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Children with language difficulties: identification and adapted language provision in Early Childhood Education and Care, and subsequent assessment by the Educational Psychological Service

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ABSTRACT

We investigated how children with language difficulties are identified, and which adapted provision is given in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) before referrals are made to The Educational Psychological Service (EPS), and the EPS assessment of such difficulties. A qualitative content analysis of 20 documents pertaining to four children with language difficulties were conducted, based on national regulations, national guidelines and theories on language development and language difficulties. The ECEC used observations of social settings to identify language difficulties, which mainly reported pronunciation difficulties. The EPS identified a broader spectrum of language difficulties, which was not always in accordance with ECECs observations. The adapted provision given in ECEC before the referral and in the gap between the referral and the decision on special needs assistance was lacking. This implies a need to target the gap between when a referral is made and when special needs assistance is received.


KEYWORDS

Early Childhood Education; identifying language difficulties; adapted language provision; special needs assistance; language assessment

Introduction

Language difficulties are one of the most common developmental challenges seen in children attending ECEC (NOU 18 2009). Weak language has a negative outcome for children's social functioning and can cause children to not be included in play with their peers (Stangeland 2017). This can lead to a negative social spiral in which they are ignored, rebuffed and/or excluded from peer interactions (Rice 1993). It is thus important to address these difficulties when they appear. In addition, weak oral skills at an early age can have consequences for education and working life (Johnson, Beitchman, and Brownlie 2010).

There is a large potential in ECEC to prevent and identify difficulties, and to initiate interventions for children with special needs, but this varies in terms of whether adults

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have the skills and ability to recognise a child's needs and implement appropriate interventions; however, we lack knowledge about the help and interventions these children receive (Nordahl et al. 2018). This potential may be among the reasons why the concept of early intervention has influenced ECEC policy and practice in the last 30 years (Pianta et al. 2009; Kamerman 2000).

Even though early intervention has had a major impact on education policy in the Norwegian education system in the recent decades, no political guidelines have been issued on what the concept of early intervention in the Norwegian ECEC should encompass (Vik and Hausstätter 2014). We, therefore, have no specific theoretical knowledge base that can help ECEC to operationalise early intervention (Lyngseth and Mørland 2017). This can make implementation of early intervention related to language development extra challenging for ECEC. Additionally, ECEC are responsible for identifying and following up with these affected children (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017).

The aim of the study is to describe practice regarding the identification and follow up of four first language children with language difficulties attending ECECs and contribute to the knowledge base regarding the provision given to these children.

Identifying language difficulties

Many studies have tried to determine why some children do not develop language as expected (Bishop et al. 2017). The dividing line between typical development and difficulties is not clear, and children at risk for developing language difficulties are a heterogeneous group, in which several biological and environmental factors are involved (Bishop et al. 2017). Children with language difficulties exhibit challenges in one or several of these areas: grammar, syntax and semantics, language awareness and social communication (Justice et al. 2015). To gain insight into children's language skills, each element must be analysed (Frans et al. 2017; Bishop 2014). There are also several associated risk factors related to language difficulties such as medical difficulties and motor skills deficits (Law et al. 2017).

A common characteristic of children with language difficulties is that they are late talkers with slow language development (Bishop 2014). Additionally, 20% of children can be classified as late talkers, but few of them develop enduring language difficulties (Rescorla 2011). One should also consider when the language is stable enough to be an indicator of enduring language difficulties. Research thus far suggests that this is often between the ages of three and four (Duff et al. 2015).

Evidence-based strategies associated with accelerated language development include asking open-ended questions, repeating, and extending children's utterances, and modelling advanced vocabulary. Findings imply that few teachers provide literacy instruction that is explicit, systematic, and purposeful (Justice et al. 2015). Norwegian preschool teachers stress conversations as the most important context for children's language learning, including activities such as meals, play, hall conversations, and diapering, but they do not state how they can use these situations to expand children's vocabulary by asking open-ended questions, prolonging a conversational theme, or supporting children in uttering a thought, feeling, idea or perspective (Sheridan and Gjems 2017). In addition, ECEC

teachers in OECD countries have self-reported that ‘working with children with special needs’ is their main professional development need (OECD 2019).

