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TEACHERS' REPRESENTATIONS OF DIFFICULT STUDENTS ON REDDIT

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Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan sitä, miten opettajat representoivat niin kutsuttuja vaikeita oppilaita englanninkielisillä opettajien Reddit-keskustelupalstoilla. Tutkimuksen teoriapohja on monitieteinen, mutta ennen kaikkea kriittisessä diskurssianalyysissä. Kriittinen diskurssianalyysi ja representaation tutkimus perustuvat sosiokonstruktivistiseen näkemykseen kielestä sosiaalisen todellisuuden rakentajana. Sosiaalisista ongelmista saadaan näin ollen tietoa kielenkäyttöä analysoimalla.

Aineistoksi valikoitui 13 Reddit-keskustelua vuosilta 2013–2019, yhteensä 106 kommenttia. Kommentit käytiin läpi lähiluvulla ja teemoittelulla, keskittyen kuvailevaan ja arvottavaan kieleen. Kuvauksista muodostui erilaisia representaatioita, jotka koostettiin teemoiksi sen perusteella, miten "vaikeus" niissä näyttäytyi – oppilaan ominaisuutena, kitkaisesta opettaja-oppilas suhteesta johtuvana, vai jostakin muusta. Lisäksi tarkasteltiin muiden toimijoiden osaa representaatioissa.

Tulokseksi hahmottui erilaisia representaatioita, joista osa oli hyvin samanlaisia kuin aiemmissa tutkimuksissa oli havaittu. Vaikeus nähtiin useimmiten oppilaan ominaisuutena ja oppilaita kuvailtiin negatiivisesti. Keskustelun kohteena olleet vaikeat oppilaat kuvattiin usein "erityisinä" oppilaina, mikä liittyy erilaisuuden ja normaaliuden diskursseihin. Toisaalta vaikeat oppilaat saatettiin myös esittää vaikeina lapsina, mihin liittyi eräänlainen huolenpidon diskurssi.

Negatiivisesta kuvailusta huolimatta opettajien yleinen suhtautuminen vaikeisiin oppilaisiin ei välttämättä ollut negatiivista. Varsinkin niissä representaatioissa, joissa "vaikeuden" esitettiin johtuvan huonosta opettaja-oppilas suhteesta, opettajien päämääränä oli suhteen parantaminen positiivisuuden kautta. Hyvän suhteen taas nähtiin johtavan parempaan käytökseen ja arvosanoihin. Toisaalta käytettiin myös "deal with" -fraasiverbiä, joka kuvaa hankaluutta toimia oppilaiden kanssa.

Opettajan ja oppilaiden lisäksi representaatioissa mainittiin toimijoina myös oppilaiden vanhemmat sekä koulun hallinto, jotka molemmat kuvattiin pääasiassa opettajan työtä haittaavina. Tämä näkemys saattaakin liittyä siihen miksi opettajat ovat päätyneet kirjoittamaan kokemuksistaan nettiin; viestien päällimmäinen tarkoitus vaikutti olevan avun saaminen. Kuten aiemmissa tutkimuksissa on havaittu, representaatiosta näkyi, että opettajilta puuttui tietoa ja taitoa toimia vaikeiden oppilaiden kanssa. Koska tutkimusta ei voi paikallistaa mihinkään tiettyyn kontekstiin, tarvitaan lisää tutkimusta paikallisemmissä konteksteissa käytännön ongelmiin puuttumiseksi. Tulokset kuitenkin yleisellä tasolla viittaavat siihen, että opettajien representaatiot vaikeista oppilaista ovat negatiivisia. Näin ollen olisikin tärkeää, että "vaikeista" oppilaista ja erilaisuudesta ylipäätään puhuttaisiin opettajainkoulutuksessa ja opettajien kesken mahdollisimman rakentavasti.

Avainsanat: kriittinen diskurssianalyysi, CDA, representaatio, vaikea oppilas

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ABSTRACT

Satu Dalnell: Teachers' representations of difficult students on Reddit
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This thesis explores how teachers represent so-called difficult students on English-speaking Reddit discussion forums. The theoretical basis of the thesis is multidisciplinary, but primarily in critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis and research on representation are based on the socioconstructivist view where language constitutes our social reality. It is therefore possible to gain knowledge about social problems by analyzing language in use.

The data selected for the study consists of 13 Reddit discussion threads from 2013 to 2019, 106 comments in total. The comments were analyzed using close reading and thematization, concentrating on descriptive and evaluative language. The descriptions formed different representations, which were compiled into themes based on how the "difficulty" appeared – as a characteristic of the student, stemming from a frictional teacher-student relationship, or something else. In addition, the role of other actors in the representations was examined.

As a result, various representations emerged, some of which were very similar to those identified in previous studies. Difficulty was most often seen as a characteristic of the student and students were described negatively. The difficult students discussed were often described as "special" students, which relates to discourses of difference and normality. On the other hand, difficult students were also portrayed as difficult children, which was related to a certain discourse of care.

Despite the negative description, the general stance of teachers towards difficult students was not necessarily negative. Especially in those representations where "difficulty" was presented as stemming from a poor teacher-student relationship, the goal of teachers was to improve the relationship through positivity. A good relationship, on the other hand, was seen to lead to better behavior and grades. Contrarily, the phrase verb "deal with", which describes the difficulty of working with these students, was also used.

In addition to the teacher and the students, the parents of the students and the school administration were also mentioned as actors in the representations, both of which were described as mainly hampering the teacher's work. This view may be related to why these teachers have ended up writing about their experiences online; the main purpose of the messages seemed to be to get help. As observed in previous studies, the representation showed that teachers lacked knowledge and skills to work with difficult students. Because this research cannot be localized to any particular context, more research is needed in more local contexts to address practical problems. However, the results indicate that in general, teachers' representations of difficult students are negative. Thus, it would be important that all kinds of "difficult" students and difference in general be discussed as constructively as possible in teacher education and among teachers.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis, CDA, Representation, Difficult student, problem student

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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1 INTRODUCTION

There have always been students that teachers find requiring more effort to teach than others, in other words, difficult students. As teaching has shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered, the interest in and awareness of the myriad of very different causes for challenging behavior has increased. However, the results from studies on difficult students (e.g. Petit-Ballager 2009, Huard 2009) have shown that teachers can have inaccurate and prejudiced views about difficult students, which can lead to unhelpful solutions to manage the difficulty. Difficult students are also discussed in studies on class management practices and difficult behavior prevention (e.g. Petit-Ballager 2009, Gaudreau et al. 2012, Marzano et al. 2003), which have suggested a need for further studies and involved important implications for teacher training so that teachers can respond to students appropriately. In fact, the vast majority of studies suggest that rather than talking about problematic students or behavior, it would be more appropriate to concentrate on the relationship between the students and the teacher (Butterworth 2011, Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. 2010, Huard 2009; Marzano et al. 2003, Dobbs et al. 2009).

While numerous studies on teachers' opinions or attitudes, teaching-related discourse and teacher-teacher or teacher-student communication on online discussion platforms have been made, no previous study on the description of students on online forums seems to have been published before. Moreover, there are few studies on teachers' description of students in CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS in general. Critical discourse analysis is at the center of this study because it is a field which does not shy away from the social, political, historical and ideological dimensions of language in order to investigate how language is used to naturalize, normalize, produce and reproduce societal inequalities. Of course, the social issues related to this topic reach far beyond the particular communicative events that I will analyse. Still, by combining various disciplines – most importantly linguistics and education – with critical

discourse analysis, I hope to find an approach that will help to uncover what needs to be understood about the discourse around difficult students to be able to address these issues on a larger scale.

The purpose of my study is to find out what kind of representations of "difficult students" teachers construct and share in online discussions on Reddit.com. The research questions are as follows:

1. What kind of representations of difficult students do teachers construct and share on reddit?
2. Do teachers represent the "difficulty" as an attribute of the student, as something which stems from the student-teacher relationship, as situation-specific or something else?

The study will concentrate on how the "difficult" student is referred to, also known as NAMING, and how the students are described and evaluated. In addition, I will also look at what other actors are included in these representations, and how they are described and evaluated. By doing this, I hope to also gain insight into how the source of the difficulty appears in these representations.

The thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical background of the study and consists of critical discourse analysis, REPRESENTATION, EVALUATION and COMPUTER-MEDIATED DISCOURSE. Chapter 3 in turn examines the social background of the topic, including a brief analysis of the phrase "difficult student" and its uses in general and in this thesis, followed by previous studies on teachers' representations of difficult students as well as an overview of the social problems faced by difficult students. Chapter 4 presents the data and the analytical methods used, and discusses some limitations and ethical considerations related to this study. The results of the analysis are presented in chapter 5 under numerous themes and subthemes derived from the results. Chapter 6 examines the importance of the findings and identifies questions which could be explored more in future research. Important angles are reviewed and a conclusion of the present study is drawn in chapter 7.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical background for this study. The present study has important connections to the fields of linguistics, (critical) discourse analysis and education, and studies that are similar in topic or theoretical framework can be found mainly in these fields. Directly comparable studies, where both the methodology and topic would be parallel to those used in this study, do not seem to exist. Previous research on the exact topic, teachers' representations of difficult students and related studies, are discussed in chapter 3. This chapter will introduce the most important theoretical frameworks for this study. The first section, 2.1, concerns the definition of discourse for the purpose of this study and critical discourse analysis (CDA). It is followed by section 2.2 on representation, 2.3 on evaluation and 2.4 on computer-mediated discourse (CMD).

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

In this study, DISCOURSE is understood as a dynamic notion which comprises both the processes of text production and comprehension, and discourse analysis as a discipline which studies text as discourse (Virtanen 1999). This study concentrates on studying language use from a discourse analytical perspective, where language is used to reproduce but also to resist inequality in the society (Tannen et al. 2015: 466). Critical discourse analysis is strongly linked to social constructivist ideas about language, identity and power relations. Researchers who have published numerous influential core works in CDA include Teun A. van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak. Common to all research in CDA is the view that language is a social construct which both shapes and is shaped by society (Machin and Mayr 2012: 4). According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 271-80), CDA has the following characteristics:

1. CDA addresses social problems.
2. Power relations are discursive.
3. Discourse constitutes society and culture.
4. Discourse does ideological work
5. Discourse is historical.
6. The link between text and society is mediated.
7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory.
8. Discourse is a form of social action.

In essence, critical discourse analysis studies social problems by examining language in use; discourse. Three broad domains of social life may be constituted discursively: representations of the world, social relations and people's identities (Tannen et al. 2015: 407). In addition, power relations are a common target of CDA research, because they too can be considered to be substantively discursive in nature (ibid., p. 405).

Critical discourse analysis is not a method per se, rather an analytical practice or perspective (Tannen et al. 2015: 466), and several frameworks for analyzing discourse from a critical perspective have been developed. It is common to talk about different levels of analysis, namely MICRO- and MACRO LEVELS. Micro level is that of language, while social phenomena like power are on the macro level (ibid., p. 468). Therefore, the analysis may begin with a structural analysis, but it is important to explain what kind of social phenomena the linguistic material is linked to and what the relationship between certain types of language and the society is. As such, critical study of discourse focuses on social problems rather than structural analysis of discourse, it is multidisciplinary and aims to explain discourse structures instead of only describing them (ibid., 467).

For the analysis, Fairclough (1989) suggests following an order of three steps: 1. Description, 2. Interpretation and 3. Explanation. These three stages are based on different dimensions of discourse analysis, and the nature of the analysis changes in each stage (ibid., p. 26). In more detail, the first step, description, concerns the formal properties of the text (ibid.). In this step, the researcher concentrates on linguistic features or other "unproblematic" objects

in the text (ibid.). In interpretation, the researcher is to analyse the relationship between text and interaction, “as the product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation”, interpretation here referring to the interpretation by the discussion participants (ibid.). In explanation, the researcher explores the relationship between interaction and social context, in other words the social and societal effects (ibid). However, Fairclough (1989: 27) notes that despite these names for the stages, a process of interpretation is necessarily present in all of them. Research in CDA is fundamentally qualitative and the researcher must choose which aspects of the text to concentrate on, and interpret the text on different levels.

While it is commonly accepted that language and society are fundamentally linked, it is often not made explicit how exactly language is able to influence the society, and vice versa. Van Dijk (2008) argues that language is only able to influence society, and society to influence language, through certain processes in human cognition and communication. Van Dijk (2008) sees a great drawback in that CDA has not developed its own theory of context and does not explain the relations between discourse and context. He criticizes the tendency in CDA to oversimplify the connection into social determinism, where discourse and society are seen as directly linked (2008: 8). In the most simplified sense, this would mean that when we say something, it has a direct effect on society, determined by the time, place and participants in the communicative situation. However, van Dijk argues for the importance of a theory of context in CDA where context is not the set of objective circumstances, but rather what he calls “subjective participant constructs” (2008: 16). In many respects, our cognition relies on representations, rather than observations, of the reality. In practice, this means that rather than the time, place, participants or other features of the communicative event directly influencing the discourse, it is the participants’ understanding and interpretation of the importance of those factors that is central for the study of discourse (van Dijk 2008: 16). Representations can influence people’s conduct, which in turn can have societal effects (van Dijk 2008: 16).

2.2 Representation

Discourse and representation are both concepts which are firmly anchored to the constructionist view of language, where language is constitutive of reality. Since usage of the terms can cause confusion, their use in this thesis will be explained here. Discourse was, in the previous section, explained as a dynamic notion about texts, in other words, a view of text as processes. Representation is also a process: “Representation is a process of social construction of practices, including reflexive self-construction – representations enter and shape social processes and practices.” (Fairclough 2001: 123). What might cause confusion is the way in which discourse and representation can also be countable *a discourse* and *a representation*, in which case discourses contain representations: “Discourses are diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned – differently positioned social actors ‘see’ and represent social life in different ways, different discourses” (Fairclough 2001: 123) In this study, these notions are used in the same way. *Discourse* and *representation* are used as meaning, in very oversimplified terms, “the way we talk about things” as processes, while *a discourse* and *a representation* are the products. In this way, there should not be too much confusion between the object of study and different levels of terminology.

