

1 **Early childhood education and care professionals’**
2 **descriptions of challenging situations in Norwegian**
3 **kindergartens: A qualitative pilot study**
4

5 Early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals in Norway
6 (ECEC teachers, special teachers, pedagogical leaders, assistants,
7 managers, and child and youth workers) work in challenging situations
8 in which they face barriers in ensuring appropriate pedagogy for
9 children. Despite the recognition of challenging situations and public
10 discourses surrounding them, there is still limited knowledge about how
11 they appear in professionals’ work. This qualitative pilot study aimed to
12 explore ECEC professionals’ descriptions of challenging situations and
13 to generate directions for further research. The data consisted of 251
14 written descriptions from kindergarten professionals, collected via a
15 survey with one open-ended question about situations where they felt
16 they had no more solutions. Qualitative content analysis identified three
17 main themes: 1) difficulties in recruiting staff, 2) high job demands, and
18 3) limited collaboration. The findings align with earlier Nordic studies
19 and confirm the existence of challenging situations in Norway,
20 suggesting the usefulness of this concept. However, the results
21 remained rather descriptive. Future studies should thus use advanced
22 analytical approaches to deepen understanding of challenging situations
23 and, potentially, of professionals’ belonging in ECEC. Such approaches
24 can be applied to the existing data. Future research should also use
25 various data production methods and include participatory research
26 approaches.

27
28 *Keywords:* Early childhood education and care (ECEC), ECEC
29 professionals, challenging situations, Norway
30

31
32 **Introduction**
33

34 Ensuring quality education and well-being for all, both within and across
35 countries, is one of the most significant social, economic, and political
36 challenges of our time (United Nations, 2020). Early childhood education and
37 care (ECEC) is encountering considerable challenges not only across Europe but
38 also within the Nordic region, and especially in Norway. ECEC professionals in
39 Norway (ECEC teachers, special teachers, pedagogical leaders, assistants,
40 kindergarten managers, and child and youth workers) are currently working in
41 challenging situations in which they feel helpless in ensuring appropriate
42 pedagogy and effective early support for every child (Jacobson et al., 2025;
43 Pesonen et al., 2023a; Äikäs et al., 2022). At the same time, the importance of
44 effective support and early intervention for children is constantly emphasized.
45 The values underlying inclusion need to guarantee that every child’s right to

1 receive support in their own group is met (UNESCO, 2021). Despite the
2 recognition of challenging situations and public discourses surrounding them,
3 we know too little about what leads to them in professionals' daily work in ECEC
4 in Norway, and how such situations could be further investigated.

5 To address this gap in research, the purpose of this qualitative pilot study
6 was to explore ECEC professionals' descriptions of challenging situations and
7 to generate directions for future research on this topic. For instance, this pilot
8 can help to identify which methodological choices and theoretical concepts
9 could be used in further studies. The data consisted of 251 written descriptions
10 from kindergarten professionals of the challenges they face in ECEC in Norway
11 to answer the following three research questions: 1) What do ECEC
12 professionals' descriptions reveal about challenging situations in Norwegian
13 ECEC? 2) What methodological choices need to be considered when designing
14 more systematic qualitative analysis methods with the current data? and 3) What
15 suggestions does the pilot study provide for larger future studies on challenging
16 situations in ECEC? The article now turns to the literature review, introducing
17 Norwegian ECEC and challenging situations, after which the methodology is
18 described that is followed by the results, discussion and conclusions sections.

21 **Norwegian ECEC and Challenging Situations**

22
23 Kindergartens constitute the main form of ECEC in Norway, serving
24 approximately 264,000 children from infancy until the age of 5 (Statistics
25 Norway, 2026). Compulsory education then starts in the year children turn 6
26 (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022, 2023). Since 2011,
27 ECEC has gradually shifted from private to municipal ownership, although
28 private kindergartens still account for around half of all kindergartens. Several
29 professionals work in Norwegian kindergartens: ECEC teachers, childcare and
30 youth workers, assistants, pedagogical leaders, support pedagogues, and special
31 education teachers, though the latter may not hold full-time positions in every
32 kindergarten (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023).

