

# SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN NORWAY

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*Abstract: This article is an analysis of how a discourse within special needs education relates to ethnic diversity in Norway. The analysis is based on a review of research projects, publications in four journals and curriculums at major institutions that qualify for professional work within special needs education or counselling. It is concluded that a monocultural "regime of truth" dominates the discourse in a multicultural context. Ethnic diversity in education is a challenge to critically analyse epistemology, theory, method and norms that the professional discourse applies in a multicultural context.*

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## Introduction

How does a discourse within special needs education relate to ethnic diversity?<sup>1</sup> The basic assumption is that a discourse within special needs education plays a crucial role in the process of categorising the educational needs of children with ethnic minority background. The discourse produces concepts, norms, methods and standards that are applied in the assessment processes. The discourse contributes to the construction of normality and deviance and processes of inclusion and exclusion in a multicultural context.

Today about 8 per cent of the population in Norway has an immigrant background. This has significantly changed the population in schools. In Oslo almost 30 per cent of the children in compulsory education belong to an

ethnic minority. They have a linguistic, cultural, historical and social background that differs from the ethnic majority. This significant change in the demography in schools has developed during the past 20–30 years. However, a multicultural population in schools is not an entirely new phenomenon in Norway. Historically, sami children, tater (the travelling people), kvener (Finnish descendants) and other minorities have been taught in Norwegian schools within the framework of standard education. These children have basically been invisible in the dominant educational discourse, assimilated into mainstream education. How does a discourse within special needs education relate to linguistic and ethnic diversity in schools today?

### *Analysis of a discourse*

Discourse can be defined as a group of statements "in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation (Foucault 1995: 117)." A discourse that applies to one and the same phenomenon; the education of children with "special needs," constitutes a discourse. Institutions qualifying for work in special education and researchers and professional practitioners contribute to the discourse within special needs education. The objective here is to identify some characteristics of the discourse in a multicultural context. I analyse publications in terms of books/monographs and publications in journals. I also study curriculum at institutions that qualify for professional work as teachers or as counsellors within the *Educational and psychological counselling service (Pedagogisk-psykologisk tjeneste)*, which assesses pupils' needs for special education.

The article is an initial analysis of how a discourse within special needs education relates to ethnic diversity. It should be regarded, as an "opening up" of an issue which is both important and controversial. In order to get a broader view of the situation in the field other studies are needed to complete "the picture." At the outset it should also be noted that research within special needs education is a relatively new field of research in Norway. Historically, knowledge development within special needs education has been developed primarily through professional practice.

### *Analytical strategies*

I have identified research projects and publications within special needs education that has ethnic diversity as a major research topic. The research projects were identified on the basis of search in libraries and databanks and contact with researchers in the field. The study of research concentrates primarily on publications by researchers at or above PhD level. I also focus upon some large research projects during the 1990s and how they relate to ethnic diversity. Studies on how general educational research has related to ethnic diversity over the years, are analysed elsewhere (Pihl 2001b).

I have studied the discourse in four journals that specifically address special needs education or pedagogical-psychological counselling. The journals reflect and construct the discourse within special needs education. *Spesial-pedagogikk* is the only Norwegian journal on special needs education. *Nordisk tidsskrift for spesialpedagogikk* is the only Nordic research journal for special needs education. *Skolepsykologi* is the journal for the Educational and psychological counselling service. *European Journal of Special Needs* is an important European journal in which Norwegian researchers publish. For the purpose of this study, these journals are relevant and significant.

However, publications in these journals are not representative of all publications in the field of special needs education. Researchers and professionals publish in other journals as

well. Nevertheless, it is a fair assumption that the four journals that specifically address special needs education give a good indication of how the discourse within special needs education relates to ethnic diversity.

I have analysed the curriculum at some important institutions that qualify for professional practice within special needs education or educational and psychological counselling. I analyse when a multicultural curriculum was introduced and defined as obligatory within the standard curriculum, and the quantity and themes within the multicultural curriculum. The curriculum indicates to what extent professionals are being qualified specifically for practice in a multicultural context.

