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Behind the practice: Finnish early childhood education and care professionals' perceptions and beliefs concerning children in need of social and emotional support

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Abstract

Children needing social-emotional (SE) support tend to face unique challenges that may have an effect on the perceptions of those who work with them. The aim of this study was to gain knowledge of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals' perceptions and beliefs concerning children needing SE support. The study utilizes interviews with 12 ECEC professionals in Finland, and analysed the material using qualitative content analysis. The findings show that professionals' perceptions concerning individual children needing SE support were more positive than their general beliefs. Children were perceived as having several strengths and the potential for positive developmental outcomes; however, their challenges were described broadly. The findings are discussed in relation to labelling, individual-centred views of challenging behaviour and the educational background of ECEC professionals.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care (ECEC), social-emotional (SE) needs of support, perceptions, beliefs

Behind the practice of early childhood education and care (ECEC) lies the foundation of professional's perceptions and beliefs concerning teaching and children, which have a profound impact on the education of all children (Calderhead, 2004; Schaffer, 2004; Vartuli, 2016). For example, teacher's beliefs and perceptions may have an effect on the roles and

responsibilities that he/she adopts in relation to children with special needs (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003). The importance of this study relates to a notion discussed in several studies; teachers in different educational levels often possess conflicting and negative perceptions of children with social-emotional (SE) difficulties (Pihlaja, 2008; Scanlon et al., 2020). In this study, the aim was to gain knowledge of the ECEC professionals' perceptions and beliefs concerning children in need of SE support. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the perceptions by steering the focus towards more specific perceptions of individual children. The beliefs concerning children needing SE support are also taken into account as a reflective base for individual perceptions. Only by understanding and being aware of teachers' perceptions and beliefs, can children's equal opportunities for positive interaction in ECEC be supported.

Identifying and answering children's need of support in Finnish ECEC

The social-emotional (SE) need of support is a widely used concept in Finnish ECEC and refers to delays and difficulties in children's social and emotional development. One way of defining SE need of support is to divide the difficulties into externalising behaviours (e.g., aggressive behaviour, activity disorders), internalising behaviours (e.g., anxiety, social withdrawal) and dysregulation problems (e.g., regulation of emotions) (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2006). However, in Finland, it is typical not to give medical diagnoses to young children needing SE support; instead, the identification of these needs is usually based on an assessment conducted by ECEC professionals. When a child is identified as needing special support, the special education teacher (SET) will be involved in assessing their specific needs (Law 540/2018, 23 §).

The Finnish ECEC follows the principles of inclusive education (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018), which means that the primary way of answering the special needs of children is through support offered in general groups intended for typically-developed children (Pihlaja et al., 2010). The support can be arranged, for example, through consultative support from SETs with flexible educational arrangements and by reducing the number of children in a group. However, sometimes the children require even more support, in which case, the child can participate in a special group or integrated special group part-time or full-time (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018).

ECEC professionals' beliefs and perceptions concerning children needing SE support

Beliefs form a complex system that represents our thoughts and is assumed to affect our behaviour (Bryan, 2012) by having an influence on perceptions, information processing and decision making (Vartuli, 2016). The difference between beliefs and knowledge relates to the notion that beliefs are subjective and connected to emotions, whereas knowledge is usually based on more objective facts. Beliefs are considered highly personal as they are influenced, for example, by one's education and previous professional experiences. (Vartuli, 2016.) The perceptions and beliefs educators have about children have an impact on the interaction between the educator and the child (Calderhead, 2004), and challenging behaviours of a child is shown to have negative effects on the child-adult relationships (Ladd et al., 1999; Suhonen, 2008). An educator's conflicting perceptions can lead to educational practices and ways of interaction that do not support children towards more positive behaviours (Rautamies et al., 2011). Through teacher-child interaction, the perceptions and beliefs have an impact on the development of child's self-concept (Pesu et al., 2016) and social competence (Zhang & Nurmi, 2012).

