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# Portrayals of special educational needs in Norwegian ECEC psychoeducational reports: a document analysis in the context of inclusion

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**Introduction:** This study aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on promoting more inclusive assessment practices for children in need of special educational support. It examines how special educational needs are portrayed in the assessment sections of psychoeducational reports (sakkyndige vurderinger) for children in Norwegian ECEC settings.

**Methods:** A qualitative document analysis was conducted on selected psychoeducational reports, employing in-depth reflexive thematic analysis with a hermeneutic approach. The analysis focused on how the reports portrayed special educational needs and the extent to which they emphasized the individual child, the child's social context, or both.

**Results:** Special educational needs were frequently framed in terms of the child's limitations and deficits, often equated with their needs, and compared to the development of a "typical" child. Portrayals were sometimes ambiguous, influenced by individual differences, the dual role of the reports, and inconsistencies among stakeholders. While concerns were expressed about limited participation for some children, their own perspectives and needs within the broader social context were often absent.

**Discussion:** Promoting inclusive assessment requires a holistic approach that addresses both the unique child's special and basic psychological needs within their specific social environment. Incorporating children's own perspectives seems crucial to identify opportunities and barriers for inclusion on both the individual and social level.

## KEYWORDS

diversity, differences, inclusion, special educational support, early childhood education and care, holistic approach, expert assessments

## 1 Introduction

Inclusion has become a globally preferred policy in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings (Kuutti et al., 2022) and is widely recognized for its role in supporting the right of all children to participate, learn, and develop in diverse environments. However, despite clear policy guidelines and considerable efforts, achieving full inclusion for all children has proven difficult (Barton and Smith, 2015), especially for those in need of special educational support (Odom et al., 2011).

Assessing special educational needs is often regarded as the first step in the intervention process, with the broader goal of supporting individual children's learning, participation, and

development (Nagle et al., 2020) and identifying children who do not follow typical developmental trajectories and may therefore be at risk of exclusion is widely considered essential (Lebeer et al., 2012; Bartolo et al., 2021).

In Norway, as with several other countries, it is the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) which assesses special educational needs in ECEC through a psychoeducational report (*sakkyndig vurdering*). Historically, the EPS has been tasked with focusing on the individual child, including assessments and providing guidance to parents and ECEC professionals. In recent years, however, there has been a shift in policy and practice toward prioritizing prevention and systemic interventions (Moen et al., 2018). Assessments of individual children may promote inclusion when they provide meaningful insights that inform appropriate and individualized support within diverse communities (Lebeer et al., 2012). However, there appears to be a tendency to frame the principle of inclusion and the ideal of individually tailored support as opposing approaches (Hannås and Bahdanovich Hanssen, 2016), underscored by previous research that suggest that the EPS has experienced challenges with navigating both individual and social contextual approaches to supporting special educational needs for various reasons (see, e.g., Moen et al., 2018; Kolnes et al., 2021; Kolnes and Midthassel, 2022; Szulevicz and Arnfred, 2024; Jensen and Szulevicz, 2025).

In recent years, a small number of studies have highlighted the potential of psychoeducational reports in advancing inclusive practices in ECEC (Franck, 2021; Vaags and Uthus, 2025). However, prior research suggests that reports representing the work of EPS advisors when assessing special educational needs may, at times, pose barriers to inclusion (Nordahl et al., 2018; Franck, 2021; Vaags and Uthus, 2025). Specifically, studies indicate that such reports often frame children's needs solely in terms of individual characteristics, overlooking the influence of shaping those needs. As a result, recommended goals and measures tend to focus on individualized support to enhance the child's skills and abilities within the ECEC setting, rather than addressing systemic or environmental barriers (Nordahl et al., 2018; Franck, 2021; Vaags and Uthus, 2025). This raises a critical question: How can ECEC become truly inclusive for children receiving special educational support if interventions do not target the contextual barriers that limit their participation? Conversely, other research emphasizes that special educational support is a legally mandated individual right, which places a formal responsibility on EPS advisors to assess and document individual children's special educational needs (Joner et al., 2022, 2023). This suggests a counterquestion: How can children experience meaningful inclusion in ECEC if they are not provided with adequate compensation for their challenges at an individual level?

While the individual approach typically adopted in psychoeducational reports is intended to provide appropriate support and improved opportunities for children receiving special educational support, it remains unclear how this approach aligns with the broader ambition of promoting inclusion for all children. Additionally, there is still limited knowledge about how EPS advisors navigate the tension between individual assessments and socially constructed perspectives when identifying and describing special educational needs in these reports. Notably, there is a lack of research on how such special educational documents may promote, or hinder, the development of inclusive practices in ECEC settings (Palla, 2020).

Given the dichotomy identified in previous research between individual and social contextual aspects when assessing special

educational needs for psychoeducational reports and the ongoing ambiguities in the field, this study examines such reports through a holistic lens, *exploring how special educational needs are portrayed in psychoeducational reports, with attention to both individual and social contextual factors*.

The aim is to contribute to the ongoing discourse on how these reports can support more inclusive practices for children in need of special educational assistance within ECEC settings. More broadly, the study seeks to generate new insights within the fields of inclusive (early childhood) education, diversity, and special educational needs.

The following sections present the theoretical framework underpinning this study, along with a description of the context in which it is situated.

