

Challenging Behaviours in Middle Grade Students An Exploratory Study

VINAY KUMAR SINGH* AND LATIKA**

ABSTRACT

This study intended to explore the challenging behaviours of students at the middle stage of schooling. The methodology adopted was exploratory. Five schools in five educational blocks of five districts from each of the five regions of the country were selected through the multistage stratified random sampling technique. A self-designed, standardised, bilingual, 90-item, three-point rating behavioural checklist was used. Altogether, 1728 students of 540 academic classes were observed by the pre-oriented teachers using participatory and uncontrolled method of observation. The findings revealed that 64 students were exhibiting challenging behaviours of different nature and severity. The most common was lying or twisting the truth to benefit oneself, followed by screaming, pushing others, escaping from assigned responsibilities, etc. Destructive, self-stimulatory and behaviours injurious to others were found more common among students with hearing and visual disabilities while distracting and withdrawal behaviours were more prominent in students with low vision, having a history of mental illness and learning disabilities. Teachers were found to be ignorant of these challenging behaviours, causing continuous disturbances in the classrooms. It was recommended to design an effective classroom-based positive behavioural teacher mediated intervention programmes for reducing the challenging behaviour and assisting students in learning and overall development.

Keywords: Behaviours, Challenging Behaviours, Inclusive Classroom, Behaviour management

*Professor in Education of Children with Disabilities, Department of Education of Groups with Special Needs (DEGSN), NCERT, (email: vinay.singh303@yahoo.com)

**Scholar of Master of Education, Department of Educational Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi (email: latikakhullar1@gmail.com)

Introduction

The classroom is not immune to undesirable student behaviours, such as theft, avoidance of work, harassment, damage to objects, aggressiveness, verbal insults, bullying, attention-grabbing behaviours, etc., irrespective of abilities, grade-level, diverse nature and background of students in particular and the different ecosystems of the schools in general. Challenging behaviour, also known as misbehaviour, maladaptive behaviour, undesirable behaviour, and inappropriate behaviour, is defined as disobedience or a breach of school expectations that disrupts the orderly conduct of teaching. These are the activities or learned behaviours of some or a group of students in academic classrooms that violate explicit rules, implied norms and classroom expectations. Disruptive behaviours usually connote to the actions that anger teachers, interfere with students' learning or development, and force teachers to re-embark on their actions constantly. These actions undermine the system and damper teaching and learning (Rachel and Daniel, 2012; Gupta et al., 2017), which is detrimental to academic activities, social relationships, physical equipment and the environment (Teyfur, 2015).

Although frequency and severity may vary from infrequent to frequent and mild to severe, it remains a thorny issue in the classroom. Challenging behaviours in the classroom are a problem that has developed to become a worldwide issue in school education, causing stress for teachers (Patnaik and Subban, 2023), parents (Gupta et al., 2017; Barman and Khanikor 2018), and students themselves. This is more chronic in Indian schools where single teacher, overcrowded and pluralistic classrooms are still in existence (Patnaik and Subban, 2023). The Rights of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, has provided norms and standards for students and teacher ratio for Grades I to VIII, but the scenario has not yet improved after a decade of its implementation. Raver and Knitzer (2002) reported that one in ten pre-schoolers exhibits challenging behaviours in classroom settings, leading to high expulsion rates because of behavioural problems.

These undesirable behaviours pose grave challenges and have become a common persistent issue for both novice and veteran teachers. It is often a 'reality shock' for novice teachers, who feel particularly anxious about their ability to manage student behaviour (Gupta et al., 2017; Okafor, 2022; Patnaik and Subban, 2023). Even for experienced teachers, a student's indulgence in undesirable behaviour is stress-provoking (Patnaik and Subban,

2023), as it negatively impacts the quality of instruction, impedes learning, overwhelms teachers, tests their patience and diverts their attention from more essential classroom activities, thereby becoming counterproductive (Al Qahtani, 2016). It grossly impairs the efficiency and efficacy of teaching and learning. It impedes the students' and their peers' learning, thereby dwindling the value of education and the allure of the learning culture. This is evident in the findings of an OECD study (2014), which revealed that elementary school teachers devote approximately 13 per cent of classroom time to manage behaviour of students in the classroom, while other studies (Alter et al, 2013, Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017 and Patnaik and Subban, 2023) indicated that this number may be as high as 50 per cent of the school day. The time and energy spent in disciplining students is actually on the cost of teaching-learning time in the classroom (Gupta et al, 2017) and the loss of which results in incomplete lessons (Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017) and impaired learning outcomes at particular grade, school safety and teacher attrition (Alter et al, 2013).

