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## Correlates of the Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances among Teachers in Crowded Post-Covid-19 Lockdown Classrooms in Kasese District, Uganda

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This study assessed secondary school teachers' overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) among the growing number of students with EBDs in post-COVID-19 lockdown government-aided schools in Western Uganda. The study was quantitative, employing a correlational cross-sectional survey research design. A sample of 330 full-time teachers was drawn from three public secondary schools through stratified and simple random sampling. Data were collected using the Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances Questionnaire (KEBDQ) to establish relationships between variables. Pearson correlation coefficient and a stepwise linear regression were used to analyse data. Findings revealed that teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs was very low implying that they were not aware of the characteristics of these learners and thus managing them in their crowded classrooms may be a disaster. A stepwise linear regression revealed that undergraduate courses and crowded classrooms significantly predicted teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs in crowded classrooms after the COVID-19 lockdown. In conclusion, based on the findings, higher teacher education institutions should make undergraduate courses related to EBDs compulsory during professional training, and the Ministry of Education and Sports should reduce overcrowded classrooms for effective classroom management.

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## INTRODUCTION

The growing number of students diagnosed with emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) requires that teachers' overall knowledge in handling EBDs should be enhanced if the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all including those with EBDs (UNESCO, 1994) is to be achieved. A systematic review by Smith et al. (2022) reveals that approximately 20 percent of students repeatedly displayed EBDs which worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic period. These EBDs serve as risk factors for later adverse outcomes, including school disengagement (Olivier et al., 2020), classroom climate (Sarkunan et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020), rejection by peers (Dong et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2022), teacher stress (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2014), low grades (Chan et al., 2023; Donolato et al., 2022; Garwood et al., 2020; Horbach et al., 2020; Kulkarni et al., 2021; Pickren et al., 2024; Roberts et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022; van Dijk et al., 2023), school suspension (Camacho et al., 2022; Ksinan et al., 2019; Naser et al., 2018), and expulsion (Bal et al., 2019). Adequate knowledge of EBDs is thus required for a teacher to effectively manage their classroom and create a suitable learning environment for all students to achieve learning outcomes (Cho et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, although positive classroom management skills are necessary to maximize

students' academic and social achievement, many teachers have demonstrated deficiencies in managing learners' disturbances within their classrooms (Scott, 2017). When teachers are not well prepared to manage a classroom, they will likely be dissatisfied with their job and leave the profession (Greene, 2008; Hamad et al., 2023). Therefore, the assessment of classroom management skills stemming from overall knowledge of EBDs is necessary for re-imagining the handling of learners with EBDs (Soydan et al., 2018), which this study sought to investigate. Several studies (e.g., Amini et al., 2015; Piri, & Pourfarhadi, 2018; Rezaei, 2018), most of them outside the Ugandan context, have focused on classroom management and few have evaluated teachers' awareness and knowledge about emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs). Therefore, this study was undertaken to unearth the overall knowledge of teachers on EBDs in crowded classrooms in Kasese District, Uganda after the COVID-19 lockdown.

The study's main objective was to investigate the level of awareness and overall knowledge of Emotional Behavioral Disturbances (EBDs) among secondary school teachers working in government-aided schools in Western Uganda. More specifically, the study attempted to: (a) find out teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs, (b) establish the relationship between teacher factors and overall knowledge of EBDs, and (c) determine whether teacher factors predict their overall knowledge of EBDs among students in Western Uganda. The

review of related literature in the following section exposed the gaps resulting in these objectives.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### Theoretical Review

This study was underpinned by the Social Constructivism Theory postulated by Vygotsky (1978). The central proposition of the Theory relevant to the current study is that students can make meaning out of their learning under the facilitation of the teacher within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD assumes that learning can be enhanced if students who are less experienced are guided and supported by a more experienced facilitator, in this case, the teacher. Teaching from a student's point of need or their zone of proximal development (ZPD) is important as it helps in students' engagement, motivation and growth. If the task is too easy (below their ZPD), then the student is likely to become bored and disengaged and this situation can worsen for students with EBDs. This theory therefore assumes that the teacher who is seen as an experienced facilitator with expertise to guide and support learners in all areas including EBDs should be able to handle the situation successfully to enhance the teaching-learning process. However, it is not clear whether the teachers in the context of Uganda effectively manage students with EBDs in their classrooms without compromising quality. Otherwise, literature elsewhere highlights gaps in teachers' classroom management (e.g., Alkahtan, 2022).

