

## **A reflective cycle: understanding challenging situations in a school setting**

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## Abstract

**Background:** Good teacher-pupil relationships support the well-being of pupils and promote a good atmosphere in school settings. However, pupils' diverse needs and behavioural problems can cause challenging situations for teaching staff. There is currently limited understanding about the nature of these situations and how teachers respond and interact with pupils when these challenges arise.

**Purpose:** The aim of this study is to explore the reflections of teaching staff on challenging situations with pupils, in order to gain insight into how teaching staff understand and conceptualise challenging situations.

**Sample, Design and Method:** A descriptive qualitative study design was used. The data were collected from an online course aiming to support the skills that teaching staff employ when facing challenging situations with pupils. Participants were teaching staff who worked at a school in Finland. Qualitative data were derived from the reflective writings of these participants (teachers and classroom assistants, N=10) about challenging situations. The participants structured their reflective writings using Gibbs' reflective cycle. Eight participants allowed us to use their writings as research data. The data analysis was a combination of deductive and inductive analysis.

**Results:** Teaching staff were able to reflect on challenging situations from a variety of perspectives. Gibbs' reflective cycle was a helpful aid for teaching staff when reflecting on their feelings, thoughts, and actions related to challenging situations. The participants tried to understand the challenging situations from the pupils' point of view and considered the situations as opportunities to learn to review their professional practice.

**Conclusions:** Teaching staff face challenging situations with pupils and have to meet the diverse needs of pupils constantly, in their everyday work. This small-scale study gives in-depth insight into teaching personnel's reflections on these situations. According to this study, the use of frameworks such as Gibbs' reflective cycle may help focus reflective learning gleaned from challenging experiences.

**Keywords:** Well-being; Teachers' professional development; Reflection; Gibbs' reflective cycle; Teacher-pupil relationship, Pupil behaviour

## **Introduction and background**

Cognitive, social and emotional well-being is essential to the development of children and adolescents (Walter, Gouze and Lim 2006). Teachers have an important role in supporting children and adolescents' well-being, since pupils spend a considerable amount of time in schools. According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), adolescents who reported good life satisfaction were more likely to report positive relationships with their teachers (OECD 2017).

However, there is a significant number of pupils experiencing a range of challenging and complex needs in the classroom and, as a consequence, teachers have had to adjust their everyday work (Reinke et al. 2011, Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, & Conway, 2014). Mental health problems among pupils at school are a global concern (Belfer 2008), with the most common problems thought to be disruptive behaviour and anxiety disorders (Costello, Egger and Angold 2005). The number of psychiatric and neurodevelopmental diagnoses among children and adolescents has increased in several high-income countries during the last decades (Atladdottir et al. 2015). Some hold that if support for pupils with concerns were provided at an earlier stage in schools, it might lower their emotional and behavioural barriers to learning (Walter, Gouze and Lim 2006).

Teachers have reported that the most prevalent challenging classroom behaviour includes off-task behaviour, verbal aggression and verbal disruption (Alter et al. 2013, Sun and Shek 2012). Sullivan et al. (2014) found that the most prevalent behavioural problems were the low-level disruptive and disengaged behaviours, with teachers having difficulties managing them (Sullivan et al. 2014). In a study by Reinke et al. (2011), teachers rated their concerns related to pupils, and also found behavioural problems such as disruptive, aggressive and conduct problems to be most concerning.

Other concerns were hyperactivity and inattention problems, family stressors, problems with social skills and depression. (Reinke et al. 2011.) On the other hand, it is not entirely clear what kinds of behaviour teachers consider challenging, and teachers do not have common understanding of how to define challenging behaviour (Nash, Schlösser, & Scarr, 2016). As a socially constructed concept, challenging behaviour is a complex concept which is variously defined and may vary even between classrooms (Grieve 2009, Nash, Schlösser, & Scarr, 2016).

Teachers may lack confidence in their ability simultaneously to support pupils' well-being and to manage challenging situations during the school day (Graham et al. 2011, Lang et al. 2013, Sisask et al. 2014). Although teachers encounter pupils' mental health issues everyday, teachers still report that they have insufficient knowledge about how to manage their pupils' diverse range of needs (Graham et al. 2011, Westling 2010). Therefore, teachers need support in knowing how to respond to the challenging behaviour of their pupils (Garland, Garland and Vasques 2013, Reinke et al. 2011).

