

MINIMISING THE EFFECTS OF EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DISORDERS ON AFFECTED LEARNERS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IN INCLUSIVE PRIMARY SCHOOL SETTINGS IN WARREN PARK-MABELREIGN DISTRICT HARARE

RAVIRO MAHACHI¹, EPHIAS GUDYANGA² AND ENNIE MANYUMWA³

Abstract

This study sought to investigate strategies that can be used to minimise the effects of Emotional and Behavioural Disorders (EBDs) on the academic achievement of affected learners in inclusive primary schools in Warren-Park Mabelreign District, Harare. The study was necessitated by continued efforts to improve the inclusion of learners with EBDs enrolled in mainstream schools in the district. The interpretivist paradigm guided the study and a qualitative approach was used, with the case study as the adopted design. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews with the school head, deputy head and five selected teachers, as well as focus group discussions with 10 prefects. These participants were purposively selected because of their direct involvement in managing student behaviour and academic progress. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the generated data. The study reveals that learners with EBDs encounter numerous negative effects that hinder their academic achievement. These effects include academic underperformance,

¹ Department of Curriculum and Educational Philosophy, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe, raviromahachi81@gmail.com, 0009-0003-4808-0046

² Department of Curriculum and Educational Philosophy, Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University, Bindura, Zimbabwe, egudyanga@staff.zegu.ac.zw, 0000-0002-1336-735X

³ Department of Educational Foundations, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe, manyumwae@gmail.com, 0009-0003-5637-7894

inability to concentrate, disruption of the learning environment, attention seeking behaviour, communication challenges, peer rejection, unstable behaviour and absenteeism and dropping out of school. It also shows that school heads, teachers and school prefects use strategies which include close monitoring, differentiated instruction, workload adjustment, individual attention, positive reinforcement, punishment, peer support, guidance and counselling and promoting empathy and social tolerance to mitigate the effects of EBDs on the affected learners' academic achievement. In spite of the use of these methods, the inclusion of learners with EBDs remains a struggle since school heads, teachers and school prefects resort mostly to punitive measures. This further complicates the inclusion of learners with EBDs as they end up absenting themselves from school or dropping out completely. The study recommends teacher training, increased access to specialised support services, strengthened parental involvement and the implementation of inclusive, school-wide strategies to effectively support learners with EBDs in mainstream classrooms.

Keywords: *inclusion, minimising, effects*

INTRODUCTION

The current trend in public schools is to mainstream children diagnosed with emotional behavioural disorders (EBDs) into regular education classrooms as much as possible (Sutherland, 2000). UNESCO (2023) calls for an inclusive approach to education, meaning that each individual's needs are considered and that all learners participate and achieve together. Kushnir and Nunes (2022) point out that the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) ensures inclusive and equitable quality education

and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for learners. All students with special educational needs should, therefore, be supported in mainstream classrooms. Mainstreaming gives children with EBDs the opportunity to interact with all other students in the classroom. However, while this may be true, research has shown that EBDs have many negative effects on the academic achievement of affected learners in inclusive settings.

Emotional and behavioural disorders include disruptive behaviour, depression, anxious and pervasive developmental (autism) disorders. These can be categorised as either internalising or externalising concerns (Ogundele, 2018). The affected learners may also exhibit internalising behaviours such as depression, anxiety, social disengagement and psychosomatic reactions (Gidlund, 2018).

Adams (2024) reports a significant increase in school exclusions and suspensions in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly among students with EBDs, as educators face great challenges in managing disruptive and aggressive behaviours. Furthermore, students with EBDs in the UK are more vulnerable to academic underperformance and poor post-school outcomes compared to peers with other disabilities (Zolkoski, 2019). Tas and Minaz (2024) note that strategies such as differentiated instructional activities were found interesting, intriguing, entertaining, surprising and instructive, while promoting active learning and improved students' academic achievement.

Students with EBDs tend to show lower levels of school engagement and receive more disciplinary referrals (Smith, Poling and Worth, 2018). Findings from United States-based studies

emphasize the urgent need for increased training and support for teachers working in inclusive classrooms (Gilmour and Wehby, 2020). Walker, Ramsey and Gresham (2004) document that children with EBDs frequently show behavioural instability, including quick shifts from calm to angry states, inconsistent academic engagement and poor response to feedback. Aldabbagh *et al.* (2022) propose appropriate strategies, significant and moderate improvements in teacher-child closeness and reduction in teacher-child conflict as interventions that can be used to teach learners with externalising issues of EBDs. Landau (2022) highlights the importance of deeper acquaintance with the students who have EBDs.

In Kenya, it was found that the academic achievement of learners with EBDs ranges from average to poor despite well-established instruction strategies and relevant programmes for them (Amondi, 2019). Studies reveal a statistically significant strong positive relationship between guidance and counselling services and students' academic engagement, with all participants perceiving these programmes as effective in enhancing academic involvement (Ondima *ibid.*, 2013) In Ethiopia, studies have shown that children with EBDs are more likely to experience school absenteeism and lower academic achievement, emphasizing the need for early identification and intervention (Mekonnen *ibid.*, 2020).

