

Exploring Preschool Teachers' Knowledge in Managing Students with Learning Disabilities (SLD)

Roza Erma Changze, Syar Meeze Mohd Rashid

Faculty of Education, National University of Malaysia (UKM)

Corresponding Author Email: cikgumeeze@ukm.edu.my

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Abstract

According to the 2023 Special Education Data, 1,430 students with learning disabilities (SLD) are enrolled in preschools (Special Education Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2023). These students face challenges in reading, writing, arithmetic, or other learning processes. Preschool teachers with low knowledge levels will face significant challenges in educating and managing SLD. This research aims to explore the knowledge of preschool teachers in managing SLD in Johor. A purposive sampling method was employed, selecting eight preschool teachers in Johor as participants. Face-to-face interviews were run to gather data, which were then investigated in-depth using a qualitative case study approach. The semi-structured interview data were recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis revealed that the knowledge level of preschool teachers in managing SLD was moderate. Three evaluators were involved in reviewing and examining the constructed protocol questions, and the participants were asked to review the study data to ensure accurate interpretations and validate the interview protocol. Implications of the study suggest that various seminars, workshops, and periodic courses ought to be organized by the Ministry of Education and school administrators to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy in managing SLD. This study shows that participant with intermediate knowledge in managing SLD still can devise effective strategies to engage students in learning, manage their behaviour, enhance sensory skills, and effectively use teaching aids tailored to the students' abilities.

Keywords: Knowledge, Preschool Teacher, Students with Special Needs, Students with Learning Disability, Early Childhood Education

Introduction

Preschool education is a formal education for children aged between four to six years and serves as preparation for primary school. Preschools in Malaysia are overseen by several agencies such as the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), the Ministry of National Unity (MNU), which manages Tabika Perpaduan, the Department of Community Development (KEMAS) that supervises Tabika KEMAS, the Federal Territories Islamic Religious Council

(MAIWP) handling MAIWP Islamic kindergartens, and the Selangor Islamic Religious Department (JAIS) overseeing JAIS preschools, alongside other private kindergartens. Generally, there are two types of preschool streams in Malaysia: mainstream preschools for typical students and Special Education preschools for children with special needs.

Like other children, students with special needs also have unique qualities and equal rights to receive early education at the preschool level. The Education Act 1996 (Act 550) has stipulated that preschool education falls under National Education. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) plays a role in providing accessibility to early learning for children aged between four and six years. In line with the provisions of the Education Act, children in this age range should be given access to preschool education regardless of their background, family socioeconomics, location, ethnicity, or race, including children with special needs.

The demand for inclusive education in preschools is growing. This aligns with the increasing number of special-needs students with learning difficulties and the rising awareness in society about the importance of early education, regardless of a child's limitations. This is consistent with the direction of education as stated in the National Education Philosophy (FPK), which aims to provide fair access to education for all Malaysian citizens to nurture a knowledgeable, confident, well-mannered, and responsible generation capable of optimizing their potential to contribute to the economic development and well-being of their families, communities, and the nation.

Students with learning difficulties are students who require special attention, tailored handling, and appropriate teaching strategies. These students often have distinct learning styles compared to typical students, as everyone has different abilities (Rozila Muda et al., 2023). They tend to take longer to grasp learning concepts compared to their peers. Therefore, teachers must possess the knowledge to implement engaging teaching and learning processes (Rowen et al., 2021). Additionally, many of these students struggle with self-management, emotions, and behaviour, requiring adult assistance and supervision to navigate daily life successfully. Their unique characteristics also limit their social interactions with peers, often leading to classroom conflicts that are challenging to manage. Student with learning difficulties (SLD) also find it hard to interact and respond to conversations with others (Nusaibah & Aliza, 2020).

