Between hopes and possibilities. (Special) educational paths, agency and subjectivities

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ABSTRACT
The article explores educational paths of disabled young people in Finland. Our approach is life-historical: we are interested in how individual paths are formed by historically and culturally specific discourses and practices, and in the cultural understandings concerning disability and educability these carry. We also focus on questions of subjectivity and agency by asking how individuals positioned in these practices build an understanding of themselves, and of the possibilities and obstacles in their educational path. Two life-history interviews are analysed in detail. Our analysis highlights the persistence of stereotypical cultural narratives of disability in the life stories. In addition, it suggests that disability rights discourse has provided an important counter discourse for disabled young adults – a new way of conceptualizing self and one’s educational path.

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Introduction
During the 2000s, the Finnish school system has been celebrated as one of the best and most equal in the world (e.g. Simola 2015). However, this success story of the equal and unified Finnish comprehensive school hides some structural inequalities. While equalization of educational opportunities has been a central aim of the unified Finnish school system, some students have always been considered as unable to participate in mainstream education (Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006). These students, currently called students with special needs, have a history of being positioned in the margins of the school.

This article explores educational paths of disabled young people. Our approach is life-historical: we are interested in how individual paths are formed by historically and culturally specific discourses and practices. As our title suggests, our analysis also focuses on subjectivity and agency. We ask how individuals positioned in these practices build an understanding of themselves and the possibilities and obstacles in their educational path.

Research focusing on education of disabled people and their transitions from education to work has shown how these still tend to be complicated (e.g. Båtevik and Myklebust 2006; Bjarnason 2004; Winn and Hay 2009; Yates and Roulstone 2013). In educational discourses, students regarded as having special needs are often positioned as subjects at risk because of their assumed potential for dropping out of education and becoming unemployed later on (Niemi and Kurki 2014; Tomlinson 2012). In both policy documents and research, disabled students’ educational paths have commonly been approached from the point of view of institutional or education policy, with a focus on...
identifying the problems and defining appropriate solutions. In this article, we instead study disabled young adults’ educational paths and transitions to work by concentrating on their life-historical accounts.

Our analysis focuses on two interviews of young disabled adults. These have been drawn out of a data set consisting of 27 life-historical interviews of young adults who studied in segregated special education settings during primary and lower secondary school. We are interested in how the interviewees negotiate cultural truths concerning disabled people when narrating their own lives and selves. Our analysis extends also to current disability and education policies and subsequent changes in common understandings of the educational rights of disabled people, as well as equitable educational practices.

Our analytical approach is twofold. Through life-history narratives, we analyse historically specific discourses and practices by asking: (1) how our interviewees’ educational paths, choices and educational subjectivities have been shaped within the (special needs) education system. In addition, we focus more particularly on the construction of interview narration by asking: (2) how our interviewees reflect on their educational experiences, action and selves from their current position, and what kind of narratives the ‘now’ makes possible and plausible.

Finnish education system and (past and current) educational opportunities for disabled people

The basis for the current Finnish school system was built at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s when the comprehensive school system was designed and launched. The comprehensive school reform aimed at promoting equal educational opportunities and pedagogical development to even out societal differences connected to social class, region and gender. Special needs education had a fundamental position in the development of this new school system, which was expected to include all students. Support was to be arranged according to the so-called normalization principle, which meant that all students should primarily get support in common teaching groups and that non-stigmatizing practices should be developed and used. These aims, however, were realized mainly through the newly built system of part-time special education within mainstream schools, while the existing special education schools and classes were left to cater for those students who had traditionally studied in special needs education (Kivirauma 1999; Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006; Mietola 2014).

It was not until the 1980s that the integration policy started to impact the special education system, making it possible to bridge together the newer practices and the more traditional segregated arrangements. At the school level, however, practices were slow to change. Segregated arrangements still held a very firm position, even during the 1990s when the national education policy committed itself through international statements to develop an inclusive school system (Kivirauma, Klemelä, and Rinne 2006).

