Peer-Mediated Strategies for Managing Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: *This qualitative phenomenological study explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on managing inclusive classrooms in Lahore, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers from 9 inclusive schools. Thematic analysis revealed that most teachers reported that students help each other in inclusive classrooms through peer learning and cooperation. Teachers created mixed ability groups and peer support, facilitating disabled students' learning and social skills. Cooperative learning was viewed as improving academic achievement, social acceptance, positive behaviour and friendships. Findings suggest that peer collaboration and self-regulation strategies can effectively manage inclusive classrooms. More teacher training is needed on student-directed strategies.*

Key Words: Inclusive Education, Classroom Management, Peer Strategies, Self-directed Strategies, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Inclusive education refers to a system of educating students with disabilities and special needs alongside their non-disabled peers in regular classrooms (Lindner, Schwab, Emara, & Avramidis, 2023; Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2010). It involves altering schools to accommodate all students' diverse academic, social, and behavioural needs (Iqbal & Muhammad, 2020). Inclusive schools provide additional support, adaptive technologies, individualised instruction, and equal opportunities for meaningful participation to disabled students (Hayes & Bulat, 2017; United Nations, 2016). Compared to segregated special education, inclusive education has demonstrated greater academic progress and social adjustment for disabled students (Kolbina, Kasianenko, Sopivnyk, Karskanova, & Chepka, 2023). Inclusion is an established educational practice ensuring access and equity in countries like Canada, the USA, the UK and Australia (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015). However, in developing countries like Pakistan, inclusive education is still in the initial stages, with various challenges in implementation (Kazmi, Kamran, & Siddiqui, 2023). This study

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explores early childhood teachers' perspectives on managing inclusive classrooms in the Pakistani context.

Early childhood is critical for developing foundational academic and social skills (Bracken & Theodore, 2023). High-quality inclusive preschools facilitating peer interactions and supporting diverse learning needs are essential to ensure disabled children gain these vital competencies (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011). However, managing behaviour, collaborations, and differentiated instruction for children aged 3-5 with varying abilities pose unique classroom demands (Naveed, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2022; Tahira, Muhammad, & Masood, 2020). Teachers require training in evidence-based strategies to promote disabled students' participation and learning while maintaining a productive classroom environment (Helbig, Schreiber, Radley, & Dereiux, 2023). Peer-mediated techniques like cooperative learning groups, peer tutoring and modelling allow non-disabled students to assist disabled peers in academic tasks and social interactions (Draper, 2023; Sperry, Neitzel, & Engelhardt-Wells, 2010). Such collaborative strategies increase disabled students' engagement and motivation while fostering peer acceptance (Saleem, Muhammad, & Qureshi, 2021, 2023). Self-directed strategies that teach students to monitor their behaviour, evaluate their work and provide self-instructions develop disabled students' independence and self-regulation (Agran, Blanchard, Wehmeyer, & Hughes, 2002; Draper, 2023). Thus, peer-mediated and self-directed approaches can effectively manage early inclusive classrooms. This study will explore Pakistani preschool teachers' perspectives on these student-focused strategies for successful inclusion.

In Pakistan, inclusive education policies and legislation have expanded over the past decade, but substantial barriers persist in practice. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 22 promotes inclusive schools and the right to education for disabled students (Malik & Amin, 2012). Article 25-A of the constitution mandates free compulsory education for all children aged 5-16. The Special Citizens Act 2008 prohibits discrimination against disabled persons (Ahmed, Khan, & Nasem, 2011). However, only 1-2% of disabled children are enrolled in schools with minimal access beyond primary grades (UNESCO, 2014). Most schools lack trained teachers, accommodations for diverse needs and accessibility for disabilities (Saleem, Muhammad, & Masood, 2019, 2020; Saleem et al., 2023). Stigma, lack of awareness and resources also deter inclusive education (Miles & Singal, 2010b). Preschool inclusion is an even greater rarity. Thus, Pakistan has a long way to go in ensuring quality, inclusive education. Exploring preschool teachers' classroom experiences can identify strategies and training needs essential for successful inclusion during early childhood.

