study, several kindergartens were contacted and offered an opportunity to participate. The groups that showed interest towards the study, discussed with the parents of a possibility of participating. The parents gave their permission for the study. Only those groups participated where the parents and ECEC professionals shared the view of the child as having SEBD. In other words, the children were identified based on the assessment done by the ECEC professionals and the opinion of parents. This was seen as a valid way of identifying the children, as in Finland it is

unusual to have diagnosis for children with SEBD at this age. According to ECEC professionals the children established difficulties such as withdrawn behaviour, hyperactivity or aggressive, and threatening behaviour (see Table 1). The sample of our study represents the typical features related to children with SEBD in context of early childhood education in Finland (e.g. Pihlaja 2008).

For this study, ten 4 to 7-year-old children were interviewed (see Table 1). The two 7-year-olds, Adam and Frida, had both turned seven in the beginning of the year 2016, as they were born in 2009. Beth, the only 6-year-old, was born in the beginning of the year 2010. Four of the 5-year-olds, Cloe, Gilbert, Ivan and Jake, were also born in 2010. Jake had his birthday few weeks after the interview, while the other three had their birthdays later in that year. Two of the 5-year-olds, Eric and Harry, and the 4-year-old Danielle, were born in 2011. Eric and Harry had had their birthdays by the time the interviews were conducted, whereas Danielle had hers later. The age range of the children was approximately 2 to 34 months. Three of the children had immigrant backgrounds, but did speak and understand Finnish.

[Table 1 near here]

Research task and data collection

In this research, our intention was to investigate the self-perceptions of children with SEBD, especially concentrating on the social and emotional dimensions of the self. In relation to this research task several topics were discussed with the children (see Table 2).

[Table 2 near here]

Before starting the interviews, teachers informed the children about the event. At the beginning of each interview some time was spend on introductions and obtaining information

about the child's preferences related to the interview procedures. The aim was to follow the interview frame while discussing the children's thoughts related to the kindergarten group and to find out the child's perceptions of the self as part of this social environment. At the end of each interview a little time was spent talking about topics the child was interested in. Picture cards of peer relationships and emotions were used to help the children to understand and talk about the interview topics (materials offered by The Finnish Association for Mental Health). A group photo, play and drawings of their own picture were also used in some interviews depending on the child's interests. The interviews were conducted in a quiet and peaceful environment in the kindergarten. All interviews were recorded and the duration was on average 30 minutes. The transcribed interviews were on average 6 pages, and the total number were 65 pages.

Ethical considerations

In this research, the anonymity and privacy of participants is protected and permission for the research was gained from the municipalities, employees, parents, and children. The parents were informed about the research and the questions concerning privacy and anonymity through informed consent, and by signing the letters parents gave their permission for the research. The children gave their permission orally. This research follows the ethical guidelines set out in the *Responsible conduct of research and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct in Finland*, presented by the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2012).

Analysis

The analysis was accomplished by using thematic analysis, which is considered to be a valid and flexible research method (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis can be used to identify, organize, analyse, describe and report the themes (Nowell et al. 2017). In this

research, a theory-guided approach to analysis has been adopted, which means that the analysis has connections to, and is guided by the theory, but is not directly based on it as theory-driven analysis would be (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018). In this research, the analysis is guided by theoretical understanding of child development and development of self.

The first phase was started by writing the transcriptions meticulously and reading the material carefully many times. Through this close reading, a general view of the material was formed. *The second phase*, was guided by theoretical background and the material was divided and placed into four categories: social perception of self, emotional perception of self, positive perceptions of self, and negative perceptions of self. Although the material was divided into four categories the categories contained some overlapping. At this phase of the analysis the material was organised in a meaningful way and the key features were highlighted in the text (e.g. general positivity, negative narration, integration of positive and negative perceptions) (see Braun and Clarke 2006). It was also found that the material had something which could be described as ‘levels’, as the key features were not only in what was said about the self, but also in how it was said, and in some cases what was left unsaid.

Based on previous phase, *the third phase* of the analysis was started by searching for themes from key features, which are shared by several interviewees (see Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2010) and which capture something that is relevant to the research task (Nowell et al. 2017). This was done by sorting the themes and drawing initial thematic maps to structure the material. In this phase, four *types of self-perceptions* which contained several subthemes or theme features were formed (see Table 3). These self-perception types were seen to function as a frame for the individual self-perceptions. The four self-perception types – *authentic positive*, *defensive positive*, *ambivalent positive* and *integrated positive* -were strongly linked to positivity and hidden negativity of self-perceptions. In this phase, each child was placed under specific self-perception type.