All the national policy documents discussing special education since the end of the 1990s have emphasized the importance of increasing the proportion of special needs students who are either totally or partly integrated in mainstream education. Yet, this commitment to developing an inclusive system has not questioned the position and legitimation of segregated special education arrangements: the proportion of students studying full-time in special education classes and schools has remained more or less the same until recently (Kirjavainen, Pulkkinen, and Jahnukainen 2014). Special schools are still expected to ‘arrange teaching for children and young people with visual, hearing or physical impairment, neurological or chronic illness, dysphasia or autism, as well as for children and young people with other disabilities or illnesses’ (Ministry of Education 2007, 64, our translation). Even though the majority of students with special needs study in mainstream schools, in 2013, approximately 3% (approx. 16,500 students) of all students studying in basic education studied full-time in segregated special education settings (FNBE 2014; Statistics Finland 2014). While the comprehensive school system has been considered to have fulfilled its goal of equalizing opportunities, the concern over equality in education has moved to post-compulsory education,
especially to those students who drop out of education, and are left without a post-compulsory degree (Brunila 2012; Niemi and Kurki 2014). Guaranteeing post-compulsory education for all has been a central part of the inclusion policy of education. Most students with special needs continue post-compulsory education in the vocational sector. For students with more extensive needs for support, there are also special groups within vocational institutions and in vocational special needs education colleges. Academic upper secondary education, the path chosen by half of the age group, is a rare choice for disabled youth and people with special needs. Over the past decades, new preparatory programmes have been launched for students with special needs to bridge educational transitions (Niemi and Kurki 2014).

There are marked differences between disability groups in terms of educational opportunities in post-compulsory education markets (Hakala, Mietola, and Teittinen 2013). For example, the options for studying in sign language are very limited (Haarni 2006). The overall level of education of disabled people is notably lower than in the mainstream population (Haarni 2006).

On theory, methodology and analysis

Our epistemological stance draws from poststructural theorizations (e.g. Butler 1990; Foucault [1975] 2000). The analysis focuses on cultural knowledge and truths, and the kind of implications these have for individuals, their (narrated) selves and lives (e.g. Davies 2000; Hall 2001). By using the theoretical concepts of subjectification and agency, we aim to make visible the power of hegemonic discourses on the construction of subjectivities and lives of our interviewees. At the same time, our epistemological stance and these theoretical concepts allow us to recognize multiplicity of discourses and truths, and thus to make visible available possibilities of resistance, re-conceptualization and change.

Subjectification literally refers to the process of making of a subject, by being simultaneously positioned in discursive practices and participating in the rethinking of these (Butler 1997; Davies 2006, 425). The concept turns our analytical gaze towards discourses producing disability, and asks how our interviewees’ subjectivity – that is, private understanding of who they are and what they can become – has been formed in the social and cultural practices of education (e.g. Mietola 2014; Youdell 2006). We have found this viewpoint powerful in the context of special needs education, which is still dominated by an individual medical model of disability, explaining an individual and her actions as resulting primarily from impairment, thus drawing on biological and psychological determinism (Oliver 1996; Shah and Priestley 2011; Shakespeare 2006). The question of subjectivity turns into two analytical questions: how do the interviewees represent themselves in their narration of their educational path, and what kind of ‘I’ is possible for them within certain discursive practices?

We refer to agency as socially positioned and influenced by social structures, but never completely determined (see Ahearn 2001; Evans 2007). Subjects themselves are seen to have a personal history and imagined future which guide and formulate their agency with negotiations they have in relation to their own conceptions and to societal structures (Evans 2007). We thus ask what kinds of expressions of agency are available in the narrations of our interviewees, and what kind of discourses do our interviewees draw on in these narrations.

Our approach to life-history research has been influenced by youth and disability studies. In youth studies, the biographical approach has both highlighted young people’s reflections and interpretations concerning their own life paths and positions, and pointed out the structures and practices framing young people’s lives (see e.g. Henderson et al. 2007). In disability studies, the use of life-history narratives has a strong link to the political intention of producing knowledge about disabled people’s lived experiences, ‘giving voice’ to this historically marginalized group of people (Goodley 1996; Shah and Priestley 2011). Narratives have been used to show how different structural and cultural barriers structure individuals’ lives. Life-history research has also challenged the biological determinism in the individual paradigm of disability by paying attention to agency and choice (Shah and Priestley 2011).
The data analysed in this paper are drawn from a research project *Special needs class in the course of life*. The focus of the study was to examine the educational and working life careers of young adults with disabilities and/or Roma and immigrant backgrounds who had studied in a special education class during basic education. We conducted life-historical interviews with 27 young adults (aged 17–33, 18 women, 9 men).

