

# The Status of Teachers of Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Practicing Strategies for the Modification of Aggressive Behaviour in Saudi Arabia

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## Summary

This study examines teachers' implementation of strategies to modify the aggressive behavior of students with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia, to determine the obstacles to their real-world execution. In addition, it presents potential approaches to overcome the obstacles to implementing strategies with this group of students. The research employed a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews as a data collection tool and applied a thematic analysis. The study population comprised 35 teachers of students with intellectual disabilities and the study sample numbered six teachers. The interviews were conducted via different methods: three by phone, two face-to face, and one using the Zoom platform. The results revealed inadequate understanding among teachers of intellectual disability and behaviour modification strategies, and this affected their capacity to develop plans that were compatible with the needs of students with intellectual disability. The findings also identified multiple obstacles that impede teachers' implementation of strategies to modify aggressive behaviour among students with intellectual disabilities; the most important being the lack of input from a psychological specialist when developing programs to modify aggressive behaviour. In general, it is apparent that programs for modifying aggressive behaviour are neither structured nor complementary, due to the scarcity of administrators with sufficient knowledge and familiarity with the characteristics and personalities of students with intellectual disabilities. This study presents several recommendations, the most important of which is that teachers of students with intellectual disability should develop themselves through training courses to enable them to deal with these students and create treatment plans that include strategies and clear steps to modify the aggressive behaviour of students with intellectual disabilities. To support teachers, it is also necessary to remove the obstacles facing education centres by providing financial support to create an environment in

which they can access the required devices and equipment in their classes.

**Key words:** *teachers, students with intellectual disabilities, aggressive behaviour, Saudi.*

## 1. Introduction

Intellectual disability, which occurs with varying degrees, can have considerable adverse effects on the life of the affected individual. In the educational setting it negatively affects several aspects of a student's life. In addition to intellectual problems, intellectual disability is frequently accompanied by several other problems, such as: deficiencies in social skills, adaptive abilities, and emotional regulation. These problems are associated with the emergence of problematic behaviours among students with intellectual disabilities.

Among the most prominent forms of problematic behaviours in this group of students are aggressive behaviours. Aggressive behaviours can take multiple forms with various effects, and negative consequences for the individuals around the student, as well as the student himself. In research contexts, intellectual disability has been classified into categories, including simple intellectual disability. Students in this category are considered capable of receiving an education and benefit from educational programs, although they are slow to progress, and can have poor achievement and pronunciation defects, as indicated by Obeid (2013). They are capable of attaining social and economic independence, and they require educational programs to help them adapt to and learn social patterns. Some students in this category exhibit behavioural problems, including aggressive behaviour.

Aggressive behaviours can cause many problems for those around the perpetrator, such as family members and specialists responsible for meeting their needs (van den Bogaard, et al, 2018). They may experience negative feelings and be exposed to psychological stress, physical harm, and feelings of fear, psychological burnout. The

negative consequences of aggressive behaviour are not limited to those in the surrounding environment, but also affect the perpetrator, potentially exposing them to physical harm, problems engaging in social activities, or abuse and harm from others. Al-Farmawi and Al-Nasaj (2010) have demonstrated that people with intellectual disabilities can also become involved in crimes, as they have lack of foresight, or sufficient awareness to understand the consequences of their aggressive behaviour. At the beginning of the last century, it was common to link intellectual disability with criminality, and deviant behaviour among juveniles.

