



Research Article

Norwegian Educational Psychological Service Advisors' Perspectives and Practices in Supporting Immigrant Students in Primary Schools in Norway

Sultana Ali Norozi 

Department of Education and Lifelong Learning (IPL), Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway
E-mail: sultana.a.norozi@ntnu.no

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Abstract: In light of increasing migration to Europe, providing educational support for immigrant students, especially those needing special assistance, has become crucial. In Norway, the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) plays a key role in supporting students with special needs. This paper explores EPS advisors' perspectives and practices in assessing immigrant students in Norwegian primary schools through interviews with eight advisors. The research highlights challenges and perspectives related to working with immigrant students, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and special education theories. The findings reveal that although EPS advisors understand the unique needs of immigrant students and recognize the importance of cultural differences, they experience challenges in applying this knowledge in practice. The study underscores the need for alternative approaches and tools to better support immigrant students and foster inclusive education. By addressing the challenges faced by the EPS advisors, the education system in Norway can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for special needs immigrant students, ensuring their optimal learning and development. This study relies solely on EPS advisors' personal understanding of their work. Therefore, further research incorporating the perspectives of teachers and mother tongue instructors is needed.

Keywords: immigrant/multicultural students, Educational Psychological Service (EPS) advisors, Norway, language mapping, special education

1. Introduction

As of 2024, statistics from Statistics Norway (SSB) indicate that 16.8% of Norway's population has a refugee background, amounting to 931,081 individuals. Furthermore, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2023) reports that 22.6% of primary school-aged students in 2023 were of immigrant background. This growing demographic diversity in primary schools includes students who may face special educational challenges or difficulties with the instructional language. Assessing this group of students can be challenging due to uncertainties regarding their learning conditions and appropriate assessment methods and interventions.

Immigrant students may experience learning difficulties, stress-related challenges, or disabilities that affect their learning, adaptation, and development. Consequently, it is crucial for special educators, teachers, and other stakeholders in the education sector to possess adequate knowledge and competence in this area. Morken and Karlsen (2019)

emphasize that the majority of individuals with a migration background encounter challenges that fall within the realm of special education. In recent years, increasing national attention has been directed toward multilingual children and students with special educational needs in Norway. Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2022) has highlighted the importance of understanding the intersection between multilingualism and special educational needs and providing appropriate support for this group. However, it is essential to note that minority lingual and/or multilingualism itself is not inherently a special education issue; rather, it is the specific challenges related to migration, language difficulties, or other barriers that fall under special education.

A child's special needs do not necessarily mean the child requires individual assistance. The most effective support may involve reviewing school organization, teaching methods, resources that include services, professionals and assessment work (Galloway, 2018). Professionals in support services have the responsibility to ensure effective communication and develop robust assessment tools that consider the diversity of school children. This article aims to provide insights into the perspectives and practices of EPS advisors regarding the referral and assessment of immigrant students in Norwegian primary schools. To achieve this, the research addresses the following question: What are the perspectives and practices of eight Educational Psychological Service (EPS) advisors on the referral and assessment of immigrant students in Norwegian primary schools?

Minority Language Students Versus Multicultural Students

In addressing the issue at hand, the term "Multicultural Students (MS)" is employed to foster a more positive and inclusive approach. However, it is necessary to delineate who these multicultural students are, as the term can be broad. In this context, MS refer to students who are sequentially multilingual and have a mother tongue other than Norwegian or Sámi, currently in the process of learning a new language of instruction. The Sámi are an Indigenous people inhabiting parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, and are officially recognized in Norwegian policy and legislation, with Sámi languages holding a protected status. Typically, multilingualism refers to proficiency in multiple languages, with varying levels of competence (Egeberg, 2016).

A substantial portion of public policy documents and legal frameworks use the term "minority language students" for this group, as seen in the Norwegian Education Act (Opplæringsloven, 1998), which was the governing legislation at the time of data collection for this study, and in previous studies (Nordahl et al., 2018; Norozi, 2019; Morken, 2019; Egeberg, 2016). However, this term may be perceived as misleading or stigmatizing. Using "minority language" can foster an "us" and "them" mentality (Hilt, 2017; Norozi, 2019). Since the aim of this study is to investigate inclusive education, I opt to use "multicultural" to describe the student group. Hence, from an inclusive perspective, it is more appropriate to use the term "multicultural" while clearly contextualizing and defining what the term encompasses. This term, multicultural (flerkulturell in Norwegian), was included in the documents sent to informants from the Educational Psychological Service (EPS).

The Educational Psychological Service

In Norway, EPS is a nationwide municipality-based special education support service that was established under Section 5-6 of the Education Act. EPS is a professional body mandated to prepare expert assessments. Additionally, EPS supports schools and kindergartens with organizational and competency development, according to the Ministry of Education (Regjeringen, 2023). Historically, special education services began in the early 1800s, gradually developing into a counseling service (Haug, 2017). Established in 1948, the EPS initially was to assist schools in identifying students unable to follow the standard curriculum (Nordahl et al., 2018). The introduction of the Special Schools Act in 1951 increased the need for counseling and professional assessment of students' needs for special or regular schools. In 1969, today's EPS was established through the Primary School Act, under the name Educational Psychological District Service (*Pedagogisk psykologisk distrikts tjeneste*). The Special Schools Act was repealed in 1975, granting all students the right to special education in their regular primary school (Læringscenteret, Faglige enhet for PP-tjenesten, 2001). In 1974, the Act on Secondary Education was introduced, extending EPS's responsibilities to include secondary school students, adults, and preschool children. With changes in the Primary School Act in 1975, EPS became a nationwide municipal frontline service for children, youth, and adults with special needs (Nordahl et al., 2018). Every municipality in Norway must have an EPS, although multiple municipalities can collaborate on an EPS office. Over time, EPS has evolved from an individual perspective to a systemic focus (Moen et al., 2018; Fasting & Breilid, 2024). Working systemically since 1998 (Opplæringsloven, 1998, § 5.6), involves developing the competencies of schools and kindergartens and organizing services to better meet children's needs (Moen et al., 2018; Kolnes et al., 2021; Moen