The curriculum was studied at “professionally oriented studies” (“profesjonsstudiet”) at three institutes at the University of Oslo. *The Department of Special Needs Education* is the most important educational institution that qualifies for professional work within special needs education in Norway. At the *Institute of Educational Research* students may choose educational and psychological counselling as a speciality at postgraduate level. Professionals who work within the *Educational and psychological counselling service* are recruited from both of these educational institutions.

*The Institute of Psychology* provides general education in psychology (Wold 1995). Psychology is strictly speaking not a discourse “within special needs education,” but the institute educates

psychologists who work as counsellors within the *Educational and psychological counselling service*. Psychology is an important profession within the service. As counsellors psychologists contribute significantly to the professional discourse within the service. This is the argument for including the *Institute of Psychology* in the study. I found that the multicultural curriculum was extremely limited in the year 2000. I therefore decided to restrict the analysis of the curriculum to the year 2000 – there is hardly reason to believe that a multicultural curriculum has been more extensive during previous years.

### **Research projects relating to ethnic diversity**

#### ***Research project about children with an immigrant background***

In 1989 Hauge (1989) analysed schools’ referral of children with an immigrant background to special needs education in Oslo in 1987. It is an analysis of the assessment process and how the counsellors judged their own qualifications and competence when they worked with children with an immigrant background. The study focuses upon the relation between standard education, special needs education and bilingual education and the consequences of this relation upon education of minority pupils. International research had documented that ethnic minority pupils were heavily represented in special needs education

classes at the time (Ibid). Were ethnic minority children disabled to a greater extent than majority children? Or could the overrepresentation be linked to the lack of bilingual and multicultural education and to the assessment procedure itself?

Hauge's theoretical focus was on how monocultural education generates special needs among minority children. This was in opposition to a dominant, pathological and individualistic discourse, which dominates research in special needs education (Haug, Tøssebro and Dalen 1999). Hauge draws a theoretical distinction between multicultural education and special needs education and points to the need for changes in educational policy: bilingual education is needed in a multicultural context. The book highlights a dilemma; standard monocultural education has little to offer linguistic and ethnic minority pupils who have difficulties in school, except special needs education.

Hauge came to the surprising conclusion that ethnic minority children were underrepresented in special needs education in Norway at the time. According to Hauge, minority pupils who needed special education did not receive it. The conclusion was controversial. It implied that more pupils with minority background ought to receive special needs education. Up to the present, no studies were conducted which might confirm or reject this conclusion.

### ***Research project about children adopted from abroad***

Dalen (1992) is the first study within special needs education in Norway that analyses socialisation, learning and identity development among children who are adopted from abroad. Questions of discrimination, racism, assimilation, integration and solidarity are important with respect to education of adopted children as well as other children with an immigrant background. One important difference between these groups is that adopted children live in middle class families. Dalen found that 30 per cent of the adopted children had received special needs education, whereas 10 per cent of majority pupils receive special needs education (Ibid). Another difference is that adopted children live and are being socialised in Norwegian families.

Research about adopted children has been developed as a specific field of research (Dalen and Rygvold 1999; Dalen and Sætersdal 1999; Rygvold, Dalen and Sætersdal 1999; Sætersdal and Dalen 1999). The research focus is on adoption, identity, ethnicity, school achievement, language development and special needs. The research confirms the initial finding that about 1/3 of the adopted children have problems at school. The adopted scored significantly lower on competence in managing school-related language and on the ability to concentrate (hyperactive behaviour), compared to Norwegian born children. Between 25–30 per cent develop problems related to language, learning, identity and ethnicity (Dalen and

Rygvoid 1999).