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that Students with learning difficulties have the potential to improve themselves and achieve good academic performance. According to research by Saiful Azam Khoo Abdullah (2020), early education in Malaysia, especially at the preschool level, is a significant contributor to the development of students before transitioning to primary school. At this stage, students begin to engage in learning activities, play, exploration, and social interaction, preparing them for the next phase of education. Therefore, with the increasing number of SLD in preschools, preschool teachers must play a role in supporting and assisting their development to help them achieve their full potential. Furthermore, teaching is not merely about imparting knowledge but also shaping individuals holistically, encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects, as advocated by the National Education Philosophy. Teachers are pivotal in nurturing future generations who excel not only academically but also possess noble character, integrity, and commendable personal qualities. The knowledge a teacher possesses reflects their excellence. Teacher

quality is crucial as it serves as a benchmark for student achievement, as highlighted in the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025 under Shift 4, which focuses on system transformation.

Prepared teachers find joy in conducting smooth PdP sessions with active student participation. Conversely, unprepared teachers may face emotional challenges. This is supported by research by Seligie Lajan and Ruhizan (2022), which states that compassionate teaching practices create a calm and comfortable classroom environment which The Love Pedagogy approach emphasizes excellence among students through loving and caring interactions during PdP. Teachers who lack skills, sufficient training, or time constraints may feel frustrated if activities are not executed effectively. Similarly, prepared teachers who fail to implement PdP plans due to a lack of resources or support may experience decreased motivation. This aligns with Thorndike's (1921) Law of Readiness, which states that when an individual is prepared to perform an action and does so, it results in satisfaction; conversely, unprepared individuals or those unable to act despite readiness experience discomfort.

Preschool teachers must equip themselves with knowledge and skills to conduct effective teaching. Nusaibah and Aliza (2020) support this by emphasizing that teachers' understanding of MBPK learning difficulties is crucial for conducting efficient classroom PdP. However, many preschool teachers still face challenges in managing MBPK with learning difficulties, which somewhat lowers their motivation. Additionally, the implementation of inclusive education at the preschool level is still not widespread, limiting teachers' opportunities to prepare adequately in terms of knowledge and skills when dealing with MBPK learning difficulties.

Prepared and knowledgeable teachers handling SLD positively influence classroom management and student outcomes. Teachers are central to the success of PdP, where their knowledge significantly impacts a student's holistic development and serves as a model influencing values, attitudes, and behaviour (Nusaibah & Aliza, 2020). Teachers are also more motivated when teaching strategies yield positive results, such as noticeable improvements in student development. Conversely, a lack of support or increasing workload can diminish teachers' motivation and enthusiasm for teaching.

According to Mohd Ikhlas (2024), teachers' interest and positive attitudes can be enhanced through administrative support. A collaborative school environment strengthens professional relationships and helps reduce workloads, enabling responsibilities to be shared. This close collaboration allows teachers to be more prepared and motivated to deliver effective teaching. Arzizul and Dg Norizah (2018) emphasize the importance of prioritizing teachers' skills, knowledge, and spirit to contribute to student achievement and talent development. Guided by Thorndike's Law of Effect, actions that result in individual satisfaction are likely to be repeated, while unsatisfying actions are abandoned (Thorndike, 1921).

Teachers' active involvement and deep subject knowledge ignite students' interest and motivation to learn, solidifying teachers' role as the cornerstone of school learning success. Preschool teachers with training and ongoing professional development are more competent and confident in managing SLD. Research by Yusof and Ismail (2020) states that

well-prepared preschool teachers possess high levels of knowledge and competence. When teachers are equipped with knowledge, skills, and teaching aids, the teaching process becomes a fulfilling experience. Teachers must be skilled in managing students' behaviour to encourage independent thinking and acceptance of individual differences. Furthermore, teachers must possess knowledge and abilities to manage students with special needs behaviour ethically, guided by relevant beliefs and theories of behaviour (Anis Shahirah & Suziyani, 2019). Therefore, this study aims to explore preschool teachers' knowledge in managing SLD.

Literature Review

Preschool Education

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE) launched the Preschool Education Program, also known as the annex preschool, in 1992. This pilot project was initiated following the Cabinet's approval on December 18, 1991, which agreed to establish approximately 1,070 preschools. Consequently, preschool education was integrated into the National Education System through the Education Act 1996 (Act 550). In 2002, the MOE's Preschool Program began to expand with the gradual establishment of preschool classes in primary schools nationwide. In line with the Preschool Education Policy, the MOE plays a pivotal role in providing formal education for children aged four to six years.