In *the fourth phase* the self-perception types and the analysis was reflected. Each self-perception type were compared to others and to the interpretations made from the self-perception types. Forming interpretations is essential for developing the material into results (see Braun and Clarke 2006). These interpretations as well as the patterns, connections and possible inconsistencies (see Brantlinger et al. 2005) between the self-perception types were reviewed by constructing thematic maps of each self-perception type (example of thematic map see Appendices 1). At the end of this phase, it was concluded that the material within these four self-perception types was meaningfully connected to each other through the view of positivity and that the four types were also clearly distinctive.

In *the fifth phase*, the self-perception types with each type's theme features were identified and defined (see Table 3). According to Braun and Clarke (2006) this is the part of the analysis where the 'essence' of each theme, or in this case the self-perception type is identified. Within these self-perception types, the social and emotional self-perceptions of the children were described. In the next sections of this article, the conclusions are illustrated and discussion is presented on the results; that is, what has been seen as important and why (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Results

As a result, four main self-perception types, *authentic positive*, *defensive positive*, *ambivalent positive*, and *integrated positive*, were formed from the material. The self-perception types were found to range from the positive and idealistic self-perceptions to perceptions containing signs of negativity. These types are defined by theme features which function as the core elements of each type, and within these types the children discussed their perceptions of the self (see Table 3). The self-perception types do not exclude each other entirely, but their features are emphasized in different ways. Also, some of the features reported by the children were classified as neutral perceptions.

[Table 3 near here]

Authentic positive

The self-perception type of *authentic positive*, includes theme features such as general and strong positivity of self-perceptions, absence of negative self-perceptions, ‘authenticity’ of positive perceptions and emotional positivity. The perceptions included in this self-perception type are more positive than perceptions included in the other three self-perception types as they are associated with the element of genuine positivity. This means that the children seemed to view themselves genuinely in a way that is typical for this developmental stage. The children saw themselves as skilled experts with many talents and abilities. The children described themselves through a number of positive features, such as funny, kind and brave, and more freely expressed, *‘I’m nice’* (Chloe), *‘Happy’* (Ivan), and more neutral, *‘Well, just normal’* (Jake). Shyness being the only possibly negative description in the speech of one child, Chloe. On the other hand, Chloe might also have experienced shyness as a neutral feature. Another child, Jake, mentioned shyness as being a lacking feature, *‘I’m not shy’*, which he used to emphasize the positive features related to one’s self. Jake also reported that he would be, *‘Well, good’*, when grown up.

In relation to peer relationships, the children experienced social acceptance and reported that they were well liked among their friends and in their group. The children also liked all the other children in their kindergarten. All the children believed that they possessed extensive social skills, in which they saw very little, if any, need for improvement:

Jake: ‘This and this, this, this, this’ (the child points at picture cards)

Interviewer: ‘Everything, except in calming down?’

Jake: ‘Yes... yeah yeah, this too... all!’

As their special skills, the children mentioned helping a friend, cheering and asking friends to play with them. All of them had a lot of friends, although many friends could be somewhere else rather than in the kindergarten group: '*They all live in different houses and they are not in kindergarten*' (Chloe).

The children especially discussed their peer relationships, and talked very little, or not at all, about the adults in the kindergarten group. The talk about social relationships outside the kindergarten contained positive narrations of children together with their parents or grandparents, and was related to topics such as safety and comfort or having fun at birthday parties and during holidays. Bullying was a topic which came up only to a small extent. None of the children admitted bullying others, but two of them said that they sometimes had been bullied. Children did not admit that they had experienced any negative feelings in the kindergarten even in situations which were seen to be negative, such as when being bullied, but reported that they always felt happy.

Defensive positive

The self-perception type called *defensive positive*, is characterized by the apparent positivity of self-perceptions. In this type, the children's perceptions of themselves were almost exclusively positive, but the real positivity was questioned, because of the avoidance of all negative subjects. The children described themselves with positive features, such as funny, kind, brave and cheerful. Both of the children saw themselves as well-liked group members, and they liked all the children in their group as well.

Both children reported having many friends, and mentioned skills like asking others to play and taking everyone with them as being their special skills. Danielle mentioned that she might need some practice in helping others, but this was the only thing in which she thought she needed practice. Neither of the children reported being bullied or being bullies. The children's experience of belonging, was evident in both cases, and especially the use of *Us*

and *We*, was strong: *'We ladybugs (group name) also have ...'*, *'we go first ... and then we'* (Gilbert). However, the children spoke very little about the adults in the kindergarten, and mostly about the way they limited the children's activities, although the adults were mentioned as liking the children. Families were mentioned in a neutral way, but in some cases Danielle shifted the negative features to characteristics of a younger sibling. For example, when asking if she had ever done something she's not supposed to do, she answered, *'No, Jack has pulled my hair'*.