When students with EBDs are not attended to properly and professionally, they tend to drop out of school due to many factors including low grades (Chan et al., 2023; Pickren et al., 2024; van Dijk et al., 2023), school suspension (Camacho et al., 2022; Ksinan et al., 2019; Naser et al., 2018), and expulsion (Bal et al., 2019). Therefore, based on the Social Constructivism Theory, this study examined teachers' expertise and preparedness as facilitators in terms of knowledge to keep students engaged and

motivated through proper management of EBDs in the classroom in attunement with SDG 4 of providing education for all including those with EBDs.

### Empirical Review

#### *Teacher's Overall Knowledge of Emotional Behavioral Disturbances*

Teachers' knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) is crucial in the identification and assessment process because they are the primary source of information necessary to make a diagnosis. However, the literature shows contradictory findings about the knowledge of EBDs among teachers. Previous studies have underscored a significant correlation between teachers' knowledge of EBDs and their confidence in effectively teaching and managing these learners, fostering an inclusive classroom environment (Akdağ, 2023; Krtkova et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2024; Ward et al., 2022; Willoughby et al., 2022).

For instance, a study carried out among teachers in Turkey by Akdağ (2023) found that 58% of the teachers accurately identified EBDs and specifically ADHD and the majority (61%) correctly answered the question related to comorbidity of ADHD and learning disabilities. Akdağ (2023) affirms that teachers who lack accurate knowledge or harbour misconceptions about EBDs may fail to recognize or utilize evidence-based interventions and accommodations designed to support students with EBDs in crowded classrooms. In contrast, teachers who possess a more comprehensive understanding are generally more inclined to employ effective strategies for handling these students in their crowded classrooms (Akdağ, 2023).

Another study by Gajda et al. (2022) shows that Poland primary school teachers were aware of the existence of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) and declared their willingness to counteract them, using correct strategies and actions. However, they demonstrated knowledge gaps in recognizing possible reasons for the

occurrence of these EBDs. Another study by Soydan et al. (2018) found that 81% of teachers need to be supported in terms of classroom management and 55% of them in terms of understanding EBDs. These findings imply that higher institutions of learning training teachers need to review their curriculum to ensure teachers acquire adequate knowledge and skills to manage EBDs.

A mixed-method study by Alkahtan (2022) determined whether there was a relationship between the level of general education teachers' knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) and their attitudes toward students with EBDs. Using the Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances Questionnaire (KEBDQ) and the General Educators' Attitudes toward Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances Questionnaire (GEAEBDQ), Alkahtan established that the teachers had negative attitudes toward students with EBDs and poor knowledge of EBDs. This negative attitude and inadequate knowledge of EBDs made them believe that if these students were in their classrooms, it would require teachers to change classroom procedures, provide extra attention and would be harmful to students without EBDs. This implied that teachers in Saudi Arabia believed that students with EBDs should be taught in special schools and thus handled by specialized teachers.

### ***Teachers' Qualifications and Students with Emotional Behavioral Disturbances***

Students' emotional behavioural disturbances (EBDs) top the list of school concerns, with teachers consistently ranking disruptive, defiant, aggressive, and related classroom misconduct as a major barrier to teaching (Bushaw, & Lopez, 2010; Harrison et al., 2012). Despite national-wide awareness of behaviour management difficulties, Reinke et al. (2011) found that 65% of teachers report receiving little or no training to address students' challenging behaviours.