Norwegian ECEC and the responsibility of identifying and following up with children with language difficulties

In 2009, ECEC became a legal right for all children starting from the age of 1 in Norway. From 2002 to 2010, the number of children enrolled in ECEC nearly doubled, with 93% attendance (1–5 years) (SSB, 2021). The Norwegian ECEC is part of the Norwegian education system, but it is not compulsory (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2020). ECEC is regulated by the Kindergarten Act and the Framework Plan (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017), both of which emphasise ECEC’s responsibility to identify and follow up with children with difficulties.

ECEC has a special responsibility to prevent difficulties and to discover children with special needs. For these children, it may be relevant to provide a specially adapted provision. The adaptation can apply to both social, pedagogical and/or physical conditions in ECEC. (Ministry of Education and Research 2006b, 18)

It’s common to test children’s language development to identify children at risk of developing language difficulties even though the predictive value may be uncertain (Frans et al. 2017). Many Norwegian ECEC institutions use the assessment tool TRAS (Early Registration of Language) (Espenakk et al. 2011) for the early identification of children with language difficulties (Lyngseth 2008). Preschool teachers see TRAS as a tool that gives them the possibility to identify children with delayed language development, and to use the results as a starting point for adapted provision (Lyngseth 2008). If a child’s needs cannot be met by general ECEC pedagogical practices, the relevant ECEC institution shall inform the parents of their right to request an expert evaluation to establish whether the child has special educational needs (Ministry of Education and Research 2006b; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017).

The chain of action in special education in Norway

The right to special educational assistance for children under compulsory school age was enshrined in the Education Act until 2016, now it is regulated in the Kindergarten Act.

Related to these acts, national guidelines describe the different chronological steps in the proceedings, from a concern arising regarding a child’s development to the receipt of special needs assistance (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2009), this trajectory is called the chain of action in special education (Figure 1).

The Norwegian Education Act stipulates that every municipality shall provide an educational psychological service (EPS). The EPS have a dual mandate which means that they work both with individuals and the pertinent organisation in educational



Figure 1. Chain of action in special education.

institutions. EPS have no national guidelines, and the work they do may differ between municipalities (Moen et al. 2018).

The focus of the study

According to the white paper ‘Early intervention and inclusive education in kindergartens, schools and out-of-school-hours care’ (Ministry of Education and Research 2019) many children get help too late and are met with low expectations. The paper also highlights that many children are not heard or understood and develop and learn less than they could have done with better adapted provision (Ministry of Education and Research 2019). To meet these challenges, it is essential that children who struggle with different aspects of their development are identified and followed up in a responsible manner.

In this study, we describe how children with language difficulties were identified and followed up with in the Norwegian education system within the first phases in the chain of action in special education, specifically answering the following research questions:

- How did the preschool teachers identify and describe the children’s language difficulties in ECEC prior to referral to the EPS?
- How did the preschool teachers adapt their provision for children with language difficulties in ECEC prior to referral to the EPS?
- How did the EPS assess these language difficulties and children’s language environment in ECEC, and what did this assessment add to the ECEC identification of difficulties?

Design and method

Participants

Our study is part of the longitudinal Stavanger Project ‘The learning child’, which followed over 1000 children from when they were two years old until they turned ten. For a more comprehensive description of the project see (Reikerås, Løge, and Knivsberg 2012).

All parents with children of the right age attending participating ECECs were invited to let their child participate. This resulted in a diverse group of children including children in need of support from the EPS. When a child was referred to the EPS, the consultant they meet in EPS asked if they wanted to give the researchers in the Stavanger Project access to the tests from the EPS. The parents that agreed on this, gave an additional consent to the one they already had given when their child was included in the Stavanger Project. Eighty children with different causes of difficulties were registered.

From these children, we selected 23, all with language difficulties as part of their referral reason, as possible participants. We mailed a letter of consent to their parents. Of these 23, the parents of 18 children agreed to let them participate. The inclusion criteria were that the children should have language difficulties as part of their reason for referral to the EPS, and that their native language was Norwegian. We excluded children who had severe additional difficulties due to the impact this could have on language development. After studying the 18 records at the EPS, we selected four children. All the participants

were boys, and their age at the time of referral varied between 2 years, 8 months and 4 years, 3 months. One of the children was an only child, one was the oldest child and two were the youngest child. SES data was not available. All the children attended different ECEC. We obtained ethical approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and parental consent for each child in the study.