Emotions were mostly described in a positive way and the descriptions of negative emotions were extremely narrow. The children reported being always happy. As a negative emotion, Danielle mentioned the fear that she felt for the characters of a cartoon, whereas Gilbert mentioned being moody when losing competitions. Danielle reported being similar to others, and Gilbert defined himself as different, but refused to answer any following questions about the topic. The avoidance of negative subjects was obvious and frequent. As ways of avoiding questions the children used being quiet, and changing the subject *'And I have been last Monday in child health centre, when I had a day off'* (Gilbert), explaining the matter in a more positive way *'Adults don't let me, cos I'm too good' (at the games)* (Gilbert), shifting the negative features to another person *'No, but Jack has, because he bites me'* (Danielle), or stated that they did not know the answer to the question.

Ambivalent positive

A typical trait for the self-perception type of *ambivalent positive*, was that the children's answers were short, positive, and followed by negative narrations and stories. The difference between Eric and Adam was related to their way of connecting negative features to themselves. Eric did not connect any negative features directly to himself, whereas Adam did to some extent. Negative speech was focused primarily on the interaction between the child and the social environment. Features such as changing answers, shortness of positive

descriptions, negative storytelling, and gloominess of emotional perceptions were seen to form the essence of this self-perception type.

Eric's speech was found to contain only positive meanings and he described himself with one feature, *'I'm brave'*. Adam included positive, neutral and negative attributes to himself, he was brave, different (in growth) and mean to others. Both children first reported that they had many friends, however, Adam's friends were in other groups and Eric changed his mind and said that he only had one friend. Nevertheless, both children liked all their friends and felt that their friends liked them. As social skills, Adam mentioned talking with his friends, whereas it was difficult for him to calm down. Adam said that he wanted to be a good friend, play, help, and ask others to play. Both children reported feelings of being different, which they attached to neutral descriptions of growth and physical difference.

The positivity of their speech often contained controversies, which were mainly expressed in two ways. First, the child's answers could change in a moment. Eric would say, for example, that he had many friends and had never been bullied, in the next moment he said that he only had one friend and others had bullied him. The direction of change was often from positive to negative. Secondly, the positive descriptions of children were often followed by strong negative storytelling. For example, the child could state that he was always accepted into games, others like him and he had never been bullied, and in the next moment tell a story about exclusion:

'This does not want to play with him... this does not want to be his friend ever again... Then you have to go home if you don't get... He can watch a telly, or a phone, or he can watch a video or play... he is alone in there... Then he cannot ever come here'
(Eric)

The main topics of these stories was exclusion from play and bullying. Both children felt that they had been bullied in kindergarten, and Adam described the situation as follows:

'Someone always argues with me... they always say something... you are not my friend'. The children did not see themselves as bullies, although, Adam said that adults were sometimes angry if he had been bullying others. Eric, in turn, started to repeat the matter: *'But I did not bully anyone... I did not even bully anyone in the yard, I did not even bully there. I did not bully everything'*. The negative stories were in Adam's case also related to adults as he stated, *'everyone is angry'*. From this the speech was moved to the anger of his mother, caused by Adam's failure to behave well. Adam also said that adults did comfort him when needed and said, *'they are good adults'*. Eric did not mention the adults, and in his speech the family and home arose as the place where someone could go when others did not accept them: *'Then you have to go home if you do not get' (accepted)*. In relation to negative subjects, children reported emotions like loneliness and feeling bad.

Despite the expressions of negativity, the children felt that in the kindergarten they were usually happy. Feelings of joy were associated for example with situations in which adults were no longer angry, or something pleasant was going to happen in the kindergarten. On the other hand, the feeling of anger was also included in Adam's day in kindergarten: *'I'm really angry ... I don't want to play with that boy ever'*, and sadness: *'Everyone does not want to play at the same time... then I was left alone, I cry'*. All these positive and negative emotions were related to the social interaction situations in kindergarten and at home. The emotions talked about by Eric were narrow, but he did say that he had some times been crying if not included in play. Within this self-perception type, the self-perceptions of children were predominantly positive, but the positivity was in many parts overshadowed by negativity and emotional gloom.