The process of representation is realised through language, or rather, it is representation which gives meaning to language. In Hall’s (1997: 28) words, representation is “the production of meaning through language” and languages are “systems of representation” (Hall 1997: 4). When we talk about something, it is not possible to present all sides of the issue so that we would be able to communicate reality, rather, we communicate through representations when we use language. In Hall’s (1997: 5) terms, language also includes body language, music and clothing, which can also be used to transmit meaning. However, there are different ways to interpret gestures, music and the expression of identity or other messages with a certain clothing style, and there are different ways to interpret words, phrases and language

in general. In this view, language in itself does not hold meaning: without other people, language or music are simply sounds (ibid.). It is the way we use signs to represent ideas and the way others can understand our meaning by interpreting these signs, that they gain meaning (ibid.). In other words, representations are not stable; they are ideas and values that can be constructed, shared and adapted. Indeed, In the constructivist view, these meanings and representations are ever changing from one culture to another and from one time to another (Hall 1997: 24). This does not mean that representations are random or fully individual. Rather, representations are built on earlier representations, history, politics and ideologies (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 44). Consequently, there are problematic aspects to representations, because they can be constructed as biased and there might be a reluctance to review common representations that are based on old views. This is the case when representations of groups of people are based on stereotypes, for example.

One essential component of representations which I will explore in this study is how things or people are referred to, which is also known as naming (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 56). A soldier, for example, can be referred to as soldier, rebel, freedom fighter or terrorist depending on the context and how the writer wants to represent the issue (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 44). In the case of “difficult students”, I am also interested in possible other names these students are called, as well as in finding out whether they are referred to collectively, individually, whether there is use of euphemisms or a tendency to use some other words than “difficult” from other domains, such as medical domain or criminal domain. At least vocabulary from medical domains is expected, because behavioral problems, which many difficult students presumably have, tend to be pathologized as symptoms of illnesses (Rafalovich 2005).

The way we can use language and representations to transmit and interpret meanings can be powerful. According to Pietikäinen and Mäntynen (2009: 56), discourses have

situational power but language is also an object and instrument of power. The representational power of discourses is their ability to present something as true, as if we were communicating the reality (ibid.). However, while representations can be used to transmit a certain viewpoint or ideology, the creation of a certain kind of a representation can also be unintentional. Here I wish to emphasize that I doubt the presumably negative representation of difficult students is based on malicious intent. In a pilot study I conducted in November 2020 on the self-presentation strategies on the same data as in this study, I asserted that the teachers who make threads about their difficult students have a certain exigency to represent the student in a negative way. In general, it seems that the primary purpose of these threads is to receive help, so teachers have to illustrate their problem in great detail and make themselves heard, which unfortunately means concentrating on the problems. Pashnyak and Dennen (2009: 402) had similar findings about the negative-tone posts made in teachers' blogs:

These posts typically indicate the classroom teachers' struggle to reach students from a variety of educational and socio-economic backgrounds while facing the demands of government officials, parents, and community members and coping with classroom management issues.

Pashnyak and Dennen (ibid.) add that "the teachers typically are interested in working towards improving conditions". Still, we cannot ignore that representations always have consequences (Pietikäinen & Mäntynen 2009: 44). Language and representations essentially construct our social reality, so by choosing to represent an issue or a person in a certain way, possibly accompanied by persuasive and argumentative rhetoric, we are inviting others to adopt our point of view regardless of how biased it might be. Even if we try to be objective, representations are fundamentally limited and allow us only to present a part of the truth, which brings a certain responsibility when we share them with others, especially when they are about people.

2.3 Evaluation

Answering the research questions in this study involves analyzing descriptive and evaluative language. Many terms are used in literature for different types of evaluation, for example ATTITUDE, STANCE and APPRAISAL (Hunston et al. 2000: 2). However, evaluation is the term used by Hunston and colleagues in their combining approach and it will also be the term used throughout this study. The importance of studying evaluation lies in the understanding that evaluation is not only personal. According to Hunston and her colleagues (2000: 6), studying evaluation is not only studying a person's feelings about something, it is studying communal value systems. In their view, what the writer expresses can reveal the ideologies of the society behind the text (ibid.). If this is the case, by looking at the ways the "difficult students" are described, it is possible to find out what the society thinks of them in a larger scale, or at least within educational institutions.

Recognizing evaluation, however, is difficult because it is subjective and it happens on many structural levels, hence the difficulty of defining which linguistic material to look at. Still, there are three complementary perspectives introduced by Hunston and colleagues (2000) that I will draw upon in the choice of material: evaluation as comparison, evaluation as subjective and evaluation as value-laden. Firstly, evaluation can be found when one thing is being compared to something else. The linguistic material in this case are comparators, including, for example, comparative adjectives and adverbs, adverbs of degree and expressions of negativity (Hunston et al. 2000: 21) Of course, this list is not exhaustive and I do also not plan to only look at individual words, but rather how these words bring together actors and actions into representations. The same applies for the other two perspectives. The second perspective concentrates on subjectivity. The linguistic material of interest from the viewpoint of subjectivity are different markers of subjectivity. These include, for example, modals, certain adverbs, nouns, and verbs, sentence adverbs and conjunctions, report and attribution structures

(ibid.). The third perspective holds important that evaluation is about communicating values. The linguistic material of interest here is markers of value, which are divided into two groups. Firstly, there is lexis typically used in an evaluative environment. Typically evaluative lexis includes “lexical items whose typical use is in an evaluative environment”, but it is noted that this definition is circular (ibid.). It is difficult to establish criteria for which words are evaluative in general because practically any word can be used evaluatively. As such, it is also important to investigate indications of the existence of goals and their (non-) achievement (ibid.). In this case, something is evaluated as good if it helps achieving one’s goals and bad if it impedes achievement of those goals (ibid.). It does not, however, address what kind of indications these could be in a linguistic sense.

Below is a summary of evaluative linguistic matter according to each perspective:

Evaluation – Perspectives and examples		
1. Evaluation as comparison	2. Evaluation as subjective	3. Evaluation as value-laden
<u>Comparators</u>	<u>Markers of subjectivity</u>	<u>Markers of value</u>
comparative adjectives and adverbs	Modals (e.g. <i>can, could, may, must, should, would</i>)	a) Typically evaluative lexis (<i>bad, good...</i>)
adverbs of degree; comparator adverbs (e.g. <i>most, just, only, at least, too, very</i>)	Non-identifying adjectives & certain adverbs, nouns and verbs, sentence adverbs & conjunctions	b) Indications of goals and their (non-)achievement; a good thing is one that ‘achieves our goals’ and a bad one is that which ‘impedes the achievement of our goals’
Expressions of negativity (e.g. <i>un-, not, never, hardly</i>)	Report and attribution structures (e.g. <i>I think...she said...; he is...</i>)	
Lexical (e.g. <i>fail, lack</i>)	Marked clause structures including <i>it & there</i> -patterns	

Table 1. *Evaluation – Perspectives and examples*. (adapted from Hunston et al. 2000: 21).

As all these perspectives on evaluation seem to lack important considerations when used on their own, they gain more value together. By considering all these perspectives on what constitutes evaluative language, it is possible to have some kind of a definition and signpost for the linguistic material that is especially relevant to the research questions. Nevertheless, a careful close reading of all the content will be conducted and evaluation is considered as a component of representations, rather than the object of study on its own.

2.4 Computer-Mediated Discourse

The application of discourse analytical frameworks to computer-mediated communication (CMC) is becoming increasingly common. As Carr (2020) points out, at this point of technological development, a move away from the *computer* to emphasizing the *mediated* might be in order. Computer-mediatedness is something that creates fully new possibilities for communication between teachers. Through internet, teachers can now communicate with people they have never met, the communication happens in real-time or almost real-time, it can be formal or informal and perhaps most importantly, it can be anonymous. Characteristics of teachers' online communication will be discussed after introducing the functions of Reddit.com, which is one of the most important platforms where teachers' computer-mediated communication has been studied.

Reddit is one of the biggest existing social media platforms, with currently more than 430 million average monthly active users (Reddit Inc. 2020). Reddit has numerous subreddits dedicated to different themes, and houses more than 130,000 online communities (Reddit Inc. 2020). Reddit has certain distinct features compared to Facebook, for example. Users on Reddit are anonymous by default, posting by usernames and without a picture (Staudt Willet & Carpenter 2020: 218). Below is an example of the structure and functions of Reddit threads:

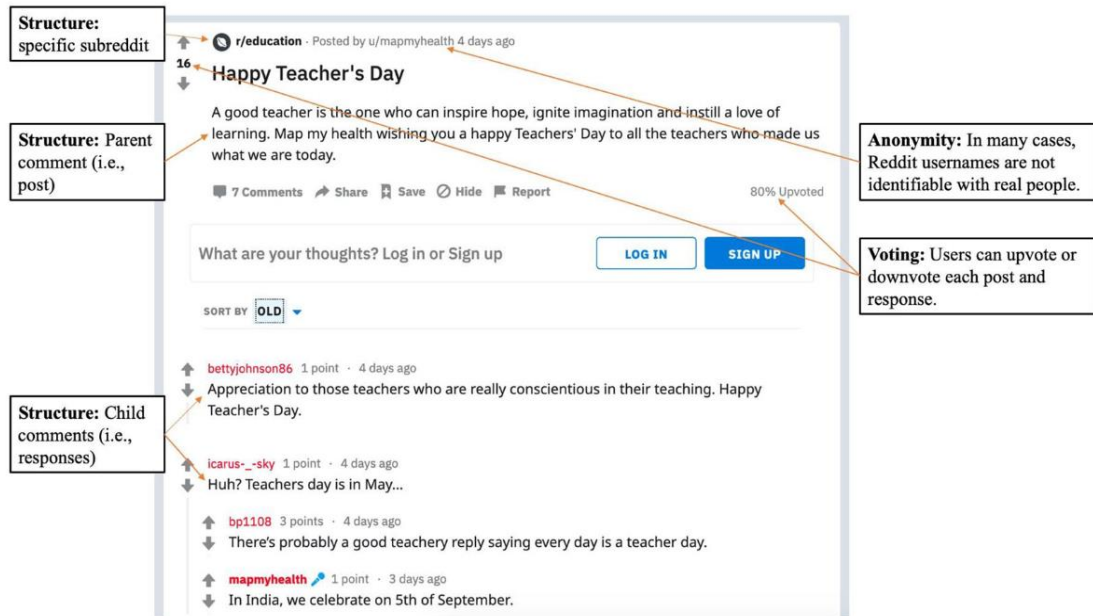


Figure 1. *Example of a Reddit post and responses.* (Staudt Willet and Carpenter 2020: 218).

These structural and functional features of Reddit can affect popularity or visibility of certain posts and comments – Reddit has a voting system where users can upvote and downvote posts and Reddit sorts the subreddit content based on the voting counts (Staudt Willet & Carpenter 2020: 218). The Reddit website was redesigned in 2018 (Pardes 2018) and the change in appearance also involves some changes in how the comments appear, especially on mobile. This redesign is now known as the *New Reddit*, and the old version as *Old Reddit* which is much simpler in appearance. However, the appearance or structure of Reddit posts are not especially important features considering this study, except for the choice to use Old Reddit addresses for the data in Appendix 1., for the reason that Old Reddit does not require logging in on mobile to see all comments. The most important features for this study are the numerous subreddits and anonymity, which might have effects on the nature of the discussions.

Many of the subreddits are dedicated to teaching related topics and targeted at teachers, for example r/Teaching and r/Teachers which were chosen for this study, but also country-specific subreddits such as r/TeachingUK, subject-related subreddits such as r/MusicED and entertainment subreddits such as r/Teachermemes. Despite Reddit offering a wide variety of content for teachers' communicative needs, teachers' use of reddit has been studied little (Staudt Willet & Carpenter 2020). Staudt Willet and Carpenter (2020: 218) postulate that anonymity might be an important aspect of teachers' Reddit use, because it allows teachers to discuss sensitive topics. On the other hand, anonymity makes it challenging to assess the credibility and expertise of users (ibid.). Still, anonymity can allow for discussions between various different actors in education since it can alleviate pressure about experience levels (ibid.). These kinds of discussions rarely happen in the real-life school context, at least in the USA, because teachers have busy schedules and have more interactions with students than colleagues (Pashnyak and Dennen 2009: 394). In addition, communication between teachers in different countries and cultural contexts can be very fruitful and is considerably facilitated by online discussion forums such as Reddit. While it is likely that many of the threads discussed in this study are written by teachers from the United States – as USA has by far the most users on Reddit (Statista 2021) – it is possible that there are teachers from other parts of the world participating in the discussions as well.

Although it must be stressed that every context is unique, it is still valuable to study what kind of ideas about “difficult students” teacher might have and how they constructed and revised on platforms like Reddit. A content analysis of US teachers' blogs by Pashnyak and Dennen (2009: 399) revealed that the most common topics for teachers to blog about was students, which comprised almost 45% of all analyzed posts. Furthermore, the most common themes in this topic were classroom management and guidance/advising (ibid.). Although blogs are a different genre, the study indicates that these are the topics that teachers feel the need to

share with other teachers online. Pahnyak and Dennen (2009: 402) also analyzed the tone of the blogposts, and the results were quite even with reflective being the most common tone, followed by mixed experience, negative experience and neutral, all over 20%, while only 10% of posts had a positive tone. According to Pashnyak and Dennen (2009: 400): “In this sense, the blogs might be considered the virtual watercooler at which colleagues might discuss shared concerns and external pressures that affect their jobs”. Peer support and shared reflection between teachers is an important way to give teachers tools to deal with these issues. According to Staudt Willet and Carpenter (2020), the subreddits r/Teachers and r/teaching, can be online affiliation spaces which make this possible, so studying Reddit discussions between teachers is very relevant. While studying representations on Reddit is studying online space and therefore perhaps a bit far away from the reality of school communities where the social problems essentially are, it is not detached from the society. The same mechanisms of influence between language and society are also present in online discussions.

3 SOCIAL BACKGROUND: DIFFICULT STUDENTS

This chapter will discuss the social background related to the topic of the present study. The chapter consists of three sections. First, section 3.1 discusses important aspects of the use of the phrase “difficult student”, including its definition and a brief analysis of its possible meanings and common uses, as well as equivalency in other languages, notably French and Finnish. Second, section 3.2 will present previous research on teachers’ representations of difficult students and closely related topics, sub-section 3.2.1 discussing representations that could be labeled as “harmful” and 3.2.2 discussing “useful” representations. Last, section 3.3 delves into social problems related to “difficult students”, both those related to language and those related to common practices in the school context.