Lahore is the capital city of Punjab province and Pakistan's second-largest city after Karachi. Its population is over 11 million, making it the country's biggest Punjabi city (Government of the Punjab, 2022). Lahore's economy and education sector has expanded rapidly over the past decade. Several public and private preschools in Lahore have started 'inclusive' programs and classes to meet the rising demand for early education. However, research on inclusion practices at these preschools is limited. This study addresses this gap by interviewing teachers from inclusive early childhood classrooms in Lahore to understand their methods and perspectives on managing students of varying abilities. The findings will provide insights into peer-mediated and self-directed strategies that teachers find effective for successful inclusion during early years.

Literature Review

Social Constructivist Theory

Social constructivist theory by Lev Vygotsky underpins the conceptual framework of this study. It suggests learning is a social process facilitated by interactions, collaborations and scaffolding from more skilled peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Language and culture shape cognitive development. Zone of proximal development

refers to tasks that students can accomplish with peer assistance but not yet independently. Peer collaborations enable learning within this zone. These premises support using peer-mediated strategies where non-disabled students collaborate to scaffold disabled peers' learning. Vygotsky also emphasised self-regulation. Children first regulate behaviour through external factors like adult directions but eventually, internalise control. Hence self-directed strategies that develop students' capacity to monitor their behaviour and learning foster inclusion. The study is grounded in these key concepts of social constructivism - peer interactions, collaborative learning, scaffolding, self-regulation, and culture-shape development.

Peer-mediated Strategies

These practices are identified as positively impacting the behaviours of students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings and are thus used as an effective strategy for managing classes (Saleem, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2021). Activities like the pairing of students with disabilities and without disabilities for tutoring, collaboration, and play were studied in an inclusive setting. Peer-assisted learning strategies help students with disabilities achieve more social acceptance in an inclusive setting (Fuchs, Fuchs, Mathes, & Martinez, 2002). Copeland et al. (2002) have used peer budding to pair students without a disability with one having a disability. This helped in the social adjustment of students with disabilities in everyday class activities and thus created positive relationships between peers. This enhanced self-confidence and independence among students with disabilities, with a marked decline in anti-social behaviours. Spencer, Scruggs, and Mastropieri (2003) studied the impact of peer tutoring and cooperative learning and identified these as positively associated with increased academic and social behaviours of students with disabilities in an inclusive setting. Goldstein and Thiemann (2000) reported a decrease in frustration among students, an increase in their interaction in class, and a decline in the frequency of inappropriate behaviours due to peer-mediated strategies. These strategies enhanced respect and appreciation among nondisabled students for disabled peers.

The most frequently used technique for teaching and learning in inclusive classes is peer-mediated strategies. The purpose of peer-mediated strategies is to improve the student's academic performance.

Many types of peer-mediated strategies are used in inclusive classrooms (Ryan, Reid, & Epstein, 2004). *Cooperative learning:* Cooperative learning is group learning where all team members are not just responsible for their own learning, but they have the responsibility to teach and provide help for understanding all group members. They develop an understanding of a subject or topic and learn in subjects-based activities. All students' abilities differ from each other. *Peer-tutoring:* Some students need help in studying, so these students pair with highly skilled students. The highly skilled students help to study the same curriculum. The tutors provide directions to their peers. *Peer assessment:* Friends are utilised to evaluate the items or results of the learning of different peers of comparative status. *Peer- reinforcement:* In the natural setting, the peers reinforce disabled students for suitable reactions. The purpose is to strengthen the suitable behaviour of the special needs students according to their class fellows.