School teachers acknowledge their role in supporting their pupils (Reinke et al. 2011, Rothi, Leavey and Best 2008, Sisask et al. 2014). The relationship between the teacher and pupil is important for the sake of pupils' development, mental health and well-being (Lang et al. 2013, Sarkova et al. 2014). Children who have a positive relationship with their teachers are less likely to have behavioural problems in their later school years (Sutherland et al. 2013). It has also been found that a good teacher-pupil relationship is related to a lower level of depression and anxiety symptoms among pupils (Sarkova et al. 2014). As atmosphere in the classroom affects pupils' engagement and behaviour, focusing on supporting pupils' engagement may be more effective than concentrating on consequences and punishments (Sullivan et al. 2014). According to Nash et al. (2016), simply managing challenging behaviour is not enough

for pupils with complex emotional needs. They may benefit from clear boundaries, but they also need reflective and emphatic responses from the teaching staff. (Nash et al. 2016).

Reflection, as a way of thinking, relies on the recollection of events and refers to the usual method of mulling over an event or experience (Fakude and Bruce 2003). Reflection as a teaching method (Schön 1991) can support learning from experiences, feelings, reactions and attitudes (Boyd and Fales 1983, Wong et al. 1995). Reflection entails recalling the experience of a specific event and helps to analyse and evaluate the situation as it occurred (Fakude and Bruce 2003). It includes self-awareness and critical analysis, which can develop a new perspective on old events (Atkins and Murphy 1993). Reflection related to one's own work may, therefore, enhance professional performance by improving insight and helping to connect/convert knowledge into practice (Berglund, Sjögren and Ekesbergh 2012).

The literature which explores reflection presents various examples of how reflection as a concept and/or tool has been applied in education (Berglund, Sjögren and Ekesbergh 2012, Crowe and O'Malley 2006). The most commonly used method is writing or documenting personal experiences in a reflective diary (Schön 1991), reflective journal (Atkins and Murphy 1993, Chirema 2007), or educational portfolio (Pereira, Parente, & da Silva, 2016). Reflective methods can support learning and the identification of the significance of any experience (Pereira, Parente, & da Silva, 2016). Reflective writings may therefore be helpful in making sense of challenging situations by identifying connections between personal experiences and professional values (Walmsley and Birkbeck 2006, Berglund, Sjögren and Ekesbergh 2012). Beavers et al. (2017) found that the levels of critical reflection of pre-service teachers increased when the teachers were given regular guidance and the appropriate tools for reflection

(Beavers, Orange, & Kirkwood, 2017). In the quasi-experimental study by Fakude and Bruce (2003), nursing students engaged in reflective writing during their eight-week period in clinical nursing. They were asked to write about their experiences and to analyse one clinical event per week using Gibbs' reflective cycle. This study suggests that the reflective method enabled the students (N=20) to describe their clinical event more accurately than those students who did not use reflective writing (control group, N=23) (Fakude and Bruce 2003.)

### ***Purpose of the present study***

In order to promote pupils' learning and teachers' professional development, teachers are expected to learn and reflect throughout their careers (Vermunt and Endedijk, 2011). However, there is little literature specifically on teachers' reflections on challenging situations during daily school life. In this study, we explored the reflections of teaching staff on challenging situations with pupils in a school environment.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

In Finland, children begin compulsory schooling the year during which they turn seven years old, and they are required to attend school for nine years. Comprehensive school comprises the primary level (grades 1 to 6) and the lower secondary level (grades 7 to 9). Education is free of charge at all levels, and comprehensive schools are maintained by municipalities. Less than 3 % of each age cohort go to private schools (Kumpulainen 2018). The schools do not select their pupils based on ability, and children usually, as a matter of course, attend a school in their neighbourhood or, otherwise, somewhere nearby. The support for pupils with special needs is mainly provided in mainstream

education (Basic education Act 628/1998, Ministry of Education and Culture.)

The participants in this study were teaching staff (class teachers working at the primary level, subject teachers working at the lower secondary level and classroom assistants from both levels) at a comprehensive school in Finland. At the time of the study, the school provided education for between 550 and 600 pupils. In Finland, teachers have master's degree in education or in a specific subject (e.g., biology) in addition to pedagogical studies (Ministry of Education and Culture 2014). Special teachers have a master's-level qualification in special education (Paju et al. 2016). In addition, all schools have classroom assistants to help pupils with special needs during the school day (Takala 2007). The training and education needed to qualify as a classroom assistant is offered by vocational institutes and takes one year (Paju et al. 2016).

