



## Article

# Who Is Responsible for Students' Challenging Behaviour? A Study of the Causal Attributions of Teachers to Challenging Behaviour in Primary Schools in West Bengal, India

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**Abstract:** The aim of the study was to understand the causal attributions of teachers to challenging behaviours in primary classrooms in West Bengal, India. Data from 21 teachers from government and private primary schools were collected using semistructured interviews. The study investigated the types of challenging behaviours as perceived by teachers, their causal attributions, and the strategies suggested by the teachers for managing them. The participants described challenging behaviour broadly, and it was divided into four categories: aggression, disruption, talking, and noncompliance. They reported the causes of challenging behaviours in five broad categories: home- and parent-related causes (family violence, busy parents); social causes (socioeconomic conditions); student-related causes (disabilities); school- and teacher-related causes (large class sizes); and government- and policy-related causes (banning corporal punishment). The teachers predominantly recommended employing proactive strategies, such as improving teaching strategies, collaborating with parents, and building relationships with students. A small group of teachers recommended using reactive (e.g., discipline and threats) strategies to manage challenging behaviours in their classrooms.

**Keywords:** challenging behaviour; teacher education; causal attribution; classroom management; disabilities



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## 1. Introduction

There has been an increase in challenging behaviours in classrooms in recent times, and it has become a matter of concern for teachers worldwide [1]. Teachers who are overburdened by nonteaching duties, administrative tasks, and a lack of support in school settings feel stressed and burned out when managing challenging behaviours in their classrooms [2,3]. The prolonged presence of behavioural problems affects both teachers and children [4,5], and poses concerns for teachers attempting to provide effective instruction [6]. As Charles and Senter [7] (p. 133) summarise, “students’ classroom behaviour has negative outcomes: it disrupts students’ right to learn; it disrupts teachers’ right to teach; it wastes time; it weakens student’s motivation and energy; it produces a climate of fearfulness and stress for students and teachers, and it dissolves trust and lessens relationships between teachers and students.” The present study focuses on Indian teachers’ perceptions of challenging behaviours, being mindful that research on this aspect of teacher perception is largely lacking within South Asia. Consequently, this study examines teachers’ perceptions of challenging behaviours, and the practices they employ to manage challenging behaviours in primary schools. We believe research examining the perceptions and practices of schoolteachers is necessary, as it can guide the development of pre- and in-service teacher education programs and may have significant policy implications for the education sector at large.

### 1.1. Understanding the Context

India is the second most populous country in the world and is home to approximately 1.3 billion people. India also has the largest youth population in the world (600 million), with a minimum of 260 million students (2015/16) attending schools [8]. After India gained independence from Britain, on 15 August 1947, the Department of Education was established under the Ministry of Human Resources Development. A number of policy documents guided the development and the governance of the education sector, commencing with the University Education Commission in 1948, followed by the Secondary Education Commission (1952), the Indian Education Commission (1964–1966), the National Policy on Education (1968), the Draft National Policy on Education (1979), the National Policy on Education (1968, 1992), Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) (Education for all 2001), and the RTE (the Right to Education Act, 2009). This recently culminated in the formulation of the National Education Policy 2020. Since 1947, India has progressed well by attaining an enrolment of 95% of primary school children, aged from 6 to 10 years [9]. The two policies that the Government of India has identified as the main driving forces contributing to the progress and success are universal primary education, or SSA (Sarva Siksha Abhiyan) in 2001 (Education for all), and the RTE [9]. These policies have ensured that all children aged 6 to 14 years have the right to free and compulsory education in appropriate government schools [10].

A comprehensive search through popular websites and databases yielded limited results relating to scholarly studies exploring challenging or disruptive behaviours in Indian schools. There are media reports that mention students regularly being punished for challenging behaviour in schools, but there is a scarcity of research about how school educators address challenging behaviour in India [11]. A better knowledge of the educators' understanding of challenging behaviours, and how they respond to such behaviours, could provide useful insights that may have implications for school educators, as well as for policy makers in India. In an attempt to address this gap, this study focuses on examining the causal attributions of teachers to challenging behaviours in India, and the strategies they consider as appropriate responses to such behaviours. Teacher perceptions of challenging behaviours have formed a central point of scholarly research in several countries [5,12–21], with strategies and varying classroom practices being identified to alleviate the strain and concern experienced within the learning context.

### 1.2. Literature Review

Challenging behaviour, in the context of education, can be defined as “any repeated pattern of behaviour, or perception of behaviour, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with optimal learning or engagement in prosocial interactions with peers and adults. Challenging behaviour is thus defined on the basis of its effects [3]”. These types of challenging behaviours on the parts of students have thus had an impact on the work in classrooms and have had an impact on the perceptions of teachers in many countries worldwide [22–25]. The following review of the literature explores how challenging behaviours in classrooms are viewed and interpreted by teachers globally.

