

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Challenging Behaviours in Primary Classrooms: Examining Causal Attributions and Strategies Used by Primary School Teachers in India[†]

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(Received 19 May 2022; revised 12 June 2023; accepted 13 June 2023; first published online 04 August 2023)

Abstract

In this study, we examined 535 primary classroom teachers' causal attributions about challenging behaviour in West Bengal, India. The participants completed a questionnaire that collected information about their perceptions, causal attribution, and proposed strategies to address a range of challenging behaviours that were presented through five vignettes. The participants identified student-related and family-related factors as the main causes of challenging behaviour more frequently compared to teacher-related causes. They reported using proactive strategies more often than reactive strategies to address challenging behaviours in their classrooms. The findings provided insight into teachers' causal attributions influencing their choice of classroom-management strategies, which helped to understand teaching practices and how they affect students. The implications of the study are presented to improve professional learning and practice for teachers and guide them to adopt strength-based strategies to address challenging behaviour in primary schools in West Bengal, India.

Keywords: challenging behaviour; causal attribution; strategies; teacher education; primary school

India, with a population of 1.3 billion, 1.5 million schools, 8.7 million primary and secondary teachers and 260 million enrolments (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2019), has one of the largest education systems in the world. India has invested up to 4% of its public spending towards the development of education (Ghosh, 2014) and has seen remarkable progress since its independence in 1947. The gross enrolment ratio for primary schools is currently at almost 100% (2019–2020; Sarangapani et al., 2021), suggesting India's success in achieving universalisation of primary education for children aged 6–10 years. The universalisation of primary education has been possible due to two prominent policies that have also aided in the progress of education among all populations, and the overall performance level of the education system. These policies are, first, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan ('Education for all'; Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2011), which recommended the universalisation of primary education in India, and second, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2009), which recommended the right of children to free and compulsory education in all primary schools for children aged 6 to 14 (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2019).

In India, the education system is structured into pre-primary, primary, upper-primary, secondary, and higher-secondary schools, where the complete education of a student takes place from the age of 3

[†]This manuscript was accepted under the Editorship of Michael Arthur-Kelly.

to 18 years (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2019). The present study focuses on primary schools in India, which are administered by the government or private organisations, and some schools are also run by religious organisations. The central, state or local government bodies run government schools, whereas individuals, trusts, or societies operate privately owned schools. Primary school students start schooling at the age of 5, with the primary section divided into lower primary and upper primary. The lower primary consists of grades from pre-primary to Grade 4 and the upper primary consists of Grades 5 to 8 (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2019). In a review of the progress of primary education in India in the areas of enrolment, infrastructure, teacher quality and cost of education, Chatterjee et al. (2018) expressed some concerns over lower teacher qualifications, poor school performance, high student–teacher ratios, and the use of corporal punishment in classrooms. Overall, there is limited research on Indian education, especially with a focus on students’ challenging behaviour and teachers’ perceptions about students’ behaviour, as well as their adopted strategies to address the behaviour.

Challenging behaviour in classrooms is one of the most significant concerns experienced by teachers across the world (Belt & Belt, 2017; Grieve, 2009). Additionally, the recent increase in students’ challenging behaviour in India (Deshpande, 2022) has also aggravated anxiety among teachers. The presence of challenging behaviour in the classroom has a significant impact on teachers and students, creating a stressful and disruptive environment and adversely affecting student–teacher relationships (Charles & Senter, 2012). Past studies (Barman & Khanikor, 2018; Joseph et al., 2021) suggest that the presence of challenging behaviours in Indian schools has led to a stressful classroom environment for teachers (Harish & JeyaPrabha, 2018).

Several studies (Agrasar, 2018; Anand, 2014; Cheruvalath & Tripathi, 2015; Ogando Portela & Pells, 2015) indicate that teachers in Indian schools used various reactive strategies mostly in the form of physical or corporal punishments to address students’ challenging behaviour. In corporal punishment, an authority uses physical force to control or correct behaviour by inflicting pain (Gershoff, 2002). An example of a contemporary published newspaper article describes a scenario from a classroom:

An 8-year-old child was allegedly made to do 120 sit-ups for making noise in the class. A few days back there was news about a child’s lips being sealed by tape over it by his teacher as a punishment for talking in class. These are not isolated instances. Every now and then we come across such shocking incidents of innocent children being subjected to corporal punishment in the garb of disciplining them. (Deswal, 2019)

Punishment causing physical or mental harm has been banned in India by 15 legal and regulatory policies, such as the RTE Act 2009 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 1989; India being a signatory since 1992; Agrasar, 2018). Despite the ban, an earlier report by the government suggested that at least 65% of children were physically punished (such as slapping, hitting, and pulling hair or ears) by teachers (Kacker et al., 2007). If mental harassment (such as humiliating, ridiculing, or threatening) was to be counted, 99.9% of children experience some form of corporal punishment in schools (Kacker et al., 2007).

A study by Agrasar (2018) argues that several episodes of corporal punishment are not reported primarily because of social norms and attitudes towards the use of punishment in India. There is a likelihood that teachers in India may have veered toward the use of reactive strategies to address socially unacceptable behaviour (Agrasar, 2018; Ghosh & Pasupati, 2016) and may even continue to believe that students are punished for their benefit (Agrasar, 2018; Cheruvalath & Tripathi, 2015). Historically, in Indian society, teachers are often seen as authoritative figures in children’s lives and with that authoritative status (Raj, 2011) they are in a position to use any behaviour management strategy they feel is appropriate for the student (Agrasar, 2018; Tiwari, 2014). Due to limited research in the area of teachers’ use of strategies to address students’ behaviour in India, it is difficult to understand the real situation in Indian classrooms.