Adopted children have received special needs education to a significantly greater extent than Norwegian children have, but traditional special needs education has not been effective in relation to children adopted from abroad. This is a very important conclusion, with relevance for education of other ethnic minority pupils as well. Dalen and Sætersdal conclude that children adopted from abroad need a different form of special needs education which relates to the specific language situation of these children (Dalen and Sætersdal 1999). This is a challenge to further research in a multicultural perspective. Two questions emerge from this. Do adopted pupils with difficulties in school need a different form of special education? Or might changes in standard education have prevented the children's need for special education? The answer to these questions points in different directions. One direction will develop special needs education specifically in order to meet the needs of adopted children more adequately than today. Another direction will investigate how standard education can meet the needs of adopted children more adequately than today.

### ***Language development among immigrant children***

Lie (1996) has studied development of the first language among ex-Yugoslav children who have immigrated to Norway. Lie concludes that the children have only retained their first language at a

communicative, oral level. This situation is explained by the strong influence of Norwegian language and culture, lack of linguistic homogeneity, input, stimuli and motivation for developing the first language, and the lack of organised teaching in the first language of ex-Yugoslav children.

### ***Other research projects in the 1990s***

A research program sponsored by The Research Council of Norway evaluated "the state of the art" within special needs educational research (Haug et al. 1999)." It concluded that research is completely dominated by a focus upon specific categories of disabled children and upon methodology. The analysis documents a relative absence of theoretical focus on the educational system itself and the cultural content of education. A cultural perspective, including a multicultural perspective, is almost totally absent.

The Research Council of Norway initiated a large research program within special needs education in 1996. The research program was designed to investigate questions of organisation, teaching methods, pedagogical strategies and content in relation to children with special needs (Haug and Tøssebro 1999). A presentation of the different projects within this program shows that none of the projects study how special needs education relates to education of children with an ethnic minority background (Ibid).

A third research project points in the same direction (Haug 1999). Haug

develops a broad analysis of special needs education within primary education in Norway during the past fifty years. He identifies two discourses within special needs education. A medical discourse explains needs with individual, biological, organic or socially dependant pathologies. The other discourse explains disabilities as social constructs (Haug 1999:22). The medical discourse dominates over the latter. However, none of these discourses have addressed issues related to the multicultural population in society and schools.

#### Discourse in four journals 1985-2000

Table 1 shows publications in four different journals that address special needs education and counselling in a multicultural perspective.

Between 1985 and 2000 neither *Skolepsykologi* nor *European Journal of Special Needs Education* published any articles which had special needs education in a multicultural context as topic. (The European journal was established in 1987). *Nordisk tidsskrift for spesialpedagogikk* published only four articles about multicultural topics during the past 15 years. *Spesialpedagogikk* published one issue in 1990 and altogether 14 articles between 1985 and 2000. In conclusion: during the past 15 years these four journals only published 18 articles altogether, which relate special needs education to a multicultural society and population in schools. The majority (14 articles) were published in one and the same journal – *Spesialpedagogikk*.

Table 2 gives titles of the 18 publications which address ethnic diversity between 1985 and 2000.

**Table 1: Publications about ethnic diversity in four journals between 1985 and 2000.**

| Name of journals                         | Issues on ethnic diversity<br>1985-2000 | Articles on ethnic diversity<br>1985-2000 |
|--|---|---|
| Skolepsykologi                           | 0                                       | 0   |
| European Journal of Special Needs Ed.    | 0                                       | 0   |
| Nordisk tidsskrift for spesialpedagogikk | 0                                       | 4   |
| Spesialpedagogikk                        | 1                                       | 14  |
| Sum                                      | 1                                       | 18  |

**Table 2: Articles about ethnic diversity in *Nordisk tidsskrift for spesialpedagogikk* and *Spesialpedagogikk* between 1985 and 2000.**

