

# Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Difficult Children: A Phenomenological Study\*

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**Abstract:** This study examined classroom teachers' perceptions of difficult children. It applied the descriptive phenomenology design of qualitative research approaches. In identifying the participants, the maximum variation sampling technique, one of the purposeful sampling methods, was used. Sixty classroom teachers working in Konya (20 from central schools, 20 from disadvantaged area schools, and 20 from private schools) have been selected and included in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed by the content analysis technique. Findings revealed that the participating classroom teachers were generally aware of difficult children's characteristics (such as having academic difficulties, exhibiting communication problems, inability to adapt socially, or disobeying classroom rules). According to the participants, there are at least five types of difficult children in schools: (1) children with giftedness or learning difficulties, (2) children who are overly active or silent, (3) children who are spoiled or not cared for by their families, (4) children who are excessively aggressive or quarrelsome, and (5) children who are distracted or uninterested. The study concludes that more research is needed to understand the difficult child phenomenon fully.

**Keywords:** Classroom teacher, difficult children, descriptive phenomenology

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## Introduction

Education is one of the most critical factors that shape the future of a country. One of the elements of this factor is teachers, and the other is students. Educational activities generally take place in schools. Students who are educated at school participate in the adaptation process by learning behaviors such as obeying social rules and fulfilling responsibilities. Thus, they become a part of the education process. However, the education process is slightly more difficult for some students. For instance, it is known that there are students at schools who experience delays or distortion in “the acquisition and use of speaking, reading, writing, comprehension or arithmetic skills” (Asfuroglu & Fidan, 2016, p. 49). Such children diagnosed with “dyslexia” (reading disorder), “disgraphia” (written expression disorder), or “dyscalculia” (mathematics learning disorder) as a result of genetic factors or functional disorders in the brain may experience a learning difficulty in at least one or more of these areas (Asfuroglu & Fidan, 2016).

Moreover, children in some disadvantageous groups including (1) refugee children who have to leave their homeland due to reasons such as war or natural disasters; (2) children who have mental, visual, auditory, or orthopedic handicaps resulting from birth or a disease/accident; (3) children who come from split families as a result of the death, divorce, or separation of parents; (4) child workers who have to start working at an early age to support their family or themselves; (5) children who have been exposed to physical, sexual, or emotional abuses may also experience severe difficulties during the education process (Bayir, 2019). For instance, Syrian primary-school-age refugee children who had to leave their homeland due to the war in Syria and presently reside in Turkey experience a severe language problem, and as a result of this problem, face academic and social adaptation difficulties in the educational process (Celik, 2019; Karaagac & Guvenc, 2019).

On some occasions, societies’ educational policies are among the leading factors that negatively affect children’s school lives. For instance, a regulation issued in Turkey on 21 July 2012 and published in the Official Gazette numbered 28360 (<https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2012/07/20120721-9.htm>) allowed children between 60-66 months of age to start primary school early. However, later research (Ozdemir & Battal, 2019) revealed that children in this age group had insufficient school readiness and experienced various adaptation and learning difficulties.

Due to these factors and similar situations, teachers experience numerous undesired behaviors during the educational process (such as disobeying rules, not completing the assigned tasks, or being disrespectful) (Esin & Dursun, 2014; Uysal, Altun, & Akgun, 2010). Such behaviors may also make the curriculum challenging to implement according to the stated goals and negatively affect teachers’ motivation. The following four criteria are usually presented in the literature to coding a behavior as undesired behavior (Balay & Saglam, 2008):

- If the behavior prevents the student's or his/her peers' learning.
- If the behavior causes danger for the student's or his/her peers' safety.
- If the behavior damages the school equipment or the peers' possessions.
- If the behavior hinders the student's socialization with other students.

There are several reasons for undesired behaviors. While some of them stem from schools' or classrooms' physical conditions, some others may result from teachers' negative attitudes or parents' incorrect upbringing of children (Gokyer & Dogan, 2016). For instance, some parents may neglect to have the necessary authority over their children. As a result, we observe spoiled, carefree children who disobey rules. In some situations, the reverse is observed. Some parents put extreme pressure on their children and try to control them with strict rules at home. Mainly, parents' negative attitudes, such as lack of authority or being too rigid, display themselves as the child's problematic behaviors at school and in the classroom (Güven, 2019).

Apart from these types of domestic or environmental factors, some types of children who experience difficulties in obeying social rules due to different character traits and who refuse to receive help for their unique conditions negatively affect other children's education at school. Children who display such negative behaviors and attitudes as being oversensitive or anxious, worried or stressed in class, experiencing attention deficiency or hyperactivity, being overly quiet or too introverted, not obeying rules or being nonadaptive, being overly aggressive or violent are called "difficult children" (Greene, 2015).

This phenomenon, which was described as undesired behavior for years, is now defined as "challenging child", "socially disadvantaged child", "child under risk", and "difficult child" as a result of the increase in research in this field in the last decades. Discussions carried out currently in the literature concerning this topic (Armstrong, 2017; Burger, 2006; Erden, 2011; Greene, 2015; Greenspan & Salmon, 2013; Laney, 2005; Loehken, 2016; Ozdemir & Acarkan, 2014; Turecki & Tonner, 2011) have made it obligatory for us to perceive differently the children who have been labeled as problematic, naughty, lazy, arrogant for years and have experienced social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. Also, it is observed that in traditional evaluations of negative student behaviors and attitudes, there is insufficient focus on the "temperament" phenomenon. On the contrary, studies conducted in recent years (Kansiz & Arkar, 2011; Tezer & Arkar, 2013; Totan, Aysan, & Bektas, 2010; Yagmurlu, Sanson, & Koymen, 2005) draw attention to the multifaceted effects of the child's temperament and personal characteristics on his/her behaviors, actions, or attitudes.

Although the terms "temperament" and "personality" are widely used interchangeably by some researchers, in reality, these two terms are quite different from each other. In general, temperament is a phenomenon related to the individual's biological roots and refers to his/her inborn natural manners and behaviors (Doksat, 2004). On the contrary, personality represents the distinctive characteristics of thoughts, emotions,

and actions that the individual has acquired later, defining how he/she has interacted with the social environment (Yilmaz, Gencer, Unal, & Aydemir, 2014). Personality, which develops on “the static/constant characteristics of temperament, has a dynamic/changeable structure” (Selcuk & Yilmaz, 2016, p. 8).