& Szulevicz, 2022). Systemic work can also have a preventive effect and serve as early intervention (Hesselberg & Von Tetzchner, 2016; Buli-Holmberg, 2012). EPS's competence varies significantly, and the field of Special Education is constantly evolving, with a great need for ongoing competency development. The main focus of systemic work is to adapt and change the system around the child to meet their needs rather than segregating students with special needs. This work focuses on understanding the system around the child and how it can be adapted to meet their needs (Hesselberg & Von Tetzchner, 2016). Currently, more than two decades later, there is ongoing debate that system work in EPS is still a challenge (Moen et al., 2018; Kolnes et al., 2021).

Additionally, there are ongoing concerns about whether EPS's efforts effectively uphold the values of inclusive education (Nordahl et al., 2018). So, there is a desire for further education and competence building within EPS's main areas. One of the proposed areas for further education is acquiring multicultural education and migration policy.

In 2013, the Directorate for Education and Training was tasked by the Ministry of Education with initiating what was then called a Competency Boost in the Multicultural Area (*Kompetanseløft på det flerkulturelle området*), aimed at the entire education sector from 2013 to 2017. This initiative was launched due to the specific challenges faced by minority language children, youth, and adults in the education system. The Competency Boost was renamed Competence for Diversity (*Kompetanse for mangfold*) in 2014. There are no legally regulated requirements for competence or case processing time in EPS (Egeberg, 2016). Although the Ministry of Education highlighted the significant need for EPS and other support services to acquire multicultural competence (Pihl, 2010), suggests that misdiagnosis and misplacement by EPS will continue if this competence is lacking. This was mirrored in the report from the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2023) which stated that while EPS has high professional competence, there is a need for competence in the multicultural area because over half of the staff have limited competence in working with immigrant students.

Assessment (mapping) at EPS aims to identify children at risk for language difficulties, to implement preventive measures before challenges develop further (Klem et al., 2016). Generally, assessment has various purposes depending on its intent. In relation to this study's research question, diagnostic assessment (*utredende kartlegging* in Norwegian) is relevant. The purpose of diagnostic assessment is to achieve a thorough understanding of a complex case to offer tailored support and interventions (Klem et al., 2016). Overall, assessment is a tool necessary for providing appropriate education to students requiring special accommodations. Assessing multicultural students in EPS and schools is crucial for providing tailored instruction and support. Assessing multilingual students can be challenging because their language competence often varies across the languages they know. Therefore, it is essential to use a holistic approach to get a comprehensive picture of their language skills (Egeberg, 2016). A language assessment may cover several areas, including oral and written language comprehension and expression, vocabulary, grammar, and phonology. For multilingual students, it is important to assess their mother tongue to get a complete picture of their language skills and understanding (Egeberg, 2016). Using validated and reliable tools for language assessment is crucial, and for multilingual students, selecting tests that consider their background and multicultural context is necessary. Additionally, observing students' interactions with others and their behavior in the classroom can provide important information about their language competence (Egeberg, 2016).

1.1 Multicultural students with special needs

Recent international research highlights that the challenges associated with assessing and supporting immigrant students are not unique to Norway but are evident across a range of educational contexts. Comparative studies across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries show that assessment practices alone are insufficient unless accompanied by systematic use and transparency of data (Teltemann & Schunck, 2020). Similarly, European-level analyses indicate that many countries lack coherent monitoring systems for migrant education, leading to inconsistencies in support and assessment (European Parliament, 2017). Research from Germany further demonstrates how structural inequalities and contextual factors continue to shape educational outcomes for immigrant students (Georgi, 2024). In addition, research on the psychological assessment of culturally and linguistically diverse learners highlights the complexity of distinguishing between language-related challenges and underlying learning difficulties (Geva & Wiener, 2014). At the same time, countries such as Finland, often highlighted for their high performance in international assessments such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), emphasize early support, inclusive practices, and systematic attention to language development, which may contribute to more

effective educational outcomes for immigrant students (Sahlberg, 2021). These comparisons suggest that the challenges identified in the present study reflect broader systemic issues across countries rather than isolated national conditions.

Opplæringsloven (1998) stipulates that students in primary school who have a language other than Norwegian and Sami as their mother tongue have the right to specialized language education until they have sufficient Norwegian language skills to follow regular instruction. Specialized language education includes Norwegian instruction, mother tongue instruction, and bilingual subject instruction. Criticism of the implementation of Section 2-8 has been expressed by researchers (Pihl, 2010; Øzerk, 2012; Hilt, 2017; Norozi, 2019) by emphasizing when the student has sufficient proficiency in Norwegian, the student loses the right to mother tongue education. It is a requirement that education be adapted to each individual student and their conditions, according to the Education Act (Opplæringsloven, 1998, § 1-3). Research shows that despite the intentions of the law, the adaptation of education is less followed up in practice (Westrheim, 2011; Øzerk, 2012; Hilt, 2017; Norozi, 2019). Studies have shown that including the mother tongue and offering bilingual subject instruction contributes to learning, but it is not necessarily an offer that minority language students receive. The report “*Evaluation of specialized language education and introductory courses* (Evaluering av særskilt språkopplæring og innføringstilbud)” from Rambøll (2016) points out significant differences in knowledge and prioritization of specialized language education between schools and municipalities. This is due to the lack of clear guidelines for the content and organization of the service (Rambøll, 2016). In 2020, there were 1827 primary school students who received education solely in their mother tongue, while 907 primary school students received both mother tongue education and instruction in another language (Statistisk Sentralbyrå (SSB), 2024). However, it is likely that there are more students who need this support but do not receive it due to lack of resources or expertise in municipalities.

