

Teacher Strategies for Improving the Engagement of Students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders: A Narrative Review

Tianyu Yang

*New York University, New York, USA
ty2110@nyu.edu*

Abstract: This study employs a narrative literature review to examine students' academic engagement with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). Research has indicated that students with EBD often experience significant academic deficits and that increasing classroom engagement effectively improves their academic achievement. Given the essential role of teaching strategies in fostering engagement, this study focuses on teaching strategies, including teacher-mediated strategies, student-mediated strategies, and peer-mediated interventions, and it shows that different teaching strategies have different effects on students' engagement. Most teaching strategies focus on increasing students' on-task behavior, aligning with existing scholarly perspectives. This study also finds that teacher-mediated strategies primarily enhance students' behavioral engagement, while student-mediated strategies aim to improve cognitive engagement. A notable distinction of some peer-mediated interventions is their fostering of students' positive emotions and interest in learning, influencing students through emotional engagement. The findings suggest that future research could focus on developing teaching strategies that enhance EBD students' efforts and involvement in learning.

Keywords: Emotional and Behavioral Disorder, Students' Engagement, Teaching Strategies, Academic Achievement

1. Introduction

Approximately 12% to 20% of students are either experiencing or at risk of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD) [1], and the actual number of EBD students is higher than the official definitions suggest [2]. Children with EBD face both externalizing challenges, such as defiance and disruptive behaviors, and internalizing challenges, including emotional responses like sadness and anxiety [3]. These behavioral and emotional difficulties often hinder their academic performance, making teaching more challenging than students with other issues [4,5]. Research shows that students with EBD are more prone to academic deficits, struggle in the classroom, fail courses, experience grade retention, perform below grade level, and face a higher risk of dropping out [6-8]. If left unaddressed, EBD students are shown to face adverse employment outcomes, substance abuse issues, and high demand for mental health services in adulthood [9,10].

Researchers have agreed that student engagement is a crucial factor in improving students' academic achievement with EBD [11-13]. Some scholars, such as Al-Hendawi, have conducted

comprehensive reviews on academic engagement among students with EBD [14], while other researchers, including Ryan, Reid, and Epstein, have outlined various teaching strategies to enhance students' academic performance [15]. However, limited research has examined the specific mechanisms through which these teaching strategies foster student engagement. There remains a gap in the literature regarding the direct link between teaching strategies and student engagement.

Through a narrative literature review, this study investigates the relationship between teaching strategies and the academic engagement of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). It explores how various teaching strategies foster students' different types of engagement. Ultimately, the article summarizes findings and offers recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. EBD students' engagement

2.1.1. The definition of engagement

Low task engagement is a common challenge among students with EBD and a frequent focus of intervention research [11]. Sutherland and Snyder focus on specific behaviors such as reading aloud, answering questions, writing, tracking text, and attending to the teacher or peers [16], while Sinclair, Gese, and Lemons use broader terms like listening or visibly participating to describe academic engagement [17]. Regardless of the different explanations, researchers in the EBD field often aim to define and measure academic engagement primarily through observable behaviors.

However, Al-Hendawi argues that this definition is too narrow. A student may appear attentive—such as looking at the teacher—without actively processing or understanding the material. She believes that studies on the academic engagement of students with EBD in special education have focused on the behavioral dimension of academic engagement and strongly emphasized on-task behavior. To effectively support EBD students' academic success, research must move beyond merely controlling misbehavior and foster a more holistic approach to engagement [14].

2.1.2. The classification of engagement

Al-Hendawi argues that educational research outside the EBD field provides a more comprehensive definition of engagement, dividing it into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement [14]. Behavioral engagement includes participation, effort, persistence, involvement in academic activities, and on-task behavior [18,19]. Emotional engagement refers to students' feelings and interests, encompassing positive and negative emotions toward academic tasks, teachers, classmates, and themselves [20,21]. Cognitive engagement is related to motivational goals, self-regulated learning, and students' appraisal of the value of learning [22,23]. Table 1 summarizes the literature on different types of engagement, as outlined by Al-Hendawi [14].