In Nigeria, the prevalence of disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorders and anxiety among students, necessitated a comprehensive approach to address these issues. Undiyandiye (2019) developed the Behaviour Modification Model, which aimed to replace

maladaptive behaviours that hinder learning with adaptive ones. This involved using positive routines without extra reinforcement and allowing the teacher to eliminate negative behaviours through reinforcement of desirable alternatives.

In South Africa, research shows that disruptive behaviour, challenging authority, attention-seeking, disorganised school work and intense emotional reactions are major issues that hamper the education of learners with EBDs (Nunan and Ntobela, 2021). It was found that teachers apply inclusive teaching and learning strategies such as peer tutoring, flexible grouping and curriculum differentiation (Malahlela and Johnson, 2024).

Attention-deficit and hyperactivity disorder is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in children in Botswana (Olashore *ibid.*, 2020). Individualised instruction, problem-solving assignments and small group work are some of the teaching methods that special educators may apply, given the magnitude of the disability, including those with EBDs (Mboya, Odongo and Omoke, 2019).

Ncube, Muranda and Tshabalala (2015) confirm that physical bullying is the most common form of conduct disorder in Nkayi primary schools in Zimbabwe. In rural areas of Zimbabwe, school dropout is the major concern for learners with EBDs. Khumbulani and Kaputa (2022) found out that primary school learners leave home for streets and gold mining (*makorokoza*) because they hardly comply with rules at home, school or their community. Chitiyo *ibid.* (2014) note that in Zimbabwe, few teachers think that physical punishment is an effective way to manage problem behaviour and that teachers should be allowed to use corporal

punishment which has since been banished. This study, therefore, sought to explore alternative strategies that can be used to combat the effects of EBDs among affected learners so as to improve their academic achievement.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In Zimbabwe, the effects of EBDs on the academic achievement of primary school learners remain underreported, particularly in the Warren Park-Mabelreign District, Harare. Countrywide, affected learners are often stigmatised and are poorly understood, with limited reliable data available (UNICEF, 2022). This lack of research diminishes efforts towards inclusive education and hinders the development of effective support strategies for affected learners in Zimbabwe. This gap in understanding how EBDs affect academic achievement and ways of combating the effects in inclusive schools calls for focused inquiry. Therefore, this study seeks to explore how EBDs affect learners in inclusive school settings in the Warren-Park Mabelreign District and strategies that can be used to combat the effects.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- ☐ What are the effects of EBDs on academic achievement?
- ☐ How can the effects of EBDs on the academic achievement of affected learners be minimised?

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- ☐ The study would contribute to theoretical understanding of how EBDs affect academic achievement in inclusive settings and the behavioural mitigation strategies.

- It would also broaden personal professional insight into effective practices of supporting learners with EBDs within inclusive settings.
- Through identifying strategies that teachers and schools are using to better support learners with EBDs in inclusive schools, the study would come up with additional recommendations hence improve educational practice.

ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study held the following assumptions that:

- participants would provide honest, accurate and unbiased information.
- the environment where the study was conducted was typical of inclusive schools that enrol learners with EBDs.

METHODOLOGY

The interpretivist paradigm was adopted to guide the study. Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed and best interpreted through the perspectives of those involved (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). It enables exploration of complex phenomena (Creswell and Poth, 2018). It, therefore, allowed for the exploration and interpretation of the views of school heads, teachers and prefects on the effects of EBDs on the academic achievement of affected learners and how schools can mitigate these effects.

A qualitative approach was employed to collect and analyze non-numerical data such as words and narratives (*ibid.*). This approach involves studying individuals and organisations and their reasons, opinions, motivations and beliefs in their natural settings (Chandra and Shang, 2019). The qualitative approach is also

flexible. Data collection and analysis can evolve as new ideas or patterns emerge (Bhandari, 2023). Although qualitative research takes time and often leads to long reports, in this study, it leads to a deep and complete understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

A case study design was used, chosen because of its ability to provide insight into an individual, group, event or to gain an understanding of a real-life phenomenon (Teasdale, 2022). The case study design is considered as a research strategy when “why”, “how”. and “what” questions are researcher’s interest (Yin, 2018). This design was, therefore, considered suitable for this particular study which seeks to explore strategies that can be used to minimise effects of EBDs on the academic achievement of affected learners included in mainstream classrooms in the Warren-Park Mabelreign District of Harare.

Face to face interviews were used to collect relevant rich data. These are highly flexible, with the interviewer able to adjust questions based on the participant's responses (Delve and Limpaecher, 2024). The school head, the deputy head and five teachers participated in face-to-face in-depth interviews. Delve and Limpaecher (*ibid.*) note that some participants may be hesitant to share personal information or be unable to articulate their feelings clearly, affecting the quality of data collected. This may have been one of the disadvantages of using the method but the reassurance provided by the research to uphold confidentiality was meant to give participants confidence.