The “temperament” phenomenon was first studied by Thomas, Chess, and Birch (1970). This longitudinal study included 85 families and 141 children. In this study, the children were observed from birth for ten years, and the data were collected in specific intervals (at the ages of one, two, five, and ten). According to Thomas et al., all children exhibit differences in temperament characteristics from birth on, and the child’s character is shaped by the interaction of this inborn temperament with environmental factors. A total of nine temperament traits were defined as a result of this study. Turecki and Tonner (2011, pp. 25-26) increased this number to ten by adding one more trait (self-control) to this list. The ten temperament traits are as follows:

- *Level of activity*: In general, how active is the child beginning from an early age?
- *Self-control*: Is the child able to control himself/herself? How much of the behavior is impulsive?
- *Distractibility*: How easily is the child distracted?
- *Intensity of reaction*: How loud is the child when happy or unhappy? How dominant is he/she? Does he/she exhibit exaggerated behaviors?
- *Rhythmicity*: How predictable are the child’s behaviors concerning sleep, appetite, and evacuation habits?
- *Persistence*: When the child is busy with something, can he/she maintain interest (positive persistence)? When asked for something, how obstinate is the child (negative persistence)?
- *Threshold of responsiveness*: How does the child respond to a stimulus (noise, bright lights, colors, odors, pain, hot weather, taste, the texture of clothes, and the feelings they arouse)? Does the child get bored quickly? Is the child easily over-stimulated?
- *Approach or withdrawal*: What is the child’s first reaction to newness (new places, people, food, and clothes)? Does the child approach it or withdraw from it?
- *Adaptability*: How does the child cope with transitions or innovations?
- *Quality of mood*: What are the primary character traits of the child? Is he/she cheerful or serious generally?

Accordingly, it is nearly impossible to carry out the educational process according to the desired goals without discovering children’s inborn temperament traits. Although temperament is not the sole determiner of personality, it is a critical factor shaping one’s character. It is essential to cause awareness in teachers concerning this factor and consider the effects of familial and environmental factors such as parent attitudes or school programs based on temperament. Although temperament is a concept that has been widely used by educators in recent years, we have to deal sensitively with temperament based on character types. It is believed that some temperament styles or types are more challenging and incomprehensible than others. The difficult child phenomenon is tried to be understood within the context of these temperament types

as individuals behave in styles in which their temperament affects their character without being aware of it. This situation differs for difficult children in terms of their experienced difficulties and the difficulties they cause to other people.

For instance, Greenspan and Salmon (2013) have argued that there are five types of difficult children depending on their general characteristics and the shared elements of their reactions: “oversensitive child”, “introverted child”, “rebellious child”, “careless/distracted child” and “active/aggressive child”. Accordingly, “introverted children” (who have such characteristics as being shy, quiet, and unresponsive) and “rebellious children” (who have the reverse features such as being stubborn, challenging, controlling, and obstinate) experience different types of difficulties in their family, society, school, or classroom. At the same time, they cause other people to experience these difficulties. The most prominent problem faced by teachers when communicating with these children, and the biggest hindrance in guiding/helping them, is that they cannot understand and define the exact situation in which the children are.

One of the most significant reasons underlying this situation is that teachers do not spend enough time with their students to know them well. For instance, a study conducted with 457 Italian sixth-grade students and 58 teachers (Marucci, Oldenburg, & Barrera, 2018) examined how well teachers knew their students (how attuned they were with their students). The study investigated the extent to which teachers were aware of which students were highly liked, disliked, antisocial, aggressive, or engaged in risky behaviors. According to the study findings, it was observed that the “teacher attunement” phenomenon was positively associated with (a) how much time teachers spend with their students and (b) their awareness of children’s peer relations and experiences. In other words, the more time teachers spend with their students during the educational process, the better they know their students and the social dynamics among them.

This study aimed to examine classroom teachers’ perceptions about difficult children. The study intended to determine the extent to which classroom teachers were aware of difficult students in their classes and their characteristics. For this purpose, answers to the following questions were sought:

- How do classroom teachers define and conceptualize difficult children?
- What are the characteristics of students perceived as difficult children according to the opinions of classroom teachers?
- Which metaphors do classroom teachers use to reflect their perceptions of difficult children?
- From the classroom teachers’ perspectives, what kind of character styles do difficult children exhibit in their social communications and interactions?

## Method

### Study Design

This study was conducted within the phenomenological research design, one of the qualitative research approaches. Phenomenological studies focus on phenomena that we are aware of but do not have a deep and detailed understanding. According to Yildirim and Simsek (2013, p. 78):

“Phenomena can appear in various types such as events, experiences, perceptions, orientations, concepts, and situations in the world in which we live. We may encounter such phenomena in different ways in our daily lives. However, this familiarity does not mean that we understand them to the fullest extent. Studies which aim to explore the phenomena that we are familiar with but do not understand well constitute appropriate bases for phenomenology.”

Phenomenological research focuses on people’s experience and the in-depth meaning people derive from these experiences (Patton, 2014). According to Ersoy (2019), “descriptive phenomenology” and “interpretive phenomenology” are the two main approaches. While the primary purpose of descriptive phenomenology is to describe the participants’ perceptions and experiences about a phenomenon, interpretive phenomenology tries to delve into how they make sense of a given phenomenon based on their experiences. This study, which was conducted using the descriptive phenomenology design, has the concept of “difficult child” as its phenomenon.

### Participants

Table 1 shows the participating classroom teachers’ demographic characteristics.

**Table 1.**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

Central School (CS)			Disadvantaged Area School (DAS)			Private School (PS)		
Participant code	Gender	Teaching experience	Participant code	Gender	Teaching experience	Participant code	Gender	Teaching experience
CS1	F	18	DAS1	M	15	PS1	F	2
CS2	M	41	DAS2	M	9	PS2	F	11
CS3	M	30	DAS3	M	14	PS3	F	39
CS4	M	39	DAS4	F	16	PS4	F	3
CS5	F	14	DAS5	M	22	PS5	F	11
CS6	F	31	DAS6	F	15	PS6	F	2
CS7	M	31	DAS7	F	13	PS7	F	2
CS8	F	20	DAS8	F	12	PS8	M	20
CS9	M	10	DAS9	M	15	PS9	M	43
CS10	M	30	DAS10	M	12	PS10	F	5
CS11	F	20	DAS11	F	11	PS11	M	35
CS12	M	21	DAS12	F	14	PS12	F	4
CS13	M	25	DAS13	M	26	PS13	M	13
CS14	M	27	DAS14	F	17	PS14	M	5
CS15	F	25	DAS15	F	17	PS15	M	5
CS16	F	8	DAS16	M	17	PS16	F	29
CS17	F	25	DAS17	F	22	PS17	M	37
CS18	M	1	DAS18	F	20	PS18	F	7
CS19	M	6	DAS19	F	16	PS19	M	22
CS20	M	21	DAS20	M	23	PS20	M	28

To determine the study participants, maximum variation sampling, a purposeful sampling technique, was used. The aim of this technique is “to create a comparatively small sample and to reflect in this sample the variety of individuals who will be present in the focused problem on the maximum” (Yildirim & Simsek, 2013, p. 136). From this point of view, 60 teachers employed in three different types of schools in Konya (20 from central schools, 20 from disadvantaged area schools, and 20 from private schools) have been selected and included in the study. The purpose was to present similar and different perceptions of teachers working in different types of school settings and demographic factors such as gender and professional experience. As shown in Table 1, the participants included 28 females and 32 males, and their teaching experiences ranged between two and 41 years.