## 1.1 Conceptions of the child and inclusion in ECEC

Over the last few decades, there has been a paradigm shift in how children and childhood are viewed and understood. At the heart of this shift is the recognition that children are individuals with their own agency from the very beginning of life, rather than simply passive objects to be shaped and influenced (Sommer et al., 2013). The shift underscores the significance of viewing children as subjects, with the individual child as an active participant who both possesses and develops competence. Occurring simultaneously with the paradigm shift is recognition of the rights of all children, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). The right of each child to participate, be heard, seen, and included, indicates a clear child-oriented focus, giving children a significant voice in matters that concern them (Sommer et al., 2013). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further underscores that all children, regardless of ability and need, have the same rights (United Nations, 2007). These rights can serve as valuable tools for fostering inclusion, as they entitle children to participate in decision-making processes (Eriksen, 2018).

Inclusion embraces diversity by recognizing and valuing both the differences and similarities among young children, emphasizing that that everyone is equally valued. Additionally, it focuses on fostering a sense of community and shared values (Booth et al., 2006). The aim of inclusion is to counteract marginalization by creating equitable opportunities for all children, and thereby ensuring that differences in abilities, needs, or backgrounds do not result in exclusion or reduced participation (Ainscow, 2020).

A child-centered perspective of inclusion has gained increasing attention in recent years. Participation is highlighted as a primary concern regarding inclusion (Bartolo et al., 2021) and is determined by attendance and engagement (Imms and Granlund, 2014), both of which are key predictors of children's development, learning, and well-being (Imms et al., 2017; Björck, 2023). Participation involves engaging in play, learning, and collaboration with others and means having the opportunity to make choices and voice opinions about what we do. More fundamentally, it is about being recognized, accepted, and valued for who we are. Thus, inclusion goes beyond mere attendance in ECEC, to encompass children's experiences of participation, engagement, and a sense of belonging (Ginner Hau et al., 2022). According to Maslow (1970), a sense of belonging is a universal characteristic of human beings and a basic human need. It involves feeling valued within a community, forming

lasting, positive, and meaningful relationships with others (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), giving the feeling of being 'at home' (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Being accepted fully as a member of a group, regardless of individual characteristics, contributes to this sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Consequently, all children should be included physically, socially, and psychologically (Qvortrup and Qvortrup, 2018), with the latter aspect marking the individual child's own experiences of inclusion as particularly important. Thus, inclusion cannot be universal in the sense that it is the same for each child but instead takes various forms as a context-based relational process (Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur, 2016).

## 1.2 Toward a holistic approach to inclusion and special educational needs

There is no globally agreed upon definition of *inclusion* (Dunne, 2009). With a desire to bring more clarity to the ideal of inclusion, the connections between inclusive practices, diversity, and the concept of special educational needs have been widely analyzed in the field (Uthus and Qvortrup, 2024). The traditional (orthodox) perspective on special educational needs is often criticized, as it focuses solely on the individual child (Lebeer et al., 2012), implying that what is 'special' is located within the child (Runswick-Cole and Hodge, 2009) and that these deficiencies can be corrected and the child's weaknesses addressed (Dunst, 2000). The more recent social perspective takes a different approach to special educational needs and encompasses the broader social context and failure to accommodate human diversity (Vislie, 2003). This social model contrasts with the traditional individual model (Allan, 2010), directing attention to the social context and advocating for dismantling disabling barriers through environmental adjustments (Thomas, 2004).

The phrase *children with special needs* is widely recognized within the field of ECEC and may refer to conditions that are unusual, exceptional, or atypical. However, within the context of special education, the label is more specifically tied to how an individual functions in relation to a key developmental or educational goal (Wilson, 2002). While having needs is part of the human condition, having special needs is typically viewed as a deviation from what is considered typical. As such, these needs are often seen as undesirable, either by the individual or by others (Vehmas, 2010).

Despite numerous efforts to establish a clear definition of *special needs*, there is still no universally accepted understanding of what the concepts entails (Vehmas, 2010). Such a definition presupposes to answer fundamental questions such as why certain children are considered to have special needs (Skidmore, 1996), when is it that common and basic needs become 'special' (Vehmas, 2010), and how the term *special needs* should be defined (Wilson, 2002). Nevertheless, the term continues to appear frequently in policy documents, literature, and educational practice, often giving the impression that everyone knows what it entails (Wilson, 2002). To move away from deficit-based terminology, *special needs* has largely been replaced by *special educational needs* with the goal of emphasizing individual support in a more positive framing. Still, the term remains controversial. Critics argue that it is overly broad and vague and may lend itself to an increase in the labeling of difficulties and disabilities (Norwich, 2014). These contrasting perspectives contribute to the ongoing debate about whether children should be described 'with needs' or 'in need,' reflecting fundamental differences in values, educational strategies, and interpretations of what constitutes meaningful support within ECEC settings (Palla, 2021).

The interplay between individual and social contextual approaches is not straightforward to navigate in practice. To shed light on this complexity, Norwich (2010) introduces what he terms "the dilemma of difference," a concept that highlights the inherent challenge of whether, and how, to identify and respond to individual differences. On the one hand, it is difficult to identify special educational needs while simultaneously avoiding potential negative impacts on the child, such as the risk of stigmatizing or isolating children. On the other hand, if inclusion involves treating all children the same, it may deny individual children the equitable opportunities they require to thrive. As this is a complex issue with no simple solution, it requires continuous attention to balancing both diversity and inclusion (Norwich, 2010; Uthus and Qvortrup, 2024).

