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ENTLE TEACHING PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION: INFUSING TEACHING PRACTICES WITH NURTURANCE, POSITIVE CHILD PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMANISTIC TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

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Abstract

In today's world the prevalence of increased anxiety, classroom disengagement, emotional distress, and behavioural challenges is observed among the learners. Such challenges compel us to rethink about the classroom practices in India. We are still stuck at authoritarian attitudes and performance-oriented teaching practices which tend to neglect the emotional and mental well-being of the learners. On the contrary, we need to create a space for the learners where they can exhibit their creativity, autonomy, empathy and holistic nurturance. In this context, the present paper explores the conceptual foundations, pedagogical and educational applications of Gentle Teaching Methodologies. Based upon the principals of positive child psychology, humanistic education, attachment theory, social emotional learning and constructivist pedagogy, the paper examines how gentle teaching practices foster emotional and mental well-being, learner motivation and inclusive classroom environment. The paper recommends systematic teacher training and policy integration to formalize gentle teaching practices within contemporary school system.

Keywords: Gentle Teaching, Positive Psychology, Nurturing Classroom Environment, Humanistic Education, Social-Emotional Learning.

1. Introduction

The fast-changing educational landscape characterized by rapid technological transformation, AI, chat bots, cut-throat competition, emotional instability, confusion among learners and rising concerns about learners' mental health and well-being. We hear on the daily basis how students are undergoing heightened levels of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, social isolation, academic stress, behavioural challenges within the school environment. Such concerns intensify the need of reshaping our classroom teaching learning practices into more learner-centred and emotionally safe teaching learning practices.

Where the present teaching approach is deeply rooted in behaviourist approach of discipline, compliance, competition, and performance, it creates more prioritization to academic achievement at the cost of emotional nurturance and mental well-being. These approaches inadvertently create fear-based environment in the classrooms and neglects the intrinsic and positive motivation, creativity and deep engagement in learning. Thus, there is a need to implement pedagogical practices that recognize the learners not just as cognitive entities but as conscious, emotional, social and relational beings.

Gentle teaching practices emphasize on the dignity, mutual respect, emotional well-being, empathy, and valuing the learners unconditionally. Primarily rooted in the field of special education, this approach is equally required in the view of growing learners' unrest in the mainstream education scenario.

Van de Siepkamp et. al. (2018) describes gentle teaching as a thoughtful, deliberate approach where teachers and learners build relationships rooted in safety and care. Rather than imposing rules, this method rests on four foundational commitments: (i) teachers create unconditionally safe, loving relationships and spaces where the learners feel accepted even during moments of difficulty or anxiety; (ii) teachers nurture a sense of belongingness where the learners are valued as equals, surrounded by people who respect them for who they are, not what they achieve; (iii) teachers enrich the learners with emotional awareness to support their overall well-being which allows the learners to pursue their own dreams and



develop their unique strengths and qualities; (iv) the teacher understands the interdependence of relationships where both people can change and doesn't get in fixing or changing the learners.

Lehr and Lehr (1989) states that parents and teachers often turns to aversive methods or punishment when a child misbehaves, hoping to stop the behaviour. In psychological terms, positive reinforcement such as praise and rewards increases desired behaviours, while punishment decreases unwanted ones. The goal is to suppress one behaviour in order to teach a more appropriate behaviour.

However, aversive methods carry hidden costs. They may stop a behaviour in the moment but fail to teach what should happen instead. Most importantly, they damage the relationship between teacher and learner.

McGee's (1987) approach is grounded on genuine care which proposes a straightforward method- (i) ignore the undesirable behaviour rather than giving it attention; (ii) redirect the learner towards a desirable behaviour; (iii) show genuine appreciation and affection when they respond. This simple yet powerful approach helps to preserve the dignity of that relationship and encourages cooperation rather than demanding obedience.

McGee's (1987) gave a simple framework of ABCs of problem behaviour to understand what is really happening:

- Antecedents (A): what occurred just before the behaviour happened
- Behaviour (B): the behaviour itself (hitting, spitting, shouting etc.)
- Consequences (C): what happened as a result of the behaviour

By understanding and recognizing these three patterns, teachers can identify patterns and respond more thoughtfully.

Encapsulating, this approach proposes a shift from authoritarian to anti-authoritarian teaching which reflects a fundamental change in values. Instead of viewing teacher-student relationship as hierarchical, this approach sees it as mutual and equal. Power is shared rather than imposed. The goal is not obedience but interdependence and to learn to grow together.

2. Theoretical Background

Gentle teaching is a relationship-based teaching approach having its roots in multiple theoretical traditions. Its foundation lies in John Bowlby's attachment theory, which emphasizes that children require a safe and secure emotional bond with a consistent caregiver to nurture healthy psychological functioning (Van der Horst, et. al. 2025). Bowlby's emphasis on the concept of secure attachment with the caregiver from where they can safely explore the world around indicates the importance of gentle teaching approach and creating unconditional safety and trust between teacher and the learner.

