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Early childhood teachers' perspectives on supporting children with special needs in Norwegian early childhood education and care

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood teachers' (ECTs) increased responsibilities in providing special educational support have made their role complex. Particularly, there seem to be uncertainties about who is to provide special education, as usually in Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC), this is often considered to be the responsibility of the special teacher. Despite the recognition that ECTs face challenges, research specifically focusing on how they view their work with children with special needs is scarce. The aim of this study was to examine ECTs' perspectives on supporting children with special needs in ECEC. The study involved semi-structured interviews with five ECTs. A qualitative analysis of the extensive interview data produced eight dimensions, divided into three thematic categories: (1) work during times of turmoil, (2) understanding of children's special needs and (3) aspirations for collaboration between professionals. We were interested in hearing what ECTs had to say, and our research provides encouraging findings to further investigate their role in supporting children with special needs, especially when considering the current 'chaotic' circumstances in ECEC and the unclear professional responsibilities in providing this support. Important practical implications are also given.

Keywords: *early childhood education teachers, special education, support, professional role*

Introduction

Early childhood teachers (ECTs) in Norwegian early childhood education and care (ECEC) have an important role in ensuring inclusion for all children (e.g., Buli-Holmberg et al., 2022). Every child has the right to be equally valued, treated with respect and provided with equal opportunities in education (United Nations, 1994), yet the meaning of children's inclusion depends significantly on its definition, whether it be narrow or broad in scope. More precisely, a narrow understanding focuses primarily on children with special needs and their placement, while one of a broad nature focuses on building inclusive communities for all children (Finkelstein et al., 2021). International sentiment, including in Norway, has notably deemed the narrow definitions insufficient and the broad definitions (or at least a broad set of values) favourable as principles for practice (Ainscow, 2020; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2015; Nilsen, 2020). Although ECTs are responsible for supporting every child in inclusive ECEC (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022), they often encounter challenges in supporting children with special needs (Ališauskienė et al., 2023; Dan, 2019; Hanssen & Olsen, 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Usually, in Norwegian ECEC, the special teacher is mainly responsible for arranging this support (e.g., Homme & Kjærgård Eide, 2024); however, the growth in this student population (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024c) has led to an increased shifting of responsibility to ECTs (see Bruflot, 2024; Tangvald-Pedersen, 2024), who often lack sufficient competencies to ensure appropriate support (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2022; see also Dan, 2019; Karila, 2016) making their professional role complex (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022).

These changes have led to public demands for higher ECT salaries (e.g., Melvold, 2024) and recent strikes (Søraunet Wangberg, 2023; Vik & Brusegard, 2022), with one nearly occurring in May 2024 (see Dahl Bakken et al., 2024). Despite the recognition of ECT challenges in ECEC (see also Dan, 2019; Mithans et al., 2023), research specifically focusing on how ECTs view their work with children with special needs in Norway is scarce. Here, we interviewed five ECTs about their perspectives on supporting children with special needs and the increasing nature and challenges of providing this support within their ongoing ECEC responsibilities.

Norwegian ECEC and children with special needs

In Norway, ECEC consists of kindergartens for children 0 to 5 years of age (approx. 267 000 children in total); compulsory school begins the year children turn 6 years of age (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022a; 2023). Out of all children in ECEC, 3.6% receive special educational assistance (Norwegian Directorate for Education

and Training, 2024b); as translated from the Norwegian term, it can also refer to special education internationally (e.g., Buli-Holmberg et al., 2022) and is how we will refer to the topic in this article. Legally, receiving special education is a statutory right in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). While approximately over half of Norwegian kindergartens are privately owned, since 2011, ECEC has been increasingly transferred from private to municipal providers. To compare, the private ECEC can be a 'family kindergarten' (*Familiebarnhage* in Norwegian), which is run in a private home, cares for up to 10 children 0 to 3 years of age and employs staff who are not required to have pedagogical training. The public whole-day ECEC, on the other hand, can typically place children in groups based on age – for example, children 5–6 years of age placed in 'pre-school groups' in preparation for compulsory school. Further, there are kindergartens (N=57) with special groups in Norway for children with extensive support needs (e.g., intellectual disabilities) (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023).

Public ECEC employs several kinds of professionals, including ECTs, childcare and youth workers, assistants, pedagogical leaders, support pedagogues (who have similar roles as special teachers) and special education teachers (who might not always work full time in all kindergartens) (see Ministry of Education and Research, 2023). Less than 10 percent of ECEC staff (including special teachers, as there is no exact percentage available) hold full-time positions supporting children with special needs (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023). Overall, ECEC staff members possess various educational backgrounds: ECTs have completed 3-year kindergarten teacher education coursework offered by Norwegian universities or university colleges; childcare and youth workers possess an upper secondary education consisting of 2 years of study and 2 years in practice (e.g., in kindergartens); assistants need no formal education related to working with children; pedagogical leaders are often educated kindergarten teachers who might have additional education in management; special teachers have a degree in special education (bachelor's or master's); and support pedagogues have a bachelor's degree (some municipalities also seek applicants with master's) in child-related education (e.g., , social educator, special education teacher, preschool teacher, or nurse) and they often have overlapping duties with special teachers, but do not necessarily have an educational background in special needs education (e.g., not required in Oslo area) (see Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023). Furthermore, for example, the ECEC staff who most frequently work with children with special needs are the assistants or child and youth workers who lack formal qualifications and possess a minimal education in special needs content. Generally, in ECEC, there is a lack of competence in the particular discipline of special needs education (Hansen & Olsen, 2022).

