Facilitating Inclusion through Student-Driven Strategies: Perspectives of Early Childhood Teachers in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This phenomenological study explores early childhood teachers' perspectives on using student-driven classroom management strategies to facilitate inclusive education. Twelve teachers from nine inclusive schools in Lahore, Pakistan, participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of transcripts provides insights into teacher views on utilising self-directed approaches to promote positive student outcomes. Most teachers recognise the value of self-management strategies like self-monitoring and self-evaluation to improve student autonomy, behaviour, and learning. However, developmental, and disability-related challenges may limit young learners' usage of such strategies. Findings indicate that student-driven approaches are promising but require training on scaffolded implementation, considering diverse learner characteristics. Self-directed methods should be integral to teacher preparation and inclusive education policies. The study addresses a knowledge gap and has implications for enhancing inclusive practices during early schooling.   .*

Introduction

Inclusive education aims to provide quality education to all students by accommodating their diverse needs in regular classrooms (UNESCO, 2014). It involves making appropriate modifications and providing the required support to ensure the full participation of students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. Early childhood inclusive education lays the foundation for lifelong, inclusive learning. However, teachers face challenges in effectively managing inclusive preschool and early elementary classrooms. Students exhibit behavioural, social, emotional, cognitive and communication difficulties that are barriers to learning and participation (Saleem, Muhammad, & Masood, 2021a, 2021b; Saleem, Muhammad, & Qureshi, 2021). Teachers require suitable classroom management strategies to promote positive student outcomes (Saleem, Muhammad, &

Masood, 2019, 2020a, 2020b).

Self-directed learning strategies that encourage student autonomy and self-regulation can be useful. The literature indicates that self-management methods like self-monitoring, self-assessment and self-reinforcement allow students to take responsibility for their own learning and behaviour (Wehmeyer, 2002). Self-monitoring improves the academic performance and class participation of students with disabilities (Menzies, Lane, & Lee, 2009). However, there is limited research on teacher perspectives on using such student-driven strategies with young learners in inclusive settings. This study aims to fill this gap by gaining insights into early childhood teachers' views on managing inclusive preschool and early elementary classrooms in Pakistan using student-centred approaches.

The research objectives are: (1) Understand teachers' perspectives on peer-mediated tactics in

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inclusive classrooms that lead to positive outcomes for all students. (2) Understand teachers' perspectives on student-driven strategies in inclusive classrooms that lead to positive outcomes for all students. This qualitative phenomenological study uses semi-structured interviews to examine teacher experiences of managing inclusive classrooms. It provides an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive self-directed strategies as suitable for young learners. The findings have implications for improving classroom practices to facilitate inclusion during early schooling.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into three sections. The first section deals with self-directed strategies, which encourage students' self-awareness, independence, self-reliance, and competence. This strategy has been shown to be effective for students with autism spectrum disorder, improving their social, academic, and behavioural outcomes. The second section examines self-monitoring techniques like goal-setting, self-recording, self-observation, self-charting, and self-instruction. Researchers have found these strategies help students take responsibility for their learning and improve performance. The third section covers the characteristics of self-directed strategies, which develop creative thinking, decision-making, teamwork, organization, information evaluation, and communication skills.

Self-directed Strategies

The self-directed strategy encourages students' self-awareness, independence, self-reliance, and competence. The strategies of self-management provide help to special needs students in the general classroom settings and both types of teachers, special and general teachers, and paraprofessionals to fully participate in their classes.

The use of this strategy involves students learning to assess, observe, and change one's own behaviour. This strategy is very effective for autism spectrum disorder students and improves socially, academically and manages their behaviour in the classroom (Carr, Moore, & Anderson, 2014). In this strategy, the student learns to modify, observe, and assess one's own behaviour.

Such practices help students with and without disabilities to take charge of their own behaviours by monitoring and reinforcing and ultimately moving towards self-management. Agran, Blanchard, Wehmeyer, and Hughes (2001) have advised explicitly encouraged students with disabilities to take responsibility for their learning by practising self-management techniques. These techniques, particularly reinforcement, were identified to strengthen positive behaviours among students in inclusive settings. Practices such as self-promoting to answer questions on a worksheet proved to be very effective in improving the performance of students with mental retardation in inclusive settings (Copeland, Hughes, Agran, Wehmeyer, & Fowler, 2002). Self-management skills, especially self-monitoring, taught to students with learning disabilities have improved completion rates, and the quality of assignments has identified a positive impact of self-instruction, self-monitoring, and self-reinforcement strategies on the academic and social behaviours of disabled students.

Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring is the very used strategy of self-management. For learners of ASD, this strategy helps to enhance task conduct, task commitment, academic output, and different social behaviours, just as social starting (Carr et al., 2014). There are two components used in self-monitoring—self-recording, in which the students mark their own target behaviour where this behaviour occurs. Moreover, the second is self-observation, in which the student observes their own behaviour (Briere III & Simonsen, 2011). Goal setting: In goal setting, the student sets the aim to change their behaviour. When the students set goals, this strategy helps to motivate the students and design develop toward the goal. Self-charting or self-graphing: Students are accountable for charting their behaviour frequently, which they observe to monitor the progress of their behaviour (Sutherland & Snyder, 2007). Self-instruction: In self-instruction, the learners utilise self-assertion to immediately and immediately change behaviour, often through a set of tasks. For instance, students with ASD might be instructed to verbalise arranging (e.g., "What is the subsequent stage?") Or adapting report ("I can do this. I'm working admirably.") to advance assignment fulfilment and keep up task resilience (Asaro-Saddler & Saddler, 2010).

Characteristics of Self-directed Strategies

According to du Toit-Brits and van Zyl (2017), the characteristics of self-directed strategies are: Students identify their own problems and resolve the problem, moreover, to build creative thinking and develop

decision-making qualities. In teamwork, the individual's cooperation is very effective. The individuals managed, responsible, and organised their activities. The students gather information, to scanning the things, information organised, and critically evaluate. The students are very able to communicate effectually in many forms through language skills and visionary skills.

The literature review clearly demonstrates the benefits of self-directed strategies for students with special needs in inclusive classrooms. By taking ownership of their learning and behaviour through goal-setting, self-monitoring, and other techniques, students build self-reliance and self-management skills. These strategies have been shown to increase academic performance, task engagement, assignment completion, and positive conduct in the classroom. Although more research is needed, current findings indicate self-directed strategies that facilitate student independence can improve outcomes across academic, behavioural, and social domains. Implementing such student-driven practices in inclusive settings provides a promising approach to empowering learners with diverse needs and fostering their success.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to gain insights into early childhood teachers' views on managing inclusive classrooms. It also aims to find out what strategies teachers employ in inclusive classrooms to promote positive outcomes for all students.

This is a 'hermeneutic phenomenological' (Thomas-Anttila & Solomon, 2023) study that examines experiences from the teacher's standpoint to comprehend how early childhood teachers manage inclusive classrooms. It is a fitting approach to understanding social issues from different viewpoints (Godden & Kutsyuruba, 2023). Qualitative research assists in gathering real-life data related to people (Farooq, Muhammad, & Mahmood, 2023; Lichtman, 2023). Moreover, it enables studying things in their natural setting and constructing a comprehensive picture of the situation (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023).

Twelve interviewees were purposefully chosen to share their experiences. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify and recruit information-rich cases for optimal use of limited resources (Obilor, 2023). It involves selecting individuals knowledgeable about the phenomenon of interest (Khawaja, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2022). Nine inclusive schools in Lahore were recruited to select 12 teachers who teach students with and without disabilities. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method. Interviewing is a natural and socially acceptable way of gathering data on diverse topics and settings.