Integrated positive

The self-perception type *integrated positive*, contained core features such as integration of positive and negative perceptions, the accuracy and diversity of descriptions, the use of

temporal comparison, and the momentariness of negative features. The children described themselves with a number of positive features, such as funny, nice, brave and cheerful. Each child also mentioned that they had at least one negative feature: *'Well, happy, and brave, and sometimes I'm angry'* (Harry). All the children understood that they could be different things at different times: *'Funny and a bit shy sometimes, then I'm a little brave, and then I'm mean when I do some stuff'* (Frida). Beth also pointed out similar remarks about herself: *'Sometimes I'm naughty'*. Yet, the negative perceptions did not act as guiding factors for the conversations, as the tone was rather neutral.

In these negative descriptions, the children attached elements of momentariness (*'at times', 'sometimes', 'when I do something'*) as the children seemed to understand that they can express different traits at different times and behave differently in different situations. Elements of momentariness was not associated with positive descriptions, which led to a conclusion that positive perceptions are more permanent. Harry also used temporal comparison and his positive perception were linked to some extent negative perception of his past self: *'I do everything right... but When I was four I did everything wrong... Well I did hit others hard, and I threw sand at others and... Oh and I wanted some candy on the wrong day'*. The children did not try to conceal or hide the negativity associated with themselves. Although, in some cases the children then sought to explain or reject the negative descriptions which one had mentioned. The perceptions interpreted as negative were, without exception, related to the child's own behaviour in social situations.

All the children reported having many friends, and saw themselves as highly skilled in various things, such as encouraging and helping others, being funny and in play: *'Well, when I'm being funny, I almost always get Susan to laugh... Well, at least when I'm playing, because if Susan like falls down then we like always play that I'm the best girl in the world and I always help her'* (Beth). The children saw only a little need to improve their skills.

Harry and Frida said that they liked everyone else and were convinced that others liked them. Beth, however, stated that she liked *'At least some'* children at the kindergarten, and her experience of social acceptance was questioned as she was unsure whether the others liked her or not: *'Mmmm, I don't know, except Eve and they do because we play together and Susan, she's my little sister and she almost always plays with me'*.

In contrast to the previous self-perception types, all the children admitted that they had sometimes bullied others: *'I have quite many times, but Mike bullies even more'* (Beth). Beth also reported that she had continued to bully others even though she saw that the other child was feeling sad. If the children themselves were also experiencing bullying they spoke very little about it. Harry and Beth stated experiencing bullying at home with siblings or among the neighbourhood children. Although, they also mentioned siblings as playmates. Parents were mentioned by Beth as a *'bossing around'*, but also, on the other hand, as organizers of funny moments; however, in Harry's case, this was through shouting and anger. The children spoke very little about the adults at the kindergarten, and when they did it was associated with discipline actions and positive feedback given by adults.

The children also spoke a lot about their emotions. According to the children the most common feeling at the kindergarten was cheerfulness, which was related to success in social situations, when the child was accepted in play or was given positive feedback by the adults: *'When they show me the thumbs up'* (Harry). The children also said that they were angry and sad if they were hurt, bullied, or left out of the play. Moreover, the anger of adults could make the child feel bad. The perceived difference was usually related to physical differences, yet in Harry's case there was the perception of his own aggressive behaviour:

'But I have hit, I have hit today my friend Edward, because Edward has hit me, but I'm just like Edward... No, Edward does it too. I'm same as Edward, but I'm not same as other friends.'

Discussion

In this study, our aim was to examine and to describe how young children perceive themselves in kindergarten, as the early childhood education side by side with the influence of family life, forms an important environment for the child (see e.g. Lahikainen 2014). As findings of this study, four self-perception types were presented. Based on this study the concept of *self-perception type* is not understood as categorical sense, but as a frame which describes the child's perceptions of the self, and utilises theories of social and developmental psychology. For example, the self-perception types of *authentic positive* and *defensive positive* contained features that were found to correspond with, what is generally understood as a typical self-development in cognitive developmental psychology. Whereas, the features related to the self-perception types of *ambivalent positive* and *integrated positive*, were considered as less typical for children in this age. (see e.g. Coplan et al 2004; Harter 2012; Jacobs et al. 2003.)

The children, who were described as having *integrated positive* self-perception type, described themselves by integrating both positive and negative features. Whereas with the children with *ambivalent positive* self-perception type, the negativity was related to storytelling and general gloominess of the perceptions. According to Harter (2012), in early to middle childhood (ages 5 to 7) it is typical for children to believe that one may have been bad at something before, or may be in the future, but usually these beliefs are not related to the present experience of the self. The integration of positive and negative features is usually seen as typical for children in middle to late childhood (ages 8 to 10).