Inclusion of linguistic and ethnic minority groups in schools and society are overarching objectives of Norwegian educational policy. Individually tailored instruction and specially adapted education for students with special needs are tools aimed at realizing these objectives (Pihl, 2010; Pihl et al., 2018). MS are often overrepresented in special education in several Western countries, including Norway (Schmaus, 2022). Although Pihl (2010) contends that MS are overrepresented in special education even though being multicultural poses no additional challenges, this is disputed by Arfa et al. (2022), who argue that a child with special needs may face numerous challenges, and being an immigrant can further amplify their vulnerability. It is also documented that minority students are often separated from regular instruction, contrary to educational policy objectives (Rambøll, 2016; Egeberg, 2016). Studies show significant disparities in the proportion of minority students receiving special education (Rambøll, 2016; Nordahl et al., 2018), and Pihl highlights how minority students are referred to EPS if they encounter problems at school. Nordahl et al. (2018) point out that overrepresentation in special education primarily affects children of parents with low educational levels and students with minority language backgrounds. However, questions arise about whether special education is an appropriate method for reducing social and cultural inequalities in schools. Egeberg (2016) discusses the issue of overrepresentation in this context, suggesting that discrepancies may be related to “our ability to make correct assessments and to tailor educational offerings according to linguistic and experiential backgrounds” (p. 12). Studies on expert assessments show that there has been little consideration of individual prerequisites and that conclusions have been drawn on the wrong basis (Pihl, 2010). According to Pihl (2002c), the relationship between multicultural themes and special education is a sensitive and controversial topic that has been overlooked within special education. Morken (2019) points out that fear of misdiagnosis, stigmatization, and professional uncertainty have contributed to this neglect. Morken argues that multicultural themes and special education are two separate areas and that having a disability and belonging to an ethnic minority are two different things. However, it is necessary for special education to consider ethnic relations, as students from ethnic minorities may have “common” disabilities that require special educational support. Furthermore, Morken emphasizes that immigrant children may have special needs due to the pre-migration, during migration and post-migration circumstances and hardships. Therefore, multicultural themes should be included in special education (Pihl, 2002a; Johansson et al., 2021; Norozi & Vik, 2024).

The role of the EPS in supporting these students is crucial, yet the research on support MS with special needs is scarce (Sibley & Brabeck, 2017; Jørgensen et al., 2020; Norozi & Vik, 2024; Mohamad et al., 2025). Based on current knowledge, there have been no studies investigating the perceptions and practices of EPS advisors in the referral and assessment of immigrant students in Norwegian primary schools. Consequently, this study is highly relevant and significant.

1.2 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provides a framework for understanding human development within the context of multiple environmental influences. This model conceptualizes development as occurring through the interactions between an individual and various layers of environmental systems, each influencing the individual directly or indirectly. These systems include the microsystem (immediate environments such as family, peers, and school), mesosystem (interconnections between microsystems), exosystem (external settings that indirectly affect the individual, such as parental workplaces), macrosystem (broader cultural values, laws, and societal norms), and chronosystem (the dimension of time, reflecting changes over the life course and sociohistorical context).

In the present study, Bronfenbrenner's theory provides a lens to examine how the intersecting influences of family, school, support system and broader social policies and their interconnection shape the assessment work of MS for Special Education. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems offers a framework for understanding the assessment of MS in relation to the dimension of time, reflecting both changes across the life course and the broader sociohistorical context of MS.

2. Methodology

Eight EPS advisors were purposively selected from various municipalities in mid-Norway and participated in 60-90-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). All participants possess experience working with immigrant students, with their experience ranging from three to twenty years. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants shared their practices, thoughts, challenges, and routines related to the study's topic. Ethical practices were followed, including informed consent and voluntary participation. The study was approved by Norwegian Data Protection Services for Research (SIKT), all data were stored securely ensuring confidentiality and anonymity (Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of participants' qualifications and years of experience in the Educational Psychological Service (EPS)

Participants	Qualifications	Years of experience
Informant 1	Education (Pedagogy)	Approximately 15 years in EPS
Informant 2	Psychologist	Approximately 4 years in EPS
Informant 3	Psychologist	Approximately 30 years in EPS
Informant 4	Special education	Approximately 15 years in EPS
Informant 5	Education (Pedagogy)	Approximately 7 years in EPS
Informant 6	Special education	Approximately 10 years in EPS
Informant 7	Special education	Approximately 13 years in EPS
Informant 8	Special education	Approximately 18 years in EPS

Initially, coding was done manually with colors, but the complexity led to using Nvivo for digital coding, improving visualization and organization. Although this transition was time-consuming, it provided a significantly improved visual overview of the text data. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). The process involved repeated readings of the transcripts, inductive coding, and the identification of initial codes grounded in participants' understanding.

Approximately 60 codes were generated across the dataset. These codes were then systematically reviewed,

compared, and grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities and patterns across all interviews. Codes that were consistently present across participants were considered particularly relevant in the development of themes. NVivo 15 software supported the organization and refinement of codes and emerging themes. For example, codes related to school-home collaboration and interdisciplinary collaboration were combined into the category “Collaboration with parents and other partners.” Similarly, codes related to length of time in Norway, previous schooling, and language *proficiency* were refined into the overarching theme of contextual factors. Through this iterative process of reviewing, refining, and defining themes, an initial set of seven themes (Assessment-Evaluation, School, Multicultural Student, Parents, Experience, Referral, Length of Stay) was developed. These were subsequently condensed and abstracted into three overarching themes; contextual factors, collaboration with parents and other partners, and mapping which structure the findings and discussion. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2022) by continuously revisiting the interview transcripts, reflecting on interpretive decisions during coding and theme development, and acknowledging the researcher’s interpretive role in shaping the analytical process.