Studies by Churchward and Willis (2023) and Cochran-Smith (2021) have shown that a major factor in educational systems that influences student outcomes most is the quality of teachers. However, undergraduate teacher training has been criticized for being too theoretical and inadequately preparing teachers for the practical realities of the classroom (Bolton, 2019; Carey, 2019; McIntosh et al., 2021). This criticism is particularly acute with regard to the management of emotional behaviour disturbances (Joseph, 2017) which may stem from inadequate knowledge about EBDs.

According to Camacho et al. (2022), high-quality teacher-student interactions are critical for the healthy social-emotional, behavioural, and academic development of middle school students. Camacho and colleagues found that classrooms with lower interaction quality were more likely to have larger student-to-teacher ratios and higher rates of student emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) than classrooms with intermediate interaction quality and to be in schools with a higher percentage of out-of-school suspensions than classrooms with higher interaction quality. This is even worsened when the teachers are put under pressure by school administrators to complete the syllabus and teach to pass exams without considering the students wholly.

Anderson and Hendrickson (2007) in their initial study observed that there was a significant positive correlation between teachers' knowledge and their use of individualized support strategies for students with EBDs. However, a study by Gable et al. (2012) revealed that teachers lacked the necessary knowledge and preparation to effectively educate students with EBDs. Similarly, Shillingford and Karlin (2014) also showed that teachers had insufficient knowledge and they suggested that when teachers had knowledge or a deeper understanding of students with EBDs, they might become more supportive of those students in their classroom, an indication that knowledge of EBDs is



paramount for proper classroom management and effective teaching-learning process.

These findings suggest that interventions at the teacher, classroom, and school levels are necessary to promote positive teacher-student interactions, such as consultation to support teachers' effective classroom management, alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, and smaller student-to-teacher ratios. All these interventions can be effectively utilized only if teachers are aware and knowledgeable about them in connection to EBDs.

### ***Teaching Experience and Students with Emotional Behavioral Disturbances***

Studies have hinged on the fact that there is a tendency to presume a straightforward linear relationship between teachers' years of experience and the quality of teaching (Araujo et al., 2016; Brandenburg et al., 2016; Hång et al., 2022; Mockler, 2018; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020; Podolsky et al., 2019; Sullivan et al., 2019) when emotional and behavioural disturbances are under control. On the other hand, a study by Graham et al. (2020) shows no evidence of lower teaching quality for beginning teachers (0-3 years' experience), but some evidence of a decline in teaching quality for teachers with 4-5 years' experience.

Barker et al. (2022) employed a mixed-methods approach to investigate how preschool teacher participants experienced early literacy-focused professional learning; and approached literacy teaching within their classrooms. Participants echoed feelings of exclusion from most professional learning experiences and offered insight into considerations for designing and delivering professional learning opportunities to effectively support preschool teachers' literacy instructional practices. However, the Barker study did not focus on teachers' knowledge of EBDs which the current study investigated.

Students with EBD often struggle to regulate their emotions and behaviours (Cumming et al., 2019)

and this requires their teachers to respond calmly and effectively to a variety of emotions and behaviours (Stark, & Koslouski, 2021). As such, teaching students with EBD is emotionally demanding, and teachers often report that working with these students invokes strong emotional responses (e.g., Kerr, & Brown, 2016; Stark et al., 2022) ranging from both positive and negative feelings. For example, in Prather-Jones's (2011) qualitative study of experienced Special Education Teachers (SETs) teaching students with EBD, SETs noted that to continue teaching students with EBD over the long term, they needed to distance themselves from negative feelings, so they did not "take it personally" when students engaged in significant negative behaviours (p. 185).

Specifically, looking at the experiences of novice special education teachers, Stark and Koslouski's (2021) findings show that teachers described the great pride they felt in students' successes and their joy in positive interactions with students while also noting the frustration they experienced when trying to communicate with students who were emotionally dysregulated. Another study by Brunsting et al. (2022) found that SETs serving students with EBD not only had higher emotional exhaustion but also had higher personal accomplishment and lower depersonalization, highlighting the complexity of their emotional experiences.