## Data Collection

The study data were collected using semi-structured interviews. According to Patton (2014, p. 341):

“We conduct interviews with people to find out what we cannot observe directly. We cannot observe situations in which an observer is not present. We cannot observe how people organize their lives and which meanings they associate with their life experiences. We must ask questions to people in order to learn such things.”

This point of view has given the motivation to use the interview technique and present the study data in detail. Four open-ended questions regarding the study’s four sub-questions were asked in the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. Also, probing questions were directed to the participants to elaborate or exemplify their views they shared based on these questions. The four open-ended questions used in the interviews are as follows:

- Who is a difficult child? How would you define him/her?
- In your opinion, what behaviors and characteristics of difficult students make people perceive them as difficult children?
- What/Whom would you resemble a difficult child? Why?
- In your opinion, what kind of character traits do difficult children exhibit in their social communication and interaction processes?

A voice recorder was used to record the interviews. The schools in which the interviews were conducted were determined beforehand. The approval (permission) for the study was received from the Konya Provincial Directorate of National Education. As the study was based on a voluntary basis, interviews were conducted at each school only with the classroom teachers who were volunteers instead of interviewing all teachers. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in appropriate settings at the schools during pre-scheduled hours. Before the interviews, the participants were reassured that the recordings and their names would be kept secret so that they could express their feelings and thoughts freely. Also, the study’s purpose was explained to them shortly

before each interview, and they were assured that the views that would be shared would be invaluable for the study's findings.

The interviews were carried out during teachers' free hours, lunch breaks, or in between class hours. Special care was taken to conduct the interviews at suitable times for the teachers to prevent conflict concerning class hours and not cause any inconvenience. A small portion of teachers requested to conduct the interviews between classes or during lunch hours. Special care was taken to use time efficiently to get maximum efficiency from such interviews. On the contrary, most of the interviews were conducted in teachers' free hours without facing any time limitations. Also, some interviews which initially had some tense or worried participants turned out to be sincere conversations in which they expressed themselves comfortably and thanked the interviewer. At the end of the interviews, most classroom teachers expressed that they were pleased about the interviewer listening to them and valuing their thoughts.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves the processes of converting data into findings and interpreting them (Patton, 2014). In this study, the data were analyzed using the content analysis technique. For this reason, the rough data obtained from the interviews were transcribed first. Following that, the data were organized within the study's sub-questions, and themes were identified. In addition, sub-themes were formed by coding similar opinions under each theme. The participants' own words and descriptions were used to name the themes. Finally, the data were converted into visual aids using figures. Direct quotations were used to increase the trustworthiness of research findings. Demographic information showing which opinion belongs to which participant was presented as codes in parentheses right after a given opinion (e.g., CS1, F, 18). The abbreviations "CS1", "DAS1", and "PS1" represent the types of schools where the classroom teachers work and their alphabetical order according to their first names. The letters "M" and "F" stand for male and female. The number presented right after gender represents the teachers' experience in years.

## Findings

In this section, the participants' answers to the open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews were analyzed and presented in four themes within the research's four sub-questions. The four themes are (1) perceptions of difficult children, (2) types of difficult children, (3) metaphorical images of difficult children, and (4) difficult children in the social process.

## Perceptions of Difficult Children

Figure 1 shows the definitions of participants on difficult children. The first five sub-themes in Figure 1 present the participants' conceptualizations of difficult children, whereas the sixth sub-theme represents the explanations of teachers who refused to accept the difficult child phenomenon. Below, these sub-themes are explained one by one.

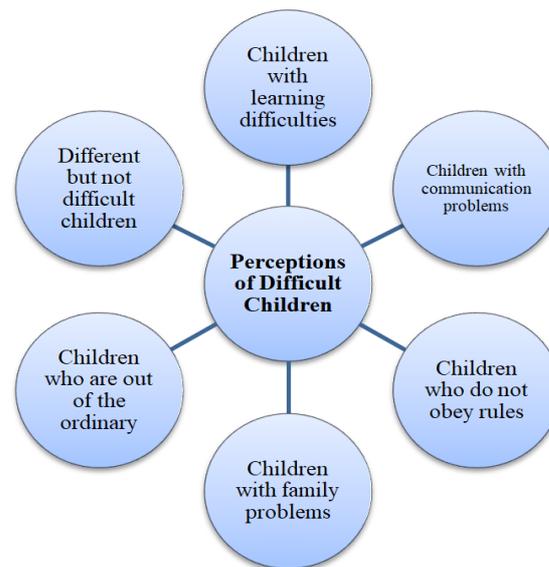


Figure 1. Perceptions of difficult children

### *Children with learning difficulties*

Under normal circumstances, every teacher desires to have students in his/her classroom with similar learning abilities. However, this is difficult to ultimately accomplish even in special classrooms arranged based on placement tests because every student may be a bit behind in some subjects. In contrast, some others may have success rates much higher than the average. Similarly, classroom teachers who participated in this study regarded students below or above the class average as having learning difficulties. They expressed that the children in both groups were equally challenging. The first group was conceptualized as children who learned later than the others, and the second group as children believed to be gifted or talented. According to this point of view, gifted children experience difficulties in class as much as children with learning disabilities and strain their teachers. These children, who get bored and focus their attention on other things in classrooms where their expectations are not met, may display undesired behaviors and may receive teachers' adverse reactions. For instance:

- "A child who has learning difficulty is difficult. If he/she is a bit below average, that child is difficult because he/she expects extra attention. If a child learns faster than the others or has an IQ higher than the other class members, that child is also difficult because he/she expects more

knowledge and attention from you. Both children experience difficulties in the classroom as education is carried out according to mainstream students." (CS5, F, 14)

- "A difficult child is the type of child who has different characteristics compared to other students in general and needs different teaching methods and techniques." (DAS1, M, 15)
- "Difficult children are those who learn and perceive slower than others, needing different methods on a topic to learn, as well as those who are too smart to keep up with the pace of learning in the classroom." (PS7, F, 2)

### ***Children with communication problems***

A curriculum that has to fit into specific class hours, overcrowded classrooms, and short breaks confine the amount of time spent to have high-quality communication with students. However, communication is one of the critical points of the teacher-student relationship in the classroom. Despite this, the method of communication is different for each child. Individuals' communication preferences generally bear the characteristics learned from family and the environment. In addition to this, the person's temperament is an essential factor that shapes the person's communication style. This communication style affects all of the child's family relationships first and later in the immediate environment or school. However, the participating classroom teachers' definitions regarding some difficult children's communication styles have been associated with a lack of communication. These types of children, which are identified as experiencing problems having conversations, are difficult to convince and understand and are replaced in the category of difficult children by their teachers. For instance:

- "They are students that we cannot convince, collaborate with, or communicate with, who isolate themselves from us." (CS19, M, 6)
- "A difficult child is one that is difficult to reach and requires effort to do so. You cannot understand a difficult child easily. It is easy to get to know some children, but getting to know such children is quite difficult. Even when you spend many years with a difficult child, things may not go as well as you wish." (DAS18, F, 20)
- "Difficult children are those who have difficulty communicating and with whom we have communication difficulties." (PS3, F, 39)

### ***Children who do not obey rules***

Rules are an essential factor in maintaining the teaching-learning process in the classroom. Once rules are determined, they are announced to class members, who are expected to obey them. However, one cannot always get what is desired, and there may be students who object to rules. In this respect, students who disobey or oppose rules have been included in the study participants' definitions of difficult children. Classroom teachers whose opinions are presented below have described these types of children as inharmonious, annoying, and on some occasions, arrogant. Although these types of students who disturb others have different reasons for disobeying rules, some teachers state that these students' behaviors are on purpose, implying that they are furious about this situation. For instance:

- “They are children who are disobeying class rules and general school rules and cannot get along with their peers. They harm the congruence and harmony of the class.” (CS4, M, 39)
- “Difficult children are those who cannot accept. They do not accept rules and advice. They do as they wish and have been brought up without discipline.” (CS17, F, 25)
- “They are children who have problems obeying rules and sometimes do this without being aware of it and sometimes on purpose to conflict with others. They act so as they have received too much or too little attention from their families.” (DAS14, F, 17)
- “They are children who disobey class rules and think they know everything. They consider themselves superior to others, but we do know that they do not know too much.” (PS20, M, 28)

### ***Children with family problems***

The family was one of the most prominent factors that some participants referred to when handling behaviors of difficult children. These teachers have attracted attention to the problematic family structure rather than the difficult child phenomenon. The fact that the environment was an important determining factor was emphasized as the second element to express the difficult child. It was stated that family and environment could negatively or positively affect the child and cause him/her to be perceived as difficult. For instance:

- “When I think of these students, I believe that these types of children exhibit such behavior due to domestic and social factors. The difficulties of these children stem from family and environment. I believe that children display different behavior due to domestic and environmental fears, especially pressure and physical violence at early ages, and factors related to these.” (CS3, M, 30)
- “I believe they are children who face challenges because of environmental factors. As the environments we work in are all disadvantaged area schools, with the children we see as difficult children, the problems are usually related to parents. Parents do not show enough interest in their children. They just send the children to school without a purpose. They just want their children to complete their compulsory education and learn to read and write. They do not want to send their children to school after compulsory education. Thus, they do not allocate attention to their children.” (DAS11, F, 11)
- “A difficult child is one who experiences behavioral problems related to family and causes difficulties to others because of these.” (PS12, F, 4)

### ***Children who are out of the ordinary***

Some participants have perceived difficult children as not ordinary or fitting into standards. Not fitting into standards means being closer to the unknown and departing from the normal. In this respect, a child who has not been met or known priorly may gradually cause problems in the educational process. When the opinions in this category are analyzed in detail, it is observed that classroom teachers try to explain difficult children using temperament. Although the number of such teachers is low, it draws attention as these teachers focus on genetic, character, nature, and temperament while defining difficult children and having the awareness to understand difficult children considering these factors. These teachers have also expressed that they do not consider themselves to be challenged by these students. Instead, it is the

individual defined as a difficult child who faces a challenge. They have stated that it is their primary duty to guide/help these students in the teaching-learning process due to these reasons. For instance:

- "I believe that a difficult child is one that I cannot provide any solutions for even though I use all scientific, humane, and moral methods that I know of as a teacher. I believe that the reason is genetic. There is no other reason for this." (CS4, M, 39)
- "Difficult children are those who are not mainstream, or different from general standards. They usually have a character that refuses to adapt to school life." (CS20, M, 21)
- "I define difficult children by dividing them into two categories: Some children display undesired behaviors due to family and environmental factors. On the other hand, some children may display negative behaviors with their inborn characteristics without external factors. No matter how well you treat them, do your best, or provide all desired conditions for them, they present behaviors that make you question whether you have made a mistake somewhere. I believe difficult children are those types of children." (DAS15, F, 17)
- "A difficult child is one that presents a different challenge for teachers. A difficult child is one who has differences due to some inborn characteristics. Temperament is dominant in difficult children." (PS8, M, 20)

### ***Different but not difficult children***

This sub-theme reflects an approach that considers the child solely as a child. According to this approach, each child is unique, exhibits individual differences, and has some rights as a child. Sometimes they have challenging sides, but this should not place him/her in the difficult child category, and the difficult situations he/she causes should be treated with understanding. It is observed that this approach is used from the child's perspective and not evaluated in terms of the difficulties the teachers encounter. When the definitions of difficult children in this category are carefully examined; children who are spoiled by the family and the environment, children who do not obey the rules, children who learn slowly in the classroom or who have a higher IQ and make teachers feel inadequate, always active/hyperactive children, and children who are difficult to communicate are also defined as difficult children. This multifaceted approach reflects classroom teachers' positive attitudes who try to understand students without prejudices with their differences. For instance:

- "Actually, there is nothing called a difficult child because I believe that some teachers and parents use such terms. Maybe some children are a bit more active than others. Some children learn slower than others or with different methods. It is said that difficult children are very active, disturbing, or do not listen to adults. However, that is why that child is different. If everyone is obeying the rules, nothing happens there, and the children are not at ease. When considered in general, each individual is different. They have individual characteristics specific to themselves. For this reason, they will act differently, of course." (CS7, M, 31)
- "I believe that there is no such thing as a difficult child. I care about individual differences. I do not like monotype students. I like different characters. Of course, there are challenging children. There are some children, some traits of whom are at extremes compared to their peers. Nevertheless, would these put us off from our job? No. I believe that we can overcome all difficulties with love." (CS1, F, 2)

- "I believe that teachers have created the difficult child concept. There is no such thing as a difficult child. The education systems, schools that offer educational services; teachers who work in these schools; techniques and methods used by teachers; tools and equipment; and the assessment and evaluation approaches they employ all result in easy or difficult children. If you do not make changes in the educational setting, if you do not use techniques and methods suitable for the age and needs of the child, the child will be difficult in the classroom." (CS19, M, 22)

## Types of Difficult Children

Figure 2 shows the types of difficult children stated in the participants' opinions. Below, these types of difficult children are explained one by one.