### 1.3. Types of Challenging Behaviours

Research on this topic, particularly with a focus on attributions, seems to be limited to a few countries (e.g., Canada, China, and Turkey), with varied interpretations of what constitutes challenging behaviour. In a Canadian study focusing on teachers, the researchers report that challenging behaviours were identified as “physical behaviours (temper tantrums, kicking, pushing, hitting, and running away), verbal behaviours (screaming, yelling, swearing, lying), academic disengagement (time management, setting priorities and miscellaneous behaviours such as (non-compliance, opposition, social conflict, stubbornness)” [22] (p. 117). In China, teachers perceived talking out of turn, nonattention [23], daydreaming, being inattentive, not responding to questions, and slowness [24] as challenging behaviours. A study by [25] in Scotland identified violent behaviours, and students

not attending to tasks or not following instructions as challenging behaviours. Teachers in Turkey reported talking without permission, studying without a plan, not listening to the teacher, and fighting with friends as challenging behaviours [26]. It is evident, therefore, that challenging behaviours are interpreted in a range of ways across the globe.

#### *1.4. Causal Attributions of Challenging Behaviours*

Nemer, Sutherland, Chow, and Kunemund [27] argue that the causal attributions of teachers to challenging behaviours are significant, as they could help them to develop and implement better strategies and interventions. Understanding the source of a student's challenging behaviour could affect a teacher's readiness to adopt effective interventions [13]. The attributions of teachers, to themselves or other causes, significantly reflect the ways that teachers choose strategies to manage behaviours in their classrooms. Importantly, a knowledge of the attributions of teachers can support self-reflection on practice, a focus on student behaviour, and the effective management of the classroom [28].

An examination of the literature in this field suggests that researchers have broadly grouped the causes of challenging behaviours into three categories: family-related causes, student-related causes, and teacher- or school-related causes. Frequently identified student factors relating to challenging behaviours are those linked to a lack of motivation [29], or to students having learning difficulties, low self-esteem [30,31], disabilities, hyperactivity [14], and health or emotional problems [21], with others linking challenging behaviours to the personality traits of the students [32].

Past research reveals that teachers attribute family-related causes to challenging behaviours. These have included inappropriate parenting styles, the absence of a father, and the mother's low level of education and depression [33]. In another study, Turkish teachers perceived poverty, divorce, family background, and poor economic and social conditions as causes for challenging behaviours in students [14]. In Spain, teachers indicated that parents were responsible for not teaching their children about prosocial values [30]. A few other causes that emerged include inappropriate parenting styles, an absence of appropriate discipline measures at home [21], the pampering of children, and encouraging inappropriate behaviour without realising that it may create more problems in the future [19].

There are far fewer studies where teachers have attributed the causes of challenging behaviours to either themselves or to school-related factors. A Greek study by Poulou and Norwich [34] reports that teachers attributed challenging behaviours to causes within the school environment and themselves, rather than blame the family or the students. Teachers in England and Ireland reported that their own and the parents' behaviours influenced the behaviours of the students. The teachers recognized that the students' behaviours reflected their social interactions with family and teachers, and that they did not necessarily lie within the students themselves [17]. Similarly, in a study by Dutton, Tillery, et al. [15], teachers in the United States indicated that their behaviour influenced the behaviour of their students. Under school-related causes, teachers expressed concerns about harsh discipline, a poor relationship between students and teachers, and the inability of teachers to focus on the individual needs of students. Turkish teachers reported their inability to generate engaging classwork [14], whereas Bangladeshi teachers reported large class sizes, the unavailability of teaching materials and resources, and the learning environments of the schools as the causes of challenging behaviours [19].

A few studies focus on the cultural and social influences on student behaviours. These studies are mainly comparative and are focused on teachers and their perceptions about challenging behaviours. In Ho's [35] quantitative study, no prominent cultural differences between Chinese and Australian teachers were found with regard to the attributions of challenging behaviours. Teachers from both countries suggested that student-related causes were responsible for the challenging behaviours of students. Australian teachers attributed the causes of challenging behaviours to students, whereas Chinese teachers, in contrast, recognized both student-related and family-related causes of challenging behaviours. It is assumed, in China, being a country of Confucian tradition, that a sense of

shared and collective responsibility exists among its people, and that, thus, family plays an important role in determining a child's behaviour [35]. Similarly, Erbas et al. [16] report that the Turkish cultural principles of the collective responsibility of the family, school, and community for a child prompted the belief that the causes of challenging behaviours were related more to child-related or family-related factors.

### 1.5. Strategies

Teachers employ either reactive or proactive strategies to address challenging behaviours. Proactive strategies are preventive measures used by teachers, whereas reactive strategies are remedial measures and can be negative in nature [36]. Two studies in Greece report that teachers were comfortable using positive incentives and neutral practices, and that they were not in favour of punishing or threatening students [32,34]. Although, in these two studies [32,34], the teachers attributed the causes of challenging behaviours mainly to student- and family-related causes, they preferred choosing teacher-based strategies. The teachers were more interested in counselling, supporting, and talking to the students. Interventions and collaborations were preferred strategies by preservice teachers in Turkey [14]. Fewer studies report teachers using disciplinary measures or reactive strategies. A study by Dutton Tillery et al. [15] in the United States reports that teachers used both proactive interventions, such as rewards and praise, as well as reactive strategies, such as warnings and disciplinary approaches, for socially unacceptable behaviour. The strategies were implemented depending on the contextual factors relating to the students or a group of students. Similarly, in a study by Author et al. [21], teachers reported using proactive and preventive strategies, such as changing teaching methods, or introducing better teaching methods, and making the lessons more engaging. However, the teachers also used warnings and threats, especially the threat of hitting students with a cane. The teachers from this study also reported that they used strategies such as counselling and motivating students, understanding them better, communicating with them, and giving them more attention. Studies across countries such as Greece, the United States, Turkey, and Malaysia reveal that teachers prefer using proactive strategies rather than reactive strategies. However, from time to time, when necessary, research shows that teachers have also used reactive strategies in countries such as the United States and Malaysia.