Pihlaja et al. (2015) have reflected on their findings concerning the ECEC professionals' descriptions of young children with SE needs of support and noted that the descriptions were strongly based on their personal opinion and views. Similarly, Gargiulo (2009) has noted that 'we each view behavior through personal lenses that reflect our own standards, values and beliefs' (p. 277). According to Pihlaja et al. (2015), this tendency to view challenging behaviour from a personal perspective can create a risk of labelling, which further reinforces the continuity of these perceptions in the educational paths of these children. In relation to this concern, Gibbs et al. (2020) showed that teachers viewed children as having more essence-related characteristics when categorising labels (dyslexia, ADHD, etc.) were used. Children labelled as having ADHD have also been related to teachers' higher expectations of problem severity, negative emotions and lower efficacy beliefs (Ohan et al., 2009).

According to Armstrong (2014), the educators often describe working with children needing social, emotional and behavioural support as challenging, but also rewarding. For example, in Viitala's (2014) research, several positive features describing children's strengths, progress and peer relationships were mentioned. The previous studies have also examined conflict situations between educators and children as challenging. These studies have found that when educators offer children opportunities to succeed, it leads to positive interactions (Lundán & Suoninen, 2006); by acknowledging the challenges as interaction situations, the difficulties are not viewed as a child's features (Lundán, 2009) or as child's fault (Ahonen, 2015). When we take a look at these studies focusing on educators' perceptions and behaviours regarding the children they work with, a shift towards more positive perceptions can be observed.

Method

Participants and sampling

For this research, 12 ECEC professionals from two municipalities in Southern Finland were interviewed in spring 2016. The participants came from eight ECEC groups (one special group, two integrated special groups, and five general groups), which tended for 4–6-year-old children. Of the 12 participants, 11 were women and one was a man. The age of the participants varied between 25 and 60 years old, and their work experience in the field of ECEC varied from 5 years to over 20 years. In Table 1, the job titles and educational backgrounds are described in groups for ethical reasons. All the participants were selected to this study based on a previous study, which focused on interviewing children in need of SE support (see Heinonen & Pihlaja, 2020). The selection was carried out based on the willingness of the participants to volunteer.

<TABLE 1 HERE>

Research task and data collection

In this study, the aim was to gain knowledge of the ECEC professionals' perceptions and beliefs concerning children in need of SE support. The focus was on their perceptions concerning individual children, but the more general beliefs were also considered. The professionals were interviewed by following an interview frame, focusing broadly on the children's SE behaviour. For this study, the focus was narrowed down to match the research

task. All the interviews were conducted at the ECEC institutions in a peaceful environment. Almost all the participants had a seemingly open response to all the interview questions, only one of the professionals had concerns about what information she is allowed to share about the child.

The interviews were recorded, and the duration was on average 30-45 minutes. The average length of the written interview transcripts was seven pages, comprising a total of 82 pages of text (34102 words in Finnish). The material consists of 15 child descriptions related to 10 children, as some of the participants discussed the same child, while others gave their perceptions concerning two different children. The children were seen to have internalizing difficulties, externalizing difficulties, or both. The study followed the ethical guidelines given by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (2019). In this research, the anonymity and privacy of the participants were protected. The municipalities and professionals gave their approval for this study.

Content analysis

A qualitative content analysis was chosen for this study, as the method is well suited to examining written materials (Krippendorff, 2013). In the first step of the analysis, the aim was to become acquainted with the material through several readings. In this step, irrelevant information was separated from the text. In the second step of the analysis, the original expressions derived from the material were coded. This meant that the original expressions were given descriptive codes that summed up the content of these expressions (e.g., 'now he is doing a lot better than last autumn' was coded as *progress*; Cohen Manion & Morrison, 2007). Based on these codes, in the third step of the analysis, a lower level of categories was

established (code groupings; e.g., *social and emotional strengths*, *strengths of other domains,* and *personality and progress*), which was further developed into higher-level categories (content groupings; e.g., *strength and potential*; see Table 2). In this way, the material was further summarized and examined in an inductive manner (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In the fourth step of the analysis, the categories were conceptualized and reviewed. For example, the higher-level category called *explaining behaviour* was considered to involve lower-level categories (*confusion*, *child-related reasons,* and *environmental reasons*). In turn, the lower-level categories (e.g., *child-related reasons*) were seen to contain codes (e.g., *bad self-esteem* and *personality factors*). In this way, the higher-level categories formed a categorical framework, which drew together lower-level categories, codes, and initial expressions (e.g. Cohen et al., 2007).