Cross-age tutoring: In cross-age tutoring, the younger student pairs with an older student. The tutor is older than the tutee in age and grades. There are no enormous contrasts in expertise levels between the coach and the tutee. The tutor should be at least two years older than the tutee's. *Peer-modelling:* Some students act as role models for achieving some desired behaviour according to some instructions in front of the special needs students. The teacher provides instruction to the role model students; however, these students have deficiencies or have some problematic behaviour to observe the peer model, and the teacher evaluates the desired behaviour of the students. *Class-wide peer*

tutoring: In the whole class, students perform the role of peer tutoring. Both types of students, like tutee and tutor, participate during the tutoring session. A student participates in only one role in peer tutoring; for example, one student performs the role of only a tutor or tutee. *Peer-assisted learning:* This is also a type of class-wide peer tutoring, in which teachers sele students with expertise in specific subjects. In this category, the tutor changes every day or specific time because all students participate in a tutoring session and have many skills in different things. If one student plays a tutor role the next day or another activity, the same student participates as a tutee.

There are many characteristics of peer-mediated strategies. The peer-mediated strategies increased all students learning in an inclusive set-up (Burns, 2015). These characteristics are given below:

Peer-mediated strategies develop the positive interaction of all students with each other.

Peer-mediated interventions are beneficial in achieving the learning goals for all students in inclusive classrooms.

The students with disabilities observe their peer's behaviour, so this observation improves the positive behaviour of the special needs students.

The peer-mediated strategy is beneficial for inclusive and mainstream students learning.

Use of this strategy, students with disabilities, students with behavioural problems, and students without disability achieve learning outcomes during school time and out of school.

The students develop positive relationships with the peer, and they become good friends.

When a teacher uses a peer-mediated strategy in an inclusive classroom and makes peers of both students (students with disabilities and students without disability), these students-built friendships, share things with each other, and also develop meaningful communication when they interact with each other.

The peer-mediated strategy is a lifelong process; its effects tend to on students' learning, behaviour, and emotions and also on teachers (Burns, 2015).

Peer-mediated strategies have been shown to be an effective approach for promoting inclusion and learning in general education classrooms. As evident from the above review, these practices enhance academic and social outcomes for students with and without disabilities. Key benefits include increased positive interactions and friendships between students, improved behaviour of students with disabilities, and greater learning for all students (Ashraf, Muhammad, & Bokhari, 2022). Peer-mediated techniques align with social constructivist principles of learning as a social process facilitated by collaborative interactions with more skilled peers. This review of the literature provides a strong rationale for the use of peer-mediated strategies as a way to facilitate inclusion and suggests they are a promising practice worthy of further research.

Methods

The study aims to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on managing inclusive classrooms. Moreover, this study explored which peer-mediated strategies teachers use in inclusive classrooms to achieve positive outcomes for all students in inclusive settings.

This is a 'hermeneutic phenomenological design' (Vagle, 2018) study that is concerned with the study of experience from the individual's perspective to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on the management of the inclusive classroom. The qualitative research approach is appropriate for understanding social problems from various perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research helps us to collect data from actual realities of life-related to people (Tracy, 2020). Moreover, the qualitative approach allows research to be conducted in a natural setting and involves a process of building a complex and holistic picture of the situation of interest (Mills & Gay, 2019).

A purposive sample was used to select 12 interviewees who shared their experiences. Purposeful sampling is a method generally used in qualitative research to detect and collect information-rich cases for the most valuable use of inadequate resources. This involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest.

At the time of data collection, there were nine inclusive schools in Lahore. All these schools were selected to recruit 12 school teachers who deal with both students (students with disabilities and students without disability). This study used semi-structured interviews as the primary method. Interviewing is a natural and socially acceptable way of collecting data as it can be used to cover various topics in different settings.

The interview guide is designed in the English language. The interview questions were grouped into two categories. The first group of questions required the participants to provide their demographic information, age, years of working experience, and educational levels. The second category sought to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on managing an inclusive classroom according to the conceptual framework.