Debates around inclusion are closely linked to differing views on the value of inclusive education and varying conceptions of disabilities and special educational needs (Terzi, 2014; Uthus and Qvortrup, 2024). This study posits that these differing perspectives influence how special educational needs are portrayed in psychoeducational reports. It is grounded in a social-relational approach, which deconstructs disability theories that perceive disabilities and special educational needs either exclusively as a medical condition or entirely as social constructs shaped by discrimination and limited opportunities within the social context (Reindal, 2009). It emphasizes the equal importance of individual prerequisites, biological and psychological factors, as well as social contextual factors, asserting that an individual's experience of disability depends on the interplay between individual abilities and contextual barriers in their environment (Thomas, 2004; Reindal, 2008, 2009).

## 1.3 The context of this study

In Norway, as in many other countries, inclusion is a core element of national educational policy (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Ministry of Education and Research (2005) regulates special educational assistance (SEA) and the use of psychoeducational reports in Norwegian ECEC settings. All children, regardless of ability and needs, have access to mainstream provisions. In addition, children are entitled to SEA when required (§31) and those identified with impairments are granted both priority admission (§18) and the right to an adapted provision (§37). The purpose of SEA is to offer early support for each child's development and learning, particularly in areas such as language and social skills (§34, Ministry of Education and Research, 2005).

To determine whether a child qualifies for SEA, the EPS conducts an assessment and prepares a psychoeducational report. With parental consent, the municipal EPS is mandated to evaluate whether the child has special educational needs. EPS advisors collect information through multiple sources, including conversations with the child, parents, and ECEC professionals, direct observation of the child, and developmental assessments. In completing the report, the advisor must assess whether the child has potential developmental delays or learning difficulties and whether these needs can be met within the existing ECEC provision (§§31–34, Ministry of Education and Research, 2005). This assessment informs the municipality's individual decision. Additionally, it serves as the foundation for recommended goals, measures, and development of individual education plans (IEP), as well as targeted educational practices.

According to §33 of the Ministry of Education and Research (2005), EPS has a dual mandate and is expected to support ECEC settings at both individual and systemic levels, with increased attention to identifying

barriers in the child's context (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). Although the Kindergarten Act does not explicitly mandate an emphasis on inclusion or social contextual factors in psychoeducational reports, these considerations are highlighted in other national policy documents. A government green paper, developed through public consultation—despite some opposition—affirmed that the EPS should assess the child's broader ECEC context. It emphasized that a child's development is shaped by their environment, while the child also exerts influence in return. The paper underscored the importance of evaluating the child's context, stating that excluding environmental factors from the assessment process may limit the potential to provide comprehensive and inclusive support (Ministry of Education and Research, 2015). In line with this, a national guideline underscores that the child's ECEC environment and the pedagogical provision they receive should be part of the assessment process (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017).

In 2018, an expert group recommended shifting the primary focus from the child's individual challenges to the ECEC setting's responsibility to provide care and support, advocating for a move toward genuinely inclusive assessment practices. Their rationale was that the existing legislation, combined with the requirement for psychoeducational reports, tended to reinforce an individual perspective, often at the expense of critically examining pedagogical practices and environmental factors (Nordahl et al., 2018). However, Norwegian authorities chose to retain the requirement for psychoeducational reports, instead placing emphasis on strengthening the competence of EPS advisors and improving the quality of these assessments (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019).

## 2 Methodology

This study is a qualitative document analysis of the content in psychoeducational reports for seven children receiving SEA in Norwegian ECEC settings. The authors used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's (2022) methodology to explore how special educational needs are portrayed in psychoeducational reports with attention to both individual and social contextual factors. Our interpretation was guided by a hermeneutic approach rooted in Gadamer's (1989) philosophical framework. We viewed the dialogue between the researchers, the data, theoretical framework, and prior research as a dynamic and iterative process of meaning-making. Interpretation of documents is an active process that requires us to bring our own assumptions and understandings to the analysis process (Coffey, 2014). Both authors are former special educators who believe that a social-relational understanding of special educational needs is essential, recognizing that educational difficulties can arise due to the interplay between individual abilities and social contextual barriers (Reindal, 2008). Furthermore, we consider inclusion, participation, and belonging to be inherently context-based, in line with the study's theoretical framework.

Documents are prevalent in both organizational and social contexts and serve as a valuable tool for understanding and interpreting practices in both of those contexts. Similar to how organizations and social settings are impacted by various documents, individual lives are also influenced by them (Coffey, 2014). In this study, we view psychoeducational reports as key resources that can offer valuable insights into portrayals of special

educational needs in ECEC settings, making them the primary focus of our research.

### 2.1 Participants and materials

The dataset comprises psychoeducational reports for six boys and one girl—a total of seven psychoeducational reports. The reports were prepared by EPS advisors situated in three different districts, where the seven children attended five separate ECECs. EPS advisors typically possess professional backgrounds encompassing special education, psychology, and social work (Moen et al., 2018). The psychoeducational reports analyzed in the study were written in 2021 and 2022, during a period when the children were between 13 months and 4 years old.

Psychoeducational reports are confidential and not available to the public. To initiate access, the first author reached out to the ECEC authorities in three districts in Norway. Subsequently, leaders and special educators from diverse ECEC settings were invited to participate in digital meetings to receive information regarding the research project. Following this, the special educators contacted parents of children receiving SEA in these ECEC settings to gauge their interest in participating, with seven families ultimately confirming their participation in the project. Each of the children in question has an individual decision that entitles them to SEA and is assessed as having a functional impairment related to hearing or motor development, challenges related to language and communication, and/or socio-emotional and behavioral difficulties. In addition, a few of the children are awaiting assessments for neurodivergence, specifically for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or/and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In this publication, the children are referred to as “the child” or “they,” and the psychoeducational reports are labeled PR1 to PR7.