Several external factors (Teyfur, 2015; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017; Joseph et al., 2021; Patnaik et al., 2022) triggering challenging behaviours in students have been identified. They were categorised as school-related factors, teacher-related factors, family-related factors, student-related factors, physical conditions of the class, lesson-related factors and policy-related causes. For example, parental factors (Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017; Joseph et al., 2021 and Patnaik et al., 2022) include interference of parents in the teaching-learning process, spoiling students, comparing students with the peers, not tracking the success of students, forcing students to attend various courses, failure of families to reinforce at home the positive behaviours gained at school, parents' acting as if they were teachers in their affairs with teachers, parents' ceremony-based interest in school, inadequate educational level of family, adoption of violence by the parents for solving student's problems. Reasons related to students themselves (Tiwari and Panwar, 2014; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017; Joseph et al., 2021 and Okafor, 2022) were displaying lack of attention, lack of self-confidence, low level of interaction with teachers or peers inadequate in social skills, attending more than one course, not liking teacher, disobedience, rudeness, nicknaming the teachers, losing temper on a milder form of penalty given by the teacher, chatting during a lesson and having disdainful attitudes toward teachers, trying to attract attention,

reluctant to go to school, absence of good friend, not loving school, being in a state of dissatisfaction with society and teachers related reasons (Baloglu, 2007; Teyfur, 2015; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017; Patnaik et al., 2022; and Patnaik and Subban, 2023) were failure to reflect the diversity of methods, careless about the start-finish time of lesson, failure to check the assigned homework, failure to give feedback for positive aspects of the students, demonstrating authoritative attitudes, paying more attention to some students while neglecting other, acting more sincere to some parents. The physical infrastructure of schools (Teyfur, 2015; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017 and Patnaik et al., 2022) was also reported to be the causative factors that includes inadequate playfields in the schoolyard, lack of security at school, no or inadequate sports hall at school, crowded classrooms, lack of resources, location of the school, etc. Poor seating arrangements, a high noise level, the noisy and crowded formation, number of students in the class, etc., contribute to classroom level factors. Lesson related factors are student's opinion is not taken in the school, traditional way of teaching learning, lack of challenges, fun and excitement in the class, etc., and under policy related factors, banning punishment (Patnaik et al., 2022) and no retention policy also contribute to the causes of increasing undesirable behaviour in students.

Different studies (Tiwari and Panwar, 2014; Teyfur, 2015; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017; Gupta et al., 2017; Patnaik et al., 2022) have categorised the challenging behaviour into different domains depending upon the nature, frequency, severity and circumstances of occurrences of these behaviours. Physical behaviours include temper tantrums, kicking, pushing, hitting, and running away, etc; screaming, yelling, swearing, and lying have been grouped into verbal behaviours; academic disengagement cover time management, setting priorities, and miscellaneous behaviours include non-compliance, opposition, social conflict, stubbornness, etc. Talking out of turn, daydreaming, inattention, not responding to questions, and slowness, violence, lateness, leaving class in the middle of a lesson, cheating, eating and drinking at the wrong time, not attending class regularly, doing irrelevant activities in class, hyperactivity, lack of concentration, not doing homework, not sitting properly, rudeness with teacher or talking back, not having healthy communication, and getting other students in trouble, insulting, attaching nickname, being rude, noisy speech, lying, lack of personal hygiene, damaging school equipment, theft

are unacceptable behaviours, smoking, cheating, lack of interest in cultural activities, silence, complain about their teachers, friends, swearing or profanity, naughtiness, damaging school equipment, theft, had been identified as unacceptable behaviours. Further categorisation of these behaviours in different behavioural domains include hindering behaviours of students during the lecture (talking without taking permission, wandering around without permission, complaining about their friends constantly, failing to demonstrate responsible conduct as per group, and so on), behaviours stemming from not fulfilling their responsibilities (coming late, reluctant to come to school, not bringing course materials, forgetting books, not prepared for the lesson and so on), behaviours stemming from their relationships with their friends (quickly taking offense at their friends, making fun of their friends, trying to be funny and so on) and behaviours non-compliant with social expectations (not sensitive towards environment, telling lies, tendency to steal and so on).