Established in 2017, the latest framework plan for ECEC in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) has an enhanced focus on inclusion, the role and rights of children, collaboration with parents, sustainability and digital competence (Regulations on a Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens, 2017). Although ECTs working in kindergartens must possess a 3-year bachelor's degree in ECEC, legislative changes have led to new expectations for ECT mastery. Most recently, in 2023, the Norwegian government presented its 'Kindergarten for a New Era' plan and related goals for 2030, such as increasing qualified personnel, following up on quality development and curriculum implementation (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023).

As mentioned above, Norwegian law specifies that a child has a right to special education and to receive it when it is needed (Kindergarten Act, 31/2020). A particular child's need for special educational assistance is determined by Educational and Psychological Counselling Services (EPS), which serves as the basis for decision-making related to ECEC support (Kindergarten Act, 33; 34/2020). Such support, however, varies widely across Norway: in some places, special needs teachers work in ECEC; in others, they work only in pedagogical resource centres outside of the kindergarten (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022). Pedagogical resource centres offer guidance for kindergartens and parents, special educational support and speech therapy services (Oslo Kommune, 2024) and are staffed by special needs teachers, speech therapists and support pedagogues (who assess and plan support for the children). Given the overall contextual background of Norwegian ECEC and the staff and their qualifications, even in the same municipality, there may be differences in the quality of special education (Oslo Kommune, 2024). Furthermore, the attitudes and beliefs of the staff towards inclusive education can impact how inclusion is implemented (e.g., Hanley & Garrity, 2022; Pesonen, Äikäs, Heiskanen, et al., 2023).

Norway is aiming to fulfil its competence promise of 2023–2025 to raise competency in special needs education and inclusive practices, a topic also recognised internationally (e.g., Dan, 2019; Lee et al., 2023; Mithans et al., 2023). Structured through 'local competence development, providence of further education, competency packages and resources and guidance materials' (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2022, p. 17), the main goal is to locally boost competence according to local needs. Further, inclusion, early intervention and individualised education are to be explored, given their centrality to the aspirations of today's Norwegian educational system (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2019).

Early intervention and special education in Norwegian ECEC

Theoretically, inclusion efforts in Norway lean on a broad understanding that focuses on building inclusive communities (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2022). Working within this understanding of inclusion presupposes both early intervention and collaborative efforts between professionals. First, early intervention in special education in Norwegian ECEC refers to 'giving support as soon as possible in a human's life, whether the challenges arise in preschool-age or later in life' (Statped, n.d.). This is to be interpreted as both 'as early as possible in the child's life', and for the process to be started 'as soon as possible when problems arise' (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2006). Not only is ECEC highlighted as an important part of early intervention (Kaurel, 2018), it is considered the first step in lifelong learning as well as the first stage where the need for early intervention might be discovered.

Second, different professionals (e.g., staff in ECEC, EPS, child services and child and adolescent psychiatry) must be involved. This range of expertise looks to the behaviours, attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to ensuring the learning of a diverse group of children in community with other children (Finkelstein et al., 2021). Collaboration with parents is also critical (Børhaug et al., 2018). Procedurally, receiving special education support in the Norwegian ECEC system involves: (1) ECEC staff or parent expresses concern about a child, (2) a referral is sent to EPS for an expert assessment of the child's needs, (3) it is determined whether the child has the right to special educational assistance, (4) if applicable, special educational assistance is planned and implemented and (5) strategies are evaluated and decisions made on proceeding further (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). ECTs already have a vital role in this context (in collaboration with parents and healthcare, for example), and the concept of early intervention adds to the expectations and complexity of that role (Børhaug et al., 2018).