### 2.2 Ethical considerations

This study has received ethical approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). All personal and identifiable information was redacted before the documents were obtained from the ECECs to safeguard the children's privacy. The psychoeducational reports were promptly transcribed, with all names and identifiable characteristics excluded from the transcriptions. Children involved in research have a special right to protection (NREC, 2022) and are generally considered vulnerable individuals who may not be capable of protecting their own interests (Robson, 2017). For this reason, the children's parents provided written and informed consent for access to their child's psychoeducational reports. To ensure the anonymity of everyone involved, all characteristics and identifiers have been omitted.

### 2.3 Analyzing with RTA

Through this analysis, our goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how special educational needs are portrayed in psychoeducational reports with attention to both individual and social contextual factors. To begin, the documents were anonymized, transcribed, and digitized to facilitate analysis. The initial phase is about becoming familiar with the data and identifying intriguing elements and patterns; we therefore engaged in a close reading of the documents (Coffey, 2014; Braun and



Clarke, 2022), something which was also essential to gaining an overview and understanding of the content. This was particularly crucial because we were working with pre-existing documents not generated by us nor specifically constructed for research (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Following this initial phase, we recorded some inductive notes on the content of the reports. They were written down in observations such as “Special needs appear to be equated with a lack of functioning,” “Insufficient participation is in focus,” and “It appears to be an individual-oriented emphasis.”

Subsequently, we adopted a more systematic approach to explore the diversity and patterns of meaning within the data by developing inductive codes and applying them to specific segments of each data element/psychoeducational report. We came up with codes such as “age-appropriate,” “compared to peers,” “adult support,” “functioning,” “lack of functioning,” and “the social context.” The purpose was to capture concrete and relevant meanings related to the research question. Subsequently, we developed theoretically informed assumptions with analytical implications regarding what the data represents (Braun and Clarke, 2021), which was a more deductive approach. In doing so, we aimed to construct knowledge and understanding through a dynamic process, often referred to as *the hermeneutic circle* (Gadamer, 1989). Examples of such assumptions were “limitations and deficits,” “potential,” “inherent to the child,” “inconsistency,” “concern for limited participation,” and “typical child.” Thus, the coding process involved a combination of data-driven and inductive approaches (bottom-up), as well as theory-driven and deductive approaches (top-down). RTA allows for both directions, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the data. The deductive approach provided us with an interpretative lens for making sense of the data.

Given that RTA enables the examination of both explicit content through semantic codes and underlying implicit meanings through latent codes (Braun and Clarke, 2022), we identified codes and patterns that were notable through their absence. Examples include “needs beyond limitations,” “barriers in the social contextual context,” “input directly from the child,” and “considering the child within their ECEC community.” We actively engaged in identifying and developing codes, patterns, and themes, as is typical in the process of RTA, finally identifying three themes, each with several patterns, to illuminate the research question.

In the following sections, we present the three themes from our analysis, outlining the presence (or absence) of patterns within them, and continuously discussing our findings in relation to the study’s theoretical framework. The text excerpts have been translated from Norwegian into English by the authors.

### 3 Portraying special educational needs

#### 3.1 Special educational needs are usually portrayed by individual children’s limitations and deficits, as often compared to the “typical” child

Initially, the reports provide some information regarding the children’s well-being and temper, such as:

“The child is positive and happy, expressing enjoyment in the ECEC.” (PR7)

“The child is mostly cheerful and content.” (PR3)

There are also some descriptions related to what the children prefer to do:

“The child enjoys being outdoors and engaging in gross motor activities like biking, climbing, and running.” (PR1)

“The child thrives outdoors and is physically active.” (PR2)

Additionally, many assessments highlight the children’s skills and abilities, as well as activities they are capable of:

“The child can engage in parallel play with other children for short periods.” (PR2)

“The child demonstrates strong language development.” (PR7)

Some of the assessments emphasize the child’s learning potential:

“The child learns very quickly.” (PR4)

“They are eager to learn and are perceived as cognitively strong.” (PR1)

Although there are variations across these reports, most of them place significant emphasis on the children’s limitations and the challenges they face. This is empirically reflected in statements such as the following:

“The child exhibits highly repetitive behavior.” (PR2)

“The child struggles with language, regulation, concentration, and activity level.” (PR1)

“The child has significantly low functioning in all areas.” (PR3)

“The child exhibits deviant and ‘abnormal’ social functioning.” (PR4)

“The child is perceived as less independent during meals, dressing, and toileting.” (PR6)

“The child struggles to express their thoughts and desires, which leads to frustration and causes them to withdraw.” (PR5)

Our analysis further revealed that special educational needs are portrayed through descriptions of the child as possessing weaker or fewer skills, or facing greater challenges compared to their peers. This is empirically reflected in statements such as:

“The child demonstrates fewer skills in the ECEC on most areas compared to peers.” (PR1)

“The child is delayed compared to same-age peers in terms of social abilities, independence, language, play competence, and resilience.” (PR5)

“The child experiences significantly more difficulties than children of the same age.” (PR4)

“The child’s functioning falls below age expectations in all areas.” (PR3)

“The child exhibits fewer skills in all areas compared to others of their age.” (PR2)

The initial descriptions include some evaluation of the child’s strengths, coping areas, abilities, mood, interests, and learning prerequisites, which indicate an assessment of each child’s potential and well-being. Such assessments that focus on each child’s potential and what they can achieve with proper support are suggested to favor inclusion, as they provide valuable information to the ECEC and the child’s family on how each can best support the child (Lebeer et al., 2012). However, although there are variations across the reports, most of them place significant emphasis on the children’s limitations and the challenges they face. This indicates that the EPS prioritizes identifying each child’s challenges, equated with their perceived deficits and limitations. This persistent individual understanding of special educational needs is consistent with prior research on psychoeducational reports within ECEC (Franck, 2021; Jøner et al., 2022) and considered one of the main barriers to inclusion (Lebeer et al., 2012; Franck, 2021; Vaags and Uthus, 2025). Furthermore, it highlights the core issue with assessments of special educational needs in educational settings (Lebeer et al., 2012).