In the school context, managing aggressive behaviour requires teachers to be familiar with a number of areas of competency. According to Al-Jalmdah (2017), the role of the intellectual disability education teacher differs from that of the ordinary teacher. The intellectual disability education teacher must address the needs of children with intellectual disabilities by developing a thorough understanding of their psychological characteristics, behaviours, needs, tendencies, and interests, and so as to provide appropriate strategies to modify their aggressive behaviour. As noted by Aziz (2021), teachers responsible for students with intellectual disabilities need to be able to draw on effective and simple methods and techniques, to ensure their classes are effective and free from disruption. Aggressive behaviour modification strategies are vital to ensure positive experiences for all those involved in the educational process, and to improve the behaviour and integration of people with intellectual disabilities. In addition, teachers of students with intellectual disabilities must familiarize themselves with the characteristics and conditions of each individual student, identify the behavioural problems they suffer from, and choose an appropriate strategy to reduce and treat it. At present, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is directing attention towards modifying the behaviour of this group of students, providing qualified cadres, capable of employing appropriate strategies, to reduce aggressive behaviour. This researcher believes that it is critical that intellectual disability education teachers' practice strategies to modify aggressive behaviour among students with all degrees of intellectual disabilities. Emphasis can be placed on the practicality of these strategies, and classroom learning environments can be created, so that they are more appropriate to the needs of students and can address the complex behavioural problems they suffer from. This requires the development and adoption of appropriate plans to enhance their efficiency when applying the strategically in classroom environments

## 2. Literature Review

Students with intellectual disabilities suffer from diverse problems in various areas; the most prominent of

which are behavioural issues, with aggressive behaviour being among the most complex behavioural problems for this group of students. Addressing these behaviours requires the application of appropriate strategies for behavioural modification, so to be able to mitigate these behaviours among this group of students. Several recent studies have examined the positive effects of applying a number of behavioural modification strategies to reduce aggressive behaviours among this group of students. A study by Sartinah and colleagues (2019) examined the effect of applying aggressive behaviour modification strategies with students with intellectual disabilities, namely the assertive training strategy. As indicated in the results of the study, the application of an assertive training strategy can alleviate aggressive behaviour in this group of students. The effects when applying this strategy take on several forms, such as a decrease in the frequency of occurrence of these behaviours, a shorter duration of their occurrence, and a reduction in the degree of severity. A study by Sadler (2018) concerns the effects of applying a further behavioural modification strategy, i.e., the video self-modelling strategy. This study highlighted the effectiveness of this strategy at reducing aggressive behaviours among people with intellectual disabilities. The results of the study also indicated that the outcomes of the implementation of this strategy are direct and immediate, in addition to being sustainable over an extended period of time. Despite the results of recent studies suggesting that positive outcomes can be achieved by applying multiple strategies to address aggressive behaviours among students with intellectual disabilities, the many difficulties that surround the application of behavioural modification strategies in this group of students specifically should not be ignored.

Given the complexity of the problems associated with aggressive behaviours among people with intellectual disabilities, and their multiple negative repercussions on the perpetrator and those around them, it is vital to implement appropriate strategies and practices to modify aggressive behaviour and replace it with prosocial behaviours. Many strategies can be applied in this regard. What motivated the researchers to conduct the current study was to identify the reality for teachers when implementing strategies to modify aggressive behaviour among students with intellectual disabilities in the city of Makkah. It is also the intention of the study to reveal the obstacles that teachers of students with intellectual disabilities in this context experience when modifying aggressive behaviour, and to identify ways to overcome them.

In this context, studies that dealt with issues relating to problems experienced by people with intellectual disabilities varied. A study by Hassan (2016) confirmed some of the behavioural problems of students with intellectual disabilities reported from the teachers'

