Experiences of Special Education Teachers in Dealing with Behavioral Problems Presented by Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The primary goal of any classroom is effective teaching and student learning, with an emphasis on changing negative students' behaviors into positive ones. This change can occur when students' behavior is always at the forefront of teachers' educational goals. The current study aimed to reveal the experiences of special education teachers in dealing with the behavioral problems that students with disabilities show by identifying behavioral problems among students with disabilities and investigating the efficacy of the application of behavior modification plans and strategies designed to address the behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities. The researcher used a qualitative phenomenological approach, and the study tool consisted of semi-structured interviews that consisted of (13) questions directed to (10) special education male and female teachers who work in special education centres and institutes. The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The findings of the study showed that the most undesirable behaviors prevalent among students with disabilities in the classroom were aggression, bullying and ADHD. The actions taken by teachers in confronting these behaviors were not systematic and were carried out randomly, as no behavior modification plans were applied. The most important strategies used by teachers in facing behavioral problems were applied behavioral analysis (ABA) strategies such as reinforcement, punishment and ignoring. The results have many important implications for future practice, including the need to conduct practical training courses for special education teachers to implement behavior modification plans and develop methods of measuring inappropriate behavior.

Key words: *Special education teachers, Behavioral problems, Children with disabilities.*

1. Introduction

Teacher self-efficacy is related to teachers' beliefs in their ability to achieve desired outcomes regarding student participation and learning and their beliefs about their ability to deliver quality instruction in the classroom. It also influences how students learn, even those who have difficulties or lack the motivation to learn. Furthermore, teacher self-efficacy also impacts teachers' personal choices, motivations, traditional and actions. Researchers have proposed that teacher self-efficacy is closely related to purposeful educational outcomes such as learners' perseverance, enthusiasm, commitment, and educational behavior (Dimitrios et al., 2020). High teacher self-efficacy is additionally linked to the ability of teachers to tackle challenging tasks, including classroom management and behavioral problems presented by students in the classroom. Teachers, in their classrooms, face many behavioral problems presented by students. Such problems require the teachers' professional competence to help them implement strategies that encourage students' positive behavior, use problem-solving skills, reduce aggressive behavior, and increase compliance with the rules, which in turn encourages the creation of a safe environment in the classroom. Knowledge of student behavior and its management is an important component of the field of special education. It is also essential for teachers to realize that every behavior which students exhibit is caused by specific factors that influence the situation. However, many teachers enter the profession without adequate classroom management training and continue to face challenges throughout their careers (Mitchell, 2019). Behavioral problems presented by students in the classroom put a lot of pressure on teachers and peers. Moreover, behavioral problems in the classroom create a negative learning environment, increase stress and teacher fatigue, and negatively affect the learning process. Many teachers see student discipline problems as the most challenging and stressful factors in their work environment. Behavioral problems presented by students are closely related to teacher burnout, as nearly 45% of teachers who left the profession cited student behavior as the main reason for leaving the profession. Such reports indicate that helping students behave in a way that supports learning outcomes and a safe environment remains one of the most important issues facing schools (Carr, 2012), especially when it comes to educating students with disabilities. Research has shown that students with disabilities are more likely than their non-disabled peers to display behavioral problems, including social problems, peer problems, oppositional behaviors, ADHD, comprehension problems, aggression, and bullying (Fauth et al.,2017), which affect their learning progress and prevent their social acceptance inside and outside the classroom. This requires the teacher to have extensive knowledge of the individual characteristics of students and the students' strengths and individual needs so that they can design and implement educational programs that emphasize the strengths and needs of individual students (Ali et al., 2014). Therefore, this study aimed to examine the experiences of special education teachers in addressing the behavioral problems that students with disabilities show in the classroom by identifying the behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities and assessing the effect of their application of behavior modification plans and strategies to address the behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities.