The assessments of the child in question are often compared to the development of “typical” peers, an approach that warrants critical reflection. These comparisons underscore each child’s limitations and deficits, reflecting an underlying assumption about what children should achieve and be capable of at specific ages. This approach is encouraged by the Norwegian guidelines which recommend that the EPS use such comparisons to determine whether a child has special educational needs when drafting psychoeducational reports. The guidelines advise assessing whether a child develops at a slower pace or in a way that deviates from typical age-related expectations (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). This indicates that “ages and stages” theories continue to strongly influence the assessments of individual children in Norwegian ECEC settings, focusing on what constitutes a “typical” child with “typical” development. It reflects a normative approach, where children’s development is measured against a standard benchmark—their “typical” peers—and the gap between their abilities and “normal” development seem to be interpreted as a special educational need. This gives the impression that the child must adapt and develop their abilities to meet “normal” standards, a notion also reflected in prior research (Vaags and Uthus, 2025).

While inclusion is all about embracing diversity and valuing the unique abilities and potential of each child, these comparisons suggest the opposite, highlighting differences in terms of deficits and limitations. However, not all children develop at the same pace, particularly when they have some form of impairment (Underwood et al., 2012), a factor that these comparisons seem to overlook. Children develop in diverse ways, and each child has a range of needs which differ from those of other children. For instance, a child with hearing or motor impairment or diagnosed with ASD is likely to experience and interact with the world in ways that are unique to them, which in turn influence their development. Similarly, a child dealing with pain, illness, social exclusion, or adverse home conditions may find their needs and development significantly

impacted. Furthermore, not all children will meet the same milestones, despite early interventions and special educational support (Underwood et al., 2012). This underscores the need to explore new ways to assess special educational needs within educational settings.

### 3.2 Special educational needs are portrayed by ambiguity and inconsistency at the individual level

The portrayals of special educational needs appear to vary depending on the nature of the child’s perceived challenges. When a medical or biological impairment is identified, there tends to be less emphasis on the child’s limitations, with the descriptions of their needs being more explicit and clearer. This is evident in statements such as:

“The child needs visual support.” (PR5)

“The child will need signs for speech.” (PR3)

These statements clearly indicate what specific support the child requires from their social context. These examples highlight a direct link between the identified condition and the necessary interventions. In contrast, when a child’s difficulties are more diffuse, such as those related to behavior and language, the descriptions of their needs are often more general and less specific. This is seen in statements such as:

“The child needs to be accompanied by an adult throughout the day.” (PR6)

“The child needs close adult support throughout the day.” (PR5)

“The child will need adult support throughout the entire day.” (PR1)

These statements reflect a more ambiguous understanding of what is required, lacking the specificity seen in cases where a known impairment or diagnosis is present.

The analysis further indicates that, at the individual level, special educational needs are at times portrayed by inconsistencies in how various stakeholders assess the child’s needs. While there is general agreement in most cases, notable discrepancies occasionally arise. This becomes apparent, for example, in one report where the ECEC professional’s description of a child states that:

“The child is age-appropriate in terms of sense of security.” (PR5)

The EPS, however, assesses the child’s sense of security differently, describing it as follows:

“The child appears insecure and anxious in many situations that are a natural part of the ECEC routine, which significantly affects their ability to benefit from both the mainstream provision and many of the tried interventions.” (PR5)

Additionally, there are several reports wherein the ECEC professionals describe the child as having more challenges and

limitations than the parents describe. This is reflected in the following statement:

“The parents report no issues beyond typical development, but the ECEC suggests that the child faces considerably more challenges than other children of the same age.” (PR2)

One report shows that the parents’ description of the child does not align with other mapping results. In the report, it is stated that:

“It is difficult to determine whether the parents’ perspectives or the assessment more accurately describes the child’s functioning.” (PR3)

Furthermore, parents and ECEC professionals often assess children’s special educational needs differently during evaluations, despite using the same mapping schemes. One report notes that:

“The ECEC’s scores are generally somewhat higher than the parents’ scores.” (PR4)

Another report involves both parents and ECEC professionals assessing a child using the ASRS (Autism Spectrum Rating Scale), which measures behaviors associated with ASD. The findings are summarized as follows:

“The scoring shows significantly different results between the ECEC and the parents. The ECEC reports that the child exhibits many behaviors that may be indicative of autism, whereas the parents’ questionnaire shows no signs of behavior associated with autism.” (PR2)

