Introduction

Families with an ethnic minority background are systematically underrepresented in international studies of children with disabilities (Hatton et al., 2003). Disabled children are also almost invisible in ethnicity studies. The Nordic countries are not an exception to this lack of research on the intersection between minority and disability. One explanation may be that children with a minority background are less likely to be discovered and diagnosed, both due to language problems and a lack of knowledge about the health and welfare system. Another explanation could be an assumption that ethnic minorities tend to solve problems within the ethnic community and do not seek help from the welfare system unless the situation becomes really demanding. A third explanation might be that disability is as frequent as in majority families, but that traditional research designs have not been able to make this visible. Practitioners report that disability is at least as frequent among children with a minority background as in the majority population. This view is also supported by statistics which indicate that various kinds of impairments are, in fact, overrepresented among ethnic minorities (Blom, 2005).

During the last three decades the immigrant population in Norway has increased from approximately 2 per cent to 14 per cent of the total population (from about 100,000 in 1982 to 710,000 in 2012). In spite of the increasing amount of immigration into Norway, the immigrant population is still relatively small compared to most other European...
countries. About 75 per cent of immigrants in Norway have a non-Western background. About 160,000 immigrants in Norway have a refugee background. In Oslo, every fourth inhabitant has an ethnic minority background. In smaller cities and municipalities, the proportion of immigrants is more limited, but still ethnic diversity is a reality in all parts of Norway. Immigrants in Norway come from 220 different countries, and they have widely varying beliefs and political opinions (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2013).

On average, people with immigrant background have almost the same level of education as ethnic Norwegians, but behind this ‘average’ lie huge differences – between different ethnic groups, between men and women, and between the first generation and their descendants. There is also a variation when it comes to modes of living and lifestyles. In short, immigrants in Norway form a heterogeneous category of people. We can hardly speak of them as a group, if by group we mean ‘people with common characteristics’. On the other hand, they have their minority status in common, and as a society we still have progress to make in accepting immigrants as equal members.

A more diverse society means both new possibilities and new challenges. Norwegian public policy is that society will aim to include migrants in all arenas, such as the labour market, education, and the welfare system. Over the last two decades, various white papers, official reports, action plans, and governmental regulations have promoted goals such as equal rights, avoiding discrimination, and avoiding the marginalization of minority groups in general and people with special needs in particular (Meld. St. 6 2012–13). However, both statistics and research show that the unemployment rate among non-Western immigrants is three to four times higher than for ethnic Norwegians, and that they have lower levels of income, poorer living conditions, and suffer more frequently from various diseases (Craig, 2007; Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2013). Studies focusing on post-traumatic stress and psychological strain among refugees indicate that living in exile has a negative influence on mental health (Berg, 2010; Sveaass, 2001; Varvin, 2008). There have been a few studies of somatic and mental health among the ethnic minority population in Norway, but little attention has been paid to disabled immigrants. The lack of research-based knowledge that could confirm practitioners’ experiences and anecdotal reports was the point of departure for the research project on the intersection between ethnicity and disability in Norway that is described in this chapter.