Table 1: The classification of engagement and its definition

Engagement Type	Literature Source	Engagement Subcategory	Definition	Code
Behavioral Engagement (1)	[18,19]	On-task Behavior	Decrease students' inappropriate behaviors, such as aggression or non-compliance, by having them remain on-task	1.1
		Participation	Paying attention and concentrating on what is being taught	1.2

Table 1: (continued)

Emotional Engagement (2)	[20,21]	Effort	Showing persistence by working hard and not giving up	1.3
		Involvement in Learning	Contributing to class discussions, such as asking questions and doing homework on a regular basis	1.4
		Affect and Interests	Encompasses pleasant and unpleasant emotions that a student develops towards academic tasks, teachers, classmates, and self	2.1
		Motivational Goals	The underlying reasons that drive individuals to engage in learning	3.1
Cognitive Engagement (3)	[22,23]	Self-Regulated Learning	Students take control of their own learning to achieve success.	3.2
		Appraisal of Value of learning	How students perceive the importance, usefulness, and relevance of learning activities	3.3

2.2. The need for effective teaching strategies

Teachers play a critical role among stakeholders involved with students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). Research suggests that a well-structured learning environment and targeted interventions can significantly enhance EBD students' academic success [24]. However, teachers of students with EBD often spend excessive time managing behaviors, which reduces instructional time [25]. Not only do student achievements suffer without effective instructional practices, but problem behaviors may also escalate, creating a cycle that further disrupts learning [26].

Fortunately, effective instructional strategies can benefit all teachers, regardless of their experience level. Gage et al. found that teacher characteristics—such as educational background, certification status, and years of experience—do not directly determine the academic success of EBD students. This suggests that new teachers, like experienced ones, can effectively support EBD students if equipped with the right strategies [27].

2.3. Teaching strategies for improving EBD student' engagement

2.3.1. Teacher-mediated strategies for enhancing engagement

Researchers suggest that educators can implement strategies to improve on-task engagement and reduce disruptive behaviors among students with EBD. These include establishing predictable rules and routines and utilizing techniques such as group-based game formats, help-card procedures, and student response cards [28-30]. Additionally, teachers can support EBD students in developing self-regulation skills through therapeutic interventions, such as art-based and relaxation techniques, which further enhance their engagement [31].

Several instructional models also help EBD students adapt more effectively. For example, co-teaching provides additional support for EBD students, particularly in addressing their academic challenges, as it allows for increased teacher attention. In practice, one teacher specializes in subject instruction and delivers academic content, while the other focuses on behavioral needs and collects data. This collaboration enables students to behave more engaged in class [32].

In addition, some other teacher-mediated strategies can improve the academic performance of students with EBD, such as the personalized system of instruction, incorporating student interest, and adjusting task difficulty [15]. Since these strategies do not explicitly indicate how they enhance student engagement, they will not be listed individually here. Table 2 concludes the teacher-mediated strategies for enhancing students' engagement.

Table 2: Teacher-mediated strategies for enhancing engagement

Literature Source	Type	Content	Primary Goal	Classification of Engagement
[28-30]	Set up rules and routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group-based game formats • Help-card procedures • Student response card 	Reduce disruptive behavior & increase on-task behavior	1.1-Behavioral Engagement- On-task Behavior
[31]	Therapeutic interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Art-based techniques • Relaxation techniques 	Increase self-regulation	3.2-Cognitive Engagement- Self-regulated learning
[32]	Co-teaching model	One teacher delivers academic content, while the other addresses behavioral needs and collects data	Reduce disruptive behaviors, help focus, and increase participation	1.1-Behavioral Engagement -On-task behavior 1.2-Behavioral Engagement - Participation

Based on the literature synthesized in Table 2, teacher-mediated strategies primarily focus on enhancing the behavioral engagement of students with EBD by promoting on-task behavior and active participation. These strategies help minimize disruptive behaviors and establish structured routines, thereby facilitating effective classroom management. Additionally, some teacher-mediated strategies emphasize fostering students' self-regulation by using therapeutic interventions as a means to enhance their cognitive engagement.

2.3.2. Self-mediated strategies for enhancing engagement

Self-mediated interventions are those in which students are responsible for providing academic instruction themselves [15]. Different scholars offer various interpretations of the components within self-mediated interventions. The following introduces three examples that belong to self-mediated strategies.

Cover, Copy, and Compare (CCC). CCC involves four steps: (a) reviewing an item and its solution; (b) concealing the item and solution; (c) writing down the item and its solution; (d) comparing the written response with the original item and solution to verify its accuracy [33]. Both Strategy Instruction [15], which teaches students a series of steps to solve a problem or achieve a goal independently, and Self-management [2], where students complete assignments independently and correct their work by comparing their answers with the teacher's, are derived from the CCC theory. These strategies aim to help students with EBD develop the ability to solve problems independently.

