

Impact of Peer-Mediated Instructional Strategies within Inclusive Education Settings

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the insights of educators on the implementation and impact of peer-mediated instructional strategies within inclusive education settings. A qualitative research design was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 22 educators currently working in inclusive educational settings. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experience with peer-mediated instructional strategies. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes related to the implementation, benefits, and challenges of peer-mediated instructional strategies. The study identified five key implementation strategies: training and professional development, collaborative planning, resource availability, student pairing, and monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Educators reported numerous benefits, including academic improvement, social skills development, increased inclusion and acceptance, peer leadership, motivation and engagement, and behavioral improvements. However, they also highlighted significant challenges, such as time constraints, lack of resources, diverse student needs, teacher preparedness, peer dynamics, administrative support, and difficulties in evaluation and assessment. Based on these findings, the study recommends policy changes, enhanced teacher training programs, the development of collaborative networks, flexible implementation models, and increased student involvement. Peer-mediated instructional strategies show great potential for enhancing inclusive education by fostering academic and social benefits for all students. However, successful implementation requires addressing challenges related to resource availability, teacher preparedness, and administrative support. By prioritizing comprehensive training, collaborative planning, and adequate resources, educators and policymakers can improve the effectiveness of inclusive education practices.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, peer-mediated instruction, teacher perspectives, implementation strategies, educational benefits, challenges, professional development.*

1. Introduction

The concept of inclusive education is grounded in the principle of providing all students with the opportunity to participate fully in the educational process (Carrington et al., 2010; Isaksson et al., 2010; Khandelwal et al., 2020; Macdonald et al., 2017; Moriña et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2023). According to Hornby (2015), inclusive education involves the development of new theories and practices that accommodate the diverse needs of students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This approach contrasts with traditional special education models that often segregate students with SEND from their peers. The inclusive education paradigm aims to integrate students with SEND into mainstream classrooms, promoting social integration and academic success (Hornby, 2015).

Peer-mediated instructional strategies involve students working together in structured activities designed to enhance learning and social interaction. These strategies have been shown to be effective in promoting academic achievement and social skills among students with and without disabilities (Salend, 2000). By facilitating peer interactions, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Peer-mediated strategies can include peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and peer support groups, among others (Molina & Casado, 2013).

Research indicates that peer-mediated strategies can significantly enhance the learning experience for students with autism and other disabilities. For instance, Alkhoui (2021) emphasizes the importance of using distance learning strategies and assistive technologies to support students with autism, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such strategies can help bridge the gap between students with disabilities and their peers, fostering a more inclusive learning environment (Alkhoui, 2021).

Despite the benefits, several barriers hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. Sharma et al. (2018) identify key barriers such as inadequate teacher training, lack of resources, and insufficient administrative support. These challenges can impede the successful adoption of inclusive practices and limit their effectiveness (Sharma et al., 2018). In regions like Tanzania, the adequacy of teaching and learning resources is a significant concern. Akiyoo et al. (2022) highlight the need for adequate resources to support inclusive education in primary schools in the Arusha region (Akiyoo et al., 2022).

Another challenge is the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms. Revelian (2022) discusses the

complexities of addressing these needs through tailored teaching and learning strategies in Tanzanian public primary schools. Educators must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to manage diverse classrooms effectively, ensuring that all students receive appropriate support (Revelian, 2022).

The advent of e-learning has introduced new opportunities and challenges for inclusive education. Meskhi et al. (2019) explore the potential of e-learning to support higher education for students with disabilities, noting both the opportunities and limitations of this approach. E-learning can provide flexible and accessible learning options for students who may face barriers in traditional classroom settings. However, the effectiveness of e-learning depends on the availability of technology and the ability of educators to integrate digital tools into their teaching practices.

Studies from different regions provide valuable insights into the implementation of inclusive education. For example, Molina and Casado (2013) examine the case of the Catalan school system in Spain, highlighting the importance of intercultural education in promoting inclusivity (Molina & Casado, 2013). Similarly, Dawadi (2022) presents a stakeholder-informed framework for the inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood education in Nepal, emphasizing the role of community involvement and support (Dawadi, 2022).

