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# Conflicting norms in Danish and Norwegian educational psychology counselling

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## Abstract

With rising special education expenditures in many countries, educational psychology services (EPS) have been brought to the centre of renewed attention. Educational psychology counselling plays a vital role in facilitating inclusive education and addressing and fulfilling students' mental health needs in the educational context. Like many public services, EPS work is characterized by a lack of resources and by high-stakes accountability. However, as the resource perspective is widely discussed in the literature and public debate, we turn our attention to a less explored topic – the mismatch or conflict between the EPS users' expectations from the services and the accountability demands and the resources made available to the services from the authorities. Through open in-depth interviews with Danish and Norwegian EPS professionals, we identify three interrelated conflicting norms encountered by EPS professionals: a methodological conflict (whether to work on a system/organizational level or with individual evaluation), time and capacity conflicts (time pressure and limited resources) and a normative conflict between loyalty to what the EPS professionals perceive as a restricting system and loyalty to the children with and for whom they work. We argue that there is a need for more research that does not simply take the conflicting demands as a given premise but focuses on how these are experienced and dealt with.

## Keywords

educational psychology services, inclusive education, cross collaborative work, welfare institutions, sociocultural theory

## Introduction

With rising special education expenditures in many countries (Thomas & Loxley, 2022), a significant increase in the number of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and those experiencing mental health problems, educational psychology (EP) counselling has been brought to the centre of renewed attention. EP counselling plays a vital role in facilitating inclusive education and addressing and fulfilling students' mental health needs in the educational context. However, renewed discussions about the effects of EP practice, its legitimacy and its

scientific basis has surfaced (Conoley et al., 2020). Although the field of EP practice has restructured itself to serve more general education students, EP counsellors still devote the majority of their working time to assessing and documenting individual special education eligibility (Benson et al., 2019; Dybdal & Skårbrevik 2014). This is also the case in the Scandinavian welfare context, in which educational psychology services (EPS) for decades have played a critical role in supporting schools and students and in assessing student eligibility for special education services. Every municipality in both Norway and Denmark is responsible for setting up an interdisciplinary EP unit for children and young people with special needs.

Like many public services, the work in EPS is characterized by a lack of resources and by high-stakes accountability, perhaps even increasingly so (Andrews & Hustad, 2022). However, as the resource perspective is widely discussed in the literature and public debate, we turn our attention to a less explored topic – the mismatch or conflict between EPS users' expectations from the services and the accountability demands of the authorities and the resources they make available to the services (Moen & Szulevicz, 2022). The EPS centres thus find themselves in a dilemma. On one hand, they are expected to facilitate the establishment of inclusive learning environments for as many students as possible to be part of mainstream education. On the other hand, schools and parents ask for individual assessments of students. The result is that EP counsellors spend a substantial amount of their working time on writing statutory psychoeducational reports; at the same time, they are expected to be more practice-oriented and supportive of teachers in creating inclusive learning environments.

Over the years, EP counsellors have faced criticism for their lack of adaptability and for the fact that most of their working time is devoted to individual student assessments. The dominant critique is that EP counsellors have been too reluctant to abandon the medical model in favour of an ecological orientation and more expansive understandings of student problems (Sullivan et al., 2019). This is compounded by how the public debate on EP practice is characterized by the consistent theme of “reconstruction” and “reformulation” of the profession, which suggests persistent under confidence in its professional identity and direction (Fallon et al., 2010).

The challenges in the field of EP practice often tend to be explained with reference to the lack of relevant competencies among EP counsellors (Szulevicz & Tanggaard, 2017). Although EP counsellors have many functions that they can carry out, the assessment task continues to play a large role in the field. In this article, we go beyond discussions related to the relevance of the professional backgrounds or competencies of EP counsellors. Instead, we have interviewed Norwegian and Danish EP counsellors about how they understand their own work conditions and premises for their counselling in light of the current status and ongoing debate regarding EP practice.