33 The current framework plan for ECEC, introduced in 2017 (Norwegian
34 Directorate for Education and Training, 2017), emphasizes children's inclusion
35 and participation, collaboration with parents, sustainability, and digital
36 competence (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017).
37 Building on this, the government launched the policy initiative "Kindergarten
38 for a New Era" in 2023, setting targets up to 2030, such as increasing the
39 proportion of qualified personnel, reinforcing quality development, and
40 strengthening curriculum implementation (Ministry of Education and Research,
41 2023). As part of this initiative, Norway is working towards fulfilling its
42 "competence promise," which seeks to improve staff competence in inclusive
43 practices—a development area that is also recognized in international research
44 (e.g., Dan, 2019; Lee et al., 2023; Mithans et al., 2023).

45 However, these various top-down initiatives increase job demands, and
46 generally increasing societal challenges due to insecure global situations have

1 set many expectations for professionals' work in ECEC. Research indicates the
2 existence of challenging situations in Nordic countries (e.g., Jacobson et al.,
3 2025; Pesonen et al., 2023b; Äikäs et al., 2022). ECEC professionals are
4 expected to fulfill many professional duties, and their own wellbeing might be
5 at risk (e.g., Heiskanen et al., 2024). They feel helpless as they may not be able
6 to ensure support for every child (e.g., Heiskanen et al., 2024). The current
7 challenging situations are also reflected in protest activities by ECEC educators
8 (e.g., strikes) (e.g., Søråunet Wangberg, 2023) and in Nordic and societal
9 discourses about the field-related chaos (e.g., Jacobson et al., 2025; Havisalmi
10 & Reunamo, 2023). In such discussions, for example, children, families, and
11 uncooperative colleagues are often framed as demanding (e.g., Pesonen et al.,
12 2025). However, it is more about the situations arising in ECEC that place
13 demands on professionals' work, rather than, for example, children or colleagues
14 themselves being challenging or demanding (e.g., Äikäs et al., 2022). The
15 concept of challenging situations can therefore also help to shift attention away
16 from labelling children, other people, or factors.

17 Although there has been increased attention to challenging situations in
18 Norwegian ECEC, as reflected in public discussions, there is still limited
19 knowledge about what leads to them in professionals' daily work and how such
20 situations could be further investigated. This qualitative pilot study therefore
21 aimed to explore ECEC professionals' descriptions of challenging situations and
22 to generate directions for further qualitative inquiries on the topic. Drawing on
23 251 written descriptions provided by kindergarten professionals, three research
24 questions were addressed: 1) What do ECEC professionals' descriptions reveal
25 about challenging situations in Norwegian ECEC? 2) What methodological
26 choices need to be considered when designing further systematic qualitative
27 analytical methods with the current data? and 3) What suggestions does the pilot
28 study provide for larger future studies on challenging situations in ECEC? The
29 first research question will be specifically answered in the results section and
30 questions two and three are mainly addressed in the discussion and conclusion
31 sections.

32 33 34 **Methods**

35
36 A pilot study approach was used in this study, which is a small-scale
37 preliminary or exploratory investigation that is conducted to test and refine
38 methods and research questions before carrying out further research (Given,
39 2008). Although pilot studies might be viewed as exploratory, they still have a
40 clear purpose, leading to developing conclusions that can generate clearer aims
41 for future studies (Given, 2008; Kim, 2017). For example, through qualitative
42 pilot studies it is possible to narrow proposed research topics, discover more in-
43 depth analysis methods using existing data, gain more focused conceptualizations of the
44 topic, and strengthen theory for future studies (e.g., Kim, 2010).

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1 Data collection and participants

2
3 Ethical clearance was granted by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services
4 in Education and Research before data collection. Data for this study were
5 collected from kindergarten professionals across Norway using an online survey
6 (Nettskjema). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained
7 electronically prior to survey completion. No directly identifiable personal
8 information was collected. Recruitment took place via an email distributed to all
9 kindergartens in Norway. The email presented the research project “Current
10 Circumstances in ECEC” (2023–2024), which examines professionals’ practices
11 in supporting children in challenging situations in Norwegian ECEC, and
12 included a link to the online questionnaire. The survey included one open-ended
13 question, followed by a quantitative section on work-related wellbeing. In this
14 qualitative pilot study, the focus is solely on the participant-produced
15 descriptions.

