How Do Day-Care Personnel Describe Children with Challenging Behaviour?

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Abstract

In educational contexts there are few topics that receive as much attention from adults as children’s behaviour that is seen as challenging. Challenging behaviour has been a topic in many disciplines, such as education, child psychiatry, psychology and special education. Along with the definition of challenging behaviour, we can read about social and emotional difficulties or disruptive behaviour. In this article we examine the definitions of challenging behaviour in Finnish day care. Altogether 291 professionals answered an open-ended question. The results show a wide range of individually defined meanings where the focus is mostly on children in a problem-oriented way.

Keywords: challenging behaviour, day care, early childhood education, special education

Introduction

In this study, we are interested in how early childhood education teachers and practical nurses describe challenging behaviour in day care. Lyons and O’Connor (2006) argue that there are few topics within education that receive as much attention or cause as much concern for adults as children’s behaviour that is seen as problematic. Children with challenging behaviour challenge teachers every day in many educational contexts (Lyons and O’Connor 2006). In the international literature and in education, according to Thomas (2005), the term EBD (emotional and behavioural difficulties) is quite a widespread and often used term. Along with EBD, the term challenging behaviour is used. Identifying and describing challenging behaviour as it seen in early childhood education is important since we do not know enough about what the challenges or difficulties are in fact in the minds of day-care professionals today. It has been found that teachers feel that they do not have sufficient skills or tools to address behavioural problems and they feel worried knowing that such problems have significant negative outcomes (Fox and Smith 2007; Hammarberg 2003). In order to give support and plan effective interventions for day-care personnel and other caregivers we need to know more about this phenomenon from the actors themselves.

The context of the study is Finnish day care. In Finland, public day care is the mainstream service as 92% of all children in day care are in the public sector.
An estimated 63% of 1- to 6-year-old children take part in day care. Further, 74% of all 3- to 5-year-old children and 41% of all 1- to 2-year-old children are in day care. About 80% of all the children had an all-day-care service, and spent about 8 hours a day in day care (see THL 2011, 2014). Thus, the majority of children aged 3–6 spend most of their waking hours in child groups in day-care centres. In Finland, the personnel in day care have either kindergarten-teacher-level education (about 33% with a Bachelor degree) or practical-nurse-level education (vocational education, secondary level). The adult-child ratio by law in whole-day care is 1:4 children under 3 years of age, and 1:7 when children are between 3 and 6 years of age. By adult, we mean either kindergarten teachers or practical nurses.

In this study, we analyse the written descriptions made by day-care personnel. In these written descriptions the language, the words, that are in use are seen as meaningful. Language is essential in many ways. Language shapes meanings, fosters the forming of different types of meanings, and clarifies or conceals connections between meanings and actions (Charmaz 2014). Language is an inseparable part of being human and is strongly involved in the developmental processes of the individual child (Jokinen, Juhila and Suoninen 1993; Lehtonen 2000).

Conflicting approaches to challenging behaviour

Lyon and O’Connor (2006) note that, despite the fact that challenging behaviour attracts a lot of attention, its precise nature is open to discussion and debate. We can also talk about problem behaviour referring to behaviour that is challenging (Fox, Dunlap and Cushing 2002). In the literature, depending on the discipline or the setting, a variety of terms is used to describe challenging behaviour, social and/or emotional difficulties and disorders. Every branch of science or every branch of service has its own way to see, describe and define these problems.

According to Papatheodorou (2005), challenging behaviour can be defined as a continuum of a repeated pattern of behaviour that interferes with learning or engagement in social interactions. Again, this is not always placed within one or another dimension such as aggressive behaviour or withdrawn behaviour, but is seen as a mixture of behaviours identified in a negative way. It is often considered that children are the problem in educational contexts (Thomas and Loxley 2002) which is the traditional way to look at this issue. According to this orientation, when children are seen as a problem, there is a need to plan the child’s education individually. In these educational plans, teachers can specify the aims and the methods that could be used to make the identified children as ‘normal’ as possible. The goals are set for the individual child, while the pedagogical context has been very often ignored or forgotten (Pihlaja 2003).

