

(Re)connecting communities – (towards a systemic approach on EPS – kindergarten/school interactions), experiences from a Norwegian innovation project.

Abstract (600 words) [567 words]

The paper report from an ongoing three-year collaborative innovation project (SUKIP, 2019) situated in two Norwegian municipalities. The purpose of the project is to introduce and investigate new strategies for collaboration between kindergarten/schools and Educational Psychological Service (EPS) with regard to the development of competence for inclusive practices.

Inclusive education is a fundamental principle in Norwegian educational policies (MoER, 2019). Research as well as Norwegian steering documents has documented a gap between national policies and practice as it appears in the EPS's interaction with kindergartens and schools. (Allan, 2008; Haug 2011; Nordahl, 2018; Moen et al 2018; Tveitnes 2018,).

A national "expert" committee (Nordahl 2018) has analysed the present situation for children in need of special educational support in kindergartens and schools. Their report states that Norway need to change the organizational system dramatically in order to strengthen the competence closer to the children (Nordahl, 2018). Briefly, the critique is about the EPS's dominance of individual expert assessments at the sacrifice of participation in competence and organisational development.

In a white paper published by the end of 2019, The Ministry of Education summarises the critique from the expert committee as follow: "The Educational Psychological Service must also improve practice oriented competence in order to be a good counsellor for kindergartens and schools. At the same time, there is a need for EPS to develop their competence in order to strengthen the quality of expert assessments" (MoER 2019, p.63).

The key innovation in the project is to introduce a new infrastructure for collaboration on pedagogical practices that support development of local and situated competence for inclusive practices. This includes changes in how actors collaborates, who participates, the content of the collaboration and the link between the innovations and other developmental projects within the municipality. Further, the innovation challenge the EPS's institutional expert knowledge as well as the schools'/kindergartens' expectations for service from the EPS (Tveitnes, 2018; Moen, et al. 2018). It is an ambition to regard the EPS's dual purpose (individual expert assessment and competence- and organisation development) as two sides of the same coin. As such, the project has a potential for wide-ranging changes both in the use of, and development of, competences located in the municipality.

Inspired by the ECER 2020's conference theme, we use the term *(re)connecting communities* with reference to the three partners in the project; *teachers* in schools/kindergarten, *counsellors* in Educational Psychological Service (EPS) and *researchers*. In the nexus of the present project, the concept of community can be operationalised in different ways. On a micro level, schools, kindergartens and EPS represent different communities with their distinct tasks and institutional culture in the educational system (cf. Moen et al, 2018, Tveitnes 2018). On a meso level, municipalities constitute communities with separate policies and practices, which is local interpretations of national legislation and steering documents. Accordingly, the macro level refers to the national and international level (which is beyond the focus of this project).

The aim of the project is, within a three-part innovative collaboration project, to contribute to the development of new competence for inclusive education and to support educational communities in welcoming diversity as an essential element of their practices and the policies that frame them. The paper seeks to discuss preliminary results on the following research question: *How can the innovation contribute to and support the process of developing theories and practices that sustain the (re)building of communities that value diversity?*

Methods (400 words) [365]

The project will use national guidelines for local competence development (MoER, 2017), in the sense that it is the local actors (kindergarten, school and EPS) in collaboration with the research group, that are responsible for the decisions with regard to implementation of innovations. The research strategy is inspired by interactive research (Bennich et al., 2016). The project combines different kinds of knowledge production and uses formative evaluation contributing to experiential learning. Key issues are to support some kind of normative change, development of new knowledge, a relationship based on equal but distinctive roles, and enhancing the knowledge and competencies of the parties involved through processes of individual and collective learning (ibid, 2016).

The project is organised as a multi-case design situated in two municipalities. In each municipality, one school, one kindergarten and the EPS agency participate. The two municipalities constitute the main case, and within each case, an overall unit of analyses is the collaboration between EPS and kindergarten or school.

The paper report from activities in one of the municipalities. In line with the overall project plan, the school and the kindergarten have formulated their own innovation plan. Both the school and the kindergarten have decided to take a point of departure in a reorganisation of a regular staff meeting in terms of purpose, structure and content. At the meeting, the team of teachers at one grade level

(school) or one unit (kindergarten) present and receive feedback on regular educational activities as well as particular challenges.

Two aims are formulated: First, to give regular teachers, support staff and leaders an arena for exchanging information in order to acquire a common understanding relevant for inclusive education. Second, and of particular interest for this paper, to give EPS counsellors opportunities for improving their understanding of the regular school activities as well as particular challenges at kindergarten and school.

A broad set of data is constructed in the project. (1) Documents of different kinds and at different levels. (2) Field notes, minutes and transcribed speech from formal meeting at the staff meetings. (3) Individual and focus group interviews with teachers, leaders and EPS counsellors. (4) Questionnaires to staff in kindergarten, school, SEN support staff and EPS counsellors.

Conclusion (300 words) [254]

The innovation project is a three-year project (2019-21), which formally started in the beginning of the school year 2019-20. During the previous school year (2018-19), an initial investigation based on questionnaires to staff in kindergarten, schools and EPS as well as interview with leaders in school, kindergarten and EPS identified a set of challenges concerning inclusive education and school/kindergarten's communication with EPS. Some of these are:

- *Understanding inclusive education:* Across the institutions, there was a common endorsement to general statements on inclusive education as this appear in steering documents at the national and municipality level. However, there was a divergent understanding on questions regarding what was considered as ordinary and special, and the level of individual oriented approaches.
- *Collaboration between kindergarten/school and EPS:* The EPS raised questions about the amount of requests for individual expert assessment from the kindergarten and the school. The kindergarten and the school raised questions about the EPS's knowledge of the regular activities in the kindergarten and the school, in order to provide supervision within the regular activities.
- *Internal collaboration within the kindergarten and school:* Unclear systems for supervision, who give and who receive supervision (kindergarten). The absence of arenas for discussing issues related to inclusive practices (school).
- *The municipality's support system:* Unclear responsibilities and inadequate coordination.

The results from the pre-project were presented to the participants, and based on these the kindergarten and the school developed their own project plan in the autumn semester 2019. The paper at the conference will present initial analysis from the first project year.

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