Focus group discussions were also used to collect data. Focus group discussions are effective in educational research for eliciting

collective views and facilitating interactive discussions. These can generate insights that might not surface in individual interviews (Morgan, 2019). The method allows for efficient collection of diverse perspectives from multiple participants in a single session (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Ten prefects participated in the focus group discussions, making it suitable for exploring effects of EBDs on affected learners' academic achievement and mitigation strategies used by school prefects. Nyumba (2018) posits that focus group discussions may have problems in controlling participants who dominate in discussions. Prefects were given equal chances to talk in order to prevent a few from dominating the discussion.

Purposive sampling was used to select one school head, one deputy head, five teachers and 10 prefects, the reason being that these work directly with learners with EBDs. Purposive sampling is one of the most commonly used approaches in qualitative research across a wide range of scientific disciplines (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2025). Nikolopoulou (2023) states that purposeful sampling refers to a group of non-probability sampling techniques in which units are selected because they have characteristics needed in the sample. Purposive sampling can be done to obtain rich data from the participants (Ames, Glenton and Lewin, 2019).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical Considerations are important in ensuring that research is conducted with integrity and respect. Muridzo, Chikazi and Kaseke (2018) state that ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality, deception, debriefing, beneficence, non-maleficence and fairness are fundamental in any research involving human participants. Approval to go to the primary

schools was obtained from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education and permission and from the school administration. Participants volunteered and signed consent forms. They were approached respectfully and provided with clear information regarding the nature, purpose and procedures of the study. Informed consent should be obtained and participants should be made aware of their right to withdraw at any stage without facing any consequences (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Participants were protected from harm by giving them pseudonyms. They were also assured that the information they gave would not be divulged. It is necessary to take ethical considerations very seriously so as to minimise any immediate discomfort or risk to research participants (Conlin and Boness, 2019).

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Thematic data analysis procedure was used to analyze the generated data. This involved organising and coding qualitative data to identify recurring themes related to effects of EBDs on the academic achievement of affected learners. This method allowed for a structured yet flexible approach to analyze complex educational experiences and recommendations. The six stages of thematic analysis, familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes and producing a research report, were followed (Dawadi, 2020). The process moved from analyzing raw data to making meaningful interpretation through systematic coding and theme development.

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the data generated were:

- Effects of emotional and behavioural disorders on learners' academic achievement,
- Strategies used in schools to combat effects of EBDs on affected learners' academic achievement.

THEME 1: EFFECTS OF EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL DISORDERS ON LEARNERS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Under the first theme, the following sub-themes were identified: academic under-performance, inability to concentrate, disruption of the learning environment, attention-seeking behaviour, communication challenges, rejection by peers, unstable behaviour, absenteeism and dropping out of school.

ACADEMIC UNDERPERFORMANCE

School administrators and teachers described learners with EBDs as academically slow and struggling to understand even simplified content. They revealed that these learners do not do their homework and they seem not to care much about their school work. One school head had this to say about the learners,

“They do not do homework exercises. Their school work is not pleasing at all.”

Teachers reported that they do not finish their work and they take long to master concepts. T3 stated,

“Even when I simplify the content, they take long to master concepts.”

School prefects added that they do not write their homework. P3 revealed,

“They do not write their homework, both the internalised and externalised.”

Learners with EBDs were described as academically slow and struggling to understand concepts. They still struggle academically, even when the work has been simplified. The

statement by T3, “Even when I simplify the content, they take long to master concepts,” shows that they have a very big challenge which needs serious attention. They do not master concepts easily so they need a considerable amount of time. Research has consistently shown that students with EBDs are at heightened risk for poor academic performance (Amondi, 2019; Zolkoski, 2019). This underperformance may be a result of their inability to concentrate.

INABILITY TO CONCENTRATE

Teachers reported that learners with EBDs have a problem in concentrating on their academic work. They always fidget and do not pay attention to the teacher when the lesson is being delivered. T5 revealed,

“They cannot concentrate in academics right through. They need to be constantly rebuked.”

Learners appear to be attentive during lesson delivery but when asked questions they do give correct answers. T3 stated,

“Even if you teach them, they do not understand, they look like they are following, only to find they did not understand anything.”

The inability to concentrate and pay attention may be due to hyperactivity. The most likely result is inability to engage with school work, as revealed by T5,

“They cannot concentrate in academics right through. They need to be constantly rebuked. They concentrate for few minutes and quickly disengage and start to move around the class making noise.

Attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common neurodevelopmental disorders in children (Olashore *et al*, 2020). A learner with ADHD may fail to pay attention and this negatively affects performance in class. Failure to concentrate often leads to failure to achieve academically.

DISRUPTION OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Teachers and prefects explained how learners with EBDs disturb lessons by making noise, screaming, shouting vulgar words and acting like comedians or moving around the classroom showing off. Prefects complained that they distract lessons. P6 stated,

“They are always making a lot of noise, disturbing our lessons.”

P8 complained,

“We are not pleased with their behaviour because they distract others while learning.”