Disruptive behaviour and oppositional defiant disorder, or wider descriptions such as externalising or internalising behaviour problems, refer to challenging behaviour. Externalising behaviour problems are characterised by aggressive, noncompliant and
oppositional acts. Internalising problems refer to a lack of social skills manifesting as states such as withdrawal, anxiety etc. Descriptions in the literature of challenging behaviour more often mean externalised than internalised problems (Hammarberg 2003, 13; Powell et al. 2007, 81; Snell et al. 2012, 98). Further, according to Hammarberg (2003, 41), when studying teachers’ low perceived control to manage challenging behaviour, it was most strongly related to externalising behaviour.

Identifying and describing challenging behaviour is important when considering the idea that the term challenging behaviour is to some extent socially constructed and varies across the settings in which the children are (Oliver et al. 2003). These kinds of labels or definitions of children are not transient, even the definitions of these problems seem to lie in a grey area. Further, the permanence of these kinds of problems is solid, the occurrence or prevalence is substantial, and these difficulties, problems or disorders concern many children, their parents and day-care personnel. Moreover, the growing acknowledgement that early signs of challenging behaviours can have severe long-term consequences has led to more concrete efforts to describe such behaviours across professionals, disciplines and service systems (Wright 2009).

The permanence and prevalence of problems assigned to social, emotional or behavioural difficulties have for a long time been one argument that makes this theme socially important. Many studies have stated that the prevalence or occurrence have for years been between 10% and 20% (Brauner and Stephens 2006; Campbell 1995; Pihlaja 2003, 2009; Pihlaja et al. 2010; Powell et al. 2007), and many studies have affirmed that there is strong evidence of the permanence of socio-emotional difficulties (Bayer, Sanson and Hepmhill 2006; Briggs-Gowan et al. 2006; Goodman and Goodman 2009; Mesman and Koot 2001; Morgan, Fargas and Qiong 2009). Brauner and Stephens (2006) say that behavioural problems should be seen or identified early and allow children to be treated before they are ‘labelled’ as emotionally disturbed.

Many population-based birth cohort studies have shown that childhood psychiatric problems are developmental precursors for a wide range of negative outcomes (Achenbach et al. 1995; Goodman and Goodman 2009; Kim-Cohen et al. 2003; Sourander et al. 2005; Sourander et al. 2009). Powell et al. (2007) talk about “unchecking this problem”. By this, they mean that even though these problems are noticeable we do not react to them early enough (Powell et al. 2007). To examine this ‘problem’, we need research focusing on children’s authentic environments and also on the people who are responsible for the children and raise them. There are strong grounds for studying these problems and especially how professionals see them. Various studies and reports show that these problems entail huge costs for society, for the young and for all those with whom the child interacts (e.g., family, peers, educators). The costs that are associated with education include early and persistent peer rejection (Coie and Dodge 1998), mostly punitive contacts with teachers (Hammarberg 2003; Pihlaja 2003; Strain et al. 1983) and school failure
It seems that this negative trajectory described in the literature and in many studies is the child’s fate. The view taken towards these problems is extremely problem-oriented and dark. The reason we study day care is because the early years are arguably the most significant period of children’s education, and their first encounters with the education system are therefore of fundamental importance (Blenkin, Rose and Yue 1996).

Defining and focusing the problems into a child is linked to the individual model of disability that has its roots in medicalisation. The individual model of disability has seen the problem, deficits or disorders placed in an individual. This tends to be a mainstream way to see children with disabilities or special needs not only in psychology and child psychiatry but also in education (Pihlaja 2003; Vehkakoski 2006; Vehmas 2005). In education, the traditional way to solve this ‘problem’ has been to segregate, to treat and teach these pupils in special classes, in special schools with special teachers (see Jahnukainen 2003; Kivirauma, Klemelä and Rinne 2006; SVT 2012). There has been growing criticism of both special education practices and research. According to Mallory and New (1994), there is a gap between theoretical bases and practices in education because the theoretical bases of research are often neglected in practice.

In addition to the individual model, there is growing emphasis on the social model that shifts our view to the process during which we socially construct disability (Oliver 1996; Reindal 1995). According to this model, different communities and settings socially construct what is regarded as disability or as special. The social constructionist view of challenging behaviour, which is close to the social model, suggests that the identification of challenging behaviour varies across settings. For example, considering the day-care setting, the perception and descriptions about challenging behaviour can vary a lot among employees with different backgrounds. Consequently, challenging behaviour can be considered an undesirable activation or trait, related not only to personal character but also to context (Lyons and O’Connor 2006). For example, according to a Finnish study by Pihlaja (2003) also internalised problems are considered challenging by early educators in the day-care context, which is not necessarily the case in basic education (see Kuula 2000). Finnish kindergarten teachers’ descriptions of social emotional problems can be divided into three different types also depending on the setting. These areas in typical day-care child groups and also in special day-care child groups are anxiety problems and peer relationship problems with disruptive or aggressive behaviour. In special groups disruptive or aggressive behaviour combined with specific learning difficulties was also identified (Pihlaja 2003). Similar types of these three areas were found in a survey conducted by Snell et al. 2012.