The interview guide was used to collect the data from the purposefully selected participants. Thematic data analysis technique was used to analyse the data. Thematic Analysis is analysing figures or questions in qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The main aim of the thematic analysis was to make figures and questions, whether arrangements of the data are essential or not, and these figures are used to answer the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013). All transcriptions were analysed through Excel software. Five analytical methods were used to analyse the data, "familiarisation, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation."

To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the first author (MT) reviewed the literature on classroom management in inclusive classrooms and then consulted other members to develop a semi-structured interview guide. Before the actual data collection process, the initial piloting of interviews was done to achieve in-depth information related to the research objectives through open-ended interview guide questions used to collect the data from the purposefully selected participants. Recording the participants' responses carefully and after the data collection process, checking all the interviews and spending enough time for all interviews and carefully transcribing all the interviews in MS Word sheet, and create sub-themes of the interview guide and then giving them some codes to the relevant response of the participants and after the debriefing of the supervisor, write the findings and conclusion. At last, for steadfastness and conformability, the review trial was engaged to check the reliability and objectivity of the outcome through the regular response provided by a qualitative researcher in the research practice and the last part.

This researcher followed an ethical research design to ensure that no harm was done to the research participants. In the development of ethical research design, obtaining the informed consent of the research participants was mandatory. An informed consent form was obtained from the teachers at the beginning of the study to ensure the free will of each participating individual. The participants were given an informed consent form that consisted of two sections. Section one contained information regarding the study, which included details about the purpose of the study, a description of the participant, the procedure of participation, participation voluntariness, anticipated risks and benefits, the confidentiality of the data, communication of results, and contact information for further queries.

Moreover, section two of the informed consent form contained a consent certificate. After reading the detailed information sheet, if the participant decided to participate in the study, he or she was asked to sign the consent certificate. And the participant was given a copy of this informed consent form. The consent was obtained prior to the interviewing

process, and they were informed that they had a free choice to participate in the study and to withdraw from it at any time throughout the process. The responses of the participants were kept strictly confidential. No one other than the researcher had access to the transcripts and audiotapes. All the transcripts were coded (Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and so on), and these codes were assigned with randomisation.

Moreover, pseudonyms were used to ensure participants' anonymity in interview transcripts. In addition, the participant's identity was kept anonymised during data analysis and publication/presentation of results. Any personal information (demographic data) collected was not disclosed or distributed.

Findings

This section presents findings from interviews with early childhood teachers regarding their use of peer-mediated strategies to facilitate inclusion. Key themes related to students helping peers at the early childhood level, the benefits of creating small groups, peers supporting students with disabilities, and using cooperative learning groups. The findings provide insights into how teachers leverage peer interactions to promote academic, behavioural, and social outcomes for all students in inclusive classrooms.

Peer Mediated Strategies

Students at the ECE level help each other

Most teachers believe that students help each other in learning and in-class activities at this level because they are very cooperative and caring. Some believe that at this level, students are very innocent. They know their peers' condition, and they help in the study. However, they argue that some people are not good and caring in our society, and they tell their children to ignore students with disabilities. It depends on the classroom environment and the child's upbringing. For example, two teachers stated:

Yes, according to my one and half year experience, they can teach each other. This

behaviour is more about preschool. They are very caring towards each other. If one of them mostly does not know his work, his peer will leave his work and help him. If any children have mobility issues, his peers will help him by giving support to their hand so they can take books out of his bag. (Teacher 2)

Yes, they help each other in learning, especially normal children, who are very cooperative. But this depends on it their home environment because some mothers tell their children to stay away or avoid such children like a special child. (Teacher 5)

Some teachers believe that early childhood students are not capable of helping their peers in their study; these students are in the process of learning and, therefore, cannot help other students study. They also report that in inclusive classrooms, they modify the syllabus according to the need of their students; the curriculum is the same for both types of students, but only some modifications according to the need of special students. Therefore, students without a disability cannot help the special student's learning. For example, a teacher states,