| Publications about ethnic diversity 1985 - 2000                   | Year   | Name of journal                  |
|---|--------|----------------------------------|
| Multicultural teaching in multicultural classes                   | 1987   | Nordisk tidsskrift for spes.ped. |
| Children adopted from abroad in Norway                            | 1987   | Nordisk tidsskrift for spes.ped. |
| Organising education for linguistic minority pupils               | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Immigrant children in a suburb outside Oslo                       | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Fjell – a multicultural school in Drammen                         | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Linguistic minority children with special needs                   | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Educational and psychological counselling in the inner city       | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Deaf children among ethnic minority pupils                        | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Speech therapy in a multicultural perspective                     | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Child care in a transcultural perspective                         | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Introductory program for immigrants                               | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Special education for adult immigrants and asylum seekers         | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Antiracist work at school   | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Linguistic minorities in primary education                        | 1990/1 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Migration pedagogy as a field of development in special education | 1993/2 | Spesialpedagogikk                |
| Special education and racial hygiene/eugenics                     | 1994/1 | Nordisk Tidsskrift for spes.ped. |
| Handicapped children of immigrant Muslim Parents                  | 1994/1 | Nordisk Tidsskrift for spes.ped  |
| Teaching model for a multicultural school                         | 1997/4 | Spesialpedagogikk                |

The majority of publications were as far back as in 1990. There was no increase in publications during the 1990s, although the multicultural population in schools is increasing.

### Themes relating to ethnic diversity

#### *The eugenics movement*

Although there are few articles about education in a multicultural context,

these discuss many of the basic challenges which ethnic diversity represents to special needs education. Arte (1994) analyses the question of disability and ethnicity in a historical perspective. He outlines the basic principles of racial hygiene/eugenics, which categorised and measured individuals “degree of humanity” and defined some people as “not-human.” Motivated by nationalism or economic efficiency, eugenics advocated and practised sterilisation of disabled

persons and ethnic minorities.

The eugenics movement raises fundamental questions about the intersection of science, politics and professional practice in the social construction of disability and ethnicity in a multicultural context (Pihl 2000b). This concerns important questions related to the professional categorisation of "The Other," the misuse of science, and the exercise of professional power in a multicultural society. These fundamental questions are of utmost importance to education in general, and to special needs education in particular. The historical heritage that the history of the eugenics movement and scientific racism in western science and professional practice represents (Gould 1981; Koch 1996; Lavik 1998; Haave 2000; Pihl 2000a; Pihl 2000b) constitutes a major challenge to special needs education. The documented oppression of ethnic minorities by professionals, often in the name of science, in the name of objective, professional judgement or in the name of benevolence, contributes to the fact that the relation between special needs education and ethnicity is regarded as a "minefield" (Morken 1993).

### ***Multicultural and special needs education – a "minefield"***

The relationship between multicultural education and special needs education is a sensitive, controversial topic that basically has been neglected within special needs education (Morken 1993). According to Morken, fear of producing

a wrong diagnosis, fear of stigmatising and professional uncertainty has contributed to this situation.

Morken argues that multicultural education and special needs education are separate fields within education. Being disabled and belonging to an ethnic minority are two different things. Nevertheless, there is a need for special needs education to relate to ethnic relations, firstly because pupils from ethnic minorities also may have "ordinary" disabilities that require special needs education. Secondly Morken argues that linguistic and ethnic minorities may have special needs that are caused by the multicultural society itself. Morken argues that multicultural topics should be included in special needs education. Special needs education is the answer for the disabled and multicultural education for language and cultural minorities (Ibid:9).

But what should teachers and counsellors do if the option between multicultural education and special needs education is dubious, due to the fact that education is basically monocultural? (Pihl 1999; 2001a; 2000c; 2000d). Should teachers and counsellors categorise minority pupils as in need of special needs education if the childrens' problems are caused by monocultural education?

### ***"Learning problems related to migration"***

Morken introduces a new assessment category, which is a positive response to these questions. "Learning problems



related to migration” is defined as ordinary functional problems among minority pupils, specific problems related to the migration process, specific problems caused by teaching and problems related to belonging to an ethnic minority (Morken 1993). According to Morken, the challenge within special needs education is to relate the problems of ethnic minorities in school to the migration process, to the majority-minority situation, to being a victim of racism and to relate ethnic minority children’s special needs to poor conditions for bicultural and bilingual development.