<TABLE 2 HERE>

ECEC professionals' perceptions concerning individual children

Building trust in children's possibilities through strengths and potential

The strengths and potential of children needing SE support were discussed through three main topics that focused on the children's social and emotional strengths, their strengths in other developmental domains and their positive features related to personality factors and progress. The strengths and potential in children's social and emotional behaviours were especially connected to three features: empathy, emotion recognition and reflection, and the ability to receive and show affection. First, the children's capacity for empathy seemed especially important in children expressing aggressive behaviour, as it was most often mentioned in these cases: 'I find him empathetic ... he has such great gentle traits' (P8). The perceived

ability for empathy seemed to give professionals hope, as compared to the general beliefs, introduced later in the findings, the lack of empathy was found to have severe effects on children.

Second, the child's ability to recognize emotions and reflect their own behaviour was described, for example, as follows: 'He notices if the other one doesn't feel good and . . . how he should act [in that situation]' (P1). The children were also seen as capable of understanding and reflecting on their own challenging behaviour, with one professional stating that the child 'thinks and understands a lot; he knows what should not be said' (P1). And third, the thoughtful behaviour with the ability and willingness to show affection ('he pays attention . . . and praises [others] often' [P11], for example paying attention to 'the smaller ones' [P12]) were seen as qualities that reinforced the child's ability to do well in peer relationships and with ECEC professionals. These three features were all seen to reinforce the ECEC professionals' trust in the child's potential for positive developmental outcomes.

The children were also described as having several strengths in other developmental domains, such as speech and language development ('He speaks clearly . . . that's his strength' [P8]), cognitive skills ('He has a really good memory' [P11]) and physical skills ('She has good fine motor skills and rough motor skills' [P4]). In relation to these, the fluency of everyday activities (e.g., the child listens and acts according to instructions) was mentioned and could lead to a child being described as, for example, an 'ordinary good girl' (P4). Many of these features were seen as crucial when the child transfers to school. While talking about the children, the ECEC professionals often added several positive features, such as 'happy, loving, and kind' (P10), to describe the children's personalities. Whereas, in relation to the

children's social and emotional strengths, the professionals often mentioned that the child had made clear progress: 'She has started to open up, has begun to smile . . . and trust the adults' (P4), noting that 'even a small progress feels huge with some children' (P8).

Describing the diversity of challenging behaviour – focusing on social difficulties

The ECEC professionals' perceptions revealed that the children were viewed as having diverse challenges mainly in their social behaviour but also in their emotional lives and other developmental domains. As social challenges, the children's behaviour was viewed as disturbing, restless, unpredictable and aggressive, and the children were seen to have tendencies to control others. The ECEC professionals described the children as having age-inappropriate tendencies for threatening ("'I will take a knife and cut your stomach open'" [P1]) and atypical behaviour ('He laughs at the wrong time, laughs too loudly, and acts too conspicuously, and he talks about what others think is weird stuff' [P1]). According to the professionals, the children had challenges, such as poor social skills, attention deficit and hyperactivity, and difficulties accepting guidance and authority: 'If someone gives him limits . . . it can be really challenging' (P12). It could also be seen as troubling if the child did everything that was asked and did not show any emotion: 'She has never objected to anything; it is really difficult for her to show sadness or anger' (P4).

According to the professionals, the children also had emotional challenges, such as strong inflexibility, low tolerance for disappointments, and difficulties in self-regulation. The children were also described as having temper tantrums. These difficulties were seen to relate to the children's inability to show their own emotions or recognise the emotions or gestures of others. In fact, it was seen as puzzling if the child 'had the same basic facial expression all the

time' (P4) or behaved timidly in new situations. Some children were described as 'extremely shy' (P4) or 'apathetic and sad' (P3). In some cases, the children could be described as 'getting locked' or being in 'another world' (P11). Also, in the daily lives of these ECEC groups, the child's inability to carry out fluent transitions, such as difficulties in ending playtime, was seen as challenging. In addition, difficulties in physical skills (e.g., balance) and language learning were mentioned to a small extent. The tendency to focus more on social challenges may be due to the fact that the social behaviour is more visible and has more profound effects on the relationship than the emotional difficulties or challenges in other developmental domains.