3.1 On the use of the phrase “difficult student”

One of the most, if not most common context where the phrase “difficult student” can be heard is probably in the teachers’ common room. Out of all the possible phrases teachers might sometimes admit to using for students who they feel are constantly behaving in a disturbing way in their class, the phrase “difficult student” is perhaps relatively neutral and general. In Cambridge online dictionary, *difficult* is defined as ‘needing skill or effort’ and ‘not friendly, easy to deal with, or behaving well’ (Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *difficult*). Usage examples include “The manager is difficult to deal with/a difficult person to deal with”, “His wife is a very difficult woman.” and “Please children, don't be so difficult!” which is noted to be mainly UK usage (Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *difficult*). Still, “difficult” does not reveal much about what these students really are like. Since “difficult student” is not an official term in any way, it does not refer to any specific type of student or even specific type of behavior. Yet plenty of literature

on “difficult students” exists, with the exact phrasing seen for example in studies on class management practices and difficult behavior prevention (e.g. Petit-Ballager 2009, Gaudreau et al. 2012), as well as class management guides. One such guide, Gnezda (2005) compares difficult students to blue jays:

“In our classroom, we have blue jays, too. They are disruptive and irritating. They won’t follow directions, they act like they don’t care, they pester or attack other children, they argue with us. On days when they are absent, we secretly sigh with relief. They are not fun birds to have around.” (Gnezda 2005, xi).

Although deeming something difficult is necessarily a subjective judgement, Gnezda’s (2005) description is likely close to what “difficult student” means to teachers in general. In this thesis, the teachers’ description of the students as “difficult” will not be accepted at face value. For this reason, double quotation marks are generally used for the whole phrase “difficult student” or for “difficult” only, and even when this is not the case because of stylistic reasons, this view holds.

Of course, there are also more official terms used for students who manifest certain types of behavior in the school environment, and debate about suitable terminology resurfaces whenever school policy is revised. It is important to pay attention to the way difficult students are referred to, because many diagnoses that the students may have come with the risk of labeling and stigmatization. According to Baglieri and Shapiro (2012: 43), it is possible to resist labels and stigma by choosing to use PEOPLE-FIRST LANGUAGE or PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE. Person-first language means choosing to use “child with a disability” over “disabled child”, for example (ibid.). In the case of difficult students, it could be using “students in difficulty” instead of “difficult students”, or “students with behavioral problems” instead of “problem students”. This use is, according to Baglieri and Shapiro (2012: 43–44), preferred in media, American school settings and public discourse in general. This avoids stereotypical group representations and emphasizes the personhood of individuals (ibid.).

However, the question of whether to use person-first or identity-first language is far from simple. In fact, person-first language especially in the case of disability is today, sometimes strongly, contested by disabled people themselves. Dunn and Andrews (2015: 255) discuss that while The American Psychological Association APA advocated for person-first language, disability culture advocates and disability studies scholars have begun to promote identity-first language instead. For example in the case of autism, some prefer to be referred to as “autistic person” or “autistic” instead of “person with autism” (Dunn & Andrews 2015: 257). According to Dunn and Andrews (2015: 257):

“Those who advocate for an identity-first approach argue that the person-first approach subtly implies that there is something inherently negative about disability and that use of constructions such as “with a disability” or “with diabetes” unnecessarily dissociates the disability from the person.”

For these people, their disability is a part of their identity that cannot be removed. According to Dunn and Andrews (2015, 257), using identity-first language “promotes autonomy, agency, and indicates a decision to exercise choice over one’s disability destiny.” Furthermore, in English, as Baglieri and Shapiro (2015: 48) explain, “placing “disabled” before “person” is read, grammatically, as a past participle to indicate a position of being dis-abled, or made not-able.” This emphasizes how the environment disables people and the side of disability which is an imposed position rather than an attribute (ibid.). This is a very relevant aspect of this debate in English, but it does not necessarily apply to other languages – for example, it does not apply to Finnish, where *vammainen* is the only existing term.

Some final, perhaps detached but nevertheless necessary notes on the use of the phrase have to do with its equivalency in other languages. All the data of this study is in English, but many of the studies cited are in French. Consequently, the phrase used in those studies is often *élève difficile*, which directly translates as ‘difficult pupil’ rather than ‘student’, which would be *étudiant-e*. I have not limited my choice of threads by the age of the students, except for not

including adult learners, so I have also translated *élève difficile* as ‘difficult student’. The use of *élève* and *étudiant-e* is different from the use of ‘pupil’ and ‘student’ in English, where it is ‘student’ that can be used of a wider age group (e.g. elementary school student, high school student), while in French, it is *élève* that is used in this way, not *étudiant-e*. However, some studies also use the phrase *enfant difficile* which cannot be translated as anything other than ‘difficult child’, which inarguably has slightly different connotations. I did not cite or find any Finnish studies using the phrases *vaikea oppilas* or *vaikea opiskelija*, but to me they are both reasonably equivalent with the English ‘Difficult student’ to be considered Finnish equivalents of the topic. In the end, “difficult student” is mostly a phrase used for filtering the data. While it has different properties and connotations than some other, possibly more specific phrases, and while there might not be a clear equivalent in other languages for studies in different contexts, what is more important is how these students are described and the social problems facing them. In that sense, it is likely possible to concentrate on a slightly different phrase and still find very similar representations of students.

3.2 Teachers’ representations of difficult students in previous studies

According to Fairclough (2001: 125), Critical discourse analysis involves studying social problems which have a semiotic aspect (Fairclough 2001: 125). Here, I have identified teachers’ representations of “difficult students” as one important semiotic aspect of social problems that these students face. As the term suggests, representation is re-presenting thoughts and ideas through language, constructing a certain image of the topic of discussion (Pietikäinen & Mäkinen 2009: 44). When teachers talk about students among themselves, they are consciously or unconsciously painting a certain picture of that student, as they choose which aspects of the student to emphasize or leave unmentioned. This section concentrates on presenting previous research and its relation to the present study. There are two subsections, one for discussing

harmful representations of difficult students and one for discussing useful representations. “Harmful” and “useful” here refer to the way the representations can be counterproductive or aid the teacher’s goal to respond to the difficult student appropriately.

3.2.1 *Harmful representations*

In this study, harmful representations of difficult students are the kind of representations which are overly negative, and which fail to consider students’ individual differences, preventing the teacher from responding to the student’s behavior appropriately. Possibly the only previous study which specifically concentrates on teachers’ representations of “difficult” students is that of Huard (2009). Her study involved testing a process which concentrates on working on representations of “difficult students” with sixty primary school teachers in four courses during four consecutive years in Aquitaine, France. The depictions of students in the pre-training letters include "difficult", “unmanageable", "unmotivated" and even "violent" (Huard 2009: 117, my translation). Similar, very negative descriptions including the use of negative superlatives in reports of students written by French primary school teachers were also found in Petit-Ballager’s study (2009). Moreover, an evaluative division between different types of difficult students was reported, where there were good “difficult” students, *élèves en difficulté*, meaning approximately “students with difficulties”, those that are disabled, sick or have learning problems but not behavioral problems (Petit-Ballager 2009: paragraph 7, my translation). The rest the teachers saw as “difficult students” who are “unmanageable” (Petit-Ballager 2009: paragraph 7). These representations show that teachers who struggle with classroom management can have very negative feelings about certain students, which makes it difficult to treat everyone equally.

In Huard's study (2009), one of the main problems about the teachers' initial representations was the lack of knowledge about and attention to the variety of difficult students, which affected the way they tried to "manage" the difficulty as well. There is not necessarily time to delve into the needs of different learners or causes of challenging behaviors, so teachers simply learn how to "deal with" these students, which is not necessarily in the students' best interest. Meanwhile, as in Petit-Ballager's study (2009), the children had varied backgrounds – there are those who refuse to work, those who insult teachers, disabled children, and deeply disturbed children (Huard 2009: 120). Despite this, the teacher group constructed a definition of a "difficult student" where these differences are not considered, and this definition became the system of reference of the group (Huard 2009: 127).

It is understandable that teachers may construct and rely on generalizing group representations with difficult students, considering the large class sizes in US, Europe and Asia reported in the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013 (OECD 2013). Categorization cannot be condemned altogether because categorization is something that everyone necessarily does, and teachers must categorize their students' behavior to a certain extent (Rex & Schiller 2009: 98). However, according to Rafalovich (2005: 41), in today's school there is a problem where teachers tend to cross the limit of their expertise by pre-labeling children with medical conditions:

“By failing to acknowledge “their part in things” and by labeling children “probable ADHD,” clinicians argue, teachers unjustifiably attribute children's troubles to behavior disorders rather than to the environment that causes or exacerbates them.”

In general, teachers are closely involved in diagnosing ADHD despite not being medical professionals (Rafalovich 2005). In this case the behavior or child is beyond what would be considered *difficult* and the student is represented as *sick* in a way that must be cured. Behavioral problems are represented in terms of illness, and other factors are not considered. Rex and

Schiller (2009: 98) also describe unproductive categorization where the teacher's assessment of the student's behavior is oversimplifying or based on a poor understanding of what the student is doing. This leads to conflict between the teacher and the student, who do not see the student's actions in the same way. Moreover, when we categorize the students' actions, we are essentializing and assessing the student (Rex and Schiller 2009: 98).

In today's ever more diverse classrooms, it is imperative to have time to consider and discuss differences. According to Rex and Schiller (2009), "difference" is a classroom issue – teachers must learn how to productively respond to the diversity of persons in their class. They attest that "observing uniqueness should extend beyond standard differences common in schooling, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, culture and nationality." (Rex & Schiller 2009: 98). This means that in an ideal situation, it would be possible to see and appreciate the individuality of everyone, and not predominantly view students through labels or teacher-constructed categories. Difference should not be something that the teacher establishes based on their judgement of what kind of students are *normal*, but negotiated: "Negotiating difference means that as they interact, teachers and students discursively construct the problem, a way of talking about it, and the resolution (e.g., conflict, truce, acquiescence, or agreement)" (Rex & Schiller 2009: 118).

3.2.2 *Useful representations*

It is important for teachers to have rational, well-informed mental representations of difficult students because it allows teachers to respond to students appropriately. In Huard's study (2009), pre-service essays revealed the teachers' "unhelpful" representations of students, which were then worked in groups and in after-service essays, the representations had changed. The research shows how it is possible to collectively discuss and review representations: the initial representations were transformed through a better understanding of theories of development

and educational science, and with the help of discussions between trainees as well as interventions from specialists (Huard 2009, 121). The teachers learned to consider important angles, such as the development of the child, giving the child time and valuing the child (Huard 2009: 120). In addition to representations, professional practices and learning expectations related to the students were re-examined in the study (ibid.).

In the course of training, according to Huard (2009: 119), the representations change from general "difficult child" to a more precise notion "a child who has difficulty in developing in an unstable environment and who needs help". This change reflects an increased understanding of the causes of the students' misbehavior, which is especially important in the case of very young students, who still require much nurture and care. Marzano and his colleagues (2003: 58) also advocate for a compassionate outlook: "It is important to remember that although they appear to be highly resistant to behavior change, hostile students are simply children experiencing a massive amount of fear and pain.". They discuss the severity of problems that students with behavioral problems face, such as physical abuse, noting that they originate outside of the classroom and that for these students, changing their behavior is very difficult (Marzano et al. 2003).

Marzano and his colleagues (2003: 56) also introduce a figure of "Five categories of high-need students", which are passive, aggressive, attention problems, perfectionist and socially inept. With each of these types of students, a slightly different approach is to be taken for effective classroom management (Marzano et al. 2003: 55). In this way, categorization becomes a useful tool towards appropriate response to different behaviors, although categorizing students in general is far from problematic. In any event, since there are different types of students with different problems, it is very important to carefully consider the nature of the student's "difficulty" when problems occur. If a student for example refuses to work, rather than simply thinking they are "difficult" it is important to consider that they might find the tasks too difficult

and dread failure. If they cannot be sure that the teacher responds in an encouraging manner to their mistakes – possibly because of previous bad experiences with teachers or other adults – refusing to work is an effective way to dodge putting one’s skills under criticism.

In fact, there is very strong evidence that rather than talking about problematic students or behavior, it might be more appropriate to talk about difficult relationships. According to the study of Marzano and his colleagues (2003), teachers have much control over students’ behavior. The aforementioned study is a meta-analysis of more than 100 studies on class management and student behavior, and in this study, certain teacher interventions were clearly more effective than others (ibid.). According to their meta-analysis, good class management entails negotiated rules over imposed ones, that negative consequences are kept to a minimum, that expectations should be positive rather than negative and positive behavior should be reinforced (ibid.). Graff (2009: 452), in turn, claims that “difficult student” is something that is co-constructed by the teacher, the “difficult” student and other students in classroom interactions. Since interaction in the class between students and the teacher is public, everyone in the class can witness how teacher and student role expectations play out. Graff (2009: 452) suggests that teachers could perhaps sometimes record their classes and see what kind of interaction happens in their class and strive to “re-shape the relationships until fair treatment works equally for all students”. In his study, the difficulty manifests in certain situations and can be mitigated by the teacher by structuring the classroom environment differently (ibid.). In other words, being a “difficult student” emerges as a co-constructed classroom role, not as an inherent quality of the student, nor stemming solely from the relationship between an individual teacher and student.

3.3 Social problems related to difficult students

Difficult students are not always met with compassion – no one wants difficult students in their class. The fact that some students are unwanted and labeled as difficult is related to various

social problems, most of which negatively impact the student themselves. A problem mentioned by Petit-Ballager (2009), STIGMATIZATION, is especially central to this study because it is an issue of language use and identity. Planning special education, which many difficult students are referred to, or other support measures, it is often inevitable to verify different diagnoses and categorize behaviors and characteristics. What is problematic is the way these diagnoses and characteristics can become LABELS that begin to erase the individuality of the person in practice: “To label a person is to use a single descriptor to imply a general sense of a person.” (Baglieri & Shapiro 2012: 42). According to Baglieri and Shapiro (2012: 42), labels “obscure other elements of personhood, which can lead to distorted perceptions of a person”. Baglieri and Shapiro (2012: 42) continue by explaining that while the labels might be derived from seemingly neutral descriptions, they can provoke stereotypical thinking and distorted views and underestimation of individuals. Labeling someone with a condition or characteristic – such as “a difficult student” – can lead to stigmatization. According to Baglieri and Shapiro (ibid.) “Stigma is the social phenomena by which particular traits draw severe social disapproval.” Being worried about stigmatization of students does not mean that we should turn a blind eye to differences, especially when a student needs accommodations that are only available through an evaluation. However, “difficult” is not a diagnosis and even official diagnoses can be very stigmatizing when they are used as labels. As Baglieri and Shapiro (ibid.) assert, “Labels are not specific enough to be useful for developing an individual education plan, but they can have long-lasting negative effects.”.