Enriching the existing body of knowledge on inclusive education, the study contributes valuable insights into EPS advisors’ perspectives and practices in assessing MS, highlighting challenges and best practices. It enhances understanding of MS’ special educational needs and supports mechanisms, informing policymakers, educators, and administrators about necessary improvements for inclusivity. The methodological approach, findings, and themes generated from this study offer a robust framework for future research on similar topics and contribute to promoting a more inclusive educational environment. This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample is relatively small and limited to eight EPS advisors from selected municipalities, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. As a qualitative study, the aim is not to generalize but to provide in-depth insights into participants’ perspectives and practices. Although the sample size is limited, the findings are consistent with existing research in the field, suggesting relevance beyond the immediate context. Future research with larger and more diverse samples would further strengthen the evidence base.

3. Findings and discussion

This discussion will center on the key themes that emerged from the study: contextual factors, mapping and collaboration. The empirical findings are discussed from different theoretical perspectives on special education and the functionality of EPS.

3.1 Contextual factors

A significant portion of the data highlights the importance of “contextual factors,” which include vital information that is essential for an EPS advisor when assessing and referring MS. These factors encompass the surrounding conditions or elements that shape the situation or perception during the evaluation of a student’s development and linguistic skills. The sub-themes discussed are duration of stay, previous schooling, and Norwegian language proficiency.

The length of time in Norway emerged as a crucial piece of background information that EPS advisors find inconsistent, depending on whether the school has collected this information about the student being assessed.

Informant 2 highlighted the challenges of making accurate diagnoses without clear information on how long a student has been in Norway. For instance, they stated, “It’s challenging to make a diagnosis if we don’t know how long the student has been in Norway. Their language skills might be affected by the length of their stay.” This finding suggests that the duration of stay in Norway can significantly influence the assessment of MS. This underscores the necessity of considering the length of stay as a crucial factor, as new arrivals or those with a short stay might have limited proficiency in Norwegian, impacting their educational assessment and needs (Egeberg, 2016; Jortveit, 2018). Informant 4 emphasized the importance of understanding the student’s duration of stay to choose appropriate assessment tools and referral practices, as it significantly affects their language acquisition and adaptation to the school environment. Jortveit (2018) emphasizes that it is important to take this into account and give multicultural students sufficient time and support to develop their language skills. This will have a positive impact on the development of, among other things, grammar and sentence length.

The informants mentioned that due to uncertainty regarding the length of time children have lived in Norway or their young age, diagnosing language difficulties is often inconclusive. They also stressed the necessity of allowing these students sufficient time and support to develop their language skills. The findings indicate that contextual factors, such as the duration of stay, are emphasized in referrals for MS. The time required for students to adapt and develop adequate language skills highlights the importance of considering their cultural and linguistic background during the assessment process. The findings suggest that contextual factors, like the length of a student's stay, play a significant role in MS referrals. The time needed for students to adjust and acquire sufficient language proficiency underscores the need to consider their cultural and linguistic backgrounds during assessments. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) chronosystem, which highlights how the passage of time and changes in life circumstances, such as prolonged exposure to new environments, influence an individual's development and adaptation processes. The chronosystem in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory emphasizes the role of time and life transitions, which fits well with the idea of adaptation over time for MS in new cultural and linguistic settings.

Previous schooling experiences and background history were also noted as vital. Informant 3 stressed the need to delve into students' educational history and potential traumatic experiences in pre-migration, during migration and post-migration phases, to understand their learning challenges. Research participants suggested that there was a need for more standardized practices in how information on previous schooling of immigrants is collected and considered. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) process-person-context-time model, which posits that a child's development is influenced by multiple layers of their environment, including previous schooling and socio-cultural experiences (Bø, 2018; Tudge et al., 2009). Norwegian language proficiency emerged as a key contextual factor, with informants acknowledging the complexity introduced by multiple languages and multicultural environments. Informant 5 discussed the challenges of distinguishing between language acquisition difficulties and potential cognitive issues. They remarked, "Sometimes it's hard to tell if a student is struggling because of language issues or if there's a cognitive problem. This makes accurate assessment difficult." Informant 4 argued that a lack of understanding of multilingual development among school staff often leads to premature referrals for special education, which may not always be necessary. This highlights the need for EPS advisors to be aware of these factors when assessing MS. Respondents noted that schools varied in how much information they collected about immigrants' histories. Informants also pointed out that understanding a student's background, including experiences in refugee camps or under harsh conditions, is crucial for proper assessment and support. This aligns with the need for sensitivity and competence in identifying students' needs, considering the potential impact of traumatic experiences on their learning and behavior. EPS advisors must be equipped to differentiate between language acquisition challenges and other cognitive issues. The need for schools to have a better understanding of multilingual development was emphasized, suggesting that with more knowledge, schools could better tailor their approach to support these students rather than referring them to Special Education. Research from other European contexts also highlights that the challenges associated with integrating immigrant students are not unique to Norway. For example, a study on the integration of newly arrived refugee children in the German school system shows that schools face similar difficulties related to language acquisition, educational continuity, and systemic coordination (Jäger et al., 2021). These findings point to broader structural and institutional challenges across countries, indicating that the assessment and support of immigrant students must be understood within a wider international context. Informants indicated that a lack of understanding often leads to quick referrals for special education, which may not always be necessary.