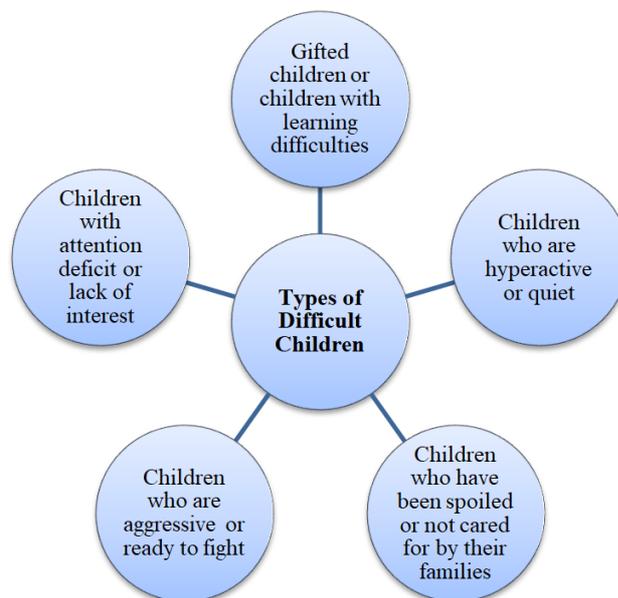


Figure 2. Types of difficult children

### *Gifted children or children with learning difficulties*

Children in this category are evaluated in two sub-categories regarding their characteristics. The first sub-category is children behind their peers in class or believed to have a problem like learning difficulty, whereas the other sub-category includes children who are believed to have IQs above average. Although these children show similarities in their behavioral styles, they are generally seen as children who draw attention to traits such as maladjustment, hyperactivity, stubbornness, or lack of interest. For instance:

- "Their perceptions are usually closed. They have perception problems. They have difficulty answering questions." (CS1, F, 18)
- "They are children who draw attention with their intelligence. Either they are loud or too quiet. Teachers easily notice the loud ones while they do not even notice the quiet ones." (CS6, F, 31)

- “These children generally make it difficult for the teacher to teach the subject. The difficult child may or may not have an idea of what the subject is. Both situations cause problems for teachers. When the student does not know the subject, this prevents his/her interest in the class. If child knows the subject, then he/she gets bored.” (DAS1, M, 15)
- “These children have a problem of learning slower than others. Apart from these, some children are intelligent but cause problems with their behaviors. Some children cause complaints during each break time. They have either injured someone or been in a fight with someone. I also consider those types of children as difficult.” (DAS12, F, 14)

### ***Children who are hyperactive or quiet***

Participants defined children who are hyperactive or quiet in contrast as difficult children. When the opinions in this category are analyzed, it is understood that hyperactive children or children who are quiet and do not respond to external interventions are perceived as difficult children. For instance:

- “They are hyperactive, but when we ask them what and why they are doing, they respond with the answer ‘nothing’.” (CS2, M, 41)
- “There are children who are quiet and introverted, and whose voice you can hear only when you directly ask a question to them. Those children are more difficult to handle. They are children that we should not overlook because we may lose them completely. Children who are active prove their existence by being naughty. However, introverted children are insignificant. We experience more cases of losing those children in crowded classroom settings such as in central schools.” (CS5, F, 14)
- “To give a simple example, these types of children never sit back and listen to the teacher. They have to get others’ attention. They disturb their classmates or want to go to the bathroom constantly. They never sit quietly. They are more active than the average child.” (CS8, F, 20)

### ***Children who have been spoiled or not cared for by their families***

Another kind of difficult child emphasized in the participating classroom teachers’ statements is spoiled children. It has been observed that these types of children also frequently display problematic behaviors. Families have been pointed out as the cause of problematic behavior. It has been emphasized that inadequate or incorrect training in the family, the family’s lack of love or extreme interest in the child causes problems in him/her such as being spoiled, disobeying rules, being irresponsible or problematic in social relationships. For instance:

- “I believe it is something caused by the family. The difficult child has a family source. For example, there may be educational problems in the family. Children with divorced parents, those whose fathers are in prison, or those who do not live with their parents may be given examples. These children have a longing for love, and they have problems. I believe that they are not naughty; they have not received enough love and attention. These children show their reaction either by keeping their feelings to themselves or overreacting.” (DAS6, F, 15)
- “They are children who have problems obeying certain rules in social structure and sometimes do this with an awareness of their actions and sometimes unconsciously. They behave so due to the extreme or insufficient attention of their families. They are children who cannot obey rules or have good communication with their peers or perceive the world from a different angle compared to

- their peers. They are defined as difficult children as their vision of the world, and incidents are different. They are exposed to different reactions by their peers." (DAS14, F, 17)
- "A difficult child is one who has been spoiled by his/her family, and does not listen to anyone, or tries to do everything he/she wants." (PS13, M, 13)

### ***Children who are aggressive or ready to fight***

Children who have a temper, tend towards violence or aggression have also been considered difficult children by teachers. These children's most prominent characteristics have been emphasized as being inharmonious, stubborn, and quarrelsome. For instance:

- "The child is incompatible and acts disturbingly. There is a tendency to violence. The child walks around instead of listening to the teachers. He/she expects everyone to show interest in him/her as he/she does not get enough attention at home. The child is either restless in class or shows his/her feelings by fighting in class." (CS3, M, 30)
- "They act like mavericks, form groups, act as leaders and get into fights. They are ill-tempered, and there is a tendency to violence. They have hyperactivity that they cannot prevent." (CS12, M, 21)
- "These types of children generally tend towards violence. When I talk to them about a problem, they say: 'I receive worse reactions at home. I am beaten. What you say does not affect me, no matter how much you talk.' What we try to do is in vain due to the violence they are used to, and I call them children with whom we cannot reach the desired results." (DAS9, M, 15)

### ***Children with attention deficit or lack of interest***

One of the salient characteristics of difficult children is distractibility and the lack of interest in the subject that accompanies it. It is observed that classroom teachers stated different reasons for this in their examples. For instance:

- "These children do not like to act the standard way. They act as opposed to social norms. They get bored when they carry out the same tasks in class. They are incompatible and get bored easily, which is challenging. They are easily distracted. They are straightforward and do not mind expressing straight that they are bored. They cannot sit still for a long time. Their way of thinking prevents them from being in the same position for a long time. They want to stand up. They do things to show that they are bored. In short, they are not interested in the lesson and distract the other students' attention with their actions." (CS10, M, 30)
- "These children experience too much distraction. They have difficulty concentrating in class. They are disorganized and act inconsistently. I believe that these children do not have good examples in their family or environment. This area is an agricultural region. They want to do their fathers' jobs and do not have a positive attitude towards education. I think they do not have goals." (DAS10, M, 12)

## **Metaphorical Images of Difficult Children**

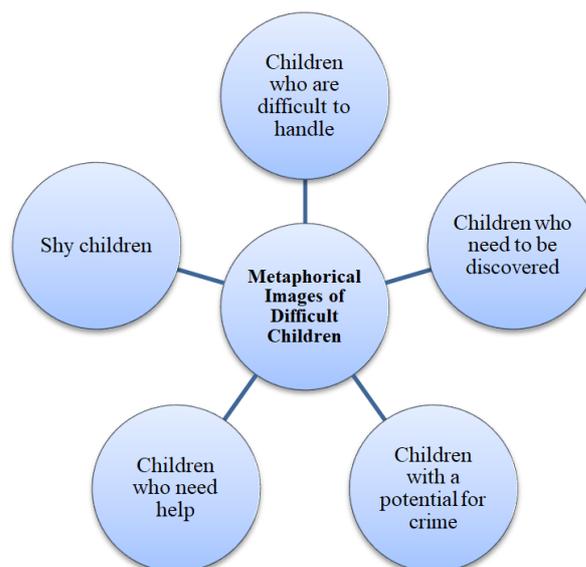
The participating classroom teachers were asked to resemble difficult children to a living creature or an object to present a more distinct explanation of difficult children in their minds. They were also asked to state why they chose to make that resemblance.