Teachers' Perceptions of Challenging Behaviour

In the context of education and classroom practices, challenging behaviour is defined as any repeated pattern of behaviour that interferes with the process of learning and interaction with peers or adults (Powell et al., 2007). Teachers identify several types of behaviours in classrooms as challenging, such as distractibility (low attention span), disobedience (not following rules), delinquency (lying or stealing) and aggression (bullying, damaging property; Stephenson et al., 2000). However, 'talking out of turn' (Alter et al., 2013; Ding et al., 2008; Durmuscelebi, 2010; Grieve, 2009; Shen et al., 2009; Stephens et al., 2005) is reported as the most problematic. Not paying attention, non-compliance (Durmuscelebi, 2010), being disengaged or unproductive (Sullivan et al., 2014) and distractibility (Stephenson et al., 2000) are less frequently reported behaviours compared to talking out of turn. It appears that teachers mostly find less severe behaviour more concerning even though the behaviours might be more disruptive (Axup & Gersch, 2008; Simms, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2014) than violent behaviours that occur less frequently (Beaman et al., 2007).

Teachers' Causal Attributions of Challenging Behaviour

A considerable volume of research suggests that teachers attribute a range of causes to students' challenging behaviour. Broadly, the causes, as perceived by teachers, could be grouped into three categories: student-related causes, family-related causes, and teacher/school-related causes (Atici, 2007; Grieve, 2009). Teachers have attributed student-related causes of challenging behaviours to a child's personality traits (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000), learning disabilities (Atici, 2007), low self-esteem (Mavropoulou & Padeliadu, 2002), hyperactivity (Atici, 2007), poor learning habits (Mensah et al., 2020), and health and emotional problems (Kyriacou et al., 2007). Teachers also suggested family-related causes of challenging behaviours, such as family influence (Johansen et al., 2011), disruptive home environment, lower socio-economic background (Kyriacou & Ortega Martín, 2010; Mensah et al., 2020), and divorced parents (Joseph et al., 2021). Gibbs and Gardiner's (2008) study reported that primary school teachers recognised students' behaviour as a reflection of social interaction. Teachers also expressed concerns about harsh discipline (Atici, 2007), the poor relationship between students and teachers (Nash et al., 2016), their inability to focus on students' individual needs (Dutton Tillery et al., 2010), and unattractive teaching methods (Kyriacou & Ortega Martín, 2010).

An Overview of Strategies Identified by Teachers

The significance of teachers' causal attributions of challenging behaviour is that it helps to determine what approach or strategy a teacher will adopt when addressing or managing the behaviour. If the cause of misbehaviour is identified as student-related, especially a student with a disability, then the chances of teachers not taking responsibility are greater, and they may not address the behaviour at all (Andreou & Rapti, 2010; Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000). A study by Hemmeter et al. (2008) reported that pre-service teachers in preschool settings were prepared to use strategies such as working with families, using preventive measures, and supporting socio-emotional development. However, they were not prepared to teach children with challenging behaviour. A teacher's perspective on students' behaviour can aid in identifying strategies to address the challenging behaviour, manage the classroom effectively and determine the choice of intervention they will use to address the behaviour (Dutton Tillery et al., 2010; Paramita et al., 2020).

Teachers' choices of strategies can be broadly categorised into reactive and proactive approaches. Proactive approaches are usually preventive measures that are likely to be positive, whereas reactive approaches are about using remedial measures that can be negative (Clunies-Ross et al., 2008). Past studies found that teachers took disciplinary actions for socially unacceptable behaviours (Dutton Tillery et al., 2010). Teachers also used warnings and threats of using a cane to prevent misbehaviour in classrooms in West Africa (Irwin et al., 2005). For example, Malak et al. (2014) reported how teachers were willing to use punitive methods for addressing behavioural issues in the class. Other studies by

Anand (2014) and Cheruvalath and Tripathi (2015) contextualised in India, found that teachers often suggested the use of reactive strategies such as punishment to address challenging behaviours. Some of the common punishment methods were pulling or twisting students' ears, forcing them to stand for long hours, and threatening and hitting them using a stick/ruler (Anand, 2014; Cheruvalath & Tripathi, 2015).

Teachers often select classroom-management strategies that work in their classroom based on their preferences or students' needs. These strategies may not always be the most effective or appropriate strategies. A seminal study by Soodak and Podell (1994) found that teachers tend to form strategies based on their causal attributions for problem behaviour. For example, teachers who attributed the home environment as a factor of problem behaviour considered greater parental involvement to address the behaviour. Similarly, when they attributed school factors as contributing to student misbehaviour, they suggested changing or improving teaching strategies. Another study from Bangladesh (Malak et al., 2015) suggested using corporal punishment to address students' behaviour, and that teachers in the study mostly believed that the family of the students was responsible for their behaviour (Malak et al., 2014). Similarly, other studies in Malaysia (Zakaria et al., 2013), Indonesia (Paramita et al., 2020) and Ghana (Mensah et al., 2020) also suggested reactive strategies because they attributed the causes of students' behaviour to either the student or the family. Ho (2004) suggested that further research should be undertaken to examine relationships between teachers' attributions and how these influence the strategies teachers identify to address behavioural issues in classrooms. The importance of teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviour and their preference for strategies to address the behaviour in classroom settings have been shown to have a long-lasting impact on the students' academic, social and emotional future (Nungesser & Watkins, 2005).