Other problems are related to the way difficult students are treated in practice. Petit-Ballager (2009: paragraph 7) reports that teachers spontaneously prejudge the nature and causes of pupils' difficulties. Teachers do not know how to respond to disruptive behaviors, thus applying random solutions of trial and error and questioning their ability to teach (Huard

2009: 118). Moreover, teachers tend to attribute negative events to internal dispositions of students (Geyang 2006). This means that teachers tend to think in terms of “difficult students”, not difficult situations or difficult relationships. Unfortunately, the teacher’s attribution of a student’s behavior shapes their response to the student, which causes the student to act in a certain, often the expected, way (Dobbs et al. 2009). Difficult teacher-student relationships are extremely stressful for teachers, which shows in their behavior towards student, creating a vicious circle (Gaudreau et al. 2012: 91). Teachers are also more likely to punish students retributively if they judge that the student’s failure is due to controllable factors, such as laziness, compared to factors perceived as uncontrollable, such as illness (Reyna & Weiner 2001; Dobbs et al. 2009). To avoid so-called self-fulfilling prophecies where expectations of them begin to shape someone’s behavior, it is important for teachers to pay attention to their perceptions of the student, as well as the way they speak and respond to them. The way teachers position students affects what kind of identities they adopt (Rex & Schiller 2009), and we do not want students to adopt negative labels as parts of their identity.

In addition, there are problems mentioned by Petit-Ballager (2009) which have to do with the student’s right to privacy and access to education. For example, according to Petit-Ballager (2009, paragraph 20), the difficult student “has no right to be forgotten”, which means that as teachers’ goal is to be taken seriously, rather than actually assessing the students’ abilities they write down everything negative they can find about the student, even their words. By doing this, teachers reinforce the representation where the student is the problem. In addition, “difficult students” are often referred to various sorts of specialists (Petit-Ballager 2009, Paragraph 17). While it is important that those who need help receive help, Petit-Ballager’s (2009) descriptions of teachers’ thoughts suggest that it is rather a way for teachers to get rid of the students, so someone else would have to take care of them instead. Moreover, according to Petit-Ballager (2009, paragraph 26), constant referrals and meetings create a problem where the

student becomes a partial drop-out. In this case, the student spends so much time in meetings that they barely go to their classes at all, which greatly affects their learning.

There are many more problems on different levels, but one additional injustice I wanted to mention here is that these students' own perspective is rarely heard. I wanted to avoid committing this injustice in my own research, but studies from the students' perspective are scarce. In one study, all 33 students of "an alternative education program for young people with history of behavioral difficulties in school" in a junior high in Alberta, Canada were invited to a video program where they were to give imaginary advice to student teachers or new teachers on making classrooms more supportive (Ellis et al. 1998: 143). Many of the same helpful and unhelpful ways to respond to "misbehavior" were mentioned by the students. The most favored approach was preventative, where the teacher would win over the problem students. Students stressed the importance of being respected by the teacher. According to them, a caring teacher can receive respect and goodwill by giving it to the students, otherwise the students will not bother (Ellis et al. 1998). Although the study was small in scale, it is very important to note the students' basic need for respect and willingness to cooperate when approached by care and goodwill. In fact, many studies suggest that class management should concentrate on the relationship between the teacher and student and prevention and reflective practice in teacher training, rather than punishing the student for their behavior (Marzano et al. 2003, Butterworth 2011; Beauty-O'Ferrall et al. 2010, Huard 2009).

Unfortunately, the study also reported that according to students' stories, those who need inclusion and sense of belonging the most are more likely to get less of it, and those who need encouragement and affirmation the most are more likely to get less of it (Ellis et al. 1998: 143). In practice, this means that while there can be important psychological, physical, or social needs that are not met behind behavioral difficulties, teachers do not necessarily understand this. In Petit-Ballager's study (2009), for example, the teacher appears as a very unjust

figure, whose response to the student is uncompassionate and hateful. However, as a teacher student having some experience of the school reality on the teacher's side, I am inclined to think that most teachers are in fact benevolent and compassionate but might lack the knowledge and skills necessary for preventing and managing behavioral problems. Indeed, teachers' SELF-EFFICACY , the trust in their capacity to manage various issues that arise in their work, is one concept which has been found to have a rather direct connection to behavioral problems. Teachers' poor sense of self-efficacy and personal efficacy cause them stress, which has effects on their behavior towards students and consequently, the student's behavior towards them (Dobbs et al. 2009). In this way, teachers' feelings and the student's behavior become a vicious circle which has negative personal consequences for both. Considering this, looking at teachers' description of difficult students can reveal very important social issues.

4 DATA AND METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the data in this study and the analytical methods used, as well as to discuss the limitations and ethical considerations related to the present study. This part consists of three sections. Section 4.1 presents the data, followed by section 4.2 presenting the analytical methods and the procedure, and finally section 4.3 discussing of possible ethical concerns and limitations to this specific study.

4.1 Data

The data consist of online discussions collected from Reddit.com in November 2020. The collection of material was narrowed to two subreddits which are meant for education-related discussion, r/Teachers and r/Teaching. The initial search yielded a great number discussions and according to Staudt Willet and Carpenter (2020: 230), r/Teachers and r/Teaching are the subreddits which have highest levels of interaction between users and longer conversations, in other words, they are more professional. The 13 threads, containing a total of 104 individual comments, were chosen with the criteria that the phrase “difficult student” is mentioned in the title or first post, and that the first post contains some description of the “difficult student”. The most recent threads have been published in 2019 and the latest ones in 2013. The web addresses for the threads can be found in Appendix 1.

This type of data was chosen because of its accessibility but also because it offers an unexplored side to research on discourse on this topic. It would have been possible to answer most of the defined research questions also using, for example, questionnaire data – however, this topic is somewhat sensitive, and the anonymity offered by Reddit potentially offers a more open way to discuss sensitive topics (Staudt Willet & Carpenter 2020: 218). Of course, online discussion data might not reflect upon the true views of the authors either because of questions

related to external- and auto-censorship. However, this is a relatively irrelevant problem from the point of view of this study, since the focus is on the discourse that does appear and does shape views regardless of the author's intentions.

The same data was used in a pilot study I conducted in November 2020 on teachers' self-presentation strategies. The pilot study allowed me to get well-acquainted with the data and make some preliminary findings which guided the design of this study. The pilot revealed that the thread opening posts could be roughly divided into two categories, "advice-seeking posts" and "rejoicing posts" (in this study, posts 11a, 12a and 13a). The *advice-seeking posts* were named as such because they always contained a plead for help or advice. In *rejoicing posts*, the communicative purpose of the posts seemed to be celebrating the student's success. It should also be noted that in the pilot study, no clear *ranting posts* were found despite the topic. This is in accordance with what Staudt Willet and Carpenter (2020) say about the professional nature of the discussions in the teacher subreddits.

Nevertheless, negative description of students and their actions was extremely common. In the pilot, description of students in the first post of the threads was labeled as either negative, positive, neutral or mixed to find out whether a self-presentation tactic called BLASTING was being used. Blasting is defined as follows: "A behavior intended to produce or communicate negative evaluations of another person or groups with which the actor is merely associated" (Lee et al. 1999: 704–705). In this case, blasting was equated with negative description of the "difficult" student. Although there were no formal criteria for attributing description about a student into a certain category, the result is so striking that it is worth noting here: There were only two instances of positive description of students, six neutral, nine mixed and 96 instances of describing the student in a negative light. In this study, the description of the students will be examined much more rigorously, but this small-scale pilot shows that in the vast majority of cases where evaluation is to be found, it will be negative.

4.2 Analytical methods

Two research questions were to be answered in the study: 1. What kind of representations of difficult students do teachers construct and share on Reddit?, and 2. Do teachers represent the "difficulty" as an attribute of the student, as something that stems from a poor student-teacher relationship, as situation-specific or something else? Since there is no specific method for conducting CDA research, answering the research questions required combining different qualitative methods and frameworks. In the choice of methods, it was necessary to solve two operational problems: what should be analyzed and how. Based on concentrations in CDA and representation literature, research question 1. was divided into three operational questions:

- a) How are the difficult students referred to?
- b) How are the difficult students and their actions described and evaluated?
- c) What other actors are included in these representations and how are they described and evaluated?

Fairclough's (1989; 2010) framework introduced in section 3.1. concerns a suggested order of steps taken in the analysis, as well as an indicative description of what kind of analysis each of these steps may include. The steps proposed by Fairclough (1989: 2010) are 1. Description, 2. Interpretation and 3. Explanation. According to Fairclough, (1989: 26), "Description is the stage which is concerned with formal properties of the text". In this case, the Description phase entailed looking at the following linguistic material: question a) involved looking at words or phrases that refer to the "difficult students", while question b) and c) involved looking at evaluative and descriptive language used for different actors in the text. In practice, the entire threads were pasted into excel, a close reading of all the posts and comments was conducted and the found representations were coded to form themes. Simultaneously, I looked at where the difficulty was appointed in these discourses, to be able to answer research question 2. The results are presented in chapter 5 under main themes and subthemes based on the analysis. The

wider relevance of these results, in other words, the results after Fairclough's (1989; 210) interpretation and explanation steps, are discussed in chapter 6.

4.3 Limitations and ethical considerations

There are some important limitations and ethical considerations to making this study, which will be addressed here. First a word on the ethical considerations. Since the data of the study is readily publicly available online, it was not necessary to acquire permissions. However, while the data is entirely public, it was necessary to consider the integrity of the discussion participants and moreover, the privacy of the students they talk about. While it might not be the case everywhere, in Finland for example everything that happens in a school, especially students' health information, falls under professional confidentiality and should not be publicly discussed. In this case, a reasonable level of privacy was assured by not choosing threads where there was any personally identifiable information revealed in the thread.

Considering the limitations, the most important issues are due to the limited scope of the study. Firstly, the study only concentrates on one type of data. While interest in discussion forum data in discourse studies is on the rise, for this study it poses some questions about generalizability and reliability of the results. For example, it is not certain that all discussion participants were real teachers, even if the subreddits are dedicated to teaching-related discussions, because Reddit does not verify this. This could affect the validity of the results as specifically teachers' representations. However, the study was preceded by a pilot where background information was also looked at, and most of the posters identified themselves as teachers, sometimes mentioning age, amount of experience, taught subject and grade. Based on this information, the posters are a very heterogenous group. On one hand, this means that it is not possible to investigate connections between any of these factors and language use. On the other hand, this also

means that recurring patterns in description of students might suggest that teachers in general engage in similar discourses, rather than for instance only teachers of a certain gender or those teaching in a particular setting. An additional problem in discussion forum data, however, is that the way people express thoughts online does not necessarily reflect on how they talk about the issue at school, and we also don't know the relationship between what they say online and how they act. Then again, this is often the case when doing research on certain types of texts. Moreover, we understand language as social practice, so internet discussions cannot be considered completely unrelated to real life discussions or actions.

Of course, critical discourse analysis as a methodology has its own weak points. Critical discourse analysis has been criticized for being subjective. The interpretations made in critical discourse analysis are always subjective and someone could interpret the messages in a different way. It is not possible to tackle this issue, but the data and results are carefully reported in this study with examples, and it is possible to conduct more studies on the same data and also to use the same methods. It is possible to mitigate the problems in purely qualitative CDA research by combining CDA with corpus studies (Jantunen 2018). This was the original plan, but in the end the qualitative analysis of representations based on descriptions and evaluation of different actors proved so laborious and time-consuming that it was not possible to include a corpus part. In fact, even in the analysis of teachers' representations of difficult students alone, there would have been many more possibly important phenomena to analyze. There are at least two directions where future studies could concentrate. On one hand, more studies in critical discourse analysis, especially corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) such as that of Jantunen (2018) could be made. With this topic, a historical and intertextual perspective could reveal important aspects which have not been explored in this study. On the other hand, more practical research on the topic, such as ethnography, is also needed to be able to address the discussed social problems in local contexts.

5 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this chapter, I present the results under main discursive themes which come from the research questions: 5.1 Difficulty as an attribute of the student and 5.2 difficulty in the teacher-student relationship and 5.3 The role of other actors. The results are reported under several subthemes that arose in the analysis. The examples are numbered according to the thread number and letters beginning from a) (the post itself) are used to make it possible for readers to trace the exact comment. The data is available in Appendix 1. These themes are overlapping – since the purpose was to analyze representation and its linguistic manifestations rather than comments or other clearly defined units, some of the examples may appear in several subthemes. The threads were also analyzed for representations where the student is only considered as difficult in certain situations or environments, but such representations were not found. While there were some individual remarks which possibly represented the difficulty as situation-specific, it was the student or relationship that was difficult and caused the situation to escalate, not the other way around.

5.1 Difficulty as an attribute of the student

Under this theme, there are subthemes which have been formed of findings where, in the representation, “difficulty” appears as an attribute of the student or child, rather than something which stems from complicated situations or a bad teacher-student relationship in general. “Difficulty” is presented as a trait or attribute of the student, or the student’s difficult behavior is presented as a natural or habitual way to behave for that student. In the themes that emerged, difficult students were regarded as “special” students who exhibit abnormal behavior, they were compared to other students, their behavior and attitude were negatively evaluated and in some cases, they were represented as difficult *children* rather than students.