This approach is further rooted in Lev Vygotsky's social-cultural theory of development, which stresses that learning and growth occurs through social interaction and shared meaning-making between the more capable/knowledgeable other and the learner. Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development and the importance of scaffolding through caring relationships align with gentle teaching's emphasis on mutual interdependence and the caregiver's role as a supportive guide rather than an authoritarian controller.

Gentle teaching also draws its bases from Abraham Maslow's humanistic psychology where he talks about the hierarchy of needs, need of belongingness, love, self esteem as fundamental human requirements before higher-order learning and self-actualisation can happen. This theory supports gentle teaching's core values, such as: feeling safe, feeling loved, becoming loving and becoming engaged.

The framework is explicitly built on what McGee (1987) called the psychology of interdependence. A perspective that recognizes that human beings develop best through reciprocal, mutual relationships rather than hierarchical control. McGee



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rejected the behaviourist approach of punishment and external control, arguing instead that unconditional valuing, companionship, and the caregiver's authentic presence are the true catalysts for behavioural and emotional change.

Taking them together, all these theoretical foundations, such as-attachment, socio-cultural development, humanistic values, and interdependence psychology, form a coherent framework that prioritizes dignity, belongingness, safety and quality of life as the foundation for meaningful support and growth.

3. Review of Related Literature

The literature related to gentle teaching practices or pedagogical practices spans over pedagogy, psychology, sociology of education, special education and cross-cultural education. The major focus is on teacher student relationships, classroom climate, trauma-informed, and inclusive approach.

The review of the related studies revealed similar and divergent findings with respect to the effectiveness and dimensions of gentle teaching across various educational and relational contexts. Steele (1995), Bryk and Schneider (2002), Cox et al. (1992), and Chorrojprasert (2020) highlighted the positive impact of relational, humanistic, and emotionally attuned approaches on learner engagement, behavioural outcomes, and overall educational wellbeing. Steele (1995) reported that gentle teaching, as a value-based non-aversive framework, produces meaningful behavioural change through unconditional valuing, co-participation, and redirection, emphasizing that human connection rather than control is the true catalyst of growth. Bryk and Schneider (2002) add institutional weight to this finding by demonstrating that relational trust, build on personal regard, respect, competence, and integrity, is foundational driver of school reform and student achievement. Similarly, Cox et al. (1992) confirmed through longitudinal evidence that quality of early caregiver and child interaction is the significant predictor of secure attachment, lending theoretical credibility to gentle teaching's assertion that safe, consistent relationships are prerequisites for healthy development and learning Chorrojprasert (2020) furthers this view by arguing that learner readiness is a multifaceted condition encompassing emotional, motivational, and intellectual dimensions, and that constructive, personalised feedback, which is a hallmark of gentle and humanistic teaching, is essential for developing self-regulated learners. Juul (1990) also confirms that children are required to fulfil their basic needs such as love, security, attachment, belongingness, dependence and independence; in order to form a healthy personality. Whereas, Moore (2019) highlighted the empathetic engagement with doctoral students, which is rarely talked about, highlighting that emotional safety and attuned mentorship are essential even for advanced adult learners navigating high-stress academic environments.

On the contrary, Ozer et. al. (2016) reveal a troubling gap between humanistic ideals and classroom reality, reporting that teachers frequently demonstrate authoritarianism, emotional harshness, anger, and psychological disconnection in their practice, the behaviours which directly contradict the core principals of gentle teaching methods. Furthering this, Shirkhani and Ardeshir (2013) warns against the uncritical imposition of any single framework, including gentle teaching. Chen and Schmidtke (2017) add a nuanced perspective by concluding that while humanistic elements are largely absent from technical and vocational education, their inclusion doesn't compromise with learning outcomes and in fact enhances teamwork, problem solving, and lifelong learning skills, which suggests that gentle teaching is not contextually limited but universally beneficial.

Thus, the review of related literature suggests that gentle teaching can facilitate educational outcomes in the following ways:

- Unconditional valuing and emotional safety create the foundational conditions for learner engagement, behavioural transformation, and secure attachment.
- Relational trust between teachers, students, parents and institutions significantly enhance school effectiveness, teacher collaboration, and reform outcomes.



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- Quality of teacher-student interaction, not merely instructional time or content delivery, is the critical predictor of learner development and autonomy.
- Constructive, personalised feedback and attention to learner emotional readiness foster self-regulation and independent learning.
- Humanistic and gentle teaching principles are applicable across all educational levels, from early childhood to doctoral education, and across diverse contexts including general, language, technical, and vocational settings.
- Learner autonomy develops relationally and socially and not in isolation. It requires collaborative effort among students, teachers, families, institutions, and society.
- Despite strong theoretical consensus, a significant gap persists between relational ideals and actual teacher behaviour, pointing to the urgent need for systematic embedding of gentle teaching in teacher education.

After the in-depth synthesis of the related literature, it can be concluded that to realize the benefits of gentle teaching methods, researchers must articulate precise constructs, develop valid metrics, examine long-term outcomes, and attend to teacher workload and systemic constraints.