Research studies have suggested that teachers' perceptions of students' challenging behaviour affect the way they choose strategies to address the behaviour (Ho, 2004; Paramita et al., 2020). A study by Kim et al. (2009) reports that there is a strong correlation between teachers' beliefs and the choice of strategies they may use to address students' behaviour. Past research also reports that teachers' causal attributions impact the way they address students' behaviour in their classrooms (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Ho, 2004). Teachers who attribute the causes of students' behaviour to factors that are external to them are more likely to suggest strategies that are either reactive or non-teacher-based (Mavropoulou & Padelidiu, 2002; Poulou & Norwich, 2000). Therefore, teachers being aware of their perceptions and beliefs about challenging behaviour will aid in managing their classrooms effectively (Suveges Bitar, 2010). Additionally, a study by David (2013) reports that there is an almost total absence of studies about teachers' perspectives on students' behavioural issues in India. There is also negligible research on teachers' causal attributions of challenging behaviour (Wang & Hall, 2018) and the use of strategies to address the behaviour.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, we adopted Weiner's (2010) theory of causal attribution as the theoretical framework, reflecting on the appropriateness of attribution as a causal factor for undertaking this research. Weiner's attributional theory suggests that people tend to find reasons for failure and success, which eventually affect their behaviour. The theory focuses on causes, which help in understanding outcomes and results, and does not attempt to seek the truth (Weiner, 2010). Causal factors may alter depending on the environment, culture, and perception of oneself or others. The characteristics of causes that are attributed are divided into three dimensions, namely, locus, controllability, and stability. For example, aptitude is an internal, stable, uncontrollable attribution. If a child's learning disability is attributed as a cause of his or her behaviour, then it can be classified as a cause within the child (internal), the cause cannot be altered (stability), and the cause cannot be controlled (controllability). If the child's behaviour is attributed to his/her efforts in classrooms, it can be attributed as internal, unstable, and controllable. The locus of causality refers to where the cause is located: within the child or outside the child. Ability, mood, and indifference are examples of internal causes, whereas teachers' instruction,

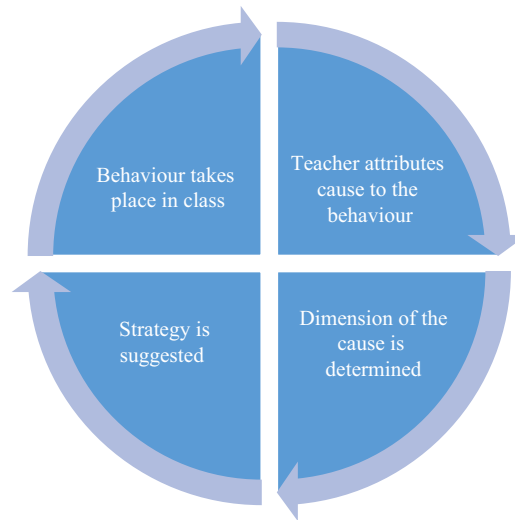


Figure 1. Weiner's (2010) Theory of Causal Attribution.

difficult tasks and luck are external causes (Yang & Montgomery, 2011). Similarly, controllability refers to the cause regulated by others or other factors, but not by the child him/herself. Stability focuses on the duration of the cause, such as chance, which is an external, unstable, and uncontrollable attribution, which would imply that the cause is temporary and will change over time (Yang & Montgomery, 2011; see Figure 1).

The current study focused on teachers' causal attributions of challenging behaviour in primary schools in West Bengal in India. In the context of education, when the theory of attribution is applied, it can be suggested that teachers attribute students' failure, success, and even behaviour to different causes, resulting in adjusting their strategies and goals (Ho, 2004). A review by Wang and Hall (2018) suggests that there are only a few research studies on teachers' causal attributions of students' misbehaviour. Furthermore, teachers' causal attributions and how their attributions influence their choice of strategies is still under-researched and more specifically in the Indian context. In this study, we adopted the theory of causal attribution (Weiner, 2010) to guide the study to identify factors of challenging behaviour as perceived by teachers and how they identify strategies to address the challenging behaviour.

Research Questions

The study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What type of behaviours are perceived as challenging by primary school teachers in West Bengal, India?
2. How do primary school teachers perceive challenging behaviour, and to what do they attribute these behaviours?
3. Which strategies do primary school teachers identify as an appropriate means of addressing challenging behaviour in their classrooms?

Methodology

Data Collection

Permission was obtained from the Directorate of School Education Department of West Bengal. Ethics approval to conduct the study in selected schools from Kolkata, West Bengal, was also obtained from

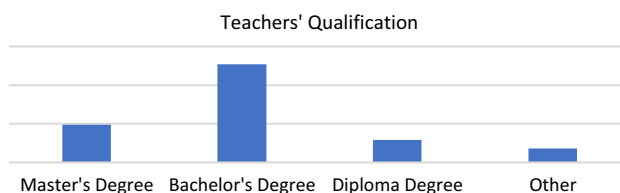


Figure 2. Teachers' Qualifications.

Monash University, Australia. To collect the data from private schools, principals were contacted through the Directorate of School Education Department. The principals were provided with an explanatory statement and a link to an online questionnaire. It was expected that the principals would forward the link and explanatory statement to the teachers. Similarly, in the case of government schools, sub-inspectors of each area within a district in West Bengal were contacted and provided with the explanatory statement and an online link. They were requested to forward the link to head teachers, who subsequently provided the link to teachers in their schools. The participants were informed that by completing the questionnaire, they were providing their implicit consent to participate in the study. The explanatory statement provided to the participants informed them that they would remain anonymous and that their data would be protected by the researcher. Participation was voluntary and participants had the option to withdraw at any time.

Sample

West Bengal is divided into 19 districts. The study was conducted in the North 24 Parganas district. This district is located close to Kolkata city and consists of a mostly urban population, along with some rural population. Five areas within the district, consisting of government teachers ($n = 706$) and teachers ($n = 129$) from private schools, were selected to participate in the study.