Additionally, the Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), the Department of Community Development (KEMAS), and the private sector also offer preschool education. In 2003, the MOE, through the Special Education Division (BPKhas), launched the Preschool Education Program, which included three inclusive classes in Selangor, Pahang, and Kedah. This initiative aimed to meet the needs of Special Education Preschools (Guidelines for Preschool Management, 2018). According to Saiful Azam Khoo Abdullah (2020), early education at the preschool level significantly contributes to the development of students with special needs before they transition to primary school. At this stage, children are introduced to learning activities, play, exploration, and socialization before progressing to the next educational phase. Therefore, teachers must provide an optimal learning environment that offers positive experiences for students.

Preschool education serves as the first schooling experience for children before entering formal schooling. An enjoyable and effective schooling experience helps children acquire skills, boost confidence, and develop positive behaviour as preparation for formal schooling (Rosmah & Mariani, 2020). The primary aim of preschool education is to holistically develop the abilities of children aged four to six years.

Preschool administrators must utilize the National Preschool Curriculum Standard (KSPK) as the primary guideline, including the Special Education Preschool Curriculum (KSPK Pendidikan Khas), which is tailored to the developmental needs and learning theories of students with special needs. It comprises six core foundations: interaction skills, religious values, behaviour and humanity, physical development and creativity, technology and science, as well as self-reliance. Preschool teachers are required to refer to this curriculum to implement effective teaching and learning (T&L) practices.

The Special Education National Preschool Curriculum Standard (KSPKPK) for students with learning disabilities aims to holistically enhance students' strengths in physical, mental, spiritual, intellectual, and interactive aspects through a conducive learning environment and engaging, beneficial classroom activities (MOE, 2017). The Standard Curriculum and Assessment Document (DSKP) for Special Education Preschool is the main reference for teachers (MOE, 2017). It ensures that all Malaysian children, regardless of background, receive opportunities for preschool education.

The increase in students with learning disabilities in preschools aligns with the rising awareness among parents about the importance of early education. However, many parents may not realize their child has learning disabilities. Therefore, preschool teachers must be prepared to identify students with these characteristics. The study by Nusaibah and Aliza (2020) emphasizes that teachers' understanding of the traits of students with learning disabilities is crucial for implementing effective T&L practices. Teachers face challenges in managing classrooms without knowledge of these traits.

Learning disabilities refer to conditions where students face difficulties in understanding and retaining information, leading to delays in reading, writing, and arithmetic (Manisah & Norizza, 2016). Teachers need to employ teaching methods and techniques that suit the cognitive abilities of students, including questioning techniques and teaching aids. This approach can encourage students to actively engage in learning (Hashimah Hussein et al., 2020).

According to the study by Mohamad Taha Abol and Zaimuariffudin Shukri Nordin (2023), the categories of learning disabilities involve core psychological elements that affect information or language processing, such as communication and writing. Students with learning disabilities also face emotional and behavioural challenges. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1990) defines learning disabilities as dysfunctions in the central nervous system, impacting hearing, speech, reading, and mathematical problem-solving skills. Teachers must be prepared to address these challenges to ensure that students do not fall behind in education.

Preschool Teachers' Knowledge in Managing Students with Learning Disabilities

Preschool teachers hold significant importance in the early development of children. Zil Afiqah and Suziyani (2021) assert that teachers' teaching methods influence various aspects of children's development, including physical, brain development, communication skills, mental health, and language domains. Preschool teachers must possess knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes to manage students with learning disabilities. Teachers' preparedness encompasses knowledge, interest, behaviour, and abilities (Nur Hawa & Ghazali, 2018).

Managing students with learning disabilities is a challenging task as they require extra attention in behaviour and self-management. Teachers need to be mentally, physically, and professionally prepared. The study by Boset and Asmawi (2020) indicates that highly motivated teachers exhibit greater confidence and positivity in performing their duties. Understanding the characteristics of learning disabilities enables teachers to manage students effectively, using engaging and appropriate teaching aids to stimulate student communication (Nusaibah & Aliza, 2020).