In the Pacific region, Sharma et al. (2018) discuss strategies to overcome barriers to inclusive education, including the development of inclusive policies and the provision of professional development for teachers (Sharma et al., 2018). These strategies are essential for creating an environment where all students can thrive. Massouti (2024) provides a qualitative perspective on Dubai's inclusive education policy, underscoring the importance of school leaders' support in implementing inclusive practices (Massouti, 2024).

An important aspect of inclusive education is listening to students' voices and incorporating their feedback into teaching strategies. Li et al. (2022) highlight the significance of student feedback in shaping inclusive teaching practices in Chinese primary schools. By involving students in the decision-making process, educators can create more responsive and effective inclusive education programs (Li et al., 2022).

To enhance the implementation of inclusive education, several policy recommendations have been proposed. Kauffman and Hornby (2020) advocate for a balanced approach that considers both inclusive and special education

needs. They emphasize the importance of realistic policies that support the diverse needs of all students (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Narot (2024) discusses the concept of value co-creation as a strategy for enhancing inclusiveness in special education, suggesting that collaborative efforts between educators, students, and families are crucial (Narot, 2024).

Educators play a pivotal role in the success of inclusive education. Souza (2022) examines the policy trajectory for inclusive education in Malawi, emphasizing the need for well-prepared and committed teachers (Souza, 2022). Similarly, Hornby (2015) stresses the importance of developing new theories and practices to support educators in inclusive settings. The professional development of teachers is essential for equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to implement inclusive practices effectively (Hornby, 2015).

The implementation of peer-mediated instructional strategies in inclusive education holds significant promise for enhancing learning and social outcomes for all students. However, several challenges must be addressed to realize the full potential of these strategies. Adequate resources, teacher training, administrative support, and inclusive policies are essential components of a successful inclusive education framework. By listening to students' voices and involving all stakeholders in the process, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. This study aims to provide insights into the experiences and perspectives of educators regarding peer-mediated instructional strategies, contributing to the ongoing dialogue on inclusive education and its implementation.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the insights of educators regarding peer-mediated instructional strategies in inclusive education. The qualitative approach is chosen to gain a deeper understanding of educators' experiences, perceptions, and practices in the context of inclusive education. The participants in this study are educators currently working in inclusive educational settings, including primary, secondary, and special education teachers.

Participants are selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of educators who have experience with peer-mediated instructional strategies. The criteria for inclusion are as follows:

- Educators must have at least one year of experience working in inclusive classrooms.
- They must have implemented or currently be implementing peer-mediated instructional strategies.
- They must be willing to participate in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.

A total of 20 educators are initially recruited for the study. However, recruitment continues until theoretical saturation is achieved, meaning no new themes or insights emerge from the data.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection is conducted using semi-structured interviews, which are chosen for their flexibility in allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences in detail. The interview guide is developed based on existing literature on peer-mediated instructional strategies and inclusive education, ensuring that it covers key areas of interest while allowing for the exploration of emergent themes.

The interviews are conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preference and availability. Each interview lasts between 45 to 60 minutes and is audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate data capture. The interview questions are open-ended, focusing on the following topics:

- Educators' experiences with implementing peer-mediated instructional strategies.
- Perceived benefits and challenges of these strategies in inclusive classrooms.
- Specific examples of successful peer-mediated activities and their outcomes.
- Recommendations for other educators and policymakers regarding the use of peer-mediated instruction in inclusive settings.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis is performed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The following steps are followed in the data analysis process:

Transcription: All interviews are transcribed verbatim to create a comprehensive data set for analysis.

Familiarization: Researchers read and re-read the transcripts to become deeply familiar with the content.

Coding: Initial codes are generated by systematically working through the transcripts and highlighting significant phrases or sentences that relate to the research questions.

Theme Development: Codes are then grouped into potential themes based on their similarity and relevance to the research questions. Themes are reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately reflect the data.

Defining and Naming Themes: Each theme is clearly defined, named, and supported with representative quotes from the transcripts.

Writing Up: The final themes are integrated into a coherent narrative that addresses the research questions and provides insights into educators' perspectives on peer-mediated instructional strategies in inclusive education.

Throughout the analysis, researchers employ strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, including member checking, where participants are asked to review and provide feedback on the initial themes and interpretations, and triangulation, where multiple

researchers independently code and analyze the data to ensure consistency and reliability.