### Danish and Norwegian educational psychology counselling

From being a service that mainly worked with individual children and youths referred by schools and/or parents, EPS are increasingly required by both Danish and Norwegian national authorities to move towards more system-oriented and consultative work. Among other things, this means that EPS should help and support schools in developing inclusive learning environments for everyone, including children with special needs. The two reasons for this emphasis are the high rates of referrals to the services, and the idea that systemic and prevention-oriented approaches may be more effective ways of helping and supporting schools than the traditional work with referred individuals (Nordahl et al.,

2018). However, in parallel with system-oriented and consultative work, the authorities in both countries obviously also expect EPS to focus on individual children referred by schools and/or parents, as this is still a core function for EP counsellors. This means that EP counsellors spend considerable time on conducting individual student assessments, evaluating special education eligibility and writing statutory psychoeducational reports. In Norway, this double role is referred to as EPS' "two-part" (Hustad et al., 2013; Moen et al., 2018) or "double" mandate (Tveit et al., 2012), while the Danish EPS are said to be walking "on two legs" (Nielsen, 2019). Thus, the field of EP counselling practice has a multifaceted nature (Müller et al., 2021; Rosenfield, 2022). It is a constant challenge for EP counsellors to balance both general and special education matters and to contribute with pedagogical-psychological advice regarding collective issues, while being experts in dealing with challenges related to individual students (Kureer, 2021).

Discussions about the roles of EP counsellors, and what the mandate of EPS should be, are not new. Back in 1994, Shinn and McConnell (1994), for example, urged for the field of EP practice to restructure its perspective to serve more general education students instead of requiring counsellors to spend most of their time on assessing the special education eligibility of individual students. Since the 1990s, the field has more or less constantly been in a transition phase, with the intention to shift from a primarily individualized orientation towards children with problems to a greater focus on how a systemic, consultative approach extends the possibilities for understanding and acting in relation to problems experienced in schools. Both the Danish and the Norwegian EPS are part of the same global trend, where authorities express their ambition that EP counsellors move from exclusively focusing on individual children with problems to helping schools and teachers develop inclusive educational environments (Kolnes et al., 2021; Szulevicz, 2018). Both quantitative (Idsoe, 2003; 2007; Idsoe et al., 2008) and qualitative (Moen & Szulevicz, 2022; ) studies show that consultative and system work is positively assessed by EPS employees. EP counsellors also appear to support a more consultative role, as they express their desire to spend less time on working at the individual level and more at the systemic level. However, according to studies from both Denmark (Szulevicz, 2021) and Norway (Fylling & Handegård, 2009; Hustad et al., 2013), there seems to be a limited ability to prioritize system intervention and prevention work and programmes. EP counsellors still devote an increasing amount of their time to working on individual student assessments and completing statutory expert assessments (Hygum & Bork, 2022; Szulevicz & Arnfred, 2022; Szulevicz & Arnfred, 2023).

## **Theoretical framework**

Over the years, the field of EP practice has expanded through the provision of individual student assessments, counselling, mental health services and a range of other services. Since many EPS centres currently receive increased referrals of individual students, many EP counsellors face unmanageable caseloads, which creates a fundamental conflict where EP counsellors must prioritize among their different tasks. In our study, we aim to combine the perspectives of conflicting processes of professionalization within EPS with the more micro-oriented practice of conflicts as a foundation for negotiations and development found in sociocultural approaches. Sociocultural approaches (Lave, 2011; Valsiner, 2014; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978) emphasize how development is shaped by the contexts in which individuals are based and live, as well as by the social and interactional relations between individuals. In sociocultural approaches, social practice is perceived as

fundamentally conflictual because social institutions are historically constituted through social practices around common problems (Højholt & Røn Larsen, 2021). Nonetheless, the majority of conflict theories consider situations of conflict as exceptions in which a hegemonic consensus collapses. Predominant understandings of conflict thus tend to regard conflicts as incidents that occur when opposing and incompatible interests clash. On the contrary, from a sociocultural perspective, conflicts are understood as an integral part of societal, cultural and historical processes and of people's collective engagement in societal practices, such as school activities, work, and so on. Conflicts arise from historical, economic, ideological and structural contradictions that permeate the processes of societal development. This understanding of conflict is based on dialectical thinking in which development is characterized as the result of people engaging in contradictory negotiations and societal processes. According to Højholt and Røn Larsen (2021), this perspective considers how conflicts can also constitute possibilities for uniting different positions for developing solutions in more integrative directions.