Morken’s argument highlights dilemmas in education. By introducing a diagnostic category that is designed specifically for minority pupils, these pupils are constructed as a specific object of special needs education, defined specifically in relation to ethnicity. The suggested assessment category “learning problems related to migration” appears to be inconsistent with Morken’s argument that bilingual education and special needs education are separate fields in education.

With regard to bilingual education, Morken suggests that professionals within special needs education might test minority children’s educational needs in order to assess whether they need bilingual education (Morken 1993). This presupposes bilingual education on the basis of a cultural deprivation paradigm and a transition model. It is an argument for bilingual education as a compensatory measure. Bilingual edu-

cation in terms of compensatory education provides bilingual education on the basis of a documented lack of proficiency in the dominant language (which requires extensive testing). In the Norwegian school law of 1998 (“Opplæringslova”) bilingual education was introduced as a compensatory measure in regulations pursuant to the law (Pihl 2001a). The irony of introducing a “right” to bilingual education based on a deficit paradigm (as a compensatory measure), is that this will generate a dramatic increase in testing of minority pupils in their second language (Norwegian) in order to decide whether they “need” bilingual education. There is reason to believe that an effect of this will be an unprecedented production of social facts that document minority pupils’ incapacity and underachievement in the dominant language, when compared to majority pupils.

### *Recognition of minority pupils’ first language?*

The alternative to this is recognition of minority pupils’ first language as valuable in itself and corresponding entitlement to bilingual education. The alternative is recognition of minority pupils as linguistic minority pupils with a different first language and with linguistic qualifications in their first language. Entitlement to bilingual education does not depend upon assessment that documents the pupil’s poor proficiency in the dominant language (Norwegian).

Morken’s suggestion that professionals

within special needs education might assess minority pupils' need for bilingual education, appears to be inconsistent with Morken's argument that there is, and should be, a distinction between special needs education and bilingual education. The proposal that professionals within special needs education might test, rests on an implicit assumption that professionals within special needs education are qualified for assessing language proficiency among bilingual pupils. This is highly questionable, especially in view of the monocultural education of professionals within special needs education that is being documented here (see previous and following analysis).

The previous inconsistency points to dilemmas that are caused by the educational system itself. There is evidence both in research and practice, that monocultural education in a multicultural context is a systemic factor that may generate learning difficulties among pupils with an ethnic and a linguistic minority background

(Skutnabb-Kangas 1980; 1981; Cummins 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins 1988). This points to the need for changes in educational policy and research that recognise ethnic and linguistic diversity in education and develop the educational system systematically on the basis of the multicultural population in schools.

### Curriculum for professionally oriented studies

How does educational discourse qualify professionals for work within special needs education in a multicultural context? In 1987 the colleges for teacher education in Oslo and Akershus commissioned a report about how educational institutions should qualify teachers for professional work in a multicultural context. The commission delivered three reports (Befring, Hauge and Morken 1988a; 1988b; 1989). This did have a slight influence on the curriculum (see below).

**Table 3: Multicultural curriculum 1999/2000 at post-graduate professional studies in education at Faculty of Education, University of Oslo.**

| Educational institutions          | Degree (6 years) | Multicultural curriculum 1999/2000 | Total curriculum | Multic. curr. in per cent |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| Institute of Educational Research | Cand. ed.        | 373 pages                          | ca. 17.500 pages | ca. 2                     |
| Dep. of Special Needs Education   | Cand.paed. spec. | 655 pages                          | ca.15. 000 pages | ca. 4                     |

Following recommendations from the commission The Department of Special Needs Education introduced a preliminary course on "Learning problems related to migration" in 1989. This course was, however, discontinued. In 1997/98 "Learning problems related to migration" was introduced as a topic within the *standard curriculum* for the first time (Institutt for Spesial-pedagogikk 1997) (593 pages + an article on a multicultural approach in contemporary philosophy of social science, 62 pages).

