

Investigating Western Australian Teacher Perceptions of Young Children's Challenging Behaviour in the Early Years (Kindergarten to Year 2): An Exploratory Analysis.

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Abstract: An upward national trend in challenging behaviour amongst young children in Australian schools has prompted widespread concern and garnered frequent media scrutiny. Scholars have established that child-teacher relationships are central to understanding and mitigating challenging behaviour; however, exploration of teacher perceptions of children's challenging behaviour in the early years has been scant. This paper reports on findings drawn from a larger mixed-methods study of how teachers perceive, and respond to, young children's challenging behaviour. Survey data from 111 Western Australian teachers of Kindergarten to Year 2 showed that challenging behaviour is appraised contextually, and relational pedagogy is valued. The analysis revealed that teacher responses are affected by the complexity and frequency of challenging behaviours, teacher stress, inadequate support, and resource constraints. This paper highlights that teacher perceptions of young children's challenging behaviour offer a vital and unique lens through which to better understand and respond to challenging behaviour.

Introduction

In Australia, widespread concern and frequent media scrutiny dominate the discourse around children's rising, challenging behaviour in schools. This trend, prevalent across the years of schooling, notably extends to young children in the early years of schooling. The adverse effects of challenging behaviour are extensively documented, impacting not only children's current and future academic, developmental, emotional, and social trajectories, but also contributing significantly to teacher stress. If supportive and strategic interventions to address this problem are not found, then children may suffer negative impacts such as lack of social and emotional adjustment, decreased engagement and academic achievement across their years of schooling (Doumen et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2014; Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta et al., 1995; Silva et al., 2011). Furthermore, teachers may also suffer negative impacts such as increased stress, potential burnout, and early exit from the teaching profession (Herman et al., 2020; Newberry & Allsop, 2017; Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Stasio et al., 2017).

The critical importance of early childhood is universally acknowledged as a pivotal period for early intervention. Despite this and the well-established understanding that positive child – teacher relationships are foundational in addressing challenging behaviour, scholarly exploration of early childhood teachers' (ECTs) perceptions of young children's challenging

behaviour is limited. This paper suggests that an effective approach to addressing young children's challenging behaviour necessitates a consideration of the nuanced and contextual perceptions of ECTs. The way that ECTs think about and respond to challenging behaviour provides an essential lens through which the complexities of young children's challenging behaviours can be more thoroughly and appropriately addressed. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore ECTs' perceptions of young children's challenging behaviour, with the intention of making a substantive contribution to the academic literature.

Literature Review

Young Children's Challenging Behaviour in the Early Years of School

Young children's challenging behaviour is a prevalent and perplexing issue which can impact how schools function. International studies have estimated that approximately 10% to 20% of children in the early years display high impulsivity, hyperactivity, oppositionality and aggression at school (Carter et al., 2014; Gilliam et al., 2018). This pattern is mirrored in Australian schools, where a comparable prevalence of challenging behaviours has been observed (Walker & Graham, 2021). Notwithstanding research efforts to clearly define challenging behaviour (Fox et al., 2022, Sullivan et al., 2014), pinpointing a definition remains, ironically, challenging. The core of this difficulty lies in the subjective nature of the term and the wide array of contexts in which such behaviours are manifested (Low et al., 2019). Although some behaviours described as challenging in the early years are typical in younger children, scholars have concluded that these tend to decrease after the age of three, and therefore, aggressive, non-compliant or disruptive behaviours from children in the early years at school are considered atypical (Carter et al., 2014). However, there is a notable variation in how teachers, influenced by their unique environments and cultural backgrounds, perceive, and interpret challenging behaviour (Specht, et al., 2016). This diversity contributes significantly to the complexity in formulating a universally accepted definition, underscoring the nuanced nature of this issue in educational research and practice.

There is limited published data in the region of this study to determine the extent to which challenging behaviour in the early years is increasing, although recent literature indicates an upward trend (Armstrong, 2019; Graham et al., 2022; Paterson et al., 2016; Pearce et al., 2019). Scholars have investigated exclusion practices, such as suspension, as a response to children's challenging behaviour, and even though these are established as unsuccessful (Nash et al., 2016), they are still widely implemented in schools both in Australia and internationally (Allen & Steed, 2016; Gilliam et al., 2018).

Researchers have explored contextual factors contributing to young children's challenging behaviour. The erosion of play as a pedagogical tool and the increasing demand of a crowded curriculum has been linked to an increase in children's challenging behaviours (Barblett et al., 2016; Sullivan et al., 2014). Furthermore, extant literature highlights the clarion call for inclusive education practices and suggests that an elevated number of young children with complex social and emotional needs has contributed to the growing incidences of challenging behaviour in the early years (Armstrong, 2019; Graham et al., 2022; Specht et al., 2016; Walker & Graham, 2021). It is not yet well understood how ECTs perceive their competency, considering the increasing numbers of children with complex social and emotional needs.