Wright (2009) talks about three meta-discourses which classify children as ‘bad’, ‘mad’ or ‘sad’ referring to the challenging behaviour. Pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties and challenging behaviour are often considered the most
challenging group to manage within mainstream education (Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes 2013), also even in special education (Kuula 2000; Seppovaara 1998). The challenges perceived by teachers may be due partly to negative attitudes to these children (Pihlaja 2009, 2012; Scanlon and Barnes-Holmes 2013; Thomas 2005; Viitala 2000).

In the many different studies mentioned above we can find conflicting forces. By this we mean that even the definition seems to be in a grey area, there are still ‘facts’ about the prevalence, the permanence or the consequences. This makes the examination of what is seen as challenging behaviour in day care at least interesting. Our aim is to examine how employees in day-care describe children with challenging behaviour and what kind of meaning structure can be drawn. Can we draw one all-inclusive picture of it, or is it fragmented?

We start by describing the aims of the study and then go on to the methodology and results.

**Research frame**

**Aims**

The purpose of this study is to increase our knowledge and understanding about the day-care staff descriptions of challenging behaviour assigned to children. What are seen as challenges in a day-care context? The aim is to form a meaning structure of the challenges according to day-care personnel answers. Respondents wrote a description in response to an open-ended question: “Describe briefly what in your opinion is a child who has behavioural challenges or difficulties in day care”. This article forms part of a larger study about challenging behaviour in day carried out together with the Department of Education and the Research Centre for Child Psychiatry at the University of Turku. In the survey of this larger study we have also contributed other themes concerning this topic, mostly quantitative data that are not part of this article.

**Participants**

To obtain answers from right across Finland we selected participating municipalities by convenience sampling from the north, east and south of the country. In Finland, there are 320 municipalities and we chose 18 of them. The data were gathered via the Internet by the Webropol survey software. In Finland there are Internet connections in every kindergarten and especially principals have to use the Internet and IT in their daily work.

We sent the survey via the Internet to the heads of the early childhood education service at the municipal level and asked permission to do this research in the municipality. We obtained permission from all 18 municipalities to do the study. Data were collected from day-care staff in Turku, Oulu and Kuopio and smaller
municipalities around these cities. Thus, 18 municipalities took part in this study (11 towns and 7 other municipalities), with 279 child groups and altogether 291 respondents by the deadline of our survey. In Finland, 78% of all inhabitants live in towns and 22% in other municipalities (Kuntaliitto 2014) so the ratio between towns and other municipalities in our study is analogous to the ratio in Finland. After receiving permission to do this study, we sent the survey to the managers of day-care centres who forwarded the questionnaire to the child group staff. We received answers from all 18 municipalities.

In the survey we gathered background information from the respondents (gender, education, working years, age), about the child group (number of children, form of the day care etc.), and the municipality (size, its location). The mean of the respondents’ age was 43.7 years and most respondents were females (98%), which is the case in Finnish day care. Their job titles were kindergarten teacher (56%), practical nurse (35%), special kindergarten teacher (3%), principal (3%), or some other (3%). The educational background varied: 37% had a kindergarten teacher degree, 22% a social pedagogue background, 3% a special kindergarten teacher degree, 30% a practical nurse’s diploma, and 8% some other kind of secondary educational background. The respondents had a lot of working experience; 51% had worked in day care for over 15 years, 33% had 5–15 years’ experience, while 16 percent of the respondents had less than 5 years’ working experience. The share of kindergarten teachers in Finland is about 33% of the pedagogical-responsible employees, and the nurses’ share is about 66% (Pihlaja, Rantanen and Sonne 2010; THL 2011). In early childhood education, kindergarten teachers have greater responsibility than nurses and have a leading role in the work team so, from this point of view, these answers describe the ideology of the group well.