Further, in Norway, there is a three-tiered, preventive work scale similar to the Response-to-Intervention model in the United States (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005), wherein ECEC, as the first step, is responsible for recognising children who may need additional support. The second step includes mapping and outlining children's needs to determine further measures or procedures, and the final step involves official decisions from EPS for a child to receive special education services (Kaurel, 2018). Often, the first two steps fall to ECTs, since it is their responsibility to find time to observe a child's situation using systematic observation tools or unstructured observation notes. ECTs' working hours may consequently increase, as time is required to observe, document, evaluate and act accordingly. While it is an unarguably important expectation, the overall process of

adapting education for each individual child can take many hours away from working with an entire child group. The idea of adapted education is favourable in theory, but in practice, ECTs see it as challenging to understand and implement (Hansen & Hansen, 2021). For example, teachers might begin to view the child as demanding. Notably, research indicates that the child is both viewed and treated differently when the 'problem' is also placed with the child instead of the environment (Heiskanen et al., 2018). This might increase the risk of children with special needs being labelled as 'different' (Børhaug et al., 2018). Instead, the authors are requesting competence development for ECTs to ensure consideration of children's individual needs and inclusivity in the entire child group. Since 70% of children with special needs receive support in general child groups, competence development among ECTs to properly accommodate them is essential (Hanssen & Olsen, 2022). Currently, the challenges in balancing support for individual children's needs while addressing the needs of the entire ECEC child group can also pose a risk to ECTs' well-being (see e.g., Cumming & Wong, 2019; Wong et al., 2022). This might in turn have negative consequences for children's wellbeing (see e.g., Pesonen, 2016). Developing competencies in supporting children with special needs can thus enhance belonging for adults and children alike (see e.g., Pesonen, Äikäs, Viljamaa, et al., 2023).

Challenging situations in ECEC

Research has indicated the presence of challenging situations in ECEC (e.g., Pesonen, Äikäs, Heiskanen, et al., 2023), specifically where educators feel helpless in ensuring appropriate pedagogy and support for every child (Äikäs et al., 2022), particularly for those they worry about the most (e.g., Pesonen, Äikäs, Heiskanen, et al., 2023). Children should not be viewed as challenging or demanding; rather, it is the situations in ECEC that challenge the ECTs' work (Äikäs et al., 2022). While the term 'challenging situations' does not appear in the literature regarding ECEC in the Norwegian context, challenging situations such as transitions, personnel shortages, exhaustion and poor leadership do (see e.g., Ergin & Bakkaloğlu, 2019). In Norway, increasing demands to support children's varying needs have combined with a lack of competent and qualified staff, endangering children's right to timely and effective support (e.g., The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024c). This can cause ECTs to feel helpless (e.g., Äikäs et al., 2022) and in turn compromise interventional efforts. Staff engagement and positive attitudes are vital to ECTs' success in providing inclusive education (Solli & Andersen, 2019; Hanley & Garrity, 2022). Moreover, it is important to define the intensity of required collaborative support approaches (e.g., multidisciplinary and interprofessional collaboration, and collaboration with families). This will assist ECTs in providing support to children with special needs without labelling them as demanding and in altering

environments (e.g., kindergarten environment, pedagogical methods, etc.) that might not be adequately serving these youngsters (Pesonen, Äikäs, Viljamaa, et al., 2023).

Research objective

Existing research has focused on ECTs' views regarding inclusion (Solli & Andersen, 2019), the development of quality tools for supporting inclusion (Buli-Holmberg et al., 2022) and pre-service ECTs views on special education in ECEC (Hanssen & Olsen, 2022). Internationally, an increasing number of studies have explored ECTs' experiences in providing support for children with special needs and the challenges they encounter in ensuring inclusive education (e.g., Dan, 2019; Lee et al., 2023; Mithans et al., 2023); however, research particular to the Norwegian context is scarce. Seeking to fill this gap in research, we examined ECTs' perspectives on supporting children with special needs in ECEC. To this end, five ECTs were interviewed to answer the following questions: (1) what are the perceived barriers to support for children with special needs in ECEC and (2) what can be done to improve the support for children with special needs in ECEC. By examining what ECTs have to say, the findings have the potential to improve practices in ECEC and special education content in Norwegian ECT training, as well as to inform topics for future research.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited using existing professional networks and by sending emails to ECEC centres in Oslo and surrounding municipalities. In total, 65 centres were contacted. We invited ECTs with experience in working with children with special needs in kindergartens to participate, as usually the special teachers in the Norwegian system are considered to be more responsible for organising the support for children with special needs (e.g., Homme & Kjærgård Eide, 2024). As defined, children with special needs referred to children's individual support needs (e.g., due to emotional and behavioural needs, disabilities, neurodivergent needs, etc.) that need to be considered in pedagogy and in other possible support services so that children can receive education in inclusive settings (e.g., Pihlaja, 2022). Furthermore, in Norway, children with special needs or those who have not been officially assigned support yet have an individual right to receive support in the child group (see Kindergarten Act, 19/2020). We valued all experiences and thus did not have any further inclusion criteria (e.g., minimum years of experience in ECEC). However, it proved challenging to recruit participants. For example, two

kindergartens responded that they had no capacity to fulfil our request, while three answered that they had forwarded the email to potential teachers. The remaining kindergartens did not respond.