This behaviour causes them to perform poorly and this affects academic achievement.

The explanations given by participants on how learners with EBDs can significantly disrupt the learning environment shows the effect EBDs can have on the academic progress, not only of the learners, but also that of their peers. As stated by one of the prefects,

“They are always making a lot of noise disturbing our lessons.”

Adams (2024) reports that educators face great challenges in managing disruptive and aggressive behaviours. Disruptive behaviour commonly displayed by learners with EBDs can be a major source of teacher frustration, especially in the absence of adequate training and support systems. Smith *et al* (2018) found disruptive behaviour as one of the issues that affect education of learners with EBDs. When learning environments include learners with EBDs, both the affected learners and their peers may suffer academically. Teachers also face challenges, as disruptions can hinder their ability to complete the syllabus effectively.

ATTENTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

School administrators and teachers expressed that learners with EBDs demand a lot of attention. They complained about learners with EBDs' disregard for administrative protocols. They can go straight to the school head's office to report minor issues. As stated by one of the participants,

"This learner can go straight in the office even if we are in a meeting and say this one did this to me and this one did this to me.

Teachers also confirmed that these learners seek a lot of attention.

"The learners seek a lot of attention. If you tell them that I will attend to you later they will already be disturbed and they go and report to the school head that my teacher ignores me."

Also, because of their need for attention, these learners act like comedians in order to attract people's attention. It was revealed that,

"Other learners will pay attention to them because some of them act like comedians wanting to entertain the classmates."

Such behaviour disturbs everyone in the classroom including the teacher. The need for attention affects academic achievement because they will not have time for school work. The statement, "...act like comedians wanting to entertain the classmates," shows a high level of class disturbances which affect everyone, including the teacher. Nunam and Ntobela (2021) found out that learners with EBDs display attention-seeking behaviours, contributing to teacher burnout and reduced instructional time. Instead of concentrating on the core business of teaching and learning, more time is spent on trying to control the learners' behaviour. This behaviour control may be compounded by poor relationships between the teachers and the learners, leading to academic underachievement.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Teachers also showed that these learners have difficulties in communication, especially when they have not understood concepts. Instead of communicating that they have not understood, they can just keep quiet or cry. T4 pointed out,

“Some, even if you ask them a question, they do not respond. They just keep quiet or even cry.”

This makes it difficult for the teachers to interact meaningfully with the learners.

Learners with EBDs have difficulties in communicating when they have not understood and they are slow in doing their school work even if the work given is not much. EBDs include disruptive, depressive, anxious and pervasive developmental (autism) disorders, which are categorised as either internalising or externalising concerns (Ogundele, 2018). Learners with EBDs might, meanwhile, also exhibit internalising behaviours such as depression, anxiety, social disengagement and psychosomatic reactions (Gidlund, 2018). Struggling with communication is a barrier to learning because teachers will not know if they have understood or not, and this leads to underachievement.

PEER REJECTION

Teachers and prefects indicated that learners with EBDs are rejected by their peers and are always lonely. Teachers revealed that they cannot interact well with others, they bully and intimidate their peers. T3 reported,

“They cannot interact with others properly.”

T2 added,

“Some of them they bully and intimidate others.”

This behaviour has caused them not to be liked by their peers, so they fail to get friends. Prefects disclosed that learners with EBDs have no friends. P10 mentioned,

“Some of them are always lonely.”

Rejection by peers can lead to limited opportunities for collaborative learning, peer support and communication skills which are important for academic success. This is because the learners bully others so they are hated by their peers.

Learners with internalising issues of EBDs are the ones mostly bullied and they do not report the bullying. Ncube *et al.* (2015) confirm in their research that physical bullying was the most common form of conduct disorder in Nkayi primary schools in Zimbabwe. Rejection also causes emotional distress which impacts negatively on academic achievement.

UNSTABLE BEHAVIOUR

School administrators and prefects complained about the unstable behaviour of learners with EBDs. Administrators reported that this behaviour often results in irregular classroom engagement, where learners may participate actively one day and be withdrawn, become disruptive, or uncooperative the next. D/H described,

“On his worst day, he will be just walking all over the school not listening to anyone.”

Prefects indicated that the behaviour of learners with EBDs is unpredictable. P3 had this to say,

“Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don’t.”

This behaviour disrupts classroom routines and even school routines because the administration, teachers and prefects will be

forced to attend to them on their worst days and interrupt work and duties.

Participants complained about unstable behaviour of learners with EBDs. Such behaviour often results in irregular classroom engagement, where learners may participate actively one day and be withdrawn, disruptive, or uncooperative on the next. This was evident in the comment,

“Sometimes they listen and sometimes they don’t.”

Walker, Ramsey and Gresham (2004) document that children with EBDs frequently show behavioural inconsistencies, including quick shifts from calm to angry states, fluctuations in academic engagement and responding poorly to feedback. Unstable behaviour causes learning to become unpredictable, instructional planning is difficult and progress is inconsistent. All this may lead to academic underachievement.