The survey was sent to child groups in which the children were 3–6 years old, and the mean age was 4.8 years. Most children were in ordinary child groups (80%). Some (15%) were in so-called special groups (5% missing information).1 In special groups where there is usually a special teacher the number of children is fewer than in ordinary groups. Special groups are, in Finland, mainly integrated groups, where most children are typically developed and only some have special educational needs (Pihlaja 1998; 2003; 2010).

*Description of the methodology and analysis*

The main idea of this study was to construct a meaning structure of the descriptions expressed by day-care personnel related to challenging behaviour of children in day care. Open-ended answers formed qualitative material for the qualitative analysis process in which we used the ideas of Grounded Theory (GT); it especially provides “tools for analysing processes” (see Charmaz 2008, 202). When examining words or language the information the respondents gives us is something about
the individual body of knowledge based on action, context and culture where is it used (Berger and Luckman 1994; Burr 1995). According to this social constructivist view, every individual expresses something that is created socially in the day-care context and in day-care culture. The original Grounded Theory has been developed further and Charmaz (2000; 2008) writes about a constructive way to use GT. This means that researchers take a reflexive stand on modes of knowing and representing life that have been studied. Thornberg (2012) criticises rigid inductive inquiry with delaying literature review. We share this constructive view. No researcher carries out his or her inquiry in a social vacuum. As Charmaz (2008, 207) states, “the entire research process is interactive, we bring past interactions and current interests into our research and we interact with our empirical materials and emerging ideas as well”. We gathered the material and analysed it by our lenses in the light of earlier theoretical and practical knowledge. The ideas we use here are connected with the analysing process by emphasising the original data. We did not make any categories or classes from any earlier used theory, but still the coding system leans on our earlier knowledge. The coding system we have here is used widely in GT. This system is: initial and focused coding, axial coding and theoretical summary of the results (see Charmaz 2008; Hildenbrand 2004; Ryan 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1996).

First, we formed one document from all these open-ended answers and loaded it into N*Vivo for Windows (see QSR International), which is a software for qualitative research. N*Vivo helped us to organise the material and made it easier to analyse it. After reading the material, we coded (=initial coding) keywords with meaningful context. “A challenging child is in my opinion aggressive” or “the challenges can be seen daily as restlessness”. We coded keywords with meaningful context, and the coverage of references was in the whole data 85%. In the first step, the material was analysed in a research team. In this first process (=initial and focused coding), two writers of this article and four special education master degree students took part. During this process, as a team, we developed the subclasses (N=28) for this material (see Hildenbrand 2004, 20–21), and the peer reliability was good, over 90%. After this phase, the writers are responsible for the rest of the analysis process. By examining the material, we were seeking similarities and differences that could lead to a reduction in the number of classes (see Appendix 1).

After focused coding with altogether 28 subclasses, we read the material critically and compared the subclasses. This axial coding process helped us to form seven (7) major classes from these 28 subclasses. In this phase, we integrated classes that had similarities either theoretically or in functionally meaningful activities in day care. Theoretically words or sentences that belong together, e.g. to emotional development and its problems formed one major class. In the process of this axial coding, we actually formed umbrella terms or major classes (see Picture 1).
Results

The most frequently mentioned of all the subclasses addressed attention problems (172), weak or bad social skills (127), aggressive behaviour (108), emotional disorders or difficulties (70), and problems with obedience and adjustment to the group (65) (see Appendix 1). Picture 1 shows the result of analysing these 28 subclasses and the reduction to seven (7) major classes.

Emotional problems formed the largest major class in this study. The development is seen as a source of challenging behaviour when the child is aggressive or violent, has emotional disorders or difficulties, is shy, depressive, sensitive, or introverted, or has problems with controlling his/her own emotions. These examples are close to the traditional classification of emotional disorders: externalised and internalised emotional difficulties. Altogether, the aggressive behaviour was the largest problem group, while depressive or introverted problems were less often cited compared to aggressiveness in our study. The line between typical and atypical development is sometimes hard to draw in early childhood, and this is also seen in our material. According to Margaret Briggs-Gowan and Alice Carter (2006), social-emotional difficulties and problems belong to typical development, but they become problematic when they are particularly strong or weak, or repeated particularly often.

Social and behavioural difficulties included weak or bad social skills, disruptive behaviour, problems with play or bullying. In this class, the relationship with other people, especially with other children, is described as problematic. This gives a

![Diagram showing major classes assigned to challenging behaviour.](image-url)
picture of a child who is having social problems with peers, and needs support and help in this area. In this we can actually interpret and see another child or adult as being problematic to a child who is seen as challenging. Even the challenges are mentioned as disruptive in this class, there are no references to violent actions.