Relationship-based Pedagogies

Contemporary pedagogical approaches in early childhood education emphasise the importance of social interaction, a child-centred focus, active learning and catering to individual learner needs (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022). Scholars highlight the vital need for relationship-based pedagogies and interventions in the early years (McCullough et al., 2021; Oberele & Schonert-Reichl, 2016; Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Within this context, relational pedagogy has gained prominence, foregrounding the centrality of relationships, reciprocity, and empathy (Noddings, 2012; Page, 2014). The emotional dimensions of educational environments are increasingly valued, leading to policies that support, and in some cases, mandate, nurturing approaches (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018). The importance of establishing relationships with children is a recurrent theme and a trend towards holistic approaches is evident in the literature. Consequently, these concepts can be considered foundational when exploring and understanding ECTs' perceptions of challenging behaviour.

Even though it is established that children with challenging behaviours have the most to gain from positive child-teacher relationships (Walker & Graham, 2021; Wolcott et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2021), existing research has not thoroughly investigated how some ECTs navigate relationships with children who demonstrate challenging behaviour toward positive outcomes. Furthermore, although research efforts in this domain have focused extensively on investigating relationship-oriented interventions (Berger et al., 2022; Sabol & Pianta, 2012), they have, to date, largely omitted exploring ECTs' assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions specific to the issue of children's challenging behaviour in the early years.

Teacher Perceptions

Recently, literature investigating children's challenging behaviour has begun examining teachers' interpretations, beliefs, and attitudes that moderate perceptions and inform responses (Stasio et al., 2017, Sullanmaa et al., 2022). This shift from exploring child-teacher relationships to exploring teacher perceptions is noteworthy because acknowledging the inner world of the teacher has previously been overlooked in academic and school contexts (Emerson et al., 2017). Teacher personal resources have been established as indicators of teacher quality (Hur et al., 2015) and strong emotional competence in teachers has been linked to effective teaching (Hosotani & Imai-Matsumura, 2011). Research has established that teachers' personal resources have a moderating influence on their perceptions of children's challenging behaviours (Burić & Frenzel, 2019, Friedman-Krauss et al. 2014; Jeon et al., 2019). It follows then that children's social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes can be improved through interventions that acknowledge the influence of teacher perceptions. However, how this influence can be harnessed, particularly in the early years, is a gap in the research worthy of investigation.

Teacher perceptions about children's challenging behaviour have a bearing on how the teacher experiences that behaviour (Herman et al., 2020). Perceptions of what constitutes challenging behaviour differ depending on the context of the behaviour and teacher judgements of what constitutes challenging behaviour increase if there are several children with challenging behaviours in the classroom (Wienen et al., 2019). An association between what teachers believe about children and how children behave has been established (Hur et al., 2015). Although these findings hold promise for the powerful impact of teacher perceptions in reframing children's challenging behaviour, further research is required to

examine these constructs specific to the early years to determine the interplay between teacher perceptions and young children's challenging behaviour in early childhood. To date, limited research has focused specifically on ECTs' perceptions of challenging behaviour, in Australian early years settings. Examining ECTs' perceptions of, and responses to, children's challenging behaviour will offer a vantage point that illuminates how teachers think about and understand challenging behaviour. These insights may offer ways to reduce teacher stress associated with these challenging behaviours and lessen what can be the significant adverse effects of challenging behaviour on children's current and future academic, developmental, emotional, and social trajectories. They may also offer some insight into more effective responses to these behaviours.

This study investigates Western Australian ECTs' perceptions of young children's challenging behaviour in the early years and considers how ECTs' perceptions of behaviour influence ECTs' responses to behaviour. The study addresses the following research questions: (1) What are ECTs' perceptions of children's challenging behaviour? And (2) How do ECTs' perceptions of challenging behaviour influence and inform their responses to it?

Methods

Drawing from a larger mixed-methods study of how teachers perceive, and respond to, young children's challenging behaviour, the focus of this paper is based on the quantitative data collected from an online survey of Kindergarten to Year 2 teachers in Western Australia. In the context of this study, ECTs are professionals who have obtained a bachelor's degree or its equivalent qualification. These ECTs are qualified to teach children in specific educational stages, namely Kindergarten, Pre-primary, Year 1, and Year 2. Collectively, these stages are referred to as the early years. This encompasses teaching children aged approximately 3.5 years to 7.5 years.

Data Collection

To efficiently reach a broad population and ensure time and cost efficiencies, data was collected using a survey (Mukherji & Albon, 2023). ECTs in Western Australia were recruited via a unique online link using the survey platform Qualtrics (Qualtrics, 2020). Recruitment took place in thirteen closed Facebook groups, such as 'Teaching ECE - WA (Australia)' and 'Teaching Kindy/Pre-Primary WA'. The groups were selected given their suitability and to provide a familiar and accessible platform for the research study. Prior to posting the survey link in each Facebook group, permission was obtained from the respective group administrator. Additionally, the researchers used personal contacts, email, and snowballing techniques to invite survey participation. The survey link was available for 5 weeks in total across May and June 2023. Ethical approval was received from the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number 2022-03977- SMITH. All participants provided written informed consent after being provided with information about the study, including that data would be confidential and deidentified.