viewpoint. The most prominent behavioural problems encountered by students with intellectual disabilities were aggressive behaviour and excessive activity. A study by Sudhir and Swapna (2013) confirmed that students with intellectual disabilities show deficits in adaptive behaviour, and therefore training them to overcome limitations in adaptive behaviour is the primary goal of individuals working with persons with intellectual disabilities, as several also suffer from behavioural problems that pose challenges to the teacher. The results of Al-Araydah's study (2014) indicated that the problems experienced by students with intellectual disabilities in the psychological field came first, then the economic field, then the educational field, and then the social and behavioural field. A further study (Sayed and Al-Mawla, 2015) investigated the patterns in behavioural problems for people with simple and moderate intellectual disabilities, including their relationship to gender, chronological age, and IQ variables. The results of the study showed no statistically significant differences associated with gender as a variable, while statistically significant differences appeared in association with intelligence factor variable. Individuals with moderate intellectual disabilities, who have greater behavioural problems than those with simple intellectual disabilities, varied statistically according to chronological age as a variable in the age group from 16-21 years. Sharifi's study (2017) added that the degrees of aggressive behaviour among children with intellectual disabilities is due to the variables of degree of disability and age, and the most common patterns of aggressive behaviour among children with intellectual disabilities manifest in the age group (6-18) years. A study by Warghi and Al-Zaqai (2016) showed that the majority of special education teachers have extensive knowledge of the symbolic reinforcement method, and all of them (100%) use it to modify aggressive behaviour in intellectually retarded children. Meanwhile, there are no statistically significant differences between teachers, in terms of their appreciation of the importance of the reinforcement method in the case of students with mild disability, attributable to their gender, or their professional seniority. A study by Qudsi (2011) added that teachers typically use all methods of punishment to control the behaviour of students with intellectual disabilities. The order of punishment methods from the most used to the least used is as follows: response cost method, exclusion method, verbal and non-verbal reprimand, and the corporal punishment method. In El Shazly's study (2014) the conclusion given was that reducing the aggressive behaviour of people with intellectual disabilities is best achieved through the use of the social behavioural therapy program. The study by Sartinah et al. (2019) also indicated the importance of applying an assertive training strategy to reduce aggressive behaviours in students with mild intellectual disabilities. This study's findings concurred with those of Sadler

(2018), which provided an intervention based on video self-modelling, to modify aggressive behaviours in students with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. Interestingly, Singh et al.'s (2017) study, which described the feasibility of adopting a training strategy through telehealth for teachers (teaching a mindfulness-based procedure for the self-management of verbal and physical aggressive behaviour in students with intellectual and developmental disabilities), concluded that the degree of ability of both teachers and students was (high). A study by Biliyas-lolis et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of using a self-modelling strategy to reduce disruptive behaviours among students with intellectual disabilities.

### 3. Method

This study aimed to identify the realities of the practice of teachers of students with intellectual disabilities in terms of their strategies for modifying aggressive behaviour in the city of Makkah. Specifically, it seeks to frame the current reality of the practice of teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, and strategies to modify aggressive behaviour in the city of Makkah. The qualitative approach and thematic analysis method were used as tools for data analysis since the intention was to provide deep analysis. The researcher organized and put the data into specific topics or categories, then explained and interpreted it analytically to find an answer to the research question.

The study population consisted of five schools from the integration programs for intellectual education at the secondary stage in Makkah. They numbered 35 teachers, and the study sample consisted of six teachers. The sample was an intentional selected, and the number of participants interviewed were six teachers from three schools, four participants from one school, and two separate interviews from two different schools. The interviewees' qualifications and experiences varied.

The interview schedule was designed based on a set of previous studies addressing the same topic, in an attempt to determine the focal points on which the study tools depended. They were based on interviews arranged to meet the objectives of the current research and answer the interview schedule questions posed. This process led us to design the interview schedule in its initial form and consisted of three sections with a total of 14 questions. Each section represented an answer to one of the study questions, and branched from the first section 6 questions, which focused on the reality of the practice of teachers of students with intellectual disabilities of strategies for modifying aggressive behaviour in the city of Makkah, while the second section branched from 4 questions about the obstacles facing teachers of intellectual disabilities,

when applying behaviour modification strategies. As for the third section, 4 questions branched from it and focused on ways to overcome the obstacles they face. To check the suitability of the interview schedule, the interviews were carried out with a piloting sample consisting of three teachers, in order to ensure the suitability of the interview schedule used, the appropriateness of its questions, and the ability of these questions to determine a clear answer to the primary research questions. The suitability of the interview schedule was checked by interviewing three individuals from the study sample. It emerged that the questions used were clear, and the answers to the questions combined for each section led to a clear answer to the research question related to this section.

The semi-structured one-on-one interview method was used as the primary tool for collecting primary data in this research, and some interviews were conducted by telephone. In view of the current circumstances, and the coronavirus crisis, there were three telephone interviews, two face-to-face interviews, and one zoom interview. The interviewees were contacted, their names, qualifications, and experiences obtained, and they were then informed that this data is confidential data intended for scientific research purposes only, as pseudonyms will be used for their real names, all interviews were conducted and recorded, and listened to carefully, over and over again written down and then analysed to achieve the aims of the study.

