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Capturing students' needs through collaboration - exploring challenges experienced by Norwegian educational-psychological advisers

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ABSTRACT

A system-based approach to expert assessment work presupposes collaboration between the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) and key stakeholders to capture students' needs. Nevertheless, few studies have explored what challenges to collaboration exist and how they can be resolved. The purpose of this study was therefore to fill this knowledge gap by exploring EPS advisers' experiences of challenges in collaborating with key stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers and principals. The results of eight interviews revealed challenges for EPS advisers in capturing the student's voice, gaining legitimacy from teachers, involving principals, and being parents' spokesperson, as well as challenges related to the perceived ambiguity of the EPS's mandate. The findings suggest a lack of collaborative competence to lead a joint process of knowledge development; such competence could prevent conflicting expectations of EPS's mandate, confusion about roles and contribute to trustful relationships between EPS and key stakeholders. A two-part strategy for a collaborative approach to expert assessment work is suggested.

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Introduction

In Norway, the Educational Psychological Service (EPS) is a mandatory division of municipalities charged with helping schools make the necessary adjustments to best serve students with special educational needs. Since the introduction of students' rights to special education in 1976, the Norwegian Educational Psychological Service (EPS) has represented the experts who assess students' special educational needs to achieve the best fit between the student's needs and the learning situations offered in his or her school (The Ministry of Education and Research 2014). The assessment report describes whether a student needs special education, specifies the student's difficulties and provides reasons for the student's lack of success in ongoing schooling. Similar to many other nations, Norway has committed itself to an ideology that highlights the rights of all children to participate in the ordinary school system through the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994). The idea of inclusion, which is central in this

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statement, has had consequences for the work of EPS advisers, and since 1998, they have been expected to include the student's learning environment in class in their assessments and advise the school in enhancing the competence and organisational adjustments needed for an inclusive school (The Education Act [Opplæringslova] 1998, § 5.6). The change in the law provided guidelines for the current organisation of the EPS, which expects that EPS advisers will collaborate closely with the student, parents and school staff when assessing a student's needs (The Ministry of Education and Research 2021).

A systematic review of research on the Norwegian EPS service reported various challenges due to this shift in focus. In addition to systemic work behaviour, professional identity and collaboration, the lack of a system focus in the expert assessment process was identified (Moen et al. 2018). Furthermore, this same review identified collaboration as a key element in the work of EPS advisers, even though such collaboration causes challenges due to, for instance, different expectations (Moen et al. 2018). A recent Norwegian study exploring a system-based approach to expert assessment work revealed a lack of collaboration between EPS advisers and the student, parents and school staff with regard to identifying students' needs (Kolnes, Øverland, and Midthassel 2020). This finding calls for further studies on the collaboration between the EPS adviser and relevant stakeholders in the expert assessment process to better understand what the challenges are and how they can be resolved. The purpose of this study was to fill this knowledge gap.

Capturing students' needs

According to Honneth (2003, 2008), the recognition of the student's knowledge and opinions is fundamental for student identity formation. Additionally, such recognition has been acknowledged to strengthen a child's self-esteem and ability to master skills (Omre and Schjelderup 2009). The recognition of students' knowledge and opinions is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Students' right to participation is also stated in § 1–1 in the Norwegian Education Act (The Education Act [Opplæringslova] 1998, § 1–1).

Participation, codetermination and the predictability of the design of auxiliary interventions are highlighted as key concepts in the theory of salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1993; Antonovsky and Lev 2000). According to this theory, student involvement leads to a sense of coherence, and it contributes to coping and prevents stress because the student understands the situation and has confidence in his or her ability to find a solution that seems meaningful (Antonovsky 1993; Antonovsky and Lev 2000). However, children's right to participation involves not only understanding students' experiences of school life but also ensuring students' influence on what arrangements are made (Arnstein 1969; Seim and Slettebø 2007; Sinclair 1998). Real participation is achieved only when the child's participation and the child's perspective are seen as opportunities to make good decisions (Ellingsen 2014). In addition to mobilising resources within the child, the recognition perspective also involves mobilising resources in the child's environment (Ellingsen 2014). This approach implies a shift from hierarchical and asymmetric relationships to collaboration and recognisable relationships, where decision-making processes are characterised

by recognition of user knowledge and collaborative partnerships (Dominelli 2008; Lupton and Nixon 1999; Seim and Slettebø 2007).