Assessment instruments used by the ECECs and EPS

All children in the Stavanger Project were observed by trained ECEC staff using the non-standardised assessment tool TRAS (Espenakk et al. 2011). TRAS is a known assessment tool used in many Norwegian ECEC and is used to assess children's language and interaction skills at the age of two to five years (Lyngseth 2008). TRAS assesses different aspects of language: pronunciation, language awareness, comprehension, word production, sentence production, communication, interaction, and attention. Validity is reported by the designers of the tool in Espenakk et al. (2011), and in an empirical study (Helland, Jones, and Helland 2017).

The Reynell developmental language scales (Hagtvet, Lillestølen, and Reynell 1985) and the Norwegian Phoneme Test (Tingleff 1996) are two language tests used by the EPS. The Reynell developmental language scales measure language comprehension and language production for children from 1 year, 6 months to 6 years old. The scale is valid for all children except for children over four years old with the results of 1 and 2 standard deviations above average (Hagtvet, Lillestølen, and Reynell 1985).

The Norwegian Phoneme Test is non-standardised and used for systematically assessing children's language sounds (Tingleff 1996).

Procedure in collecting data

We collected the data in autumn 2019 and spring 2020 at the EPS, the Stavanger City Archive and ECEC. The documents were scanned and anonymised. An employee at the EPS checked a random selection of the documents to ensure that they were correctly anonymised before they were saved locally on the computer.

The documents included: the referral from the relevant ECEC to EPS, the EPS case logs, expert evaluations, decisions, Individual Development Plans, Special Needs Reports, written summaries of minutes from meetings and test results.

The documents were written between 2009 and 2013. During this time national regulations and guidelines changed several times. In the analysis of the documents, we used the regulations and guidelines that were issued at the time the documents were written.

Methodology

To answer the study's research question a hermeneutic approach was chosen (Gilje and Grimen 1993). A direct content analysis was conducted. Direct content analysis is considered suitable when theories or previous research already exist but are deficient or needs further investigation (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Documents used as data in document analysis are mainly developed without the researcher's influence. They exist in advance of, not because of, research (Bowen 2009). The documents in this study are

relevant and authentic and are thus viewed as a good source to answer the research questions; they will serve as good examples regarding practice of identification and adapted provision in Norwegian ECEC.

Analytical procedure

The analytical procedure contained three phases: skimming, deep reading and interpretation (Bowen 2009). We viewed the texts in the different documents in relation to each other, and in relation to each of the children's documents, in line with what is described as a hermeneutical approach (Gilje and Grimen 1993). The results from the analysis was finally discussed and problematised from sociocultural and cognitive theory perspectives as well as current research on the topic.

We categorised the documents related to different phases in the chain of action in special education. Thereafter, we classified the content in the documents based on the research questions, educational legislation, and official guidelines. In addition, we used theories related to language development, language difficulties, and empirical data regarding language to develop more fine-grained subcategories to clarify the content of the main categories. This way a more fine-tuned in-depth detail of each child's language was evident. Some categories also emerged while reading the documents. We wrote down all pertinent details down in a codebook. The categories were then reviewed and rated by co-authors. Next, we coded the documents in NVIVO based on the categories. The results from these were then written down in separate forms. After two months, we recorded many of the documents, to see if the outcome was the same. This was done in accordance with Schreier (2014) to secure the validity of the study (Schreier 2014). Consequently, we merged and renamed some categories (Table 1).

Findings and discussions

In this section, we will present and discuss the findings to answer the three research questions successively.

Identifying the children's language difficulties

Regarding the two children who were referred below the age of three, the parents expressed a concern regarding their children's language development. For the children over the age of three both the parents and ECEC staff expressed their concerns. The language difficulties explicitly identified by ECEC in the documents were pronunciation difficulties. Comprehension difficulties could be seen implicitly in some descriptions of the children's language:

Poor endurance when required to stay focused, even for short periods, often has an open mouth. This applies to transition situations, dressing, controlled activities, and gatherings. Ignores messages he does not want to hear? (Child 2)

The main part of the referral documents described the children's language difficulties as they appeared in the ordinary provision and social settings, focusing on the social consequences:

Table 1. Analytical process.