In this paper, we focus closely on Meri’s and Pasi’s interviews and especially on how they tell about themselves and their educational paths. By focusing in detail on these two interviews, we follow the methodological commitment of life-history research of representing personal stories – how history is personally experienced and lived (Goodley 1996; see also Abrams 2014; Shah and Priestley 2011). At the same time, this allows us to build understanding of the complex processes through which these historical practices contribute to formation of lives and selves (Bertaux 1981). Our decision to focus on two interviews was also based on ethical and political concerns: we felt that this form of representation would ‘do justice’ to our interviewees’ personal stories (Cary 1999), and at the same time challenge simplistic, deterministic and homogenizing interpretations of ‘the disabled path in education’ (cf. Goodley 1996).

We started analysis by carefully reading and re-reading these two interviews. During this, we began to build chronological storyline around those particular episodes and events which our interviewees had pointed out as relevant to the formation of their educational paths. This was followed by second reading which focused on how and when our interviewees talked about themselves and what kind of self-presentations were (intentionally or unintentionally) produced. Thereafter, we continued to analytically craft Meri’s and Pasi’s stories by not only following the key moments they had articulated in their narration, but also including those sections, which we recognized as important to how their subjectivities become constituted in the interview narration.

Meri’s and Pasi’s stories represent the kind of extremities in our data set. At the same time, they are both very personal and very typical for our data: the stories differ because of their different home backgrounds; their different impairments have also constructed some differences in their educational opportunities. In addition, Meri’s and Pasi’s life situations produced for them very distinct positions from which to narrate their educational paths. However, they also reflect very similar educational practices and experiences during the interviews. Overall, Pasi’s story is more fragmented and shorter, while Meri’s is remarkably long, coherent and considered. In the representation of the stories, we have aimed at respecting the analytical stance and message the interviewees had themselves produced in their narration. However, we have also looked for contradictions and silences within the narration, thus extending analysis beyond interviewees’ interests and towards more complex reading of subjectivity and agency.

Our analytical stance is discursive in the sense that we see both experiences and narration as always constructed, shaped and shared within cultural and discursive practices. The analytical focus in interview talk is on the historical, cultural and discursive conditions of narration, which make some stories possible and plausible, and some unthinkable (see Gordon and Lahelma 2003; Honan et al. 2000; Niemi and Kurki 2014; Tamboukou 2008.). This kind of analytical perspective leads us to ask how personal realities – an understanding of one’s life and self – are constructed (see Tamboukou 2008), and how these can be renegotiated over time.

In the next two sections, we will represent the stories of Meri and Pasi by drawing on their interview narration. These will be followed by a discussion of our interpretations.

**Meri’s story**

Meri started her story by describing the ambivalence related to the choice of primary school. Her family wanted her to go to a regular school, but the teacher of the class was not ‘ready’ to take a disabled child into her class. Although she does not describe the decision of going to a special school as too dramatic, this decision was significant for her social relations. She had grown up making friends with neighbourhood children. School introduced her to a new community of disabled
children, resulting in a separation between the school community and the neighbourhood community.

Méri studied at the special school all through primary and lower secondary school. She made friends and enjoyed school socially and academically. Studying felt easy for her and the teachers considered her the brightest student in her class. She considered the overall experience of studying in a special school enriching, giving her the possibility of ‘meeting children with different kinds of disabilities’ and learning to ‘understand disability’.

When it was time to make a decision concerning post-compulsory education, Méri decided to apply to an academically oriented general upper secondary school. Even though all her classmates were applying to vocational schools, Méri stated that the choice was ‘a natural solution’ for her. She had heard from former students that general upper secondary school could feel academically very demanding after a special school.

The transition to an upper secondary school totally changed how Méri saw her experience of studying in a special school. She became aware of the huge difference between special education and regular school. She stated that going to a special school had been a mistake. Her grades dropped dramatically at the new school, which made her feel that she ‘knew nothing’. It was not until she got the results (outstanding) of her first exams in the French language, which she had just started, that she began to ‘realize that it [was] not [her] fault [that she was not succeeding in her other subjects], that there [was] nothing wrong with [her], that [she] had only had poor teaching [in the comprehensive school]’.