Teachers from government and private schools from the North 24 Parganas district were invited to participate in the study. A total of 535 teachers returned the completed survey. The majority of teachers ($n = 466$) were from government schools and 69 teachers were from private schools. The age range of the teachers was from 22 years to 59 years ($M = 40$). The length of experience ranged from 1 to 40 years and 50.9% of the teachers had a bachelor's degree, 19.6% had a master's degree, 11.6% had a diploma degree and 7.2% had degrees other than a bachelor's, master's and diploma (see Figure 2).

Study Design

Instrumentation

The survey utilised for the study comprised four parts.

Part one. The first part collected information about demographics, such as age, gender, level of training, the grade teachers teach, the number of students in a class, type of schools (government/private) employed, experience, and prior knowledge in special education.

Part two: Types of challenging behaviour. The second part of the questionnaire was an itemised table with options for types of challenging behaviour. The listed behaviours were talking, physical aggression, disobedience, not following rules, not following directions, not participating in group activities, making noises and fidgeting. Participants were asked to respond to a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *non-disruptive* to *extremely disruptive*. Each response was given a score, with 1 representing *non-disruptive*, 2 *little disruptive*, 3 *somewhat disruptive*, 4 *very disruptive*, and 5 *extremely disruptive*. The items of the scale were informed by an analysis of past literature (Alter et al., 2013; Shen et al., 2009) and an analysis of interview data collected from a pilot study conducted prior to the present study. The items of the scale were altered to make them suitable for the Indian context. For example, rather than using 'withdrawal' as an item, 'not participating in group activities' was used instead.

Part three: Causal attributions. Five vignettes were constructed for the present study. A vignette is a short episode that describes a person, object, or situation (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010). The construction of the vignettes was informed by an analysis of past literature on teachers' attributions for disruptive behaviour in an international context and vignettes from other similar studies (Mavropoulou & Padeliadu, 2002; Poulou & Norwich, 2000). The final vignettes were altered to accommodate the Indian context that represented episodes of talking (out of turn), non-compliance, withdrawal, disruption, and aggression. Nine items (i.e., factors that can be attributed to challenging behaviour) followed each vignette, with three items for each factor. Family-related factors were associated with a lack of parental interest, low income of the family, and a lack of discipline at home. Student-related factors were learning disability/difficulty, need for attention, and students exhibiting disinterest in class. Teacher/school-related factors were large class sizes, poor classroom management, and inadequate teaching method. These items were informed by two Greek studies by Poulou and Norwich (2000) and Mavropoulou and Padeliadu (2002) and required modification to suit the Indian context. Participants responded to the items using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *totally agree* (1) to *totally disagree* (4). Cronbach's alpha for the original scale was .77, demonstrating satisfactory internal reliability (Andreou & Rapti, 2010). The items were intermixed to avoid response bias.

Part four: Strategies. Each vignette was followed by eight items suggesting strategies used by teachers to address challenging behaviour in classrooms. The strategies were categorised into two parts. Part one consisted of proactive strategies, which had five items. The items were rewarding for appropriate behaviour, implementing prevention strategies, talking to parents, creating accountability in students for their behaviours, or providing alternative activities and talking to the student. Part two consisted of reactive strategies, which had three items. The items were taking disciplinary action, suspension or expulsion, and ignoring challenging behaviour. The items were adapted from a study by Anderson (2007) and were also informed by an analysis of interview data from a pilot study. The pilot study was conducted prior to the present study, where a number of teachers were interviewed to investigate teachers' causal attributions of students' challenging behaviour and their suggested strategies to address the behaviour. The original study (Anderson, 2007) had 11 items, but in the current study we used only eight items and altered them as per the Indian context. Participants could respond by using a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* (1), *hardly ever* (2), *occasionally* (3), *often* (4), *almost always* (5) and *always* (6). The Cronbach's alpha for the original scale was .80, indicating adequate internal reliability (Anderson, 2007). An open-ended question was included at the end of the survey for participants to suggest any other strategies they used in their classrooms, apart from the strategies covered in the questionnaire.

The content validity of the questionnaire for the Indian context was facilitated through an expert panel review. The panel was asked to review the questionnaire and make appropriate suggestions. The panel of experts were researchers from the area of inclusive education and students' challenging behaviour. A group of primary school teachers were also recruited to review the questionnaire. The panel recommended minor changes mainly to the wording of items (e.g., change 'talking out of turn' to 'talking'; change 'parents' low income' to 'low income of family'; change 'learning disability/difficulty' to 'learning disability/difficulties').

The questionnaire was translated conceptually from English to Bengali by the researcher and two other assistants who were experts in both languages. Both translations were offered to participants, which provided them the option of responding in their preferred language.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to determine the means for each part of the questionnaire. Prior to undertaking quantitative analysis, Cronbach's alphas were calculated to check the internal reliability of the third (causal attributions) and fourth parts (proactive and reactive strategies) of the questionnaire. The reliability coefficients were .787, .872 and .903 for student-related, family-related,

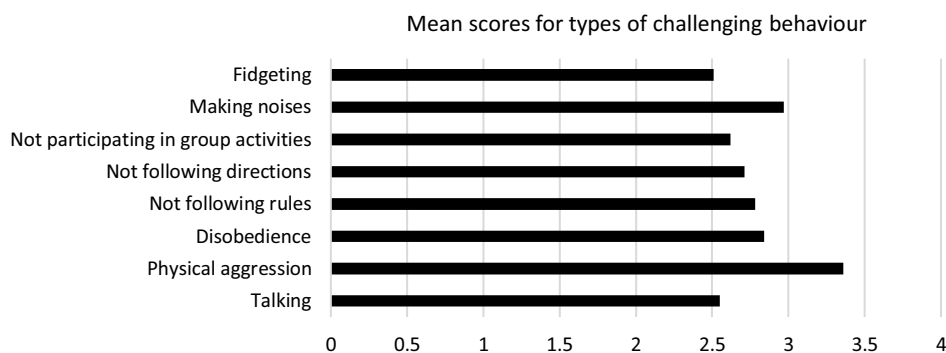


Figure 3. Mean Scores of Types of Challenging Behaviour.

and teacher-related factors, respectively. Cronbach's alphas for proactive strategies and reactive strategies subscales were .917 and .867, respectively, suggesting sound internal consistency.

The qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis (familiarising with data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing, and naming themes, and producing the report). The data from the open-ended questions were organised and a coding system was established. Initially, a large number of codes were designed; however, these overlapping codes were reduced and subsequently collapsed into themes (Creswell, 2015). The themes were then reviewed and given appropriate names.

Results

The findings are presented in three parts. The first two parts provide results about teachers' perceptions of types of challenging behaviour and teachers' causal attributions of challenging behaviour. Participants' use of strategies to address challenging behaviours was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods, and they are presented in the final section.

Most Disruptive Challenging Behaviour as Perceived by Teachers

Figure 3 presents the mean values of the items representing types of challenging behaviour. Participant responses suggested that physical aggression in the classroom was the most disruptive behaviour in comparison to other behaviours, and the mean score indicated that teachers agreed to 'physical aggression' as 'somewhat disruptive'. Teachers found 'fidgeting' to be the 'least disruptive' behaviour among others.

Causal Attributions of Challenging Behaviours as Perceived by Teachers

Table 1 represents the mean scores of the causal attributions of challenging behaviours. The scores are grouped into five categories representing different situations in the form of vignettes. The higher scores indicate that teachers disagreed with teacher-related factors as a cause of challenging behaviours in the classroom. Lower mean scores suggested that teachers attributed student-related and family-related factors as the main causes of challenging behaviour across all vignettes. Among all the vignettes, number 3 (Withdrawal) obtained the highest mean (2.97). This suggests that teachers did not perceive teacher-related factors as a cause of challenging behaviour when it came to situations where students were mostly quiet and did not participate in classroom activities. Vignette 4 (Disruption) scored the lowest mean (2.1), which indicated that teachers agreed to student-related factors as the main cause of challenging behaviour when it came to situations like causing disruptions in classrooms.

Table 1. Group Mean^a Scores of Teachers' Causal Attributions of Challenging Behaviour

| Factors | Student factors <i>M</i> | Family factors <i>M</i> | Teacher factors <i>M</i> |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Vignette 1 Talking | 2.23 | 2.34 | 2.82 |
| Vignette 2 Non-compliance | 2.15 | 2.29 | 2.95 |
| Vignette 3 Withdrawal | 2.19 | 2.33 | 2.97 |
| Vignette 4 Disruption | 2.1 | 2.4 | 2.86 |
| Vignette 5 Aggression | 2.21 | 2.28 | 2.92 |

^aLower mean scores indicate agreement and higher means indicate disagreement.

Table 2. Mean Scores^a for Individual Items Across All Vignettes

| Factors | Talking | Non-compliance | Withdrawal | Disruption | Aggression |
|----------------------------------|---------|----------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Learning disability/difficulties | 2.54 | 2.52 | 2.49 | 2.45 | 2.67 |
| Large class size | 2.69 | 2.94 | 3.01 | 2.8 | 2.89 |
| Need for attention | 1.73 | 1.72 | 1.08 | 1.67 | 1.79 |
| Poor classroom management | 2.89 | 2.97 | 2.97 | 2.89 | 2.93 |
| Lack of parental interest | 2.29 | 2.25 | 2.16 | 2.32 | 2.21 |
| Inadequate teaching method | 2.87 | 2.93 | 2.92 | 2.88 | 2.95 |
| Low income of the family | 2.78 | 2.74 | 2.68 | 2.84 | 2.73 |
| Child not interested in class | 2.39 | 2.2 | 2.26 | 2.17 | 2.15 |
| Lack of discipline at home | 1.94 | 1.88 | 2.15 | 2.04 | 1.89 |

^aLower mean scores indicate agreement and higher means indicate disagreement.

Table 2 represents the mean scores of individual items across all vignettes. The mean scores for the item 'poor classroom management' implied that teachers did not believe that this contributed to challenging behaviours in the classroom. Poor classroom management is an internal factor related to teachers; thus, the response denoted that teachers disagreed with not only teacher-related factors but also factors internal to them. Similarly, the item 'need for attention' had the lowest score, indicating that teachers agreed to the student-related factor as a cause of challenging behaviour that was internal to the student. Furthermore, a lower score on 'lack of discipline at home' suggested that teachers agreed to this family-related factor as a leading cause of students' challenging behaviour.

Strategies Suggested by Teachers to Address Behaviour in the Classroom

Figure 4 represents strategies suggested by teachers to address students' challenging behaviour in classrooms. The mean scores for the items representing proactive strategies were similar across all items and ranged from 4.42 to 4.75. The finding indicates that most teachers suggested that they *often* or *almost always* use proactive strategies. The lower mean scores (1.5) indicated that teachers hardly used reactive strategies. The mean scores were very similar across the vignettes, which indicated that despite the change in situation, teachers' responses did not vary significantly when it came to the use of strategies in different scenarios. Individual items were also analysed for the mean score for each vignette. The score did not vary from the group means and suggested that teachers use proactive strategies more frequently and reactive strategies less frequently. Of importance is that the data collected are based on self-reporting and may include a degree of bias.