The interview schedule comprised a set of 14 open-ended guide questions, and questions were asked based on the interviewees' responses. In addition, some interviews included questions that were not included on the initial interview questions form. All qualitative scientific research ethics relating to informed and prior consent were followed. Verbal consent was taken from the participants, and they were informed of the purpose of the interview's purpose and expected duration. Reliability was also taken into account, as they were informed that their private data is completely trustworthy and would only be used for scientific research purposes. The study did not neglect the aspect of privacy, i.e., maintaining the confidentiality of information, as pseudonyms were given to those individuals who were interviewed, and their real names were not disclosed. Furthermore, the data was saved in the form of audio recordings and then unloaded in files. After this, all the recordings and files were destroyed after the research had been completed.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The initial set of data relates to the authentic experiences of teachers of students with intellectual disabilities and their strategies for modifying aggressive behaviour in the city of Makkah. With regard to teachers' awareness of aggressive behaviour modification strategies,

five of the interviewees agreed that teachers had sufficient awareness of aggressive behaviour modification strategies; indeed, one of the teachers indicated:

"...yes, there is, but not all teachers have an adequate understanding of behaviour modification strategies, which causes rapid, broad, and beneficial behaviour modification not to be promoted."

Another added: "... I think that behaviour modification is one of the things that the intellectual disability education teacher is not familiar enough with to enable him to develop a behaviour modification plan for aggressive students, unless this is done in cooperation with the psychologist present in the work team for the program".

As for treatment plans, social reinforcers, activity reinforcers, punishment, and four teachers agreed that there are no specific treatment plans to modify the aggressive behaviour of students with intellectual disabilities. One indicated:

"...there are no remedial plans that are generalized to teachers, but rather with the methods available to the teacher, and according to the student's capabilities."

Another added: "...there are no plans to be circulated to teachers that include strategies to modify behaviour, but there are just personal judgments from some teachers, choosing to contain these aggressive behaviours from some students."

Two teachers disagreed with the others, one of whom explained:

"...there are clear treatment plans that include defining the behaviour to be treated, measuring the target behaviour, determining the previous and surrounding conditions when the unwanted behaviour appears, and designing and implementing the guiding plan with the participation of students."

In terms of the teachers' use of social reinforcers, as one of the strategies for modifying aggressive behaviour, the six participants agreed on the use of social reinforcers to modify the aggressive behaviour of students with intellectual disabilities. Teachers used social, verbal, and positive reinforcements, such as smiling, complimenting, paying attention, clapping, patting a shoulder, or shaking hands, talking positively about the student in front of colleagues, teachers, or relatives, and friends, looks of admiration and appreciation, verbal reinforcement (i.e. well done, great, you are really smart, great idea, this excellent job), sitting next to the student while participating on a trip, presenting good work in front of the class, appointing the student as class leader, and sending a certificate of appreciation to the student's guardian. One teacher pointed out that:

"...Positive reinforcers have a great deal to do with the continuity of students with disabilities' production of the desired behaviour to a significant extent, while negative reinforcers are formed by stopping the undesirable

behavior of the disabled child, which makes it easier to accept what will be required of him next time.”

In terms of activity enhancers, their use varied from the point of view of the participating teachers, and all the participants emphasized their importance. Interestingly, one of the teachers indicated that the use of these reinforcers and their success is the reason why students love them. They mentioned activities such as listening to stories, participating in school parties, playing sports, subscribing to the school wall magazine, and drawing, and other activities. Another added that: “Activity reinforcers work to empty negative energies through physical activity, which results in very positive results, affecting the child's behavior, whether aggressive or non-aggressive, and whether the nature of the reinforcers is positive and negative, depends on the study of the child's case in front of us, and what we need to offer him from these reinforcements.”