Participants

The sample consisted of 111 ECTs in Western Australia. Initially, 132 participants responded to the survey. Twenty participants were excluded from the sample data, as these participants commenced but did not complete the survey. Participants were currently teaching (89.19%), whilst others were in different education-based roles (9.1%) with a small minority retired (1.8%). The participants held a range of years of teaching experience, from recent graduates to teachers with over 30 years' experience. Participants taught predominantly in Pre-primary (40.54%) and Kindergarten (29.73%), with others teaching Year 1 (13.51%) and Year 2 (4.5%). The remainder taught in split year levels within Kindergarten to Year 2. Most participants were in a metropolitan area (82.88%), with a few in regional areas (14.41%). Only a small minority (2.7%) of respondents were in rural or remote areas. The participants all held teaching qualifications, the type of which varied but were largely Bachelor of Education (66.67%) and Graduate Diploma of Education (15.32%). Some had continued their studies in education obtaining higher degrees such as Master of Education (9.91%) and Graduate Certificate of Education (6.31%). A summary of the demographic characteristics of respondents is detailed in Table 1.

Participants	<i>n</i> (N = 111)	%
Teaching experience		
0-2 years	4	3.60%
3 - 5 years	8	7.21%
6 - 10 years	21	18.92%
11 - 15 years	23	20.72%
16 - 20 years	18	16.22%
21 - 30 years	21	18.92%
+ 30 years	16	14.41%
Teaching role		
Kindergarten	33	29.73%
Pre-primary	45	40.54%
Year one	15	13.51%
Year two	5	4.50%
Kindergarten pre-primary split	5	4.50%
Pre-Primary year one split	2	1.80%
Year one year two split	2	1.80%
Other split	4	3.60%
School location		
Metropolitan	92	82.88%
Regional	16	14.41%
Remote	3	2.70%
Highest qualification		
Master of Education	11	9.91%
Graduate Certificate of Education	7	6.31%
Graduate Diploma of Education	17	15.32%
Bachelor of Education	74	66.67%
Other	2	1.80%

Table 1: Summary of Participant Demographic Information

Instrument

The items in the survey were adapted from various existing survey instruments relevant to teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour, including *The Behavioural and Emotional Rating Scale-2* (Buckley & Epstein, 2004), *Behaviours of Concern to Teachers in*

the Early Years of School (Stephenson et al., 2000), *The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman, 1997) and the *Preschool and Kindergarten Behaviour Scales* (Merrell, 2002). In addition, constructs were drawn from previous studies of teacher perceptions of challenging behaviour which referenced a variety of behaviours that might raise concern for teachers (Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016; Emerson et al., 2017, Longmuir et al., 2022; Sherfinski, 2020; Stasio et al., 2017), and these teachers' responses to the behaviours (Beuttner et al., 2016; Buric & Frenzel, 2019; Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014; Jeon et al., 2019; Wienen et al., 2019). These were refined for the early childhood education context in Western Australia. Pilot testing with eight ECTs improved the survey's clarity and instructions.

The survey instrument included four sections. The first gathered demographic data, encompassing teaching role, qualification, experience, school type and location. In the second section, ECTs rated various challenging behaviours, supplemented by open-ended questions for additional insights. A scaled question quantified the frequency of challenging behaviours. Sections three and four collected teacher perceptions and responses using Likert scales, complemented by open-ended questions for further elaboration.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse early childhood teacher perceptions and responses to young children's challenging behaviour. Data from the survey were prepared for analysis by developing a codebook which structured the data file. The data was screened for errors, during which data screening decisions were documented. Once entered SPSS statistical software (IBM Corp., 2021) was used to generate descriptive statistics, summary statistics, tabulation and graphics that were used to gain an initial understanding of the underlying patterns and trends. Subsequently, data were modified and refined to facilitate further analyses aimed at exploring relationships between variables and comparing different groups within the dataset.