Problems in attention and concentration were often mentioned and the descriptions were e.g. a child cannot sit still or is restless. In this class we also included boundless children, and children who ran away or were unpredictable. What the respondents meant by unpredictable we do not know, for they just wrote one word, unpredictable. According to these descriptions we can easily see children moving and buzzing around without focus or limits like ‘bees’.

The group context was clearly seen as problematic for some children. Too many children in a group or joining the group were seen as a challenge. Transitions during the day are normal and repeated actions in day care were also interpreted as being challenging. In child groups, some routines and rules must be adjusted to or obeyed, which is not easy for some of the children according to respondents. Elements belonging to group life are, for example, order, climate and authority of the group. Are these children lost in a group? Is it hard to follow group rules and adults’ instructions in a context like this? Do these children have the same kinds of problems at home? Or do the personnel expect too mature behaviour from the children?

The strong need for adult supervision and guidance was also mentioned as challenging by respondents. Children missing their mothers or hanging on the teacher’s sleeves were challenges to early childhood education professionals. Did these children feel insecure in day care, or did some of the respondents expect children (again) to be more independent and mature than they actually were? The independence and to manage by one’s own are highly valued in Finnish day care both by parents and by personnel (Ojala 1997).

Difficulties that are linked to other developmental areas were also mentioned as challenging. According to respondents, challenging behaviour was also mentioned if the child had problems in language, speech or the use of the voice, or in learning and memory, which are all part of the cognitive development. Difficulties in problem solving or in understanding or with sensor regulation were mentioned. The guidance and control over the child’s own activities and also difficulties in motor development, like clumsiness, were also expressed. In the studies dealing with social and behavioural difficulties or emotional, behavioural and social difficulties (EBD) in day care, we could not find this kind of class from the answers (Pihlaja 2003, 2010; Viitala 2014).

The “other problem class” was formed by answers like self-image, self-esteem or family issues. Some respondents mentioned perseverations or child’s need for “different pedagogical methods” as a source of challenging behaviour.

In determining the meaning structure of challenging behaviour according to descriptions by professionals in a day-care setting, we found that the descriptions varied a lot. All professionals have their own words for telling this. These individually
made descriptions are focused on the child, on the context or on the adult-child relationship. Descriptions had something in common, by this we mean that the children were seen as the origin of the challenges, they had difficulties, disorders, delays, or a lack of something. This interpretation has similarities with the individualistic interpretation repertoire of disability or special needs. Besides this, there are also elements concerning the context (child group) or adult-child relationship which come close to the social model. Problems with group context include the large child group, the transition practices and the group rules that are hard to follow. In educational settings, the routines and the curriculum are partly hidden and partly shared and known (see Broady 1986; Karjalainen and Siljander 1993), which makes it difficult for workers to reflect on their own part in the routines or the implementation of the curriculum.

In the challenging adult-child relationship, the roles of the adult and the child are meaningful. In the class “Need for adult guidance” a child is seen as demanding something from an adult, who defines this demand as challenging. Do the adults expect too much from the child, should the child be an independent person?

When analysing the answers that deal with “Difficulties in attention and limits” our interpretation can be that this category is dealing partly with the child, partly with the adult, and partly with the day-care context. There might be some discrepancy between the adult expectations toward children’s behaviour and the competence of the children, or the day-care context is really too challenging for children to handle. One can also wonder whether children might have difficulties orienting themselves in space and time. In these, both social and contextual elements are included. The “Other problems” category is really on the border of this entity: still we can find the focus on the child, or the context, or the adult-child relationship.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to increase our knowledge and understanding about how the day-care personnel describe challenging behaviour. In this study, we used a questionnaire and respondents wrote their answers, and of by using an interview we might have a deeper understanding. However, in this study we could construct a wide picture of challenging behaviour from the material. To assess the truthfulness or credibility of this study the reader can take part and for this we have described the material rather broadly. The openness in qualitative inquiry is important and one reason for this is that “the social conditions in a society can form a silent frame on inquiry within it” (Charmaz 2014, 1076). Researchers are always part of this silent frame. Still some reflections can, and should, be made by researchers. In our study, the classes cover a wide range of empirical material, and we have made systematic comparisons between the categories, which refer also to credibility (see Charmaz 2008). Inter-subjective transparency of qualitative research is an essential criterion of the quality of qualitative research that we brought about by describing the original
material, and also by presenting the analysing process (Knoblauch 2004, 356–357). Transferability can also be seen as one criterion of qualitative inquiry (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln 2008), which was strengthened in our study by the samples we got from different day-care units and from different parts of Finland.