The study was conducted in a view to identify and understand the challenging behaviours exhibited by students, describing their nature, which may be defined as characteristics and underlying constructs of behaviours. It also attempted to explore the current state of classrooms and the difficulties teachers face in managing these behaviours. The study further sought to examine the potential for designing interventions that target specific challenging behaviours and enhancing teachers' pedagogical competence in classroom management.

Objective of the Study

- To identify the nature and severity of challenging behaviours among students with and without disabilities studying in middle grade of schools in different regions of India.

Method

Research design: The study is exploratory.

Sample: A multistage stratified random sampling technique was employed to select five schools from five different regions of the country—North, South, East, West, and Northeast. In the initial stage, one district was randomly chosen from five states each—Solan in Himachal Pradesh (North), ChamaraJanagar in Karnataka (South), Cooch Bihar in West Bengal (East), Churu in Rajasthan (West) and Kamrup in Assam (Northeast). From each selected district, one education block was chosen, and one elementary

school from each block was identified as per the pre-set criteria of the study with the help of the education department of the respective states. These schools were selected among only those schools that had three sections in Grade VI, VII and VIII with an adequate number of subject teachers, say, six to eight teachers. In each school, six subject teachers were selected with the assistance of the school headmasters. These teachers were then oriented to the research activities and tasked with collecting data from different sections of Grades VI, VII, and VIII. A total of 1,728 students were observed across three sections of Grades VI, VII, and VIII from the five selected schools. The observations took place during 540 academic sessions, allowing for a comprehensive observation of student behaviours across various classroom settings.

Research Tool: A self-designed, bilingual 90-item behavioural checklist with rating options of 'Never-0', 'Low-1' and 'High-2' occurring behaviour was used to identify the most and always occurring challenging behaviours in students through participatory and uncontrolled observation by the research-oriented teachers. The frequency and duration of occurrence of challenging behaviours indicated the degree of severity of challenging behaviours in a particular setting, i.e., classroom. The checklist is reliable and valid with a high score ($r > 0.80$) of internal consistency, retest-reliability and concurrent validity. The re-test reliability was assessed by four teachers unknown to each other, who rated ten school children on two different occasions with a gap of two months. The correlation between scores was found to be 0.87. The inter-rater reliability was established by getting four teachers to rate 50 school children. After a gap of two months, four other teachers rated the same children and the correlation between scores was found to be 0.82. The Cronbach's alpha calculated value of the internal consistency of this checklist was found to be 0.809, showing good reliability.

Procedure of Data Collection

For a collection of data, headmasters of the selected schools were approached through the school education department of the respective states and necessary consent was obtained after explaining the purpose of this study. Six subject teachers from each school were identified to assist in data collection during actual classroom teaching-learning sessions. All thirty identified teachers were oriented by the research team in each of the schools separately to collect data using the research tool through classroom participatory observation without confirming to the teacher and

students in the class. They were also oriented on screening and identification of children with disabilities using quick screening checklist of World Health Organisation (WHO) along with hand-on practise experiences in the classrooms. Each of the items of the research tool and rating procedures were explained to the teachers, discussed thoroughly, demonstrated and piloted in a class before the actual activity of data collection. They were asked to observe the two academic classes of the existing three sections of Grade VI, VII and VIII separately during school hours continuously for a week of 6 working days to screen out students who were 'always' exhibiting challenging behaviours in the running class. Finally, the filled-in rated checklists, along with written remarks, were collected from the participant teachers.