5.1.1 Difficult students, special students?

This theme is characterized by representations which either emphasize how the student is “special”, or conversely, where any difference to other students is ignored or downplayed. This theme is closely connected to discourses about difference and disability in special education. Learning disabilities, mild mental retardation [sic], as well as emotional or behavior disorders are considered as so-called “soft disabilities” (Baglieri & Shapiro 2012: 108). When talking about disability, we are always involved in evaluation. According to Baglieri and Shapiro (2012: 108): “It is important to note that some proponents of a social model of disability argue that all diagnoses and perceptions of impairment are ultimately subjective, as science itself is informed by cultural beliefs about the ‘normal’ body.” Considering this, it was important to analyze how the representations in this theme contained references to normalcy and difference. All but the first thread contained these types of representations. In many cases, teachers strongly related to each other’s representations, contributing to a shared group representation of difficult students as “special” students.

Difficult students as special students

In most threads, there is not only description of the student and their behavior, but also speculations of the possible reasons for the student’s behavior. In most cases, the speculations revolved around a discourse of “special” students, who have different conditions. Whether the “difficult students” in discussion were represented as a group synonymous with “special needs students” or as individuals who are members of those groups as in previous examples varied, but it was common to find evidence of the phenomena explored in Rafalovich (2005) – the teacher’s involvement in or initiation of a diagnostic process of a student – and prelabeling students with medical conditions. One of numerous examples:

4a) I teach 5th grade and this student is clearly undiagnosed but on the spectrum. I see inattentiveness, difficulty focusing, social difficulties, paranoia, anxiety, and inability to process his own thoughts or feelings.

While the student is undiagnosed, the teacher is certain of their diagnosis which is based on their observations of the student's behavior, represented as symptoms of an autism spectrum disorder. Names of medical conditions were often mentioned and they were used to refer to the students: 2b) an ODD kid, 5k) my adhd children, 7n) those with defiant disorders, 7e) he is OHI -- other health impaired and 12a) Aspie, 7f) ODD children, but also 7f) children with ODD and 3e) students with ED or ASD. The use of diagnoses to refer to people directly was discussed in chapter 3, where it was established that there is no general agreement on whether person-first (children with ODD) or identity first (ODD children) is more appropriate. One suggested solution is asking people which way they prefer, but this is not always possible (Dunn & Andrews 2015: 257). Moreover, here we are talking about children who are not necessarily aware of such identity questions. Another solution is to alternate (Dunn & Andrews 2015: 257), which is what this commenter has done. What is most important is what kind of overall approach a writer or speaker takes in portraying disability and difference.

Unfortunately, depictions of these “special” students was predominantly negative. This was the case even in the posts that were labeled as “rejoicing posts” in the pilot study. One of such examples:

12a) He's Aspie, very bright, sarcastic and mocking (to the point of disrespect/cruelty sometimes), has a negative worldview and self-image, would rather play with his computer, and is generally a prickly cactus.

While the “Aspie” student, with Asperger's Syndrome, is described as “very bright”, the description that follows emphasizes the negative qualities of the student. Some negative representations were surprisingly similar to those in Petit-Ballager's study (2009). In fact, there were two comments (5h and 6o) which were especially remarkable in this regard. 5h) mentioned “unmanageable” students, but also gave advice about writing a referral to the student for

questionable reasons, as well as disregarded the causes behind the student's behavior, which were all things criticized by Petit-Ballager (2009). Likewise in 6o), the teacher's goal was to make "an iron-clad case showing that he's been an issue all semester" although documenting everything the student says and does, punishing the student and turning other students against the student was "not really working" for improving the student's behavior. In this case, the student is clearly represented as nothing but a problem that is to be removed.

Still, it was much more common that the teachers wanted to help the students by referring them: 4i) This is crushing my soul because he is brilliant and the parents are doing the best they can, but he needs SPECIALIZED help[...]. The difficult student is described as "brilliant", one of the few clearly positive depictions, but as needing "SPECIALIZED" help. The use of capitalized letters suggests that the writer thought this word and what it entails in practice is especially important. However, the "special" representations easily turn into "not normal" representations. This shows especially in the following examples:

8f) I'm not sure if your district has any **alternative** placement schools, but that's the place to start. [...] Here's why: - He's **not** being successful in the **normal** setting. [...] I'm not sure what's going on with the kid, but it's **not normal**.

4g) [...] He has OCD, which makes him **difficult** to handle **everything and anything**, and smart enough to know that **something is wrong with him**. Being academically capable **means NOTHING** when you **can't function** in the world or **can't deal with** normal life scenarios without personal pain and discomfort.

In 8f), the student is "not being successful in the normal setting" and whatever is "going on" with the student is "not normal". In 4g) as well, the student cannot handle "normal life scenarios". In other words, these difficult students are represented as somehow abnormal. Another thing to note about 4g) is how it rather strongly concentrates on the student's inability rather than ability, using the words "everything and anything" for the things that are difficult to handle for the student, and "nothing" for his academic capability, even emphasizing it with capitalization. Whenever someone is evaluated as *not normal*, it can lead to stigmatization. *Not*

normal entails that someone else than the target of evaluation has the right to define what is normal and what is not. The problem is, *normal* is, in most cases, synonymous to *good*, which makes differences from the norm appear as deviations. This can cause stigmatization. As the following example shows, students can be very aware of this threat:

4a) I am “not allowed” to approach him or help him in anyway during math time because then **he thinks that it shows the rest of the class that he needs support and is stupid.** [...] **he gets anxious that the other kids think he’s special** for some reason.

According to the teacher, the student is reluctant to receive help to avoid seeming different than the other students, in the teacher’s words, that “he needs support and is stupid” or appears “special”. The tone of the comment, especially “for some reason” suggests that the teacher does not fully acknowledge the problem of stigma, but thinks that the student is being silly.

Although they were represented as needing help, posters and commenters were also rather frustrated with these “difficult” and “special” students. “Special needs kids” emerged as a group that the teacher alone cannot handle:

8h) **Special needs kids can flourish** (especially those "**twice exceptional**" students with both behavior issues and high academic potential) but are **really challenges** if your whole team isn't working together.

To “flourish”, these kids need not only the teacher’s help, but “the whole team’s”. This refers to the IEP (Individualized Education Program) or SPED (Special Education) team, which in the United States consists of several special education teachers and/or regular teachers. The special needs students here are regarded as “really challenges” in general, but a certain hierarchy between different types of students is also introduced: the “twice exceptional” students who, in the commenter’s words are those students who have behavioral problems but also high academic potential, can *especially* “flourish”. While the use here is probably intended to be somewhat positive, considering the expressed goal to make the students “flourish”, both “special” and “exceptional” are mentioned as highly contested euphemisms by Baglieri and

Shapiro (2012: 46). According to Baglieri and Shapiro (2012: 46), these words “invoke a history of segregation”, emphasize difference negatively and create polarization.

Sometimes, the students were represented in a way where their difference was only a burden to the teacher. In this example, the teacher is reluctant but obliged to meet their needs (“had to”) and emphasizes their own effort (“major” and “as smooth as possible for him”):

4a) I’ve **had to** change how the classroom works for him and give him **major modifications and accommodations** to make things **as smooth as possible for him** (he isn’t on an IEP or 504).

Likewise in 2a), the student is someone who “claims” to have anxiety issues, but they are not “officially documented”, and the student “insists on being immune to ever speaking in front of the class”, which the teacher “could work with if [I] had to”. In these examples, difficult students are “different” students who clearly require more effort and a different approach than other students.

Difficult students should be treated like everyone else

In some representations, the *specialness* of the students whose *specialness* was emphasized by others, is ignored. For example, in 1b), the “difficult student” is not mentioned, but general advice related to “kids” is given and according to this advice, they are to be respected “as people and learners”. On one hand, the student is represented as deserving respect as a person in their own right, on the other hand, the possibility that the student might need specialized support is not taken into account. This representation is shared by another commenter: 1e) Just create a relationship the same way you would with anyone that you meet. There seems to be no difference between difficult or any other students, or in fact any kind of people when it comes to building relationships – later the teacher says they care about the students “as people”. The students are also equaled with all other students in terms of schoolwork expected of them:

1e) Several of them still dislike my subject, and I'm okay with that, I just level with them that I understand that **they might not like it, but they need to learn it.**

2b) I also **don't give him any slack** on work beyond an alternate but **equal effort** task if he is **really resistant.**

For example, in thread 4 where participants discuss that the student needs to be referred for testing for signs of being on the autism spectrum, but the parents refuse, one response is:

4d) Great! Then **no more accommodations.** He **needs to do** what **everyone else** does with **the same** consequences when he doesn't. **That's how it works without an IEP/504.**

Here, the comment suggests that if the student does not have an official diagnosis, they should not have accommodations either. The student is just like “everyone else” without a diagnosis and official IEP (Individualized education program). However, 4e), although not posted as a direct response to 4d), opposes what is said about the student in 4d):

4e) He **needs** an IEP. Denying **the difficulties** is just solidifying **undesirable habits.** **His behavior can be helped** with the **proper care and instruction.** I guess what I'm trying to say is that someone has to sit with the parents and say **he needs to be in special ed.**

This comment emphasizes the need for an evaluation, implying that if he is not referred to special education, it is “denying the difficulties”. The student is not the same as everyone else – he is “special” and his behavior can be “helped with the proper care and instruction”, implying the need of perhaps some sort of medical intervention, but also changes in instruction.

I have the same student!

In many threads, commenters profoundly related to what was said about the student in the post:

4g) Your student sounds **like** one I had [...],

5i) I have a student who was **difficult like this** since kindergarten [...]

5j) I have a little bastard **just like** this [...]

6o) I have a student **like** that.

8e) I've had students in my 7th grade class **similar** to this.

10e) Oooh oooh **this was** my class last year!!!

10f) I taught 6th grade remedial reading last year and **had several of these students**.

The teachers compared the poster's student to their own, with either "like" or "similar". The statements in 10e) and 10f) "this was my class" and " I [...] had several of these students" are of course not to be taken literally, but show that the commenters strongly relate to the experiences and descriptions of the difficult student(s) in the main post. It seems that all these teachers recognize "difficult student" as a type of student they have also had, and can clearly identify which students belong to the same category.

In fact, categorizing was a remarkable feature of this theme. In many cases, the commenters not only related to the descriptions of the students, but also gave advice to the poster based on their own student:

3c) Sounds like **my student** last year [...] Do you think a weighted vest or carrying large books to the office could help **him** relax.... sometimes **my student** needed quiet in a room for a bit.

In many cases, they assumed their student might have the same condition as the poster's student (e.g. 4h) The OCD comment really strikes me because your description really matches my student). Often, the students were represented as living examples of different conditions, and their behavior as typical symptoms of these conditions:

5d) Has he been assessed for ADHD or autism?
I have one student who is this but x50.
He is concentrated evil but after seeing his diagnosis I understand why.

Firstly, the description "concentrated evil" is certainly among the most pejorative descriptions of students found, if not the most pejorative. "Evil" implies complete absence of goodness and "concentrated" ever affirms this. The commenter also writes that their student "is this" instead of "is like this", which makes the impression that the commenter's student is exactly like the poster's student. The boundary between the poster's and commenter's student was fuzzy on the linguistic level in other cases as well.

4i) I'm not sped but sped-ish as all of the kids I get are undiagnosed. **He** has been the only one with a diagnosis already. The number 1 trick I can give you is to acknowledge that things are difficult for **him** and that we can negotiate middle ground.

Here for example, the teacher talks about their own student, “he” but then refers to the poster’s student with “him” without making any clear difference between the two.

5.1.2 *Difficult students and other students*

While most of the comments in the Reddit threads concentrate on the difficult students, other students have a role in the representations as well. For example, the difficult students are compared to the other students, and certain values and goals are intentionally or unintentionally communicated through these comparisons. The difficult students were also represented as compromising the other students’ learning.

Good students and bad students

The representations under this theme are based on a contrast where different types of students are compared as if there were two types of students, good students and bad students. There was no case where the exact adjectives *good* and *bad* were used – these comparisons were realized by using various lexical choices and structures juxtaposing different types of students.

First, there was comparison that was school-related, comparing good and bad students in an academic sense:

1a) There are a lot of great students who enjoy the lessons I plan but there are so many who are disconnected and hate doing any work.

In linguistic terms, we can find comparative structures (“There are a lot of X but there are so many X”), positive evaluation of one group (“great students”) and negative evaluation of the

other group (“disconnected and hate doing any work”). What is interesting about this representation is how the writer equates “great” and enjoying the writer’s lessons. In another post, the difficult student is juxtaposed with “more studious students”: 7a) [...] he wasn't working and relied on the more studious students to do it for him. This kind of comparison means that the difficult student is not considered studious. *Studious* is a very positive adjective in the school context and compared with “he wasn’t working”, the difficult student is represented as a bad student, as the description implies that the student was able to do the task but simply did not. Further in the same post, the “problem student” is not only compared to the “studious” students, but the whole “rest of the class”:

7a) My cooperating teacher and I talked for a while about how to deal with **the problem student and the rest of the class**. Half of the class was away on a German language trip (funny enough, they were **the "good" half** of the kids) so I took the opportunity to address the class as a whole.

In this representation, it is obvious that the teacher divides the class into *good* and *bad* students, although good is within double quotation marks. Later in the message, the “problem student” is also reduced to “the problem”, which does not include a human component.

In some cases, *good student* and *bad student* were roles that the students were represented through in a more holistic sense, for example in 12a):

12a) E is a transfer student from another school, new this year. She is quiet, wears round glasses and an Army coat, loves to draw, and is a quirky, sweet kid. Of course Cactus falls for the nicest, most shy, demure but artsy girl in the class. [...] E is a great influence on Cactus. He gave up his period of dicking around on the computer to assist another human!

“E” is represented as a good student and a very nice person, described with numerous positive adjectives depicting her appearance, demeanor and even interests, and is “great influence” on the difficult student. “Cactus” is a student who was earlier described as “a prickly cactus” among other negative qualities and tendencies, the difficult student. In this context, “of course” can be interpreted as ironic – it is endearing that the bad student likes the good student. In 8a),

there is a situation where two students are whispering to each other, and the teacher is fake-angry at the good student – this solves the problem in a humorous way, without creating tension between the teacher and the “difficult student”. The students are described as “the usually-good student”, and “the really offending child” and “considerably louder and more obnoxious and [is] usually the one in trouble”. For this scenario to make sense, all the participants clearly have to recognize that the students have certain roles or identities. The good student and bad student are talking but the good student is reprimanded, which is funny.