Integrating challenges and strengths – the way of speaking about the child

Altogether, it seemed easier for the professionals to describe the challenges. Although many strengths and positive features were mentioned, the ECEC professionals were found on several occasions to integrate their positive perceptions with challenge descriptions. This was done using three different ways of combining perceptions. First, the ECEC professional could simply connect challenge descriptions with strengths by using conjunctions, as in the following: 'He is really competent, but also selective' (P10). The direction of these descriptions was often from positive to negative. Second, the professionals added conditions to their positive descriptions. For example, the child's positive features and success could be seen as depending on the child's mood or day: 'The social behaviour varies from day to day; sometimes he is really social, sometimes not so much; it depends on the mood he is in . . . when he has a really good day, he is sweet and receptive' (P11). In this way, the child's positive features were seen to depend on some internal or external factors, giving the impression that the positive features were not seen as a permanent feature but were dependent on external conditions. Third, the positive perceptions could be turned into negative

perceptions by explaining why some features could be seen both ways. For example, one of the ECEC professionals turned her descriptions of the child's strengths into challenges in the following:

> She goes [to everyone] and takes them hand in hand, and talks, and tells stories, and that is her strength, but the bigger she gets . . . I don't see it as a strength, as a 7-year-old should already know that not all people should be approached so close. (P9)

In this example, the conditions had changed in a way that enabled the professional to explain why something that had previously been viewed as a strength could now be seen as a challenge. The most profound way of doing this was to ignore the positive features and not give recognition to the child: 'I don't know where he would be socially skilled . . . he tries to say something polite to people, but I don't see any skills in that; instead it sounds like sucking up' (P2). In this example, the ECEC professional could recognize the child's positive behaviour but was unable or unwilling to give the child credit for it.

Explaining the needs of support and children's behaviour

Some of the ECEC professionals struggled to provide words for the behaviour of these children and were viewed as being confused by the origin of their challenges. On the other hand, others gave explanations for the child's challenges and behaviour and were divided into child-related explanations and environment-related explanations. In the cases of confusion, the children were described as 'strange' (P12) or 'peculiar' (P10). Or, when the cause of the behaviour was unknown, the professional could state that 'something broader happens that causes that [behaviour] to occur' (P7), giving the impression that something happens to the child that he or she has no control over. Those who gave child-related explanations mentioned

reasons focusing on the child's qualities, experiences, and skills (e.g., 'bad self-esteem' [P8], neurological disease, experienced pain in infancy). For example, the child's aspiration to seek an adult's attention could be seen as the origin of challenging behaviour if the child did not possess the necessary social skills. The child's personality, on the other hand, was mentioned as a reason for their introverted behaviour ('that is their typical personality' [P4]) and tendency to lose their temper ('she will always be temperamental, but that is her personality' [P7]).

Explanations focusing on environmental factors were also given. The parents and home situation were mentioned most often as a reason for the child's behaviour, which was explained, for example, by a traumatic background, the mother's inability to provide security or behavioural models learned from the parents. A perception concerning a child's emotions could also be connected to the relationship between the child and the parent: 'All the sadness comes from the mom; she is exactly the same' (P3). Also, one other environmental factor—the large group size—was seen by one professional as a factor that could increase the challenges.

The ECEC professionals' beliefs concerning children needing SE support

Child-centred beliefs

The beliefs concerning children needing SE support were divided into child-centred beliefs and work-related beliefs. As part of their child-centred beliefs, several ECEC professionals mentioned the diversity of SE needs: '[There are] so many different things: some of the children are a bit like ADHD-type, and then we have neurological and . . . developmental delays, and then there may be some things depending on the circumstances' (P2). Some

professionals, on the other hand, seemed to follow somewhat stereotypical views and described the children as ‘wild and bullying others, or really quiet and easily overlooked’ (P5).