EP practice is a relatively small profession compared to others, such as medical, teaching or social care; therefore, many potential users of or stakeholders in the profession may have relatively less well-developed understandings of the practice (Fallon et al., 2010). As already mentioned, the relevance and legitimacy of EP practice are often questioned (Ahtola & Niemi, 2014). Marsico (2018) argues that EP practice is in crisis, as it has lost its own horizon, and no longer asks fundamental questions about how we develop as human beings. Instead, the field has been instrumentalized through emphasis on how to intervene in situations based on new trends, new requests or new problems. According to Sæverot and Kristensen (2022), the same tendency is observed more generally across the field of education, as the fundamental and normative questions related to education tend to be replaced by technical, sociological, economic and psychological ones. They argue that a consequence is that education as an autonomous field has been marginalized and delegitimized. If this critique also applies to the field of EP practice, the concern is thus that the fundamental normative and educational questions that ought to guide EPS have been replaced by prescriptive approaches, focusing on EPS methods and on how EPS most effectively support schools or make successful interventions for individual students (see also Szulevicz, 2021). Whether the field is in crisis is obviously debatable. Nonetheless, for decades, the field of EP practice has found itself at a crossroads between different and often conflicting demands and ideologies (Conoley et al., 2020; Szulevicz & Tanggaard, 2017).

The changes that EPS are undergoing can be understood in line with Evetts' (2003) conceptualization of such transformation as professionalization from above, in contrast to professionalization from within. The distinction points to the difference between the processes of professionalization in any field as dependent on whether they are the results of a collective, bottom-up development initiated by the profession itself, or of a state-led policy initiative to improve the quality of services or other declared goals. Furthermore, the processes initiated from above might come in direct conflict with the professionals' set of values and competencies as a foundation for action. Examples could be state-directed competence schemes for a profession that do not align with the experienced needs in the field of practice, which again creates resistance to the overall idea of professionalization through competence development. In newer approaches to the understanding of professionalism, it has been argued that managing these conflicts and navigating in organizations facing conflictual demands are characteristics of professionalism itself (Noordegraaf, 2011a, 2015), especially (and increasingly) so in the public sector and welfare work, such

as EPS. In the following section, we turn to how we empirically examine the conflicting norms faced by Danish and Norwegian EPS workers.

## Design and method

Six educational psychology counsellors (EP counsellors), three each in Denmark and in Norway, were interviewed with the aim of highlighting their experiences with their work in EPS. The Danish informants were all trained psychologists, while the Norwegian informants had a professional background in special education. The different professional backgrounds of the counsellors also reflect a general difference between Danish and Norwegian EPS, as there are, proportionally, significantly more psychologists employed in EPS in Denmark than in Norway, where there are more employed with a special pedagogical professional background.