16 In the survey, participants were asked to “Describe a situation from
17 kindergarten that you find challenging, where it seems as if you have no more
18 solutions.” This prompt allowed respondents to write freely. Altogether, 251
19 ECEC professionals provided descriptions: pedagogical leaders (n = 81),
20 kindergarten managers (n = 74), child and youth workers (n = 42), ECEC
21 teachers (n = 30), assistants (n = 18), and special education teachers (n = 6). Most
22 of the respondents were women (89%). The written descriptions (N=251) had an
23 average length of approximately 40 words. The length ranged from
24 approximately 4 words (e.g, stating challenges related to staff shortages) to about
25 290 words (e.g., providing lengthier descriptions of various challenges).

26 Analysis

27
28
29 Inductive content analysis approach (Schreier, 2012; Thomas, 2006) guided
30 the analysis of ECEC professionals’ written descriptions (N=251). Each
31 description was unit of analysis and thus could include different codes and
32 emerging themes. Since the aim of this pilot study was to explore the
33 phenomenon of challenging situations in Norwegian ECEC and to generate
34 further research directions, the units of analysis (i.e. responses) were not
35 separated to different ECEC professional groups. Furthermore, the analysis was
36 preliminary and exploratory (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006).

37 The analysis began by making sure that the material was anonymous and
38 then the data were read multiple times to become familiar with it while taking
39 notes. This was followed by an exploratory round of coding, where similar codes
40 were grouped into broader categories to sketch out the main themes in the
41 material, rather than to develop a fully detailed coding scheme (e.g., Braun &
42 Clarke, 2006). The analysis continued, and the codes were organized into three
43 main themes and six subthemes. Throughout the analysis, the emerging themes
44 and subthemes were compared against the raw data. Furthermore, peer
45 debriefing was used to discuss emerging themes.

46

Results

Analysis of the participant descriptions resulted in three interconnected main themes with six subthemes about factors contributing to challenging situations in ECEC in Norway (Table 1). Data extracts are identified using participant codes (e.g., 1, 2, etc.).

Table 1. Interconnected main themes and subthemes about factors contributing to challenging situations

Interconnected main themes	Subthemes
Difficulties in recruiting staff	Excessive sickness absences Poor support for children
High job demands	Increased workload Time constraints for pedagogical work
Limited collaboration	Uncooperative colleagues Parental expectations of ECEC quality and staff

Difficulties in recruiting staff

Excessive sickness absences

The analysis of the descriptions clearly indicated that challenging situations were often related to frequent sick leave among ECEC staff. There were challenges in finding enough permanent and temporary ECEC professionals (e.g., teachers). This had led to challenging situations in which existing staff had to do more work. For example: “Many staff members are absent due to illness, and there are no substitutes available to hire. This leads to being understaffed, resulting in many physical and mental strains.” (224), “Absence of permanent staff and no substitutes available. (244), “High sick leave leading to understaffing and strain on employees who are working. Problems with getting substitutes either due to lack of availability or due to a low substitute budget.” (235), and “High employee absenteeism and challenging to get the day to go smoothly.” (236) Descriptions of limited staff numbers also included remarks about poor financial resources. For example, one professional described:

Understaffing is a significant problem. Initially, there are few resources in a kindergarten compared to the needs. A shortage of substitutes during sick leave creates a heavy burden. Managing planning time and unallocated time is also a challenge, as substitutes are rarely hired for these hours. Taking breaks is also challenging. If two staff members on a unit need to take a break, it places a heavy burden on the remaining staff members left alone, so the benefits are somewhat negated. (172)

The description above specifically demonstrates how systemic issues of absenteeism and financial constraints result in challenging situations for both children and staff (e.g., Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2024). However, it also appeared that professionals perceived challenging situations as being caused by other people or by specific factors, rather than

1 acknowledging broader systemic issues. Overall, based on the exploratory
2 analysis, challenging situations seem to be multifaceted, and staff are trying to
3 cope alone, while at the same time not taking any responsibility for the
4 circumstances.