Méri described her time at the upper secondary school as hard work and a socially demanding phase in her life. She had good friends and a familiar personal assistant at the school. However, some of her classmates were cautious about making contact with her, which she thought was due to her disability. Méri thus decided to give a presentation to her class where she told ‘about [herself]. Or more like about physical conditions/disabilities/illnesses and more specifically about the one [she had] have’, and how her condition did not ‘affect her head’.

Méri named her graduation from the upper secondary school as a high point of her educational path. When the examination results came, she went to visit the comprehensive school, to ‘tell them [teachers] that I had succeeded’. She felt that some of the teachers had expressed doubts about her being able to cope, so going back to tell them about her results made it ‘a pretty excellent day’.

After graduation, Méri had a few study options. Her long-time dream had been to become a radio reporter, which she explained probably felt like a good idea since working in radio would mean that ‘no one would see [her]’.

After graduation, she realized that radio work would not suit her due to frailty of her voice. Her other option was to study at a commercial college. Méri explained that her decision was similar ‘to many people with physical disabilities that it is the commercial college, because that’s where you also study IT and all that … but for me it was just a good solution’.

At the time of the interview, Méri worked in her ‘dream job’. After graduating from commercial college, she was employed by an association for disabled people. During the interview, she described disability activism as an important resource in her life.

**Pasi’s story**

Pasi studied at a special school for students with hearing impairments. In the interview, he did not mention that any other options would have been discussed for his primary school. Instead, Pasi explained that the big question concerning the start of his school career had to do with the teaching methods used in the lessons and especially the oral method, oralism. He attributed the dominance of oralism in teaching students with hearing impairment to the 1980s, a time, he said, when ‘you were forced to fit into particular modes’.

Studying was difficult for Pasi all through basic education. He was placed in a hard of hearing group, and he explained his difficulties by spoken language used in teaching. He was forced to
use a hearing aid at school, which he ‘would have wanted to throw away’. In retrospect, he thinks that he ‘would have got more out of the teaching had it been given in sign language … which is somehow faster and easier to understand’. During his compulsory schooling, however, Pasi did not have the possibility of learning in sign language. Pasi was more interested in spending time with friends, with whom he used sign language, than working on school tasks, which he found uninteresting and uninviting.

When Pasi talks about his transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education and the choice-making processes, he describes how ‘at seventh, eighth, not even at ninth grade did I really think about any vocational studies, I was very insecure’. This insecurity made Pasi rely a great deal on adults’ support when deciding about post-compulsory education. He applied to gardening studies, which was not exactly what he was interested in:

(M)aybe I should have said at that point that it is not my field. Maybe they just didn’t realize it. If you think that I was only 17 years old and couldn’t hold my own against three adults with strong, expert opinions.

Pasi started his post-compulsory studies in the gardening training programme but soon dropped out. After that, during the following ten years, he worked in short-term jobs, participated in courses, became a father, started three different training programmes but dropped out of those and moved house several times. He maintained contact with one social worker who tried to help him to find the education and work. The educational options he had tried out had all been programmes using spoken language. Even if he had had an interpreter in the class, the studying felt ‘too tough’.

At the time of the interview, Pasi was studying in a short-term pre-vocational programme which was organized as small group teaching. He had transferred there from a vocational programme, where he had struggled to keep up. According to Pasi, the decision to change programmes was made mostly by the teachers, but he now felt that this was a good solution,

otherwise [I] would have just dropped out, I would have nothing … no profession, no certificate, no work, so I think I’m lucky to be here; now I have my last chance to get training after leaving here.

Pasi felt that he had done well in the pre-vocational programme and that studying in a small group suited him ‘at least better than in the big group’.

Pasi was accepted into a vocational studies programme the following term in a vocational special education college. Even though he had to move again, he seemed enthusiastic. He knew that others with hearing impairments had applied to the same programme and this was important for him. All in all, he felt that ‘for those who use sign language and are deaf it would be very good to meet others using sign language’. He hoped that in the future, he could work in a community where he could use sign language with his colleagues, with ‘support that would allow me to work independently … as, for example, an ICT support person’.