Five ECEC teachers were interviewed. All participants (referred to as P1–P5) had bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and working experience ranging from 3.5 to 22 years (mean = 11.1, SD = 7.94), and they worked in child groups ranging from 0–6 years (specific age ranges for children in the participants' groups were as follows: P1 = 4–6; P2 = 3–6; P3 = 2–6; P4 = 0–6; P5 = 1–3). None of the participants had study points in special education; all had experience in collaborating with various professionals (e.g., EPSs, Educational Resource Centres, Child Welfare, etc.). Since our sample was five teachers, we are not reporting any other details (e.g., gender, age, area) to protect their anonymity.

Participating ECTs worked in child groups ranging from 0 to 6-year-olds (as described above) following the national regulations regarding child-adult ratios (Kindergarten Act 26/2020). Staffing requirements specify that kindergartens must maintain a ratio of at least one employee for every three children under 3 years of age, and one employee for every six children over 3 years of age (Kindergarten Act 26/2020). The standards for pedagogical staffing further indicate that kindergartens are required to have at least one pedagogical leader for every seven children under 3 years of age, and one pedagogical leader for every 14 children over 3 years of age. For example, one participant had 24 children in the group and four adults, one participant had 20 children (some under 3 years of age) in the group with four adults (including the participant and a pedagogical leader and two assistants). The rest of the groups were smaller, consisting of two teachers (one of them holding a pedagogical leader position) and one assistant, or no additional teachers (only assistants). The child group information is unfortunately limited in our study, as we only asked about the age range of children in the demographics. We did not specifically ask about the child group characteristics unless the participants mentioned them during the interviews. This may be a limitation that we will also address in the limitations and future research discussion later in this article.

Data collection

We obtained ethical approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection; participation was voluntary.

The first author developed the first version of the interview protocol guided by the literature and her experiences working in ECEC. It was then discussed and further

developed with the second author. Once interview guide consensus was achieved, a pilot interview was conducted. After the pilot interview, the protocol was further developed and finalised. The interview themes covered children with special needs, challenges in the current situation in ECEC and collaboration and pedagogical practices, among others. Further, prompts and probes were used throughout the interviews (e.g., 'Can you further explain what you mean?'). Semi-structured interviews were conducted at a location of the participant's preference, either online (n=3) or in person (n=2). The duration of interviews ranged from 40 to 80 minutes. In each interview, the same protocol was followed (e.g., including ice-breaker questions to make the participants feel at ease).

Data analysis

First, interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised and translated into English, taking great care to preserve meaning (van Nes et al., 2010). The transcriptions and translations were checked for accuracy by authors fluent in Scandinavian languages (Norwegian and Swedish). The data comprised 57 pages (1.15 spacing) of transcribed and anonymised material. We used inductive analysis, a recommended approach when prior knowledge about a topic is limited (Schreier, 2012; Thomas, 2006).

We followed the steps of the inductive analysis process (Thomas, 2006). The analysis was guided by the research aim and questions. First, the material was familiarised through reading and rereading, to understand the content and to begin to see relationships across the material. Second, the data were systematically coded (e.g., using codes such as time constraints, not receiving help when asking, substitute teachers, limited staffing, sick leave, receiving guidance, meetings, collaboration, special teachers, etc.) using the capabilities of NVivo 14. Next, the data were further coded, which led to emerging codes into dimensions (e.g., chaotic circumstances included codes such as time constraints, limited staffing, sick leave, etc.). The analysis and coding continued until all codes were emerged into dimensions, and finally, for the last step, the refinement of the dimensions resulted in three main thematic categories with seven dimensions (see Table 1 in the results). Complete inductive analysis should produce three to eight thematic categories; over eight themes can be considered incomplete inductive coding (Thomas, 2006).

To ensure trustworthiness, researcher triangulation (Patton, 2015) was used throughout the analysis. The first author who initially analysed the data frequently discussed the coding process with the second author (e.g., the emerged codes, themes and subtheme, extracts used during results writing). Further, the inductive content analysis and constant comparison in our study were guided by the inductive analysis phases (Thomas, 2006).

Results

The analysis identified three thematic categories with eight dimensions (demonstrated in Table 1), which we have organised under barriers and areas of improvement to answer our research questions. The data extracts are identified using the participants' codes (i.e. P1 = Participant 1, P2 = Participant 2).