The findings highlight the importance of contextual factors in the assessment and referral of immigrant students. Factors such as length of time in Norway, previous schooling, and language proficiency require EPS advisors to develop a nuanced understanding of each student's background. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the interaction between multiple environmental layers influencing a child's development. The findings also indicate that access to EPS support may be challenging, particularly when information remains unclear until students and their parents develop sufficient Norwegian language proficiency. This raises critical questions about inclusion when language mastery becomes an implicit prerequisite for receiving support, especially for students who require immediate intervention (Mohamad et al., 2025). The results further underline the importance of allowing sufficient time for language development, as premature conclusions may lead to misdiagnosis or inappropriate educational placement. Careful consideration of contextual factors is therefore essential for providing appropriate support (Hesselberg & Von Tetzchner, 2016). In addition, the findings point to the need for strengthening professional

competence among educators and EPS advisors, particularly in understanding multilingual development and distinguishing between language-related challenges and cognitive difficulties. Previous research has similarly identified language competence and multilingual development as ongoing challenges in schools (Pihl et al., 2018), highlighting the important role of EPS in providing guidance and support. This underscores the need for expertise in multilingualism and multicultural education within the EPS (Nordahl et al., 2018). At the same time, participants noted that competence varies across schools and is influenced by contextual factors such as workload and demanding working conditions, which may affect teachers' capacity to engage with students' backgrounds (Pihl, 2010). These findings suggest that improving institutional competence, rather than attributing challenges to individual attitudes, is essential for supporting immigrant students effectively.

Mapping: Challenges in Finding Culturally Relevant Assessment Tools and Approaches

Expert assessment work at EPS typically involves conducting comprehensive evaluations of students to understand their educational and psychological needs. Use of assessment tools, identify needs, and formulating recommendations are some key aspects in this work. EPS advisors use a variety of standardized tests, interviews, observations, and assessments to gather information about a student's cognitive abilities, academic skills, emotional functioning, and social development. Then, they analyze assessment results to identify strengths and weaknesses in learning, behavior, and emotional regulation. This helps in understanding barriers to learning or developmental challenges a student may face. Based on assessment findings, EPS advisors formulate recommendations. These may include specific interventions, accommodations, or modifications to support the student's learning and development.

The informants were asked several questions about mapping to obtain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives and practices. The findings indicate that most informants experience challenges in determining the best tools and approach for mapping when language difficulties are present in MS. This is often due to the presence of multiple, context-dependent factors that must be considered. Informant 5 expressed significant engagement with this student group and a strong concern about making mistakes:

I am very engaged with this student group and very afraid of making mistakes. I am also part of the specialist team at EPS for minority languages. I try to do my best, but one can never map out everything or do enough; one must set limits for oneself. To complete the work within the deadline and for the sake of the child, one cannot map a child indefinitely.

This informant highlights the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment for this student group. Participation in a specialist team on this topic also indicates that the EPS is developing competencies and advancing in this area. Consequently, it becomes apparent that advisors need to be well-versed in various mapping tools and the purpose of each assessment. Informant 2 states:

But there are children who are foreign-language speaking, no, not foreign-language speaking, sorry-multicultural. Who have actual language difficulties, and they must also be diagnosed. But then a lot more must be in place, we must know that this language difficulty applies to both the mother tongue and Norwegian. Because one does not only have a language difficulty in one language, right? It is relevant across languages.

Informant 2 finds it challenging to navigate whether language difficulties applied to both mother tongue and Norwegian language. It highlights that language difficulties are relevant across languages, necessitating a holistic approach to understand and address these challenges.

Recognizing cultural and individual understanding is an important finding in the analysis. It is emphasized that there is no culturally neutral assessment tool, which can have implications for how students respond to assessment situations. Informant 3 states "I don't think you will find a culturally neutral assessment tool. That is difficult... no impossible". Informant 3 also noted that the use of electronic tablets and structured play can influence a child's responses in assessment situations by shaping how they engage with tasks and interact with the assessor. Play and communication are not universal, and different cultural backgrounds may influence how children participate in such activities. This may, in turn, affect how students respond during assessment. These findings highlight the importance of being aware of and considering cultural and individual differences in the assessment of immigrant students. Informant

3 also expresses doubt about the possibility of finding a tool unaffected by cultural factors. Even the verbal tasks used in ability assessments are cited as examples of how Norwegian children, accustomed to using electronic tablets, can be influenced by their cultural background, challenging the idea of complete cultural neutrality. Many mapping tools are often excluded due to the requirement that students should not be over-assessed, particularly those who are newcomers in Norway. There is often a desire to conduct mapping in the student's native language to obtain a comprehensive picture of the student being assessed. Informant 5 described the challenges associated with using mapping tools for MS, revealing similarities in the tests used and their shortcomings. Informant 5 states:

It can often be confusing to determine which tools are most appropriate for assessing immigrant students. There are numerous factors to consider, including not only the type of test and assessment tools, but also which specific test yields the most accurate results for each individual student.

It is important to understand the student's background to determine which mappings can be carried out. If a student scores low on screenings, and based on evaluations from student discussions, advisors have found that some mappings might be invalid. Examples of such tools include the Student Evaluation of Language Fundamentals assessment (SELF) (assessment tool is a standardized instrument used in EPS to evaluate the language abilities of students. It is designed to identify and diagnose language difficulties in children and adolescents, covering various aspects of language functioning, including comprehension, expression, syntax, semantics, and pragmatic skills. This tool is particularly useful for assessing students who may need special educational support due to language impairments). However, Informant 7 recognizes the necessity of setting limits on how much to map a student, considering both the student's wellbeing and the workload. This acknowledgment suggests a desire to provide support and resources within given constraints.