As for the punishment strategy as one of the strategies for modifying aggressive behavior; five of the participating teachers agreed on the importance of punishment. To modify the aggressive behavior of students with intellectual disabilities, as one of the teachers pointed out:

“Punishment includes explicit censure, reprimand, threat and intimidation, stopping him on the wall, preventing him from noticing others, sequestering him in a private room for a period of time, not leaving his seat without permission, preventing him from participating in the activity to which he is inclined...etc. It is advisable to use this method after exhausting more positive methods, as it has been proven that punishment leads to a decrease in unwanted behavior faster than other methods, as it leads to a temporary cessation of the punishing behavior, and stopping punishment leads to the emergence of the behavior again. The organized use of punishment helps an individual to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, and effective use of punishment quickly stops or reduces maladaptive behavior, as well as ending unacceptable behaviour, an limiting the likelihood of others imitating it.

Another offered a different opinion, stating: “...punishment cannot be used with students of the qualifying stage, but negative reinforcement and deprivation of reinforcers are used to reduce aggressive behaviour.”

In terms of coordination between specialists, teachers and family, the participating teachers were divided into two groups. They considered the extent to which there was coordination between teachers, social workers, and family members. In order to modify the aggressive behaviour of students with intellectual disabilities one of the teachers indicated that: “...there is coordination and communication by the family with teachers and specialists, and the family's intervention to motivate the student to do

good work, as well as punishing him for his inappropriate behaviours”.

Others reported that there is no coordination between the teacher and their family on the one hand, and social workers on the other. Indeed, one of the teachers stated: “...Unfortunately, there is no coordination, and if there is, it would be rare, because most secondary programs are devoid of a specialist, whether psychological or social. Here, the researcher considers that intellectual disability teachers seem to have a good level of awareness and understanding of aggressive behaviour modification strategies. This could be explained by several factors, either because of their educational backgrounds, their experience, or their long service with a particular group of students. The reality of teachers' practice is that it lacks a specific vision or clear plans but takes place according to the personal judgments of the teachers themselves. This is unless research studies focus on it and there are plans upon which the teacher can base his strategies. Additionally, teachers actively apply behaviour modification strategies at the level of social reinforcement, particularly positive verbal reinforcement. This shows a good understanding of reality that is appropriate to the level of practice of teachers with intellectual disabilities. In addition, these different opinions confirm that the reality of intellectual disability teachers' practice of aggressive behaviour modification strategies is appropriate, and this is another aspect of the aforementioned reinforcers, and thus an indication of the complementarity of these strategies.

Second: Obstacles to practicing strategies for modifying aggressive behaviour by teachers of students with intellectual disabilities in the city of Makkah. Five teachers of students with intellectual disabilities, who participated in the research interview, agreed that they encounter obstacles to their implementation of strategies to modify the aggressive behaviour of this group of students. One of the teachers stated:

“...Yes, the lack of an integrated program between the school, the family, and the teacher to overcome aggressive behaviour... and the lack of an active role for the teacher of behavioural and psychological needs within schools, in addition to the absence of a clear and sustainable plan between the family and the school.” While others disagreed with the opinions of the remainder of the participants, he stated that “...there are no obstacles facing him in implementing strategies to modify the aggressive behaviour of students with intellectual disabilities.”

Regarding cognitive obstacles, the majority of the interviewees reported that there are many cognitive obstacles, and they indicated that these arise from the teacher's lack of experience when dealing with students with intellectual disabilities. One of the teachers disagreed with them, indicating that there are no cognitive obstacles. He said: “...there are no cognitive obstacles, most of them are logistical obstacles.”

With regard to the physical obstacles, four of the participants agreed that they face many physical obstacles as teachers of students with intellectual disabilities seeking to modify aggressive behaviour. They mentioned physical obstacles such as weakened financial capabilities due to the location of the school in a poorer environment, and inability securing funds. The basic requirement for success in the teaching process is qualified teachers, and then teaching aids, and modern technologies to minimize time and effort, and facilitate the delivery of information and facts in an interesting and exciting manner, avoiding boredom, and unmotivating traditional methods. One of the teachers stated: "...Yes, there is no cooperation from some people when requesting specific equipment for people with special needs that would develop the learning environment." Another added: "... Yes, there are financial obstacles that are clearly evident when preparing a program, to modify behavior, especially in the initial stage of its application, as it requires some equipment that the teacher cannot provide, and therefore special budget allocations must be made for equipment."