		1 Not at all challenging (%)	2 Slightly challenging (%)	3 Moderately challenging (%)	4 Very challenging (%)	5 Extremely challenging (%)
	<i>M (SD)</i>					
Acting out/explosive behaviour	3.95 (0.86)	0.90	3.60	23.42	44.14	27.93
Physically hurting other children	3.93 (0.97)	0.90	9.01	18.02	40.54	31.53
Running away	3.59 (1.09)	3.60	12.61	28.83	30.63	24.32
Throwing objects	3.41 (1.02)	4.50	13.51	30.63	38.74	12.61
Destroying or breaking others' work	3.36 (1.08)	7.21	11.71	32.43	35.14	13.51
Spitting at others	3.26 (1.10)	6.31	18.02	32.43	29.73	13.51
Verbal disrespect to educators	3.23 (1.02)	4.50	18.92	36.94	28.83	10.81
High need for teacher attention/interaction	3.11 (1.03)	2.70	27.93	37.84	18.92	12.61
Refusing to follow instructions	3.02 (0.97)	3.60	28.83	36.04	25.23	6.31
Lack of focus or attention	2.99 (0.96)	3.60	27.93	42.34	18.02	8.11
Seeking interaction with peers, to the point of disruption	2.95 (0.91)	1.80	33.33	38.74	20.72	5.41
Raising voice or yelling	2.91 (0.99)	4.50	31.53	41.44	13.51	9.01
Intruding on others' personal space or boundaries	2.78 (0.94)	3.60	42.34	30.63	18.92	4.50
Making repetitive noises	2.75 (1.00)	7.21	37.84	34.23	14.41	6.31
Difficulty with transitions	2.68 (0.96)	7.21	40.54	33.33	14.41	4.50
Leaving assigned area without permission	2.66 (1.07)	10.81	41.44	25.23	16.22	6.31

Swearing at others	2.69 (1.12)	14.41	32.43	29.73	16.22	7.21
Persistent crying	2.63 (0.89)	8.11	37.84	39.64	11.71	2.70
Unresponsive/lacking affect	2.61 (0.82)	5.41	43.24	36.94	13.51	0.90
Excluding or isolating peers from play or social activities	2.62 (0.89)	7.21	41.44	36.04	12.61	2.70
Lying	2.59 (0.92)	7.21	47.75	26.13	17.12	1.80
Hiding away	2.53 (0.91)	12.61	36.94	36.04	13.51	0.90
Making hurtful comments	2.57 (0.89)	7.21	45.95	32.43	11.71	2.70
Name-calling	2.53 (0.91)	9.91	43.24	33.33	10.81	2.70
Excessive worrying or fearfulness	2.45 (0.92)	16.22	36.04	34.23	13.51	0.00
A lack of interest or pleasure	2.39 (0.89)	16.22	39.64	34.23	9.01	0.90
Withdrawing from interactions	2.39 (0.83)	9.91	53.15	26.13	9.91	0.90
Unable/unwilling to socialise with peers	2.31 (0.85)	15.32	46.85	31.53	4.50	1.80
Talking out of turn	2.28 (0.97)	15.32	58.56	13.51	8.11	4.50
Unhappiness or sorrow	2.26 (0.81)	16.22	47.75	30.63	4.50	0.90
Stomach aches/headaches due to feelings of anxiety	2.23 (0.85)	18.02	48.65	26.13	6.31	0.90
Chatting with peers at inappropriate times	2.16 (0.96)	24.32	47.75	18.02	7.21	2.70
A lack of manners	2.19 (0.97)	22.52	49.55	18.02	6.31	3.60
Persistent expressions of inadequacy	2.16 (0.81)	18.92	53.15	20.72	7.21	0.00
Dobbing (Tattling)	2.13 (0.99)	27.03	45.95	18.02	5.41	3.60
Fidgeting	2.11 (1.01)	27.93	46.85	16.22	4.50	4.50
Repetitive movements	2.10 (0.98)	27.03	47.75	18.02	2.70	4.50

Table 2: Summary of the Extent to which ECTs Found Young Children's Behaviours Challenging (N = 111)

Exploring what Constitutes Challenging Behaviour from the Teachers' Perspective

To understand how teachers perceive, and respond to, challenging behaviour, researchers examined the mean scores and percentages of the extent to which teachers rated several types of children's challenging behaviour (from 1 = not challenging at all to 5 = extremely challenging). This provided insight into ECTs' views on what type of behaviours were experienced as challenging. Mean scores on the thirty-seven presented behaviours ranged from 2.11 to 3.95. The overall mean score ($M = 2.72$) indicated that teachers encountered a wide spectrum of behaviour, which they perceived as challenging. Findings indicated that ECTs ranked 'acting out/explosive behaviour' ($M = 3.95$), 'physically hurting other children' ($M = 3.93$), 'running away' ($M = 3.59$), and 'throwing objects' ($M = 3.41$) as the most challenging behaviours. Notably, behaviours such as 'unresponsive/lacking affect' ($M = 2.61$), 'excessive worrying' ($M = 2.45$) and withdrawing ($M = 2.39$) were also considered challenging by ECTs. The standard deviations in the data set revealed variability in ECTs' experiences with challenging behaviours. For example, 'running away' ($SD = 1.09$) suggested a wider range of perceptions among participants regarding the challenge posed by this behaviour, whilst 'unresponsive/lacking affect' ($SD = 0.82$), indicated a more consistent view about the level of challenge this behaviour presented to ECTs (See Table 2).

Frequency of Teacher Encounters with Challenging Behaviour

The survey asked ECTs about the frequency of encountering challenging behaviour within a month. The findings revealed that encountering challenging behaviours is a common experience for these teachers. Participants reported facing challenging behaviours daily (29.73%) and several times a day (45.95%). The data indicated that challenging behaviour is consistently encountered by teachers across various levels of teaching experience (see Table 3).