Teachers unaware of the traits of students with learning disabilities may overlook their needs, resulting in less effective learning (Sari Rudiwati et al., 2017). In special education, various methods, tools, and programs are available to meet the needs of these students. Competent and capable teachers are essential to ensure that students with learning disabilities become proactive and independent individuals (Hanan Aqilah Amran, Rosadah Abd Majid & Manisah Mohd Ali, 2019).

The increasing number of students with learning disabilities poses challenges to the teaching profession in special education. Teachers must provide support in terms of comfort and safety for students, requiring high levels of patience and professionalism. Preschool teachers also play a significant role in managing students' behaviour, employing psychological elements to shape students' positive attitudes (Hezlie Noorshyam, 2022).

The challenges faced by teachers include academic aspects, health, safety, hygiene, students' independence, the use of learning aids, and suitable classroom facilities. Therefore, preschool teachers must be prepared to manage these challenges effectively to ensure that every student receives equitable and meaningful educational opportunities.

Methodology

Research Design

A research design is a framework that provides a comprehensive strategy for implementing a specific study (Sabitha, 2006). This study employs a qualitative approach using a case study design involving a "Single Case, Multiple Sites" approach to explore the knowledge of preschool teachers in managing Students with Learning Disabilities (SLD). This qualitative study adopts a single case study across multiple locations (Merriam, 2009). Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with each preschool teacher to gain insights into their perspectives and experiences in managing SLD students.

Population and Sampling

This qualitative study was conducted in Johor. A purposive sampling method was used as it could provide relevant information for the study (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2009) states that purposive sampling involves selecting participants who can offer the best insights to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon being analysed.

The purposive sampling comprised eight selected preschool teachers. Kuzel (1992) recommended 6–8 interviews for homogeneous samples and 12–20 for diverse samples to achieve maximum variation or contradictory evidence. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (i) having at least two years of teaching experience, (ii) teaching both typical students and those with learning disabilities, and (iii) being willing and available for interviews. Patton (2002) noted 16 types of purposive sampling, and participants were selected according to characteristics aligned with the study objectives.

Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were adapted from two previous studies on SLD which is from Siti Jamilah et al. (2021) and Nurulshima and Khairul Farha (2023). The interview sessions began with general questions and progressed to specific questions about teachers' experiences, strategies, and challenges in managing SLD students.

The interview guide consisted of three sections. The first section contained general questions to obtain demographic information such as gender, age, and teaching experience in preschools, along with the number of students in the class and the number of SLD students. The second section addressed the study's objectives, including teachers' experiences and training to enhance their knowledge in managing SLD students. The final section involved reflective or suggestive questions to improve teachers' knowledge in managing SLD students.

Data Collection Procedures

The interviewer conducted the interviews following a structured protocol. Information provided by participants was treated as essential data for this study. In-depth interviews involved multiple meetings between the interviewer and participants to delve deeply into their lives, backgrounds, or interactions based on their perspectives (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

The researcher initiated each session by introducing herself, explaining the purpose of the interview, and informing participants that the interview would be recorded for data collection, which would later be compiled into a full report. Semi-structured interview questions were used to ensure a detailed exploration of preschool teachers' knowledge in managing SLD students.

Interviews were recorded using an MP4 recorder to ensure high-quality data preservation for analysis. This allowed the researcher to revisit the recordings and review any errors during questioning. Notes were also taken during interviews, and detailed documentation was made post-interview to capture as much information as possible (Merriam, 2009). These methods ensured accurate and thorough data analysis.

Data Analysis Procedure

In qualitative research, data analysis is conducted simultaneously with data collection and after all data is gathered. Recorded interviews were transcribed into documents, which included listening to the recordings, taking notes, reading, marking, and categorizing data according to themes. This study utilized thematic analysis involving identifying data, initial coding, finding, reviewing and naming topics or themes and writing the report. Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework involves six essential steps: gaining a deep understanding of the data, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, and naming and defining the themes. and preparing the final report.

Thematic analysis was used to structure and categorize the data into meaningful categories to address the research questions. The process started with data analysis, followed by coding and concluding with organizing and presenting findings visually through matrices, tables, diagrams, mind maps, flow charts, or figures (Rahimah Embong et al., 2018). Participants' real names were anonymized, with codes like R1 for the first participant and R2 for the second, continuing through R8 for all locations.