Dynamic mapping is mentioned by several informants. Informant 4 explains that observations are made considering the child's multicultural background: "We use the language mapping tool we have, dynamic mapping (Dynamic Assessment (DA) refers to an interactive approach to conducting assessments that focus on the learning process and potential of a child rather than just their current performance level. This method is particularly valuable for evaluating multilingual students or those from immigrant backgrounds, where traditional standardized tests may not fully capture their abilities and potential), considering the child is multicultural. This way, we measure their Norwegian language skills. However, we cannot distinguish between language difficulties and other issues. The challenge is that we often cannot determine if the child has language difficulties or if it's just their Norwegian language skills we are assessing." This can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory that emphasizes the importance of considering a student's entire environment when assessing their needs.

Dynamic mapping plays a crucial role in assessing the Norwegian language skills of MS holistically. It takes into account the student's background, allowing for a more accurate assessment of language competence (Hunt et al., 2022). Weak Norwegian language skills can stem from the influence of the mother tongue, previous linguistic experiences, or cultural background. While dynamic mapping can effectively assess Norwegian language skills, it is important to be aware of the challenges in distinguishing between multiculturalism and language difficulties (Hunt et al, 2022; Egeberg, 2016). This approach is a step in the right direction for understanding a student's linguistic competence. Informant 8 emphasizes the challenge of using mapping tools that do not differentiate between multiculturalism and potential language difficulties. Hence, mapping Norwegian language skills alone may not uncover all aspects of a student's language development (Egeberg, 2016). An inclusive approach to mapping, considering a broader understanding of the student's linguistic competence, is crucial (Hunt et al., 2022). The EPS has an important role in ensuring comprehensive mapping, which may involve using multiple methods and resources to obtain a nuanced picture of the students' language competence (Hesselberg & Von Tetzchner, 2016).

Informant 1 comments on the limitations of available tools for assessing language skills:

Actually, I think we have quite poor tools for mapping. For example, to take the WISC test (The WISC, or Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, is a psychological test designed to measure cognitive abilities in children aged 6 to 16 years. This test was standardised for ethnic Norwegian children. In the EPS, the WISC test is used to assess various aspects of a child's intellectual functioning), a student should ideally have been

in Norway for 4-6 years and have a good command of Norwegian. We used to have a non-verbal WISC, but we moved away from it. So, in some cases, we use non-verbal tasks on the WISC for mapping, but even that requires a certain level of Norwegian to understand the instructions.

This highlights the challenges in mapping language skills for MS with limited Norwegian proficiency. Many informants provided mixed responses regarding the suitability of mapping tools. Pihl (2002a) examined the EPS application of the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children-Revised (WISC-R) for minority background children. She expressed concern about the test's use in assessing these children's intelligence. The study analyzed 125 cases reported to the EPS between 1990 and 2000 due to language, academic, and socio-emotional or behavioral issues. The findings highlight the impact of multicultural backgrounds on test outcomes. Ekeberg (2016) questions the appropriateness of standardized tests for minority language students, arguing that they compare norms from a limited population sample.

Besides the suitability of assessment tools, there is also concerns about EPS advisors' competencies to use these assessment tools effectively for MS. One informant admitted the lack of competence in identifying underlying factors such as trauma, which might suggest a referral to the EPS. The challenge lies in distinguishing between language difficulties due to limited Norwegian competence and those related to trauma and stress. It is crucial to recognize that children with immigrant backgrounds may have experienced traumatic events affecting their emotional, social, and learning development (Egeberg, 2016). Informant 2 acknowledges the complexity of this issue: "Each individual mapping test might not be suitable in the same way as when I test ethnically Norwegian children. But when I test MS, many factors come into play in the assessment." Overall, advisors need to interpret mapping results with care and caution. Informant 3 explains:

They (MS) might know what a fork is, but they may not have learned the word in Norwegian because they don't use it at school, only at home. So, as we discussed earlier, how enriching are the child's language skills? You need to combine what they've learned in both languages. It's not easy to map these children.

Assessing an immigrant child's language skills could lead to interventions that might help the student. Children use language in various situations, which may explain why they have not learned equivalent words in Norwegian (Hunt et al., 2022). The findings show that informants play a significant role in the mapping process, sharing their knowledge and guiding schools on this topic.

Pihl (2002b) investigated an expert assessment of a ninth-grade minority student who had been in Norway for nine months and had no prior schooling in his native country. Utilizing a narrative approach, Pihl analyzed the EPS advisor's recommendation for 12 hours of special education per week. Pihl found that the assessment and recommendations were based more on common sense and goodwill than on professional evaluation, thereby contributing to the constructing the student as one with "special needs". Hence, a comprehensive approach is required to consider the abilities of MS, involving a broader assessment of their language competence that current tools may not fully capture. This includes collaboration with parents, who have valuable insights into the child's language development. The EPS can contribute to building this competence in schools through professional support. The EPS's role is also to foster inclusive schools, providing the necessary guidance to schools on the right path, while recognizing the ongoing need for acquiring more multicultural competence (Regjeringen, 2023).

An important aspect of this research was how respondents relate to the available mapping tools for immigrant children whose first language is not Norwegian.

The findings show that various tools are often juggled, and it must be considered that a multicultural student is being assessed. Mother tongue mapping is not always conducted, but it is something informants wish to do. Informant 3 states:

My general impression in schools is that one might not always think to map the mother tongue because it can seem that the child has a functional and fluent social language, which masks inadequate language competence needed for following lessons. Then they might think, 'Oh, s/he can't do this, so it's a learning difficulty or language problem,' but it's more about struggling with Norwegian.