Phase in the chain of action in special education	Documents used in the analysis	Research question	Main categories used in the analysis	Examples
Phase 1: identifying	The referral documents Minutes from meetings EPS logg	How did the preschool teachers identify and describe the four children's language difficulties in ECEC prior to referral to the EPS?	Language difficulties Language tests Difficulties other developmental areas Reason for referral	<i>Has a large vocabulary and language comprehension but speaks unclearly</i> <i>The assessment material TRAS</i> <i>He also struggles to stay focused</i> <i>The ECEC wants an expert evaluation from the EPS based on the parents' concerns</i>
Phase 2: Referral	The referral documents Minutes from meetings EPS logg	How did the preschool teachers adapt their provision for children with language difficulties in ECEC prior to referral to the EPS?	Language difficulties Other developmental difficulties Language interventions	<i>Have difficulty being understood by the other children due to their pronunciation and their distinct tone of voice. This gives him an extra challenge in relation to his social interaction.</i> <i>We experience that the child is not age-appropriate in relation to the sensorimotor development.</i> <i>Tries to walk on the stairs with the child</i>
Phase 3: Expert evaluation report	Expert evaluation Minutes from meetings EPS logg	How did the EPS assess these language difficulties and children's language environment in ECEC, and what did this assessment add to the ECEC identification of difficulties?	The child's functional level Learning environment The child's language Background for the assessment	<i>The child has delayed language comprehension which corresponds to the average for a child of approximately 2 years old.</i> <i>... it is important that they as staff see and encourage him so that the child experiences mastery in everyday life.</i> <i>Has good verbal development</i> <i>The assessment is based on:</i> <i>Conversation with the parents</i> <i>Conversation with the ECEC staff</i> <i>Observation</i> <i>Testing</i>

Due to his deficient language, he often falls short in play situations. He withdraws from the group when he is not understood and becomes an observer. (Child 1)

All the ECEC used the assessment tool TRAS (Espenakk et al. 2011). The EPS required this prior to referral. However, the description of the TRAS results was short, and in some cases missing: 'In relation to TRAS and ... , he is mostly within what is age-appropriate but there are some gaps' (Child 2).

The documents mention a concern for the child's language development prior to the TRAS assessments, which might suggest that none of the ECEC used assessment tools as a starting point for identification. Our analysis revealed that the description of the TRAS

results were deficient in some cases. In one example the ECEC stated that according to TRAS, the child in question had problems with pronunciation, word production and linguistic awareness. Our analysis of the same TRAS form shows that the child also exhibited difficulties with sentence production, language comprehension, communication, and interaction.

Additionally, observations of the children's language were often described in detail, giving insight into the children's language: 'Excludes sounds e.g.: Paprika > papika, Svømme > vømme, Trenge > tenge' (Child 2).

The emphasis in the documents on the children's difficulties during play led us to interpret that the referrals were completed based on the consequences the language difficulties had on social relations. This is in line with previous studies, which have revealed the serious consequences of weak language on a child's ability to participate in play and interactions (Rice 1993; Stangeland 2017). This impression was reinforced by a lack of description in the result section of TRAS results. In a recent study by Sheridan and Gjems (2017), Norwegian ECEC teachers emphasised the social aspect of language as being very important for children: playing, forming friendships, and communicating in numerous situations. ECEC teachers in other countries also emphasise this view: children's social skills are viewed as the most important skill to develop (OECD 2019). ECEC teachers did not combine this skill with a long-term perspective and lifelong learning (Sheridan and Gjems 2017). This is consistent with our findings: Concerns about what these language difficulties may lead to in the children's future/initial schooling are not addressed in any of the documents, regardless of the age at which the child was referred to the EPS. We observed a strong here-and-now perspective in the documents.

The main use of observation in the referral documents may also explain why the only language difficulties explicitly mentioned by the ECEC staff were difficulties with language production, as this is easy to observe. While the quality of language and literacy instructions often are considered low (Justice et al. 2008), only 12% of Norwegian ECEC teachers claim the same in terms of children's care, play and social competence (Gotvassli et al. 2012). Therefore, play and social competence have been highlighted in the identification of the children's language difficulties. The disadvantage of this is that difficulties in other language areas may be overlooked.

All ECEC teachers who referred the children to the EPS were trained in using TRAS. Accordingly, we question why the TRAS results were not broadly described and emphasised in the referral documents. One explanation may be that regardless of training, assessment of children's language may be viewed as something a special education teacher should do. Further, assessing children is in some Norwegian ECEC environments is controversial, with the view that by assessing children we perceive them as objects with defects that need to be fixed (Lyngseth 2008). We are unaware of the perspective of the ECEC teachers in this study. Additionally, in two of the cases, the parents wanted the children to be referred to the EPS. The 'wait -and -see' perspective on children's development that we noted is often in line with a negative stance toward language assessment.