### 1.6. Theoretical Framework

The causal attribution theory by Weiner [37] guided the theoretical framework of this study. The focus of the attribution theory is on how people react to the actions and behaviours of others by assigning a cause to it. It can be assumed that "the theory investigates the perception of causality or judgement of why a particular incident occurs. The allocation of responsibility manifestly guides subsequent behaviour" [37] (p. 203). The causes of the actions and behaviours of others are categorised into four main dimensions: Locus (internal vs external causes to the person); Controllability (the cause is either in control of the person or not in control of the person); Stability (the causes are either fixed or they can be changed); and Globality (the causes can be generalised across situations or are specific to the person). In the context of schools and student–teacher interactions, the theory helps to explain that when a teacher attributes internal controllable stable causes to a student's negative behaviour, they tend to feel frustrated and are not inclined to help or support that student. In contrast, if the teacher attributes external, unstable, and uncontrollable causes to a student's negative behaviour, they may feel compassionate and may consider supporting the student [6,38]. A number of research studies in different countries, such as Finland, New Zealand, Bangladesh, and Malaysia, indicate that teachers tend to mainly attribute the causes of a student's challenging behaviour to student- or family-related causes [1,18,19,21]. Wiley, Tankarseley, and Simms [39] note that teachers tend to more readily attribute the causes of challenging behaviours to the student and family instead of to school- or teacher-related causes. This attribution of teachers may prevent them from considering solutions to manage the behaviour within the school system,

or even by themselves [39]. A thorough knowledge of teachers' causal attributions of challenging behaviour can help in developing and implementing successful interventions and strategies to manage challenging behaviours in classrooms [27]. Teacher attributions of student behaviours are still not understood very well, particularly in countries in the South Asian region, including India, and they therefore require greater investigation [29]. This study aims to investigate the causal attributions of teachers to challenging behaviours, and the strategies used by teachers in primary schools in West Bengal, India.

## 2. Researcher Positionality

The first author who collected the data was born and raised in West Bengal, and undertook primary, secondary, and university education within the West Bengal system of education. The author is familiar with the Indian education system. The lack of research on this topic and an ongoing interest in this topic in Indian society encouraged the researcher to investigate this area. Prior to conducting the study, the researcher did not hold preconceptions related to the causes of challenging behaviours, nor to whether there would be any differences when comparing the findings of this study to those of other countries.

## 3. Current Study

The present study adopted an empirical approach to investigate teacher causal attributions of challenging behaviours, and it suggests strategies to manage these behaviours. The study was guided by the theory of causal attribution to identify the causal attributions of teachers and how they influence the ways that they select strategies to manage challenging behaviours in their classrooms. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers perceive challenging behaviours, and what factors do they attribute to challenging behaviours?
2. What strategies do primary school teachers identify as effective when addressing challenging behaviours within their classrooms?

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1. Participants

The participants of the study were selected using purposive sampling, with the schools and the teachers being intentionally chosen. Government and private schools in Kolkata, West Bengal, were invited to participate in the study. The selection of participants from different types of schools was deliberate, as it provided an opportunity to obtain data that was varied and that may represent diversity across the school sectors. Most private schools tend to cater to families of medium-to-high socioeconomic status. Most government schools tend to have students from low-to-medium socioeconomic backgrounds. The participants in the study were from primary schools (preprimary to Grade 4). The government schoolteachers had prior experience teaching varied class sizes, and were located in rural and urban areas, representing communities with different types of socioeconomic backgrounds. Most of the private schools were in urban areas. Six schools were approached by the researcher to participate in the study. Out of the six, four schools agreed to participate. In total, 27 teachers were approached, out of which ( $n = 21$ ) 77% agreed to participate in the study. The teachers were from government ( $n = 8$ ) and private ( $n = 13$ ) schools. They comprised 20 female teachers and 1 male teacher. The teaching experience ranged from 2 years to 31 years, and the participants were aged between 26 and 58 years. The majority of the teachers had Bachelor's degrees ( $n = 12$ ), with only a few holding Master's degrees ( $n = 6$ ). Three participants did not have any teaching qualifications. Recently, government schools have mandated formal teacher qualifications for all teachers (i.e., the Diploma of Elementary Education). The teachers who had completed the Diploma of Elementary Education course reported completing a unit on inclusive education. They also reported receiving in-service training through workshops and seminars about some aspects of inclusion and about including students with special needs.

## 4.2. Data Collection

### 4.2.1. Instrumentation

The data were collected using semistructured interviews. The semistructured interviews were used to gain an in-depth understanding about the teachers' experiences in an unconstrained way [40]. This method of data collection is considered appropriate when there is a limited understanding about a topic [40]. The interview questions were informed by previous studies drawn from relevant past research [41,42], and were modified to suit the present study, as per the context (see Appendix A for the questions). All of the interviews were conducted in English, as both the researcher and the participants were familiar with the language.