This indicates that schools do not automatically consider mapping in the mother tongue, but informants emphasize its importance. Therefore, schools rely on EPS advisors to guide and ensure this is addressed, conveying this competence within the school. Informant 2 highlights that mapping often does not account for the student's mother tongue, assuming that MS' functional social language masks inadequate language skills necessary for academic success. Focusing solely on social language competence can limit the understanding of the student's actual linguistic abilities (Egeberg, 2016). Aagaard (2011) argues that minority language students are often assessed as though they were majority language students, without adequately considering their cultural, background and linguistic characteristics. This can lead to misdiagnoses of learning or language difficulties, underscoring the importance of considering both the native language and Norwegian competence in MS' assessments. Comparative research across OECD and European contexts highlights similar challenges in assessing and supporting immigrant students, particularly in relation to the use of assessment data and the lack of systematic monitoring frameworks (Teltemann & Schunck, 2020).

The mapping tool FLORO is mentioned as suitable for assessing immigrant children whose first language is not Norwegian, particularly in identifying potential special educational needs, although Informant 4 expresses disagreement: "I am certified in FLORO but have not used it extensively. I have doubts about how the test is designed. I know others are skeptical as well. However, I know it can be used dynamically, especially for memory span and non-word mapping." Informant 4's skepticism about FLORO's design reflects a broader sentiment. Nevertheless, Informant 4 acknowledges the potential of using FLORO dynamically for assessing memory and non-verbal skills, indicating openness to exploring alternative methods within the FLORO framework.

Assessing all languages of multilingual individuals is crucial, but often hindered by a lack of comparable assessment tools across languages and competence of EPS advisors in different languages. Assessments in only the majority language can mislead, especially for MS with little exposure to it. Accurate assessment is vital to distinguish multilingualism from language impairment and ensure proper support, preventing misdiagnosis and underdiagnosis (Wold, 2006; Simonsen & Southwood, 2021).

3.2 Collaboration with parents and other partners

The findings indicate that collaboration is an important factor in the assessment of MS, supported by the experiences of the informants. Collaboration refers to the experiences and interactions of EPS advisors with the students' parents, schools, and other institutions (Fasting & Breilid, 2024). Parental collaboration involves elements such as the use of interpreters, communication, and timely provision of information to parents.

Findings indicate that families have different levels of understanding of the process and the Norwegian system. Informant 8 states: "And again, with the parents, it varies a lot. Some parents are very updated on their rights and should have, while others just sort of say yes, and for them any help is a good help, and they may not know what the different steps in the process are then. That they don't have an overview." Informant 6's reflection also resonates on the varying levels of parental competence and understanding of their rights in collaboration. Consequences of misunderstandings may include weak comprehension of the information provided, failure to give informed consent, and limited participation. Informant 5 states: "Parents often have a different perception than the school does, one must tread carefully. I am very concerned that we do not impose disability on the child that the child does not actually have, or use the school's resources on someone who does not actually need it." Most of the participants mentioned that parents also often have a different perception than the school regarding the child's needs. Informant 2 describes the dilemma of whether to raise unnecessary concerns or recognize special educational needs that should not be overlooked:

It is very difficult. I find it extremely challenging to determine if it is just a Norwegian language proficiency or if there are special educational needs that shouldn't be dismissed as merely a language problem. I try to look at the language development history, particularly if it runs in the family.

This indicates Informant 2's approach, considering various factors when assessing language difficulties and the need for special education support. This highlights the interaction between home and school environments, emphasizing the need to understand the interplay between these contexts for a comprehensive understanding of the student's language development (Bø, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Mohamad et al., 2025). The parents, on their part, are not concerned, and the informant describes a challenge in balancing the acknowledgment of the parents' experiences and intuitions with

the school's need to provide special educational assistance. Parents may attribute the need for special educational help to the child's multiculturalism, such as receiving support in kindergarten due to being bilingual. Informant 2, however, understands the parents' desire to protect their child from being diagnosed. In certain communities, parents may disagree with diagnoses given to their child, which can create additional challenges. This underscores the complexity and sensitivity involved in assessing language difficulties in MS. It is crucial to consider the school's concerns and the parents' perspectives while balancing the provision of support with protecting the child from unnecessary stigmatization. A holistic approach, including cooperation between the school, EPS, and parents, is essential for ensuring effective support for language development in the Norwegian school context (Fasting & Breilid, 2024).

Findings indicate that families of these students often lack sufficient understanding of the school system and frequently misunderstand the purpose of referrals to EPS. Parents are vital resources for students' education, and research indicates its significance for academic performance (Norozi, 2022). Informant 4 also expresses a commitment to avoiding imposing unnecessary challenges on the child or causing unnecessary concerns for the parents. It emphasizes the importance of using the school's resources for those who actually need them, rather than those who do not. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of providing information about the assessment work. Additionally, it is interesting to examine the macro-system's influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) on parental roles and collaboration with the school. This may involve cultural differences in understanding the school's tasks and how they may vary in different societies and contexts. This may vary among different parents based on their own experiences and educational backgrounds from their home countries. The inquiry revolves around how EPS advisors take into account the experiences and backgrounds of parents. Highlighting the voices of EPS advisors, Moen et al. (2020) show that the EPS advisors primarily focus on assisting schools in systemic work, maintaining good relationships with schools and teachers, and valuing the importance of theory and research-based knowledge in performing their roles. Yet, there is limited collaboration with parents. This concept pertains to Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem, which posits that an individual's microsystems do not operate in isolation but are interrelated, exerting influence upon one another. The mesosystem encompasses the interactions between various microsystems in a child's life. Informant 1 highlights how cultural factors can influence perceptions of acceptability in communication. Informant 1 states:

I asked a mother, an anamnesis, where we inquire about developmental history. We always ask about pregnancy and birth, if there was anything specific, and then I suddenly realized that the mother couldn't talk about such things. It was probably embarrassing to talk about, especially with the interpreter present. So, I had to understand that we need to approach this conversation differently. But I don't know enough about it.