TABLE 1 Thematic categories and dimensions

	THEMATIC CATEGORY	*DIMENSION*
Barriers	Work during times of turmoil	Chaotic circumstances
		Less time with children
		Relationships with colleagues and collaborators
	Understanding of children's special needs	Limited competence
		Considering children's perspectives
Areas of improvement	Aspirations for collaboration between professionals	Willingness for closer collaboration with special teachers
		Collaborative support approaches

Barriers: Work during times of turmoil

Chaotic circumstances

Participants used the word 'chaos' when describing the current circumstances in ECEC. As P3 put it, 'Chaos…I think it is a bit chaotic, simply put', whereas P2 agreed by stating that 'It is a kind of challenging chaos that you pretend to have control over…'. P5 further continued by describing ECEC as 'Chaotic, hectic, all-consuming...Outside of the flow state'. Participants also reported that a limited number of competent adults often leads to chaotic situations; for example, '…during the afternoons when there are fewer adults present...It can be occasionally hectic…a feeling of chaos. At least for the staff, I hope the children do not experience it as chaotic' (P4). Another participant continued by stating:

> You really test your tolerance when you have 27 children and 12 of them have behaviour regulation difficulties…I feel like I want to be more of a playful adult rather than a

> caretaker adult…which is challenging when there is so much need to support children's regulation and social skills. (P1)

Participants also described increased sick leave among staff in the current circumstances: 'There have been situations where we have a lot of substitutes. There are no permanent employees. I think we've had 20 different substitutes since March–April'. The interviews revealed that the substitute did not solve the chaos: '…it does not help because then I must split myself in two…I have to give instructions on what needs to be done, and…make sure nothing goes wrong' (P2). Another participant was worried about children's wellbeing: '…children are very dependent on good relationships…If a new person comes in after every one or two months…it is quite challenging for children who have various challenges, whether physical, emotional, or behavioural' (P1). Particularly, the interviewees were concerned about children with special needs in the group; for example, '...when there is a lack of resources for those children, then we have to adapt ourselves completely' (P2). Another participant continued, 'Every time there is illness among staff…the support pedagogue is utilised as a resource [for all children] instead of for the child with special needs' (P5). Sometimes participants had to frequently prepare food for all children due to staffing issues, which led to '…too little time to support the children who need it the most' (P1). The extracts specifically demonstrate how chaos is related to a shortage of competent and permanent staff, with the use of substitutes sometimes leading to even more chaos impacting the support for children.

Less time with children

Another barrier comprised the various meetings with families, interprofessional collaborators and other ECEC staff that took time away from being with the children. Interviews indicated a pressure to prioritise meetings, yet participants still often chose to prioritise children. For example, '…it also has to do with who I am as an educator…I am an educator who wants to be present and communicates that to the other staff members. And then...you become the party pooper who doesn't show up [at meetings]. Because you have a genuine desire and a real belief that being with the children is more important than attending a meeting' (P4). Another participant continued, 'You want to provide the best possible support. But it is physically impossible, I am just one person…there should be more pedagogues in childcare…There are more and more tasks for educators today' (P2). The extracts demonstrate how the ECTs try to survive on their own, and there seems to be an expectation of being able to do the same job as a special teacher.

The data further revealed that meeting demands created time constraints. The already limited hours for planning child group level pedagogy had to be used to plan adaptations for children with special needs. For example, planning support '…requires a lot from your

planning-time that you need to allocate in the daily life in kindergarten. Just four hours per week is not enough…' (P4). The participant also highlighted that planning for one child takes time away from other children, as all '…children also deserve the educator's attention'. In addition, attending various meetings appeared to lead to working beyond their regular hours: '…I have to take care of things at home in the evenings. It might lead to doing a bit more than one should…' (P3). The above extracts demonstrate the difficulties in balancing meeting attendance and trying to cope alone in limited time frames, while simultaneously ensuring support for all children, suggesting that the kindergarten work is poorly organised.

Relationships with colleagues and collaborators

There seemed to be poor communication within the ECEC team. P2 mentioned that there is not enough time for collegial encounters and that the '…the conversations become very brief, but never proper conversations, if there are any'. P3 also described how they would discuss work issues with another teacher colleague rather than with the entire team, including, for example, assistants. This was described as important '…because you have the same background knowledge and perhaps experience'. There seemed to be almost an avoidance of communicating some basic needs to all colleagues. For example, P1 stated, 'I experience that it's somewhat like assistants don't fully see the perspective. They just expect us to take care of them, while we expect them to take part in the community and tasks as well'.

There also seemed to be relational issues with external collaborators. This was exemplified by participants describing many expectations from the collaborators. For example, 'At times, I feel that there can be high expectations placed on us. It is not always recognised that we have other responsibilities...We also have 19 other children who require our attention' (P3). Another participant mentioned that 'I believe there is an expectation for a kindergarten teacher to have more knowledge than one should necessarily have…I am not a special teacher' (P1). Sometimes, P1 appeared to feel the pressure to fulfil all expectations: 'I feel like I have to please everyone here. All the information and everything they say needs to be done…I feel like I am being pulled towards being a special teacher rather than a pedagogical leader in the group' (P1). One of the participants expressed that they felt like the expectations for ECTs have grown in the last 4 years: 'I do feel that there is more responsibility being placed on educators. And it is a bit unfortunate in situations where one feels you do not have enough knowledge' (P4). Understanding and respect toward ECTs' expertise and role in collaboration (e.g., special teachers and interprofessional collaborators) were also emphasised. For example,

'I expect to be met with openness and understanding about why I primarily contact them. I also expect that they will regard us as equals' (P5).