	1 Rarely	2 Weekly	3 Several times a week	4 Daily	5 Several times a day
Years of Teaching Experience (n)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
All participants (N = 111)	0.90	9.01	14.41	29.73	45.95
0-2 years (4)	0.00	25.00	25.00	25.00	25.00
3-5 years (8)	0.00	0.00	25.00	12.50	62.50
6-10 years (21)	0.00	4.76	9.52	19.05	66.67
11-15 years (23)	0.00	17.39	17.39	34.78	30.43
16-20 years (18)	0.00	0.00	22.22	38.89	38.89
21-30 years (21)	4.76	14.29	9.52	23.81	47.62
More than 30 years (16)	0.00	6.25	6.25	43.75	43.75

Table 3: Frequency of Encountering Challenging Behaviour by Years of Teaching Experience

Teacher Perceptions of Children's Challenging Behaviour

To investigate perceptions of challenging behaviour in early years school settings, ECTs rated their agreement with statements on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (See Table 4). Most participants agreed ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.64$) that challenging behaviour adversely affects children's academic, social, and emotional development. Dealing with such behaviour was seen as stressful ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.96$), and most ECTs interpreted these behaviours as a signal of children feeling overwhelmed and in need of support ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.66$). Forming positive relationships with children was regarded as an effective strategy to manage challenging behaviour ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.57$). There was a consensus amongst participants that parents were responsible for teaching their children behavioural expectations and skills ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.88$).

Opinions were split on children's ability to meet behavioural expectations at school ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 1.17$). A substantial number of ECTs believed that managing challenging behaviour detracted from other important tasks ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.89$). Many reported an observed increase in challenging behaviours over the course of their teaching careers ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.74$). Additional findings indicated that ECTs viewed challenging behaviour as a form of communication by children ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.80$) and emphasised the importance of early intervention to support children with challenging behaviours ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.66$). However, ECTs reported inadequate time and resources to address the social and emotional needs of children ($M = 1.75$, $SD = 0.93$), and generally did not blame the child directly for their behaviour ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 0.91$).

When combining the percentages of those who 'somewhat agree' and 'strongly agree', important perceptions amongst ECTs emerged. A high percentage (98.19%) felt responsible to protect other children in the cohort from a specific child's challenging behaviours. Similarly, 97.30% recognised the detrimental impact of such behaviours on children's overall development and concurred that there was a need for individualised attention to support children in these instances. Additionally, 97.29% of participants believed in the efficacy of building positive relationships to address these behaviours in the classroom.

Statement	<i>M (SD)</i>	1 Strongly disagree (%)	2 Somewhat disagree (%)	3 Neither agree nor disagree (%)	4 Somewhat agree (%)	5 Strongly agree (%)
I feel responsible to protect other children in the class from a child's significant challenging behaviours.	4.72 (0.49)	0.00	0.00	1.80	24.32	73.87
Young children who exhibit challenging behaviour in the early years need help.	4.71 (0.66)	1.80	0.00	0.90	19.82	77.48
Challenging behaviour in children negatively impacts their academic, social, and emotional development.	4.64 (0.64)	0.90	0.90	0.90	27.93	69.37
Building positive relationships with children is an effective way to address challenging behaviour in the classroom.	4.61 (0.57)	0.00	0.90	1.80	32.43	64.86
There has been an increase in the number of children exhibiting challenging behaviour in my class since I began teaching.	4.61 (0.74)	0.00	2.70	7.21	16.22	73.87
Each child needs something different from me.	4.53 (0.68)	0.90	1.80	0.00	37.84	59.46
Challenging behaviour from a child has a negative impact on the academic, social, and emotional development of other children in the class.	4.50 (0.67)	0.00	0.90	7.21	33.33	58.56
When I am faced with a child's challenging behaviour, I tend to think that the child must be feeling overwhelmed or upset and needs support.	4.41 (0.66)	0.90	0.00	4.50	46.85	47.75
Managing challenging behaviour takes away from other important tasks I have.	4.32 (0.89)	0.90	6.31	4.50	36.04	52.25
Challenging behaviour serves as a means for children to communicate their needs or emotions.	4.31 (0.8)	1.80	2.70	2.70	48.65	44.14
Managing young children's challenging behaviour is stressful for me.	4.10 (0.96)	0.90	9.91	6.31	44.14	38.74
When I am faced with a child's challenging behaviour, I think of it as an opportunity to teach them new skills.	4.07 (0.73)	0.00	2.70	15.32	54.05	27.93
Parents should take responsibility for teaching children how to manage their own behaviour.	4.03 (0.88)	1.80	5.41	10.81	52.25	29.73
It is my responsibility to control children's behaviour in the classroom.	3.93 (0.94)	3.60	5.41	9.91	56.76	24.32
Children behave the way they do because they lack the skills to behave differently.	3.81 (0.83)	0.00	10.81	13.51	59.46	16.22
My colleagues know the extent to which children's challenging behaviour impacts me.	3.61 (1.14)	5.41	13.51	18.92	38.74	23.42
Certain children's challenging behaviours can only be adequately managed with a medical diagnosis.	3.51 (1.26)	8.11	18.92	9.91	39.64	23.42
Parents are supportive of my efforts to address challenging behaviours.	3.50 (1.01)	2.70	18.02	18.02	48.65	12.61
Children's challenging behaviour at school is caused by their family and home environment.	3.40 (0.86)	1.80	13.51	34.23	44.14	6.31
My school's expectations of my ability to address children's challenging behaviour are realistic.	3.17 (1.21)	12.61	18.02	18.92	40.54	9.91
I feel unsupported when managing a child's ongoing challenging behaviour.	3.05 (1.2)	9.01	30.63	18.92	29.73	11.71
Children can cope with the behavioural expectations at school.	2.90 (1.17)	8.11	40.54	13.51	28.83	9.01
When I am faced with a child's challenging behaviour, I tend to think that the child is trying to manipulate me or get attention.	2.39 (1.02)	23.42	31.53	27.93	17.12	0.00
When I am faced with a child's challenging behaviour, I tend to think that it is my fault.	2.29 (1.03)	23.42	42.34	18.02	14.41	1.80
When I am faced with a child's challenging behaviour, I tend to think that it is the child's fault, and they need a consequence.	1.98 (0.91)	36.04	35.14	24.32	3.60	0.90
Children's challenging behaviour at school is promoted by a lack of attention from their teachers.	1.96 (1.01)	40.54	34.23	14.41	9.91	0.90
I have enough time and resources to provide for the social and emotional needs of children in my class.	1.75 (0.93)	48.65	37.84	4.50	8.11	0.90
The challenging behaviours I have encountered are consistent with my initial expectations when I started my teaching career.	1.74 (0.87)	48.65	34.23	11.71	5.41	0.00