Self-Monitoring. Self-monitoring requires students to track their academic accuracy and productivity during a designated independent work period. In addition to monitoring academic performance, self-monitoring also involves tracking one's behavior. It generally includes two aspects:

(a) discriminating whether the target behavior occurs and (b) self-recording some aspect of the target behavior [15].

Academic Choice. Research shows that offering academic choice as an antecedent intervention can enhance engagement. This strategy provides students with more choices regarding their tasks. By giving students more control, they tend to reduce their task aversion and thus improve performance [34]. Table 3 below summarizes self-mediated strategies for enhancing engagement.

Table 3: Self-mediated strategies for enhancing engagement

Literature Source	Type	Definition	Primary Goal	Classification of Engagement
[33]	CCC	Reviewing, concealing, writing, and comparing the items and solutions	Help students develop a sense of self-management and solve questions independently	3.1-Cognitive Engagement-Motivational Goals 3.2-Cognitive Engagement- Self regulated learning
[15]	Self-Monitoring	Students track their academic accuracy and productivity independently	Help students independently track and regulate their academic performance and behavior	3.2-Cognitive Engagement- Self-regulated learning
[34]	Academic Choice	Give students multiple options when assigning tasks	Enhance the sense of control and reduce aversion to tasks	3.2-Cognitive Engagement- Self-regulated learning 3.3-Cognitive Engagement-Appraisal of value of learning

Note. CCC=Cover, Copy, and Compare

Based on the literature summarized in Table 3, self-mediated strategies primarily enhance students' cognitive engagement by fostering learning motivation and self-regulation. These strategies empower students to promote deeper cognitive processing and greater autonomy in their academic achievements.

2.3.3. Peer-mediated intervention for improving EBD student' engagement

Peer-mediated interventions involve students delivering teacher-designated instruction to their peers [35]. There are various types of Peer-Mediated Interventions (PMI), including Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT), Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), Peer Modeling, Peer Monitoring, Peer Tutoring, etc. [36]. Ryan, Reid, and Epstein listed several types of peer-mediated interventions [15], so this paper will not elaborate further. This paper selects Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), as well as some new strategies, Positive Peer Report (PPR) and Peer Prompting and Reinforcement (PR), to explore how these concepts enhance student engagement by referring to the classification of engagement based on their definitions.

Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS). Fuchs et al. developed Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) to enhance student motivation through structured peer collaboration [37]. In this approach, students work in pairs, alternating roles as tutor and tutee, to create a more engaging learning experience [38]. Unlike competitive learning environments, PALS prioritizes cooperation, encouraging reciprocal teaching and immediate corrective feedback. This structure fosters intrinsic motivation, promotes mutual support, and enhances academic performance [39,40].

PALS is commonly used to enhance academic and social engagement [41]. Research indicates that PALS is effective not only for students with EBD [42] but also for those with learning disabilities [43], English language learners [44], and culturally diverse students [45].

Positive Peer Report (PPR). PPR is an intervention in which students recognize and publicly acknowledge their peers' prosocial behaviors within a set time frame or class period [46]. Lum et al. found that when students reported their peers' prosocial behaviors and teachers publicly acknowledged them, disruptive behaviors declined, and engagement increased [47].

The PPR is effective for EBD students. Research suggests that students with EBD who feel adequately supported in school are more likely to experience positive outcomes [48]. Most studies on PPR's effects on students with EBD have focused on elementary classrooms, with some extending to high school settings [40].

Peer Prompting and Reinforcement (PR). In PR, peer prompting refers to peers using external prompts, including verbal or non-verbal cues, to increase the likelihood of receiving the desired response from the target student. Additionally, the effective use of peer reinforcement is associated with an increased frequency of appropriate behaviors. When peers appropriately use rewards and praise to reinforce positive behaviors, these behaviors become more frequent, as students are more likely to repeat them due to the positive feedback they receive [49]. Research indicates that PR has positive intervention effects in addressing task avoidance/escape and attention-seeking behaviors [50], particularly for students with ADHD [51]. Table 4 below summarizes the three types of PMI mentioned above and discusses how they specifically enhance student engagement in different ways.