At the Institute of Educational Research "Multicultural education" was introduced as an optional curriculum in 1993/94 (Pedagogisk forskningsinstitutt 1994) (107 pages). At professionally oriented studies ("profesjonsstudiet") a multicultural curriculum was introduced on the standard curriculum in 1997/98. In 1999/2000 the multicultural curriculum amounts to 330 pages (Pedagogisk forskningsinstitutt 1999). During six years of study, the multicultural curriculum at these two institutions amounts to between two and four percent of the total curriculum.

The multicultural curriculum covers general topics related to education in a multicultural context: questions of language instruction and learning, bilingualism, questions of socialisation, culture, ethnicity, identity, integration and empowerment. These are relevant and important topics. But none of the educational institutions have curriculum about the social construction of disability and ethnicity in a historical and multicultural perspective, or

analyses of how disability and ethnicity are constructs that converge under specific social and historical circumstances. Theoretical, methodological or political problems related to professional assessment of ethnic minority pupils' educational needs are practically absent in the curriculum. A dominant characteristic of the standard curriculum at these two institutions is that it is structured around specific disabilities and counselling practice.

In 1999/2000 The Institute of Psychology still has no curriculum which specifically addresses psychological theory or practice in a multicultural context. Students in psychology who specialise in school counselling may choose an optional course about children who need "adjusted teaching." This course contains 47 pages about multicultural issues (Psykologisk institutt 1999).

## Discussion

### *A monocultural "regime of truth"*

The previous analysis indicates that the discourse within special needs education relates to ethnic diversity to a very limited extent. It is only very recently that multicultural issues emerge on the standard curriculum. Ethnic diversity is indeed a very marginal topic within the professionally oriented studies, even today. Theoretical and empirical studies investigating the intersections and differences between special needs education and bilingual/multicultural

education are scarce. There is a lack of metaperspective on professional practice and lack of studies of how the professions construct the object and the field of which they speak, when categorising "The Other" in a multicultural context.

In fact, a monocultural "regime of truth" dominates the discourses within special needs education. Foucault coined the phrase "regimes of truth" with reference to the establishment of discursive regimes in which the practice of true and false can be made both ordered and pertinent. According to Foucault, each discursive regime is a power/knowledge nexus, which distinguishes true and false statements on the base of rules that are operating within the discursive formation. The establishment of true and false is a product of processes of exclusion, in which statements challenging the truth regime, are excluded, especially within specific research discipline and the field of politics (Foucault 1980; 1981; 1994; 1995; 1999). Generally, Foucault's power/knowledge thesis argues that power relations and scientific discourses mutually constitute each other. Research does in itself exercise power and interacts with other forms of power.

When we analyse the field of education in Norway in this perspective, we find a hierarchy of educational discourses and practices. A multicultural discourse on education is excluded from, and subordinated a discourse on standard education and special needs education. This discourse hierarchy

exists within educational policy as well as within educational research (Pihl 2001a; 2001b). Monocultural research is affected by educational priorities at state level, while monocultural research at the same time contributes specifically to the reproduction of monocultural education which is generated at state level. This is a manifestation of a monocultural power/knowledge nexus at work in the field of education.

Traditionally, education is being developed from a monocultural perspective with reproduction of the language and culture of the ethnic majority as a primary objective (Pihl 1999; 2001a; 2000c; 2000d;). This gives a strong conservative impetus to the production of knowledge. Knowledge development builds on previous knowledge and is imbedded in the power relations in society. Knowledge developed from the perspective of marginalised groups has considerable difficulties in being integrated within mainstream research and knowledge, due to specific practices of discursive exclusion. This is well documented by multicultural educational research (Hoëm 1976; Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; Skutnabb-Kangas and Cummins 1988; Skutnabb-Kangas and Kangas 1990). Sociological research (Bourdieu 1989; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and feminist research (Smith 1990a; 1990b; 1999; Harding 1993; 1996) support these findings.

Education is a political and cultural phenomenon in the modern welfare state. In Norway, which has a national school system, the state plays a crucial

role in defining the objectives, content and structure of education. Monocultural educational policy at state level constructs the conditions within which researchers and professionals work. Compensatory education is a basic principle that structures special needs education (Pihl 2001a). Within the dominant political discourse “lack of competence in the dominant language and culture” is being defined within the framework of compensatory education and a cultural deprivation paradigm. Within a monocultural “regime of truth” monocultural education seems natural. The need for multicultural research and education in a multicultural context is not obvious.