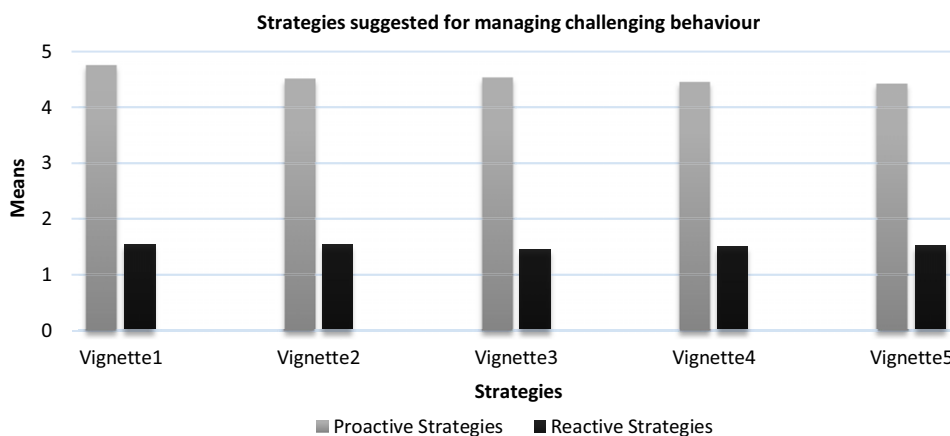


Figure 4. Strategies Suggested for Managing Challenging Behaviour.

The open-ended questions in the survey were analysed thematically. The written responses from the open-ended questions were divided into segments, the segments were labelled with codes and, finally, the codes were collapsed into themes (Creswell, 2015). Four themes were identified where teachers had suggested various strategies they used to address challenging behaviour in their classrooms. The strategies recommended by teachers were mostly proactive, as suggested by the quantitative data. The following section presents the themes that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data.

Integrating contemporary strategies in classrooms

In relation to themes derived from Vignette 1 (Talking), a situation where students talk out of turn in classrooms, resulting in a disruption of classroom activities, teachers recommended the use of audiovisual aids, learning and teaching materials, and a need to maintain interesting lessons. Teachers recommended providing students with an environment to undertake constructive and creative work at school. One teacher mentioned, 'Provide interesting lessons to students through the use of rhymes, drama, and creativity, and once a week, classes involving dance, music, art, and writing poems'.

For Vignette 2 (Non-compliance), where students refuse to obey classroom rules and regulations, teachers recommended dividing students into smaller groups in the classroom to improve students' concentration. One teacher also suggested the use of playful and entertaining methods to keep students interested in the class and stated that 'classrooms should be colourful, and teachers should teach subjects according to students' interests'.

For Vignette 3 (Withdrawal), where students do not interact with peers or teachers, teachers recommended that they should provide an environment for students that will improve their self-confidence. Students should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities as well so that they can express themselves better. One teacher suggested that 'special classes, separate from the regular classes, should be conducted for students struggling to socialise with their peers'. Teachers also believed in organising sports and extracurricular activities to engage students who communicated less with their peers and teachers.

For Vignette 4 (Disruption), where students constantly disrupt classwork and their fellow students, teachers proposed the use of meditation in the classroom. Teachers also suggested that students who may be causing disruption in the classroom could be given more work and teachers should be more attentive towards them. For Vignette 5 (Aggression), where students show aggression by disturbing peers and getting into fights and harming other students, teachers recommended the use of sports in the curriculum. Teachers believed that if students play sports, then their aggression could be positively channelled. They also recommended changing seating arrangements and working in small groups.

Teachers also proposed using different, exciting teaching methods and encouraged students to participate in extracurricular activities.

Facilitating student-teacher relationships

In the case of talking and causing disruption in class, teachers believed that if they were friendly, students would approach them with their problems. One teacher mentioned that 'teachers should try to establish a friendly relationship with students by talking to them regularly. It is very important to have discussions with the student so that they feel confident enough to share their thoughts'.

Where students were non-compliant, teachers suggested that they should try to find the student's problem and solve it by talking to them. One teacher commented,

We should talk to students and determine the appropriate reason for their behaviour; we should look for the problem, and then try to solve it. A little love and affection are required to interact with the students who are disrupting the classroom. This way we might be able to change their attitude.

When students showed withdrawal, teachers recommended talking to students, looking out for them, and educating students about appropriate behaviour. In the case of disruption in class, teachers recommended a 'sympathetic approach' towards the students and educating parents to be affectionate towards their children. When students were aggressive, teachers recommended talking to the student privately about their problems and not embarrassing them by discussing their behaviour in the classroom. Teachers believed that it was vital for students to have confidence in their teachers. One teacher remarked,

Students may have suppressed feelings for a number of reasons, such as low family income, parents busy with other siblings and parents being non-attentive, resulting in feelings of insecurities for the students. A teacher in such cases should take special care to establish a relationship with the student so that the student can rely on the teacher for his problems.

Establishing collaboration between school, society, and home

Teachers recommended observing the students closely and understanding their social background if they disrupted the class by talking. Teachers also suggested that parents should take responsibility and collaborate with other teachers to educate students at home. One teacher suggested that 'parents should use playful methods at home too for teaching students and keep the lessons interesting for them'.

For students who were non-compliant, teachers recommended meeting the parents of the students to identify the problem causing them to misbehave in class. Teachers believed in consulting with parents regularly. Teachers proposed the idea of working in collaboration with family and community in case students showed symptoms of withdrawal. Teachers believed that some students who migrate from neighbouring states may not be familiar with the local language and culture. Collaborating with family may help the teacher to understand the student better and plan lessons accordingly. Teachers also recommended talking to parents about any pre-existing health conditions in the student and encouraging parents to seek medical support.