Table 4: Mean Score and Percentage of Teacher Perceptions of Children's Challenging Behaviour

Statement - Responses	<i>M (SD)</i>	1 Strongly disagree (%)	2 Some- what disagree (%)	3 Neither agree nor disagree (%)	4 Some- what agree (%)	5 Strong ly agree (%)
I have talked to a trusted colleague, friend, or family member about my experiences in managing children's challenging behaviour.	4.67 (0.53)	0.00	2.70	11.71	57.66	27.93
When managing challenging behaviour, I prioritise building a positive and supportive relationship with the child.	4.65 (0.64)	0.00	2.70	5.41	46.85	45.05
I take into consideration the child's individual needs and background when responding to their behaviour.	4.65 (0.50)	0.00	0.00	2.70	27.93	69.37
Challenging behaviour is a problem to be collectively solved.	4.63 (0.71)	0.90	3.60	9.91	47.75	37.84
I address challenging behaviour when it occurs.	4.51 (0.63)	10.81	10.81	11.71	51.35	15.32
Collaborating with parents is an effective way to respond to children's challenging behaviour.	4.45 (0.72)	33.33	18.02	10.81	28.83	9.01
When a child is demonstrating challenging behaviour, I tend to feel concerned for the child's well-being.	4.34 (0.70)	0.00	2.70	0.90	25.23	71.17
I am supported by other teachers within my school when managing challenging behaviour.	4.18 (0.82)	5.41	17.12	20.72	43.24	13.51
When a child is demonstrating challenging behaviour, I tend to feel empathetic and understanding of the child's perspective.	4.11 (0.70)	0.00	3.60	2.70	20.72	72.97
My response to challenging behaviour is influenced by my relationship with the child.	4.06 (1.02)	0.00	7.21	12.61	52.25	27.93
I involve children in the problem-solving process to come up with a solution to their challenging behaviour.	4.01 (0.83)	12.61	23.42	10.81	34.23	18.92
I know what to do when faced with a child's challenging behaviour.	3.81 (0.80)	2.70	8.11	9.01	40.54	39.64
Professional development opportunities have helped me improve my skills in managing challenging behaviour.	3.65 (1.04)	0.00	2.70	5.41	36.04	55.86
I am supported by leadership/administration within my school when managing challenging behaviour.	3.5 (1.19)	0.00	10.81	10.81	64.86	13.51
Reward-based systems can have a positive impact on children's behaviour in the classroom.	3.42 (1.09)	0.00	0.00	0.90	33.33	65.77
I have sufficient training and resources to deal with challenging behaviour.	3.23 (1.34)	0.00	0.90	4.50	36.94	57.66
I find it easier to respond effectively when a child has a medical diagnosis that relates to their challenging behaviour.	3.09 (1.17)	13.51	20.72	28.83	34.23	2.70
Time-out is an effective response to children's challenging behaviour.	2.92 (1.09)	3.60	12.61	18.02	46.85	18.92
When managing challenging behaviour, it is important to maintain strict control over the situation and enforce rules and consequences.	2.84 (1.05)	9.91	29.73	32.43	22.52	5.41
When a child is demonstrating challenging behaviour, I tend to feel angry and frustrated.	2.63 (1.00)	18.02	41.44	17.10	18.02	5.41
I have taken breaks during the day to decompress when managing particularly challenging behaviour.	2.62 (1.42)	11.71	18.92	28.83	29.73	10.81
When a child is demonstrating challenging behaviour, I tend to feel overwhelmed and unsure how to respond.	2.51 (1.14)	12.61	36.94	26.13	23.42	0.90