Being semi-structured, the interviews became open for topics that concerned the informants themselves. From the data analysis, it emerged, among other things, that the informants in both countries reflected on demands from national authorities and challenges in realizing these demands in practice. The educational-psychological research field has a tradition of studying schools and educational-psychological practices across countries (see, e.g., Farrell et al., 2007; Hannås & Hanssen, 2016; Szulevicz & Moen, 2021). The cross-national perspective can help shed light on differences and similarities in ways of understanding and organizing practice, as well as contribute to a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of a phenomenon. And although our sample size is small in this study, we want to contribute to further knowledge production within this tradition, which is one of the reasons for our investigation. In the public sphere, politicians, school bureaucrats, teachers and parents express their opinions and views on EPS. EP counsellors' own voices may be muffled in the crowd. In this context, we deem it important to highlight, illuminate and analyze what is referred to as insiders' perspectives in qualitative research (Erickson, 1986), that is, the experiences of those who work with counselling in EPS on a daily basis. This is the second rationale for our study. In accordance with the guidelines in both countries, this study was previously registered and approved by a research committee at Aalborg University and by the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD; now Sikt), respectively. The selection criterion was that the informants should be experienced EP counsellors who were willing to share their EPS work experiences and reflections with researchers. The Danish informants were recruited via the first author's request to three different EPS offices, where the three EP counsellors volunteered to be interviewed. The Norwegian informants were recruited when the second author taught a university-based course for EP counsellors. The research project was presented to the prospective informants, and those who were interested in participating signed up. The method can thus be characterized as an *accessibility selection* (Thagaard, 2003), where participation in both countries is based on voluntary consent. The interview guide, which was common to both countries, was themed around the interviewees' general reflections on the work, reflections on the methodological approaches used in the cases that they were working on, individual and system-oriented and consultative work, as well as reflections related to the increase in the number of children and young people with mental problems. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related school closures, the interviews were conducted online in the spring of 2020. All six interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The Norwegian interview transcripts amount to 84 pages, and the Danish interview transcripts a total of 96 pages (Times New Roman, 12 points, 1.5 line spacing).

To maintain the privacy of the participants, all names and places are removed from the interview excerpts quoted in this article. In the initial investigation of the data, the informants' reflections on the demands from national authorities, as well as the resulting challenges, appeared to be a recurring pattern in the interviews. With this starting point, the first author highlighted relevant statements in the Danish interview transcripts, and the second author did the same with the Norwegian interview transcripts. These were then analyzed based on the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which means that the statements from both countries were coded and compared to identify their content-related similarities and differences. In the next phase, the analysis and the findings were presented and discussed with the third author. The aim was to agree on what should be elucidated in this study. In this phase, a common understanding and opinion formation were sought through critical and comprehensive discussions (Rossman & Rallis, 2011) among the authors. During this inductive analytical process, three topics were identified: 1) the methodological conflict, 2) the time and capacity conflict and 3) the normative conflict.

## Findings

### Methodological conflict

The first theme is related to a fundamental conflict in which the interviewed EP counsellors described how they faced different and sometimes, contrasting demands in their everyday work practices. They explained that the expectations came from teachers, parents or state-led policy initiatives. We framed this as a methodological conflict, since the EP counsellors faced various kinds of expectations that affected their work methodologies and practices.

Our analysis of the data showed that the EP counsellors in both countries were preoccupied with consultative and system-oriented work. Even if EPS had a double mandate, the demand for consultative and system-oriented work appeared to be even more emphasized than ever.

However, challenges or possible conflicts might arise as the EP counsellors experienced constantly shifting and sometimes, even contrasting demands, as explained by one of the interviewed Danish EP counsellors:

I have been through 20 reorganizations or so, and I haven't even been here that long. When I started, we were part of the family department in our local authority. Afterwards, we were transferred to the school department. For a period of time, we were asked to write a lot of individual assessments. Then, we had a period when conversations with children were on the agenda, but suddenly, these were restricted because we had to work consultatively instead. We then spent huge amounts of time convincing our schools that the consultative approach was a better way of helping them. But all the teachers were annoyed because they felt that it didn't help them anymore because we didn't look at the children individually anymore.

The EP counsellors were thus expected to accommodate new requirements and engage in professional development activities with substantial methodological implications to respond flexibly to what was experienced as a constantly changing sociopolitical context. The call for a change in focus to serve more general education students through

consultative, system-based and preventive interventions nonetheless seemed to remain constant. Despite the apparent consensus, the EP counsellors still reported that the schools were not necessarily looking for system-based interventions from them, as expressed by a Norwegian EP counsellor:

And I fully agree that system-based work is important. But the problem is that we are completely dependent on being invited to be able to take part in this. We can't go to the school if the school doesn't want us to, right? ... I don't know how many times I have made suggestions to the schools about working with the system. And then my initiative just disappears. If I'm going to contribute to system-oriented work, I'm completely dependent on the school inviting it and accepting it, right? But the facts are that the vast majority of referrals are for single children.