Some participants said that these children were unique and refused to resemble them to another entity or object. When the metaphors presented by the teachers were analyzed, it was observed that they emphasized the characteristics of difficult children within the framework of five sub-themes identified in Figure 3. Below, these sub-themes are explained one by one.

### **Children who are difficult to handle**

According to the participants, difficult children cause problems in the classroom because they have some characteristics, which are difficult to handle. When considered from this aspect, it is observed that teachers do not fully understand difficult children or find reasons for their behaviors. Thus, they experience problems when trying to communicate with difficult children. For instance:

- "I resemble them to mercury because it is difficult to bring together once scattered. Difficult children are like that too." (CS9, M, 10)
- "They are like a car with a broken engine. Traveling with them seems long and difficult." (CS15, F, 25)
- "I resemble them to a wall because they are unresponsive and quiet. It is difficult to get through to them." (DAS7, F, 13)
- "I would say a piece of rock because it is difficult to shape such children." (DAS12, F, 14)
- "They are like play-dough which has hardened because they do not take the desired shape." (PS2, F, 11)
- "They are like a flat tire because it is tough to travel with them." (PS12, F, 4)
- "It is like spinning on a stabilized road. Travelling with these children is difficult." (PS17, M, 37)



**Figure 3.** Metaphorical images of difficult children

### ***Children who need to be discovered***

Difficult children always have a mysterious side in the minds of teachers. The behaviors and reactions of difficult children initially perceived as unfavorable get some classroom teachers' attention and arouse interest and a need to discover. Teachers who pursue this curiosity stated that they achieved good results when they got to know these children. For instance:

- "I regard them as an electronic tool that we are not familiar with but wish to learn and use. In order to use the tool, I first have to discover. Difficult children may also succeed, but we have to discover them first." (CS6, F, 31)
- "They are like mines which have not been discovered because we do not completely know what they feel or experience. I think they have secrets and as science improves, their secrets will be revealed." (CS12, M, 21)
- "They are like a nut which is difficult to crack but sometimes there is something nice hidden inside." (CS16, F, 8)
- "They are like an encrypted suitcase because when you decrypt, you will get rid of the difficulty." (DAS16, M, 17)
- "They are like a planet that needs to be discovered. He/she is incomparable and unique." (PS8, M, 20)

### ***Children with a potential for crime***

It is possible to encounter children in each class who are more aggressive, quarrelsome, and sometimes throw a tantrum. These types of behaviors are sometimes learned from others. Parents', relatives', and other people's attitudes may set a bad example for children. In some other cases, despite several positive examples in the child's environment, the child is aggressive because of his/her temperament. Whatever the reason, if the tendency for violence is not dealt with at early age, it may result in situations in which the child harms not only himself/herself but also society. Teachers who developed metaphorical images in this category emphasized that it was imperative to notice aggressive, difficult children. For instance:

- "They are like predators because they constantly harm others." (CS4, M, 39)
- "I resemble them to rubber balls. When you leave them, they go on bouncing forever." (CS18, M, 1)
- "Wind maybe because you cannot keep them under control. It can be more difficult if the wind is strong. Then you cannot even keep yourself in place; you cannot control it. This is how the teacher feels like in the classroom." (DAS4, F, 16)
- "A wound clock maybe. Needs outer control all the time." (DAS11, F, 11)
- "They are like luna moths. They go towards something all the time but do not understand the harms of that thing." (DAS17, F, 22)
- "They are like an octopus because their arms reach all places and they exhibit disturbing behavior." (PS7, F, 2)

### **Children who need help**

According to the participants, some students who present characteristics of difficult children may lead an everyday life with positive feedback if they are guided correctly. Continually focusing on students' negative aspects creates a feeling of tedium in both the child and the teacher. However, suppose the teacher observes the student well and identifies his/her positive characteristics. In that case, the student may discover his/her positive characteristics, but children need help, support, and guidance from adults concerning this issue. For instance:

- "I resemble these children to tomatoes that I get from the market. I mean, you get a box of tomatoes from the market and bring them home. You see that some of them are about to rot, whereas some others are ripe or unripe. You cut the ones which are about to go bad and make tomato sauce. You use the ripe ones for salad, and you keep the unripe ones in the corner. You leave them to time. People are not the same." (CS2, M, 41)
- "They are like raw materials. They need the guidance of teachers and parents." (CS20, M, 21)
- "They resemble a tree with fruit that cannot be seen. You need a long busy process to see the fruit. We must give it time and take good care of it." (PS20, M, 28)

### **Shy children**

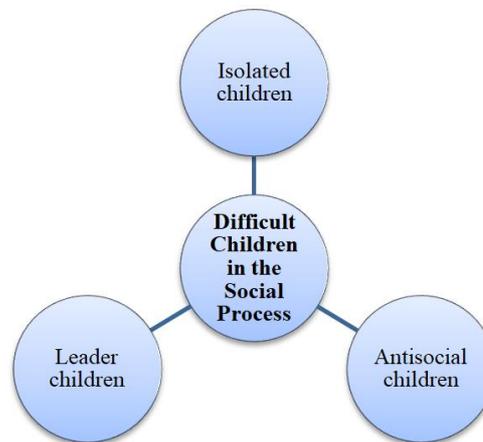
Some difficult children display introverted characters. These children get the teacher's attention with their quiet, shy, and timid reactions and fail in social relationships. Despite this, these types of children have a high sense of responsibility. If teachers approach these children appropriately and patiently, they may receive positive feedback in the future. For instance:

- "We may resemble them to a canary. A timid bird which gets closer to you as trust develops. But it may fly away if you do not know how to keep it in your hands." (CS3, M, 30)
- "They are fragile like tulips. They wait for a year to blossom." (CS5, F, 14)
- "Difficult children are like closed rooms. No sunshine inside and you do not know what is in it. You can live in that room only when you open the curtains and take care of it." (CS10, M, 30)
- "Maybe a seedling which grows slowly and does not give any reactions for a long time but suddenly grows into a tall tree because a difficult child also does not respond until he/she feels secure." (PS6, F, 2)

### **Difficult Children in the Social Process**

Each child has social interactions with his/her teachers in the classroom or school initially and following that with each adult that he/she communicates. If the child's social communication and interaction are sufficient and robust, his/her way of expressing himself/herself and self-confidence will be healthy. The contribution of a healthy social interaction to the child's future is a grown-up with balanced relationships, a good family member, and a citizen. Figure 4 presents the three types of personality structures that difficult children exhibit in social communication and

interaction based on participants' opinions. These personality structures are explained below one by one.