ABSENTEEISM AND DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

School administrators disclosed that learners with EBDs absent themselves from school and some of them drop out of school. Administrators indicated that sometimes they give these learners punishment in the form of suspension or expulsion but on rare cases. One participant stated that:

“Sometimes we give some other forms of punishment which are not corporal like suspension or expulsion but in very rare case.”

Prefects revealed that some learners with EBDs absent themselves from school because they are afraid of facing corporal punishment by the administrators. One prefect stated that,

“Some of them do not come to school all the time because they are afraid that the school head will beat them.”

This shows that corporal punishment may not be the best strategy to use when dealing with learners who have emotional and behavioural disorders.

School administrators agreed that they suspend or expel learners with EBDs. It was revealed that,

“Sometimes we give some other forms of punishment which are not corporal like suspension or expulsion, but in only in rare cases.”

Mekonnen *et al.* (2020) express that children with EBDs are more likely to experience school absenteeism and lower academic achievement. Adams (2024) also reports a significant increase in school exclusions and suspensions, particularly among students with EBDs. Even though suspension and expulsion are rarely used, these exclusionary measures further isolate learners with EBDs from school and it increases their risk of school dropout.

THEME 2: STRATEGIES USED BY SCHOOLS TO MINIMISE EFFECTS OF EBDs ON AFFECTED LEARNERS’ ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The sub-themes identified under this theme were close monitoring, offering differentiated instruction, workload adjustment, giving individual attention, offering positive reinforcement, administering punishment, encouraging peer support and offering guidance and counselling, promoting empathy and social tolerance.

CLOSE MONITORING

Teachers reported that they closely monitor learners with EBDs to make sure they are always in the classroom. They monitor those with internalising EBDs even at breaks and lunch time because

they fear that they may get into trouble. One of the participants noted that,

“At break time, I make sure that they are near me because if they go far, they get into problems.”

Another added,

“For the severe ones, I take them near me so that I see their movements even at break and lunch time.”

Teachers also try to make sure that the learners do not make noise and fidget in the classroom, so they make the learners sit close to them. As noted by one of teachers,

“I do close monitoring. I make those with EBDs to sit closer to me so that they will not find chance for making noise or fidgeting and this will help them do their work.”

Close monitoring, therefore, emerged as a crucial strategy for mitigating the negative effects of EBDs on academic achievement, as reflected in the practices shared by teachers. It also helps the learners to remain focused and it reduces disruptive behaviours that hinder learning. Aldabbagh *et al.* (2022) propose that moderate improvements in teacher-child closeness and small reductions in teacher-child conflict were interventions used to teach learners with externalising issues of EBDs. Without proper monitoring, learners with EBDs may not benefit anything in school and may harm others or be harmed themselves.

OFFERING DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Teachers reported that they do not teach learners with EBDs the same content with that of their peers. For example, when they are in Grade 4, the teachers may give them work meant for Grade 1 level learners. T3 explained, “*Iye ari mu Grade 4 womuti 4 + 8* (when he/she is doing Grade 4 you say 4+8).” They do this because they

realised the EBD learners are always lagging behind their peers. They may be in Grade 4, but they will be learning Grade 1 content. The use of differentiated content and instruction is done in order to combat the effects of EBDs on affected learners. Teachers also try to apply inclusive teaching and learning strategies such as peer tutoring, flexible grouping and curriculum differentiation (Malahlela and Johnson, 2024). Tas and Minaz (2024) state that differentiated instructional activities, which were found interesting, intriguing, entertaining, surprising and instructive, promoted active learning and improved students' academic achievement on different types of children, including those with EBDs. This method supports learners with EBDs by addressing their unique cognitive needs, thereby enhancing their learning outcomes.

WORKLOAD ADJUSTMENT

Teachers indicated that they adjust the workload for learners with EBDs. Teachers reduce and simplify the work for learners with EBDs in order to keep them engaged as evidenced by the report,

“I also give them less work which they can manage. If others are writing five questions I may tell them to write two.”

Sometimes even writing the date and topic matters to the teachers because they know the learner has put some effort. One teacher explained that,

“Even if they manage to write only the date and topic, if praised, they feel at least I did something good.”

This shows that teachers do not expect much from learners with EBDs.

Teachers also realised that learners with EBDs disengage if they are piled with a lot of work. The North Dakota Department of

Public Instruction (2025) emphasizes the adjustment of academic demands based on student responsiveness. If given a lot of much work, learners with EBDs may disengage. Therefore, reducing the workload allows them to benefit little than none at all. Too much academic demands can trigger anxiety in the learners and they end up making noise and performing like comedians so that learning stops.

INDIVIDUAL ATTENTION

Teachers revealed that they make use of individual attention to check what the learners have managed to do and what they have not managed. They, however, expressed frustration because of the challenges they meet in attending to the learners at individual level. The class sizes are too large but they do their best to attend to the learners at individual level. One teacher complained,

“I attend to them as individuals but aah, I have challenges [in] that I will be having 60 pupils in my class. However, I try my best to attend [to them].”