2. Literature Review

Behavioral problems are defined as unacceptable behaviors that result in many negative implications that affect students' progress and limit their social acceptance inside and outside the classroom, such as disruptive behaviors, impulsivity, apathy, stereotyped behaviors, and tantrums. These behavioral problems are displayed among children with disabilities more than among their normal peers (Ali et al., 2014), and negatively affect their success and academic progress. They do not occur accidentally but as a result of basic unmet needs of the student. Several factors may affect the behaviours of students such as their peers, the teacher, and the environment classroom, learning activities, and instructional materials used in the classroom. Therefore, teachers need to understand the student's academic, social, and behavioral needs (Hambrick, 2021). The primary goal of any classroom is effective teaching and student learning, with an emphasis on changing negative students' behaviors into positive ones. This change can occur when students' behavior is always at the forefront of teachers' educational goals. Teachers need to understand the student's academic and behavioral needs, as the interaction between lack of academic skills and behavioral disturbances can create further complications in these students' learning. If students are experiencing academic difficulties, they are more likely to engage in escape behaviors when assigned a challenging academic task. Teachers need to provide adjustments or facilities including creating clear and specific academic and behavioral expectations for students, providing reinforcement for positive behaviors, and dealing with behavioral problems as they arise. Doing these things can help teachers to become familiar with individual students and understand their diverse needs (Hambrick, 2021). Special education teachers have a lot of responsibilities in terms of developing and implementing effective curricula that address not only academic needs but behavioral and social needs as well (Haskel, 2018). The demands of educating students with disabilities are not easy and usually require patience and commitment. Thus, special education teachers need to equip themselves with knowledge and skills related to behavior management to be ready for these situations. Such knowledge and skills may include familiarity with the behavioral characteristics shown by children with disabilities, the actions taken by such children, the challenges that may be encountered while teaching these students, and classroom management techniques (Hambrick, 2021). It is also important for special education teachers to develop their skills in managing the various behavioral problems of students with disabilities in the education process (Ali et al., 2014). Managing these behaviors is a constant challenge for teachers if they do not receive appropriate training and are not competent to implement effective behavior management strategies, since such shortcomings affect the creation of a positive classroom environment. The lack of knowledge and experience in teaching students with behavioral problems in the classroom also reduces the effectiveness of the teaching process (Hambrick, 2021). Several studies have focused on the reality of teachers' experiences in addressing the behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities. The study conducted by Westling (2010) indicated that most teachers did not use sufficient effective strategies or receive sufficient support, suggested that behavioral problems have had a negative impact on teachers and students, and intimated that most teachers considered their professional preparation as insufficient. On the other hand, the study of Ali et al. (2014) stated that participants faced many challenges in managing behavioral problems in the classroom, including lack of time to manage behavioral problems, lack of skills and knowledge regarding behavior management, and heavy teaching workloads. Alayed & Ab-uhwash (2011) found that there was a low-level knowledge of behavior modification among special education teachers and general education teachers. Alharthy (2015) found that sample members had poor skills in addressing behavioral problems of students with learning disabilities. The studies also dealt with the most prominent behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities. Mensah et al. (2021), who explored teachers' experiences with behavioral problems and the strategies used to mitigate these problems among students with visual impairments in Ghana, stressed that students suffered from many classroom-based behavioral problems that can be classified into physiological (emotional problems, non-compliance, and aggression) and physical and social problems (verbal abuse, sleepiness, talking, habitual lateness and harassment). The study also showed that the key factors that caused behavior problems were the negative attitudes of teachers, inappropriate teaching methods, the nature of the family, and the classroom environment. Nicholls et al. (2020) found a high prevalence of behavioural problems among their samples and indicated that at least one challenging behaviour was displayed by 53% of students, as well as self-injurious behaviour (36.4%), aggressive / destructive behavior (30.2%), and stereotypical behavior (25.9%). A study by Jalal (2020) revealed that the most common problem was difficulty in verbal expression of something wanted (M = 2.14) while the least common problem was self-harm (M = 1.42). A study by Amstad and Müller (2020) also examined the degree to which teachers perceived individual behavioral problems of students with intellectual disabilities as creating stress and pressure on teachers working in special needs schools for students with intellectual disabilities. Teachers were asked to identify a wide range of behaviors typically seen in the student community. The findings showed that behaviours that put offending students or others at risk, such as kicking, hitting, biting, or talking about suicide, were rated as more stressful. Disruptive behaviors and antisocial behaviors were reported as the most stressful, and behaviors related to the communication disorder domain as the least stressful. Alajmi (2013) also aimed to identify the most prominent behavioral problems among children with intellectual disabilities from the point of view of their teachers. The results revealed that the problem of lack of motivation was one of the most severe behavioral problems among children with intellectual disabilities.

3. Method

This study follows a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of special education teachers in addressing behavioral problems exhibited by students with disabilities. The phenomenological design was selected over other designs "Grounded theory" because the aim of this study was to summarize a comprehensive picture of the experiences of special education teachers in facing the behavioral problems that students with disabilities exhibit in their own words and phrases. It can be defined as a qualitative approach to the analysis of phenomena in relation to the way individuals perceive a particular concept while "Grounded theory" investigates experiences and other data sources to develop a more objective understanding of the subject of study (Abed & Shackelfor, 2020). Ten (10) teachers of special education were purposefully selected according to the qualitative approach.