***Positivist epistemology and methodological individualism***

Specific characteristics of the research discourse contribute to the reproduction of monocultural research and knowledge in a multicultural context. With regard to “the state of the art” in research, discourse is dominated by epistemology and method deeply rooted in the natural sciences. Methodological individualism and a preoccupation with refinement of diagnostic tools are important characteristics of the research discourse in special needs education, reflected in the curriculum. This focus tends to push historical, cultural, political and structural dimensions of special needs education to the margins of the discourse. The focus upon specific categories of disabled pupils contributes to partial

blindness and tends to marginalise or rule out a theoretical and methodological focus on the educational system itself and how this generates special needs in a multicultural context.

The professions’ claims to validity of professional judgement are premised on a positivist epistemology of knowledge (Skrtric 1995). This is imbedded in the dominant research discourse. It is assumed that scientific knowledge is universally valid –thus ethnic diversity is not recognised as a challenge to the dominant discourse (with only a few important exceptions). This leaves only minor space for critical analysis of the assumptions that structure educational policy and professional practice. In this perspective, positivist epistemology and methodological individualism contribute to the reproduction of monocultural education in a multicultural context.

***Transgression and transformation in a multicultural perspective?***

Multicultural educational research is developed from alternative epistemological positions and with alternative analytical strategies. Education of minority pupils is primarily analysed as a social construct imbedded in an historical, social, cultural and political context that fundamentally shapes the conditions, possibilities and achievements of minority pupils in school. From this perspective, the potential for qualitative changes in education is more significant than from the perspective of individualistic and medical paradigms.

The preceding analysis indicates that

special needs education is informed by international and Norwegian multicultural educational research to a very limited extent. Multicultural educational research addresses language development and teaching and language learning among linguistic and ethnic minority pupils (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981; 1988; 1990; Grosjean 1982; Øzerk 1992; Romain 1995). It addresses socialisation in a multicultural context (Østberg 1998; Andersen 2000; Duraturo 2001;), issues related to educational sociology, policy and pedagogy (Hoëm 1968; Hoëm 1976; Darnell and Hoëm 1996; Pihl 1998; 1999; 2000b; 2000c; 2000d) and assessment in a multicultural context (Cummins 1984; Park 1994). Multicultural educational research addresses racism and education (Troyna 1993) and education of refugees (Carli 1987).

Multicultural educational research analyses minority pupils' performance in school as a relational phenomenon. Performance depends on a complex interaction of variables within and outside the school and between the school and society. It is estimated that for minority pupils it normally takes 6-7 years to appropriate a command of a second language as an effective tool in schools in a minority-majority context, (Cummins 1984). The relation between the linguistic, cultural and social background of the pupil and the school affects language proficiency and development and achievements in subject matter. Generally, pupils who are exposed to language and culture with which they are familiar, have an

easier time at school than pupils who are exposed to language and culture that is different or even alien to them. This is obvious and applies to all pupils. It is a major argument for changing the content and structure of schools in a multicultural perspective to accommodate teacher training, textbooks, curriculum, language, content and teaching to the multicultural diversity in schools. Multicultural educational research addresses changes in the educational system as much as it addresses the needs of the individual child in school.

The educational level of the parents has an indirect effect on the achievements of pupils in school – this applies to all pupils, whether they have majority or minority background. The content and structure of education for minority pupils is related to the social status of the ethnic minority in society at large (Pihl 2001a). The level of discrimination and racism is also closely linked to the status of specific ethnic groups, affecting the socialisation process of children in a minority – majority context. Teacher expectations do also play an important role at the individual level.

There is a need for transgression across and between different educational discourses in order to respond to the actual complexity and diversity in the educational field. In special needs education the lack of meta-perspective and an historical perspective on professional practice in a multicultural context is a striking characteristic of the discourse. The “message” which this

communicates is that research, teaching and counselling within special needs education are dealing adequately with the needs of minority children.