### 4.2.2. Procedure for Data Collection

The study was conducted following ethics approval from (Anonymous) University. Before undertaking the data collection, permission was also obtained from the District Inspector of Schools, Kolkata, West Bengal. The researcher approached six schools in total, out of which four schools, (two government schools and two private schools) agreed to participate in the research study. Subsequently, permission was obtained from the respective principals of all four schools, and the researcher approached the primary school teachers of each participating school and arranged for a convenient time to conduct the interviews. All of the interviews were conducted at the participants' school sites. An overview of the study was provided to the teachers and the semistructured interview questions were distributed just prior to the interview. The teachers who agreed to participate in the study were asked to sign a consent form to indicate their willingness to participate. The interviews were staggered to ensure the confidentiality of the teachers, and they were conducted in a room on the premises of the school. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted for around 30 min.

## 4.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was informed by the process suggested by Braun and Clarke [43]. Six steps, as described by these researchers, were used to analyse the data. In the first phase, the data was collected by the researcher. The audio recordings were listened to in order to thoroughly familiarise the research team with the data. Then, the content of the audio recorded data interviews was transcribed and was read repeatedly by the researcher. The next phase was to generate the initial codes. After reading the data thoroughly, the codes were generated manually. Similar ideas were grouped together in different categories. In the third phase, themes were searched by examining the codes closely. The themes were identified and were largely informed by past research and the theoretical framework of the study. A few subthemes were also identified in the process. In the fourth phase, the themes were closely reviewed to check for repetition. Minor adjustments were made, and the revised themes were created. In the fifth phase, the themes and subthemes were identified and titled. The final and sixth phase involved producing the report. The themes were checked for consistency and pertinent examples were chosen, which related to the study in the most meaningful way. The reliability of the data analysis was conducted through member checks and triangulation. The data was collected by the primary researcher, who is familiar with the language and culture of the participants. The first author went through the data several times to familiarize herself with the data, and then identified the themes. In order to establish the trustworthiness of the analysis, the themes were also verified by the remaining research team.

## 5. Results

The aim of the study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviours in Indian schools. The findings are presented in three parts. The first part presents the types of challenging behaviours, as perceived by teachers. The second part of the findings presents six themes used to explore the teachers' causal attributions of challenging

behaviours: parent- and home-related causes; high academic expectations from students; social causes; school-related causes; government-policy-related causes, and student-related causes. The third part of the findings presents four themes to explain the suggested strategies of teachers for managing challenging behaviours, which include: improving teaching practice; collaborating with parents; building positive relationships between students and teachers; and discipline strategies. The following research questions guided the aim of the study.

### 5.1. Research Question: How Do Teachers Perceive Challenging Behaviours, and What Factors Do They Attribute to Challenging Behaviours?

#### 5.1.1. Types of Challenging Behaviours

Teachers from government and private schools describe challenging behaviour broadly and divide it into four categories: aggression, disruption, talking (out of turn or talking excessively), and noncompliance. One teacher summarized this as follows:

*BG2: "Students talk too much, do not respond, put things in their mouth, make noise, push each other, scream and use abusive words in class."*

Under "aggression", the teachers reported many examples, such as hitting, pushing, fighting, screaming, throwing objects, and using abusive language. References to these behaviours recurred multiple times during the interviews, with the identification of aggressive behaviour as the most challenging behaviour. Examples under the "disruption" category mentioned by teachers included disturbing the class, distracting peers, frequently raising hands to ask questions, interrupting teachers, and complaining to other students. A number of teachers also reported students requesting frequent toilet and drink breaks during the class, and that this disrupted them.

Similarly, teachers mentioned "talking" as a challenging behaviour, such as talking with peers, talking out of turn, and talking with the teacher while instruction is going on in class. A teacher reports a typical incident, illustrating it with an example of students who disrupted the class by talking too much:

*JPB3: "Students talk among themselves, ask too many questions and use loud voices. They feel doing so will make them look like a good student."*

The teachers reported "noncompliance" as a challenging behaviour, but they were less concerned about this behaviour compared to other behaviours. The teachers also mentioned behaviours such as nonparticipation in lessons, not listening or responding to teachers, eating from lunch boxes during teaching time, sleeping in the classroom, cheating on examinations, and stealing. The teachers from government schools reported observing more aggressive behaviour than teachers from private schools. The teachers' ages, qualifications, and experiences seemed to have had no impact on their responses.

#### 5.1.2. Causal Attributions of Challenging Behaviours

The interview data was thoroughly analysed, and six themes emerged as teacher causal attributions of challenging behaviour. While analysing the data, we not only tried looking for themes that were reported in past studies, but we also looked for links with the theoretical framework adopted for the study. The following were the most common themes that emerged from the study.