A study by Voss et al. (2017) indicates that novice teachers face immense challenges in classroom management, especially while handling learners with EBD. Research further indicates that increasing years of experience can lead to improved performance (Ladd, & Sorensen, 2017). It is therefore vital to examine the links between experience and knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) in crowded classrooms. Moreover, these contradictory findings and limited studies that have focused on the assessment of teachers' awareness and knowledge of EBDs leave a literature gap that this study sought

to bridge as this may mitigate the management of EBDs in crowded classrooms to enhance the quality of teaching.

### ***Teacher's Continuous Professional Development and Students with Emotional Behavioral Disturbances***

Studies have indicated a relationship between enhanced knowledge through attending workshops and classroom management. For instance, Voss et al. (2017) found evidence for a significant increase in teachers' classroom management knowledge during the induction phase. However, this study didn't explore if teachers were knowledgeable about emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) as this would play a role in classroom behaviour management which the current study investigated. Teachers therefore seem to be having gaps in terms of knowledge and management of EBDs in the classroom. Continuous professional development could leverage this gap through the organization of workshops.

Similarly, Wingenbach et al. (2023) and Bowers et al. (2022) affirm that post-intervention results in their studies revealed significant gains in self-perceived understanding of students' EBDs and improved their confidence in approaching students, parents, or other school staff to discuss students' EBDs. This means that when teachers are knowledgeable about EBDs, they can seek support from various stakeholders to manage the behaviour.

Wills et al. (2019) examined the effects of class-wide function-related intervention teams (CW-FIT) in three Western U.S. city middle school classrooms to determine whether this multi-tiered intervention could help teachers proactively manage student behaviour. Their findings indicated improved rates of on-task behaviour at both class-wide and individual student levels, with corresponding increases in teacher praise and a decrease in teacher reprimands. This finding was similar to what they established in their previous study (Wills et al., 2014). This means that teachers can be the best

instruments to manage EBDs in their classrooms if oriented through such specific interventions.

Wingenbach et al. (2023) assessed outcomes of professional development activities for selected Texas school personnel helping students cope with behavioural and mental health issues using the Emotional Backpack Project (EBP). Post-intervention results revealed significant gains in self-perceived understanding of students' behavioural and mental health issues, and improved confidence in approaching students, parents, or other school staff to discuss students' harmful behaviours. School personnel's knowledge, perceptions, and confidence to help students cope with behavioural and mental health issues was significantly better after EBP interventions.

These findings highlight the fact that teachers indeed have knowledge gaps on EBDs but the good news is that this crisis can be addressed through organizing workshops on the subject matter for teachers as they normally feel unprepared to handle students with EBDs in their crowded classrooms.

These gaps in the existing literature appeared to have created a knowledge vacuum necessitating this research to test the following hypotheses:

- There is a relationship between overall knowledge and identification of EBDs
- There is a relationship between teacher factors and overall knowledge of EBDs
- Teacher factors predicted overall knowledge of EBDs

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design, Setting, and Participants**

The study was quantitative in approach, employing a cross-sectional survey design. The study participants were full-time teachers from three public schools in Kasese District, Uganda who were sampled using stratified and simple random sampling. Stratified sampling was used to select

schools to ensure that each category of schools according to different strata was proportionately involved in the study. Simple random sampling was then used to select teachers to ensure that all respondents were determined by chance allowing each participant to get involved in the study without bias. The sample size of teachers who responded to the self-administered questionnaire was 330.

### Measures

Data were collected from 5th February to 30th March 2024 using the Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances Questionnaire (KEBDQ) for teachers developed by Shillingford and Karlin (2014) to evaluate knowledge based on the ability to identify the symptoms of EBDs and to recognize the appropriate strategies for handling behaviour problems in the classroom. Test-retest reliability was conducted within a five-week interval on fifty (50) teachers in a pilot study. The test-retest reliability for the KEBDQ was ( $r = .80$ ). Filling in of questionnaires lasted approximately 30 minutes which they did at their convenience time in order not to interfere with their routine.