User-driven innovative collaboration

To provide services of the highest possible quality, the WHO emphasises collaborative practices that include users (World Health Organization 2017). According to this perspective, the user's needs provide direction for designing and implementing measures within the framework of interprofessional collaboration (Humerfelt 2012; Vis et al. 2011). Collaboration has been suggested as a means of innovation in user-oriented interprofessional collaboration in research on social work in public administration (Willumsen and Ødegård 2014); for instance, collaboration can be performed as a targeted effort to improve the quality of service in problem solving within the framework of a human infrastructure supported by social technologies (Darsø 2013; Sørensen and Torfing 2011). In fact, such user-driven innovation has been suggested to be a key concept, where reflection on the different participants' input into the collaboration process represents innovation potential itself (Darsø 2013). Furthermore, according to Fook (2004), such user need-driven critical reflection as part of a collaborative process may have the potential to change an organisation when stimulating staff knowledge development through the exploration of different understandings and approaches that can be fruitful for the user (Willumsen and Ødegård 2015).

Within the framework of this user-driven innovative collaboration, expertise is developed in a professional network (Payne 2006) through a common knowledge development process (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005). As a prerequisite for knowledge development within such an interprofessional collaboration, professionals must recognise each other's competence and use this to solve problems together (Teige and Hedlund 2016). In this context, leadership involves facilitating collaboration processes and maintaining communication so that progress does not stop (Willumsen 2009). Moreover, scholars have suggested that such a collaboration process has the potential to stimulate reflection on unarticulated understandings that are part of tacit knowledge that can help reveal complexity (Hislop, Bosua, and Helms 2018). According to Schwab (1983) and Fasting (2017), a challenge is that individuals may take the obvious as granted without engaging in any further investigation. Fasting (2017) underscored the position of the EPS in exploring previously agreed-upon knowledge through open and innovative reflection.

However, research has reported that the distance between teachers and the extended service providers whom they need to collaborate with to be a challenge (Ahtola and Niemi 2014; Fylling and Handegård 2009; Hustad, Strøm, and Strømsvik 2013). This distance reduces the possibility of shared knowledge of life in the classroom and thus reduces the utility of written plans (Mælan et al. 2019). Establishing trust has been reported to be a major challenge in interprofessional collaboration between schools and extended service providers (Mælan et al. 2019; Mellin et al. 2017; Moran and Bodenhorn 2015; Rothì, Leavey, and Best 2008). Therefore, a focus on communication and building relationships between partners is necessary for the partners to achieve a common understanding of the task they will accomplish (Midthassel 2017; Rice 2002).

The Norwegian context

Research on Norwegian EPS advisers' experiences of interprofessional collaboration has shown that EPS professionals are challenged by the complex process involved in collaboration with a number of professionals to achieve the best outcome for the student (Ødegård 2005). This research has illustrated the importance of increasing student influence by focusing more on the child's own agenda and understanding that providing information is a two-way process that includes both the adult and the child (Sandbæk 2004). Additionally, the existing approaches to the involvement of the child's parents might be problematic. The results from a Norwegian study on parents' experiences with the EPS indicated that parents might feel neglected and not listened to when collaborating with the EPS (Anthun 2000).

International relevance

Although the study was conducted in the Norwegian context and therefore has some national characteristics, the study can serve as a reference for similar institutions in other countries for the development of schools based on students' special needs through collaboration.

Aim and research question

The aim of this study was to explore challenges related to EPS advisers' collaboration with key stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers and principals. The following research question was investigated:

- What challenges do EPS advisers experience when collaborating with key stakeholders to identify students' needs?