Even if the question we asked respondents emphasised the child and problems, the answers were not only focused on the problematic individual. To this question we obtained a really wide range of answers that made our picture at least wider if we compare it to earlier research in day care about social and emotional difficulties (see Pihlaja 2003, 2009; Viitala 2014). We found answers from different areas and from different levels. The definition has a wide range of subjective meanings. In the results we can find interpretations that emphasise individual and social models of disability. The individual model of disability emphasises disorders, deficiencies, deviations, lack of something, or limitations that are individual characteristics (see Oliver 1996; Reindal 1995; Vehmas 2005; Vehkakoski 2006). This individual model is still the mainstream interpretation of disabilities or special needs also with children who are assessed as having social and/or emotional difficulties (Pihlaja 2008; Pihlaja 2012; Vehkakoski 2006; Vehmas 2005). According to this interpretation, it seems that challenging behaviour is seen as something which is within the child and therefore beyond, e.g. teachers’ or nurses’ influence, which is not the case in the social interpretation. If the pedagogy is not working, the fault is seen within the child or in the home, not in the methods or institutional activities or structures in education (Mietola and Lappalainen 2005; Pihlaja 2003, 2008).

According to this study, the context of day care was seen also to some extent as challenging, despite our study question to respondents. This led us to understand that there are also some elements connected with the social model of disability where the origin of the problems or disability is in organizational practices or in structures (see Oliver 1996; Reindal 1995; Vehkakoski 2006; Vehmas 2005). These obstacles in our study can be connected to physical and structural elements of day care in particular, as Hirst and Cooper (2008) say, to the choreography of the classroom. Practices relating to the physical design of the environment including schedules, routines, and transitions are also one factor according to Corso (2007) when reducing challenging behaviour in class rooms. Even in the case of the routines and transitions in day care that are planned and carried out by personnel, the respondents did not write about their own part in these. Respondents did not say anything about their role in these, which could also be associated with the social model of disability. Does the absence of the personnel’s own role in this involve the reflectivity of the teachers and practical nurses (see Marcos, Miguel and Tillema 2009; Pihlaja and Holst 2013)?

The challenges linked to children’s development in this study are connected to different levels and to different areas of development (e.g. learning, behaviour). The levels shift from typical to atypical behaviour, and the line between them is hard to draw.
The extent of the descriptions was wide, moving from shyness to aggression, or from learning disorders to family issues. In spite of this, we found that a lot of context-bound similarities, for example, aggressiveness, difficulties with other children, and concentration problems are easily noted in day care. In this study, it is obvious that the descriptions of challenging behaviour are also bound to the person defining it. It is a risk when in education these kinds of definitions or labels of children are based on personal opinions or views: these labels might follow the child from a child group to another, for there is strong evidence of the permanence of these kinds of problems. The child can also internalise the negative expectations and attitudes that the persons around him/her express. Can we see in our results “half-understood ideas about disturbance” (see Thomas 2005, 68) disturbances that are in a grey area.

The results of this study also make one wonder whether the expectations concerning the social emotional competence and also the learning of the children in day care are too high. How competent and mature should a 4-year-old girl or boy be? Do day-care personnel have a picture of an ideal child in their minds, a picture of a competent child? The ideal child who has good social skills, obeys and respects adults, does not demand too much from an adult, is empathic and has a good readiness for learning and guiding his or her own activities. According to Sjöberg (2014), a large group of students in teacher education states that every child is, or should be, competent, also in preschool. She noted that a competent child activates self-motivated, independently and responsibly in their learning (Sjöberg 2014).

Societies today value efficiency, excellence and competence. Have these expectations and values reached early childhood and early childhood education without reflections on the nature of childhood and what is good education in childhood? We can also ask whether the child groups per se are currently too challenging; many employees having a lower level of education and too many qualifications, with a continuously changing group structure, and with too many children in a group (Pihlaja, Rantanen and Sonne 2010). We think that personal views of challenging behaviour linked to too high expectations forms an uncertain basis for education.