##### Parent- or Home-Related Causes

The themes derived from the analysis indicate that the majority of teachers reported the home environment as a cause of the challenging behaviours among students. Examples of the home environments mentioned by teachers included the noninvolvement of parents in the children's schoolwork, as well as the busy work schedules of parents. One teacher mentioned that:

*LP7: "Parents are not giving them (student) time. both parents are working and coming home late, children are with grandparents or servants."*

A lack of discipline at home and parents not teaching children prosocial values were also frequently reported by teachers. One teacher stated:

*JPB2: "There is a lack of discipline at home, children are not instructed at home to follow discipline or even listen to their teachers. Nowadays parents promote children to misbehave."*

Where the teachers indicated that the parents were not interested in the children's classwork, they also reported that parents used corporal punishment at home, and that they forced children to attend school when they were not interested. For example, LP6 stated:

*"Parents use corporal punishment at home, so students are not happy at school. Parents force students to come to school and it does not help the teachers as they are not interested. Parents fighting at home or family violence affects the child, the child is unhappy and reflect the behaviour at school. Parents showing irresponsible behaviour reflects on the students' behaviour. Students get angry with their parents and stop focusing at school and fail exams deliberately. Students feel that this way they can take revenge from parents. They fail to understand that it affects them when they are not performing at school or behaving disruptively."*

#### High Academic Expectations for Students

There were causes related to parental expectations of high academic standards for their children, which, in turn, resulted in anxiety and manifested in misbehaviour. The teachers felt that students were pressured at home to perform well, which resulted in anxiety and disruptive behaviour at school. The teachers reported that the classwork is not interesting enough for students to focus on in class, and that parents worsened the situation by expecting high standards from students, as a few teachers stated:

*LP1: "Children at young age tend to drive themselves through their own interests and do not meet their parents' and teachers' expectations. So to keep up with high expectations, the child ends up behaving through cheating, or even stealing in class."*

*JB2: "Parents were pressuring a student to score higher in his/her tests, which led to anxiety and the made the student misbehave in class."*

*JBP3: "Children are pressurized by their parents to perform well in school."*

#### Social Causes

Poor economic and social conditions and a rapid change in social trends were reported by teachers as causes of challenging behaviours. According to teachers, some parents sent their children to school for the first time, so they did not know about formal education and could not support them adequately at home. The parents themselves had low literacy, and therefore could not assist their children or impress upon them. A teacher summarised this situation by stating:

*JPB5: "Parents are unaware of school work or their child. Even as teacher if we tell them their children have ADHD they do not respond and choose to ignore. Some of the students are even first-generation learners and their parents do not know anything about education or academics, so they fail to support them at home."*

Exposure to digital media and television were also causes identified by teachers as factors related to challenging behaviours. The teachers assumed that the parents were preoccupied with social media and were watching television. As a consequence, there was little interest or motivation in assisting their children with completing homework or becoming involved in their studies. A teacher reported:

*JPB2: "Parents are involved in electronic gadgets, when child goes back home and sees mother watching television, father, busy with mobile phone, the child is constantly distracted."*

### School-Related Causes

The interview data also revealed causes related to schools and government regulations and policies. A considerable number of teachers were concerned about class sizes and uninteresting classwork, as one teacher mentioned:

*JPB6: "There are no ratios maintained in class, there are too many students, and the classwork is not interesting."*

The teachers also believed that the lessons and classroom activities were driven by the curriculum, which was uninteresting to the students. One teacher identified some of the aspects that were missing from the daily activities in the schools, which resulted in monotonous lessons for students. The teacher summarised the situation and how teaching methods were falling short:

*JPB6: "The lessons are monotonous. There should be playgrounds for students. Activities like rhymes, studying through use of colours, activities based instruction, science experiments, clay modelling, and paper cutting allowing students to be more active in classrooms through activities. The purpose should be to make the students enjoy coming to school."*

### Government-Policy-Related Causes

A small number of teachers reported that banning corporal punishment was a cause of challenging behaviours. One teacher mentioned:

*KCM1: "Due to banning of corporal punishment the students do not pay attention to classwork at all."*

The ban on corporal punishment caused apprehension for teachers, as they struggled to manage their classrooms without the use of punitive measures. One participant expressed this through the following quote:

*KCM2: "The government should allow some type of punishment or punishment within a limit, this can help the teachers to manage their classroom."*

According to teachers, banning examinations for the evaluation of student academic achievement was also a cause of challenging behaviours in the classrooms. The teachers raised concerns about students not taking their schoolwork seriously because of the policy of no examinations or evaluations until Grade 8.

### Student-Related Causes

Only 7 teachers out of the 21 reported student-related causes of challenging behaviours. They mentioned that some type of disability was the cause of the students' challenging behaviours. The types of disabilities identified by the teachers included slow learners, autism, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), learning disabilities, and developmental disorders. One participant noted that:

*JBP4: "Students with ADHD and autism, do not respond and do not understand me or the concept of a teacher in the classroom."*

Seeking attention, not engaging with teachers, and the inability to understand teachers were some of the behaviours that teachers observed while discussing student-related causes. A teacher provided a typical example of how "slow learners" distract the class:

*LP2: "The ones (students) who talk they are the slow learners, they cannot follow instructions in the class, so they distract others also and then everyone is talking."*

### 5.2. Research Question: What Strategies Do Primary School Teachers Identify as Effective When Addressing Challenging Behaviours within Their Classroom?

Most of the teachers suggested proactive strategies, such as improving their own teaching strategies, collaborating with families, and building relationships with students. A small number of teachers suggested strategies that focused on ignoring the behaviour or reprimanding the student.