**Figure 4.** Difficult children in the social process

### ***Isolated children***

In the social communication and interaction dimension, we observe the type of children who are regarded as hyperactive by the participants and can easily join playgroups and start friendly relationships but cannot maintain a healthy friendship. Characteristics such as their extreme reactions, instability in obeying rules, and violent tendency cause them to receive adverse reactions from peers and become isolated. In the meantime, children who are known by teachers and peers as such are labeled negatively. For this reason, their chances of having social relationships are limited. The families are also informed about this negative labeling, and the result is social isolation. For instance:

- "There is a lack of communication; they cannot make friends. They are isolated in the playgroups because of their aggressive behavior. Students are intolerant of those who disturb them and disobey rules." (CS4, M, 39)
- "Children who hit and smash things are not easily accepted in social environments. Maybe the child is willing to include his/her friends in the group, but families may say things such as 'Do not sit with that child because he/she harms you'. Alternatively, they come to school and complain to the teacher, saying that they do not want that child to sit with their children. Some families even talk to the difficult child themselves. They tell the difficult child not to sit with their children. Then, the child sets up barriers and becomes more aggressive and tempered." (CS5, F, 14)
- "They get warnings in the classroom and have a bad reputation because of this. Their extreme behavior causes them to be isolated. Other students dislike those who tend towards violence. They have a difficulty of having healthy relationships." (CS18, M, 1)
- "Their behaviors negatively affect their relationships with their friends and other people. They experience a negative cycle in communication. In general, people do not understand them. Very few people can understand their situation. They are misunderstood, and people look down on them. They receive negative reactions and feel sad about this. People may make fun of them." (DAS15, F, 17)

### ***Antisocial children***

It is observed that introverted children are another group of children that experience problems in social interaction. As these types of children cannot express themselves well, they are perceived as lonely, unhappy children with weak social communication. They are seen as boring by their classmates and cannot join in games. The most prominent trait of these types of children is their lack of social skills. Thus, although they are willing to participate in games and join social groups, they have difficulty accomplishing this. They need guides who can understand and help them. For instance:

- "They do not participate in games. They are unenthusiastic in all topics. They do not make suggestions. They have difficulty forming relationships. They are known as antisocial." (CS1, F, 18)
- "Children who are quiet and introvert are also cold towards their friends and keep themselves at a distance." (CS3, M, 30)
- "Their social weaknesses cause disadvantages for them. They are not interested in others. Likewise, others are not interested in them." (CS10, M, 30)
- "These children cannot express themselves and are left alone. Children who seem not to exist in the classroom are known as difficult children." (DAS6, F, 15)
- "There are children who refuse to communicate. Whatever you do, they do not feel happy or sad. They do not give a reaction. I mean, they cannot express their feelings. You cannot have healthy communication with these children." (PS6, F, 2)

### ***Leader children***

Another issue that draws attention to the participants' opinions is that some difficult children have leadership qualities. Children who are considered hyperactive are a step further than their peers about starting games and being successful in games. However, these types of children can change their hyper-activeness to a disadvantage. It is believed that if these types of children are supported professionally by their teachers and environment, they can change this situation to a positive one in the future. For instance:

- "Advantages and disadvantages vary depending on the traits of the child. Some are naughty. They are active and good at sports. When it comes to classes, these children may experience attention deficiency and lack of interest and become unsuccessful. However, I observe leadership characteristics in these children on the whole. They are naughty, but they have the elements of fun and leadership." (DAS10, F, 5)
- "They are brave; they can easily do things that other children cannot. For example, some children earn their own pocket money by selling things or polishing shoes. This is an advantage for them." (DAS13, M, 26)
- "They are hyperactive and enjoy being leaders. They do not have difficulty expressing themselves. They are strong enough to express themselves in public, and they have self-confidence because they are not timid; they are energetic. For this reason, they may be leaders." (PS4, F, 3)

## Discussions

The “difficult child” phenomenon, which is the subject of this study, is generally explained in the literature based on “temperament” (Thomas et al., 1970). According to this approach, from birth on, every individual brings along his/her temperament characteristics. Temperament, which generally defines the why and how of behaviors/actions, draws attention to differences in the ways individuals react to their environment (Greene, 2015). For instance, although Turecki and Tonner (2011) define the ten temperament characteristics in every individual, each individual responds to social life situations and daily activities with the temperament characteristics present in him/her. These temperament traits are less balanced in some individuals, either as too much or too little. Such a situation causes individuals to experience different problems. Children whose behaviors cannot be understood by others and experience problems within their environment due to excess or lack of temperament characteristics are considered difficult children. In this respect, difficult children are conceptualized as different from standards or the ordinary by the participating classroom teachers, or as Shimomura et al. (2020) have expressed, “children outside the norms”. The study participants have also used definitions such as children who experience problems communicating with others, children who cannot control their behaviors, children who have learning and perceiving problems, and children who experience problems with their family.

Although the definitions of difficult children provided in the literature and those of the participating classroom teachers share similarities, there are also some differences. For instance, Greenspan and Salmon (2013) associate the reasons that cause children to be difficult children with temperament and divide them into personality types such as the sensitive children, the self-absorbed children, the defiant children, the inattentive children, the active/aggressive children, and children who cannot solve their problems. Similarly, in a study carried out by Owens and Ring (2007) with 12 child caretakers who had an average experience of nine years working with children, five types of difficult children were defined: biters, physically aggressive children, unruly children, destructive children, and loud children or screamers. The classroom teachers who participated in this study have made definitions that reveal that they also consider spoiled children due to familial and environmental factors, gifted children, and children with learning difficulties as difficult children. However, none of the participants has made descriptions regarding sensitive children.

In general, the participating classroom teachers are aware of the characteristics of difficult children discussed in the literature. They stated that they noticed the introverted, inattentive, or hyperactive/aggressive types of difficult children immediately. However, the number of teachers who associate difficult children’s behaviors with temperament is quite limited. Temperament offers a point of view that would shatter the tendency to regard personal behavior as superficial. According to this point of view, each child is different, but accepting that individual differences are related solely to the social environment and education is misleading. The genetic characteristics form the

individual's temperament and give him/her a difference in all life steps specific to the individual (Thomas et al., 1970). This situation makes it obligatory to handle difficult children's problematic behaviors, keeping in mind both the personal factors shaped by temperament and environmental factors (Shimomura et al., 2020).