### ***Instrumentation***

The data collection was part of an online course organised by the University of Turku. It was intended to promote teaching staff's ability to deal with challenging situations with pupils. The framework of the course was adapted from an online course aimed at managing the challenging behaviour of patients in mental health settings. It had already been demonstrated that this online course was effective in managing challenging situations and in changing practices in demanding health care settings (Lahti et al. 2014, Kontio et al. 2011). Therefore, the structure and pedagogical approaches of the course were adapted to our course context.

The online course for teaching staff included seven modules: 1) introduction to the course, 2) legislation related to school safety, 3) ethical issues in teaching, 4) internal and external factors associated with pupils' challenging behaviour, 5) teachers'

self-awareness and interaction with pupils in challenging situations, 6) teamwork at school, and 7) integration of evidence-based knowledge and practice in schools. Each module took about three weeks. Modules consisted of self-directed learning with specifically adapted course material (electronic presentations, scientific articles). The participants also took part in peer discussions (in a written format) to share their thoughts with other course participants. A reflective diary allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences and learning development (Shön 1991). After each module, a course mentor (a nurse trained to do the task) gave individual feedback and answered any questions that arose. Course mentors were mental health nurses who had work experience with children and/or adolescents with emotional and behavioural problems.

The participants were required to describe their reflections over a period of seven weeks (1 entry per module). The content of the reflection was structured by Gibbs' (1988) model of the reflective cycle. It comprises six stages that guide the process of reflection and focuses on learning from experiences. The stages proceed as follows: 1) Describe what happened without any conclusions at this point in time, 2) Describe your reactions and feelings during and after the experience, 3) Evaluate the situation; what was good or bad in the situation, 4) Analyse the situation; what sense you can make of the situation, 5) Conclude; what else could you have done in the situation, 6) Make an action plan, if the situation happened again, what would you do? (Gibbs 1988).

Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle supports reflective learning from experiences by providing a framework for reflection. The model involves feelings, thoughts and recommendations for future actions in the reflective process. Gibbs describes the use of the reflective cycle in many different educational methods, such as diaries, case-studies and simulations (Gibbs 1988.)

The model was selected because in previous studies it has been found to be helpful in identifying the connection between personal experiences and professional values and in maintaining reflective practices (Ashby 2006, Walmsley and Birkbeck 2006, Quinton and Smallbone 2010). In each course module, participants were requested to recall a challenging situation in school, answer a set of questions, and integrate their reflections using evidence-based course material.

The participants returned their reflective texts via the learning platform. After approximately a week, they received written individual feedback from one of the course mentors. The online course was conducted in Finnish, and the participants wrote their reflective texts in Finnish. The quotations in this study have been translated into English for the purposes of publication.

### ***Study recruitment***

After course completion, a meeting was organised with the course participants. Information was shared about the study, its aims and data collection. Prospective participants were assured that participation was voluntary and that there was confidentiality and anonymity regarding the course exercises. Participants were also informed about their rights to refuse or suspend their participation. The participants were given a written consent form requesting permission for the use of the reflective writings as research data. Of the 15 members of the teaching staff who signed up for the online course, 10 completed the course, and eight agreed to participate in the study. Four of the participants were classroom assistants and four were teachers (special teachers, classroom teachers or subject teachers). On account of the small sample size, detailed background information was not requested, in order to ensure the participants' anonymity.

### ***Ethical issues***

Approval to undertake the study was granted from the municipal educational administration and the principal of the school. According to Finnish research regulations (Medical Research Act, 488/1999) and the regulations of the local research committees, no statement from the ethics committee was necessary (European Commission, 2013) because the study did not involve patients, and the participation of teachers and classroom assistants was voluntary (Medical Research Act, 488/1999).

In line with ethical practices, all personal information remained confidential and anonymous (Varantola et al. 2012). Individually-written reflective writings were seen only by the mentors during the course. The participants wrote about very personal experiences with the pupils. Therefore, the fact that all the participants knew each other had to be taken into consideration when reporting the results. The results are reported in such a way that the possibility of participants recognising each other has been minimised. For example, the writings about significant incidents and reflections about them have been separated. The quotations were also chosen carefully in a way that they do not contain any identifying data. Moreover, the participants' roles are not specified in the quotations because of the small group of participants and the possibility that that they could identify each other. On the other hand, the fact that all the participants work at the same school can be considered as a benefit for the course. The participants could develop new practices together and were able to discuss issues relevant to their school during the course.