No, students do not help each other during study at this level. Because they need themselves need help, they cannot help anyone else. And we have made or set the curriculum plans so they cannot help each other. (Teacher 7)

Creating Students' Group

Most teachers believe that student grouping is very necessary for an inclusive setting. They report that they create groups of both students (normal and special needs students) in which they work together and cooperate in a group activity, and also they fully participate in activities. Some teachers believe that if students do not understand what the teacher has taught, his/her peers can tell him/her the best way, and this level of students are very friendly and do work with cooperation in classroom activities and outside the classroom. They do not envy their comrades. For example, two teachers stated,

Of course, when I sit with a special student with two or three normal students, he remembers

the lesson very well as the normal students. Normal students also help special students during their studies. (Teacher 5)

We create groups based on the same age but different learning levels. Friendship among the group is also ensured in inclusive settings so that both types of students can understand each other, and normal children can learn to accept the abnormal as part of our society. We group them in different activities like racing and give them some tasks, and we see sometimes special students perform better than normal. (Teacher 6)

Some teachers note that students understand each other better when they create student groups. They work cooperatively and help their peers enthusiastically and become good friends. They fully participate in group activities. They work together, and with collaboration, they plan some activities or competitions. For example, a teacher states,

When we make groups, they work very cooperatively. Sometimes they make different cards during group activities like independence cards, Eid cards, Mother's Day and Father's Day. When they share their thing with each other, they become good friends. So, groups are very effective for cooperative learning and students' understanding of disability. (Teacher 12)

Supporting Students with Disability

Teachers believe that when we make groups of disabled students and non-disabled students, normal students provide help in all activities. Most teachers report that inclusive means all students (with disability and non-disability) studying in one class. Teachers report that they eliminate the inferiority complex of special students by making these students realise that they are no different and by making them feel like a part of society. In addition, they report that normal students care about their disabled peers and help them in study-related activities. They. For example, a teacher states,

Yes, they provide support because when students sit together, they understand the needs of each other. Actually, inclusive means that we teach these children together so that they cannot feel different from others or which makes them

feel different. That is why we remove their concept of differentiation; we pair them with each other as we make them sit in the same class. Yes, when children sit together in the form of groups or pairs, and if one child cannot complete the given task, the other usually helps him to complete the same task. (Teacher 1)

Teachers report that peer support is very effective in their teaching since it enhances social and academic skills. They believe that special children learn more through observation in inclusive settings. They believe that if these children are taught in special schools, they will not develop full confidence, and in the inclusive school system, they observe normal peers and their fears are removed. The teachers also note that pairing both types of students is very helpful in enhancing positive behaviour, social skills, and academic learning. For example, teachers state

Normal students help disabled students. I usually make a pair of one disabled and one non-disabled. Pairing students with disabilities and students with normal is very effective and beneficial for developing good behaviour of disabled students. (Teacher 4)

Yes, normal peers help a lot of disabled students. If the peer help in the study, students easily understand it. If the normal peer supports disabled students, they enhance social relationships, friendships, communication, and academic achievement. And peer support is very effective in their study. During the activity, they also enhance social skills and also academic skills. (Teacher 7)

Only one teacher reports that he keeps special children away from normal children because the media has damaged their minds, and they make fun of them (Teacher 5).

Creating Cooperative Learning Groups

Most teachers believe cooperative learning helps academic achievement, acceptance, friendship, and positive behaviour. They emphasise that if students work together in the same curriculum activity, they can achieve positive academic outcomes, and also, they

become good friends and increase positive behaviour. For example, a teacher states,

When all the students work together, everything else will improve because students learn more with their peers. When children work cooperatively, this enhances positive behaviour, becomes friendlier and achieves positive outcomes in the study (Teacher 8).