3. Findings and Results

The study included a total of 22 educators currently working in inclusive educational settings. The participants comprised 10 primary school teachers, 8 secondary school teachers, and 4 special education teachers. Of the 22 participants, 14 were female (63.6%) and 8 were male (36.4%). The age of the participants ranged from 25 to 60 years, with a mean age of 42 years. In terms of experience, 5 educators (22.7%) had 1-5 years of teaching experience, 9 educators (40.9%) had 6-10 years of experience, and 8 educators (36.4%) had over 10 years of experience in inclusive education. Furthermore, 18 participants (81.8%) had undergone specific training in peer-mediated instructional strategies, while 4 (18.2%) had not received any formal training but had learned through practice and professional development.

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
1. Implementation Strategies	Training and Professional Development	Workshops, Online Courses, Peer Mentoring, In-service Training, Ongoing Support
	Collaborative Planning	Co-Teaching, Lesson Sharing, Joint Curriculum Development
	Resource Availability	Teaching Aids, Technology, Funding, Learning Materials
	Student Pairing	Ability Grouping, Interest-Based Pairing, Random Pairing
	Monitoring and Feedback	Observations, Peer Assessments, Teacher Evaluations
2. Perceived Benefits	Academic Improvement	Enhanced Learning, Improved Grades, Better Understanding
	Social Skills Development	Increased Interaction, Teamwork, Communication Skills
	Inclusion and Acceptance	Sense of Belonging, Reduced Stigma, Positive Attitudes
	Peer Leadership	Leadership Skills, Confidence, Responsibility
	Motivation and Engagement	Increased Interest, Active Participation, Reduced Absenteeism
3. Challenges and Barriers	Behavioral Improvements	Better Classroom Behavior, Conflict Resolution, Cooperation
	Time Constraints	Scheduling Issues, Limited Class Time
	Lack of Resources	Insufficient Materials, Technology Gaps, Financial Constraints
	Diverse Student Needs	Varying Abilities, Different Learning Styles, Special Needs
	Teacher Preparedness	Inadequate Training, Lack of Confidence, Resistance to Change
4. Recommendations	Peer Dynamics	Conflict Among Peers, Unequal Participation, Bullying
	Administrative Support	Policy Limitations, Lack of Support from Administration
	Evaluation and Assessment	Difficulties in Measuring Effectiveness, Subjective Assessments
	Policy Changes	Inclusive Policies, Funding Increases, Resource Allocation
	Teacher Training Programs	Comprehensive Training, Continuous Professional Development
	Collaborative Networks	Teacher Communities, Peer Support Groups, Partnerships
	Flexible Implementation Models	Customizable Strategies, Adaptable Methods, Context-Specific Approaches
	Student Involvement	Student Feedback, Involving Students in Planning

3.1. Implementation Strategies

Training and Professional Development: Educators highlighted the importance of training and professional development in effectively implementing peer-mediated instructional strategies. They reported participating in workshops, online courses, peer mentoring, and in-service training sessions. One teacher remarked, "The workshops provided us with the necessary skills to engage students effectively." Ongoing support was also deemed crucial for sustaining these strategies.

Collaborative Planning: Collaborative planning emerged as a vital subcategory, with educators emphasizing co-teaching, lesson sharing, and joint curriculum development. An educator shared, "Joint curriculum development allows us to integrate diverse instructional strategies and cater to all students."

Resource Availability: The availability of resources, including teaching aids, technology, funding, and learning materials, was frequently mentioned. One participant stated, "Having access to adequate resources, especially technology, makes a significant difference in implementing peer-mediated strategies."

Student Pairing: Educators used various methods for student pairing, such as ability grouping, interest-based pairing, and random pairing. A teacher explained, "Pairing students based on their interests helps in maintaining their engagement and enthusiasm."

Monitoring and Feedback: Effective monitoring and feedback mechanisms, such as observations, peer assessments, and teacher evaluations, were highlighted. An educator noted, "Regular feedback helps in identifying areas of improvement and celebrating successes."

3.2. Perceived Benefits

Academic Improvement: Many educators reported enhanced learning outcomes, improved grades, and better understanding among students. One teacher commented, "Peer-mediated strategies have significantly improved my students' comprehension and retention."