In thread ten, the *good student* – *bad student* dichotomy appears as a familiar pattern that is a part of school culture. For example, there is an assumption that good students should be popular, and the teacher claims that this has been the case before, but that the class culture has changed, and this change is “huge”:

10a) I've noticed a **huge** change in class culture when **the most popular student** in class is **well, not the best student**. Last year in my fifth grade class, my **most popular student** had the **lowest** standardized test scores I have **ever** seen, **on top of** being a **challenge behavior-wise**.

Here, the difficult student is also “the most popular student”. However, the student is not called “difficult”, except in the title, but “not the best student”. This is clearly euphemistic. On the one hand, being a bad student entails bad scores, but most importantly (“on top of”) bad behavior. On the other hand, being a good student and popular before was: 10a) “the popular students were active in sports, music, academics and generally good students”. The good, popular student here accumulates positive qualities that are not all related to studying. Meanwhile, the popular, bad student is bad influence on others: 10a) It's as if he rubbed off onto others throughout the year, and some became more like him. In this representation, the difficulty is clearly an attribute of the student – rather than the behavior rubbing onto others, the teacher directly uses pronouns; “he” rubs onto others and they become like “him”. In the following comment on the same thread, the difficult student is referred to as “that student”:

10b) When I get upset at "**that student**" I make sure my whole class know that they should be upset too because their time is being wasted.[...]. Usually "**that student**" is **isolated** by the end of the year and **everyone else** is making **smarter** choices in order to avoid being "**that student**".

This way of referring to someone with “that” as a modifier is a way to emphasize their difference. In speech, stress can be placed on “that” in phrases such as “that person” or “that guy” – ‘The person everyone loves to hate and never wants to become’ (Urban Dictionary s.v. *that guy*). Here, one student is singled out as a bad example to others, there is “that student” and “everyone else”. A similar representation of a difficult student’s role in the school community is given in another comment to the same thread, where the way to refer to the difficult student is extremely harsh. In 10d), the difficult student is a “knucklehead[s]”, “social pariah” and avoided like “the plague”. In both 10b) and 10d), the social exclusion of the difficult student is represented as the normal, perhaps even desired situation, while the situation in 10a) where the difficult student is the most popular is an abnormal, undesired situation.

Difficult students disturb the learning of others

This theme is similar to the previous in that it also mentions other students besides the difficult student, but in this theme, the other students are not described further. In these representations, the difficult student is represented as someone who disturbs the learning of other students:

7a) For example, after correcting him and asking him to stop multiple times yesterday I moved him to another assigned seat because he was **distracting his neighbors**.

The theme was especially common in thread eight, where the student, according to the teacher, bothers other students on purpose and also bullies them:

8a) [...] he starts yelling and swearing making it impossible for the rest of the class to learn. [...] he gets up and bothers other students who are trying to work, etc. [...] The other kids don't like him because he is mean to them. He is bossy, pokes them, talks to them when they are trying to work, and doesn't pull his weight during partner or group work. It's easy to understand why the other kids don't like him.

This situation is of course a teacher's nightmare – having students who would like to work and learn, which is an important common goal in school and likely the teacher's personal goal as well, and one student who prevents them from doing so, and in an especially mean way. However, what is notable about these descriptions is that no one seems to comment on how the difficult student's learning is compromised, only that of other students:

8e) Unfortunately, this student is **disrupting the learning of others**. [...] But if it continues to **distract other students**, then I send the student to the office. [...] You have **other students** who need your attention and your time.

8f) [...] **this kid can't** continue to **disrupt the learning of others**. Because **he is disrupting the learning of others**, [...]

8l) I would consider it **disruptive to the class**, if a student refuses to participate in planned events.

The focus in these descriptions is on the other student's impeded learning, even though it must be the difficult student's learning that is the most affected. As consequence, the difficult student's learning appears as if it was of secondary importance. The difficult student is represented as a single black sheep among all the other students:

6a) [...] I am responsible for teaching **all the children** and not just keeping **one kid** from **Tasmanian Devil-ing** around.

Comparing the student to Tasmanian Devil – a destructive but far from evil Looney Tunes character – is perhaps intended as humorous, but the character can be generally considered very annoying. Juxtaposing actions, “Teaching” which is related to “all the children” and “keeping from Tasmanian Devil-ing around” which is related to “one kid”, shows how the difficult student is represented as a problem that takes all the teacher's time. There were similar representations also in other threads. Comment 10c) is an exception, because the difficult student is included into students whose learning is compromised: 10c) [...] it's affecting the learning of the entire class. In general, however, the difficult student is represented as an obstacle who must be controlled or removed to allow others to learn.

5.1.3 *Difficult children and difficult adults*

While the phrase used to search for the data was “difficult student”, referring to the students as “children” or “kids” was a very common naming strategy (in 34 out of 106 comments). Inversely, the difficult students were sometimes represented as future adults or as already adults in the case of thread nine which concerns senior high school students.

Firstly, there are important differences between *student* and *child* or *kid* on one hand and *difficult student* and *difficult child* on the other hand. First, *student* refers to someone who goes to school and could refer to a person of any age, while *a child* or *kid* does not have this link to an educational institution and assumes that the person is not an adult. In the same way, *difficult student* implies that the person is difficult *as a student*, which conventionally means that they disturb the class somehow, while a difficult child is difficult *as a child*, for example in terms of temperament. In that sense, student is more restrictive and child more general.

6a) [...] I am responsible for teaching all the children and not just keeping one kid from Tasmanian Devil-ing around.

Here for example, “all the children” are contrasted with the “kid” who is the difficult student. In general however, “kid” was more common and did not necessarily come with negative collocations in the text. Rather, using ‘kid’ or ‘child’ was an alternative to using the word ‘student’ and it seemed like it was used to direct attention to the adult-child relationship, rather than the teacher-student relationship:

1b) If you're a student teacher, I would really just focus on your lesson planning and skills rather than trying to befriend or endear the kids to you. They know you're not going to be a stable adult in your life and that's OK [...]

6k) [...] it holds promise on helping you see that child as more of a person and less of the little monster that he/she has become.

12a) For a child who struggles with empathy and sincerity, his unexpected answer made my icy little heart melt.

It is significant that in 6k), the child is called a “little monster” rather than just “monster”, because it makes the monstrosity less important and emphasizes small size, which is an attribute typical of children. When difficult students are represented as difficult children instead, perhaps a certain discourse of caring and compassion is activated, as in 6k) and 12a). This is the direction to which the representations in Huard (2009) were directed after reworking: difficult students are children who need help.

However, there was also another side to these representations of difficult children, where their success as adults was questioned:

7c) The tickets for sitting in a "special chair" might work but I also want **the students** to see the merit in conducting themselves **as mature and responsible adults** because **that's what society expects of them**.

7e) I try to put myself in his shoes and remind myself that I'm teaching **a class of 14 year olds** and **not rational adults**.

7k) I know that **not every student** loves English, **but not every adult** loves to pay bills or go to the dentist.

10d) I worry about what kind of wake up call **these kids** are going to get when they find themselves in a situation where they are not rewarded for behaving badly **as adults**.

In 7c), the thread poster expects that the 9th graders can behave like “mature and responsible adults” but takes their own comment back later in 7e) where “14 year olds” and “rational adults” are disassociated. However, in 7k) students’ and adults’ responsibilities are again directly compared by the poster. In 10d), “difficult student” is represented as a group of students who will not become appropriately behaving adults. Thread nine on the other hand concentrated on senior high school students, who in many countries including the United States are between ages 16-19, which also means that some of them are legal adults. The poster in 9a) describes the context where the seniors are “difficult students” regards to a leaving the room policy. This group is then narrowed down to “a few students” and furthermore “one student in particular”. However, this is the only mention of this single student – the senior group is represented as

cunning and difficult in general: “As seniors, they know every trick in the book”. In 9c) all high school students are represented as students who “push boundaries” but in general “earn the right to be treated like adults”. There is a certain group, presumably the difficult students, who “abuse privileges” and thus “have earned the right to be treated like a kid”. This thread is the only case where there was no “special student” discourse present and difficulty was presented as somewhat normal, albeit objectionable: high school students have a tendency to be difficult but if they are, they are considered as “kids” in terms of rights, and if they are not they can be considered as adults.

5.1.4 *Bad attitude*

This theme consists of findings which concentrate on the negative evaluation of the student’s attitude. Often the student’s behavior and attitude were evaluated at the same time, but it was nevertheless possible to draw a distinction between the two by looking at whether the target of evaluation was more about *doing* or *thinking*. The word “attitude” was also often explicitly mentioned. It could be argued that a person’s attitude is even more closely connected to one’s disposition than one’s behavior, so when it is evaluated, the person is being evaluated as well.

There were individual references to difficult students’ bad attitude in many threads, but especially in thread two which included reported conversations which demonstrate the student’s bad attitude. The first post of thread two is very long and constructs a rather negative representation of a particular difficult student, whom the teacher calls Jack, described for example as 2a) headstrong and frustrating to deal with. This representation is constructed by different linguistic strategies which highlight his bad attitude. For example, the student’s attitude is described as if it was a quote from the student:

2a) To some degree, Jack cares about doing well, but his attitude is generally "If I feel like it, I'll play along. If not, this is going to be a long period for you." [...]

Rather than using adjectives, the teacher describes the student's attitude with a quote in first person that is presumably not something the student has actually said, but something that the student might think. In layman's terms, this is close to "putting words in someone's mouth", since it gives the impression that these are the person's true thoughts.

Another strategy that is used is representing the actors in opposition. the teacher mentions positive or appropriate actions by him or herself, followed by the student's disregarding responses in a "when I...he" pattern:

2a) When I responded by saying that I wanted him to make good use of his time and not create additional work for himself later, he brushed it off. When I asked him to take out his work to show me what he had finished, he gave me some slight attitude but complied. I asked him why he only had 1/3 of his work completed and he said, "I don't know how to do the rest of it."

This perhaps serves a double purpose, where the teacher can give a positive impression of themselves while highlighting how unreasonably the student acts. Especially in the first clause, the teacher shows that their goal is for the student's own good, but the student does not care. The student also "gives slight attitude" to the teacher, which suggests he is also rude.

Most of the post's language material consist of very negative descriptions of the student's attitude and behavior. However, at the end of the post, the way the student is represented suddenly changes and positive things about the student are mentioned, although mitigated by the "at times" and the whole concluding remark:

2a) At times, Jack can work very well and is capable of being humorous, charismatic, and generally enjoyable to talk to. [...] He has an irreverent attitude toward school and authority, which I find funny when it's not disrupting my class. [...] but his attitude and constant need to push back does irritate me and sour my mood when I'm already having a bad day.

Up to this point, the student was only represented in terms of his bad attitude, which seemed to be the only way of being for the student, but this is in fact not the case. The "irreverent" attitude is only towards "school and authority", and the poster even finds it funny when it does not cause problems in their class. However, in most cases, no positive characteristics of the students were

included in the descriptions. Still, some other representations also clearly separated being a difficult student and having a bad attitude, and being a bad person:

7i) It may help **an irrational 14 year old** understand that while you **do not approve of his attitude** in English class, you **don't disapprove of him as a human being**. Or in his words, you **don't hate him**.

Calling the student “an irrational 14 year old” in this context suggests that the commenter thinks it is obvious that the other teacher does not disapprove of the student “as a human being”. Later in the comment 7i), the commenter also calls their own student a “problem student” which suggests that they view the student as a problem, but also mentions “a marked improvement in his effort and and attitude” after playing basketball with him, showing that bad attitude is not an inherent feature of the student, but can change and the teacher can help in changing it.

5.1.5 *Bad behavior*

This theme consists of findings which concentrate on the negative evaluation of the student's behavior. In many posts, there were extensive lists of the difficult student's bad behavior, but it was possible to identify certain types of behaviors which made the students difficult for the teachers. Among these behaviors, there was dancing and singing in class, yelling and swearing, abusing privileges and bullying, but also lack of effort and refusing to work. It seems that there are at least three different types of behaviors that can lead to a student being labeled as difficult: *distracting*, *mean* and *nonparticipating*. Since behavior in class constitutes most of what the teachers see of students, this behavior is constitutive of their student identity in the teacher's view – distracting, mean and nonparticipating behaviors become distracting, mean and nonparticipating difficult students. In the following example, the student is described through his behavior:

3a) The kid is 8 yo, extremely disruptive, disrespectful, inappropriate, sneaky, lies excessively, etc and is already on a behavior plan but the behavior is still horrible.

In this example, other types of behaviors or actions by the student are not mentioned and the behavior is presented as typical of the student, irrespective of what happens in the class. In general, students were represented in a very similar way as in the above example. Other depictions included 5i) “challenging”, 3c) “out of hand” and 6e) “terrible”.

Some descriptions of the students’ behavior introduce finer details about the participants’ roles in these representations. In many cases, teachers were the disadvantaged party:

2a) I have a student who **drives me up the wall, no matter how** nice, accommodating, and flexible **I attempt** to be.

5a) **When he's in the room, my classroom is chaotic and messy.**

6e) I had a group of 5 students in a class that were **terrible but it reflected badly on me, even though I tried everything**, and even though another teacher of 20 years said she had the same problem with them last year. If there is ever a behavior problem, **it's the teacher's fault.**

13a) In one class, I have a group of about 4-6 girls that have been **the bane of my existence** for the past 6 months. I will call their **ringleader and instigator** Adeline. [...] **This particular girl, Adeline, has been my biggest headache.**

In 5a) it is as if the mere presence of the student makes the classroom “chaotic and messy”. In these examples the teacher is a victim of the students’ behavior and the student is represented as more powerful, or in 6e) and 13a), groups of students. The teachers have “tried everything” and in 13a), the negative impact of the students’ behavior on the teacher is taken as far as describing them as “the bane of my existence”, especially one student being “my biggest headache”. These students are represented as a gang where this one student is the “ringleader and instigator”. These are the mean students.

The representations included different reasons for the students’ behavior. In 4a), The student is represented as manipulative and as hating teachers for no reason:

4j) ETA: the meltdowns of my student were monumental with no build up as well. Not aggressive meltdowns but yelling, wailing, making accusations of teachers not caring about him or being mean and “ruining his life”, a ton of manipulation techniques. I told him that I was having none of it, he only manipulated me once the little stinker.