The child-centred beliefs and work-related beliefs were both visible when the professionals shared their views concerning children’s futures. In the long run, the children’s futures were described as gloomy, which could indicate that the work done with these children was not seen as effective or successful. For those children who were seen to lack the ability to empathise, the situation was seen as most severe: ‘Repairing things is difficult if not impossible . . . for some, you can see the future behind bars… when those basic blocks are missing’ (P1). In relation to this outcome, the professionals also emphasized the meaning of family background: ‘When there are issues related to family background . . . in those cases, the worry is about what they will become when they grow up. Is he or she going to be socially acceptable?’ (P7).

Work-related beliefs

In relation to the work-related beliefs, the children could be perceived as ‘oppressive . . . and all-consuming’ (P12), causing more work for professionals. The professionals expressed emotions such as ‘negativity’ (P12) and ‘frustration’ (P11). One of the professionals also mentioned believing that many other ECEC professionals felt the same way. However, the professionals more often described feelings of sadness and worry. The children were seen to ‘miss out on something’ (P9), which could lead to feelings such as a desire to protect and care for the children, as noted by one professional: ‘The first thing is that the maternal instincts start to take effect, you know, nurture and so on’ (P9). Some of the professionals also stated

that ‘every child is an individual’ (P6) and that support should be provided accordingly. In this sense, the ECEC professionals seemed to divide into two groups, as some viewed the children’s challenges as a burden for professionals, while others saw them as an individual tragedy for the child.

Discussion

The aim of this research was to determine what kinds of perceptions and beliefs the ECEC professionals have about children needing SE support. The findings show that individual children were associated with a number of positive qualities and strengths. These findings are not surprising, as it seems rather expected (and desirable) that positive features would be related to children that the professionals work with (see also Viitala, 2014; Ahonen, 2015). In turn, such positive descriptions were lacking from the professionals’ general beliefs, which could, in some cases, be described as negatively stereotypical. The problem with stereotypical beliefs is that individuality is easily ignored (Smith et al., 2015).

Based on the challenge descriptions offered by ECEC professional´s and the way they integrated these perceptions into strength descriptions, the study shows that although many positive features and strengths were mentioned, the challenging behaviour was described more broadly. The finding is also in line with previous research (Pihlaja, 2008; Viitala, 2014). This tendency to integrate perceptions, was illustrated with three ways: connecting challenges to strengths, adding conditions, and turning strengths into challenges or ignoring positive features. In this sense, the way professionals talked about the children was considered especially meaningful. One explanation is that the professionals may focus on challenging behaviour in order to support the children. Emphasising children’s challenges may, however,

have a negative effect on the professionals' beliefs and perceptions. The research carried out by Gibbs et al. (2020) showed that teachers' essence-related beliefs increased when categorising labels (e.g., ADHD) were used. By contrast, Link et al. (2014) noted that labelling different groups of people (e.g., children needing SE support) relates to negative stereotyping, whereby some general characteristics are seen as representative in relation to a specific group.

When talking about special educational needs, labelling is often discussed in relation to medicalisation and its controversial use in diagnosing difficulties in an individual-centred way (e.g., Mehan, 2014; Pihlaja et al., 2015). Although in Finland, it is not typical to diagnose young children needing SE support, the individual-centred way of looking at challenges can also be found in the perceptions of the participating ECEC professionals. For example, the professionals connected their descriptions of challenges with the children's personalities and/or moods. Both of these views strongly place the challenges with the child. However, in a way, the personality perspective also defends the child, as definitions such as 'temperamental' and 'introverted' suggest that the child has no choice but to follow their personality. This removes the responsibility not only from the child but also from the professionals. On the other hand, by connecting the challenges to the child's mood, the professionals may be tempted to think that the child is capable of performing well but is unwilling to do so. This kind of thinking leads to the child having the responsibility for their challenging behaviour. Also, in accordance with the thinking of Pihlaja et al. (2015), the professionals' way of giving explanations focusing on children's skills and abilities may indicate that the meaning of the social context is overlooked (cf. Ho, 2004).