By combining the results of assessment tools with observations, one could obtain a better understanding of a child's difficulties, with greater insight into which language areas the child is struggling with. However, this is not enough to state that the child's difficulties are enduring. When difficulties with motor skills and social functioning

also are described, as they were in some of these cases, this critical information can help to identify enduring language difficulties (Law et al. 2012).

One of the main reasons for assessing children's language skills is to adapt the mainstream provision for children with language difficulties. If assessing is lacking, it will be difficult to implement effective adaptations. ECEC staff are bound by the instructions in the Framework Plan to adjust general pedagogical practices to suit children's needs and circumstances (Ministry of Education and Research 2006b; The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017). This would be difficult to realise when one does not know which language areas to focus on. To be able to follow up with the children in a responsible way, one also needs knowledge of what language skills the child has mastered. This could be difficult to realise based on observations alone.

ECEC follow up prior to referral to the EPS

The analysis of the referral documents revealed that few ECEC adapted their language activities before making the referral. For example: 'Ask as many questions as possible without a yes-no answer' (Child 4). Some adaptations were related to other difficulties 'Through guidance from the ... team, we in the unit have formed a group of five, where the focus is on motor development. The child has made some progress' (Child 2). Adjustments of the organisation were mentioned: 'We clearly see that the child functions best when we divide the group into smaller units' (Child 1). One child had none adaptations prior to the referral, and the space in the referral form was marked with a line: '-' (Child 3).

The analysis showed that adapted language activities before the referral related to the children's language difficulties, seemed to be lacking in all four ECEC. What was done was related to other difficulties, or the organisation of the children's respective groups.

The overall lack of adapted provision may be explained using different reasons. It may have to do with competence and/or the split responsibilities between the ECEC and the EPS. The young age of some of the children may also play a role. Another explanation may be that the ECEC teachers regard referrals to the EPS as a first step in providing early intervention.

When considering the few adaptations that were put in place, some ECEC had good experiences with organising small playgroups around children with disabilities to guide them into the world of play. In such a group, an ECEC teacher has better opportunities to participate and observe individual children's play behaviour and is thereby able to adapt and guide the children based on the group and individual needs (Mørland 2008). In one study, 8% of ECEC owners said they use this intervention when organising special needs assistance (Wendelborg et al. 2015). This small number may be related to recent research, which has found that group size is not related to language development (Zachrisson et al. 2013). In contrast, boy's benefit from larger group size. One can argue that most of the research on group size is not done regarding children with special needs and findings can thus not automatically be generalised to these children. The example above clearly indicates the effect of reduced group size. Additionally, this was the only adaptation done prior to the referral, it is doubtful that it was enough to ensure acceptable language development (Hulme et al. 2020; Hagen, Melby-Lervåg, and Lervåg 2017).

The ‘wait- and- see’ attitude is common in Norwegian ECEC (Nordahl et al. 2018); it refers to a belief that children will grow out of their difficulties. It can be challenging to distinguish between children who are late talkers and children with language difficulties at an early age (Bishop 2006; Rescorla 2011). In the case of one of the youngest children, the ECEC staff did not share the parents’ concern about the child’s language development. This may be due to an experience of most late talkers eventually developing adequate language (Rescorla 2011), and the belief that a delay is part of normal maturational variation. This view may also be why no adapted language activities were provided prior to the referral.

It takes specific knowledge to adapt appropriate language activities, and preschool teachers’ practice is guided by their knowledge (Schachter 2017). Focusing on open-ended questions as one ECEC did, revealed competence in the importance of cognitively challenging dialogue (Wilcox-Herzog and Kontos 1998). Our analysis did not indicate whether this was a practice carried out by all staff, or a practice of the ECEC teacher who filled out the referral form. Even so, since this was the only example of language activities, we regard it a legitimate question to ask if the staff ‘have the professional knowledge to determine which follow-up measures to initiate’ as expressed in national guidelines (Ministry of Education and Research 2006a). We also bear in mind previous research on ECEC teachers’ in-depth knowledge concerning children’s language learning (Justice et al. 2008; Sheridan and Gjems 2017), and the self-reported need for knowledge on children with special needs (OECD 2019).