### 5.2.1. Strategies Suggested by Teachers to Manage Challenging Behaviours Improving Teaching Practices

The teachers focused on improving their teaching strategies and innovating new solutions to keep students motivated in class. The strategies suggested by teachers were in response to the situation they confronted at school. For example, when teachers had students with additional needs, they used strategies such as separating them from the main class:

*LP7: "I have to separate the weak student to teach them separately as they cannot cope up with instruction in class."*

Different strategies were used for the students who belonged to socially and economically disadvantaged communities. The students from these communities were reported as arriving at school hungry or sleepy, so the teachers had to work around their needs to support them:

*LP7: "Students don't eat and come to school. They are also sleepy and cannot focus. Children are going late to bed because parents are late from work. I allow them to eat and sleep in the class so that they can focus better, and tell them separately what they had missed in the class."*

There were instances where students had limited support at home and struggled to cope with the demands of school. Then parents of these students usually possessed low literacy skills. In such situations, the teachers separated the students into groups, offering more individualized assistance as a means of providing extra support:

*LP7: "I did extra classes for students who are first generation learners."*

Students with higher abilities were also supported by the teachers, who provided them with extra work when they finished the regular classwork earlier than other students. One participant noted that:

*LP7: "There are students who are capable of finishing regular classwork earlier than other students and have the tendency to distract the ones who are still working. Teachers usually provide them with extra work to keep them occupied."*

The classrooms were split into smaller groups in different situations in order to instruct and manage the classroom optimally. Teachers used strategies such as dividing the students into small groups, as well as bringing students closer to the teacher's seat to supervise them more closely and provide them with more individual attention. One teacher stated:

*LP6: "When the student distracts others, I call her close to me, change her sitting position so that I can see her closely. I also try to provide individual attention."*

### Collaborating with Parents

The teachers believed in collaborating with the parents to reduce the challenging behaviours in their classrooms. According to some teachers, the parents were not providing enough attention to their children at home, and this resulted in students causing disruptions at school as an attention-seeking ploy. Accordingly, the teachers tried collaborating with the parents, advising them on how to initiate small steps to improve their relationship with their children in order to reduce the challenging behaviours overall. For example, one teacher urged a parent to pick up the child at the end of the school day as the child always seemed unhappy. This participant provided more detail in this quote:

*LP7: "The student feels happy when the parents show up to pick them up from school, the students need more affection at home and time from parents. I always talk to the parents and try to work out with them. According to me if students are given time and affection at home then they will behave appropriately at school. I am dealing with lot of children so even if I try I cannot give attention to students all the time in the class."*

In the cases of students disinterested in classwork, the teachers collaborated with parents in order to understand the students' needs in detail. This helped the teachers

to keep the students interested in the class and to reduce challenging behaviours in the classrooms. An example of how parents watching late night television was affecting student's classwork was stated by one participant:

*LP6: "When I come across disinterested students I try to go into depth to see why they are not interested in class. I usually would find that parents were watching TV until late at night and the child slept late too making them tired in class. I try to tell the parents to change but some listen some do not."*

Collaborating with families was all the more important to teachers as they were concerned about strict parents who pressured their children to perform well in academic work. The constant pressure on students caused them stress, and, in turn, they demonstrated challenging behaviours. The teachers in such cases tried encouraging the parents to provide more support to students, as one teacher stated:

*LP6: "Some parents are very strict, they expect that a student, in an examination have to get all correct answers even though the student might not be capable. The students are compelled by strict parents. I talk to parents to not put pressure on the student and in turn it helps them."*

#### Building Positive Relationships between Students and Teachers

Many teachers agreed that it is essential to build positive relationships with their students in order to improve their behaviours. Most teachers felt that the students' adverse home environments, communities, and socioeconomic environments contributed to their challenging behaviours. They believed that understanding and learning more about the students' backgrounds would help them to successfully establish relationships. One teacher summarised:

*LP1: "I focus on resolving the issues right at the beginning, if I know the background of the child and understand why the child misbehaves in class, I talk to them and assure them that I care for them. This way the child already knows that they are going to get attention and their behaviour improves as well as their academic achievements go up."*

#### Discipline Strategies

A few teachers reported using reactive strategies to manage the challenging behaviours exhibited by their students. Some teachers believed that using a firm voice and warnings and that being strict helped them to manage challenging behaviours in the classroom:

*JBP2: "When I see two student's hitting or fighting, I scold both of them. The victim and the attacker. I tell the victim that it is their responsibility to ask the attacker to stop and complain about the incident, this way if they don't they are also participating in the fight. I also tend to use firm voice when instructing students about their behaviour."*

## 6. Discussion

The study aimed to investigate the causal attributions of primary school teachers to challenging behaviours in Indian schools. The findings suggest that teachers perceived "aggression" to be the most challenging behaviour they came across in their classrooms. The findings are similar to other studies, where teachers report aggression [44], pushing, and hitting [22] as the most disruptive behaviours. Other causes that teachers perceived as challenging were "disruption" and "talking". Several studies [23,24] also report talking as a disruptive behaviour. Teachers across cultures have indicated that they are mostly concerned about behaviours related to talking and disruption, while only a few studies indicate that aggression was also a concern for teachers. In the Indian context, it can be assumed that teachers feel overwhelmed with the aggressive behaviours of students, and that they may not know how to manage these behaviours, resulting in an increased concern compared to other challenging behaviours.