Teachers believe that cooperative learning is very important for a student's success. All students provide help to each other during study activities. When all the students work together, everything else will improve. We make groups based on cooperative learning and get better results. For example, a teacher state,

Cooperative learning groups help in academic achievement, acceptance, friendship, and positive behaviour. If a student's math is very good, he helps other students solve math problems after finishing his work. In friendship, they help their friends if they need anything. (Teacher 12)

Only a teacher believes that cooperative learning does not improve the student's behaviour and other things. If we make groups of students who work cooperatively and help each other during the study, they improve these things. The teacher also notes that the disabled students are not dependent on other students because the shadow teacher is all-time with him/her. For example, the teacher states,

Sometimes normal students help them with study activities. It has not too much effect. To some extent, it helps in all of these things because special students are not much dependent on normal students. (Teacher 5)

Thus, the findings indicate that early childhood teachers view peer-mediated strategies like cooperative learning groups and peer support as beneficial for promoting inclusion. They believe these practices enhance academic and social outcomes for students with and without disabilities when implemented thoughtfully.

Discussion

This phenomenological study explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on managing inclusive classrooms through interviews with 12 teachers from inclusive preschools in Lahore, Pakistan. The findings revealed that most teachers utilise peer-mediated strategies like peer collaboration, peer tutoring, cooperative learning groups and cross-age tutoring to facilitate disabled students' learning and social participation. Creating mixed-ability groups where non-disabled students assist disabled peers was viewed as an effective approach for improving academic achievement, positive behaviour, social skills and friendships.

The study's findings align with previous research demonstrating the benefits of peer-mediated techniques in inclusive classrooms. Teachers in this study emphasised cooperative learning improved disabled students' motivation, engagement, and sense of belonging. This corroborates Susan R. Copeland et al. (2002) study, showing peer collaboration enhanced self-confidence and reduced problematic behaviours among disabled students. Teachers also noted peer tutoring and modelling allowed non-disabled students to provide academic and social scaffolding for disabled peers, facilitating their learning and social adjustment. This confirms the positive impacts on academic and social outcomes reported in other studies utilising peer tutoring and modelling in inclusive settings (Goldstein & Thiemann-Bourque, 2000).

However, one teacher in this study was hesitant about peer strategies, preferring to separate disabled students due to perceived peer rejection. This highlights the persisting attitudinal barriers and stigma towards inclusive education in the Pakistani context (Miles & Singal, 2010a). Greater teacher training and societal awareness are needed to dismantle misconceptions and promote inclusive values.

Overall, findings suggest that student-directed strategies like peer collaboration, tutoring and cooperative activities can effectively manage inclusive preschool

classrooms by facilitating differentiated instruction, scaffolding and meaningful participation for disabled students. This aligns with social constructivist principles that student interactions, scaffolding and cooperative learning within the zone of proximal development enhance outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978; Zahid, Muhammad, & Waqar, 2022). But some teachers felt early childhood students were too young to assist disabled peers, indicating a need for more training on developmental appropriateness and implementation of peer strategies. The lack of teacher education programs specific to early childhood special education in Pakistan poses additional challenges (Malik & Amin, 2012).

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into peer-mediated approaches that early childhood teachers in Pakistan utilise to manage inclusive classrooms. Findings suggest creating mixed-ability cooperative groups, peer tutoring pairs, and modelling facilitates disabled students' learning and socialisation during the critical preschool years. However, few teachers had adequate training in managing diverse academic and behavioural needs. More professional development must equip teachers with developmentally appropriate, evidence-based peer strategies for successful inclusion. Negative societal attitudes persisted with some teachers, highlighting the need for greater public awareness. Further research should explore the impacts of specific peer techniques like class-wide tutoring, peer assessment and reinforcement on academic and social outcomes in Pakistani inclusive preschools. Greater focus on early childhood teacher preparation for inclusive settings is also essential to improve the quality of preschool inclusion in Pakistan.

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