Data reflected that teachers use the method of individual attention whereby the teacher gives personal support to a specific student usually one-on-one. The teachers, however, complained of large class sizes that hinder them from effectively attending to learners at individual level but they try their best. T2 stated, “*I attend to them as individuals....*” Landau (2022) highlights the importance of deeper acquaintance with a student with EBDs. Deeper acquaintance helps the teacher to attend to the learner at individual level. If done properly, it helps teachers to find where the learner is lagging, so it will be easy to help the learner.

USE OF POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Teachers indicated that they give encouragement in the form of praise to learners with EBDs. Teachers praise them even on very small things like just writing the date and topic. T3 explained,

“Akagona kadikidiki kekuti iye ari mu Grade 4, womuti 4 + 8, then you give an incentive (If the child manages a very simple question, for example, when doing Grade 4, you say 4+8, you give an incentive). I encourage them by praising them even on very small things. That learner will be motivated.”

T5 reported,

“Even if they write only the date and topic, if praised, they feel good.”

Teachers emphasized praising learners even on very small things like just copying the date and the topic. Undiyandiye (2019) developed the Behaviour Modification Model, which aims to replace maladaptive behaviours that hinder learning with adaptive ones, by using positive routines without extra reinforcements, allowing the teacher to eliminate negative behaviours through reinforcement of desirable alternatives. Positive reinforcement is important for learners with EBDs. When they experience positive classroom climate and receive rewards, they comply. Positive reinforcement also helps boost their self-esteem.

ADMINISTERING PUNISHMENTS

Participants disclosed that they use corporal punishment and alternative forms of punishment. The administrators indicated that they know that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education banned corporal punishment, but for them that is the only way to make learners with EBDs achieve academically. One of them explained,

“The Ministry of Education does not allow [it], but many a times we do not have a choice. We sometimes give strokes and sometimes we give other forms of punishment which are not corporal and this helps a lot.

Another one also said,

“That is the only option we have because if we do not practise corporal punishment, we are destroying the learner’s life.”

Prefects reported that they make learners with EBDs pick up litter and other punishments. P6 and P8 reported, “*We punish them.*” P2 added,

“I try my best to discipline them by making them pick up litter.”

It seems from the responses that it is the administrators who sometimes administer corporal punishment and not the prefects. It is sad, however, that this is done against the Ministry’s regulations.

Most of the school prefects revealed that they report learners with EBDs to their teachers. They report so that the learners receive some form of punishment. Chitiyo *et al.* (2014) note that in Zimbabwe, few teachers thought that physical punishment was an effective way to manage problem behaviour and that school teachers should be allowed to use it. When a child is experiencing punishment at school, especially corporal punishment, that child will lose interest in school work and may end up underperforming or dropping out of school altogether. They end up associating school with aggression and negativity.

ENCOURAGING PEER SUPPORT

Teachers and prefects revealed that they use peer support and peer mentoring systems. Teachers task learners who are good in

their school work to help learners with EBDs in areas that they lag behind. They also use methods such as pair work and group work. One teacher explained,

“Sometimes I assign other learners to help them in pairs or in small groups.”

Those who are able to read and write are also asked to help struggling learners to show them how to write or read. T1 explained,

“Sometimes we make those who can read or write to work together with them, that is peer teaching or group work.”

Prefects are not only placed to manage behaviour of their peers. It was revealed by prefects that they also help learners with EBDs to revise their work during study time as one of them noted,

“I also try to revise work with them if it’s study time.”

Use of learning strategies such as peer tutoring, flexible grouping and curriculum differentiation have been noted as being useful when teaching learners with EBDs (Malahlela and Johnson, 2024). Use of small groups is another one of the teaching methods that special educators may apply, given the magnitude of the disability including those with EBDs (Mboya, Odongo and Omoke, 2019). Peer support helps learners with EBDs to have a sense of belonging. They feel they are part of the school and they also learn more from peers as compared to the time of lesson delivery because they usually fail to pay attention when the teacher is teaching. It also reduces the risk of rejection and isolation and promotes positive social interactions. Academic performance and social skills will improve as well.

OFFERING GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING

Teachers indicated that they use guidance and counselling as a way to combat the effects of EBDs. Teachers practice guidance and counselling in their classes where they encourage all learners to be serious with their school work as well as to behave well. T3 said,

“So I encourage them to concentrate on their school work. I also try to show them that they should do good and telling them that school is good.”

Engaging learners every morning in guidance and counselling sessions before lessons start encourages all learners, including those with EBDs, to be serious with their school work as well as to behave well, as revealed by the participants. Ondima *et al.*, 2013) also express that guidance and counselling has proved to be effective for behaviour improvement among learners with EBDs. This is very important because some learners who experience EBDs can be guided in a way that encourages them to show interest and concentrate on school work.