Framework analysis—a type of thematic analysis (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) was conducted to analyse the interview transcripts. The interview guide was in English. The questions were of two types: First, participants provided demographic information like age, experience, and education. Second, questions explored teacher perspectives on managing inclusive classrooms based on the conceptual framework. The interview guide was used to collect data from the purposefully selected participants. Framework analysis involves identifying patterns and themes in qualitative data that are relevant to answer the research questions. Transcripts were analysed using Excel software through techniques like familiarisation, thematic framework creation, indexing, charting, mapping, and interpretation (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Various steps were taken to ensure 'trustworthiness' (John W Creswell & Poth, 2018; J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2023): Consulting the research team to design the interview guide, piloting interviews, carefully recording and transcribing responses, using rigorous methods to create codes and subthemes, and maintaining an audit trail (J.W. Creswell & Poth, 2023). In addition, ethical research design was followed to prevent harm to participants (Ryen, 2021). Informed consent was strictly followed to respect participant autonomy (J.W. Creswell & Creswell, 2022). A two-section informed consent form was obtained from teachers initially. Section one provided study details like purpose, risks, benefits, confidentiality, communication of results etc. and section two was the consent certificate. If willing to participate after reading section one, teachers signed section two. A copy was provided to them. Consent was taken before interviews began, and they could withdraw anytime (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). Participant responses were kept fully confidential, and only the researcher had access to transcripts and recordings (Iphofen, 2018). Transcripts were coded randomly. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity (Paoletti, Tomas, & Menendez, 2013). Identities were protected during analysis and publication and personal information was not disclosed (Wiles, 2012).

Findings

Self-directed Strategies

Helping Students to Identify Their Target Behaviours

Most of the teachers report that they help their students to identify their target behaviour, and they decrease their target behaviour through two types of reinforcements: positive and negative. The teachers also report that if students show problematic behaviour during class, then they give negative reinforcement, but sometimes they give positive reinforcement, but it depends on the student's behaviour. For example, a teacher state

Students should know how to target their own behaviour and how to correct their own behaviour. If someone has shown problematic behaviour, then I will punish him or reinforce him, and I will make him realise verbally why I have punished him. I will tell him that he does not complete his task on time or misbehaves; that is why I did not take them out. If any student has negative target behaviour on a regular basis, then I will reinforce him daily so that his negative behaviour will decrease. (Teacher 2)

Some teachers mention that they also help the students to identify their target behaviour through counselling and motivation. They believe that counselling is very necessary for all students, especially for students with disabilities. In addition, they believe that through motivation, students feel that they are the best and they can achieve everything. For example, a teacher states,

Yes, we do. If a child understands things, then we correct his behaviour through counselling. And if some students do not understand things, then firstly, we eliminate their irritating behaviour through reinforcements. (Teacher 9)

If a child is not working, we motivate him. Letting him know that he can do his best is effective because it becomes a target for him, and he does his best. (Teacher 10)

A teacher reports that at the beginning of the admission, they assess the students through some psychological tests, and then they start counselling to enhance their target behaviours. During the assessment, we develop a student's IEP plans. Students are constantly evaluated in certain classes until their target behaviour is developed. For example, a teacher states,

We always set target behaviour first and then make goals and action plans & teach them accordingly. We do the complete assessments during the making of children's IEP. In addition to this, a complete assessment of every child is verified before admission. The child faces a difficult process involving a psychologist, therapist, and another person. In this way, we can know the special needs of the child. We do an assessment from the playgroup to class six, especially to identify the development stage of the child. (Teacher 1)

Students evaluate their own Work

Most interviewed teachers believe that if the students evaluate their own work, it is very good for all students because this thing helps the students to develop confidence. They also note that in this way, students know their weak points and try to correct their mistakes. For example, a teacher state,

I provide an opportunity to evaluate their own work. I have a student who does colouring very well. When he is done, he shows all the students how well he did. In this way, the students check their own work. And we also reinforce the students. If a student does good work, he is asked to paste it onto the wall, and other students are encouraged. In the classroom, groups are made when they work, and they check each other's work and find their own mistakes. (Teacher 11)

Few teachers believe that at this level, students cannot identify mistakes in their own work. Some students check other students' notebooks and compare their work, but students with disabilities cannot evaluate their own work. It depends on their mood. For instance, a teacher states,

If I let him evaluate any work, he will not be able to find a mistake in the work. So, when I mark it, it shows where he made a mistake. Otherwise, he does not evaluate their own work. (Teacher 3)

A teacher describes that in his inclusive classrooms, the two students work together and then check each other's work. All students create a file folder and put their daily worksheets in it. And every month or every week, we assess their work, and all students know their progress. If they are weak in some subjects, they work hard more and improve their learning. For example, a teacher states,

When doing a pairing of students, we first assign a task of evaluating each other, and then the child checks each other's tasks. This is teamwork and in which they evaluate their work…We also make a portfolio, and we

promote them to the next level based on the portfolio. (Teacher 1)

Guiding Students to Self-instruct Themselves

Most of the teachers report that they provide guidelines to students on how the individual to self-instruct themselves. We all so appreciate the students. This makes them realise that they are doing the right thing. We motivate or self-instruct in different things like videos, guidelines, appreciation, encouragement, etc. For example, a teacher stated that.