This study was limited to teachers of special education who teach students with disabilities in institutes and centers of special education in the city of Mecca in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. All participants were asked to electronically sign a written consent form before their participation in the study, and the researcher clearly explained to all participants their right to participate in, refuse to participate in, or withdraw from the study. He also explained that participation in this study was voluntary, and the information was confidential and was to be used for research purposes only (Creswell & Poth). A semi-structured interview protocol was developed, reviewed by two faculty members and specialists in special education, and modified according to their directions. Semi-structured interviews, which are the main source of data collection in the phenomenological method (Hatch, 2002), were used to collect data from the participants since they lead to an exploration of experiences and impart meaningful structure to the information which can be obtained from participants (Adams, 2015). Given the aim of this study, the researcher determined that the interview method was the most appropriate, since it would ensure interaction between the researcher conducting the interview and the participating teacher, which would, in turn, affect the information that would be obtained. Interviews were conducted individually by phone during the month of December 2021. Each interview took 30 minutes on average. The responses were recorded using an audio recorder given the consent of the participants. The process of transcribing the audio messages in writing was done using the text processing software (Microsoft Word), after which it was presented to the participants to allow them to check the correctness of the information. For the purpose of the current study, which aimed to explore the experiences of teachers of special education in addressing behavioral problems displayed by students with disabilities, the study used the thematic analysis method, which is one of the methods used in analyzing qualitative data, in which the data is organized and placed in specific topics or categories, then explored and interpreted analytically to find an answer to the research question. Moreover, the method is useful for examining the views of the various participants in the study since it allows the researcher to see and understand collective or shared experiences and meanings (Nowell et al., 2017). Based on the data the researcher collected, the content was analyzed, with the expectation that insights would be revealed by collecting similar data within the framework of certain concepts and topics and organizing and interpreting them in a way that helps readers to understand. The researcher was guided by the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) to analyze topics, namely: (i) familiarity with the data through reading it more than once after downloading it into a word document; (2) initial encoding by transforming the data into texts, then defining, classifying, arranging, and categorizing the data with an

appropriate title; (3) searching for the main themes, in such a way that the topics that were formed in the previous stage are grouped and sorted to form broader categories or topics; (4) reviewing the main topics and checking the phrases and coding done for accuracy and investigation; (5) defining and naming the topics with titles that reflect each main topic and indicate the encoded phrases it contains; and (6) writing the final report (analysis) and reviewing the results.

4. Findings and Discussion

Through the analysis of the data, three topics emerged to describe the experiences of teachers in addressing the behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities. These topics were: (1) behavioral problems; (2) implementation of the behavior modification plan with its two main sub-themes (i) random and unsystematic implementation of the plan, and (ii) reasons for non-implementation of the behavior modification plan; and (3) behavior modification strategies with three sub-themes: (i) various types of reinforcement, (ii) punishment strategy, and (iii) extinction or ignoring strategy. These topics will be elaborated on in the following lines.

Behavioral problems
Two sub-themes emerge from this main topic: aggression and bullying, and ADHD.

Aggression and bullying
The participants defined aggressive and bullying behaviors as hitting, cursing, spitting, self-injury, assaulting peers, throwing tools at peers, taking the objects of their peers by force, biting the finger and hand, and bullying peers who answered wrongly. Participant A2 affirmed that he faced many aggressive behaviors such as harming others. Other responses included the following: "The most common undesirable behavior among students with hearing impairments is bullying. When a student provides a wrong answer, he / she may be bullied by his / her peers, and this affects the student's desire to study in the future" (Participant A3); and "The most common behavior among students is aggression against each other" (Participant A7). Participant A6 referred to "bullying and harming other students." This finding is consistent with Mensah et al. (2021) and Nicholls et al. (2020), who showed that 30% of students exhibit aggressive behaviors in the classroom, a result consistent with what has been confirmed by research and which indicates that aggressive behavior is the second most common problem among children with disabilities. This behavioral problem constitutes a heavy burden on teachers and has a negative impact on the usual performance of the teacher's role besides ostracizing those students and making them undesirable individuals (Wahsheh, 2019).

Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
The participants defined ADHD as the failure to sit in one's seat, lack of focus on the task, forgetfulness, lack of attention, excessive movement, moving chairs and tables, moving from one seat to another, and excessive movement of the body. Participant A1 stated that she faced many such behaviors in the classroom, including excessive activity and the inability to sit in one's seat, while Participant A10 mentioned "distraction and a weak desire to learn." Participant A4 said that the most frequent behavioral problem he faced was the inability to sit in the seat. Participant A2 claimed that the student's movement from one seat to another was one of the most significant problems he faced in the classroom.