On agency and subjectivities: culturally and historically structured choices/positions/possibilities and/or autonomous choices/action

Sign of the times

Early on in their stories, both Meri and Pasi reflect on their lives in a wider societal frame. When talking about the initial decisions made about their schooling, they see themselves as having little or no choice or possibility to influence the decision-making (see also Vlachou and Papananou 2015, 82). Both refer to the practices of the time – how placing children with disabilities in special schools was a standard practice during the 1980s (see also Shah and Priestley 2011) – and comment on how crucial this was for the formation of their educational paths.

The possibility of questioning these educational decisions in retrospect seems to be connected to the changes in disability policy, and the consequential rise of rights discourse, during the past 20 years. Rights discourse has profoundly changed the way the positions of disabled people in
educational practices are evaluated and conceptualized. This change in perspective comes up in Meri’s and Pasi’s criticism towards the practices of that particular era. While both acknowledge that these decisions were tightly framed by national policy and local practices of the time, they also state that these practices can now be recognized as unjust and harmful for disabled people in general, and for their educational careers in particular. While in Meri’s narration this criticism is connected to the general political awareness raised by the disability movement concerning educational discrimination of disabled people and Meri’s own disability activism, in Pasi’s case, the critique is more specifically connected to the deaf awareness movement, language rights of the deaf and the status of sign language in Finland.

While the oral method had received sustained criticism since the end of the 1960s, oralism was still dominant practice in Finland during the 1980s, when Pasi started school (see Salmi 2008). While the new basic education law in 1985 made it possible to use sign language in deaf education, this was not enough to change practices, since sign language was only positioned as a supportive language and the teachers in deaf education were not usually fluent in sign language because sign language was not a part of teacher training (Salmi 2008). It was not until 1995 that the Finnish constitution was changed to give Finnish sign language minority language status. This meant that people using sign language as their first language became re-conceptualized as a linguistic and cultural minority group with the right to receive education in their own language.

Recognition of educational injustice has enabled Meri and Pasi to reconceptualize their educational paths. It has made visible the cultural and structural barriers which had shaped their paths and defined their possibilities of action. Reference to the time when ‘you were forced to fit into particular modes’ builds a perspective which avoids individualism and instead highlights the discursive practices of special needs education at that time.

**Belonging on the borders of two distinct worlds?**

One central theme in both interviews is the movement between ‘two worlds’. Meri explicitly talks about how her social world split into two when she was placed in a special school. In spite of being the only disabled child in her neighbourhood community, and later on in her upper secondary class, she, however, has had a sense of belonging to both worlds (Yuval-Davis 2006). This has enabled her to move between different subject positions available in the different communities (Mietola 2014). When Meri talks about herself moving in-between and on the borders of those two ‘worlds’, a certain social transformation seems to have been possible for her. At the same time, she seems to carry ‘the unity’ of her subjectivity across the divide of the ‘world of the disabled’ and ‘world of neighbourhood friends’. She represents herself coherently as one who learns and gains social resources from both worlds, and later on, as a disability activist, works as a mediator between these worlds.

Throughout his interview, Pasi referred to the different worlds of hearing people and signers. For him, the special school seemed to be an ambivalent place where ‘the hearing world’ confronted and took over ‘the world of the signers’ (see also Bjarnason 2004). He repeatedly talks about the importance of friends, communication and language, and the split between worlds seems to be between the informal world of signing friends and the formal school world of the spoken language.

Pasi’s sense of competence seems to be located in the informal world. In contrast, Pasi did not seem to get recognition for his competence in the formal school world (see Henderson et al. 2007). This difference is reflected in how he experiences himself – who he can be – in these two very different communities and when using the two languages. Early on in basic education, Pasi chose the informal world and peer relations over school, where he struggled with learning. Also, after basic education, his life was dominated by home and friends while his educational path did not advance linearly through education to work. Even if Pasi states that his life ended up being taken over by social life, his actions could as well be read as choosing to invest in this particular area of his life (see Henderson et al. 2007). However, in the discourses of education and support
systems, Pasi’s action is not recognized as a choice. In these hegemonic discourses, which are also strongly present in Pasi’s talk, his action is conceptualized as ‘passive’ drifting. Accordingly, since Pasi’s path after secondary school has not been structured according to the normative school-to-work-path, his life story of the past 10 years looks fragmented and diminished. As Pasi states, so far, he has ‘nothing … no profession, no certificate, no work’.