In the case of causing disruption in classrooms, teachers believed that home was a significant influence on a student's behaviour, especially students who were first-generation learners and came from an economically disadvantaged section of society. Teachers also believed that students unknowingly imitate behaviour from the community, social media, or television and thus recommended that knowing their family environment would help them to plan their classroom interactions and practices accordingly. One teacher mentioned that

Students like imitating behaviour without understanding it. They imitate behaviour from their community or on television and portray the same in school with their peers. Talking to their parents might help teachers in understanding about the student's behaviour and how it can be resolved.

When students showed aggression in classrooms, teachers proposed talking to parents about the repercussions of physically hurting students to punish them and educating them to take a sympathetic approach towards their children. Teachers suspected that students might be seeing physical abuse and aggression at home and portraying the same behaviour in school. Thus teachers recommended interacting with family and working in collaboration with them.

Seeking paraprofessional support

Teachers suggested and recommended psychological interventions and counselling for students who were withdrawn from classroom activities or were aggressive. In the case of withdrawal, teachers suggested speaking to students in person and finding out about any existing mental health issues. Teachers recommended talking to parents and organising counselling and psychological intervention for students. One teacher reported that 'students with behaviour problems should consult counsellors and special care should be taken when the student is in class'.

Teachers recommended counselling for students with aggressive behaviour. One teacher mentioned that 'aggressive children are usually the ones who undergo physical abuse at home. Counselling and psychological intervention will help the student in adjusting with his home environment and can result in better progress at school'.

Discussion

The present study focused on teachers' perception of challenging behaviour in India, their causal attributions and the strategies they suggest for managing such behaviours. The outcome of the study provides insight into how teachers perceive behaviour and how they identify the ways they use various strategies to address challenging behaviours in their classrooms.

Teachers in West Bengal agreed that physical aggression is the most challenging behaviour compared to other challenging behaviours. The results are similar to studies in India (Patnaik et al., 2022), Australia (Stephenson et al., 2000), USA (Dutton Tillery et al., 2010; Quesenberry et al., 2014) and Canada (McCready & Soloway, 2010) where teachers raised concerns about aggressive behaviour. However, these results are inconsistent with views expressed by authors of studies conducted in other contexts. For example, teachers in countries such as Britain and Turkey (Atici & Merry, 2001), Norway and England (Stephens et al., 2005), Scotland (Grieve, 2009), Turkey (Durmuscelebi, 2010), and China (Ding et al., 2008; Shen et al., 2009) found talking out of turn to be one of the most disruptive behaviours among children. Although studies in the past indicate that teachers find less disruptive behaviour more challenging to address in their classrooms (Sullivan et al., 2014), this study suggested that teachers were more concerned about behaviour related to physical aggression. A possible reason for Indian teachers to find physical aggression the most challenging behaviour could be their lack of knowledge and skill in behaviour management. Additionally, in 2009, the RTE Act in India banned the use of corporal punishment in classrooms. It is anticipated that teachers may have found addressing students' aggression in the classroom difficult due to the ban, which restricted teachers' use of punishment as a strategy to address physically aggressive behaviour (Patnaik et al., 2022). Other studies (Cheruvath & Tripathi, 2015; Malak et al., 2014) also confirm that teachers mostly feel incapable of addressing aggressive behaviour when they lose authority in their classrooms and are unable to use corporal punishment. Furthermore, past reviews on this topic in the Indian context suggest that there is negligible information about the use of positive strategies to address students' challenging behaviours in Indian schools (Sharma et al., 2013; Sharma & Rangarajan, 2019). Interestingly, a study by Bhatnagar (2021) indicates that there is an urgent need for teacher-learning programs in India that can educate

teachers about using positive strategies to address students' challenging behaviour, reinforcing the idea that teachers lack the essential skills and knowledge to address students' behaviour.

Teachers in this study mostly attributed the causes of challenging behaviour to student- and family-related factors compared to teacher-related factors across all vignettes. These results are similar to other studies in Australia and China (Ho, 2004), Malaysia (Zakaria et al., 2013), USA (Nungesser & Watkins, 2005), New Zealand (Johansen et al., 2011), Bangladesh (Malak et al., 2014), India (Joseph et al., 2021), Indonesia (Paramita et al., 2020), Greece (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000), and Turkey (Erbas et al., 2010). The findings of this study suggest that teachers tend to attribute the causes of students' behaviour to students and families and more often do not take any responsibility for students' challenging behaviours themselves. The causal attribution theory (Weiner, 2010) explains this phenomenon as self-serving attribution bias, where the teacher is inclined to blame the student or the family and not take responsibility for students' behaviour themselves. According to the theory, individuals often do not attribute causes to themselves when they believe that failures are caused by outside factors. For example, in this study, teachers agreed to the 'need for attention' as one of the causes of challenging behaviour. Need for attention is a student-related cause that is internal to the student and external to the teacher. The teachers' attribution in this situation implies that they assumed that students were responsible for their own behaviour. Similarly, teachers disagreed with causes such as 'inadequate teaching method' and 'poor classroom management' as factors of challenging behaviour, suggesting that they did not agree with factors that are teacher-related causes and internal to themselves.