5
6 Poor support for children

7 Professionals described situations where they were unable to provide
8 adequate support to all children, and this was associated with sickness and
9 absenteeism among staff; for example: “High absenteeism makes it challenging
10 to follow up on all the children and their individual needs.” (51) Another
11 participant continued by stating: “It's challenging to find enough time to meet all
12 the individual needs of the children in the group.” (232) The analysis further
13 revealed everyday situations in which staffing is insufficient, with limited
14 competencies, and existing professionals cannot ensure support for all children:

15
16 Several children need support in their daily lives to be helped into play, support for
17 language, or assistance with conflict resolution. However, there are not always
18 enough regular staff on duty, and the substitutes who come are not always familiar.”
19 (163)

20
21 There are too many children with different measures and needs in one department.
22 Out of 18 children, there are 8 children with different measures who need extra
23 follow-up in kindergarten day-to-day. There are not enough staff to attend to the
24 children's needs. (81)

25
26 Eight children left, you are alone in the department, one or more children with extra
27 challenges end up in a situation where they need help, at the same time as the new
28 3-year-old is insecure and needs support, and two parents stand in the cloakroom
29 and would like to hear about how their child's day has been. Terribly awful not to
30 be able to cope. (66)

31
32 The above extracts also seem to demonstrate that perhaps children are
33 framed as demanding. This is particularly evident when professionals describe
34 challenging situations as arising from “When children are aggressive towards
35 other children.” (80) and “Aggressive children who can harm themselves, other
36 children, and me/staff.” (49). Such descriptions may suggest a wider systemic
37 issue, as children are described as demanding or challenging and causing
38 problems, and none of the professionals approach the aggressive children, for
39 example, from a worry-perspective. The extracts indicate that professionals
40 might not even see situations as challenging but rather perceive children as
41 demanding.

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1 **High job demands**

2

3 Increased workload

4 Descriptions revealed that professionals experienced an increased workload
5 that led them to take on a wider range of work tasks compared to before. When
6 there was a lot of sick leave in kindergartens – already in situations where there
7 were too few staff, combined with difficulties finding competent permanent and
8 temporary staff – professionals described how all the uncompleted work needed
9 to be done by them. Participants constantly described issues related to this, for
10 example:

11

12 Workload. To be present with the children so that play is good and lasts a long time,
13 combined with all the practical tasks that need to be done, everything that needs to
14 be prepared and planned and evaluated. Combined with frequent understaffing,
15 somewhat unpredictable staffing, and little time with full staffing. (239)

16

17 ...more work for the remaining staff when there's absenteeism. Unallocated time
18 and missed meetings create extra work and postpone tasks, making it harder for
19 directors to delegate tasks to other staff - which again increases the already heavy
20 workload of the directors. This becomes a vicious cycle that wears on all
21 employees. ... (84)

22

23 ...It also feels like we have been given more responsibility for the children's
24 upbringing than the parents these days. It's expected that we should do everything
25 for all children all the time. It's impossible. (127).

26

27 Overall, the extracts specifically demonstrate that reduced staffing made
28 professionals feel that they had increased responsibilities, with higher
29 expectations set on their work. The increased workload subtheme demonstrates
30 how there appeared to be “chaos” in ECEC (Havisalmi & Reunamo, 2023;
31 Jacobson et al., 2025) due to a shortage of employees, which was also impacted
32 the pedagogy and care for children.

33

34 Time constraints for pedagogical work

35 The descriptions highlighted that professionals faced time constraints for
36 pedagogical work. Often, the limited time was associated with kindergartens
37 currently facing staff shortages, leading to higher sick leaves and more work
38 existing staff. Professionals reflected this from the perspective of declining
39 quality of pedagogy. For example, one participant mentioned the following:

40

41 ...Kindergarten teachers in my kindergarten describe feeling like they are only
42 providing childcare, with little time for pedagogical work. Several employees have
43 more than 20 hours of overtime work and work overtime on a weekly basis. It is
44 challenging to find good substitutes to help us during tough times. We have had to
45 reduce opening hours for many periods over the past three years... (173)

46

47 Another professional continued by stating similar issues with staffing and the
48 problems with pedagogical quality: “I find it challenging with absenteeism due to

1 illness and no substitutes available. It feels like we are just storing children and not
2 providing a proper pedagogical setup!” (42)