### ***Devaluation and degradation of minorities***

In the history of western science and professional practice, there is a long tradition of devaluation and degradation of ethnic minorities (Gould 1981; Baumann 1989; Lavik 1998; Pihl 1999; 2000a; 2000b). This history represents a major challenge to research in general and a discourse within special needs education in particular. It is a challenge to analyse previous and contemporary research discourse and professional practice in a multicultural perspective in order to understand how abuses of research and professional power manifested itself in practice, and why. It is a challenge to analyse present research discourse and practice against a critical analysis of research discourse and practice in the past. These challenges have basically been avoided by a dominant discourse within special needs education.

There seems to be continuity between past and present neglect of ethnic diversity in education. Professionals are still basically being educated within a monocultural discourse. A crucial question is how categorisation of educational needs among ethnic minority children evolves in this context, and what the effects are on the construction of normality and deviance, inclusion or exclusion in schools and society.<sup>11</sup>

The history of western science and professional practice in relation to disability and ethnic diversity documents the social construction of disability and ethnicity. The status of deaf children in education is a contemporary case in point. The deaf community has acquired status as a linguistic minority in Norwegian education with a corresponding legal right to education in and at their first language. This is due to theory development (Lane 1992; Fischer and Lane 1993; Handberg 1994; Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan 1996) and the deaf community's priorities, organisation and practice. In the future it will be interesting to study the effects of this and to what extent the social status as a linguistic and cultural minority substitutes deaf people's social status as disabled. Of major concern to special needs education is a related, but reverse process in which minority ethnicity is being constructed as disability.

### ***Reflections in a meta-perspective***

The purpose of this article has been to analyse to what extent, and how, a discourse within special needs education has related to ethnic diversity and the multicultural population in schools during the past fifteen years. The objective has not been to analyse in great detail how special needs education ought to relate to ethnic diversity. From the previous analysis, it can be gathered that professionals within special needs education are uninformed about basic issues in multicultural education

I have argued that an historical perspective on the social construction of disability and ethnicity in a multicultural context is highly needed. Equally important is incorporation of multicultural research within special needs education. A theoretical analysis of the differences between multicultural education and special needs education is needed. Knowledge and awareness within special needs education about linguistic, cultural and political factors that generate marginalisation of linguistic and ethnic minority pupils in schools is necessary in all education today, including special needs education. One of the most challenging questions that needs further investigation, is how special needs education should respond to minority pupils' needs within a monocultural educational system, in which multicultural education is lacking.

Finally, I would like to emphasise that my argument for a multicultural perspective in special needs education is not an argument for constructing minority pupils as a "disabled" category of pupils, to which a specific assessment category should be assigned. It is not an argument for the development of research and diagnostic tools, the major purpose of which is identifying supposed "learning disabilities among ethnic minority pupils."

On the contrary, my argument is that recognition of ethnic diversity in education requires a break with monocultural educational research, cultural deprivation theory and a deficit

paradigm. It requires a break with methodological individualism, positivist epistemology and paradigms and analyses of learning difficulties as potential pathology. An epistemological break requires recognition of minority pupils as belonging to linguistic and ethnic minorities with educational needs that are both similar and different from the needs of children belonging to the linguistic and ethnic majority. The needs are similar in the sense that minority pupils, like all children, learn on the basis of the knowledge and linguistic competence they have acquired through primary socialisation. The needs are different in the sense that the learning environment in school in many, and sometimes in most respects, differs from the cultural environment in the primary socialisation context.

#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> This article is a publication from the research project "Ethnicity – a disability?" (1999-2002). I study the professional discourse produced by the *Educational and psychological counselling service* in Oslo during the 1990s with respect to assessment of pupils with ethnic minority background. The Research Council of Norway, Program for Competence, education and value creation, finances the research project.

<sup>2</sup> See Pihl (; 2001c; 2002).

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