In addition, the perceptions and beliefs indicate that it may not be easy for the children needing SE support to be positively perceived in Finnish ECEC. The findings also suggest that it may be difficult for the professionals to acknowledge that the children are not in control of their SE-related challenges. As noted, the beliefs and perceptions are affected, for example, by education and professional experiences (Vartuli 2016). It can be noted here that the most stereotypical perceptions and beliefs seemed to belong to practical nurses, which could result from their educational background focused on child care. In addition, two out of three special education teachers described children with somewhat negative features (e.g., oppressive). This was interesting since the special education teachers possess knowledge and experience concerning special educational needs, and have chosen this line of educational occupation. However, due to the qualitative nature of this study, no generalisations concerning educational background can be made. In future studies, it would be important to focus on the relationship between educational background and perceptions concerning children needing SE support. With these studies, the professionals' educational needs concerning children's SE development and need of support could be identified.

In accordance with Fennimore's work, Viitala (2014) noted that the way of talking about or describing children has an impact on how the child is treated; if the child is viewed as talented, he or she will be treated accordingly. In other words, the environmental and pedagogical possibilities offered to children will be different compared to those who are viewed as not so gifted. It is, however, important to note that self-reported beliefs do not necessarily describe true actions (Bryan, 2012). Although the ECEC professionals' perceptions do not necessarily tell us about the quality of interaction between the child and the adult, they may give some indications of it. Based on these findings, the professionals' ability for self-reflection is highlighted. The findings suggest that more preservice and in-service

training is needed to gain a better understanding of the need for SE support in ECEC (cf. Määttä et al., 2017). Being aware of the ECEC professionals' perceptions and beliefs concerning children needing SE support—and the effects they may have on the educational context—may allow the professionals to support positive interaction in ECEC more effectively.

Limitations and implications

For gaining a comprehensive understanding of ECEC professionals' beliefs and perceptions, two things should be considered. First, the connections between the professionals' perceptions and children's needs of support should be examined. For example, if the focus had been solely on internalizing needs of support (e.g., withdrawn behaviour), the results would probably have been different. Second, a similar point applies with regard to the educational background of the participants; if the interest had been solely on SETs, ECETs, or PNs, the findings could have differed due to the difference in education, for example only SETs have studied special education. It is also important to note that the focus of this study, the need for support, may have guided the participants to express their views on children's challenges rather than their strengths. Also, due to the sampling, it can be assumed that those who took an interest in this subject chose to participate in this study. Based on the small number of participants, it is impossible to make general assumptions related to a larger group of professionals working in ECEC. However, it can be noted that regardless of its limitations, the study has reached its aim and offers viewpoints and insights concerning the professionals' perceptions.

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Table 1. Participants job title and educational background

Professionals	**Job title**	**Educational background**
P1, P9, P12	Special education teacher	BA (ECEC + special teacher studies); MA (special education); MA (subject teacher)
P4, P6, P8, P10	Early childhood education teacher	BA (ECEC); social pedagogue; MSS (social work)
P2, P3, P5, P7, P11	Practical nurse	Practical nurse education; child nurse education

(BA = Bachelor of Arts; MA = Master of Arts in Education; MSS = Master of Social Science)

Table 2. ECEC professionals' perceptions and beliefs about children

PERCEPTIONS OF INDIVIDUAL CHILDREN	
LOWER-LEVEL CATEGORIES	HIGHER-LEVEL CATEGORIES
Social and emotional strengths Strengths of other domains Personality and progress	Strengths and potential
Challenging social behaviour Challenges in emotional development Other domains of development	Diverse challenges
Connecting challenges into strengths Adding conditions Turning strengths into challenges and ignoring	Integrating challenges and strengths
Confusion Child-related explanations Environment-related explanations	Explaining the needs and behaviour
BELIEFS ABOUT CHILDREN NEEDING SE SUPPORT	
LOVER-LEVEL CATEGORIES	HIGHER-LEVEL CATEGORIES
Diversity and stereotypical views Future and background	Child-centred beliefs
Effects on work and emotions Individuality and protection	Work-related beliefs