### ***Data analysis***

The analysed data comprised 36 separate texts (80 pages with a 2-cm wide margin on each side of the text, a line spacing of 1.5 and 12-point Times New Roman font). The

data were analysed based on a descriptive qualitative study design. A qualitative approach is useful when the aim of the study is to develop an understanding of an individual's experiences, such as challenging situations in school settings (Petty et al. 2012). In this study, our qualitative approach explored how these experiences were constructed by the participants as they were given the opportunity to accurately describe their reality (Polit and Beck 2010). The analysis was a combination of deductive and inductive analysis. In the deductive analysis, the thematic main categories were based on Gibbs' reflective cycle (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Gibbs' model was used as a thematic framework for the data analysis (Vaismoradi 2013), i.e., the findings were analysed and presented according to it.

The participants structured their reflective writings with the guidance of Gibbs' reflective cycle and used its questions as headings. It was easy to find out which parts of the texts answered which questions. First, from all the reflections, the parts answering the first question in Gibbs' cycles, "what happened", were gathered together and analysed with content analysis. Second, the parts of each reflection describing a participant's "feelings and thoughts related to the situation" were gathered and analysed. The procedure continued similarly through all six stages of Gibbs' reflective cycle (Vaismoradi 2013).

Inductive content analysis was used for coding and developing subcategories within the main categories from the deductive phase (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). At each stage, the data were first read through several times to obtain a holistic sense (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). The unit of analysis was selected to be a sentence or paragraph answering the questions of Gibbs' reflective cycle. These units were abstracted into codes. The codes were then sorted according to similarities and

differences and transferred to tables. Ultimately, all similar codes were sorted into subcategories. (Graneheim and Lundman 2004, Hsieh and Shannon 2005.)

### ***Trustworthiness of the study***

Trustworthiness is defined here as credibility, conformability, dependability, and transferability (Polit and Beck 2010). First, credibility refers to confidence in the data presented from the participants' point of view. The participants differed in their professional backgrounds, which increased the possibility of gaining information from a variety of teaching situations and classroom experiences (Polit and Beck, 2010, Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). However, the participants had completed an online course so they may have therefore been more motivated in their professional development than those who did not participate in the course. Second, conformability refers to the objectivity of the data. To ensure conformability, the data analysis was carefully described and direct quotations from the data were used (Polit and Beck, 2010). Using Gibbs' reflective cycle as framework for the data analysis made the participants' reflection process visible through the structure of their writing. Moreover, inductive content analysis was used for the data categorisation in each stage of Gibbs' reflective cycle (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). During the analysis process, the data were first coded and categorised by the first author, and then all the subcategories and main categories were discussed and resolved with the other authors (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Third, dependability refers to the stability of the data (Polit and Beck 2010). To support the dependability of the data collection process, study recruitment and the online course were carefully described so that the research procedures would be visible to the reader. Fourth, transferability refers to the degree to which the findings can be transferred to other contexts (Polit and Beck 2010). This study was conducted at

one comprehensive school, and the results are clearly not intended to be generalisable to other schools (Graneheim and Lundman 2004, Polit and Beck 2010). However, the contribution of the study is the presentation of an in-depth analysis of rich data that can provide insights to inform further research and good professional practice.

## **Findings**

The findings of this study are presented according to thematic categories, based on Gibbs' reflective cycle. This helped to structure our presentation of participants' reflections and contextualise the findings in a meaningful way. Anonymised and translated excerpts and examples from the reflective writings are included where they help to elucidate and describe the findings from the analysis.

### ***Descriptions of challenging situations***

A summary of the teaching staff's reflections is presented in Table 1.

[insert Table 1 here]

First, the non-compliance of pupils was described in situations where pupils refused to do schoolwork or obey the rules. They did not follow the teacher's requests, or they arrived late to class. Some pupils were not able to concentrate on school activities. In some cases, pupils were restless and disturbed peers by wandering around the classroom and concentrating on other things (for example, mobile phones or make-up).

“During the lessons, she almost always talks with someone on the phone, puts on make-up and talks about sex.”

Second, participants described how pupils were verbally or physically aggressive (for example, yelling, cursing or hitting), and how it was directed towards teaching staff or their peers. The texts revealed that pupils sometimes tried to hurt teaching staff during pedagogic and interactive school discussions. Pupils would sometimes push each other or teaching staff, which could lead to larger incidents.

“During recess, a boy in the class started to hit his classmate and I went to help another teacher hold him back.”