These findings agree with those of the study of Al Zaben et al. (2018) which reported that ADHD was one of the most common behavioral problems among school students. These findings indicate the need to use effective strategies to manage such behaviors in the classroom, since they have a direct impact on the teacher, the other students, and the course of the teaching process. This finding highlights the importance of updating the training programs of special education teachers with content that focuses on raising the teacher's skills and knowledge in confronting behaviors such as aggression and bullying and implementing ways to deal with them. It also emphasizes the importance of integrating rules and regulations regarding this issue

into the school system so that the teacher can refer to them when such behaviors occur.

4.1 Implementation of a behavior modification plan

This topic includes two themes: random and unsystematic implementation of the plan and the reasons for not implementing the behavior modification plan.

4.2 Random and unsystematic implementation of the plan

Formal behavior modification plans are not implemented for each student. "The plan is complex. I think everyone must participate in it. That's why we don't like to implement it formally. I mean the situation should go smoothly," said Participant A9. Participant A10 added, "I do, but often randomly without a plan." The responses of the participants indicate their implementation of behavior modification strategies directly without developing a structured plan for behavior modification. Participant A8 said "I do not implement a behavior modification plan but use the methods directly" while Participant A3 stated, "I take immediate measures such as (denial/prevention of reinforcement).

4.3 Reasons for not implementing a behavior modification plan

The participants described poor cooperation between teachers and families and the lack of time as one of the reasons why they did not implement behavior modification plans. Some of the participants' responses included the following: "I do, but not for all students because there is not enough cooperation between families and other teachers who teach the same students". (Participant A10); "Behavior modification plans require cooperation and often there is no cooperation from the other teachers" (Participant A3); "Mostly not, due to the weak cooperation of the family" (Participant A7); "I do not implement such plans due to lack of time" and "No, because I am busy making individual plans as well as class pressure" (Participant A6); and "Not for all students because there is not enough cooperation between families and other teachers who teach the same students" (Participant A9).The participants stated that the reason for not implementing the plans was the fact that this was the responsibility of the psychologist. Some of their responses included the following: "The behavior modification plans are not applied in the school in which the teacher teaches because there is no behaviour modification teacher or psychologist".

 (Participant A3); "Developing a behavior modification plan is one of the responsibilities of the psychologist" (Participant A3); "The psychologist is responsible for developing a behavior modification plan" (Participant A5); and "The psychologist is the one authorized to carry out the task of creating behavior modification plans" (Participant A2). This finding shows us that special education teachers do not have the sufficient confidence or skills to adequately confront the behavioral problems displayed by students with disabilities. According to the respondents' answers, the participants do not apply scientific and organized procedures or formally implement behavior modification plans. The participants attributed this to several reasons, including their preoccupation with other matters, the lack of cooperation shown by parents and other teachers, their belief that implementing the plan is the responsibility of the psychologist rather than of them, their lack of knowledge and practical experience in dealing with students who display behavioral problems in the classroom, and their inability to implement the plans on their own (Ali et al., 2014). This finding is consistent with those of Hambrick (2021), which suggested that the majority of special education teachers were not confident in their ability to write behavior modification plans and did not receive sufficient training related to writing behavior modification plans, and Wu (2017), which demonstrated that the amount of training received by special education teachers to write and implement behavior modification plans was the main determinant of their confidence in writing and implementing these plans. Such findings stress the importance of providing intensive, high-quality training programs for special education teachers to develop their skills in writing behavior modification plans.

4.4 Behavior modification strategies

This topic includes three sub-themes: reinforcement strategy, punishment strategy, and ignoring (extinction) strategy.

4.5 Reinforcement strategy

According to the findings of the study, the participants believed that the strategies which had a greater role and impact in modifying the behavior of students with disabilities included the strategy of using the various types of reinforcement. Some of the responses of the participants included the following: "Reinforcement has a significant role, especially after the student has performed the work required of him" (Participant A15); "The strategy that has an impact on modifying the student's behavior is verbal reinforcement as soon as the desired behavior occurs" (Participant A10); "I think that reinforcement is the most effective strategy which many teachers prefer to use, but unfortunately the vast majority uses it in an exaggerated and wrong way" (Participant A8); "Negative reinforcement has a significant role and impact in modifying behavior and positively reinforces the student's behavior when it ends so that it would be an incentive for him" (Participant A2); "I use reinforcement and encouragement with Down syndrome students whom I work with" (Participant A2); and "Reinforcement is the best strategy, and I believe that its effect is tangible" (Participant A6).