This study provides unique insight into teachers' causal attributions. It appears that despite teachers attributing the causes of students' behaviour to student- and family-related factors, they agreed to the use of proactive strategies to respond to challenging behaviours in their classrooms. Several studies (e.g., Mensah et al., 2020; Paramita et al., 2020) also reported similar findings where teachers were prepared to use positive strategies despite attributing causes of students' challenging behaviour to student- or family-related causes. However, it would be expected that teachers who are attributing the causes of students' challenging behaviour to external causes (family-related causes) will also seek strategies that are not teacher-based (Ho, 2004; Wiley et al., 2012) because teachers who attribute causes of challenging behaviour to themselves are more likely to use teacher-based strategies (Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Weiner, 1985). However, in this study, although teachers located the cause of challenging behaviour to external factors (such as student- and family-related factors), they suggested using proactive strategies. Teachers in this study may have responded in this way to protect their public image and reject negative outcomes resulting from their actions (Paramita et al., 2020; Poulou & Norwich, 2000).

Reactive strategies in the study scored lower means, indicating that teachers suggested that they rarely use punitive strategies; this may be because teachers seldom report using harsh practices, as they are not socially desirable and may attract criticism (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Paramita et al., 2020). A study by Anand (2014) reported that teachers were reluctant to answer questions related to corporal punishment and often provided politically correct responses. In the same study, where students reported receiving some type of punishment, teachers did not agree that they used any type of punishment. However, it is also important to note that, as pointed out in a study by Deb et al. (2017), Kolkata (the location of the research study) was one of the few cities in India to report less use of corporal punishment in comparison to other Indian locations. It is therefore difficult to establish the extent of teachers' use of reactive strategies in Indian schools based on limited research in this area.

Teachers in this study suggested a wide range of strategies through open-ended questions. Consistent with the past literature (Atici, 2007; McCready & Soloway, 2010; Poulou & Norwich, 2000; Zakaria et al., 2013), the themes suggested that teachers recommended using strategies such as collaborating with parents, modelling positive behaviour, building relationships with students, and developing cultural awareness. Extraordinarily for Vignette 1 (Talking), teachers recommended contemporary strategies more often than other strategies. Contradictorily, for Vignette 3 (Withdrawal) teachers proposed counselling services and psychological intervention more frequently than in other vignettes. This finding indicates that teachers were comfortable suggesting improving classroom

practices and the classroom environment for situations presented in Vignette 1 (Talking), whereas teachers sought medical and psychological help to support students when they suspected the cause of student behaviour to be student-related and not teacher-related. As suggested in the quantitative data as well as the interview data, it is interesting to note that teachers mostly focused on proactive strategies such as improving the classroom environment despite locating the cause of the challenging behaviour within students or their families. A possible explanation for teachers to suggest that they used proactive strategies frequently may be explained in several ways; for example, teachers may have refrained from suggesting reactive strategies to avoid criticism apart from providing a socially desirable response (Bibou-Nakou et al., 2000; Ding et al., 2010; Paramita et al., 2020). Additionally, teachers may have responded according to contemporary education trends (Poulou & Norwich, 2000), where suggesting proactive strategies in classrooms is more acceptable. It is also possible that because of the unique diverse cultural environment in India, attribution theory may have some limitations (Ho, 2004) in explaining why teachers suggested proactive strategies despite attributing causes to external factors, as the theory was primarily developed in Western cultural settings (Erbas et al., 2010). However, the attribution theory framework does provide a useful foundation for the study, allowing the researchers to understand the applicability of the framework in an Indian context.

It is also significant to recognise that some participating teachers suggested psychological interventions (an external recommendation), especially in situations where the student showed aggression, disruption and withdrawal. Typical of the attributional framework, teachers seeking support outside of school could be because they had attributed the causes of challenging behaviour to external causes, such as family- and student-related factors. This particular outcome of the study confirms that teachers may choose strategies depending on what they attribute to students' challenging behaviour, indicating that the theory was applicable in this particular instance.

Limitations

Although this study provides an initial insight into teachers' causal attributions of students' challenging behaviour in an Indian context, it is important to acknowledge some limitations. To begin with, as most of the data in this study were self-reported, it is not certain whether the self-reports represented actual classroom practices (Andreou & Rapti, 2010). To better understand teachers' classroom practices, researchers of future studies should use observation as a research method, along with interviews and surveys. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a small district of West Bengal; therefore, the data cannot be generalised beyond the population of the present study and care must be taken while interpreting the data.

Conclusion and Implications

The study provided in-depth knowledge about the teachers' causal attributions and their suggested strategies for addressing behavioural issues in their classrooms. Due to limited research on teachers' causal attributions of students' challenging behaviour in the South Asian region, it remains unknown how teachers perceive challenging behaviour and even more so in India. Therefore, professional learning programs can be immensely improved if teachers understand their own causal attributions and how these attributions may guide them to make appropriate choices of strategies to address students' challenging behaviour. Teachers may also focus on the use of strength-based positive practices in schools and should be provided with increased opportunities to learn about effective strategies that they can use in their classrooms. It is critical that any professional learning opportunities offered to teachers in India should take into consideration the local contextual factors so that the content is practical and meaningful to them. Additionally, the findings of the study will support the benefits of integrating family, community, and school to develop appropriate strength-based models for addressing challenging behaviour among students.

Overall, in a wider context beyond India, the significance of a better understanding of what teachers perceive as challenging behaviour and how they respond to addressing behaviour can provide insight into how they can be best supported. Teachers with better knowledge of their perceptions about behaviour and proactive strategies are likely to create classrooms that will benefit students with behaviour problems, other students, and the teachers themselves. The new insight will help in improving teacher training through which teachers will gain skills and feel confident while managing their classrooms.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2023.8>

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Cite this article: Patnaik, S. & Subban, P. (2023). Challenging behaviours in primary classrooms: Examining causal attributions and strategies used by primary school teachers in India. *Australasian Journal of Special and Inclusive Education* 47, 78–95. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jsi.2023.8>