The results of this study raise new questions and themes to be examined and developed in day care. How can the personnel be helped with the challenges they experience in early childhood education? How does their educational background affect the ways personnel see and interpret these difficulties? In our interpretation, the challenges for the most part dealt with the individual child and this interpretation needs a wider meaning structure that helps to turn the gaze toward the pedagogical setting and the processes in it as a whole. In this process, the social model of disability may turn teachers’ and nurses’ attention toward analysing the setting, attitudes, instructions and routines that form the psychological, social and physical context in which children develop and learn. The educational context that
supports and gives positive guidance to social behaviour can work with all the children in the child group according to Oliver, Wehby and Reschly (2011) and in this way the grey area might become smaller.

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RN, MNSc Terja Ristkari has been working in the psychiatric field since the early 1980s. She has rich experience in psychiatric nursing and psychotherapy. In research work she has been working for over 15 years and is currently working at the University of Turku Research Centre for Child Psychiatry as a project manager.
Note

1 The number of children in child groups varies. In Finland, the number of children depends on the number of teachers/ nurses. In one child group (3–6 years old), when children need all-day education and care, the ratio is 7 children to 1 adult e.g. one kindergarten teacher (or 2) and 2 nurses (or 1). In part-day care there are 25 children, and 2 adults, or 14 children and one kindergarten teacher. In this study, the most typical group size was 22 (Mo), the mean was 19 and the median 20. In child groups there were 20–24 children (38%), 15–19 children (28%), 10–14 (17%), 24–36 (11%) or under 10 (6%) children.
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### Appendix

**Appendix 1. From initial coding to focused classes**

| Examples of the initial codes                                                                 | Focused classes                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Hits, bites, kicks, is aggressive, uses physical acts, aggressive towards adults or other kids | Aggressive behaviour (108)                               |
| Lack of empathy; unable to face disappointments; socioemotional problems; hurting himself; immature emotionally; mental problems | Emotional disorders or difficulties (70)                 |
| Too shy and withdrawn; fearful; shy and reserved towards other people; quiet and withdrawn; so shy that is not able to participate | Shy, sensitive, introverted behaviour (36)                |
| problems with anger management; reacts to even minor changes strongly; cannot cope with anger or other feelings; temper tantrums | Problems with controlling emotions (30)                   |
| Withdrawn; autistic; passive, isolated; absent                                                | Withdrawal (38)                                           |
| Depressed; crying; depressed; broody; gloomy                                                  | Depressive, crying a lot (12)                            |
| Social problems; weak social skills; self-centred; doesn’t find friends; wants to decide everything | Weak/bad social skills (127)                             |
| Disrupts others with his or her behaviour; disruptive behaviour; disrupting is both physical and mental | Disruptive behaviour (56)                                |
| Doesn’t play with others; difficulties in playing skills; destroys others games                | Problems with play (28)                                  |
| Frequent bullying; bullies verbally; silently bullies others when adult is not around         | Bullying (15)                                             |
| Not able to stay still; restless; difficulties to concentrate; impulsive; ADHD                 | Attention problems (172)                                 |
| Unpredictable                                                                                 | Unpredictable (17)                                       |
| Without limits; limitless                                                                      | A child with no bounds (14)                              |
| Running away                                                                                  | Running away (6)                                         |
| Acting toward social norms; is not capable of following rules; disobedient; difficulties to follow adults’ rules and instructions | Obedience and adjustment (65)                           |
| Gets restless in a big group; can’t cope in a big group; leaving outside the group; incapable of following or keeping up with the group activities | The group context (46)                                  |
| Oppositional, self-willed; child with a strong will and having difficulties in making compromises, difficulties in working under adults’ guidance, constant questioning | Oppositional behaviour (37)                             |
| Arriving at day care is difficult, transitions are difficult, reacts to changes easily         | Transitions problematic (21)                             |
| Needs personal guidance more than average child; very dependent on parents; stuck to adult; needs constant support from adults | Adult dependence (63)                                  |
| Delays in verbal development; mutism, loud, linguistic difficulties, speaks about inappropriate things | Problems in language (55)                               |
| Learning difficulties; difficulties in remembering or in understanding; difficulties in receiving auditory information or in problem solving | Difficulties in learning and memory (17)                 |
| Problems with guiding own activities, problems with sensor regulation; sensory integration     | Guidance of own activities (15)                          |
| Clumsiness, physical problems, delayed in motor development                                   | Motor development (5)                                    |
| Low self-esteem; parenthood is missing; perseverations; a clown; needs different methods      | Other problems (24)                                      |