Barriers: Understanding of children's special needs

Limited competence

Participants' education did not seem to have properly prepared them for working with children with special needs. For example, one participant clearly stated that they had limited understanding '…especially in the context of children with special needs' (P4). Participants agreed that they felt secure within the early childhood education scope in which they had formal qualifications: 'I do feel that I was well prepared for that, at least in terms of general pedagogy' (P5). Similarly, while describing a situation that required more special education knowledge, participants expressed, for example, 'We are just early childhood teachers, after all' (P1). These extracts demonstrate that a general education does not sufficiently prepare ECTs to work with children with special needs or in the ethos of setting clear boundaries in professional responsibilities regarding who has the main responsibility in working with 'certain' children.

Considering children's perspectives

There seemed to be a common willingness to understand children's perspectives. For example, one participant mentioned the importance of understanding what need the child might be communicating through their actions (e.g., hitting without taught skills to communicate their needs): 'I am passionate about supporting these children whom you see struggling socially and getting labelled by adults and others as not being good kids. But people do not understand the children's perspective – that they are just defending themselves the only way they know how' (P1). Although appeared to be critique towards labelling the children, at the same time, it almost seems to be a necessity to receive adequate support for them. For example, '…when there is a lack of resources, you often feel like you are labelling a child, more than necessary. You do not want to label the child who has needs' (P2).

Areas of improvement: Aspirations for collaboration between professionals

Willingness for closer collaboration with special teachers

A common aspiration was to have more support from special teachers. For example, '…there should be a dedicated pedagogue in the ECEC, who focuses on children with special needs' (P2). Another participant mentioned that '…every ECEC should have a

special education teacher employed…I believe that could help us support the children who are struggling…I hope that we can achieve a much closer collaboration' (P4). Some participants had to make their own solutions when the situation required them to do so. For example, 'One is sort of forced to think outside the box. And then, you gain a lot of useful things along the way…both professionally and...as a person' (P4). These extracts indicate ECTs' willingness to collaborate with the special teachers, and that the ECTs have a lot of skills and knowledge to solve the situations independently in ECEC. Further, there appears to be much professional knowledge that might not fully utilised in daily work in ECEC.

Collaborative support approaches

All participants shared an aspiration for more ongoing and reachable collaborative support approaches (e.g., interprofessional collaboration) to 'acquire information and knowledge' (P2) and to simply have them 'available for brainstorming [support]' (P5). Another participant continued, '…to collaboratively create a better everyday life for the child…That everyone contributes...to the best of the child. And that one receives some help, understanding, especially perhaps in terms of communicating with parents' (P3). There was also a shared view on the importance of receiving follow-up from the interprofessional collaborator: '…to discuss how things have progressed and to receive follow-up. I anticipate that the process will not stop at merely attempting something, but that we will receive more substantive support' (P5). Another participant continued by stating, '…my expectation is that we receive assistance when we reach out for help' (P1).

Discussion

This study examined ECTs' perspectives on supporting children with special needs in Norwegian ECEC. Importantly, it contributes to the limited research about the ECT's role in supporting children with special needs, as the special teachers in the Norwegian system are usually considered to be more responsible for children who require special support. Our discussion will be structured according to our findings. First, we address the issue of chaos. Next, we discuss the need for clarity in ECEC, issues related to increasing staff competence and understanding children's perspectives and the importance of emphasising collaborative support approaches. We have organised these under the headings of barriers and areas of improvement in correspondence with our research questions. We end with addressing limitations, suggestions for future research and a conclusion.

Barriers

Chaos and poor utilisation of resources

One interesting finding was related to chaos. It seems that the challenging situations described in previous research (Äikäs et al., 2022) can also be described with the concept of chaos in Norwegian ECEC (see also Havisalmi & Reunamo, 2023). Chaos was connected to situations that did not go according to plan, and where the flow of the day was interrupted. Chaos might create a negative cycle in which staff members are unable to respond to children's special needs (Havisalmi & Reunamo, 2023), which was evident in our findings. Teacher-perceived chaos and teachers losing self-belief, motivation and commitment to their job often leads to turnover intentions (Grant et al., 2019). Further, teachers losing their motivation can also lead to them being less positive in their interactions with the children, which in turn might lead to more chaos (Grant et al., 2019). The attitude of the ECT is of great importance and can impact both inclusion (Hanley & Garrity, 2022) and children's well-being (Nilsen, 2020). Research suggests that there is a limit to how much chaos an ECT can handle and still be able to interact positively with the children (Jeon et al., 2016). In Addition, teachers need to use strategies to regulate their emotions in challenging situations in order to lead the children through them (Jeon et al., 2016).