We provide guidelines, and they follow them. If we want to give them a new concept, so we show them videos related to the concept, so they understand it and instruct themselves. (Teacher 3)

A teacher reports that all students in my class are very punctual. I train and provide guidance about self-instruction, so all students know about class activities. If sometimes I forget anything, they remember me. The teacher believes that the self- instruct strategy makes the students independent; this is very effective for students, especially for students with disabilities. For example, a teacher state,

The students, who come from the shadow department, have a visual schedule. We follow that schedule. When the class time starts, they take cards and pass them. After that, they have language & literacy sessions in which cards are set in rows. They take cards and pass them. This is all done to give them time for training instructions and to make them independent. When they come inside the class, their reading skills improve. There is a timetable posted on the notice board in every class. We teach children how to watch time on the clock. Due to this, students learn when their class activity will start and end. A student of mine daily tells me 10'o clock that his speech time has started. (Teacher 2)

Monitoring their own Behaviours

Most of the teachers note that students with disabilities cannot be taught to monitor their own behaviours in inclusive settings. For example, they think that students with disability do not accept their own mistakes because these students feel that they are very genius. They also mention that some older students with a disability could be taught to monitor their own behaviour; otherwise, this level of students cannot monitor their own behaviours. For example, a teacher states,

No, disabled students cannot be taught to monitor their own behaviour in an inclusive setting. But some students monitor their own behaviour. Those who are older or those who do not have that much problem. But at the early childhood education level, students with disabilities cannot monitor their own behaviours. (Teachers-8)

Some teachers note that some Down syndrome students are sensible, and they control their behaviour. Sometimes they manage their behaviour and monitor it, but it is very difficult for them, but ADHD students cannot think to monitor their own behaviour in an inclusive setting. For example, a teacher states

It is so difficult for these students. They cannot monitor their own behaviour. Some children with Down syndrome or those who have a behaviour problem can manage their behaviour. The ADHD child cannot monitor their own behaviour. It varies from case to case. (Teachers-11)

A teacher notes that students with disabilities could be taught to monitor their own behaviours in an inclusive setting. They think that if the students monitor their own behaviour, they become independent. With teacher support, they manage their behaviour and learn to tackle their own problematic behaviour. They also note that these students observe their own behaviour and other behaviours, and this observation develops positivity in them. For example, a teacher states,

When we make students independent, with the support of the teacher, they learn how to self-monitor their behaviour and how to manage their own problematic behaviour. And it varies from case to case. Some students learn it very fast, and some take 3-4 years. (Teacher-2)

Students' Elf-monitoring Strategies

Most of the teachers believe that students use self-monitoring, so this helps them to enhance positivity. These students evaluate their own weak points, so this is very helpful for students, and they also develop positive behaviours. Some teachers believe that if students use self-monitoring, they can improve their behaviours themselves—and if the student knows his behaviour, he will control it and will not depend on other people. Therefore, when he lives independently, his behaviour automatically develops positively. For example, a teacher states,

Yes, children with special behaviour can monitor themselves in an inclusive setting, and they can develop a passion for observing other fellows. They think that if their fellows can perform well, they can also perform well. For example, they want to compete in good writing. In this way, they learn to seek and develop a passion for trying and monitoring themselves. (Teacher 6)

Few teachers believe that students with a disability cannot use self-monitoring strategy because all disabled students have different disabilities and severity level differs, and therefore, these students are not able to monitor their own behaviour. They argue that because it is very difficult for children of this age to understand what is good and what is bad, through counselling, some students can monitor their own behaviour. For example, a teacher states,

Yes, students understand self-monitoring strategies. This helps them to develop positive behaviour, but all students with disabilities do not use the strategy. Only those who have some understanding of this use it. (Teacher 4)

A teacher note that self-monitoring strategies are not relevant to early childhood education. For example, a teacher state,

We cannot develop students' self-monitoring strategies in a proper way because our study level is not advanced enough to do this. I think if a self-monitoring strategy is used in the classroom, the students learn positive behaviour and cope with their aggressive behaviour. These things are not used commonly and do not work properly in our settings. (Teacher 1)

Discussion

This study explored early childhood teacher perspectives on using student-driven strategies to manage inclusive classrooms and promote positive student outcomes. The findings reveal certain insights.