The research notes were collected using two methods: (1) written notes with dates and times of interviews recorded in a notebook and (2) voice recordings where the researcher began each recording by stating the date and time. These notes served as references to capture the overall picture of the research locations.

After completing interviews at a location, the researcher transcribed all recorded data using Microsoft Word. Recorded data was repeatedly reviewed to ensure complete transcription. Initial coding was then performed to analyze the interview transcripts. Once all data was transcribed, the researcher began creating codes (Talib Othman, 2019). Themes were identified and carefully read to organize and classify data according to the themes. Finally, the findings were presented in the results section.

Validity and Reliability of Data

Item validity was ensured by a professional evaluator who reviewed the suitability of the interview framework and observations (Richey, Klein & Nelson, 2007). Three evaluators, including two Malay language teachers and a principal of a private kindergarten with a postgraduate degree in early childhood education, assessed the interview protocol. They unanimously agreed on the questions, with one evaluator suggesting improvements in sentence structure for clarity and alignment with the study objectives. Once validated, data collection commenced in July 2024.

Merriam (1995) suggested that member checking is a strategy to enhance validity and reliability by asking participants to review the data to ensure the researcher's interpretations are accurate. After transcribing all recordings, participants were given copies to verify the interview content. They were allowed to make corrections if needed and sign the transcript copies. This process enhanced the study's validity and reliability.

Research Findings

Demographics of Study Participants

The researcher conducted interviews with eight preschool teachers, with four from private kindergartens and the other four from preschools under the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE). All participants were female teachers aged between 30 and 40 years old, residing in Johor. Three participants had less than 10 years of teaching practice, whereas the others had between 10 and 21 years of teaching practice. Table 1 presents the demographic details of the study participants, encompassing gender, age, profession, teaching experience, and the number of students with learning disabilities (SLD) in their classrooms.

Table 1
Demographics of Study Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Type of Employment	Experience	Numbers of SLD
R1	Female	25	Government Preschool	2 years	1
R2	Female	44	Government Preschool	17 years	1
R3	Female	44	Government Preschool	17 years	2
R4	Female	43	Government Preschool	15 years	7
R5	Female	40	Private Kindergarten	21 years	2
R6	Female	32	Private Kindergarten	13 years	1
R7	Female	34	Private Kindergarten	4 years	4
R8	Female	34	Private Kindergarten	8 years	2

Preschool Teachers' Knowledge in Managing SLD in Preschools

The in-depth interviews with eight participants revealed their participation in courses and training related to managing SLD, as well as their methods and the benefits derived from such programs.

Courses attended by participants

R1, R2, R3, R4, and R8 stated that the courses they attended related to managing SLD were organized by the State Education Department (SED). For example, R1 stated:

"This year, I attended a course under the Preschool Developmental Assessment and Intervention Program (ProsPIM) organized by the SED..." (R1).

Further analysis showed that R5, R6, and R7 had not attended formal courses on managing SLD. Instead, they gained guidance from Occupational Therapists (OT), child development experts, and reading instructors. For instance, R6 and R7 shared:

"There were insights shared by Ms. Liyana Raya, an occupational therapist, on managing SLD classes. I also attended sessions by Teacher Ina, who introduced nature play as a strategy to aid children's development..." (R6).

"I haven't attended any formal courses on managing SLD, but I had the opportunity to learn from my employer, who is knowledgeable about handling classes using phonics reading techniques..." (R7).

Methods for Managing SLD

The study identified five methods used to manage SLD, which include early detection, student-centred teaching methods, use of engaging teaching aids (TAs), outdoor learning activities, and collaboration with experts and parents. Examples from R2 and R6 include:

"I conduct early detection tests for students who have not yet been officially diagnosed by medical officers. Subsequently, I implement activities suited to the student's condition or challenges..." (R2).

"I provide exposure to nature to stimulate brain development. Activities include grounding, outdoor learning, communication with peers, and interaction based on the child's understanding. I also carry out student-centred learning and collaborate with professionals and parents..." (R6).