Table 5: Mean Score and Percentage of Teacher Responses to Children's Challenging Behaviour

Teacher Responses to Children's Challenging Behaviour

To investigate teacher responses to children's challenging behaviour in early years school settings, ECTs rated their agreement with statements on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree (See Table 5). The survey data highlighted a strong empathetic and personalised approach in addressing children's challenging behaviour. Participants indicated a high concern for children's wellbeing ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.70$), showing that understanding and connection with children was prioritised when responding to challenging behaviour. While most ECTs felt supported by colleagues in their responsive endeavours to children's challenging behaviour ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.82$), there was slightly less support perceived from school leadership, although views on this varied amongst participants, as indicated by the higher standard deviation ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.19$). When responding to challenging behaviour, ECTs favoured collective solutions ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.71$) and child involvement in problem-solving ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.83$), reflecting a collaborative stance. However, confidence in the sufficient availability of resources ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.34$) and the effectiveness of reward systems ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.09$) was moderate. When responding to children's challenging behaviour, the data showed that less favoured responses by ECTs are strategies such as time-outs (Mean = 2.92, $SD = 1.09$) and strict control (Mean = 2.84, $SD = 1.05$). ECTs viewed professional development as relevant in shaping response strategies (Mean = 3.65, $SD = 1.04$). Whilst feelings of being overwhelmed (Mean = 2.51, $SD = 1.14$) and frustrated (Mean = 2.63, $SD = 1.00$) existed for ECTs when responding to children's behaviour, these feelings were not predominant. Varied practices in self-care and stress management amongst ECTs when responding to challenging behaviour were evident, as indicated by the wide range of responses for 'taking breaks to decompress' ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.42$).

An aggregated analysis on agreement percentages indicated consensus on certain aspects of responding to challenging behaviour. Most participants emphasised the importance of considering children's individual needs (97.30%) and establishing supportive relationships with children (91.90%). ECTs valued discussing their experiences of responding to children's challenging behaviour with trusted colleagues (85.59%). Agreement was high on the need for collective problem-solving approaches (85.59%) and moderate on the need for prompt responses (66.67%) to children's challenging behaviour. Opinions were divided on collaborating with parents when responding to challenging behaviour, with just over half of the participants (51.35%) expressing disagreement about its effectiveness.

Discussion

ECTs' insights provide a valuable perspective to better understand and address the complex issue of young children's challenging behaviour in school settings. The key findings are discussed in relation to the two research questions: what are ECTs' perceptions of children's challenging behaviour; and how do ECTs' perceptions of challenging behaviour influence and inform their responses to it?

Understanding and empathy are central to ECTs' perceptions of young children's challenging behaviours. ECTs think about children's unmet needs when responding to instances of challenging behaviours and seek to understand the underlying factors contributing to these behaviours, rather than merely addressing their surface manifestations. This approach aligns with the importance of addressing the holistic needs of children, considering both the immediate and latent factors that may influence their behaviour. Through this lens, challenging behaviours are not viewed simply as disciplinary issues, but

rather as opportunities to explore and fulfil unmet developmental, emotional, or environmental needs. The role of ECTs in this context is not only reactive but also proactive, emphasising the creation of supportive and nurturing environments that pre-emptively address potential triggers for challenging behaviours. This perspective aligns with contemporary educational paradigms that advocate for child-centred approaches and recognise the complexity of early childhood development.

Furthermore, ECTs' expertise in recognising and understanding a wide array of children's behavioural cues, including subtle signs such as withdrawal and more overt disruptions such as hurting others, was found in the study. This skill in detecting and interpreting both overt and subtle behavioural indicators demonstrates ECTs' adeptness and commitment to understanding the full range of children's emotional and developmental expressions. This perspective indicates the ECTs do not have a simplistic interpretation of behaviour as merely problematic, but rather, a more complex recognition of its roots and implications. Such a diversified understanding of behavioural cues significantly contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of ECTs in identifying and addressing the complex needs of children, particularly in early childhood education settings. This raises the pertinent question of how best to support ECTs towards fostering environments conducive to meeting children's needs most appropriately.