In our findings, two specific issues related to chaos stood out: challenging behaviour and illness among staff. The findings seemed to suggest that when teachers expressed that the children had problem with behaviour regulation (e.g., possibly due to the lack of adaptions in the environment), teachers did not appear to see supporting regulation and social skills development as their preferred task. Such findings can raise concerns, as supporting children in their development of behaviour regulation is important. Specifically, research has indicated that not properly supported development of behaviour regulation could be detrimental to both social and academic development in children (e.g., von Suchodoletz et al., 2009). Simultaneously, one could argue that ECTs are responsible for adapting the environment to all children, as the concept of behaviour and self-regulation is intertwined with external support and the environment the children find themselves in (Rimm-Kaufmann et al., 2009). Assisting children in developing self-control is of paramount importance, but at the same time, our finding might point towards the ECTs considering children themselves as being challenging. If this interpretation is correct, it is not the children who should be regarded as demanding but rather the requisite support for children in behaviour regulation (Pesonen, Äikäs, Heiskanen, et al., 2023).

Regarding the issue of illness amongst staff, our results shed light on how those in ECEC are used to doing tasks beyond what (they believe) is expected of them. Another aspect of our data could be the (inappropriate) use of resources. This could add to the discussion about chaos and a lack of resources and competent staff. In Norwegian ECEC, there are support pedagogues (whose roles are similar to that of a special teacher) implementing and conducting special education for children legally entitled to receive such support (Barnehageloven, 2020). Yet there are limited national regulations for supporting children, as a child who happens to live in a specific area might not get the same support they would receive in the municipality next to them or in another part of the country. Perhaps due to this and the chaos, illness and lack of staff in kindergartens, support pedagogues might be doing varying tasks across Norway (and some municipalities might have none) that do not allow them to provide much-needed support for children with special needs. Not only could such a practice be legally questionable, but it could also mean that kindergartens are not using their existing resources (adults) effectively due to 'chaotic circumstances'. For example, our results suggested that occasionally ECTs might prepare food. Such situations might reflect a poor use of resources, as the ECTs should be more engaged in ensuring the pedagogical aspects in ECEC.

Another example of resources not being properly utilised is our finding related to relationships between colleagues that indicated an unwillingness to collaborate amongst ECEC staff. Adding to the utilisation of resources, P1 and P3 illustrated that they preferred discussing working issues with another teacher colleague rather than an entire team (including assistants and staff with no formal education). P1 claimed that assistants 'don't fully see the perspective'. When there was illness amongst staff, P2 also argued that substitutes could be demanding since they required training, meaning that P2 had to assume two roles (taking care of both the substitute and the children). It is documented that clarifying staff roles and promoting positive relationships amongst staff are important to promote quality in ECEC (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018). These statements in our results might signify a hierarchical understanding of ECTs and assistants, meaning that the ECTs do not view the assistants as equally important as themselves. Such a hierarchical understanding has been regarded as inappropriate for ECEC professionals, while shared responsibility and power are recommended (Dresden & Myers, 1989).

Need for clarity

Our findings indicated a need for clarity. This is related both to who has responsibility for special education (Nilsen, 2020; Reindal, 2016) and to what the ECEC can do in supporting children with special needs (Ohna & Hillesøy, 2022). There appeared to be high

expectations for the ECTs, which seemed to lead to frustration and time constraints from not being able to manage everything. While there has been a recent examination of the role of ECTs in Norway (see Børhaug et al., 2018), there still seems to be a lack of clarity about their role in supporting children with special needs. Although there has been attempts to clarify ECTs role (Børhaug et al., 2018; Børhaug & Bøe, 2022), the descriptions concerning their professional role remain unclear. While the participants of this study expressed aspirations for receiving more knowledge and education about special education needs, they simultaneously assigned the responsibility of special education away from themselves. This might be due to the confusion around who should be responsible (Nilsen, 2020), but also due to their feeling of having restricted knowledge on how to support all children.

While there is a need for more special education content in ECT education (Joner et al., 2023; see also Pihlaja & Ojala, 2023), there might also be a need for clearer expectations and professional role descriptions. There is a need to clarify the expectations for the role of ECTs in supporting children with special needs to better align with the reality of ECEC today. While interprofessional collaboration is used as an approach to supporting children with special needs (Bricker et al., 2022), such collaboration 'in and of itself does not solve the challenges of developing inclusive environments' (Jensen et al., 2022, p. 103). Instead, how the collaboration is executed is important, and while there is a complex team of possible collaborators in the Norwegian system (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024b), the network seems to look different across different parts of Norway, and even in the same city, the support given may differ (Oslo Kommune, 2024). This suggests the need for clarity in the collaborative system in Norway and for some insight among collaborators into what ECTs can implement. Moreover, this clarity could benefit work related to children in need of special education both inside and outside of the kindergarten.