First, most teachers felt students could be taught to identify target behaviours, though students with disabilities may require more scaffolding. Goal-setting guides students to recognise undesirable actions. Teachers motivated students and used reinforcements to shape conduct. Some conducted assessments to understand student needs and challenges. These align with literature emphasising self-management strategies like self-monitoring to improve student self-awareness, responsibility and independence (Briesch, Briesch, & Mahoney, 2014).

Second, while some teachers enabled student self-evaluation of work, others felt young students could not judge performance. Students informally assessed peers, but disability challenges limited self-critique abilities. Research indicates self-assessment allows students to monitor progress, improve work quality and build confidence (Andrade, 2008). Teachers should provide structures to teach self-evaluation skills to young learners.

Third, most teachers provided instructions and modelling to promote student self-regulation. Visual cues, schedules, and appreciated self-direction. However, some believe students with disabilities may struggle with self-instruction. Literature highlights self-regulated learning strategies like self-instruction enhance student autonomy and academic success (Dignath, Buettner, & Langfeldt, 2008). Teachers should explicitly teach these techniques aligned with student capability levels.

Fourth, opinions varied on whether students could monitor their own behaviour. Some felt disability challenges prevented self-monitoring. Others noted students observed and controlled conduct with guidance. Research shows that self-monitoring improves the on-task behaviour and social participation of students with disabilities (Dignath et al., 2008; Dinsmore, Alexander, & Loughlin, 2008). Targeted scaffolding can enable the appropriate use of self-monitoring.

Finally, while some teachers encouraged self-monitoring to develop positive student behaviours, others argued students with disabilities could not use this strategy. Research emphasises self-monitoring within a self-management program allows students to take responsibility for their learning and actions (Zhu, Bonk, & Doo, 2020). With explicit teaching, young learners can be taught structured self-monitoring aligned with their skills.

The study demonstrates that student-driven strategies facilitate inclusive classrooms but require planning and scaffolding considering learner characteristics. It addresses a knowledge gap in using self-directed approaches with young students. The findings have implications for teacher training, as demonstrated by other research studies (Saleem, Muhammad, & Qureshi, 2023; Saleem, Muhammad, & Siddiqui, 2021), as well as for inclusive education policies in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored early childhood teacher perspectives on using student-centred strategies to manage inclusive classrooms in Pakistan. The aim was to understand how teachers view self-directed approaches as suitable for young learners to promote positive outcomes.

The findings indicate most teachers recognise the value of self-management strategies like self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-instruction to improve student autonomy, behaviour, and learning. However, views vary on the feasibility of implementing these with young children and students with disabilities. Some believe developmental and disability-related challenges may limit the usage of such strategies by young learners.

The study concludes that student-driven approaches are promising classroom management tactics for inclusive early education. But teachers need training on how to scaffold self-management strategies for diverse students. Implementation requires considering learner characteristics and providing appropriate structures aligned with capability levels. With adequate guidance, even young students can be taught basic self-regulation techniques like self-monitoring daily work or self-evaluating progress.

The research addresses a knowledge gap and has useful insights for practice and policy. It emphasises self-directed strategies should be integral to teacher training on inclusion. Inclusive education policies must recommend developmentally appropriate self-management strategies based on individual learner needs. Adapting the classroom environment and providing a universal design for learning is also vital to enable self-directed learning. Further research can explore the impacts of teacher professional development on using student-driven strategies for young learners. Additionally, students' own perspectives would provide unique insights.

This study highlights the need to equip teachers to scaffold self-management and empower young students to take responsibility for their learning and behaviour. Student-centred approaches can transform inclusive classrooms by fostering independence alongside interdependence. But teachers require training, ongoing support, and favourable policies to ensure appropriate, differentiated use of self-directed strategies by all learners. This will facilitate quality inclusive education during the crucial early years of schooling.

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