The findings will be discussed in light of the established theoretical rationale. Implications for achieving a collaborative approach to the expert assessment process will be further suggested.

Materials and methods

The exploratory approach of this study led to the selection of qualitative interviews as the method to capture EPS advisers' experiences of collaboration with students, parents, teachers and principals. The focus of the exploration in this study was on EPS advisers' external real-world experiences through thoughtful descriptions and reflections. This focus is consistent with a generic approach to qualitative research, which differs from a phenomenological approach focusing on the inner organisation and structure of participants experiencing processes (Percy, Kostere, and Kostere 2015).

Research design

The individual interviews were semi-structured to ensure that the same themes were addressed in all interviews. At the same time, emphasis was placed on following up on

possible important individual reflections (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). Two pilot interviews were conducted to gain experience with the guide and the interview situation. The interviews followed a three-phase structure: (1) a general brief conversation about what characterises EPS collaboration with key stakeholders led to (2) a conversation about how the EPS adviser collaborated with the various key stakeholders to gain knowledge about students' needs, which eventually led to (3) a conversation about the EPS adviser's experience of challenges related to collaboration for identifying students' needs. The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were conducted at the EPS advisers' offices during the fall of 2019. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from on-site audio recordings and were coded using NVivo12 (NVivo 2015).

Participants

The data were collected from in-depth interviews with eight Norwegian EPS advisers in one Norwegian county. One EPS adviser was recruited from eight of the ten EPS districts in the county. When participating in a Q methodological study the year before (Kolnes, Øverland, and Midthassel 2020), the EPS advisers gave their consent to participate in this follow-up study aimed at further exploring their experiences. The participants had very similar backgrounds: they were an average of 50 years old and had nine years of work experience and a bachelor's degree, with some additional education. All participants were women, which most likely reflects the actual gender distribution in the Norwegian EPS.

Data analyses

A theory-driven thematic analysis was used in this study to identify, analyse, and report patterns in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The theoretical framework used in the study is assumed to improve the analysis by making the researcher more sensitive to subtle features of the data (Tuckett 2005). Based on a general idea of what was to be investigated in the data, a holistic approach to coding was used (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2014). First, a closed coding procedure was conducted. The EPS advisers' experiences collaborating with each key stakeholder were coded based on the three-part structure of the interview guide. Then, an open coding procedure with reading and re-reading was carried out to capture additional information within and across the first codes. Further defining and refining themes and focusing on the 'overall story' of the analysis led to the naming of the themes presented in the results section of this study. In this theory-driven thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), the focus was to identify the underlying 'latent' theme expressed in the research question at an interpretive level (Boyatzis 1998). The development of themes in such an interpretive analysis involves interpretive work (Braun and Clarke 2006). This approach to thematic analysis comes from a constructionist paradigm, in which meaning and experience are understood as socially produced and reproduced (Burr 2006).

Ethics

The participants were informed in writing about their anonymity and were informed verbally about the purpose of the study and the study design. They were also informed of

the option to withdraw. The participants signed informed consent forms. The study was approved by The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

Results

The research question in this study was as follows: What challenges did EPS advisers experience when collaborating with key stakeholders, including the student, the student's parents, teachers and principals, to identify a student's needs? The analysis of the interviews with the EPS advisers revealed the following collaboration challenges: capturing the student's voice, gaining legitimacy from teachers, involving principals, and being parents' spokesperson. An additional challenge seemed to be the perceived ambiguity of the EPS's mandate. The findings will be further elaborated in the following sections.

Capturing the student's voice

Most of the EPS advisers described challenges related to interacting with the student as the main actor in the expert assessment process. The advisers were generally concerned with capturing the student's voice by involving the student in various meetings and, in some cases, conducting more clinical treatment-focused conversations. Being able to relate to students so that they would frankly communicate about their school experiences seemed to be a major challenge, as expressed by the following quotations: 'We have been wondering if the students are concerned with saying the right things' (3). 'It is the student's own opinion, so one cannot be quite sure if what he or she says is real or if he or she tells you what he or she thinks you would like to hear'. This EPS adviser further pointed out, 'It is really a challenge to get behind the facade' (5).