Considering children's perspectives and the need for increasing competence

ECTs experienced challenges in balancing support for the group and the individual child (Børhaug & Bøe, 2022). While the ECT profession can be complex and require the balancing of multiple roles (Børhaug et al., 2018), the support and adaptations made for one child might support other children as well. While in this study children with special needs were viewed as a child like any other – 'someone to learn from' – and the participants expressed a dislike towards the children being labelled, there still seems to be a need to label children. This tendency could also be seen in Børhaug and Bøe (2022), where children were related to either as 'normal' or 'special'. And once they do not fit either a box that we can understand or a view of normality, they are put in the 'grey zone',

as 'not having a specific medical diagnosis and who might not get one either' (Solli & Andersen, 2019, p. 145). In other words, our findings seem to suggest that there are children whom the ECTs worry about, but at the same time, they do not know how to cater to children's needs. The goal of Norway's 2030 strategy is to increase competence in the Norwegian ECEC by focusing on increasing the number of educated staff (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023). However, perhaps there is a need to not just increase competency but to also develop further competency specifically in relation to special needs (Hanssen & Olsen, 2022). Although diversity is mentioned in the 2030 strategy, children with special needs are not the key focus area (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2023). Our findings suggest the apparent need for a clearer role description for ECTs and the possibility to use their full professional potential as a pedagogical leader. A clearer role and education that prepares the ECTs for the reality of ECEC might also help with the current publicly debated shortage of interest in the field of ECEC (e.g., Larsen & Tønnessen, 2023). For example, ECEC teacher preparation programs have criticised the government about the lack of emphasis on investments in supporting to improve the early childhood teacher education programs when simultaneously the government is increasing qualification requirements and aiming for a greater number of teachers in ECEC (e.g., Fagmiljøet pedagogikk, 2024). Furthermore, the proposed changes for improving ECEC quality are not necessarily based on findings of Norwegian research projects. Thus, research findings based on Norwegian data, such as ours, can bring necessary evidence that can be used in national development work (see Fagmiljøet pedagogikk, 2024).

Areas of improvement

Rethinking collaborative support

Consistent with this need for change, the findings also revealed aspirations of receiving better support in interprofessional collaboration. While there might be a need for other changes as well, interprofessional collaboration is already used as an approach to supporting children with special needs (Bricker et al., 2022), and so the aspirations of the participants could inspire the strengthening of that system. While some of the participants expressed that they were viewed as essential partners in the current collaboration, others mentioned that they were overlooked. This might imply a need to clarify the role of ECTs in the collaboration. The aspiration for receiving better support includes support in standing together in a situation and receiving advice on what to do when feeling unsure about what would work, but the advice needs to be suitable for the ECEC (Ohna & Hillesøy, 2022). Clearly, ECTs expect to have a support system that is more accessible, with less waiting times, and ultimately to receive assistance closer to the ECEC.

For example, participants suggested having a special needs educator in the ECEC would help ensure children's support, and while this is delegating the responsibility to another person, it could also be a shared responsibility.

Limitations, future research and conclusion

This study has several limitations. First, although the interviews provided extensive knowledge about ECT views on supporting children, our sample might have benefitted from more participants. However, recruiting enough participants was challenging. Perhaps this might alone indicate the current circumstances of ECEC and the ECTs not finding the time to participate. Future research should seek to include more participants as well as special teachers, parents and children, given that the views here are limited to those of ECTs. Second, while our participants come from different municipalities, the support system can vary in different municipalities across Norway. Thus, in future research, an overview of the support systems in various Norwegian municipalities could be investigated by interviewing various ECTs and other ECEC staff about their experiences of ensuring inclusion. Third, related to interviewing the participants, one of the interview themes focused on the challenges teachers encountered. This may have led the participants to mainly describe the challenges in ECEC and perhaps not provide enough opportunities to share more about the current situation in general. This may be also reflected in our results that seem to be more broadly weighted in answering the first research question about barriers. Future studies should focus on producing such data that allows the participants to generally describe their current situations, not just mainly challenges. Furthermore, in the future, we should make specific inquiries about the child group to possibly help in better contextualising participants' perspectives, as currently this information is limited.

Future research should also focus on national standards and how they ensure quality special education, and how to shorten the waiting times for support since, after all, Norway strives for early intervention. Future research could also compare data from other Nordic countries. Chaos emerged as an interesting finding; to better understand the implications of these results, further research could investigate where the feeling of chaos in Norwegian ECEC stems from. The dimension of chaos was based on teachers' views, and thus it would be interesting to investigate how children perceive the current circumstance in ECEC.

Here, we examined ECTs' perspectives on supporting children with special needs in ECEC. We were interested in hearing what teachers had to say, and thus our research provides

encouraging findings for further investigations regarding ECTs' role in supporting children with special needs, particularly when considering the current 'chaotic' circumstances in ECEC (see also Havisalmi & Reunamo, 2023), varying implementations of the national regulations and unclear professional responsibilities regarding who has the main responsibility for supporting children with special needs in Norwegian ECEC.

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