It was observed that the participating classroom teachers were more empathetic towards leader children, children who expressed themselves easier in the classroom, children who were seen as leaders by their peers despite their hyperactive actions, compared to children who were isolated or perceived as antisocial by their peers. During interviews, some participants talking about their hyperactive students had an expression on their face that was positive and reflected their love and secret admiration towards these children. Despite all the difficulties and naughtiness the classroom teachers experienced because of these children, their facial expressions reveal that such children are perceived as mischievous, sweet, or innocent. As one participant stated:

"What I always say is this: As long as the child expresses himself/herself well, I can put up with all their naughtiness. Nevertheless, I believe that children who are quiet, calm, never get up or never raise their hands are much more difficult." (DAS6, F, 15)

Difficult children, who draw attention by the difficult situations they experience at home, school, and other social environments and are challenging for others, are sometimes labeled with such adjectives as different/unusual, problematic, and spoiled/naughty. Similarly, they are not usually fully understood by their peers and environment or even feel isolated (Erden, 2011). Thus, classroom teachers must know the positive sides of difficult children who cannot express themselves, rather than focusing on their negative aspects. They should also help them create awareness about their positive aspects. Indeed, some participating classroom teachers think that the most critical factor in handling difficult children is the teacher himself/herself. As one participant stated:

"If a teacher consciously or unconsciously blacklists a child in a way, he/she is also blacklisted, blamed, and isolated by his/her peers, in the same way, all the time." (PS5, F, 11)

Accordingly, if the teacher cannot maintain a constructive dialogue with the student or evaluate the student's difficulties from the child's perspective, approaching the child and helping him/her becomes difficult (Graff, 2009; Marucci et al., 2018). Suppose difficult children who cannot fully explain what they experience and have difficulty making sense of their behaviors feel that they are noticed and understood by others. In that case, they develop feelings of trust, peace, and love. This situation, in return, causes difficult children to feel at ease. As one participant stated:

"I resemble these children to candles. They are like candles that melt and destroy themselves. The candle burns and harms itself. In fact, they give out light, but it is difficult to see that. Difficult children have a light of their own, and one should see and feel that light. The child makes an effort to be noticed and asks others to notice him/her." (DAS6, F, 15)

Thus, teachers should first be willing to gather conceptual/theoretical knowledge about difficult children and later approach them with empathy using this knowledge. They

should understand the social dynamics among all the children from the child's perspective. They should play an active role in managing these dynamics (Hamm, Farmer, Dadisman, Gravelle, & Murray, 2011). Hence, it may be possible to contribute to children's social-emotional experiences at school positively. Similarly, some classroom teachers participating in this study have stated that difficult children's characteristics cause them to be misunderstood and left alone. They have also stated that it is difficult to find solutions for these types of children. However, some other participants have argued that they accept difficult children with their inborn characteristics and make an effort to cause positive changes in these children. It seems that an emphatic approach plays an essential role in the attitudes of the latter type of classroom teachers. As one participant emphasized:

"In my personal opinion, difficult children are different from others. I was also a different child. I always wanted to act and think differently. I wanted to act freely. This feeling made me do different, unexpected things. I believe that this was due to my nature. I used to get bored indoors. Naturally, classrooms are confined spaces, and when I see such a child, I can understand that child. I think about how I can make life easier for him/her." (CS10, M, 30)

In general, difficult children challenge life and those around them (Greenspan & Salmon, 2013). When this difficult challenge gets worse, the child's family and everyone around him/her get exhausted. However, being difficult, aggressive, and inattentive, or becoming different by isolating oneself from others is not a conscious choice of difficult children. In fact, when the factors that make a child difficult are identified, solutions also emerge. There are different ways to ease the problems that all types of difficult children experience. Although it is impossible to eliminate the factors that make a child difficult, it is possible to reduce these reasons if one knows them (Selcuk & Yilmaz, 2016). One of the main points emphasized by the participating classroom teachers concerning this topic is that as one gets to know the difficult children, it becomes easier to handle and help them. According to the participants, spending time with difficult children and trying to understand them has various advantages because this may also contribute to teachers' professional experience. As one participant stated:

"A difficult child is like a magic box. You pick it up thinking it is difficult, but there may be nice things inside. You start by thinking that they are difficult and will make me wear out, but they come back to you with experience." (CS11, F, 20)

Consequently, it is believed that teachers must develop consciousness and awareness of the difficult child phenomenon. They need to offer each child help/guidance in the teaching-learning process specific to each child's temperament. According to this point of view, for a teacher to cope with aggressive behavior in class, the teacher needs to know which students have an aggressive temperament. Similarly, for a teacher to help a student socially excluded by peers, initially, the teacher needs to be aware of that student's temperament (Marucci et al., 2018). As Turecki ve Tonner (2011, p. 34) have pointed out, "A difficult temperament is a risk factor for future problems, and the thing that people try to prevent are emotional and behavioral problems that may emerge in

the future". When considered from this point of view, teachers have great responsibilities. For this reason, each teacher should:

- Have conceptual/theoretical knowledge about difficult children and develop himself/herself accordingly.
- Have a good understanding of difficult children's strong and weak aspects, communication styles, and other temperament characteristics.
- Observe children's social behaviors in the school environment and create awareness about these behaviors.
- Not let peers exclude or label difficult children or harm them physically, emotionally, or socially.
- Develop and implement strategies to convert difficult children's negative characteristics to advantages.
- Allocate enough time to difficult children and each child in the classroom and get to know them well.
- Accept and love each child unconditionally.

## Conclusion

In this study, classroom teachers' perceptions of difficult children were examined. It is believed that this study contributes to a better understanding of the difficult child phenomenon in Turkey. On the other hand, the difficult children perceptions presented in this study are limited to the observations, experiences, and opinions of the participating classroom teachers; hence, it would be a too strong argument to generalize these findings to all school teachers in Turkey. Thus, it is believed that conducting similar studies with different branch teachers in different parts of Turkey and different types of schools will contribute to understanding the difficult child phenomenon more comprehensively. There is also a need for detailed research focusing on teachers' strategies to get through different types of difficult children and their success stories. For instance, in a study conducted by Saban and Saricelik (2018) using the narrative analysis method, a classroom teacher's effort to communicate with an introverted child was studied in detail through stories narrated by the teacher. Similar studies may be conducted on difficult children perceived as aggressive children, unruly children, or rebellious children. Such detailed studies are also vital for pre-service teacher training. Finally, it was found out that oversensitive children, a type of difficult children, were not fully understood or realized by the participating classroom teachers in this study. Thus, it is believed that studies on this topic will contribute to the understanding of this type of difficult children better.

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