Results

A teacher is often called the backbone of the classroom. She bears the utmost responsibility for fostering an atmosphere conducive to learning. She tries to ensure the highest standards of instruction; student engagement and content mastery are upheld at all times. Her role becomes crucial for taking such challenging behaviours seriously, identifying them and devising effective strategies for managing them. In this study, altogether 64 students out of 1728 students were identified in 5 schools in different regions of the country that were showing high-occurring challenging behaviours in their respective classrooms during academic sessions, though none of them were exhibiting all the listed challenging behaviours. The thorough review of the findings revealed that telling lies and twisting the truth to their advantage is the most prevalent behaviour (43.4%), followed by unnecessary screaming (41.5%) and pushing others (39.6%). Escaping assigned responsibility (34%), making distorted facial expressions (30.2%) as a show of disgust, laughing inappropriately (30%), slapping and hitting others (28.3%), withdrawn in groups (28.3%), dictating others while ignoring their responsibilities (26.4%), and arguing without purpose (26.4%), pinching others (26.4%), not showing interest in surroundings/on-going activity (26.4%) were also marked by the teachers as most occurring interrupting behaviours impeding in learning activities of the classrooms. Around 20 per cent of the students had shown behaviours like kicking others, clenching or pulling others, not obeying commands, doing exactly opposite of what is told, not sitting at a particular place for a required time, throwing objects

at others, tearing papers or clothes, using threatening gestures, appearing on move always, fearing to teachers, assembly/group, provoking others, reacting before listening to the instruction, fearing of self-exposure, expressing high opinion of self, banging objects, biting nails, rocking body, giggling inappropriately, standing/leaning too close to others while talking, shifting from one task to the other before completion whereas around 10–15 per cent students were exhibiting behaviours like chewing tobacco products in the classroom, stamping feet, stealing, making sudden noises, stopping the activity at hand at minor distractions, appearing anxious, talking to self, seeking excessive attention, truancy from class, playing with hands repetitively, appearing to be sad, etc. A few students indulged in smearing dirt on themselves or others, chewing collars, making peculiar sounds, repeating the same utterances, sleeping, damaging objects in the classroom, spitting, sniffing, grinding their teeth, eating and expressing feelings of being rejected. Reportedly, there was a different prevalence rate of behavioural problems among children in different parts of India, which gives insight into the effect of various socio-demographic factors on the behaviour of a child (Barman and Khanikor, 2018).

There were 11 students with disabilities among 64 students who were showing challenging behaviours in the classroom. Two students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities have shown behaviours like frequently shifting from one task to another without completing the task and a girl with psychosis (confirmed through her medical report) was insisting to be alone and didn't show interest in ongoing activities in the classroom. A boy with albinism and low vision had exhibited shyness in participating in group activities while a student with blindness had behaviours of clenching others, throwing objects, tearing papers, dismantling objects, using threatening gestures, spitting, screaming, rolling over on the floor, stamping feet, telling lies and stealing objects of others. Two students with hearing impairment were also in class and had shown behaviours like kicking others, pushing others, banging objects, clenching others, throwing objects, spitting, stamping feet, making sudden noises, repeating the same utterances, insisting on being alone, distractions from activities, appearing to be sad and withdrawn behaviours. However, four students with locomotor disabilities (lower limb affected with post-polio residual paralysis) did not show any challenging behaviours during teaching-learning sessions in the classrooms.

Discussion

Challenging behaviours reported in many western and Indian studies (Baloglu, 2007; Tiwari and Panwar, 2014; Teyfur, 2015; Gupta et al, 2017; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017; Seda and Karayol, 2019; Patnaik et al, 2022; Okafor, 2022; and Patnaik and Subban, 2023) were found similar as in this study. Tiwari and Panwar (2014) had listed out several problem behaviours among secondary school students, for example, talking, shouting in most students while, inattentiveness, fighting, arguing in less number of students. Classroom-based behaviours, such as talking to each other and playing games, were more common than other challenging behaviours. Although these behaviours appear to be common, but considered as challenging behaviours, as these behaviours meet the criteria of undesirable and inappropriate behaviour, because of their frequency of occurrence in a setting where they were not desired and treated as disobedience or a breach of classroom expectations disrupting the orderly conduct of teaching, violating explicit rules, implied norms and classroom expectations. These behaviours were also interfering with students' learning. These challenging behaviours were categorised into different domains based on the similar nature of behaviours in most studies (Gupta et al, 2017), for example, Patnaik et al, (2022) had identified domains of behaviours under aggression, disruption, talking and of non-compliance type, mainly described by teachers in classrooms and outside.