Third, pupils' withdrawn behaviour was described in situations of disappointment or conflict with peers. These situations could involve bullying, falling out with friends or disappointment about schoolwork. Pupils may have been disappointed in themselves if they did not manage to do the assignments or if they did not complete the tasks as they wished. For example, a pupil could express disappointment by hitting himself if he could not answer the questions during class. On the other hand, pupils could become quiet, not sharing their thoughts or feelings, but showing their emotions by crying or alienating themselves from peers (for example, after arguing with friends).

### ***Feelings and thoughts related to challenging situations***

Negative feelings related to challenging situations were divided into the subcategories of *displeasure*, *melancholy*, and *distress*. The subcategory *displeasure* consists of descriptions about feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment. Participants described being angry at themselves or others during certain situations, especially if they felt they were not able to influence the situation. This could happen if a pupil was disruptive or aggressive and the participant's actions did not have an effect on the

pupil's behaviour, or if a pupil ran away from a situation and the participant was unable to stop them. Feelings of anger arose especially if the participant was a victim of violence. Feelings of frustration and disappointment were related to situations where a pupil lacked the skills that he/she should have had or in situations of recurrent misbehaviour from the same pupil - for example, a pupil continually disturbing the class by yelling at the teaching staff. Moreover, participants described feelings of frustration when one pupil's disturbing behaviour prevented the whole class from continuing with the classroom activities. This might happen, for example, if a teacher was not able to give instructions to the class because they needed to intervene in one pupil's behaviour. Participants also expressed feelings of disappointment about pupils lying and constantly complaining. Further, participants might feel disappointed in the way a co-worker acted in a challenging situation, or if the participant did not receive the support expected from them.

The feelings in the subcategory *melancholy* include sadness, feelings of failure and feeling hurt. Sadness was described when participants were faced with bullying in the class or worrying about a pupil who seemed unhappy or withdrawn. Failure was related to the participants' own abilities to manage challenging situations: for example, reacting too aggressively to pupils' behaviour or not being able to connect with or interact with a pupil. Participants described not only failing in the situation but failing as a teacher. Participants described feeling hurt after being a victim of violence.

Feelings included in the subcategory *distress* are shock, fear, shame and pity. One class teacher reflected on feeling shocked when realising that the whole class was behaving in a very disruptive and exhausting way at the beginning of the semester. Fear was felt when pupils were physically aggressive; participants also described the feeling

of shame after being a victim of violence. Distress was felt as anxiety: for example, after a participant made the decision to talk with parents about pupils' difficulties, and the participant felt tense about how the parents might react. Participants also experienced feelings of distress when worrying about non-disruptive pupils in the class or the consequences that challenging situations might have on them. The feeling of pity was described as causing distress in situations where a participant had to restrict pupils' behaviour and felt unhappy about it.

“... anger when I noticed the girls ran away and I was unable to do anything in the crowd...”

Contrarily, positive feelings of relief and joy and feeling energetic were also mentioned in challenging situations. Participants described these feelings during and after certain events, for example, in situations when pupils trusted the teaching staff and told them their problems, or when the participants had good conversations after a tough situation and successfully resolved them. One such positive resolution resulting in a feeling of joy was described when a participant got the pupils to agree that they could take turns sitting beside the classroom assistant. These types of experiences energised the teaching staff.

“After the discussion I felt at ease. After the situation I somehow felt joy, as if I had achieved something.”

Furthermore, participants described feelings of surprise, astonishment, being startled and confusion. Feelings of astonishment and the sensation of being startled were describe in situations when pupils lacked the skills they should have had. Examples

included a situation when a pupil was not able to translate an easy text, or an unexpected situation that arose as a pupil revealed information about being bullied when the teacher had not been aware of it and did not expect it. A sensation of confusion was described when participants did not understand why a pupil was displaying challenging behaviour.

“It was unbelievable that a pupil could say that he/she was unable to translate the chapter.” (if the 7<sup>th</sup> is removed from the sentence.

Thoughts that occurred during challenging situations sometimes focused on rational thinking, such as getting the pupil to a safe place to calm down where he/she is not in danger of hurting him/herself or others. The participants also described considering other pupils' well-being during the situation. Teaching staff would try to understand the reasons for the pupil's behaviour, and they would evaluate their own actions to understand what may have triggered the pupil's behaviour. The actions of other individuals were also evaluated afterwards.

“I have gone through the situation many times in my mind and tried to figure out what has launched aggression in the pupil.”