Despite the general experience among the interviewed EP counsellors that understanding of the problems and work practice tended to be quite individualized, there was also a push for collective solutions, which was exemplified by one of the Danish counsellors:

I hear quite a lot of sad stories where I think there is not much we can do here. However, I still experience a desire and willingness to work with some more collective solutions. If there are five children in a class at a school who suddenly appear on the school's lists of children in all this, then there is also a desire to, okay, what do we look at and do for the entire class? ... The focus on well-being is fortunately a high priority at most schools, and they take action when the children are not feeling well.

The preceding quotes point out different conflicting normative demands, opening up to different strategies and work methodologies to deal with them. On one hand, the shifts between system and individual focus were met with a positive attitude by EPS. On the other hand, the EP counsellors' opportunity to perform their work in alignment with this depended on each school's priorities as an organization, as well as individual teachers' expectations and invitations. The EP counsellors must thus appear as national policy advocates to fulfil the normative demands in their work and persuade the teachers and schools to be receptive of new perspectives in line with national or local authority policies. From our interviews, it seemed that the EP counsellors' own professional perspectives were downgraded or set aside by themselves to fulfil their ascribed professional role, adding to the impression of an underconfident professional identity.

#### Time and capacity conflict

Two connected issues arose when discussing time constraints and capacity limitations with the EP counsellors. The first was related to the balance between individual and system approaches. The other was related to the first but concerned the time required to work directly with schools and teachers.

The EP counsellors in both countries were concerned with the challenges connected to the demand for reducing their work with individual cases while balancing this with increased demands for working in new, system-oriented ways. Although the long-term goals were argued to be more efficient services and a new balance between individual and system-oriented approaches, a transition phase will inevitably require more time and resources allocated to both tasks. Even if the EP counsellors agree to use less time on



individual cases, they cannot choose to *refuse* working with the individuals referred to them. This is so because individual assessment is part of the EPS mandate stated in law documents in both countries. A Danish EP counsellor reported conflicting issues:

I often find that our framework conditions push us to intervene at an individual student level. We have some overall ideals about inclusion, but the special education act forces us to do an individual assessment.

Other than engaging in a methodological and normative discussion about the specific character of an EP intervention, the EP counsellors described how the increased number of students referred to EP counselling both left less resources for preventive work and created waiting lists, as expressed by a Norwegian EP counsellor:

We are in a way paralyzed by all the individual cases. We cannot reject them. We have to work with them. I think there are 150–160 cases (individual children) on the waiting list. I am very worried because we have these enormous waiting lists.

I think it's despairing when I get into cases that have been on the waiting list for almost a year, and I see how serious they are. I think it is very tragic. Our biggest challenge is that we are behind because our work is characterized by a large workload. It certainly is. We are always behind, and we are constantly stressed and pushed to reduce the number of expert assessments.

It also became clear that it was not only schools and teachers who asked EPS for help regarding students. Parents also requested individual assessments of their children, and the EP counsellors explained how they often are responsible for referrals to child and adolescent psychiatric services, which also increases the individual assessment workload of the EP counsellors.

The EP counsellors in both countries were deeply concerned about their collaboration with schools and teachers, which is also emphasized in national documents in both Denmark and Norway.

The emphasis on being close to schools and collaborating with teachers was manifested in the data from Norway; for example, one of the EP counsellors said that she collaborated more closely with special teachers and teachers in schools than with her colleagues at the EPS office. Another counsellor mentioned that it was very important for her to be responsive in relation to schools as fast as possible. The Danish EP counsellors were also trying to align their counselling more closely with the everyday practice in schools. However, one of them explained how the level of practice orientation in counselling was a matter of resources:

We are often told that our presence in schools is insufficient. But we cannot sit down in the classrooms and assist the teachers. We simply do not have resources for that.

The Norwegian EP counsellors also talked about challenges in collaborating and being as close as possible to schools and teachers. These challenges were mainly articulated as capacity and time pressure-related issues. All three counsellors served several schools, and each of them was the only EP counsellor in the schools. To cite an example, one of them

was the only EP counsellor in four schools, with an average of 500 students from Grades 1 to 10.