Social Skills Development: Increased interaction, teamwork, and communication skills were identified as key benefits. An educator shared, "Students learn to work together and communicate effectively, which are essential life skills."

Inclusion and Acceptance: A sense of belonging, reduced stigma, and positive attitudes towards peers were frequently

mentioned. A participant noted, "Peer-mediated strategies foster an inclusive environment where every student feels accepted."

Peer Leadership: Educators observed the development of leadership skills, confidence, and responsibility among students. One teacher stated, "I've seen shy students blossom into confident leaders through peer-led activities."

Motivation and Engagement: Increased interest, active participation, and reduced absenteeism were highlighted as significant benefits. An educator mentioned, "Students are more motivated and engaged when they learn from their peers."

Behavioral Improvements: Better classroom behavior, conflict resolution, and cooperation were reported. A teacher explained, "Peer-mediated strategies have led to noticeable improvements in student behavior and cooperation."

3.3. Challenges and Barriers

Time Constraints: Scheduling issues and limited class time were common challenges. One educator remarked, "Finding time to implement peer-mediated activities within a tight schedule is often difficult."

Lack of Resources: Insufficient materials, technology gaps, and financial constraints were frequently mentioned barriers. A participant noted, "Our school lacks the necessary resources, which hampers the effective implementation of these strategies."

Diverse Student Needs: Varying abilities, different learning styles, and special needs posed significant challenges. An educator shared, "It's challenging to address the diverse needs of all students through peer-mediated strategies."

Teacher Preparedness: Inadequate training, lack of confidence, and resistance to change were highlighted. One teacher commented, "Many teachers feel unprepared and lack the confidence to implement peer-mediated strategies effectively."

Peer Dynamics: Conflict among peers, unequal participation, and bullying were reported as significant issues. An educator stated, "Managing peer dynamics can be challenging, especially when conflicts arise."

Administrative Support: Policy limitations and lack of support from administration were common barriers. A participant noted, "Administrative support is crucial for the successful implementation of peer-mediated strategies."

Evaluation and Assessment: Difficulties in measuring effectiveness and subjective assessments were frequently

mentioned. One teacher remarked, "Assessing the impact of peer-mediated strategies is often subjective and challenging."

3.4. Recommendations

Policy Changes: Educators recommended inclusive policies, funding increases, and better resource allocation. One participant suggested, "Policy changes are needed to provide the necessary support and resources for peer-mediated strategies."

Teacher Training Programs: Comprehensive training and continuous professional development were frequently recommended. An educator stated, "Ongoing professional development is essential for teachers to stay updated and effective."

Collaborative Networks: Teacher communities, peer support groups, and partnerships were suggested to enhance collaboration. A teacher shared, "Collaborative networks provide a platform for sharing ideas and supporting each other."

Flexible Implementation Models: Customizable strategies, adaptable methods, and context-specific approaches were recommended. An educator mentioned, "Flexibility in implementation models allows teachers to adapt strategies to their specific classroom needs."

Student Involvement: Involving students in planning and seeking their feedback were highlighted as important. A participant noted, "Student feedback is invaluable in refining and improving peer-mediated strategies."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal several critical insights into the implementation of peer-mediated instructional strategies in inclusive education. Educators identified key implementation strategies, including the necessity of training and professional development, collaborative planning, resource availability, student pairing, and monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Additionally, they reported a range of perceived benefits, such as academic improvement, social skills development, increased inclusion and acceptance, peer leadership, motivation and engagement, and behavioral improvements. However, they also highlighted significant challenges and barriers, including time constraints, lack of resources, diverse student needs, teacher preparedness, peer dynamics, administrative support, and difficulties in evaluation and assessment. Based on these findings, educators provided

recommendations for policy changes, enhanced teacher training programs, the development of collaborative networks, flexible implementation models, and increased student involvement.

The necessity of comprehensive training and professional development for educators was a prominent theme in our findings. This aligns with Sharma et al. (2018), who emphasized that inadequate teacher training is a major barrier to the effective implementation of inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2018). Educators in our study reported that workshops, online courses, and peer mentoring significantly contributed to their ability to implement peer-mediated instructional strategies. This is supported by Dawadi (2022), who highlighted the importance of continuous professional development in preparing educators to meet the diverse needs of students (Dawadi, 2022).