Above, the student is pejoratively referred to as “the little stinker”. Despite this, later in the comment the teacher says that learning about OCD “helped me help him”, showing that the teacher cares about the student. This was mostly the case with other representations as well, even if they were very negative. What might explain this is that medical conditions were often suggested as the cause of these behaviors, in which case the student is not necessarily seen as “mean” but rather suffering from their own behavior. Besides medical conditions, many representations were based on an impression that the students’ behavior is due to attention-seeking.

5a) He's knocked over desks "on accident" because **he wants attention**.

7a) [...] I feel **kicking him out rewards him** for his bad behavior.

8b) She¹ **wants to see you upset** by her behavior. Don't give her the satisfaction.

Interestingly, according to one commenter, there is no reason for bad behavior in some cases:

7i) When I was a sophomore in high school I was a headache for my English teacher for no reason at all (that I can remember).

In The teacher uses their own example of having been a difficult student “for no reason at all”, although the note in parentheses suggests that there might in fact have been some kind of a reason at the time.

With evaluation of behavior as bad comes the imperative to do something about it. Among the numerous solutions suggested, two types of interventions – Setting goals and ignoring – were the most common, and they were related to different views about the students. The following extracts are examples of using the setting of goals as a solution for behavioral problems:

¹ The commenter changes pronouns from ‘he’ to ‘she’ in their post, possibly because they are giving advice based on their own student.

1b) Set quality tasks and expect them to engage and achieve.

3c) I would set goals and rewards with the student. “What do you want to do better at?” “What sort of reward can we work towards if you hit your goals?”

In these examples, the expectations about the students are positive: they should be expected to achieve and it is possible to set goals with the student – and not only for the student – it is possible to work together. In contrast, if there are no expectations for the student, the solution is to ignore them:

3f) Also, you’re a long term sub, it’s the last 2 weeks of school, find an engaging online education game he likes and **plop him down on a computer most of the day.**

10f) For the kids who actually want to try, it [fidget toys] keeps the overactive part of their brains busy so that they can concentrate. For the ones who don't want to try, **well at least** they're **sitting still and not talking**, right?

8b) If the **offending behavior** is **not hurting** anyone, see if you can **ignore** it for a little while. Sometimes the lack of attention stops the problem.

In 3f), the verb “plop down” implies easiness and carefreeness; if the game is engaging and the student likes it, it is easy to just leave them on the computer “most of the day”. In 10f) two goals are expressed: to have the kids concentrate, which is the primary goal, or to have them “sitting still and not talking”, which is a secondary goal; well at least. In 8b), the behavior is described as “offending” but possibly “not hurting anyone” – an oxymoron – in which case it can be possibly ignored. This might “stop the problem”, where “the problem” is the behavior. In other cases, both solutions were recommended at the same time: setting goals and tasks, but the purpose of these goals and tasks was to come up with something for the student to do so they could be safely ignored. The word ‘distract’ was very common, in one case even repeated as a command; 6l) Distract distract distract. This is interesting because ‘distract’ is opposite of making the student ‘concentrate’, which is usually desirable in school. This implies an evaluation of the student where it is not worth it to expect that they can concentrate; the recommended option is to simply distract them from behaving badly, which they usually do.

5.2 Difficulty in the teacher-student relationship

In the representations that were grouped into this umbrella theme, the posters or commenters do not only concentrate on the difficulty of the student or the student's behavior but recognize the whole difficult dynamic between the teacher and the student. In the first subtheme, teachers talk about how to “deal with” the students, which indicates a difficult relationship between the teacher and the student. The second subtheme which concentrates on the role of positivity in teacher-student relationships is further divided into two subthemes: in most representations positivity was seen as an important approach for improving the teacher-student relationship and, consequently, the student's behavior and grades, but there were also opposing views.

5.2.1 *Dealing with the difficult student*

This theme is based on the frequent use of the phrasal verb, *deal with* that was found in the posts. *Deal with* was often used in the discussions, including four post titles. It was used in similar ways to the example listed under the definition of *difficult* in Cambridge dictionary – “The manager is difficult to deal with/a difficult person to deal with” (Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *difficult*) – but in relation to the student:

2a) Any advice for **dealing with** a difficult student?

2b I teach an ODD kid and **i deal with him** partly by just ignoring him when he talks back.

6a) Sure, **you deal with** him alone for maybe 30 minutes every other week or whatever but **I deal with him** every day all day while still being responsible for a class of many small children.

The reason for analyzing the use of this phrasal verb is that it is evaluative. While this is perhaps not obvious, it is hard to see “deal with” used in connection with anything positive, except in a figurative sense. If one has to “deal with” someone, communication with that person is not pleasant nor smooth. There were also a few cases of using the verb “manage” in the same sense.

Generally, the object was the student directly as in the examples above, which does hint towards an interpretation that the student is a problem in the teacher's eyes. However, in other cases, it was the student's behavior (6j) It might actually be your inability to **deal with his behavior**), a group of students (6d) This. I had a class of 34 9th graders who were **impossible to deal with as a group**) or the situation going on with a student (2a) **If it's going to be this way** for the rest of the year, I guess I could **deal with it**, [...]).

“Deal with” also implies that the main aspect to consider are the actions taken towards someone. But what kind of communication or actions towards someone does “dealing with” imply? Dictionary definitions are not very specific, for example, Cambridge Dictionary proposes “to behave towards and talk to someone in an effective way” (Cambridge Dictionary s.v. *deal with*) and Oxford Dictionary “to take appropriate action in a particular situation or according to who you are talking to, managing, etc (OED s.v. *deal with*). Dealing with, then, is talking or to or behaving towards someone in an effective or situation-appropriate way but what that might be is precisely what the teachers are confused about. There are two almost identical titles to 7a) Advice on dealing with a difficult student, two others without the verb and one using “manage”. This ambiguity of action and the ensuing descriptions of what the teacher has done and how the student continues being difficult suggest that Huard's depiction of teachers who apply “random solutions of trial and error” (2009: 118) is the case here as well. “Dealing with”, then, is associated with a negative evaluation of the student and the teacher not knowing exactly what to do.

5.2.2 *The role of positivity in teacher-student relationships*

In this section, there are two subsections discussing representations related to reaching students and the role of positivity in the teacher-student relationships. Despite the posts containing mostly negative description of students, judging from the goals expressed by the teachers, their

stance towards the students was often not negative. In fact, many teachers talk about “reaching” the difficult students. Their representations are two-sided: The difficult students annoy the teachers, but they want good things to come to the students and hope to help them. In many cases, positive classroom management solutions were recommended over punishment. The students were represented as people who can be reasoned with and who perhaps lack positive attention in general, not defined by their “bad” attitude or behavior as in the representations where the “difficulty” is an attribute of the student. However, there were also some representations where positivity was seen as ineffective with these students.

Positive approaches for positive results

In many cases, commenters recommended using positive approaches to improve the teacher-student relationship, which appeared as an important goal. The verb *to reach* was often used, implying a sense of distance between the teacher and the student – not physical distance, but emotional distance:

1a) I know there are bound to be students that **I just can't reach**, but what ways do you **make sure** difficult students **know you care about them** and **care about more than just their grades? I want them to know that I want them to be successful** just in life in general.

There was not much description of the students themselves, but there was a clear goal of trying to reach the student. In that sense, difficult students were evaluated as students that are worthy of goodwill above all else. The whole discourse here is completely different towards the difficult student from the “dealing with the difficult student” theme, for example, where the goal was simply to control the student.

In addition to the goals of teacher about “reaching”, in other words establishing a trusting relationship with the student, there were instances with other kinds of promotion of

positive approaches. In these representations, while the student is still the difficult student, the reason is not necessarily the student's disposition, but the way teachers respond to the student:

7l) **It'll [praise] help that student realize** that you're not **just there to discipline**, and it'll keep you from getting exhausted from always **having to play the bad guy**.

10f) Have a conversation with them. **Make it clear that it's not you against them**, but that **you want to work with them**. Don't tell them that they're being bad (because dancing and singing are not bad things), just inappropriate.

The reason the student is difficult is the relationship to the teacher, whose part is that of a “bad guy” who, in the student's eyes, is there just to discipline the student or even seems to be against the student. In addition, in 10f), the evaluation of the student's behavior – singing and dancing – as bad, is resisted. In 8b) as well, a teacher resists the evaluation of the student as “bad” by others:

8b) If you have the time and energy, it is sometimes **helpful to teach the student better self-talk**. I have had **students** tell me that **they are bad**. I ask them why they think that. "Well, **my teachers** (or other authority figures) **always say I am or treat me like I am**." This leads to a discussion about whether they truly believe that about themselves...about how if anyone is going to believe in them, it has got to be themselves...about how **we all make mistakes occasionally** but the point is to learn from those mistakes...that **they don't have to make bad choices**, there are other options such as fill-in-the-blank.

Here, the students are represented as victims of other teachers telling they are “bad”, which has made them internalize this evaluation and act according to those expectations, which was a phenomenon discussed in Dobbs and colleagues (2009). Teaching the student “better self-talk” will improve the relationship with the student.

In the representations in this theme, the “difficult student” phrase was not used at all. In most cases, the commenters simply used “they/them” to refer to the “difficult students” phrase mentioned in the title or post or used euphemisms such as 1d) “non-achievers”, or simply “student”. However, there were also comments such as 11b) So you never know, even some of

those shitty students probably love you :). Therefore, a positive stance towards the student did not always mean the student was not described negatively.

Positivity was not only a way to improve the conflicted teacher-student relationship in the representations; a better relationship improved the students' behavior and grades:

1a) I feel like once I can connect with them on that level, **maybe they'll be more inclined to behave and participate in class.**

11a) Eventually **we started getting along, then her grades got better.** Before spring break she had a 85 in my class.

10e) Get them on your side. Whatever it takes! I would call his mom, **I would pull him in for lunch, I would give him special jobs when he behaved, I would make sure to pick him when he raised his hand, etc. etc. All these things added up and eventually he was begging to please me with his behavior rather than the students.** It involved creating a lot of different rewards for him, but it worked.

Previously, a better relationship was an intrinsic goal for the teacher, while here it is an instrumental goal towards better behavior and grades. The difficulty, the students' behavior, along with their grades, can be changed simply by making the relationship better, for which a positive approach towards the student is the key.

Positivity is futile

In the previous representations, the teachers' goal is to "reach" the student and they are encouraged to build the teacher-student relationship through positive interactions with the student, and to regard the student positively. When the relationship is good, the difficult student's behavior and grades can also improve. However, sometimes such positive approaches were viewed as ineffective. In the following examples, it is again the student who is difficult, rather than the relationship, but these representations are discussed here because they relate to what kind of a role positivity has in the teacher-student relationship.

In some cases, positivity was viewed as ineffective because the students were viewed as somehow unreachable:

1c) However, **some kids are just assholes or do not want you to reach them.**

3c) I tried to not to react to him, and give praise but to be honest that does not always work with **students like that.** We did reward systems and tried those.

5a) He's been at this school since 2nd grade, and **no one has been able to reach him.** [...] I don't know what else to do with him. I've tried talking to him, conferencing with him and his mom together, referring him to the counselor, etc., but **nothing gets through to him**

Especially in 1c), there are kids who do not want to have a good relationship with the teacher or are “just assholes”. It is a group of difficult students that are beyond positive approaches, as is the case in 3c) with “students like that”. In 5a), a particular difficult student is someone who no one has been able to reach and to whom nothing gets through.

Contrarily, in thread 7 where all the comments contained pro-positivity discourse, it was the poster whose personal stance was against these approaches:

7c) **I'm personally not a huge fan of** using homework passes or candy as rewards. The students are given five "late homework" passes at the beginning of the semester and **most don't even care enough about their grades** to use them until the very end. [...] **Life doesn't hand you raffle tickets for acting like a normal human being.**

7m) I started doing that today and i'm trying to come up with **ways to praise that don't seem forced (I think false praise is worse than no praise).** **I came from a critical family and praise was few and far between** in the house. I've adopted that **unfortunate habit** into my adult life and I need to remember that coming off as "grumpy cat" to my students will not help **those students who came from a similar background as me.**

In 7c), students are in general represented as not caring about their grades, so rewards are not useful. The goal of the poster was to make the difficult students understand that they have to act like 7c) “normal human being[s]”, for which you do not get rewards. The poster also feels that “false praise is worse than no praise”. However, the teacher also reflects on whether these

views will really help the students, coming to a conclusion that not giving students praise is an “unfortunate habit” and will not help students with similar family backgrounds.

5.3 The role of other actors

In this section, I have collected representations in which other social actors than the difficult student are important. The main actors found besides the difficult students, apart from other students which were discussed previously and the teachers, were the difficult students’ parents and school administrators. Both were represented as actors who mostly complicate the teacher’s work when they try to solve the problems they have with the students, but school administrators were represented as particularly unhelpful.

5.3.1 *Unhelpful – helpful parents*

In these representations, teachers have problems with students and parents appear as actors who worsen these problems. Parents were almost only mentioned as “unhelpful” actors in representations of the difficult students.

3a. So weird situation : I’m a long term sub and I’ve been advised to **never contact the parents** of my most disruptive student because **they are extremely... aggressive** (by both the teacher I’m covering for and the principal).

3c. I’ll be honest **I often get tired of contacting the parents** because it **doesn’t usually help.**

In 3a), the writer reports having been advised by others who know the parents – presumably to support the following evaluation – not to contact the parents about the “most disruptive student”. The dots between “extremely” and “aggressive” suggest a hesitation about which adjective to use. Perhaps unexpectedly, the writer does not suggest any connection between the parents’ behavior and the student’s. It is surprising that there were not more comments implying the parents’ fault, because in public discourse, it is often the parents who are blamed for their

child's bad behavior – that the apple does not fall far from the tree. Still, there were a couple of comments where the parents' fault was implied:

5h) You will see how **parents spring into action** because **they don't want** a "label" on **their angels**. I guarantee once school is playing shiny for emotional disturbance testing and alternate psych placement like magic the child starts behaving well again.

5j) I have a little bastard just like this and **the mother plainly hates my guts** (**her kid won't behave or do the work!**).