The teachers believed that family-oriented problems were the main cause of inappropriate behaviours in class. This finding is consistent with past studies, despite

the cultural and socioeconomic differences. Studies across countries such as Greece, Turkey, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Finland, New Zealand, and the United States indicate that teachers were more inclined to report family-related causes more frequently than other causes [1,14,18,19,21,32,42]. It is a concern to society and government to see that this trend is developing among teachers in India. It is possible that a lack of adequate professional learning in addressing challenging behaviours has not fully prepared teachers in understanding the causal attributions of challenging behaviours. This was apparent in the interviews, where most of the participating teachers identified the family as contributing to the challenging behaviours of students. Because of a shortage of teachers in India, many teacher education institutions have grown in the past 20 years, producing substandard teachers [8]. Teachers may not be adequately trained to manage challenging behaviours in schools. There is a large body of research that has emerged from Western countries [45], which has shown the increasing usefulness and value of positive behavioural strategies in preventing and addressing challenging behaviours to low-income countries as well [46]. Unfortunately, not much information is provided in pre-service or in-service teacher education about how to address challenging behaviours using proactive and positive strategies in India, as well as in most of the South Asian countries [21,46]. Evidently there is great need for teachers to learn strategies to encourage positive prosocial behaviours through in-service and pre-service educational programs.

The teachers also reported that parents used corporal punishment at home and that they had high academic expectations. This resulted in students experiencing pressure, which is translated into challenging behaviours in the classrooms. Teachers reported the use of corporal punishment at home as a causal attribution of the challenging behaviours of students, and they may be justified because 89% of Indian parents have used corporal punishment at home [47]. Most parents across the subcontinent expect high academic results, and it is possible that they place unreasonable pressure on their children to succeed in academia [48]. Parents often feel that a successful life can be guaranteed if the child has achieved academic excellence. It is also interesting to recognize that the teachers felt that the parents did not teach the students to behave appropriately at school, and that they encouraged challenging behaviours. The finding is consistent with studies by Author et al. [19], Kyriacou and Ortega Martin [30], and Author et al. [21] in other countries, such as Bangladesh, Spain, and Malaysia. It is possible because of the similar cultural backgrounds of the teachers from these countries with teachers from India.

Many teachers spoke about the social structure and how students from different social strata reflected different types of challenging behaviours. For example, students from underprivileged backgrounds had difficulty finding support at home regarding their education. The parents from poor backgrounds were busy with work, and they were not school-educated themselves so they could not understand or support their children adequately. Similarly, a study by Atici [14] (2007) also reports that poverty and poor economic conditions led to behavioural issues in classrooms. The social and economic causes of challenging behaviours among students may partially explain the increased rate of challenging behaviours, as India still has around 6% of the population who live in poverty [49]. Although the SSA Act (Education for all) offers free meals, books, and uniforms to students, both teachers and families feel overwhelmed while supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The teachers also mentioned that they observed students misbehaving more often recently because of the increase in the use of digital media in households. A study by Alvarez Martino et al. [12] reports that the abuse of mobile applications caused an increase in challenging behaviours in classrooms. In the recent past, there has been a surge in the use of digital media across the world, and this may have repercussions in classrooms as well; however, there is not enough empirical data to suggest the implications of digital media use or overuse on the challenging behaviours of students.

The teachers did not directly accept any responsibility for the challenging behaviours in the classroom, although they did mention causes related to school and government policies.

According to the teachers, they were not given enough freedom to practice innovative teaching methods because the school system is more curriculum- and exam-oriented. A lack of resources, the large number of students in classes, and the nonavailability of modern teaching methods rendered their practices largely unappealing to learners. This finding is similar to studies in Bangladesh and Malaysia [19,21]. Teachers across these countries are also subject to limited educational training and a lack of infrastructure in schools. It is interesting to note that most teachers reported that they were not allowed to use their creativity to adapt the curriculum and thereby create more engaging lessons for students.

A few teachers raised concerns about the banning of examinations and corporal punishment by the government. They felt that students did not feel the pressure of performing in academic areas since examinations were banned in India. Similarly, because of the ban on corporal punishment, teachers felt that there was no way of disciplining the students in class and that this gave rise to more disruptive behaviour. This causal attribution is similar to a study by Author et al. [19] in Bangladesh, where teachers raised concerns about losing power over students because of the ban on corporal punishment. Traditionally, the Indian education system was focused on academic results and evaluating students through examinations. Because of the recent changes, it is possible that teachers were unable to change their own practices to adapt to this altered expectation. Similarly, teachers were allowed to punish students physically until the ban on corporal punishment (Right to Education Act, 2009), and this may have also presented teachers with a challenge, as some would have viewed this change as a loss of control in their classrooms. In the absence of appropriate behavioural and classroom management training, they may have found themselves feeling inadequate, and not in possession of the most effective methods to manage the challenging behaviours in their students.