These descriptions of special educational needs indicate that there is a tendency to provide more detailed elaboration on the child’s difficulties when there is no clear medical or biological condition to rely on. These elaborations may help clarify the nature of the child’s challenges and aid in determining whether the child is entitled to SEA. When a diagnosis or impairment is already known, such elaborations appear less necessary, as the special educational needs are already established, shifting the focus toward the accommodations the child requires in their social context. However, this elaboration of children’s challenges suggests an emphasis on labeling the child, perhaps to establish a special educational need that secures resources, allowing for the ECEC setting to provide better support to the individual child. Assessments and their potential to favor inclusion are often shaped by their intended purpose (Lebeer et al., 2012). In the Norwegian educational context, psychoeducational reports play a crucial role in determining eligibility for the allocation of resources for special educational reports. In such cases, highlighting and elaborating deficits and limitations is more often viewed as a helpful tool than a barrier (Lebeer et al., 2012). While the reasons behind highlighting the child’s limitations and deficits may be well intentioned, the label established in these reports often follows the child into school and beyond (Heiskanen et al., 2018). This label can stay with the child over time, potentially influencing how they are perceived and treated. It may prevent professionals from revising their perceptions or adapting their approaches as the child develops, thereby limiting their ability to recognize growth or changing needs (Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur, 2016). Thus, the dual purpose of these reports—both to identify special

educational needs in order to secure resources for the child and the ECEC setting and to inform the development of IEPs and targeted educational practices—may present challenges. While aiming to ensure appropriate support, this dual function can inadvertently lead to an overemphasis on the child’s limitations and deficits, potentially at the expense of acknowledging broader, more nuanced needs. Moreover, the general and sometimes ambiguous language used to describe the child’s needs for *support* and adult *support* found in these assessments may reflect an underlying uncertainty about the child’s specific needs.

The analysis further suggests that special educational needs are, at times, portrayed through inconsistencies in assessments among various stakeholders. These discrepancies highlight the inherently subjective nature of evaluating special educational needs. Although standardized tools (like ASRS) are employed in some cases to support objectivity, interpretations of the results appear to differ across stakeholders. This variation indicates that, even when shared tools or frameworks are utilized, assessments of a child’s needs may still be shaped by a range of contextual and relational factors, such as the stakeholder’s professional role, level of training, and the nature of the relationship with the child.

The discrepancies observed between ECEC and EPS professionals may, in part, stem from their differing proximity to the child. While ECEC professionals are involved in the child’s daily routines and interactions, EPS professionals typically assess the child from a more detached position. This tension, between proximity and distance, and what constitutes the most appropriate basis for assessment, has been a central theme in both the Norwegian public discourse and the Finnish debate regarding special educational assessments, without reaching a clear conclusion (Heiskanen and Franck, 2023).

Most discrepancies are found between parents and professionals in this study, including both EPS and ECEC staff, where the parents assess the child to have fewer challenges than the professionals. One possible explanation is that parents are more emotionally and relationally connected to the child. Additionally, parents typically observe and assess the child in home environment, whereas professionals conduct evaluations within the context of ECEC. Standardized tests are often administered in office settings, where only the child and the examiner are present. These differing contexts and relational dynamics may influence how each stakeholder perceives and interprets the child’s needs. A child’s need may fluctuate depending on their social context, the timing of an assessment, and even their internal state at a given moment (Heiskanen et al., 2018). This indicates that where, how, and when the assessments are conducted play an important role in shaping perceptions of special educational needs. As the empirical data illustrates, such discrepancies create uncertainty about which assessments should be considered “accurate.” Unfortunately, these inconsistencies may influence the recommended support and, in turn, affect the type, quality, and relevance of the special educational assistance the child ultimately receives in practice.

### 3.3 Special educational needs are portrayed by concerns about limited participation, with little consideration of the child’s perspectives and social context

A consistent characteristic in the portrayal of special educational needs identified in this study is the limited input of children’s own

perspectives in the assessments. While parents and ECEC professionals participated in all cases, which is crucial given their close relationship with the child, none of the reports included the child's active involvement, nor did they indicate any clear efforts to gather the child's perspective. The children in this study are young however, and most of them are perceived as having challenges with language and communication. This may complicate the process of gathering their perspectives, a concern that is also acknowledged and highlighted as an issue in one of the reports:

"The child has limited language skills and communicates very little, so it is important to focus on recognizing signals that show whether they are content and thriving or unhappy and not doing well. Additionally, it is crucial to provide them with opportunities to express their needs and desires. This work will continue in collaboration with the partners involved." (PR4)

In other reports, it is explained that the child's right to be heard was addressed through conversations with parents and professionals from ECEC, as well as other involved parties, without providing any justification regarding the limited input from the children themselves.

Furthermore, only three of the seven children assessed in this study appear to have been directly observed by the EPS within their ECEC context. For the remaining four children, neither direct observations by the EPS nor conversations with the child are mentioned.

Special educational needs are portrayed by a strong emphasis on certain children's limited participation and engagement in play and social interactions, frequently linked to language difficulties and challenges in self-regulation and social behavior. Examples include:

"The child struggles most with language on their bad days." (PR1)

"The child clearly struggles with social interactions." (PR5)

"It is very uncertain how much the child understands and whether they just are simply repeating what others say." (PR4)

"Those who do not know the child well will have difficulty understanding them." (PR2)

The limited involvement and engagement seem to raise concerns about whether the children are fully included and valued members of the ECEC community, as reflected in statements such as these:

"The child has significant difficulty interacting with other children and is unable to initiate contact appropriately or maintain interaction with others over time." (PR2)

"The child finds it difficult to read social signals from other children during play." (PR5)

"The child struggles with social codes and can exhibit aggression." (PR1)

"The child shows little interest in other children and practitioners." (PR4)

"In rough play, the child may approach other children, with it varying whether or not they are shown acceptance." (PR6)

Furthermore, the assessments include descriptions and acknowledgement of the children's social context through accounts of implemented measures and current pedagogical practices, such as:

"They use tablecloths and felt on the tables to reduce noise." (PR7)

"The ECEC has divided the children into smaller groups." (PR6)

"The child has participated in a language group once a week." (PR1)

"The child engages in structured activities including listening training, games, turn-taking, and singing within a small group setting." (PR7)

"The ECEC setting has implemented a visual daily schedule and picture-based support." (PR2)

"All staff members wear keychains with visual symbols." (PR1)

However, the reports do not include assessments or evaluations of the implemented measures and pedagogical practices that might reveal potential resources to support the child's development and participation within their social context, nor do they address possible shortcomings that could hinder it.