Promoting empathy and social tolerance

Another approach generated from the data was the promotion of empathy and social tolerance among learners. Teachers revealed that they encourage other learners in the classroom to tolerate their classmates with EBDs. They teach other learners not to joke about and name-call learners with EBDs, as one teacher stated,

“Sometimes I tell their classmates to tolerate and understand that they are also students like them. I also make sure other students are not name-calling them.”

Learners with EBDs do not understand jokes so they react badly to jokes as they take jokes seriously. T3 asserted,

“They do not understand jokes so I encourage others not to do jokes with them because they react badly.”

Teachers have accepted these learners as they are, so they encourage them to work hard. T2 echoed,

“Having such a biological child helped me because I managed to accept such children so I take them as mine.”

They take them as their own biological children.

This is done by encouraging classmates to tolerate and understand their peers with EBDs and actively discouraging name-calling, which helps protect these learners from stigma and social exclusion. They are also prevented from using jokes which learners with EBDs take seriously and react badly to. Jones *et al.* (2024) encourage comprehensive school-wide training to accommodate learners with EBDs. If a learner with EBDs is identified early, it becomes easier to teach others to show empathy and tolerance, as they will understand that the learner is dealing with a recognised disability.

From the ensuing discussion it was evident from the findings that schools in the Warren-Park-Mabelreign District are making efforts to successfully include learners with EBDs.

CONCLUSIONS

The study reveals that EBDs have adverse impacts on academic achievement. These effects include inability to concentrate, academic underperformance, disruption of the learning environment, attention-seeking behaviour, struggle with communication, peer rejection and social isolation, unstable and absenteeism and dropping out of school.

This study reveals that administrators, teachers and prefects use diverse instructional strategies to combat the effects of EBDs on academic achievement. These include close monitoring, differentiated content and instruction, workload adjustment, individual attention, positive reinforcement, punishments, peer support, guidance and counselling, and promoting empathy and social tolerance. The use of unauthorised corporal punishment, however, often leads to undesirable consequences like dropping out of school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To better support learners with EBDs, schools should take the following steps:

- All teachers need training in special-needs education so that they are equipped with the requisite knowledge and strategies which can be used to manage learners with emotional and behavioural disorders.
- Schools should involve parents more in the education of their children with EBDs so that there is a common understanding on the forms of support required by the learner.
- There is need to involve different stakeholders like trained counsellors and educational psychologists to help meet the needs of the learners.
- Schools should create special support systems that involve all staff to make the whole school a safe and caring place without necessarily resorting to use of punishment, including corporal punishment.
- Schools should keep checking if their support plans are working and make changes when needed to help learners with EBDs do their best.

REFERENCES

- Adams, R. (2024,). Sharp Increase in Pupils Suspended or Excluded from Schools in England. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/jul/18/sharp-increase-in-pupils-suspended-or-excluded-from-schools-in-england>.
- Ahmad, M. and Wilkins, S. (2025). Purposive Sampling in Qualitative Research: A Framework for the Entire Journey Quality and Quantity, *International Journal of Methodology*, Springer, 59(2).
- Aldabbagh, R. *et al.* Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Teacher Delivered Interventions for Externalizing Behaviours. doi: 10.1007/s10864-022-09491-4. PMID: 36093124.
- Ames, H., Glenton, C. and Lewin, S. (2019). Purposive Sampling in A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis: A Worked Example from a Synthesis on Parental Perceptions of Vaccination Communication. *BMC Med Res Methodol*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4>
- Amondi, P. M. (2019). Influence of Emotional and Behaviour Disorders on Academic Achievements of Learners in Selected International Secondary Schools in Nairobi County, Kenya. *Kenyatta University Institutional Repository*. <http://ir-library.ku.ac.ke/handle/123456789/21316>.
- Bhandari, P. (2023). What is Qualitative Research? | Methods and Examples. Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/qualitative-research>.
- Chandra, Y. and Shang, L. (2019). Qualitative Research: An Overview. In: Y,Chandra and L.Shang(Eds)*Qualitative Research Using R: A Systematic Approach*. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3170-1_1.

- Chitiyo, M. *et al.* L. (2014). Understanding the Causes and Management of Problem Behaviour in Zimbabwean Schools: Teacher Perceptions. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 18(11), 1091-1106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2013.875068>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2018). *Research Methods in Education* (8th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Conlin, W. E. and Boness, C. L. (2019). Ethical Considerations in Psychological Research: Protecting Human Participants. *Journal of Research Ethics*, 15(2), 123-135.
- Creswell, J. W. and Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approach* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. and Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Dawadi, S. (2020). Thematic Analysis Approach: A Step-by-Step Guide for ETL Research Practitioners. Nepal English Language. Teachers' Association, Nelta.
- Delve, H. L. and Limpaecher, A. (2024). *In-depth Interviews for Qualitative Analysis*. <https://delvetool.com/blog/in-depth-interviews>
- Gidlund, U. (2018). Why Teachers Find it Difficult to Include Students with EBD in Mainstream Classes. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 22(4), 441-455, doi: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1370739
- Gilmour, A. F. and Wehby, J. H. (2020). The Association between Teaching Students with Disabilities and Teacher Turnover. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 112(5), 1042- 1060. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000394>.