Benefits of Courses and Training Attended

R1, R3, R5, R6, and R8 shared the benefits and outcomes of the training or courses they attended. These included the use of checklists from ProsPIM, intervention kit modules, and insights from occupational therapists and early childhood education experts. Statements from R1 and R6 include:

"I use the checklist provided during the ProsPIM workshop. It has been very helpful in identifying learning issues among preschoolers..." (R1).

"Through Teacher Ina, I learned that children need to be exposed to nature. Additionally, they must undergo physical developmental processes first before they are ready to learn, as explained by the Pyramid of Learning theory by Williams and Shellenberger..." (R6).

Discussion

Based on the information obtained from the interviews, it was found that preschool teachers have knowledge in managing students with learning disabilities (SLD). Most of the study participants stated that they have attended several courses related to managing SLD, such as ProsPIM, courses with occupational therapists, and experts in early childhood education. The courses involving preschool teachers in national schools were provided by the higher authorities, while those for teachers in private kindergartens were provided by the respective kindergarten administrators. According to Exco of Education and Human Capital, Dato' Ismail Lasim, ProsPIM is a program that helps kindergarten or preschool teachers in implementing early detection and appropriate interventions as early as possible to assist preschool children in overcoming their limitations (Negerikita, 2024). This indicates that the authorities are attentive to the need for improving the skills and knowledge of preschool teachers in managing SLD.

Creative differentiated teaching, student-centred teaching, the use of engaging teaching aids such as sensory tools, colorful flashcards, physical activities, outdoor learning, and collaboration with experts and parents have been applied by the study participants to facilitate the management of SLD in the classroom. Teachers also adjust strategies according to students' interests and abilities, such as providing simple activities based on students' learning styles (kinesthetic, auditory, and visual), one-to-one teaching for better understanding, using simple language, and conducting repetition to reinforce comprehension. Cretu and Morandau (2020) state that teachers should have knowledge in managing the diverse abilities of students, as these students require special academic attention and have limitations.

Courses such as the Preschool Student Development Screening and Intervention Program (ProsPIM) and workshops organized by the State Education Department have

become the main platform for teachers to learn the best early detection methods and appropriate interventions. Additionally, some participants gained exposure through expert sharing, such as from Occupational Therapists or other early childhood education experts. Although not all participants have attended formal courses, they have benefited from work experience, guidance from employers, or colleagues. This is supported by the study of Nur Haziqah and Suziyani (2024), which states that it is crucial for preschool teachers to understand SLD, as they are responsible for implementing teaching and learning (T&L) in the classroom. When teachers possess comprehensive knowledge, T&L can be implemented according to the abilities and potential of SLD.

Overall, the courses and training attended had a positive impact, including improving skills in detecting learning issues, managing the behavior of SLD, and implementing more suitable learning activities. These initiatives also help increase teachers' efficiency in ensuring that SLD receive the necessary support for optimal development. However, the frequency of these courses and training should be increased to allow teachers opportunities to continuously update and enhance their knowledge in managing SLD.

Conclusion

This study highlights the knowledge of preschool teachers in managing students with learning disabilities (SLD). Findings show that while most teachers have attended relevant courses and training provided by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) or their school administrators, continuous professional development is still necessary to strengthen their understanding in managing SLD. Teachers have demonstrated various methods, including separated instruction, experiential learning, and individualized approaches tailored to students' abilities. These strategies help SLD students adapt and overcome learning challenges more effectively.

The motivation behind this study stems from the increasing need to ensure that preschool teachers are sufficiently prepared to support SLD students. As early childhood education plays a critical role in shaping a child's learning foundation, it is essential for teachers to have sufficient knowledge and skills to provide inclusive and effective learning experiences. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by identifying gaps in teacher training and highlighting the importance of continuous professional development. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, school administrators, and educators in designing more comprehensive training programs that empower teachers to manage SLD students effectively.

With adequate support from relevant authorities and school administrators, it is hoped that more structured and continuous training programs will be developed. This will not only enhance the quality of early childhood education but also ensure that SLD students receive the necessary interventions and support for their optimal development. Ultimately, equipping teachers with the right knowledge and strategies will foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all preschool students.

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