### Procedure

The study was conducted in the first term of schools in February and March 2024. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Mbarara University of Science and Technology and Uganda National Council of Science and Technology (Approval Code No. MUST REC-2023-908, UNCST-SS2059ES). An introductory letter to school administrators was obtained from the District Inspector of Schools (DIS) Kasese District. Following this clearance, the consent of persons in charge of the schools concerned and the informed written consent of the participants was obtained. In addition, participants were informed of the study objectives and methodologies of the study including their rights, confidentiality, anonymity, the assignment of a private code to each participant, and the right to opt out of the study. The informed consent form was

completed by all participants before the filling in of questionnaires. To establish quality control, the researchers ensured the validity and reliability of the instrument. At the preliminary level, the researchers with the help of two experts in the department ensured content validity of the items in the instrument. Again, through a pilot study, the reliability of the questionnaire was attained using Cronbach's Alpha of 0.80 which was above the benchmark of 0.70 (Taber, 2018).

### Statistical Analyses

Frequency counts and percentages were used to provide the profiles of the teachers and their overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs). The knowledge of teachers was based on their highest mean score on the questionnaire. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used for the analysis of relationships between variables. A stepwise linear regression analysis was used to reveal the extent to which teacher factors addressed in the study (gender, age, qualification, experience, diagnosis, prevalence, workshops) predicted teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs in crowded classrooms.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Information of Respondents.

On average, participating teachers had 1-5 years of job experience, and 69% were male. Of these teachers, 55% held a bachelor's degree which matches with the government policy that all secondary school teachers in Uganda should possess at minimum a bachelor's degree to be able to teach. However, those with lower qualifications needed to upgrade their education to be able to fit in this working environment as this will also advance their skills in dealing with students with emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs).

Most teachers in the study area were in the age range of 31-40 which conforms with Erickson's stages of psycho-social development and Super Donald's theory of career development where most people of

this age are giving back to the community through work and establishing to settle down in their careers. The study findings further revealed that the majority of the teachers (46%) had been serving in the current school for a period between 1-5 years. This indicates that teachers who participated in this study knew their students quite well and thus were able to identify those who could be having EBDs in their crowded classrooms.

#### Teachers' Overall Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances after Covid-19 Lockdown

Results of this study reveal that only 3.0% of teachers' perceptions about overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) were high and 67% of them were at a low level after the Covid-19 lockdown. Most teachers (68%) attested to the fact that they didn't take courses related to EBDs during their undergraduate training

as reflected in their low overall knowledge. Moreover, the majority of the teachers (72%) agreed that students with EBDs are present in their classrooms, diagnoses ranged from one and above as cited by the majority of the teachers (68%) and crowded classrooms were rated at 81%.

This result implies that undergraduate education is relevant as it enables teachers in professional development to understand and manage emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) in the classrooms and thus teachers should take course units with elements of managing EBDs seriously. This means that our first hypothesis that there is a relationship between overall knowledge and EBDs was partially retained.

#### Correlations among Study Variables after Covid-19 Lockdown

**Table 1: Correlations between Study Variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Gender	1									
Age	-.182**	1								
Qualification	.136*	-.064	1							
Experience	-.056	.555**	-.022	1						
Prevalence	-.043	-.095	-.006	.002	1					
Diagnosis	-.099	.208**	-.055	.240**	.379**	1				
Courses	-.094	-.087	-.045	.009	.132*	.138*	1			
Crowded classes	-.022	.044	.071	.001	.071	-.030	.089	1		
Workshop	.086	-.048	-.017	.045	.168**	.239**	.328**	.065	1	
Overall knowledge	.068	-.006	.027	.056	-.040	-.010	.119*	-.279**	.107	1

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table 1 displays correlations between study variables and results showed that undergraduate courses were positively and significantly correlated with overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) [ $r = .12$ ,  $p = .030$ ] while crowded classrooms were significant but negatively correlated with overall knowledge of EBDs after the Covid-19 lockdown ( $r = -.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, gender ( $r = .07$ ,  $p = .216$ ), qualification ( $r = .03$ ,  $p = .627$ ), experience ( $r = .06$ ,

$p = .313$ ), and workshops ( $r = .12$ ,  $p = .051$ ) showed no statistically significant positive relationships with overall knowledge of EBDs. On the other hand, age ( $r = -.01$ ,  $p = .909$ ), prevalence ( $r = -.04$ ,  $p = .471$ ), and diagnosis ( $r = -.01$ ,  $p = .855$ ), showed non-significant negative relationships with overall knowledge of EBDs.