3
4 Further, the writings indicated that the professionals were constantly feeling
5 not being able to do enough and ensure that children receive proper pedagogical
6 activities as the participants mainly aimed to manage the chaos; for example,
7 “...we do as we usually do, smile, breathe, and collapse exhausted and full of
8 guilt when we get home, where a family awaits, needing their parent present.”
9 (50) The professionals further continued by sharing:

10
11 ...It feels like not being able to contribute enough and the only thing one can
12 contribute to is "firefighting". Challenging, in an already difficult and pressured
13 situation with few permanent staff and many substitutes. This has a ripple effect,
14 and there is little time, and opportunity for pedagogical activities, for example,
15 dressing and mealtime situations become a major challenge instead of a calm and
16 fine arena for learning and mastery. (44)

17
18 ...generally [we] have longer stays now than before, there's high absenteeism in
19 the sector, and a constant feeling of not being able to sufficiently do the job...the
20 children, compared to before, are younger when they start in kindergarten,
21 generally have longer stays now than before, there's high absenteeism in the sector,
22 and a constant feeling of not being able to sufficiently do the job.... (84)

23
24 Some professionals also expressed aspirations that were related to the
25 feelings of inadequacy. For example, “I wish I could have time to engage deeply
26 in play with the children and have ample time for conversations and cuddles,
27 rather than rushing around putting out fires all day.” (129)

28 The writings above specifically show that professionals appeared to
29 experience feelings of guilt about not being able to do their job well. The current
30 ECEC legislative framework sets expectations for professionals’ performance in
31 ECEC that might be reflected in the descriptions about not being able to do a
32 good enough job. Overall, the descriptions in this subtheme specifically
33 demonstrate how increased work tasks and the constant need to “put out fires”
34 have impacted the quality of pedagogical activities.

35 36 **Limited collaboration**

37 38 Uncooperative colleagues

39 The ECEC professionals described their colleagues and management as
40 uncooperative; for example, by stating that “Colleagues who are not very
41 cooperative” (9), and “The preschool teacher does not take her role as a leader
42 seriously...” (10). These types of descriptions suggest a lack of shared
43 responsibility and support, which appeared to add to the existing challenging
44 situation in ECEC. Furthermore, the data indicated that some challenges
45 emerged when professionals had conflicting values and beliefs that were also not
46 aligned with the ECEC curriculum and policy:

47

1 I find it challenging with colleagues who have a worldview that does not align with
2 the mandate of the framework plan. For example, where an employee refuses to
3 acknowledge pride in kindergarten and believes homosexuality is a sin. I find this
4 challenging because we have same-sex parent couples in the group of children, and
5 the leader does not address the issue. (205)
6

7 The above extract is particularly interesting, as it appears to suggest poor
8 professional conduct when colleagues position themselves as private individuals
9 while at work. This might also reflect a systemic issue if hiring processes for
10 permanent staff or substitutes fail to consider the diversity of worldviews, which
11 can have negative consequences for how diversity is addressed in practice.
12

13 Parental expectations of ECEC staff and quality

14 The descriptions also revealed that families were not experienced as
15 collaborative. For example, one professional mentioned that “If you have parents
16 who are never satisfied but just demand and demand” (38). Another continued
17 by stating that challenging situations are due to parents’ unrealistic expectations:
18 “Parent collaboration. No matter what recommendations we as staff make,
19 parents don't seem to see the value in what we suggest...” (134), and “If a parent
20 requests something regarding their child, but which I don't think is in the child's
21 best interest.” (64) These extracts seem to suggest that families put pressure on
22 professionals’ work when professionals are already under a lot of pressure.
23 Furthermore, it appeared that professionals felt that if families did not share the
24 same views of the child (e.g., behaviors), it was difficult to collaborate for the
25 child’s best. For example, one professional stated:
26

27 A child who uses negative strategies in interactions with other children and adults,
28 where the parents do not understand that their child can behave this way. The
29 challenge lies in getting the parents to understand so that we can collaborate to help
30 the child develop positive strategies. (130)
31