Approximately one-third of the teachers perceived student-related causes, such as attention-seeking behaviour, not following instructions in class, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), autism, and developmental delays as the causes of challenging behaviours. The findings were similar to studies conducted by Atici [14] and Mavropolou and Padeliaadu [31], where teachers from countries such as Turkey and Greece also reported the causes of challenging behaviours related to students. Only a few teachers in this study perceived disability as a cause of challenging behaviours, probably because inclusion in Indian schools is still not common [21]. All the interviews were conducted in general schools, and the few who spoke about disabilities in the interviews were teachers who had some training and experience in working with students with disabilities. It is possible that when teachers fail to engage a learner, they tend to attribute the student's challenging behaviour to a disabling condition, even when they do not have a confirmed diagnosis of a disability.

Interestingly, when it came to suggesting strategies to manage challenging behaviours, most teachers suggested proactive strategies, such as improving teaching practices by innovating new ways of supporting students in classrooms, collaboration with parents, and improving their relationships with students. The findings were consistent with past studies [14,15,21,32], which have also seen a trend in teachers suggesting proactive strategies over reactive strategies. A majority of teachers perceived family-related difficulties as a cause of student behavioural problems, and suggested strategies, such as collaborating with the family or talking to the student's parents. This finding suggests that the teachers did not take responsibility for the students' behaviour, and they thus suggested strategies that involved seeking collaboration with the family instead of improving teacher-based strategies. As Ho [35] notes, teachers' perceptions of challenging behaviours influences the types of strategies they will adopt to manage the behaviours. In contrast, the teachers who held the government responsible for the challenging behaviours of students and that mentioned the need for changes to government policies also suggested teacher-based strategies, such as improving the curriculum, to manage student behaviours in the classroom.

The teacher attributions and the suggested strategies can be explained in two ways. Firstly, teachers who suggest external causes of challenging behaviours, such as family-

related causes, seek support in collaboration with families. This phenomenon can be explained through Weiner's theory of attribution framework, which implies that the positioning of the cause of the behaviour influences the teacher's subsequent behaviour. Secondly, teachers who attribute external causes to challenging behaviours, such as government policies, suggest teacher-based strategies. This phenomenon can be explained by India's society being collectivistic in nature. It is possible that teachers may assume that it is also their responsibility, along with the government and the family, to support students with challenging behaviours [50].

The study reports that a few teachers believed in using some type of disciplinary measure or punishment as well, such as threatening the student or ignoring the challenging behaviour, which is similar to the findings in studies by Author et al. [19] and Author et al. [21]. The findings of the study also suggest that the teachers unintentionally used exclusion in the classroom when separating students from each other to manage their behaviour. This finding is inconclusive, as it is difficult to understand whether teachers used exclusion as a proactive strategy or a reactive strategy. Remarkably, the inclination to choose proactive strategies as a response over reactive strategies was an interesting find, which can be explained through the framework of the self-serving attribution bias by Weiner [51]. Studies and reports provide evidence of corporal punishment in Indian schools [47,52], yet teachers tend to provide socially desirable responses. Weiner [51] explains this phenomenon as the self-serving attribution bias, where individuals will blame others for their failures to enhance their own ego. Thus, it is possible that this cohort of teachers may have provided only socially desirable responses.

## 7. Limitations and Recommendations

This study was conducted with a small group of teachers from four different schools. We acknowledge that a larger number of participants could provide a better representation of Indian teachers, and, more specifically, of teachers from West Bengal, as well as their perceptions of the challenging behaviours of students. Care should be exercised when interpreting the findings in the context of the wider population in India. The findings are based on self-reports gathered during interviews. The study cannot confirm if the participants' actual behaviours are consistent with what they shared during the interviews.

A key recommendation arising from this study relates to conducting universal professional learning programs for school educators so that they have a consistent understanding about the causal attributions of the challenging behaviours of students. We anticipate that better informed teachers are likely to use more proactive teaching strategies to prevent and address challenging behaviours, which not only benefits them, but also helps their students, their parents, and the society in which they function.

## 8. Conclusions

To summarise, the study examined how teachers responded to the challenging behaviours of students in Indian schools, specifically in West Bengal. It provides an overview of teacher perceptions and how they are influenced by Indian society and its education system. The investigation helps to understand the wide range of possible causes of the challenging behaviours of students in classrooms, and how teachers manage these behaviours. The findings of the study also reveal that the teachers' causal attributions of these challenging behaviours determined their choice of strategy. The study indicates that teachers and schools are an integral part of student development and, more precisely, their behaviour. It is important to note that understanding how teachers perceive challenging behaviours and how they manage their classrooms can inform teacher education programs and may shape educational policy related to teacher education. The introduction of the new education policy in 2020 is aimed at resolving some of the issues reported in this study. The new policy suggests more holistic, enjoyable, and engaging learning and improved teacher education, with a focus on equipping more special educators. It is hoped that the new policy changes will result in a significant improvement in India in the next ten years.

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## Appendix A

Demographics

Number of years in profession:

Educational qualification:

Age:

Gender:

Prior knowledge in special education:

Interview questions

1. What types of challenging behaviours do you see in your classroom?
2. Which behaviours do you find most challenging?
3. What are the reasons for the challenging behaviours in your classroom?
4. Could you please elaborate on the reasons for the challenging behaviours you mentioned earlier?
5. Do you follow any particular strategies to address the challenging behaviours in your class? If yes, what type of strategies do you follow and why? Give a few examples.

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