Thus, teachers who undertook undergraduate courses related to emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) seemed knowledgeable as the



number of courses covered increased, so did teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs after the Covid-19 lockdown. On the other hand, as classes became crowded, teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs decreased. This means that our second hypothesis that there is a relationship between

teacher factors and overall knowledge of EBDs was partially retained.

Regression Analysis of Teacher Factors as Predictors of Overall Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances After Covid-19 Lockdown

**Table 2: Stepwise Regression Analysis Related to Teachers' Factors as Predictors of Knowledge of Emotional Behavior Disturbances (EBDs)**

Model	Variable	B	Std Error	Beta	t	p	R	R2	CI-LB	CI-UB
1	Intercept	94.226	3.323		28.359	.000			87.690	100.762
	Crowded classroom	-	3.680	-.279	-5.267	.000	.279a	.078	-	-12.144
		19.384							26.624	
2	Intercept	84.360	4.861		17.354	.000			74.797	93.923
	Crowded classroom	-	3.658	-.292	-5.545	.000			-	-13.087
		20.284							27.481	
	Courses	7.946	2.882	.145	2.757	.006	.315b	.099	2.276	13.616

Predictors: (Constant), Crowded classrooms

Predictors: (Constant), Crowded classrooms, Courses

In a stepwise regression model, the study showed that undergraduate courses offered during professional development positively predicted overall teacher's knowledge of EBDs while crowded classrooms negatively predicted teacher's overall knowledge of disruptive behaviour after the Covid-19 pandemic with percentages of variance ranging from 7.8 to 10% ( $p < 0.01$ , Table 2). The rest of the seven (7) predictor variables (gender, age, qualification, experience, prevalence, diagnosis, and workshops), were not significant predictors of overall knowledge of EBDs.

In the first stage, the variable of crowded classrooms was entered into the regression equation and it was found that it explained 7.8% of the variance in the overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) [ $R=0.279$ ,  $R^2=0.078$ ]. The negative (-) beta value reveals that there is an inverse relationship between crowded classrooms and overall knowledge of EBDs during the COVID-19 lockdown, meaning that as crowded classrooms increased, the overall knowledge of EBDs decreased.

In the second stage, out of these variables identified; courses offered, which made the most contribution to the overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs), were entered into the regression equation and the explained variance in the point score of overall knowledge of EBDs went up from 7.8% to 10% ( $R=0.315$ ;  $R^2=0.099$ ). In other words, the variable of overall knowledge of EBDs made a 2.2% contribution to the explained variance. The positive (+) beta value reveals that there is a positive relationship between undergraduate course units offered during professional development and overall knowledge of EBDs, implying that as courses related to EBDs increased, overall knowledge increased as well.

Considering these results, it is found that the variables which predict the overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) after the COVID-19 lockdown are crowded classrooms and undergraduate course units offered at the university during professional development. This result means that our third hypothesis that teacher factors predicted overall knowledge of EBDs was partially retained.

## DISCUSSION

### Teachers' Overall Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances

The study found that teachers' perceptions about overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) were mainly at a low level. This finding is in line with the results of Gajda et al. (2022) and Opoku et al. (2024) who found knowledge gaps among teachers and contrary to Akdağ (2023) and Willoughby et al. (2022) whose studies showed that more than half of the sampled teachers seemed knowledgeable about EBDs. Considering this result, it can be stated that teachers' overall knowledge of EBDs must be supported through refresher courses and continuous professional development as affirmed by Voss et al. (2017) and Wingenbach et al. (2023) who mentioned in their studies that post-intervention results revealed significant gains in self-perceived understanding of students' EBDs and improved their confidence in seeking support from students, parents, or other school staff to discuss students harmful behaviours.