32 The descriptions in this subtheme might also suggest that professionals are
33 blaming the families for the challenges in ECEC, instead of seeing the bigger
34 system-level issues. This appears similar to the findings in the subtheme of
35 uncooperative colleagues. Overall, common characteristics of the descriptions
36 under the main theme of limited collaboration were putting other individuals or
37 groups of people as responsible for challenging situations in ECEC (e.g.,
38 Pesonen et al., 2025). However, professionals themselves did not seem to take
39 responsibility for their actions and work in challenging situations. Related to
40 this, some descriptions indicated that professionals did not recognise any
41 challenging situations; for example: "As of now, I don't have such a situation."
42 (125) Such descriptions might suggest a denial or refusal of the existing
43 problems, and this may also suggest unwillingness to even engage with the
44 survey prompt, which can be related to wider systemic issues (e.g., Pesonen et
45 al., 2026). Further studies based on the initial findings of this pilot could focus
46 on this.
47
48

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative pilot study was to explore ECEC professionals' descriptions of challenging situations and to generate directions for future qualitative inquiry on the topic. The results revealed that challenging situations in ECEC consisted of recruitment difficulties regarding competent and temporary staff that were related to constant sickness absence. The descriptions also revealed that sickness among ECEC professionals and limited staffing led to poor support for children, which also seemed to appear in the framing of children as demanding, without pointing to systemic issues. Another factor related to challenging situations was high job demands – ECEC professionals described increased workload and various time constraints for pedagogical activities and planning them. The analysis of professionals' writings further indicated that colleagues were considered uncooperative, and it was also challenging to collaborate with families.

The findings contribute to understanding of the existence of challenging situations in Norwegian ECEC contexts and recognize that the concept can be used when describing such situations (see also Jacobson et al., 2025). The results are also in line with previous studies about the recognition of such challenging circumstances (e.g., Äikäs et al., 2022; Pesonen et al., 2023b; see also Ustundag & Akar-Vural, 2025). It is important to recognize the existence of challenging situations in ensuring the development, growth, and wellbeing of every child (e.g., Äikäs et al., 2022), as well as ECEC professionals' wellbeing (e.g., Heiskanen et al., 2024; see also Ustundag & Akar-Vural, 2025). Furthermore, it appeared that children in challenging situations are, by extension, and in relation to the perceived lack of resources, made into a burden and a problem (e.g., Palla, 2021). This needs to be acknowledged and attention should be targeted more toward system-level issues. Furthermore, challenging situations can be considered a multifaceted phenomenon that might be related to, for example, ECEC professionals' limited belonging in ECEC, and thus their own wellbeing is at risk, and ensuring belonging for children may be challenging.

Therefore, the interconnected factors related to challenging situations – based on the inductive analysis of the material – led to pondering professionals' work through the theories of belonging, and particularly barriers to their belonging. Sense of belonging refers to an individual's experiences of feeling included, respected, and accepted by others in different social settings (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). Belonging is a basic need and people have a life-long desire to feel that they belong (Maslow, 1962). Belonging should not be considered consistent and something that can be achieved and captured (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2023a), especially when considering challenging situations. Thus, belonging is not something that can be simply enhanced or fixed through top-down interventions, in-service training, and policies (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2020). Instead, relational and intersectional approaches regarding belonging need to be considered. For example, belonging can be seen as a dynamic process wherein individuals become identified by someone else (e.g., ECEC professionals by colleagues and families, etc.) and

1 identify themselves in relation to people, cultures, material objects, and places
2 (May, 2013; Puroila et al., 2021). For example, the findings suggest that ECEC
3 professionals' relationships with colleagues and families were not particularly
4 warm and caring, and thus might prevent their belonging in ECEC (e.g., Ninda
5 et al., 2022; Pesonen, 2016). Such areas related to relationships (e.g., limited
6 teamwork with colleagues) appear to be problematic in the current chaos
7 (Pesonen et al., 2026). It also appeared that professionals have limited time to
8 ensure high-quality pedagogy that is related to environment dimension of
9 belonging (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2023a). For example, educators might struggle
10 to ensure inclusive pedagogical approaches and tools (e.g., the use of
11 pedagogical tools, toys, etc.) and adapt characteristics related to physical aspects
12 (e.g., a home-like environment through decor, sensory aspects, etc.) that are
13 important to experience a feeling of belonging (Pesonen et al., 2023a). This can
14 be currently challenging to ensure if ECEC educators feel that they belong to the
15 ECEC setting themselves (see also Peltomäki et al., 2023).