Yuval-Davis (2006) states that belonging refers to emotional investments and the desire for attachments; belonging, therefore, is a deep emotional need of people. Pasi also expresses a strong hope of finding his path and belonging to a working community using sign language, where he could combine his formal and informal lives. However, in the discursive practices of the different educational fields he has participated in, he has not yet been able to get a sense of belonging, nor a feeling of being competent.

Making choices in educational transitions

To examine agency we have focused on how Meri and Pasi narrate educational transitions, choice making and their position in educational negotiations. Both stories present ambivalence and contradictions. In relation to normative educational path, however, Meri’s narrative is linear: she expresses clearly her educational ambitions, how she has acted to realize these and how and why these wishes have changed along the path.

While Meri’s story makes visible the cultural and structural barriers young disabled people might encounter when making educational choices, it is structured as an individualistic and agentic story, pointing out her academic abilities and personal courage. Persistence of individuality is most clear in her description of the transition after upper secondary school where she describes giving up her dream of becoming a radio reporter because of her disability, and instead followed her second choice, a commercial college. Even if Meri comments on this as being a common path for people with a physical disability, she also emphasizes her sense of autonomy and agency (cf. Davies 2006).

In relation to a normative educational path, Pasi’s story is non-linear, blurred and unresolved. His current position, again in the middle of an educational transition, is not an end point which would make it possible to tell a normative story, like Meri’s, of an educational path formed through a set of clearly defined choices (c.f. Kauppila and Lappalainen 2015). In Pasi’s narration, the boundedness of his agency is evident: his subordinate position in the negotiations; not being supported to make decisions; adults ‘knowing opinions’ dominating the negotiations.

However, Pasi also tells an individualized story. Despite the very limited educational options in the post-compulsory education markets for students with wider support needs or specific impairments (Hakala, Mietola, and Teittinen 2013; Niemi, Mietola, and Helakorpi 2010) as well as guidance practices that emphasize expert views, the discourse of autonomous choice-making is strongly present in career guidance practices of special needs education (Mietola 2010; Niemi and Kurki 2014; also Vehkakoski 2008). Pasi refers to this when explaining how he realized, as a result of a very tough process of guidance negotiations, that he has to get a degree and reapply to a vocational programme. He stresses that this was his own decision, and thus reclaims agency at this end point of his story.

Bright students and troubled learners in negotiations and transitions

Meri had managed well with the tasks in the special school, and thus had received recognition for her competence (Henderson et al. 2007). Her teachers and classmates considered her the brightest student in her class. This was also how Meri had come to see herself. This was challenged, however, when Meri started mainstream upper secondary education: the transition forced her to consider her ‘brightness’ in a new way, rather as a product of goal setting and teaching practices in the special school than as a result of her exceptional ability.

In relation to subjectivity, Meri’s possibilities of governing the production of self-image in the narration are evident; there is coherence in the story and ‘the self’ produced in it. The story is built as a
success story about a heroic disabled person (e.g. DeVolder 2013; Shapiro 1993), but at the same time, it stresses the social and cultural obstacles in the educational paths of the disabled. Meri gets represented as an exceptional individual, capable of overcoming disabling obstacles. She, however, moves between different subject positions. On the one hand, she represents her educational path and choices as normal, and as ‘natural’ as possible. On the other hand, when Meri points out that ‘there is nothing wrong with my head’, she actually differentiates herself from ‘other’, more stigmatized disabilities, thus affirming and repositioning the boundaries of normality (see e.g. Grue 2011). We propose that the normative cultural symbols of success – such as having a degree and a job – have a very special position in Meri’s story, and the importance of those symbols is constructed against the dominant discourses of disability.

While Pasi repeatedly expresses criticism towards oralism, he also firmly conceptualizes himself as in need of support – as a slow learner – and stays within the individualizing discourse of special needs offered by the professionals (Lalvani 2013, 16; Shakespeare 2006, 198; Thomas and Loxley 2001). This discourse defines Pasi’s needs as resulting from his disability. Pasi also identifies himself as a sign language user and talks about the importance of sign language and the loss of it during his education (e.g. Bjarnason 2004). He was not apparently offered support that could have helped him to participate. Having to study in a language foreign to him has inevitably affected his learner subjectivity – his understanding of himself as a possible learner subject (see Goodley 2007).