4. Research Gap

The review of literature reveals several important gaps in existing body of knowledge:

1. Most of the studies focus on isolated dimensions of compassionate teaching rather than examining gentle teaching as an integrated pedagogical framework.
2. Existing literature predominantly addresses special education settings, with limited exploration of gentle pedagogy within mainstream classrooms.
3. There is an insufficient integration between positive child psychology and actual classroom pedagogical practices.
4. Few studies critically analyse the relationship between teacher nurturance and long-term learner well-being.
5. Limited conceptual research exists on how gentle teaching methodologies can transform institutional educational cultures.
6. There remains inadequate emphasis on teacher preparation and professional training for implementing emotionally responsive pedagogies.

5. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the conceptual foundations of gentle teaching methodologies within contemporary educational discourse.
2. To identify and analyse major gentle teaching methods and techniques applicable in classroom settings.
3. To critically examine the role of nurturing pedagogy in promoting learner well-being engagement, and inclusion.
4. To suggest educational implications and policy recommendations for implementing gentle teaching methodologies in schools.



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6. Research Questions

1. Why is there a growing need to shift toward gentle teaching practices in contemporary education?
2. What are the major methods and techniques associated with gentle teaching methodologies?
3. How do gentle teaching practices influence learners' emotional well-being and academic engagement?
4. In what ways can gentle pedagogy contribute to inclusive and psychologically safe classrooms?

7. Methodology

The present study employed qualitative conceptual research based on systematic literature analysis. Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, educational reports, policy documents, and interdisciplinary scholarly databases including Scopus, ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar.

The inclusion criteria involved selecting studies focusing on gentle teaching, compassionate pedagogy, positive psychology, social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, and nurturing educational practices. Conceptual analysis and thematic synthesis is done to identify recurring themes, theoretical patterns, and pedagogical implications.

To ensure trustworthiness and academic rigor, triangulation of sources and comparative thematic analysis were undertaken. Ethical considerations were maintained through accurate citation practices, avoidance of plagiarism, and objective interpretation of scholarly findings.

8. Gentle Teaching Practices and Techniques

Haberman (1994) outlined a comprehensive set of gentle teaching strategies that prioritize student wellbeing and engagement over rigid content delivery. These strategies reject shame, humiliation, screaming, and escalating punishments. Instead, teachers should listen to students' ideas, demonstrate empathy, and identify signs of pain and abuse. Rather than expecting learning from failure, gentle teachers create activities where students succeed, building confidence and effort. They become constant sources of encouragement, defuse authority challenges through redirection, and avoid public embarrassment and goes on to create an extended family classroom atmosphere. The teacher takes up the academic subject as a vehicle for collaborative problem-solving. The privacy and confidentiality of the student is maintained and respect is demonstrated towards parents which leads to the strengthening of home-school bond.

Findings of the Study

- Gentle teaching strategies create emotionally safe classrooms where students feel valued and motivated to learn.
- Teacher-student relationship quality is a stronger predictor of learner development than syllabus completion alone.
- Relational trust at the institutional level significantly enhances school effectiveness and teacher collaboration.
- Learner autonomy develops through social scaffolding, personalised feedback, and collaborative relationships rather than in isolation.
- Gentle and humanistic approaches are universally applicable across all educational contexts and levels.
- A significant gap exists between relational ideals and actual teacher practice, indicating urgent need for systematic integration of gentle teaching in teacher education.
- No existing research has investigated gentle teaching integration in mainstream B. Ed. Teacher education in India.



9. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a critical disconnect between the theory of gentle teaching principals and actual implementation in classroom practice. While Haberman's (1994) framework and subsequent research consistently demonstrate the effectiveness of empathetic teaching in fostering student engagement and wellbeing, teachers continue to rely on authoritarian and harsh approaches. This gap suggests that knowledge alone is insufficient and teachers require a structured, practical training, mentoring, and institutional support to translate gentle teaching principals into daily classroom practice. The absence of research specifically addressing gentle teaching integration in B. Ed. Programmes indicates that pre-service teacher education has not yet systematised these approaches, leaving new teachers unprepared to implement gentle teaching practices.

10. Educational Implications

The study has significant implications for educational stakeholders:

- Teachers should adopt empathetic communication, reflective practices, and emotionally supportive instructional methods.
- Curricula should integrate social-emotional learning and compassionate pedagogy components.
- Teacher preparation programs must include training in trauma-informed and nurturing pedagogical approaches.
- Schools should foster emotionally safe institutional cultures emphasizing well-being alongside achievement.
- Educational policies should recognize emotional well-being as a core dimension of quality education.
- Future research should empirically investigate the long-term impact of gentle teaching methodologies across diverse educational contexts.

11. Conclusion

The study underscores the urgent need to systematically integrate gentle teaching methods into mainstream school education and Teacher Education. While international research affirms the effectiveness of relational, emotionally safe pedagogy, Indian teacher education programmes have not yet made this integration structured. By embedding gentle teaching into pre-service curricula, practicum experiences, and institutional cultures, teacher education can equip educators with both knowledge and skills to create classrooms where students thrive emotionally, socially, and academically. Such integration aligns with contemporary educational policy frameworks emphasizing holistic development while addressing the real gap between what research recommends and what teachers actually practice.

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