### ***Evaluation of the situations***

The participants were asked to evaluate the situations, considering the positive and negative aspects of the events they described. Positive evaluations were given to interactions that encouraged pupils to keep trying or that helped them calm down. Participants reported feeling successful when they had empathetic and understanding

interactions with pupils and were able to stay calm during conflicts. Further, participants described support from co-workers when they were present or when they knew how to act in a challenging situation. Other positive evaluations were mentioned in situations involving discussions with the pupils, parents or co-workers. These included resolving a conflict, seeing better behaviour from the pupils after discussions about the challenging situation, pupils showing greater trust in the adults in the situation, and pupils finding an adult whom they could talk to. Finding out about bullying was also sometimes seen as a positive, as it enabled the teaching staff to intervene and work to prevent further bullying from taking place at school. Participants described how going through a problematic situation as soon as possible with colleagues, a special education teacher or other co-workers, was important and helpful.

“One good thing in a situation was that I was able to calm down and help him translate. Even though I was tired, I showed empathy instead of being bossy.”

Negative evaluations were related to situations that involved poor interactions with the pupils and negative situations thereafter. An interaction was considered poor when the teaching staff responded to challenging behaviour in an ineffective or unprofessional way, i.e., they did not react with empathy or did not take reasons for the behaviour into account. Staff could also be provoked by a pupil's defiant or aggressive behaviour and respond aggressively. Moreover, interaction with pupils was described as having failed when the pupil did not seem to understand what is allowed and what is not. Negative situations after challenging situations included those when pupils displayed aggressive behaviour or an arrogant attitude. Other negative situations involved the continuation of a problematic situation or behaviour, disagreement between pupils, bullied pupils

refusing to go to school out of fear, and other classmates feeling afraid after an incident.

Furthermore, participants described physical pain after being a victim of violence.

“I behaved too aggressively, cold, I did not even want to find out why a pupil had a bad day or what motivated his/her behaviour.”

### ***Conclusions made about challenging situations***

It is evident from the analysis that, according to the reflections, good practice in challenging situations involves good interaction skills and respect, and good guidelines for managing a variety of challenging situations. Good interaction skills were mentioned as being essential for teaching. In particular, interaction with pupils with special and specific needs must be clear and supportive, especially if the class is restless or in situations that differ from familiar routines. The writings suggested the belief that respect is the basis for interactional teaching, and the respect shown by teaching staff towards pupils increases the pupils' respect towards them. Moreover, participants described how contact with pupils improved when more respect was shown to them. Guidelines for managing a variety of challenging situations were mentioned, as these included good practices, such as rapid intervention and discussing separately with pupils, guidance about how to deal with challenging situations, and how to put one's own feelings aside. Advice about taking the concerns of pupils seriously, rather than dismissing them, was also mentioned. The belief that, in bullying situations, all participants should be treated completely equally, was highlighted.

“A safe environment will be provided for the child by using rules, trust and authority, and by discussing at the level of the child.”

Second, conclusions drawn about the teaching staff's own abilities were based on their own evaluations of their actions during and after challenging situations. The teaching staff made it clear that they were aware of the responsibilities of their professional role as well as their potential limitations, such as the possibility of lack of self-control. Challenges were also considered to be learning opportunities, when the staff could review their own professional practices. Evaluations consisted of accounts of how the teaching staff had made improvements in self-control and in skills in anticipating challenging situations over the years. For example, more experienced staff had become less sensitive in the sense that they did not necessarily take offence so easily when the pupils were rude. They were aware that their own emotions affected their reactions, and they found that controlling their emotions had become easier after gaining years of working experience. Teaching staff also described how they had learned to reflect on their own emotions and actions from different points of view, and they were able to evaluate their own actions related to a specific class or pupil.

“I noticed my own insufficiency and afterwards I had to reconsider my own actions and what kind of a teacher I wanted to be.”

Third, the conclusions drawn about the teaching staff's need for knowledge were related to gaining a better understanding of the issues in pupils' behaviour or condition (for example, the specific characteristics of their special need). More generally, being familiar with the special needs of pupils was considered to be helpful in the teachers' work. Teachers also expressed their awareness that the support and knowhow from classroom assistants, who are constantly present, was essential.

“I notice daily though that I would need the assistant in every lesson. Also, knowledge and understanding about pupils with special diagnoses would ease the everyday routine.”