The absence of the child's voice is consistent with prior research on psychoeducational reports within ECEC settings (Franck, 2023). Young children with functional variations are often not perceived to be equipped with the ability to contribute to personal decision-making (Underwood et al., 2015; Dalkilic and Vadeboncoeur, 2016) even though they have demonstrated that they are capable of sharing information about themselves when facilitated (Underwood et al., 2015; Ytterhus and Åmot, 2021). Because first identifying and then reducing barriers to children's participation and development is essential for achieving inclusion (Ainscow, 2007), the importance of involving each child in this process is crucial (Granlund and Imms, 2024). Children's perspectives can offer valuable insights into the barriers they encounter and involving them as active participants in the assessment process hold promise as a meaningful step toward more inclusive assessment practices.

Furthermore, it appears as if the EPS did not conduct direct observations of, or engage in conversations with, several of the children included in this study, despite this being a stated prerequisite for assessing special educational needs in Norwegian ECEC (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). The absence of such direct engagement may be problematic, as it limits the ability of EPS to understand how the child functions within their everyday environment, reduces the validity of the assessment, and weakens the foundation for providing tailored and contextually appropriate recommendations for support. Without observing the child in their ECEC setting, important contextual cues may be missed, and the potential interplay between the child's abilities and their social surroundings may go unrecognized.

Numerous statements and observations highlight children who are rejected by peers or face other challenges in participation in play and social interactions, thereby portraying special educational needs as concerns related to limited participation and social engagement. Without appropriate support and scaffolding, we know these children can experience exclusion from their peer group (Kuutti et al., 2022).



However, the assessments tend to focus solely on describing the children's limited participation and difficulties in social interactions, without addressing their specific needs. As a result, they fail to offer detailed information about how the child is responded to and what their precise needs are in various contexts. For instance, they do not clarify what seems to trigger the child's aggression and what their specific needs are in such instances, as seen in PR1: *The child struggles with social codes and can exhibit aggression*. Similarly, in PR6: *In rough play, the child may approach other children, with it varying whether or not they are shown acceptance*, there is no attention given to the conditions that lead to the child either being accepted or excluded, how peers respond to the child, or the identification of the child's specific needs in these situations. While assessing the child's limitations may be necessary to recommend appropriate support, this one-sided focus and lack of detail may result in important insights into the child's actual needs being overlooked. For example, one child might prefer solitude and choose to play alone, as indicated in PR4: *The child shows little interest in other children and practitioners*, while another experiences exclusion and isolation from peers, as indicated in PR6: *In rough play, the child may approach other children, with it varying whether or not they are shown acceptance*. These two children likely have different needs and require different forms of support within their social context, specifically tailored to their unique needs.

Meaningful participation in play and interactions with others are essential for children's experiences of inclusion and their opportunities to develop a sense of belonging (Koivula and Hännikäinen, 2017). Nevertheless, the assessments tend to focus solely on the individual child, overlooking the important role of the social context in shaping special educational needs (Terzi, 2005). This suggests that the special educational needs are inherent in the child, with the social context being irrelevant. For instance, the reports include several descriptions of the children's social context and implemented measures to support the child in their daily life, such as *They use tablecloths and felt on the tables to reduce noise* and *The ECEC has divided the children into smaller groups*. However, while some assessments acknowledge the child's social context by highlighting interactions and positive relationships with adults and peers within the ECEC community, they generally lack a critical evaluation of the social contextual resources that could support the child's participation, as well as potential environmental barriers that might hinder it. Including such evaluations is essential, as participation is highly context-dependent, and enhancing a child's participation can often be achieved by adapting the environment to meet their specific needs (Imms and Granlund, 2014; Granlund and Imms, 2024). Moreover, given that special educational needs are fundamentally shaped by the dynamic interaction between individual abilities and social contextual barriers (Reindal, 2008), it is essential that psychoeducational assessments include a critical evaluation of the child's social context (Franck, 2021). Additionally, as these reports are intended to assess whether a child's needs can be met within the mainstream provision (§34, Ministry of Education and Research, 2005), the absence of evaluations of the child's social context or the existing pedagogical provision may imply that the child's deficits and limitations are solely inherent and perceived as too challenging to be addressed through the mainstream provision, thereby justifying the need for special educational support.

Peer acceptance and feeling valued are crucial for children's well-being. Play, along with peer interactions, are often highly valued by the children themselves. Being rejected can lead to negative emotions toward peers, which may, in turn, foster antisocial behavior, and

thereby create a vicious cycle that becomes difficult to break (Kuutti et al., 2022). Indeed, many social emotions can be shaped and developed by environmental factors and are not solely determined by hereditary traits (Tekerci and Çöplü, 2024). When the social context is overlooked, as seen in this study, the challenges or barriers children encounter regarding participation, often shaped or intensified by their environment, are not fully considered. This highlights the importance of understanding children's (limited) participation and engagement within the context of their ECEC community, rather than treating it in isolation, as reflected in these statements.