From the Social Constructivism theory that guided the study, when teachers have inadequate overall knowledge of EBDs, they will not be able to teach according to the principles of the Zone of Proximal Development where the teacher is the facilitator. This unpreparedness will reduce motivation and academic growth of students which is even worse for students with EBDs as they will be bored and disengaged during the lesson.

### Relationship between Teacher Factors and overall Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances

This study found a positive relationship between undergraduate courses offered during professional development and teachers' overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs). These findings are in tandem with previous studies (Akdağ, 2023; Krtkova et al., 2023; Opoku et al., 2024; Ward et al., 2022; Willoughby et al., 2022).

This result implies that undergraduate teachers in professional development need to be guided when selecting electives as most course units they seem to drop have a component of managing EBDs in the classroom and universities should reconsider making such course units core to enable teachers to take them seriously.

Furthermore, the study established a negative relationship between crowded classrooms and teachers' overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) as crowded classrooms seemed to decrease their overall knowledge. This may be attributed to the fact that an increase in the student ratio in the classroom attracts a diversity of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs). These findings are in tandem with previous studies (e.g., Alkahtani, 2022; Salarvand et al., 2023) which found EBDs in crowded classrooms.

### Teacher Factors as Predictors of Overall Knowledge of Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances After Covid-19 Lockdown

It was found that the variables which predict the overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) after the COVID-19 lockdown are crowded classrooms and undergraduate course units offered at the university during professional development. This is in line with Alkahtani (2022) and Salarvand et al. (2023). With improved knowledge of teachers concerning EBDs, they can be able to handle learners with EBDs even in crowded classrooms meaning that universities should focus on enriching their curriculum for teachers to accommodate students with EBDs in their crowded classrooms.

These findings stress the fact that professional development through undergraduate courses related to EBDs will enable teachers to use Vygotsky's principle of Zone of Proximal Development as they exercise their expertise as facilitators to guide learners in the teaching-learning process. Teaching at a student's point of need or their zone of proximal

development (ZPD) will promote students' engagement, motivation and growth, otherwise, if the task is too easy (below their ZPD), the student will be likely to become bored and disengaged and this situation tends to worsen for students with EBDs.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study offer significant insight into teachers' understanding and perceptions of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs). It has been observed that teachers exhibit gaps in their overall knowledge of EBDs, underscoring the necessity for expanded undergraduate professional training in higher institutions of learning. This research also implies that it is crucial to revisit the existing curriculum of teacher training at colleges and universities for newcomers and ongoing professional development programs for experienced educators. These programs should aim not only to broaden their knowledge but also to improve the management of EBDs in crowded classrooms. Importantly, fostering teachers' comprehension and acceptance of EBDs can enhance learning efficacy for students with this behaviour, potentially boosting their school attendance and educational engagement, and reducing school suspensions and expulsions in the end. This information is relevant to teacher programme coordinators such as the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) in Uganda indicating that further efforts should be made to increase pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge of EBD, and to provide strategies for identifying and working with students with EBD in crowded classrooms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is revealed in this research study that teachers' overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) is influenced by undergraduate courses offered related to EBDs. Implementation of professional development training to support teachers to acquire knowledge of EBDs may improve teachers' perceptions of students with

EBDs. Therefore, colleges and universities training teachers in Uganda should make such course units compulsory, not elective to boost teachers' knowledge and management of the diverse behaviours of their learners including EBDs.

In line with the finding that crowded classrooms decreased teachers' overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs), the Ministry of Education and Sports together with other policymakers in Uganda should consider reducing the teacher-student ratio to less than thirty (30) as suggested by Sun (2015) and Zyngier (2014) in China and Australia respectively.

Teachers' overall knowledge of emotional and behavioural disturbances (EBDs) should further be explored by carrying out studies designed with a qualitative research approach only or a mixed methods approach putting into consideration other factors such as identification and/or diagnosis through professional testing, parental involvement, conducive learning environment and classroom management.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest in the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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