### *Alternatives and action plans*

It was clear from the data analysis that the teaching staff were satisfied with their actions at times when they had acted professionally and in a mature way. Equal treatment, empathetic interactions, and feeling confident in knowing the best way to react in the situation were all mentioned as being professional reactions. Regularly occurring situations gave considerable experience and increased preparedness. Empathetic interactions and feeling satisfied with how they handled challenges provided the participants with the strength to continue acting in the same way.

“I would act in the same way. I always have a mobile phone with me. If there are not any adults available, I ask other pupils to get help quickly.”

Suggestions for improving actions included alternatives such as acting more calmly, better anticipation of situations, gaining better knowledge, and acting ethically. One suggestion for remaining calm was to leave the situation, even though this might be problematic as it could potentially mean leaving the class unsupervised if no other adults were present. Calmness also requires asking for help and support from others, especially when one’s physical integrity is compromised. The participants suggested that adequately anticipating problems would be helpful, i.e., noticing and addressing pupils’ disruptive or agitated behaviour as soon as possible. Anticipation may be supported by creating a structured environment in the classroom where the routines,

rules, and expectations are clear to the pupils. A structured environment can be established with concrete actions and procedures, such as rearranging seating or providing help during demanding or frustrating assignments. Improving knowledge about pupils and the issues affecting their behaviour can help with challenging situations and can be obtained, for example, from online courses. Participants also mentioned that, in the future, they should be more active in researching their pupils' special needs and asking the pupils' supervisors about them. Handling problematic pupils ethically means seeing the person behind the misbehaviour and treating them as equally valuable. Negative preconceptions of pupils may lead to unequal or unfair treatment towards them. Moreover, empathetically discussing challenging situations with pupils afterwards was suggested to be an ethical way to improve actions.

“In other words, to be genuinely interested in the pupil, see the child and his/her well-being or difficulties behind all that complaining...”

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore teachers' reflections on challenging situations with pupils. The study was based on the reflective writings of teaching staff. The study found that teaching staff dealt with a variety of challenging situations in their daily work with pupils, such as non-compliance, aggression or withdrawn behaviour. Earlier studies have suggested that teachers consider the behavioural problems of pupils the most concerning issue connected to pupils' well-being (e.g. Reinke et al. 2011). Teaching staff experienced various feelings towards pupils in challenging situations, such as anger and frustration, but also joy, and their feelings related to their management of challenging situations varied from feelings of failure to feelings of satisfaction. These varied feelings were also identified in a study by Burić, Slišković, and Macuka (2017).

According to their results, teachers most often reported positive feelings related to teaching, such as joy, happiness, satisfaction and pride. However, they also frequently reported experiences of negative feelings, such as anger, frustration, exhaustion, hopelessness or resignation. (Burić Slišković and Macuka 2017.)

Participants also held the view that dealing with challenging situations could be considered an opportunity to develop themselves professionally (e.g. Berglund, Sjögren and Ekeshbergh 2012). They described that learning to reflect on their own emotions and controlling their reactions in challenging situations became easier after a long period of working experience.

In addition, the participants described worries or confused thoughts regarding the difficulty a teacher faces in understanding the reasons for a pupil's behaviour. As teachers have reported in earlier studies, this may be due to the fact that they have insufficient pre-service education related to pupils' well-being (e.g. Graham et al. 2011, Westling 2010), and need better training in responding to challenging behaviour and in supporting pupils' well-being (e.g. Garland, Garland and Vasques 2013, Reinke et al. 2011, Westling 2010). In this study, the online course aimed to encourage the self-confidence of participants in supporting pupils' well-being. Even though the classroom roles of the participants varied, they all reflected on challenging situations with pupils from different points of view, and the perspective of reflection did not depend of the level of training. This may be because we used Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988), which we found to be a helpful aid for participants when reflecting on their feelings, thoughts, and actions related to challenging situations with pupils. As in previous studies (e.g. Beavers, Orange, & Kirkwood, 2017, Fakude and Bruce 2003), participants in our study were able to provide experiences and thoughts that supported their self-reflection and learning.

The participants considered that increasing their knowledge about issues in pupils' behaviour would support their ability to anticipate challenging situations. This need for increased knowledge has also been recognised in earlier studies (e.g. Garland, Garland and Vasques 2013, Reinke et al. 2011, Westling 2010). Although not all of those participating in the course completed it, those who did were satisfied with it. More generally, this highlights a broader point about the potential of such online education as a support and learning tool. Our research experiences lead us to believe that, in the future, the administration of professional education should be reconsidered. There are many benefits to online courses, as they enable participants to study and complete tasks at their own convenience. It is also important to consider the ways in which teaching staff can be motivated to participate and engage in professional education and specifically education of a reflective nature rather than courses focused on short term solutions. We argue that the importance of reflection in professional development and as a means of enhancing professional performance (Berglund, Sjögren and Ekesbergh 2012) should be highlighted in pre-service education. Self-reflection should also be supported by school-wide practices and policies. In this way, more professionals in the future can be offered longer term support for dealing with challenging situations.