In relation to developmental perspectives it is important to note, that all the children described themselves mainly with positive features. Positivity is the most common feature of self-perceptions in early to middle childhood, as many cognitive processes work in a way that promotes the maintenance of positive perceptions (see e.g. Harter 2012; Thomaes et al. 2017). Without a doubt, the developmental phase of the child has an effect on the self-perceptions

which the child is capable of producing. While observing the findings in relation to the age of the children, it can be noted that three of the oldest children (the 7- and 6-year-olds), but also two of the youngest children (the 5-year-olds, born in 2011), described themselves showing signs of negativity (*ambivalent positivity*), or integration of positive and negative features (*integrated positive*). Although, these children are younger than those at the age of discovering the negative features or developing accuracy in their self-perceptions; it might be possible to explain this with the cognitive maturity.

One possible explanation could also be that the children with SEBD may get more remedial feedback from caregivers (see e.g. Pihlaja 2008). Thus, the children's use of negative storytelling could be seen as a result of contradiction between the internal and social world of the child. In this kind of situation, the cognitive structures tend to maintain the positivity, whereas the feedback from social situations may question the self-perceptions. As according to the theories of social psychology, the self is developed in relation to others (see e.g. Mead 1955). So, would this suggest, that the children have already internalized the perceptions of others? The current literature does not support the explanation that children would internalize opinions of others in this age (see Harter 2012). However, it must be noted that the literature mainly focuses on describing the typical traits of development in typically developed children. Harter (2012) for example notes that there are several forms of maltreatment that may lead to distortion of self-development.

The previous research has suggested that the link between low self-perceptions and internalized difficulties already exists in preschool age (Coplan et al. 2004). However, the results have been conflicting as both, the positivity and the negativity of self-perceptions, has been associated with internalized difficulties (Henricsson and Rydell 2004; Coplan et al. 2004; McGrath and Repetti 2002), and with externalized difficulties (Henricsson and Rydell 2004; Hoza et al. 2002). Due to the size of our sample any generalizations cannot be made,

however, it can be noted that the children did differ from each other in their self-perception type, but not as a result of their age or the form of their difficulties. For example, the children with internalized difficulties were described as having *authentic positive* or *integrated positive* self-perception types. Also the self-perception types of *authentic positive*, *defensive positive*, and *ambivalent positive* could be found in children with externalized difficulties. The self is a complex structure affected by many factors (e.g. individual qualities, culture, gender), which makes it harder to fully explain these findings by referring only to the age or difficulties of the children. This study, however, revealed that there is a need for further research on this topic as according to Coplan et al. (2004), the negativity of young children's self-perceptions is a deviation from the typical and thus, in itself, a meaningful observation.

Limitations and implications for future research and practice

In this study, we have identified different levels and features related to the self-perceptions, but a deeper comprehension could be achieved with a larger number of cases and several more interviews (Brantlinger et al. 2005). Also the identification of SEBD could have been verified by using for example SDQ (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). However, this was not seen as essential for this research due to the identification procedures used in Finland. The children in our study represent the diverse nature of SEBD, and perhaps our self-perception types would have been shaped differently if we would have narrowed our focus. Although, as we have described, the form of SEBD did not seem to explain the self-perception types. It also must be noted that the unfamiliarity of the researcher may affect the children's ways of discussing, or what the children reported may have been affected by recent occurrences in the kindergarten of which we were unaware. Despite these limitations we have aimed to accomplish a possible and justified interpretation of the material (Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2010).

In relation to the findings, three implications for future research can be presented. First, young children with SEBD may possess self-perceptions that include signs of negativity, which needs further research. Second, researchers should pay attention not only to what is being said about the self, but how it is being said. Third, we suggest that as the self is seen as a multidimensional structure (Marsh and O'Mara 2008) the defining elements (e.g. positive and negative) should also be more complex and well defined since the definition of positive and negative seems to be quite subjective and to some extent reductive concepts, which can also overlook information relevant for understanding self-perceptions.

Based on this research it is impossible to say that the children in future studies would fall under these self-perception types, and with this study we have merely aimed to explore if certain types were applicable to participating children. With further research these types could be verified and further developed. Therefore, with more research the self-perception types could be used as a tool for assessing the direction of self-perception development in early childhood. In order to implement the types discovered in this research to practice, a larger sample and a deeper analysis would be needed. With the help of a longitudinal research, it would be possible to follow the direction of development of self-perceptions, especially with those children who show signs of negativity. For us it seems obvious that early and middle childhood is an extremely important phase for self-perception development as it forms the basis on which the child's perceptions change and grow.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendices 1. Example of the thematic map