To structure the meetings with students, some of the EPS advisers referred to the use of a template for student interviewing. However, most student interviews were intuitive, experience-based and relatively unstructured. To identify students' learning challenges, several EPS advisers reported that they combined conversation, as a break activity, with psychometric testing in the form of either a more structured follow-up or in some cases direct guidance. To obtain information on how students functioned in class, nonparticipant observation or a more participatory form of observation was used. While both interventions provided the advisers with access to information on the interactions between students and their learning environments, the latter intervention also allowed the adviser to provide direct guidance to the teacher as well as the student. However, the ability to perform more participatory observation presupposed trustful relationships.

My entrance is to tell the student that 'I would like to see how you work. I am the one who will take notes to tell what kind of teaching is good for you. Therefore, I need to sit by your side and question how you get it and ask you what you like'. This is how I usually talk, and this allows me to sit and help, and yes, building relationship and trust is important (1).

Another EPS adviser indicated that her school knowledge was important for relating to the student: 'I use my knowledge of what I know is good teaching and good classroom management when I ask questions or think together with the student about what works

or not' (4). Some EPS advisers also described handling sensitive information about home and school conditions that were revealed in collaboration with the student as demanding. Although the EPS advisers described the process of capturing students' voices as time consuming, they also described contact with students as motivating. One of the EPS advisers expressed, 'It is very rewarding to be in touch with the student; it gives me a boost – it is meaningful' (3). These quotations provide examples of how the EPS advisers exerted themselves to develop a trustful relationship with students to try to determine their real situations; these efforts were also perceived as rewarding when they were successful.

Gaining legitimacy from teachers

Collaboration with teachers was shown to be somewhat challenging. The EPS advisers described a feeling of falling short when voicing opinions on classroom work. One adviser said, 'One who comes in as an EPS adviser who might not have been a teacher has perhaps more problems gaining legitimacy from experienced senior teachers' (2). This quote illustrates what many of the EPS advisers noted: school knowledge is crucial for establishing a trusting climate for collaboration between EPS advisers and teachers. One of the EPS advisers tried to take on the teacher perspective when commenting on the challenges related to providing guidance on classroom matters:

It can be challenging when the experts come into the classroom and tell the teachers what to do. That can be provoking. Therefore, it has to be done in a good manner by establishing a common ground, like, 'We are in this together; we agree on this' (3).

The interviewed EPS advisers reported that rather than expecting to collaborate on classroom work, teachers expected to receive a report that would give them access to extra resources for special educational help for the student in question. To the advisers, this expectation became a challenge since it conflicted with their mandate for a system focus and inclusion. Contrasting expectations made it challenging for the EPS advisers to communicate observed information to teachers about classroom conditions, such as a lack of facilitation for the student's needs, classroom management, the student-teacher relationship and prejudices among teachers. This system approach to identifying the student's needs had the potential to threaten the professional relationship between the EPS adviser and the teacher. As one of the EPS advisers explained, 'They (teachers) may be surprised if we suddenly take the student perspective; when I question the established understanding of the situation, it can be perceived as threatening by the teacher' (4). To avoid unpleasant situations and a difficult climate for collaboration, the EPS advisers could modify their reports: '... therefore, I did not report it if I thought it was very bad; I just did not write it' (8). Time constraints were also reported to be a challenge. The overall trend was that teachers' time for collaboration with the EPS competed with their time for internal collaboration with colleagues and with students and their parents after school hours.