- Khumbulani, S. and Kaputa, T.M. (2022). Management of Learners with Conduct Disorders in Nkayi Rural District Primary Schools in Zimbabwe. doi: 10.47679/jrssh.v3i1.38.
- Kushnir, I. and Nunes, A. (2022). Education and the UN Development Goals Projects (MDGs and SDGs): Definitions, Links, Operationalization's. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 21(1), 3-21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14752409221088942>.
- Landau, Y.E. (2022). *Including Students with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders: Case Management Work Protocol*. 7 Maagal Beit Hamidrash: The David Yellin Academic College of Education.
- Malahlela, M.K. and Johnson, E. (2024). South African Teachers' Application of Inclusive Education Policies and their Impact on Learners with Learning Disabilities: Implications for Teacher Education. *Education Sciences*; University of South Africa. DOI:10.3390/educsci14070743
- Mboya, H. A. O., Odongo, B. C. and Omoke, C. M. (2019). Challenges/Difficulties Faced by the Learners with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) in Accessing the Regular Curriculum in Inclusive Primary Schools, Siaya County, Kenya. *International Journal of Current Research*, 11(10), 7774-7781.
- Mekonnen, H., Medhin, G. and Tomlinson, M. (2020). Impact of Child Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties on Educational Outcomes of Primary School Children in Ethiopia: A Population-based Cohort Study. *Child Adolescence Psychiatry Mental Health* 14(22). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00326-6>

- Morgan, D. (2019). The Importance of Interaction. In: *The Importance of Interaction*, 27-36. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071814307.n3>
- Muridzo, N. G., Chikazi, V. and Kaseke, K. E. (2018). Ethics in Research: A Review of Key Issues. *Zimbabwe Journal of Research and Development*, 36(1), 45-52.
- Ncube, A. C *et al.* (2015). The Nature and Prevalence of Bullying in Primary Schools of Nkayi South Circuit in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 8(1), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.9734/BJESBS/2015/14554>
- Nikolopoulou, K. (2023). *What is Purposive Sampling? / Definition and Examples*. Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/purposive-sampling/>
- North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (2025). *Guidelines for Serving Students with Emotional Disability in Educational Settings*. <https://www.nd.gov/dpi/sites/www/files/documents/SpeEd/Guidelines/ED%20guidelines%20July%202025.pdf>
- Nunan, J. S.R. and Ntombela, S. (2019). Causes of Challenging Behaviour in Primary Schools: The Perspectives of Students in Phoenix. South Africa. *Education and Urban Society*, 51(8), 1127-1141. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0013124518781911>
- Nyumba, T. O. *et al.* (2018). *The Use of Focus Group Discussion Methodology: Insights from Two Decades of Application in Conversation*. <http://doi.org/10.1111/2041-210x.12860>.
- Ogundele, M. O. (2018). Behavioural and Emotional Disorders in Childhood: A Brief Overview for Paediatricians. *World Journal of Clinical Pediatrics*, 7(1), 9. <https://doi.org/10.5409/wjcp.v7.i1.9>

- Olashore, A. A. *et al.* (2020). Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in School-age Children in Gaborone, Botswana: Comorbidity and Risk Factors. *South African Journal of Psychiatry*, 26. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajpsychiatry.v26i0.1525>
- Ondima, P. C. *et al.* (2013). Effectiveness of Guidance and Counselling Programme in Enhancing Students' Academic Career and Personal Competencies: A Case of Secondary Schools in Nyamira District, Kenya. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 4(24), 1-12. <https://www.iiste.org/Journals/index.php/JEP/article/view/8896>
- Smith, S. W., Poling, D. V. and Worth, M. R. (2018). Intensive Intervention for Students with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 33(3), 168-175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/LDRP.12174>
- Sutherland, K. S. (2000). Promoting Positive Interactions between Teachers and Students with Emotional/Behavioural Disorders. *Preventing School Failure*. 44, 110-120.
- Taş, H. and Minaz, M. B. (2024). The Effects of Learning Style-based Differentiated Instructional Activities on Academic Achievement and Learning Retention in the Social Studies Course. *SAGE Open*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241249290>
- Teasdale, R. (2022). Multiple Case Study. In: *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Research Design*. SAGE <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071812082.n352>
- Undiyandiye, F.A. (2019). Management of Behaviour and Emotional Disorder for Child Integration in Societal Functioning: Implication for Teaching and Learning. *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies*, 3(1), 21-28.
- UNESCO (2023). What You Need to Know About Inclusion in Education.

- Walker, H., Ramsey, E. and Gresham, F. (2004). *Antisocial Behaviour in School. Evidence Based Practices*. (2ndEd). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods* (6th ed.). London: SAGE Publications.
- Zolkoski, S.M. (2019). The Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships for Students with Emotional and Behavioural Disorders, Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth. 63(3), 236-241, doi: 10.1080/1045988x.2019.1579165.