Shared responsibilities between different institutions, may easily lead to the assumption that when a child is referred to the EPS, the responsibilities for the child’s development are transferred to the specialists. Adding to the lack of national guidelines attached to the concept of early intervention in Norwegian ECEC (Vik 2014), the referral per se may be seen as a first step in early intervention: ‘... as action at an early stage of a child’s life ...’ (Ministry of Education and Research 2006a).

The EPS assessment of language difficulties

When evaluating the children’s difficulties, the EPS used a variety of data: conversations with parents, conversations with ECEC teachers, observations of the children in ECEC and language tests.

Summaries of dialogue with parents were written down in the expert evaluation and the EPS log shows that many of these cases share commonalities. All the documents describe children who struggle with being understood. They mention different reasons for this ‘struggle with finding words and language comprehension’ (Child 1), and ‘experience that the child’s largest challenge is about expressing himself’ (Child 3). Further, they all state additional difficulties with motor development, concentration, and social skills. Some also explicitly say that the child does not appreciate literacy activities, such as book reading.

The EPS dialogue with the ECEC teachers highlighted that all but one of these children spent much time alone in the ECEC due to difficulties with language. This is in accordance with what was expressed in the referral documents: ‘The child walks around alone a lot’ (Child 1), and

The child talks relatively little with other children. Other children have rejected him a lot and he is invited to play to a small extent. (Child 4)

The observations by the EPS confirm what was said by the parents and ECEC teachers: difficulties with social interaction that the children experience was due to their language difficulties.

In studying the documents, we found that approximately six months had passed from the time the referral was sent to the first conversation between the EPS and the ECEC teachers. When the ECEC teachers described which adapted provision they had given since the referral, they all tried to facilitate small groups. One ECEC worked on motor skills in small groups. One institution mentioned language interventions: 'No interventions in relation to language are implemented' (Child 3).

The EPS concluded that all the children had difficulties in different language areas; however, the results were not always in accordance with the relevant ECEC concern. Not all the children had difficulties with pronunciation, as identified by the ECEC, but rather difficulties with comprehension. Others had difficulties with both pronunciations and comprehension. In one case, a speech therapist used the Norwegian Phoneme Test to due to concerns by the ECEC about language production. The speech therapist deduced that there was no reason to be concerned about language production, and thus referred the child internally for further testing and to obtain an expert evaluation. The EPS did not conduct any other language test. Our TRAS analysis shows that the child was delayed in all areas. None of the ECEC concerns regarding concentration and ADHD were confirmed by tests addressing these matters.

These findings underscore how complex it is to identify language difficulties if one relies on observations alone. We found that daily observations of play and social interactions in ECEC are useful to raise concerns about children's language development. Assessment tools such as TRAS can add helpful information, but they rely on ECEC teacher's adequate knowledge of children's language development (Lyngeth 2008), on the other hand, this is not enough to identify the depth and scope of children's language difficulties.

Given the average of six months from the time the referral was made to when help was received from the EPS, we are concerned that the possibilities that lay in early identification were not used sufficiently. Children's language will often display some degree of development regardless of interventions; therefore, we cannot determine to what extent the gap between referral and special needs assistance has impacted the children's language. However, analyses of the EPS observations in the documents reflect the negative social spiral and serious consequences language difficulties can have, as described by Rice (1993) and Stangeland (2017).

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

We were unable to evaluate the quality of the special need's assistance given in these cases, but the findings can be used as an example of how early identification and follow up may appear in Norwegian ECEC and in the EPS.

The findings underscore that there is still a need for focus on how to identify language difficulties in ECECs. Observations of social settings are an important first step in

identification but are not enough to identify the language difficulties with accuracy. This information is needed to implement accurate language and social adaptations for children. In addition, our findings indicate that the identification of language difficulties is not enough to ensure the large potential of ECEC has in the follow-up of these children. This may be due to ECEC teacher's competence, in both language difficulties and in the use of assessment outcomes. The need for increased competence regarding children with special needs must be addressed by policy makers.

Another important issue is the grey zone between adapted provision and special needs assistance, with split responsibilities between the ECEC and the EPS. When a child is in this grey zone for a long time, the negative consequences of language difficulties for social interactions and belonging are serious. We thus need to address both ECEC teacher's competence regarding children who require special needs assistance in language development and the ECEC's overall responsibility for all children in the different phases of the special education chain of action.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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