Involving principals

Some of the interviewed EPS advisers found that principals did not involve themselves in the assessment process and that their only interest was in receiving a report that could

legitimise the school's need for additional resources. This tendency among principals annoyed the EPS advisers, as one of the advisers explained:

If the principal thinks that we (EPS advisers) only should work with the individual student and that this will culminate in an expert assessment report, then it is difficult to align with the principal. They (principals) did not seem happy when I interfered with their school matters (4).

What the EPS advisers described as a lack of involvement from the principal made their own roles in taking the lead in the expert assessment process difficult. This difficulty was described in different ways: 'Unless there are clear instructions that they (principals) should join, they will not participate, so I say that if the principal does not attend, then I will not attend either' (6). The same EPS adviser called for '... a school leader who sees connections, who observes students systematically in the school environment, who actively participates in pedagogical discussions and who contributes to a data-driven school culture' (6). However, another EPS adviser suggested that the service's mandate to make the principal prioritise collaboration should be underscored: 'I think I can use my mandate more clearly in my collaboration with the principal' (4). These two EPS advisers described situations in which principals did not understand or did not agree that they should be involved in the process.

Being parents' spokesperson

Collaboration with parents, as well as with students, was characterised as intuitive, experience-based and highly unstructured. The EPS adviser's role as the parents' spokesperson in school was highlighted by several EPS advisers as a main challenge: 'It's easy to get caught up in parents' frustration. After all, we try to deal with parents' frustration without necessarily supporting the frustration itself' (3). The EPS advisers described themselves as trying to listen and be open, transparent and genuine when they encountered vulnerable and often insecure parents. Nevertheless, some of the advisers experienced challenges due to a unilateral focus on the expert assessment report in these relationships.

Imagine how vulnerable you would be as a parent if you had a child with some kind of difficulty and if you then met an EPS adviser who focused on writing a piece of paper and that's it. I would not have so much confidence in such a person. After all, such an EPS adviser risks becoming a factor that prevents you from moving forward (2).

Several EPS advisers reported managing parents' frustrations and anger towards the school system and becoming involved in already conflicting school-home collaboration as further challenges. When parents are in opposition to the school, collaboration suffers. One EPS adviser explained this phenomenon as follows: 'It becomes the parents against the school, and if we end up in such an intermediate role, it can be challenging to focus on the student's needs' (3). In seeing the distress of the parents, some of the EPS advisers wished they had time to help the families.

Many times, I have wished I had more time to work with the family, a little more therapeutically, because then I would have the opportunity to go into what it's really about, but I lack the skills, tools and time (4).

Perceived ambiguity of the mandate

The analyses revealed that the EPS's mandate was perceived as ambiguous. While some EPS advisers limited themselves to detecting students' learning difficulties, others struggled to include the learning environment and staff members' need to develop their competence to meet the student's needs. The analysis further showed that the challenge of combining students' needs with the need to develop the school organisation became even more difficult if the school culture was characterised by a limited focus on students' learning difficulties. One of the EPS advisers described this challenge as follows:

I see the mandate as two-fold, focusing on either organizational development or expert assessment work. Combining the tasks is challenging. I certainly think they are linked, but the reality is that they often become two separate processes (3).

The results show that the perceived ambiguity of the expert assessment role made the EPS advisers vulnerable to a strong individual-oriented school culture, such that the role of EPS is reduced to identifying students' learning difficulties and advising the school on special educational measures for the student. In fact, the results revealed uncertainty about the role of EPS advisers. One of the advisers expressed this uncertainty in the following way:

The mandate that we now have in the EPS, I think it is contradictory. On the one hand, it is about circular ecological thinking, and on the other hand, it is more about a medical way of solving problems. It is demanding to unite the two of them. Some want more of this, and some want more of that. The expert assessment process feels more like a linear process. It is unclear what kind of expertise we are supposed to have (8).

Discussion

To gain insight into challenges related to EPS collaboration with key stakeholders, the results are discussed in light of the theoretical rationale for capturing students' needs through collaboration that was presented in the introduction.