Findings from the study shine a light on the individual nature of teachers through their differing interpretations of what constitutes challenging behaviour, revealing that different behaviours may be perceived as more or less challenging by different ECTs. This positions both the teacher and child as protagonists in their educational relationship, each influencing the other. These differing interpretations align with previous research (Butler & Monda-Amaya, 2016; Specht et al., 2016), further elucidating the complex dynamic between teacher perceptions and children's behaviour. The ECTs' interpretations of what type of behaviour is challenging, and to what extent it is challenging, adds layers of complexity to pinpointing what constitutes challenging behaviour, contributing to the ongoing scholarly discourse at attempts to define challenging behaviour (Fox et al., 2022; Low et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2014).

Results from the study indicate that children's challenging behaviours are a common experience for teachers, regardless of their years of teaching experience. Furthermore, the perception amongst ECTs that the prevalence of such behaviours is increasing aligns with broader research trends (Berger et al., 2022). The frequency and diversity of challenging behaviours encountered across different teaching tenures, coupled with reports of teacher stress, burnout, and early career exit (Herman et al., 2020; Jeon et al., 2019), shed light on the demands and stresses that teachers face. This finding points to the critical need for supportive measures and resources to assist teachers in managing these challenges effectively, not only for the benefit of the children but for the well-being and sustainability of the teaching profession.

The results also reveal ECTs' concerns regarding the inadequacy of resources and support available to them. Coupled with their perceived obligation to safeguard not only the child exhibiting challenging behaviour but also their peers, this scenario highlights a significant professional responsibility. This responsibility, borne largely by teachers, potentially creates a professional burden. This discussion points to the crucial role of secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationships in key curriculum frameworks like the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022). Teachers are expected to use their emotions effectively to build strong relationships with all children (Sherfinski, 2020). However, the emotional labour required in early years teaching, amidst demands for increased documentation and prescriptive curricula, depletes teachers' personal resources (Monrad, 2017; Sherfinski, 2020). This systemic

constraint places the onus on teachers to provide nurture even when resources are lacking, thereby raising the pertinent question of when, where, and how best to support teachers to effectively manage challenging behaviours. Addressing this question is crucial for the sustainability of teaching practices and the well-being of both teachers and children in early childhood education settings, requiring a collaborative effort among policymakers, school leaders, teachers and researchers.

Findings from the study highlight the significant support the ECTs perceived from colleagues, friends, or family members when addressing challenging behaviours, emphasising a network of trust and collaboration. This sense of collective solidarity, along with the preference for collaborative problem-solving methods (Sullanmaa et al., 2022) that actively involve children (Wolcott et al., 2019), underscores the collective efforts ECTs recognise as requisite to addressing challenging behaviours. However, the study reveals a division among ECTs regarding the efficacy of collaborating with parents in managing challenging behaviour. ECTs expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of such collaboration. This apprehension points to a potential disconnect between home and school environments. While teachers feel adequately supported within their professional circles, the extension of this collaborative approach to include parents is perceived as difficult. This divide in parent-teacher collaboration represents a significant concern, as it may affect the success of strategies aimed at addressing challenging behaviours both in school and at home. The perceptions of teachers regarding this issue highlight the complexities in forging a cohesive approach to behaviour management that effectively bridges educational and familial environments (Hoffman & Kuvalanka; 2019).

Implications and Future Research Directions

This study aims to enhance an understanding of ECTs' perceptions and responses to children's challenging behaviour, seeking to improve practices in schools and outcomes for children. The need for supportive and strategic approaches to relationship-oriented interventions in response to the increasing prevalence of challenging behaviours in early childhood educational settings is highlighted. The study contributes to the limited data available on the nature and impact of challenging behaviours and the responsive strategies employed by teachers. Limitations such as potential survey biases (Bauhoff, 2014) and a small Western Australian sample suggest cautious interpretation of findings as initial insights, prompting the need for further research.

This research has significant implications for early years education policies and practices. The study emphasises the importance of understanding specific challenging behaviours, their causes, and the supportive practices that guide these situations. This understanding is crucial for promoting and supporting standards of excellence, equity, children's wellbeing, and inclusive practice. Additionally, the findings highlight the need for further research to explore the dynamics of parent-teacher collaboration when addressing challenging behaviours. The insights gained could potentially lead to transformative changes in funding models, support structures, policy drivers, and teacher education, enhancing outcomes for children and teachers in early childhood educational settings.

Conclusion

This research, conducted in Australia, underscores the nuanced nature of children's challenging behaviour in the early years of schooling, affirming that it is assessed within specific relational and situational contexts by teachers. The findings highlight the personalised aspect of teaching and the diversity in interpreting behaviour, presenting a layered complexity. This complexity paves the way for an in-depth look at the internal perceptions enabling teachers to respond empathetically and effectively to young children's challenging behaviour. The study urges a profound exploration into how teachers *hold space for hope* in the face of children's challenging behaviour. Such research could significantly deepen our understanding of the dynamics that lead to effective and compassionate approaches to young children's challenging behaviours, thereby enriching educational practices in the foundational years, and in so doing safeguard both children, and their teachers.

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