Table 4: Peer-mediated interventions (PMI) for enhancing engagement

PMI Type	PALS	PPR	PR
Target Population	EBD students, students with learning disabilities, English language learners, and culturally diverse students	EBD students (mostly elementary level)	EBD students, especially ADHD students
Implementation	Students work in pairs, alternating roles as tutor and tutee	Students observe their peers' prosocial behaviors and publicly acknowledge them in class	Peers provide prompts and reinforcement to encourage positive behavior
Primary Goal	Improve social and academic skills	Foster prosocial behaviors	Reinforce positive behavior and enhance learning comprehension
Classification of Engagement	1.1-Behavioral Engagement - On-task Behavior 3.1-Cognitive Engagement-Motivational Goals	1.1-Behavioral Engagement - On-task Behavior 2.1- Emotional Engagement -Affect and Interests	1.1- Behavioral Engagement -On-task Behavior 1.2 -Behavioral Engagement - Participation 2.1- Emotional Engagement - Affect and Interests

Note. PALS = Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies; PPR = Positive Peer Reporting; PR = Peer Prompting and Reinforcement; EBD = Emotional and Behavioral Disorders; ADHD = Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.

Table 4 presents three different types of Peer-Mediated Interventions (PMI), highlighting their primary focus on enhancing the behavioral engagement of students with EBD, particularly by increasing on-task behavior. Unlike teacher-mediated and self-mediated strategies, some PMI approaches leverage peer reinforcement through rewards and praise, fostering students' positive emotions and interest in learning from the perspective of emotional engagement.

3. Discussion

This article explores how teacher-mediated, student-mediated, and peer-mediated strategies impact students' engagement. The findings indicate that different strategies influence various dimensions of

engagement. Notably, the strategies for improving on-task behavior among students with EBD appear most frequently, which aligns with the prevailing research. The conclusions are as follows:

(a) Teacher-mediated strategies primarily affect behavioral engagement by increasing on-task behavior and participation, which helps reduce problem behaviors and enhance classroom attention.

(b) Student-mediated strategies mainly influence cognitive engagement, aiming to enhance students' motivational goals and self-regulated learning skills.

(c) Peer-mediated strategies impact students' behavioral engagement by increasing on-task behavior and participation. They also foster emotional engagement, helping students create positive feelings toward teachers, classmates, and tasks.

3.1. Possible explanations

(a) Teacher-mediated strategies typically involve direct interaction with students. When addressing EBD students' externalizing challenges, such as defiance and disruptive behaviors, teachers often prioritize behavioral engagement—particularly on-task behavior and participation—to maintain classroom routines and support students in staying focused.

(b) Student-mediated strategies often involve self-directed learning, where students take greater responsibility for their own academic progress. Students deepen their cognitive engagement by setting goals or self-regulating their learning progress.

(c) Peer-mediated strategies are also designed to encourage students to engage in tasks and maintain focus. These strategies leverage peer influence to provide motivation and a sense of responsibility. Students develop favorable emotions toward their peers, teachers, and academic tasks through positive reinforcement.

3.2. Future research

Future research could explore the combined effects of multiple teaching strategies on the engagement of students with EBD and their subsequent academic outcomes. For example, Carter integrated Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) and Positive Peer Reporting (PPR) and examined their influence on students' achievement in his study [40]. Future research could build upon this approach to investigate the effectiveness of such combinations.

Additionally, this study identifies a gap in research regarding how teaching strategies impact students through effort (1.3) and involvement in learning (1.4) within behavioral engagement. Future studies on teaching strategies could focus on these two aspects on students' academic achievement.

3.3. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it examines only three strategies within each category; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all strategies. Additionally, this study does not consider broader contextual factors, such as school policies or curriculum frameworks, that may shape the effectiveness of teaching strategies. Furthermore, the study does not account for variations in students' age groups, specific academic subjects, or educational settings (e.g., inclusive vs. special education). These variables must be specified if empirical analysis is conducted in the future.

4. Conclusion

Given that academic achievement is a significant challenge for students with EBD, enhancing their engagement is one of the most critical approaches to addressing this issue. This study reviews existing literature on how teaching strategies can be leveraged to improve student engagement.

Specifically, this study examines the effectiveness of teaching strategies from the perspectives of teacher-mediated strategies, student-mediated strategies, and peer-mediated strategies. Three sub-strategies are selected within each category to explore how they enhance engagement at different levels. The findings indicate that most teaching strategies focus on increasing students' on-task behavior, aligning with existing scholarly perspectives. Additionally, this study identifies differentiated effects of teaching strategies on student engagement. The potential reasons for these observed patterns are provided.

Further research could focus on developing and refining teaching strategies that enhance students' efforts and involvement in learning. These strategies have been relatively underexplored in the existing literature but are crucial for fostering students' engagement.

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