Understanding of the expert assessment role

The results suggest that there are conflicting expectations of EPS expert assessment work. While the EPS advisers seemed to focus on adaptations in the student's learning environment, they perceived school staff to ignore the context and to instead demand expert assistance that could legitimise extra funds and segregation measures for the student. However, the vague and ambiguous understanding of the expert assessment process among the EPS advisers seemed to make them vulnerable to the influence of a strongly individually oriented school culture. In fact, some advisers lowered their expectations of collaboration with school staff. The lack of a focus on collaboration for making changes in the learning environment for the student conflicts with the parents' expectations of the EPS. Thus, conflicting expectations seem to create mistrust between schools and the EPS, which in turn creates mistrust between the EPS and parents.

In user-helper relationships, mistrust develops when the helper does not understand the user's situation. A lack of understanding leads to violation, which harms the

relationship (Honneth 2008). From a recognition perspective (Honneth 2008), it is understandable that school staff try to simplify a complex situation by explaining the student as the problem. However, such simplification is problematic because it violates the parents' and the student's need for help from the EPS in providing reasons for adaptations in the learning environment. Understanding the complex work situation of school staff may certainly be a first step in establishing a partnership built on trust between the EPS, teachers and principals. In addition, the results show that schools' understanding of the expert assessment role of the EPS must change to be in accordance with a system approach. Such a change calls for initiatives from EPS advisers to inform schools about the system approach needed. However, the observed uncertainty among the EPS staff themselves suggests that implementing such initiatives could be difficult. In fact, the results indicate that the system approach in expert assessment work lacks sufficient implementation in the EPS.

The dual role of school staff

The results further suggest that when EPS advisers do not give in to pressure from the school but instead attempt to follow a system approach to expert assessment, tension arises between the EPS adviser and school staff. According to the recognition perspective, this tension can be understood as an expression of the demanding dual role imposed on the school staff as a result of this system approach (Honneth 2008). On the one hand, school staff are involved as users in an asymmetrical helper-user relationship (Honneth 2008). On the other hand, school staff are involved in a symmetrical helper-helper relationship as equal professional partners (Dominelli 2008; Lupton and Nixon 1999; Seim and Slettebø 2007). The dual role of school staff seems to challenge the EPS adviser to channel school staff members' own personal needs into adequate staffing measures to achieve a joint focus on interprofessional collaboration. Supported by the literature, such interprofessional collaboration should allow the development of joint knowledge (Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005) about the student's needs to promote innovative reflection (Fasting 2017) on unarticulated understandings and tacit knowledge in the school culture (Hislop, Bosua, and Helms 2018). In fact, conflicting expectations and the dual role of school staff seem to lead to a lack of focus on interprofessional collaboration.

EPS' inability to mobilise knowledge

These results indicate a lack of focus on interprofessional collaboration and show that it can be difficult for EPS advisers to mobilise school staff's knowledge of the student's needs. In addition, the results show that EPS advisers seem to lack competence in communicating with students about their situations, which the literature has emphasised as important (Gamst and Langballe 2004; Vis 2004; Øvreeide 2009). Overall, these results suggest that the EPS is unable to mobilise the student as a resource as well as resources in the environment to gain knowledge about the student's needs. Drawing on the literature, we assert that a lack of knowledge about the student's needs can be problematic for three reasons. First, lacking such knowledge violates the student's right to be listened to in the expert assessment process and can be an obstacle to a respectful helper-user relationship and user accountability (Honneth 2008). Second, a lack of knowledge about the student's needs weakens the student's opportunities for involvement and real participation in the decision-making process (Arnstein 1969;

Ellingsen 2014; Seim and Slettebø 2007; Sinclair 1998); participation is a prerequisite for the student's sense of coherence, which contributes to coping and prevents stress based on the student's ability to understand the situation and feel confidence in his ability to find a solution that seems meaningful (Antonovsky 1993; Antonovsky and Lev 2000). Third, in a user-driven innovation approach to collaboration, knowledge of the student's needs is defined as actual innovation potential (Darsø 2013; Humerfelt 2012; Vis et al. 2011). Therefore, a lack of knowledge about the student's needs means that EPS's expert assessment work will most likely have little impact on the development of the school.