16 It also appears that the results on challenging situations include the
17 dimension of politics of belonging that is associated with ECEC professionals'
18 values, beliefs and attitudes toward their work in ECEC, which can either foster
19 or hinder belonging (e.g., Pesonen et al., 2020; 2023a). For example, in practice,
20 professionals implement the politics of belonging by following the ECEC policy
21 frameworks (e.g., Yuval-Davis, 2011) and the way they implement it, thus can
22 vary greatly, as educators might not share ECEC setting's values and beliefs
23 (e.g., Honig, 2006; Pesonen et al., 2023a). This appears to be problematic in the
24 light of the pilot study findings. For example, the findings revealed that some
25 professionals did not share values and beliefs related to family diversity, which
26 is problematic not only at the kindergarten level but also in terms of following
27 the principles of the national ECEC framework.

28 Overall, the current findings related to belonging dimensions of
29 relationships, place and politics are in line with the literature and thus do not
30 offer novel contributions. Therefore, future research needs to consider various
31 methodological and theoretical perspectives for making theoretical contributions
32 in relation to ECEC professionals' belonging in ECEC. However, in light of the
33 concept of challenging situations, professionals' belonging to ECEC can be
34 endangered and lead to ill effects, such as sick leave, and this in turn can
35 negatively impact children's belonging (see also Jacobson et al., 2025).

36 This study further suggests that the content analysis approach applied in the
37 current article has also resulted in rather descriptive findings. Therefore,
38 perspectives and concepts from discursive approaches might be particularly
39 useful for developing a more nuanced understanding of how professionals' work
40 in challenging situations in ECEC is constructed, even if they are applied to the
41 same dataset. The initial qualitative analysis reported in this pilot study was
42 conducted in 2024. At the time of reporting, we are also analyzing the same data
43 using a discourse-analytic approach to gain a better understanding of the
44 underlying factors related to challenging situations (Pesonen et al., 2026).
45 Moreover, because the data were analyzed as a whole without focusing on
46 specific professional groups, future research should concentrate on particular

1 ECEC professionals—either by reanalyzing the current data, collecting new
2 material, or combining existing and new datasets. Future studies should also
3 draw on a broader range of qualitative data production methods, rather than using
4 prompts designed to elicit challenges related to work in ECEC, and include
5 participatory research approaches.
6
7

8 **Conclusions**

9

10 The findings of this pilot study deepen our understanding of the occurrence
11 of challenging situations in Norwegian ECEC settings and demonstrate that the
12 concept is applicable when describing such situations in Norway (see also
13 Jacobson et al., 2025). The results are consistent with earlier research from the
14 Nordic countries on acknowledging such situations (e.g., Äikäs et al., 2022;
15 Pesonen et al., 2023b). The current study also suggests that the factors related to
16 challenging situations could be studied through theories on belonging,
17 particularly focusing on barriers to professionals' belonging. ECEC educators'
18 own belonging is an important foundation for professional growth including job
19 satisfaction, stress reduction, collaboration, staff retention, positive culture, and
20 building inclusive ECEC communities with positive child impact (Puroila et al.,
21 2021).

22 Although the current results for the first research question do not seem to
23 provide new perspectives when viewed through the lens of belonging, in light of
24 the concept of challenging situations, professionals' belonging can be
25 endangered, which may lead to ill effects such as sick leave and, in turn,
26 negatively affect children's belonging. Yet this pilot study indicates that future
27 studies should use discursive analysis approaches that have potential to improve
28 understanding of belonging and professionals' work in ECEC contexts. At the
29 time of this reporting, we are already examining the same data using a discourse-
30 analytic approach to gain deeper insight into the underlying factors associated
31 with challenging situations (Pesonen et al., 2026).

32 Future studies should also employ various methods of qualitative data
33 production and not only focus on using prompts that generate challenges related
34 to work in ECEC, and they should use participatory research approaches.
35 Furthermore, since the data were analyzed as a whole without focusing on
36 different professional groups, future research should study specific ECEC
37 professionals either by using the current data, collecting new material, or
38 combining the existing and new data. For example, focusing on ECEC teachers,
39 who often hold the main pedagogical responsibility in ECEC, has the potential
40 to provide insights into either their belonging or unbelonging in challenging
41 situations.
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