4.6 Punishment strategy

Based on their description of their experiences with strategies that have a role in modifying behavior, participants also stressed that punishment strategy is useful in reducing behavioral problems. They argued that it plays a significant role in modifying the undesirable behavior of students. Some of the participants' responses included the following: "Deprivation of sports and art classes, as this strategy is sometimes useful with some students who love sports and drawing classes" (Participant A2); "Deprivation sometimes" (Participant A15); and "Deprivation of favourite things is the most effective method as it has an impact and a role to play in modifying undesirable behavior" (Participant A8).

Ignoring (extinction) strategy

The responses of the participants and their description of their experiences with the most important strategies used in confronting behavioral problems showed that the strategy of ignoring (extinction) is effective in facing some behavioral problems. Some of these responses included the following: "Ignoring in the event of repeating the behavior" and "Ignoring when refraining from showing the inappropriate behavior" (Participant A12); "Ignoring the undesirable behavior" (Participant A3); "Ignoring the behavior so that the student does not feel that he got attention" (Participant A4); "Ignoring the behavior if it is simple and not harmful to the student" (Participant A9); "Disregarding and ignoring the behavior" (Participant A8); "I ignore the behavior" (Participant A12); and "The strategy that plays a major role in minor behavioral problems is ignoring" (Participant A6).The findings of the study shed light on special education teachers' adoption of applied behavior analysis strategies such as reinforcement, punishment, ignoring and extinction. Other studies also show the effectiveness of such strategies to increase desired behaviors and reduce undesirable ones. They also use ignoring, as mentioned by Cook (2005), who noted that teachers are encouraged to ignore negative behavior that remains at a low level and focus more on praising or reinforcing positive behavior. These strategies are not only useful in the classroom but can be used in the school environment as a whole and are effective in reducing behavioral problems. The study also indicates that teachers use the rules and systems of punishment in the classroom to reduce negative behaviors. Teachers use punishment not only to reduce unwanted behavior but also to instill fear in misbehaving students' peers and prevent them from imitating such behavior (Mensah et al., 2021). Punishment is often used because it may take less time and is a common measure taken by teachers in dealing with discipline problems in the classroom (Ali et al., 2014). In light of this finding, it seems that special education teachers do not tend to use a particularly wide variety of different strategies to address individual differences among students with disabilities, since not all strategies suit all students, and the method that a teacher may use in modifying the behavior of one student may not be appropriate for another student. This requires providing teachers with training courses to raise awareness of various appropriate and modern strategies for addressing behavioral problems and provide guidance on how to apply them properly.

5.Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the experiences of special education teachers in addressing the behavioral problems presented by students with disabilities by identifying the behavioral problems among students with disabilities and exploring the key strategies used to confront these behaviors, and to explore the degree to which special education teachers have the competence to prepare behavior modification plans on their own. Based on the data analyzed, the findings of the study identified the following topics: (1) behavioral problems; (2) implementation of the behavior modification plan with its two sub-themes (i) random and unsystematic implementation of the plan and (ii) reasons for non-implementation of the behavior modification plan; and (3) behavior modification strategies with its three sub-themes (i) various types of reinforcement,

(ii) punishment strategy, and (iii) extinction or ignoring strategy. According to the findings of the study and its discussion, the participants agreed that the most undesirable behaviors prevalent among students with disabilities in the classroom are aggression, bullying and ADHS. These may be among the most challenging behaviors faced by the teacher and consequently require more effort to address. Furthermore, the negative effects of such behaviors are not limited to the student himself but may also harm other students and even lead to teacher burnout.

The findings of the study also showed that the actions taken by teachers in the face of these behaviors are unsystematic and are carried out randomly, since no formal behavior modification plans are applied for each student. In addition, all participants agreed that the creation of such plans is the sole responsibility of the psychologist. According to the participants' responses, it may be concluded that the participants did not have the efficiency to implement these plans, although they are one of the basic methods of managing behavioral problems in the classroom. Therefore, there may be a need for greater efforts in raising and developing the competence of special education teachers regarding applying behavior modification plans and confronting the behavioral problems that occur in their classrooms with more efficiency and confidence. The findings of the study also showed that teachers do not use diverse modern strategies that take into account individual differences between students but rather focus on just a few well-known applied behavior analysis strategies such as reinforcement, punishment and ignoring, even though such strategies may not suit all students or some behaviors. Diversity and modernity are supported by using strategies which recent research has shown to be effective in modifying behavior and applying such strategies may require teachers to continuously review research related to the latest strategies, in addition to enrolling in training courses which refine these skills in a practical way.

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