As for social obstacles, the six teachers participating in this research interview unanimously agreed that there are social obstacles to implementing strategies to modify aggressive behavior. Raising children, guiding students, teaching them misconceptions, and rigid modes of thinking. In addition, the social obstacles that students with intellectual disabilities might face are apparent when witnessing their ridicule by others and interference in the scientific methods that are applied to them. One teacher said: "...the nature of the obstacles is the student's failure to accept the subject of deprivation of something. It is endearing, and some students refused to respond to this method of behavior modification. Another added: "...Yes, most social obstacles come from the family, and society in general, when the disabled person feels that he is a weak person, needs help, and is not given the opportunity to highlight his talents."

The researcher believes that there are multiple obstacles facing teachers in their application and use of aggressive behavior modification strategies, and that these obstacles vary between the teacher himself, the student, and his family, as well as the educational environment, including the school. These obstacles relate to the student and their family, highlighting poor understanding of students, and poor coordination and cooperation among family members. However, the most important of these obstacles are cognitive obstacles that hinder teachers' application of strategies to modify aggressive behavior, especially their limited experience and contact with multiple cases, and material obstacles. These impede teachers' application of aggressive behavior modification strategies, and center on providing the logistics and equipment necessary to implement strategies. In addition, social obstacles hinder teachers' implementation of

aggressive behavior modification strategies, due to the societal views of students with intellectual disabilities, and the extent to which they suffer from neglect and marginalization, as well as the difficulty of dealing with the students themselves, and their rejection of strategies.

Third: Ways to overcome the obstacles that teachers of students with intellectual disabilities practice of strategies for modifying aggressive behaviour in the city of Makkah. With regard to ways of overcoming cognitive obstacles, the responses of the participants varied, and the majority showed enthusiasm for finding ways to overcome cognitive obstacles. They felt this should be done by developing their ability to use behaviour modification strategies, through training courses, and increasing their experience through exposure to multiple cases, in addition to developing the ability of families and society to address the needs of students with intellectual disabilities and apply behaviour modification strategies. A culture of accepting students with intellectual disabilities must be disseminated, and joint work between the family, the teacher, the school environment, and the community is essential to create an appropriate learning environment. In addition, society is an important party in overcoming obstacles, and can be educated to develop awareness of how to care for students with intellectual disabilities, via the media and cultural publications.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, this study identified the reality of the practice of teachers of students with intellectual disabilities and their strategies to modify aggressive behavior in the city of Makkah in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in addition to the most important obstacles that teachers of students with intellectual disabilities may face, as well as potential ways to overcome these obstacles. The results of the study indicated the a of appropriate means in the school to modify the aggressive behavior of students with intellectual disabilities, in addition to physical and social obstacles that make it difficult for teachers to modify the aggressive behavior of students with intellectual disabilities. They indicated that there are three strategies (enhancement, punishment, and exclusion), and circulated treatment plans to teachers, including clear strategies and steps to modify the aggressive behavior of students with intellectual disabilities. The majority of the participants reported that there was no treatment plan distributed to teachers, and no clear strategies and steps to change the aggressive behavior of students with intellectual disabilities. In addition, the reality of teachers' practice takes place without specific vision or clear plans, according to the personal judgments of the teachers themselves. Inadequate human resources and lack of professional experience, lack of teamwork and cooperation among teachers, and between parents and schools, and

insufficient attention has been directed towards developing an effective and appropriate behavior modification curriculum, or individual learning styles for students who need aggressive behavior modification or providing appropriate levels of support for teachers. Due to the actual practice of their own behavior modification strategies, the nature of the strategies used has changed, as some people report using reinforcement methods such as rewards, excursions, or use of deprivation methods. There are many obstacles that limit the practice of positive behavior modification strategies for teachers of students with intellectual disabilities. Perhaps the most important of these obstacles is the lack of psychologists available to assist in developing the program, the necessary equipment to support special education programs under the supervision of experts in intellectual disabilities, financing, and the necessary capacity to increase community awareness via the media.

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