Social and language skills are considered among the most important for children to develop (OECD, 2019). Opportunities for participation in social interactions within a child's social context are crucial for developing language skills, which in turn are essential for the child to participate in play and other social interactions with peers (Brekke Stangeland, 2017). Consequently, children with social and language challenges may find themselves in negative cycles of limited participation, reduced engagement, and fewer opportunities for social interactions (Joner et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of assessing the child within their specific social context and community (Vaags and Uthus, 2025). By identifying both the child's individual difficulties and the barriers each child encounters within their specific social context, as well as individual and social contextual resources, the ECEC settings are better equipped to foster the individual child's development, participation, well-being, and sense of belonging within their community. From a social-relational perspective, placing primary emphasis on the individual child's limitations while neglecting the broader social context, both of which were observed in this study, offers a narrow and one-dimensional view of a complex and multidimensional issue. This approach may not only serve as a barrier to inclusion but could also negatively impact the child's well-being, in addition to their social and language development.

## 4 Concluding remarks

The findings of this study should be interpreted considering the multiple functions that psychoeducational reports are intended to serve: identifying the special educational needs and determining whether these can be met within the existing ECEC provision, guiding the allocation of resources, and providing a foundation for IEPs and special educational practices. When results indicate that children's needs are primarily portrayed by limitations and deficits, often in comparison with their "typical" peers, the results can be understood as a reflection of the report's formal mandate. Since these reports play a key role in decision-making and administrative processes, there may be an implicit need to present children's challenges in a deficit-oriented manner to ensure access to resources. In this sense, such portrayals may be seen as functional or even necessary, given the purpose of these reports. Accordingly, it is reasonable that the reports adopt, to some extent, an individual- and difficulty-oriented focus, as such an approach may yield valuable insights that support both the child's development and their participation within the ECEC community. Furthermore, when portrayals of special educational needs are found to be ambiguous, as in this study, this may reflect the inconsistent expectations placed on these reports.

This study indicates that the medical model and "ages and stages" theories are both still deeply embedded in psychoeducational reports with special educational needs primarily understood as inherent to the

child. As a result, each child is assessed in a decontextualized way, with responsibility placed on them for their perceived deficiencies, while the crucial role of the social context in shaping special educational needs is overlooked. While this study critiques this one-sided focus on individual deficits and limitations, we acknowledge that failing to assess children's needs on an individual level could obscure and undermine their right to receive tailored support. Paradoxically, this may lead to situations that compromise the dignity of the children, which is entirely contrary to the ideals of inclusion (Uthus and Qvortrup, 2024). However, the findings point to a clear concern regarding the limited participation of certain children, without encompassing children's own perspectives or the social context, as well as lack of direct observation for several children. With this, it becomes clear that assessing special educational needs is a complex process and a demanding task, where the "dilemma of difference" (Norwich, 2010) emerges in discussions about the individual emphasis and lack of social contextual considerations found in these assessments.

Additionally, the children evaluated in these reports are assessed because they require special educational support beyond basic needs, which leads to an exclusive focus on what is considered "special." To fully include any child, we must be concerned with the whole person (Booth et al., 2006) and ECEC is most beneficial when children's holistic needs are met (UNESCO, 2021). The narrow focus found in these assessments results in a failure to assess the whole unique child within their specific ECEC context, concentrating primarily on their limitations and deficits rather than their actual needs. Our study highlights how this reductionist approach to assessing children's needs may create a barrier to inclusion.

Based on this study, we suggest that assessments of special educational needs, aimed at fostering inclusion in ECEC, adopt a broader social contextual evaluation, considering each child's participation within their specific ECEC community. By considering the child's unique social context and incorporating the child's own perspectives, this approach could offer a more holistic understanding of their needs (not just those labeled as "special") and help reduce inconsistencies in the assessments. In turn, this may better support the child's participation, sense of belonging, and overall experience of inclusion. This approach would shift from the medical and "ages and stages" models, both of which focus on deficits, limitations, and comparisons to "typical" peers, and toward more inclusive assessments that prioritize the unique child's unique needs within their specific social context. Finally, further exploration and research into more holistic approaches to assessment are essential if we are to move toward genuinely inclusive practices. Central to the shift is the incorporation of assessment criteria that consider not only the child's special educational needs but also their basic needs as unique individuals. Equally important is the recognition of the specific contexts in which these children live and learn.

This study's recommendations for shifting the focus in the assessments of special educational needs carry several important implications. First, it can be argued that changes to the assessment procedures alone are insufficient to transform pedagogical practices that remain exclusive. For the education system to become more inclusive, pedagogical approaches must also be critically examined and adapted. Second, when research consistently highlights the problematic nature of assessing children primarily in terms of limitations and deficits to determine eligibility for special educational support, it underscores the need for future studies to explore the broader context in which such assessments are produced, particularly

the experiences of EPS advisors as they navigate the gap between the ideal of inclusion and the practical realities of their work.

## Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study is subject to the following licenses/restrictions: Due to the sensitive nature of the data and confidentiality agreements, we are unable to share the dataset publicly. However, we can provide a summary of the data or discuss potential access under specific conditions that ensure confidentiality is maintained. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to [ava@dmmh.no](mailto:ava@dmmh.no).

## Ethics statement

The project has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). Written informed consent was obtained from the minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

AK: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MU: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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