Both the Danish and Norwegian counsellors thus express being in a time and capacity conflict. It could be interesting to investigate whether the counsellors' different professional backgrounds (psychologists in Denmark and special educators in Norway) have consequences for their counselling. However, our data material does not provide the opportunity to illuminate this specific issue.

### Normative conflict

So far, we have presented conflicts and tensions connected to expectations, time and capacity. These were common for the two countries. Among the Danish EP counsellors, we noted their tendency to point to what we call normative conflicts. By normative conflicts, we refer to the fact that EP counsellors are faced with a range of normative and ethical dilemmas in their counselling. In both Denmark and Norway, EP counsellors are public employees; as such, they are subject to economic, political and legal standards. They are also expected to represent and show a certain loyalty to the public system. However, one of the Danish EP counsellors raised a concern that the public system is part of the problem, and the school system itself is contributing to the learning difficulties and escalating mental health problems in the student population:

One of our main challenges is that we are dealing with societal problems and ... the problems within a school system that is under pressure itself. Right now, the school system focuses a lot on professional and vocational competencies and less on the Bildung aspects of schooling. We have a lot of children who deal with individual problems like anxiety issues and self-harm. But in my opinion, we are witnessing societal problems, and it is very difficult to help these students within a school system that is very focused on competition and visible learning.

In the preceding interview excerpt, the Danish EP counsellor identified the school system as part of the reason why many students had difficulties and failed to thrive. The EP counsellor thus found himself in a normative conflict where, on one hand, he represents the system, but on the other hand, he also sees the same system as one of the reasons why children increasingly experience distress.

Another example of a normative conflict was related to discussions about the caregiver/child ratio and group size in early childhood education and care. One of the Danish EP counsellors expressed her concern, as follows:

But I think that we underestimate the critical issue of [not only] the daycare [centres] being short-staffed but also the lack of quality.

The EP counsellor described a fundamental dilemma in educational counselling. In many ways, educational counselling is a so-called indirect service in which educational counsellors work behind the scenes to support children, teachers and pedagogues. However, if the daycare centres are short-staffed, as the counsellor reported, it represents structural, organizational and economic challenges that can hardly be alleviated through counselling. In this example, the counsellor was worried that her counselling would function as

symptom treatment in relation to problems that should be dealt with at political and societal levels.

An additional instance of a normative conflict was expressed by another Danish EP counsellor. She addressed the challenge in balancing the task of describing both student weaknesses and strengths:

I have a great ambivalence, which is built into both the work function and organization called PPR [Danish acronym for EPS]. It's hard because our job is to troubleshoot to ensure that someone can help the kids. And if we write that they have strengths, and we try to find the appreciative point of view too much, then the children do not get the help they need in the system. We also have a basic premise in PPR, which states that these are individual referrals focusing on individual children, and this is completely against the systemic and narrative perspectives. Of course, we would really like to receive inquiries about children in groups, but the entire system in PPR is built around single children and built on the fact that they must have difficulties before we come in. We cannot do anything until there are problems with a child.

With the increase in the number of students referred to EP counselling, many special schools in Denmark are pushed beyond the limits of their capacity. Consequently, EP counsellors must emphasize the deficits of a child in order to gain access to special education placement.

In our empirical materials, the Danish EP counsellors were more inclined to describe normative conflicts related to their counselling compared to their Norwegian counterparts. Our data do not allow us to conclude if this is a general trend. As mentioned, the Norwegian counsellors described how they were challenged by huge caseloads, increasing referrals and methodological conflicts. Despite some of the concerns raised by the counsellors from both countries, they agreed that EP counselling was important and meaningful, as explained by one of the Norwegian counsellors:

It is meaningful. Yes, then it is daring to be loyal to the child then – that our loyalty lies with the child. Because it requires something from us. That we take the perspective of the child.