During the implementation of anamnesis, a method used to gather information about a person's developmental history, questions about pregnancy were asked, and Informant 1 noticed that the mother had difficulties discussing such topics. The informant presumed that it might be embarrassing for the mother to discuss this, especially in the presence of a male interpreter. This led to recognition of the need to approach the conversation differently. However, it is noted that the informant lacks sufficient expertise to handle such situations, as others may be more familiar with discussing such matters. Immigrant parents generally desire that assessment and placement decisions become more inclusive before they can fully endorse support for their children with special needs (Rizvi, 2018).

In assessment situations, EPS advisors are concerned with ensuring the child's safety, as it is an integral part of their work. By ensuring that parents receive accurate information and keeping them updated on the child's case. The child's experiences are influenced by how parents perceive this process, and if such children are to be assessed, the results of the assessment may not be valid. One can draw parallels to initiating early assessment of a child, as seen in, for example, assessments of newcomers. One factor contributing to these experiences may be that the schools' competence varies in the multicultural competence domain. Today's school life demands a broad range of competencies, with a diverse student population. Informant 4 expresses that the quality of specialized language education is "poor" and lacks expertise in the informant's municipality. When asked about the competencies the informant lacks, it is answered:

Yes, there are teachers who have education in specialized Norwegian language education, for example. And ways to do it. There are curricula (lærerplaner in Norwegian) for example, for this. I don't experience that many know about it or how to use it. So just yes, it's a bit random then.

The data revealed a recurring pattern where the EPS advisors tend to attribute teachers' challenges in collaborating with immigrant parents to their lack of competence. Simultaneously, the participants acknowledged their own limitations in working effectively with immigrant students. This raises the question: how can EPS advisors be expected to support teachers in systemic work if they themselves lack the necessary competencies? General competence enhancement on multicultural education in several areas in the education sector is clearly needed, both in EPS and in schools (Nordahl et al., 2018). Various professional groups are involved in supporting MS. These include mother tongue teachers, bilingual teachers, teaching assistants, classroom teachers, and educational psychologists. EPS advisors usually collaborate with teachers and not with other groups. Beside the competence enhancement, it is also important that teachers and EPS advisors are aware of their implicit and explicit biases while working with immigrant students (Markova et al., 2016). Systematic work within EPS is important to meet the needs of the students, involving developing schools' competencies and organizing services that provide better support to students (Hesselberg & Von Tetzchner, 2016; Buli-Holmberg, 2012). Kolnes et al. (2021) identify two types of EPS advisors: teacher focused EPS advisors and principal focused EPS advisors. Joint collaboration on developing knowledge during the assessment process seems scarce in both viewpoints. It is important to note that there has been a general shift in Norway towards increased systemic work and reduced direct work with students, which may result in EPS advisors placing less emphasis on students' individual experiences (Cameron & Lindqvist, 2014; Johansson et al., 2021).

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the perspectives and practices of EPS advisors in relation to the referral and assessment of immigrant students in Norwegian primary schools. Through in-depth interviews with eight EPS advisors, the research has shed light on the different perspectives and challenges faced by these advisors in their assessment work with MS. Key contextual factors such as the students' length of stay in Norway, experiences of trauma, previous schooling, and language proficiency have been identified as significant influences on their learning and development. These findings can be understood through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, which proved helpful in interpreting how multiple contextual layers shape both students' learning conditions and the assessment practices of EPS advisors. The findings of this study indicate that EPS advisors possess substantial competence within their service. They demonstrate a deep understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by MS. The advisors demonstrate a commitment to inclusive education and are aware of the importance of considering cultural and individual differences in their assessment work. However, they struggle with knowing how to put it into practice. This highlights the importance of providing ongoing professional development and support to EPS advisors to ensure they remain up-to-date with best practices in the field. One of the key challenges identified in this study is the collaboration with parents. While the advisors recognize the importance of involving parents in the educational process, they also face various obstacles in establishing effective communication and collaboration. Language barriers, cultural differences, and differing expectations and priorities can hinder effective collaboration between the advisors and parents. It is crucial for EPS advisors to develop strategies and approaches to overcome these challenges and establish strong partnerships with parents. This may include providing interpreters or translators, organizing cultural awareness workshops, and actively involving parents in decision-making processes.

The advisors in this study express concerns about the adequacy of existing assessment tools and approaches. They highlight the need for alternative tools and approaches that take into account cultural and individual differences. This emphasizes the importance of developing culturally sensitive and contextually appropriate assessment tools and methods that can accurately identify the strengths and needs of MS. This may involve incorporating multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, and portfolio assessments, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the students' abilities and challenges. In conclusion, this study has provided valuable insights into the perspectives and practices of EPS advisors in relation to the referral and assessment of MS in Norwegian primary schools. The study highlights that, although EPS advisors demonstrate substantial knowledge and a strong commitment to inclusive education, there is a need for targeted training and support to help translate this knowledge more effectively into practice. By addressing the challenges faced by the EPS advisors, the education system in Norway can foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for MS, ensuring their optimal learning and development. Overall, the study

contributes to existing literature by providing empirical insights into how EPS advisors perceive and enact their work in practice. At the same time, it highlights the need for further research that includes additional perspectives, such as those of teachers and mother tongue instructors, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of assessment practices in multicultural educational contexts.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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