A lack of collaborative competence?

Based on this discussion, one may ask whether an emphasis on a system approach to expert assessment work in an individual-oriented school culture requires a collaborative competence that EPS advisers do not possess. The findings of this study indicate that EPS's inability to mobilise key stakeholders' knowledge of the student's needs might be related to unclear leadership of the joint knowledge development process implicit in a system approach to expert assessment work (Kolnes, Øverland, and Midthassel 2020). The findings further indicate that this lack of collaborative competence may contribute to conflicting expectations of EPS's mandate and role confusion as well as to a general lack of trust in the relationship between EPS and key stakeholders.

Implications

Based on this understanding of collaboration challenges, a two-part strategy for a collaborative approach to expert assessment work is suggested. The first part relates to generating a joint understanding and clarifying expectations of EPS's expert assessment work by developing a concrete way of working with school staff based on the core idea of a system approach to expert assessment work (Kolnes, Øverland, and Midthassel 2020). This part of the strategy is in line with research showing that changes to ways of working requires a combination of joint understanding of what the changes entail and good tools for implementing the changes (Coburn 2001; Fullan 2007; Meyers, Durlak, and Wandersman 2012; Spillane, Reiser, and Gomez 2006). Otherwise, the implementation of changes will rely on local understandings, with different practices as a result (Honig 2006). The second part of the strategy relates to EPS advisers recognising that school staff plays two roles by separating the school staff's knowledge of their own needs from the school staff's knowledge of students' needs. While school staff members' knowledge of their own needs is channelled into adequate staff measures in the school organisation, their knowledge of students' needs is channelled into the EPS's expert assessment. According to the recognition perspective (Honneth 2008), trust in the relationship between the EPS and school staff is enhanced when school staff feels that their demanding work as both users and professional collaboration partners is recognised and taken into account. At the same time, adequate channelling of knowledge could lead to a joint focus on students' needs as a starting point for school development. However, more research is needed to explore effective measures.

A successful strategy will enable EPS advisers to assume the role of researcher in a 'research-practice partnership', working with school staff to investigate problems and find solutions that improve schools (Coburn and Penuel 2016, 48). By integrating the insider and outsider

perspectives in a joint analysis, new knowledge with greater validity than knowledge produced through one-sided approaches can be created (Svensson et al. 2007). However, further research is needed to explore how a collaborative approach to students' needs based on such a joint learning process can be achieved.

Limitations and strengths

This study included a limited selection of participants from one county who were interviewed about their experiences. The findings from this nonrepresentative sample of interviewees cannot be generalised. However, the informants were valuable representatives of their professional work groups. A small but highly informed strategic sample, as used in this study, can still provide rich information on a topic (Percy, Kostere, and Kostere 2015, 79). The lack of perspectives from students, parents and school staff in this study calls for caution with regard to the proposed two-part strategy for building trust. Further studies focusing on these perspectives will be important for increasing our understanding of this topic. The interview subjects, who were EPS advisers, were experts in their respective disciplines. When interviewing experts, it is essential to possess knowledge of the respective subject area, master the subject terminology and know the social situations and backgrounds of the interview objects. Such knowledge may contribute to respect and symmetry between interviewers and informants in the interview situation (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). The interviewer had a similar background of experience, which allowed for a joint construction of meaning by negotiating common understandings. At the same time, we were aware of how this role of the researcher could also risk reducing the validity of the data if the interviewer's pre-understanding greatly affected the interview subjects' opinions. Since qualitative interviews require interpretation by the researcher, we were cautious in the analysis process, aiming to adhere to good research practice. To increase the validity, the findings were presented to another group of EPS advisers, who gave their approval. Nevertheless, the findings should be further explored through a survey to determine whether the challenges are representative across counties.

Disclosure statement

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