Disability incited challenging behaviours matching the symptomatic characteristics of the specific disability were observed in this study; for example, impulsiveness and shifting from one task to another before completion of the first task are mostly seen in students with specific learning disabilities. Similarly withdrawn and mannerism behaviours were also common among students with mental illness and sensory impairments. It was an interesting finding that none of the students with locomotor disabilities had any kind of challenging behaviour. It revealed that they might be getting enough opportunities to interact with teachers and other students of their class as Teyfur (2015) observed that positive communication and interaction with others help in eliminating these behaviours in children, whereas students with behavioural problems are often rejected by their peers, receive less positive attention from their teachers and perform less well in the classroom (Seda and Karayol, 2019).

A teacher needs to understand the source of a student's challenging behaviour (Baloglu, 2007; Joseph et al., 2021; Patnaik et al., 2022; Okafor, 2022) for designing strategies (Patnaik and Subban, 2023) to reduce them significantly. Teyfur (2015) attributed a low level of interaction between teachers and students as the cause of the emergence of various undesirable behaviours. Therefore, the teacher must develop a positive attitude and provide ample opportunities to students with and without disability for communication and interaction to eliminate these behaviours in the classroom (Patnaik and Subban, 2023). Seda and Karayol (2019) also found that students who develop positive relationships with their teachers are more attentive to what their teachers say and do.

Teachers use many strategies to curb or control undesirable classroom behaviours (Patnaik and Subban, 2023). Okafor (2022) summarised various such strategies used in Africa, such as warnings, use of reward, incentives, confrontation, counseling and social isolation. Punishment, reinforcement, working with students, working mutually with school stakeholders, keeping busy, asking help from experts (Tiwari and Panwar, 2014; Teyfur, 2015; Berhanu and Sabanci, 2017 and Patnaik et al., 2022), ignoring, approaching warning, reprimanding, changing seats, making a wisecrack, making a break, talking, making deprived of rights and privileges, detention, refusing requests, communicating to parents, agreeing, non-physical punishments (Baloglu, 2007), were the different techniques of eliminating challenging behaviours, reported by researchers. However, Tiwari and Panwar (2014) had suggested specific preventive measures that could be suggested to teachers to deal with behaviour problems, including beginning class on time, setting up procedures for beginning their class, dismissing the class, stopping misbehaviour immediately, making clear rules, making transitions between activities quick and orderly, directing, mediating the conversation and instruction to the class, being polite to the students and reinforcing their politeness, being firm and consistent, providing positive reinforcement, being with them, using nonverbal signals, being helpful, not hurtful, planning well in advance, etc. Leach and Helf (2016) advocated for Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) that emphasise proactive and preventative approaches to dealing with misbehaviour rather than using reactive and punitive measures to respond to behavioural challenges. It should be extended to establish

collaboration with various stakeholders in students' behaviour management and the provision of effective counselling and guidance sessions. Life skill training is also beneficial as students learn the skills of problem solving, better ways of communication, analysing their behaviour and self-coping skills in stressful situations. It serves as the foundation for students' lifelong patterns of social behaviour, self-management and coping with stressful aversive situations.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the study provided insights into the challenging behaviours exhibited by students in Grades VI, VII, and VIII across different regions. It highlighted the importance of regular screening of school children for preventive as well as timely interventions; otherwise, these behaviours may hinder effective classroom management and learning. It also emphasised the difficulties teachers face in managing these behaviours, revealing gaps in current teaching practices and training models. The study suggested the need for targeted interventions tailored to specific challenging behaviours and underscored the importance of revamping both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. This would equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills to handle diverse classroom dynamics. Additionally, the research pointed to several areas that require further investigation, particularly in understanding the root causes of challenging behaviours and developing evidence-based strategies for managing them effectively in classrooms. Additionally, it identified critical research gaps that need to be addressed for future studies.

Devising effective strategies to manage these challenging behaviours is crucial in shaping students into productive, culturally aware and socially adjusted members of society. Effective classroom management helps not only in immediate behavioural intervention but also in equipping students to cope with adversity and thrive in their future endeavours. However, as noted by Kitishat and Al-Friehat (2013), it is not enough to simply identify and develop management strategies; preventing the occurrence of such behaviours is essential. Without effective prevention, even the most modern and well-designed curricula would lose their effectiveness.

There is an urgent need for further research in Indian classrooms to identify the causes of challenging behaviours, examine the

strategies teachers use to manage them and design more effective interventions to prevent disruptive behaviours. Additionally, both in-service and pre-service capacity-building programmes for teachers must prioritise training in managing these behaviours to foster a more conducive learning environment.

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