The EP counsellor described how adopting a child's perspective became a strategy to navigate the different dilemmas and challenges in counselling. It thus seemed that across the different kinds of conflicts experienced by the EP counsellors, they adopted varying coping strategies to legitimize, negotiate, explain and understand the conflictual dilemmas in their working lives.

## Discussion

The inductive empirical analysis has pointed out three conflict dimensions that the EP counsellors have to manage in their daily working lives. The challenges in the field of EP practice often tend to be explained with reference to the lack of relevant competencies among EP counsellors (Szulevitz & Tanggaard, 2017). In contrast, our identification of different kinds of conflicts in EP practice points to understanding these challenges as structural, organizational, legal and cooperative conflicts. Likewise, our analysis shows how the challenges are of an extremely complex nature that cannot be reduced to a matter

of the competencies or professional backgrounds of EP counsellors. One of the interviewed Danish EP counsellors addressed this issue by arguing for more collective solutions:

Although our work is very interdisciplinary, we have a great deal of individual responsibility, where we negotiate how we will cooperate with the schools individually. I think it would be a better solution if we thought more organizationally about this task, so that it does not just become the responsibility of the individual EP counsellor.

On one hand, advocating organizational solutions that address individual experiences of occupational, normative and conflicting demands is putting the responsibility where it belongs, instead of individualizing structural problems. On the other hand, organizational solutions do not constitute a uniform or easily accommodated way forward. Organizations are complex entities with loose couplings and often characterized by vertical and horizontal segregation of different parts (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This is also true in the case of organizations in the field of education (Rapp, 2018; Weick, 1976, 1995). Globally, we see trends indicating that more children and young people are experiencing distress. In this context, the quality of EP counselling becomes even more crucial. This also applies in a Scandinavian welfare context, where EP counselling and its societal and normative function are rarely the subject of either research or public debate.

In creating new organizational connections to handle conflictual demands experienced by either users (in this case, children and parents) or staff (EP counsellors), difficulties are often encountered when attempting to cope with structural, cognitive and geographic distances (different locations under the same organizations) (Nesheim et al., 2019). Often, differences in jurisdictional power (Abbott, 1988) also make interactions difficult when organizational solutions are sought. With this as a background, it is clear that the kind of conflictual experiences as a point of departure in the sociocultural framework with which we started out will persist also when solutions are sought – they are simply part and parcel of the ways that people in general, and EP counsellors in this specific case, move about in the world. Noordegraaf (2007, 2011b, 2015) points out that dealing with organizational demands must be perceived as part of professionalism in itself. However, as argued by Vabø (2019), it is also possible to view this claim for hybrid professionalism as a response to the dialectics of steering in the public sector, shifting from a public administration approach to a new public management or public governance approach. In this respect, the shifts in claims for professionalism and the changing trends in EPS work, mapped out earlier and reflected in the interviews, also mirror broader trends in public sector administration. Furthermore, the identification of these shifts and the call for organizational solutions beg the question of whether the situation is not merely another pivot in the shifting dialectics.

Based on the literature and the research on both the public sector in general and EPS in particular, this critical perspective adds another layer to the possible solutions by highlighting the fact that policymaking in the field of special education needs should be informed by both the history and the development in the field, as well as by empirical studies such as this, to avoid simply repeating old shifts and solutions. Organizational solutions can certainly be found, but these should take into account the complexity and conflictual nature of EPS work.

## Conclusion

By empirically addressing the conflictual demands experienced by EP counsellors in two similar yet distinct contexts (Denmark and Norway), we have mapped out three different areas of conflict (methodological conflicts, time and capacity conflicts, and normative conflicts). We have also pointed out the inherently conflictual nature of EPS work, as well as the challenges that EP counsellors face in developing and professionalizing their work in increasingly complex organizations that also experience shifts in the modes of governance from public authorities. However, our sample is small, and although it has proven useful as a point of departure, there is a need for more research that does not simply take the conflicting demands as a given premise, but focuses on how these are experienced and dealt with. This will be useful in developing new modes of organizing the important and challenging work in EPS, with the aim to improve its quality and professionalism.

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