Collaborative planning was another critical strategy identified by participants. Co-teaching and joint curriculum development were noted as effective practices for integrating peer-mediated strategies into the classroom. This finding is consistent with the work of Molina and Casado (2013), who underscored the importance of collaboration among educators in promoting inclusive education. Collaborative efforts enable teachers to share resources, ideas, and strategies, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience for students with diverse needs (Molina & Casado, 2013).

Resource availability emerged as a significant factor influencing the implementation of peer-mediated strategies. Educators reported that access to teaching aids, technology, and sufficient funding was crucial for successful implementation. This finding resonates with Akiyoo et al. (2022), who pointed out that the adequacy of teaching and learning resources is essential for the effective delivery of inclusive education in Tanzanian primary schools (Akiyoo et al., 2022). The lack of resources can hinder educators' ability to provide high-quality inclusive education, thus highlighting the need for adequate funding and resource allocation.

The benefits of peer-mediated instructional strategies reported by educators, such as academic improvement and social skills development, align with previous research. Salend (2000) noted that peer-mediated strategies enhance learning outcomes and foster social interaction among students (Salend, 2000). Similarly, Li et al. (2022) emphasized that involving students in peer-mediated activities can lead to better academic performance and improved social skills (Li et al., 2022). These strategies not

only support the academic growth of students with disabilities but also promote a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment.

However, the challenges identified in our study, such as time constraints and diverse student needs, reflect ongoing issues in inclusive education. Revelian (2022) highlighted that managing the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms requires careful planning and tailored teaching strategies (Revelian, 2022). Educators in our study reported that balancing the implementation of peer-mediated strategies with other classroom demands was often difficult, echoing the concerns raised by Sharma et al. (2018) regarding the complexities of inclusive education (Sharma et al., 2018).

Administrative support was also a critical factor influencing the success of inclusive education. Educators noted that policy limitations and lack of administrative backing were significant barriers. Massouti (2024) emphasized the role of school leaders in supporting inclusive education policies, highlighting that strong administrative support is crucial for the effective implementation of inclusive practices (Massouti, 2024). Without this support, educators may struggle to implement and sustain peer-mediated strategies in their classrooms.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the sample size was limited to 22 educators, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and perspectives in different educational contexts. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may be subject to bias and inaccuracies. While efforts were made to ensure the reliability and validity of the data through member checking and triangulation, the subjective nature of qualitative research inherently limits the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the study focused on a specific set of peer-mediated instructional strategies, which may not capture the full range of practices used in inclusive education.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by expanding the sample size and including a more diverse range of participants from different educational settings and regions. Longitudinal studies that track the implementation and impact of peer-mediated instructional strategies over time would provide valuable insights into their effectiveness and sustainability. Additionally, quantitative research methods, such as surveys and experimental designs, could complement qualitative findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing

inclusive education. Further research should also explore the perspectives of students and parents, as their insights are crucial for developing holistic and effective inclusive education practices.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to enhance the implementation of peer-mediated instructional strategies in inclusive education. Firstly, policymakers should prioritize the provision of adequate resources and funding to support inclusive education initiatives. This includes investing in teaching aids, technology, and professional development programs for educators. Secondly, schools should foster a collaborative culture among educators by encouraging co-teaching and joint curriculum development. Providing opportunities for educators to share ideas and strategies can enhance the overall effectiveness of inclusive education practices.

Thirdly, ongoing professional development should be emphasized to equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to implement peer-mediated strategies effectively. Training programs should be tailored to address the specific challenges and needs of inclusive classrooms. Additionally, administrative support is crucial for the success of inclusive education. School leaders should actively promote and support inclusive policies, providing educators with the necessary resources and backing to implement peer-mediated strategies. Finally, involving students in the planning and implementation of peer-mediated activities can enhance their engagement and ownership of the learning process. Seeking student feedback and incorporating their perspectives can lead to more effective and responsive inclusive education practices.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the implementation of peer-mediated instructional strategies in inclusive education. The findings highlight the importance of comprehensive training, collaborative planning, adequate resources, and strong administrative support in promoting effective inclusive practices. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, educators and policymakers can enhance the educational experience for all students, fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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