### ***Limitations and implications for future research***

This study includes some limitations. As a small-scale qualitative study with a small number of participants from same school, the findings are not intended to be generalisable to different learning environments or to other regions or countries. The fact that all the participants worked at the same school could have potentially influenced their reflections, especially if they had concerns about privacy. Therefore, the texts analysed in this study were written anonymously and only course mentors have had

access to them. Participants wrote about very personal experiences, which implied that they were able to trust our confidentiality.

Another aspect of the limitation of this study's small sample size is that, if the reflections of teaching assistants and reflections of teachers had been analysed separately, these findings could have been presented according to professional background. In a future study, the reflections of teachers and teaching assistants, i.e., the conclusions they draw in each situation, and the actions they plan to take in future, could be evaluated separately, according to their different roles and prior training.

Despite the study limitations identified here, we believe that this study offers important insights through our analysis of the reflections of teaching staff on challenging situations and how teaching staff reported that they were able to benefit from education that supported their reflective learning. More research is clearly needed to identify effective strategies that support teaching staff. In addition, further research is needed to produce a better level of knowledge and understanding about reflective learning and its benefits, in education in general and in the professional development of teaching staff more specifically.

### ***Conclusions***

This small-scale study presents an analysis of the self-reflections of teaching staff related to challenging situations with pupils. Teaching staff deal with challenging situations with pupils constantly in their everyday work, and to manage and anticipate these situations, teaching staff need education and support when it comes to mental health issues in school settings. In this study, Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle proved to be a helpful model and basis for structuring the content of the reflections. The use of frameworks such as Gibbs' reflective cycle may help focus participants' reflections, and

turn challenging situations into valuable learning experiences.

## Funding

This work was supported by TEKES (The Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation, project Dnro grant 1547/31/2012, 40245/12), the grant holder: Professor M.V.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to the teaching staff who shared their reflections with us. We would also like to express our appreciation and gratitude to the mentors of the course. We acknowledge the University of Turku for providing facilities for the study.

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**Table 1. Summary of the teaching staff's reflections**

<b>Main categories and subcategories</b>	
<p><b>DESCRIPTIONS OF CHALLENGING SITUATIONS</b></p> <p><b>Non-compliance</b>                      Refusals                      Concentration difficulties</p> <p><b>Aggressive behaviour</b>                      Verbal aggression                      Physical aggression</p> <p><b>Withdrawn behaviour</b>                      Not sharing what is on one's mind                      Disappointment in oneself</p> <p><b>FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS DURING AND AFTER CHALLENGING SITUATIONS</b></p> <p><b>Negative feelings</b>                      Displeasure                      Melancholy                      Distress</p> <p><b>Positive feelings</b>                      Relief                      Joy                      Feeling energetic</p> <p><b>Feelings of surprise</b>                      Astonishment and being startled                      Confusion</p> <p><b>Thoughts during and after the situation</b>                      Safety of the pupils                      Understanding the situation</p>	<p><b>EVALUATION OF THE SITUATION</b></p> <p><b>What went well in the situation</b>                      Good interaction with the pupil                      Support from co-workers                      Discussions and resolving the situation</p> <p><b>Concerns about the situation</b>                      Ineffective and unprofessional interaction with the pupil                      Negative consequences</p> <p><b>CONCLUSIONS MADE ABOUT THE CHALLENGING SITUATIONS</b></p> <p><b>Good practices in challenging situations</b>                      Good interaction skills and respect                      Guidelines being available</p> <p><b>One's own abilities</b>                      One's own actions                      Evaluations of improvement</p> <p><b>Need for knowledge</b>                      Knowledge about issues in pupils' behaviour                      Understanding the condition                      Support from co-workers</p> <p><b>ALTERNATIVES AND ACTION PLANS FOR NEXT TIME</b></p> <p><b>Satisfied with your own actions</b>                      Acting professionally                      Gaining experience</p> <p><b>Suggestions for improving actions</b>                      Acting calmly                      Anticipating better                      Gaining knowledge                      Acting in an ethically correct manner</p>