In both cases, the tone is negative towards both the student and the parents and very evaluative language is used. In 5h): "angel" refers to the way in which parents are reluctant to accept that their child does not behave well, and "like magic" suggests that the parents are in fact able to control their child's behavior when pressed. In 5j), the student is a "little bastard" and the mother reportedly hates the teacher. The reason is left undiscussed, instead, the teacher concentrates on the fact that "*her* kid won't behave or do the work", suggesting that the mother is wrong.

Other representations of difficult students where the parents had an important role revolved mainly around the "special needs" discourse. Parents in these representations had two different roles. On one hand, parents were against the teachers' wish to refer their child to an evaluation:

4c) **I have referred him** and we've met with **parents - they don't want an evaluation** and admin doesn't see a need since he is academically capable.

4i) [...] **his mother** withdrew him and now started homeschooling, because **they don't want an IEP and want to give him more time..**

In some other cases as well, the teacher represented the difficult student as a special student, but the parents strongly resist – their reasons are not necessarily mentioned. On the other hand, there were also parents who wanted to cooperate with the teacher:

5a) From what I gather about his **home life**, it's **fairly stable**. Dad is in and out, but **mom is involved, caring, and wants her son to succeed**. In our last conference, **she was crying because she doesn't know how to help her son**.

13a) I had braced myself for an aggressive fight that I would have to deescalate, but I was met with a mom who sounded weary. She said that Adeline was going through a rough time at home and that she felt she had not been as good a mom as she could have been for the past few months. We talked a bit about things we each might be able to do to help Adeline.

The parents are represented as caring and wishing the best for their children and they are in a similar position with the teacher, because they are not sure how to help their children either. However, the teacher's expectation of the cooperation with the parents was that contacting the parent would result in "an aggressive fight". There were no indications in the post for why this would be the case, but it is likely that the teacher's description of themselves as 13a) "a first-year teacher" and as hating confrontation are connected; the teacher has none or little experience being in contact with parents. In conclusion, parents did not have any consistent role in the representations, but they were most often mentioned in the "special needs" discourse and more often opposing the teacher than not.

5.3.2 *Unhelpful admins*

School administrators, admins for short, had a very consistent role in the representations as authority figures who have no idea about the classroom reality, and who are very unhelpful from the teacher's point of view regarding the difficult students:

5a) His average in my class is roughly a 40. He's turned in maybe 15 homework assignments all year, and **admin is forcing me to pass him to 6th grade.**

10d) When **students are not held accountable by the admin**, the benefits of screwing around more than outweighs the cost of his behavior.

The admins have more authority to decide what happens to the difficult student in the end, and in these cases they were not working together with the teachers. In 5a), the admin is forcing the teacher to pass a student to the next grade even though they do badly at school, and in 10d) the admin does not hold the students accountable for "screwing around", which has benefits to the

student. Thread six where the following example is the title of the post, concentrated on the admin's role:

6a) I have **an extremely difficult student**, and the response I get from **any sort of admin/non-teacher** at school is "Well, he listens to me. You need to learn to deal with him. **He's not that bad.**" [...] Any advice on how to **deal with those comments without losing my temper and getting fired** would also be appreciated.

While the student is described in very negative terms, the admin's comments are also something that risk the teacher to lose their temper and even getting fired. The representation of the school administrators as a sort of an enemy of the teacher was reinforced by the commenters:

6c) Oh, they have, and there is never ANY sympathy or understanding. It's all "You have to find some way to control him... give him special jobs to do" which I do but I can't do during teaching time or every second of the day.

6j) I kept on sending them to the admin. The admin gave me little sympathy and told me to learn to manage my class.

6n) As for dealing with the very unhelpful comments that seem to be a standard in education admin [...]

According to 6c), the admins have absolutely no sympathy for teacher "never ANY sympathy or understanding" and they offer no help. Likewise in 6j), they have "little sympathy". Especially in 6n), the commenter is not only talking about their own experience, but claiming that the norm is that admins' comments are unhelpful.

Perhaps an important factor in why these particular teachers feel the need to write about their difficult students online is that they feel school administrators are not helping them. They have gone through the official procedures and contacted relevant parties, but as it has not helped, they are turning to an internet community to help them manage the situation they are left in. As stipulated throughout this study, the primary purpose of these posts is not to complain about the students, but to receive help, which shows well in these representations where parents and school administrators are represented as unhelpful social actors.

6 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of my findings and possible parallels and differences to previous studies. In other words, I will describe the “explanation” phase of my analysis (Fairclough 2010) and the applicability of the results after all steps of analysis. The global nature of these discussions, small scope of the study and lack of previous research made the explanation phase challenging. It was, nevertheless, possible to draw some conclusions from the way the students were represented and how different actors appear in these representations.

In most cases, the “difficulty” appeared as an attribute of the student. This means that the teachers felt that a single student was causing problems because of their bad personality or bad attitude. This finding is in accordance with those discussed in Huard (2009), Petit-Balager (2009), Geyang (2006) and Reyna and Weiner (2001). This was evident from the negative naming strategies, evaluation of their attitude, behavior and characteristics. The difficult student was a *bad* student among the other *good* students, whose learning was compromised because of this individual. These students are represented as “not normal” in various ways. Most of these individuals, according to the representations, were so-called special students, *erityinen oppilas* or *erityisoppilas* in Finnish, who have various diagnoses. In many cases, diagnoses were only speculated by teachers, which is common according to Rafalovich (2005). The teachers related to each others’ experiences so profoundly, that not only was advice given by commenters based on their own students, but also linguistically, sameness was emphasized and the boundary between the students became fuzzy. Difficult special students was a category that was collectively recognized.

There are both positive and negative social implications to the findings. Virtually all social problems mentioned in this thesis were implied. Negative feelings and stress can drive teachers’ responses, which aggravates the student’s behavior, possibly leading to lamentable

self-fulfilling prophecies (Reyna & Weiner 2001; Dobbs et al. 2009; Gaudreau et al. 2012). Negative feelings towards students were evident from the descriptions, and the teachers' role was often that of a "bad guy". Labeling was also something that clearly happened, posing problems discussed in Rafalovich (2005), Rex and Schiller (2009) and Baglieri and Shapiro (2012). Fear of stigma was present in the teachers' reports of the students' behaviors. Writing referrals to remove students (Petit-Ballager 2009) was also apparent in some descriptions.

Most importantly, however, teachers had no idea what to do about the students and felt like receiving help from parents or school administrators is hopeless. Despite all the negative description of students, teachers strived to disregard their negative feelings toward the students. This was apparent, from the indication of positive goals such as "reaching" the student, especially in those representations where the "difficulty" was attributed to the teacher-student relationship rather than the students. It was also the case for the "special student" and "difficult child" representations, where teachers tried to remind themselves of the fact that their student are children who need help, the importance of which is stressed in Huard (2009) and Marzano et al. (2003). These comments show a regard for the student's best interest and willingness to look at the possible causes of the student's behavior. These findings are in accordance with what Pashnyak and Dennen (2009) found out about teachers' blog posts; they mostly discuss students and the tone of the posts is negative, but they reflect the teachers' struggle to reach students and improve conditions. Although there was some reluctance, teachers were quite willing to try the positive approaches that are backed by Marzano and colleagues' (2003) meta-analysis of 100 class-management studies, as well as students themselves in Ellis and colleagues' (1998) study.

Interestingly, all representations seemed to attribute the difficulty to either the student or the relationship between the teacher and a particular student, even though Graff's (2009) study indicated that "difficult student" is rather a class role that is co-constructed by the

teacher and all the students together in communicative situations. Factors such as class and school culture, wrongly perceived intentions and the relation of the difficult student's behavior and other students' response to it were mentioned, but not represented as the source of the difficulty. It would be important to study when these roles begin to form; would early childhood educators represent some children in a similar way? Perhaps these roles begin forming from the moment children first begin school – or even earlier – and follow them from grade to grade, making it difficult for the teacher to notice how other students contribute to how someone becomes a “difficult student”. Another question is whether this role becomes something that follows the student because teachers share these representations with others – it is easy to imagine that representations can cause prejudices in new teachers who have not yet had their own experiences with different types of students. In my teacher training, this was clearly something that mentoring teachers tried to avoid, especially with individual students.

Although it is important for teachers to be able to alleviate feelings of frustration and perhaps even anger at student behavior and release stress, care should be taken that this does not cause stigma to individual students. On Reddit or blogs, this cannot happen when the participants are not identifiable. However, the focus should be on reflective and constructive discussion and the kind of harmful representations discussed in this thesis should probably be avoided. Of course, teachers are in a difficult position here because they are not supposed to share any specifics of what happens in their class with anyone in the first place. The question of “difficult students”, preventative classroom management and development of self-efficacy should therefore be central in teacher education. Although one must remember the limits of teacher training – that it is never possible to include everything that has been suggested it should include – difficult students could be a significantly important topic to discuss. At the very least, any teacher training should provide new teachers with more understanding about difficult students than just "how to deal with" them. Prevention of problems is of utmost importance so

teachers will not find themselves in a last-resort situation where they only seek to remove a student from the class to solve all problems.

While the goal of this study has been met, direct applicability of the results is questionable. Perhaps this study, if read by teachers, will help them reflect on their own professional practice and the way they speak and think about difficult students. However, this study on representations is only a very first small step in addressing the various social problems related to difficult students on a societal level. Since the data was gathered on a worldwide, English-speaking forum and posters revealed little information about themselves, it is difficult to see the results directly applying to any specific context. The data is global, but concrete solutions must be local on a national-, school- and class-level to reach individual teachers and students. Therefore, further studies in different fields are needed.

7 CONCLUSION

The thesis examined what kind of representations of “difficult students” teachers construct and share online on Reddit. In addition, it looked at the way the source of the “difficulty” was represented as an attribute of the student, as stemming from a difficult teacher-student relationship, as situational or possibly something else. The study was multidisciplinary but based on critical discourse analysis. The aim of the analysis was to investigate the following features of the representations: a) How are the difficult students referred to?, b) How are the difficult students and their actions described and evaluated? and c) What other actors are included in these representations and how are they de-scribed and evaluated? The analysis was based on theory on representation and evaluation and was conducted by close-reading and thematization.

In the analysis, clear themes emerged based on different naming strategies and descriptions of the students and other actors. In most cases, the source of the difficulty was attributed to the student and the description of students, their behavior and attitudes was generally negative. In the most prominent theme, difficult students were represented as “special” students – students were labeled or referred to with names of different conditions and represented as “not normal”. Difficult students were also compared to other students. A naming strategy where the students were referred to as “difficult children” was also the basis of a theme, as well as description and evaluation of the students’ attitude and behavior.

In some cases, the difficulty was attributed to the teacher-student relationship. In one such theme, teachers were using the phrasal verb “deal with”, which was related to the teacher not really knowing what to do about the student. In other representations, the role of positivity towards the student, in thoughts and actions, was important. However, there were exceptions; sometimes students were represented as resistant to positive approaches, but the

problem could also be in the teachers' expectations. Although representations where the "difficulty" would have been represented as situation-specific were also searched for, no such representations could be found.

Other actors than the students and the teacher were occasionally mentioned and described. The most important social actors were the difficult students' parents and school administrators. Both were represented mainly as actors who hamper the teacher's work, although parents were sometimes trying to cooperate with the teacher as well.

The representations found relate to various social problems discussed in the paper. Language itself can be a problem because of labeling and stigmatization. However, there are also more important problems, which have to do with teachers' practical solutions to manage the "difficulty". There were indications of almost all these problems in the representations.

This study contributes to many bodies of research due to its interdisciplinary nature. Moreover, no previous research using the same methodology has been made on this subject. Regrettably, because of the limited scope and nature of this study, the results are not directly applicable. While the goal of conducting CDA research is often to alter social practices, this study does not necessarily aim to act as basis for policy decisions about language usage. However, this study can potentially contribute to a change in social practice among the studied target group, meaning teachers. Based on previous studies, it is important that teachers' perceptions of students are not prejudiced and that their attitudes towards these students are not overly negative. Even more importantly, "difficult students" and classroom management should be central topics of teacher training, so that teachers' representations would be well-informed and aid them in tackling classroom management issues. Overall, more research in different fields is needed on the social problems facing difficult students in school and the society as a whole.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Url addresses of the Reddit threads used as data

Thread 1: “How do you reach difficult students? How do you let them know you care about them and want them to succeed?” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/f9gq7l/how_do_you_reach_difficult_students_how_do_you/

Thread 2: “Any advice for dealing with a difficult student?” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/dmc9qb/any_advice_for_dealing_with_a_difficult_student/

Thread 3: “How to manage a difficult student without contacting a parent?” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/bljky/how_to_manage_a_difficult_student_without/

Thread 4: “Advice for a difficult student” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/a3784v/advice_for_a_difficult_student/

Thread 5: “Any advice for a difficult student?” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/8ixth0/any_advice_for_a_difficult_student/

Thread 6: “I have an extremely difficult student, and the response I get from any sort of admin/non-teacher at school is “Well, he listens to me. You need to learn to deal with him. He's not that bad.”” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/3uk1zt/i_have_an_extremely_difficult_student_and_the/

Thread 7: “Advice for dealing with a difficult student as a Student Teacher.” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/1wzq0b/advice_for_dealing_with_a_difficult_student_as_a/

Thread 8: “Advice on dealing with a difficult student” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.
https://old.reddit.com/r/teaching/comments/1muyin/advice_on_dealing_with_a_difficult_student/

Thread 9: “[Help!] Leaving the room policy, difficult students” *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.

https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/1mx5cq/help_leaving_the_room_policy_difficult_students/

Thread 10: "Advice for when difficult student is the most popular." *Reddit*. Accessed February 27, 2021.

https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/3eudka/advice_for_when_difficult_student_is_the_most/

Thread 11: "One of my most difficult student today said (on a zoom meeting) I was the best teacher she ever had..." *Reddit*. Accessed March 25, 2021.

https://old.reddit.com/r/teaching/comments/fu1aoi/one_of_my_most_difficult_student_today_said_on_a/

Thread 12: "Corny cute moment with a difficult student warmed my heart" *Reddit*. Accessed March 25, 2021.

https://old.reddit.com/r/teaching/comments/bv1uva/corny_cute_moment_with_a_difficult_student_warmed/

Thread 13: "Difficult Student Success." *Reddit*. Accessed March 25, 2021.

https://old.reddit.com/r/Teachers/comments/atct9i/difficult_student_success/