Conclusions

Our examination highlights, on the one hand, the persistence of stereotypical cultural narratives of disability. Interviewees have to negotiate their personal meaning in relation to cultural understandings of the possible subject positions and normative educational options for disabled people. On the other hand, we have interpreted that disability rights discourse has provided new ways of conceptualizing self and one’s educational path to young disabled adults. This counter discourse has thus enabled new forms of subjectivity to emerge (see Tamboukou 2008).

We find interesting the pervasiveness of the individualizing discourse in our data. It could be argued that a life-historical approach calls for ‘I-stories’, which emphasize the unique and personal nature of the account. Our interpretation, however, is that through critical and highly contextualized narration, our interviewees challenge this kind of reading and instead direct the researchers’ gaze towards educational practices. Nevertheless, such a contextualized narration is constantly challenged by the stereotypical narratives concerning disability. Our interviewees’ stories could be easily positioned as narratives of heroic overcoming and tragic victimization (e.g. DeVolder 2013; Shapiro 1993). Even though we want to question such positioning, in our view, our interviewees cannot fully escape these positions in their narration. Narratives which are used to prove cultural stereotypes and paternalistic assumptions wrong actually affirm exclusive norms concerning normative individuality, educability and life course. As DeVolder (2013) notes, the overcoming narrative can be considered both as an effect and as a strategy of normalization. While the obstacles to be overcome are situated in the structures and culture of education, these accounts of battle are easily read as stories of individual bravery or failure (DeVolder 2013; Gilmore 2010).

Educational inclusion primarily depends on the direction of education policy. During 2000s, inclusive education has faced a major challenge from neo-liberal education policy stressing educational excellence and competitive aspects of schooling (Goodley 2014; Slee 2014). Neo-liberal policy assumes an able(bodied) student subject, who normatively manages her/his school-going. Attempts of combining these two policy targets have led to narrowed down interpretation of inclusion which considers inclusive schooling possible only for students’ competent and ‘able enough’ for inclusion (e.g. see Goodley 2007).

In reference to the narratives analysed in this article, the impairments, needs and incompleteness could be seen not just as something to be overcome, but as issues inevitably belonging to human life and, therefore (Goodley 2007), as an aspect of agency (Honkasalo, Ketokivi, and Leppo 2014). Our
data suggest that the norms concerning appropriate learning and learners have not been challenged in educational practices, but these have been constantly used to measure the ability and educability of individual students. Norms, and the practices connected to these, persistently lock the gaze of educators on the individual and her/his ‘incapacity’, preventing noticing that support practices might sometimes fail.

Our analysis also highlights how a feeling of belonging in a school community is one of the first requisites of educational inclusion. That is why the educators should concentrate more on deconstructing the barriers of belonging and participation in classrooms. This could be realized by fully welcoming different kinds of learners to the school community, and by starting to question the constitution of the ideal student as (always) independently able enough to cope with the school tasks (see Goodley 2014; Liasidou 2012).

Despite its unquestionable success in equalizing educational opportunities, the Finnish comprehensive school has not truly managed to fulfil the demands of an inclusive education policy. Disability rights discourse has somewhat challenged the special needs education system to re-conceptualize disability by highlighting that the educational inclusion is always a political and human rights question. However, our data suggest that while critical accounts are emerging, individualized interpretations of special needs are still dominant in educational practices and perceptions concerning educational accomplishments, possibilities and needs of disabled young people. Although the schooling experiences of the two interviewees in this study are from the 1980s and 1990s, similar accounts could be found in our data concerning practices in the twenty-first century. In addition, recent news concerning educational discrimination of disabled young people in Finland underline the importance of raising awareness about disability rights.

Notes

1. In Finland, the concept of inclusive education mainly refers to the organization of special needs education, and not to the wider aim of developing inclusive educational cultures (with regard to multiple minority groups). Also, the concept is commonly used only in relation to students with mild learning difficulties, while students with more severe and multiple disabilities are typically considered to be ‘beyond inclusion’, and thus study in segregated arrangements.
2. These names are pseudonyms.
3. Pasi identified himself as a sign language user in the interview. While his narration makes visible that at school, he was rather considered as ‘hard of hearing’ student than deaf, we consider this identification significant.

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