



**CHALLENGING BEHAVIOURS EXHIBITED BY LEARNERS  
WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES AND THEIR IMPLICATION  
ON EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN SELECTED  
SPECIAL SCHOOLS IN KITUI COUNTY, KENYA**

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**Abstract:**

Intellectual disability (ID), once called mental retardation, is commonly diagnosed before 18 years of age. It is characterized by below-average intelligence or mental ability, as well as a lack of life skills necessary for daily living. Individuals with intellectual disability have limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviors. These limitations range from two or more standard deviations in intelligence (IQ of 70 to 75 or less) with coexisting deficiencies in two or more of the ten adaptive skills, such as communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work. Intellectual disability is a cognitive impairment categorized into four types, showing wide variation in the degree of impairment. The four types are: mild (IQ 50 to 70), moderate (IQ 35 to 49), severe (IQ 20 to 34) and profound (IQ less than 20) intellectual disabilities. The main objective of this research was to establish the types of challenging behaviours exhibited by learners with intellectual disabilities in selected special schools in Kitui County. Respondents were selected using stratified and simple random sampling techniques. The main tools of data collection were an interview schedule. The common challenging behaviours they exhibit were found to include: agitation, aggression, self-injury, disruption, distraction and destruction, inappropriate sexual mannerism, vandalism, impulsivity, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, truancy, tardiness, and social-emotional behaviors. They also exhibited difficulty following directions and not paying attention, which interferes with learning.

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This negatively affects their academic participation and learning in general. The intervention strategies recommended include the development and application of research-based behavior intervention strategies. It is also necessary to enhance in-service professional development training for teachers. Further, it is important to have teamwork and collaboration. Finally, inclusive education is recommended so that typically developing peers can mentor behavior to learners with intellectual disability.

**Keywords:** intellectual disability, mild intellectual disability, intellectual functioning, adaptive behaviours, cognitive impairment, challenging behaviour, special schools

## 1. Introduction

Intellectual disability (ID), once referred to as mental retardation, is characterized by below-average intelligence or mental ability and a lack of skills necessary for day-to-day living. Individuals with ID have limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviors (Byrd, 2025). This disability is normally identified before the age of 18 (AAIDD, 2018). The American association on mental retardation's (AAMR's) 1992 definition of intellectual disability specifies limitations of two or more standard deviations in intelligence (IQ of 70 to 75 or less) with coexisting deficiencies in two or more of ten adaptive skills, inclusive communication, self-care, home living, social skills, community use, self-direction, health and safety, functional academics, leisure, and work (Shree & Shukla, 2025).

It was in 2008 that the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) began recommending the term "*intellectual disability instead of "mental retardation"*" (Tasse *et al.*, 2025). It is a cognitive impairment categorized into four, namely: mild (IQ 50 to 70), moderate (IQ 35 to 49), severe (IQ 20 to 34) and profound (IQ less than 20) intellectual disabilities; hence, the degree of impairment from an intellectual disability varies widely (Gluck, 2016).

Scientific attempts to educate children with intellectual disabilities originated in the efforts of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, who dedicated five-years to train and educate a boy who had been found running wild in the woods of Aveyron, and whose work with the boy became notable for the possibilities it raised regarding the education of persons with mental or emotional disabilities (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). In the past, it was believed that intellectual disability was static and, therefore, nothing could be done to improve the condition of the affected individuals. In this case, educating individuals with intellectual disabilities was considered a waste of time and services. However, hitherto research has shown that the functionality of all people can be improved (Chomba *et al.*, 2015).

In a neighboring Uganda, special education has undergone recommendable development since 1988; because a mission funded by UNESCO undertook its participation program from 1986-1987, and found out that there were eight schools,

homes and units for intellectual disability, with an enrollment of 143 pupils; and as well observed that only two specially trained teachers were in this area and 24 regular ones (Karugu, 1988). Learners with ID in Kenya are educated with students without disabilities in regular schools; those with moderate to severe forms of ID are educated mainly in special units in regular education schools, special schools and residential settings (Kiarie, 2006).

Teaching learners with intellectual disabilities can be difficult due to the commonly exhibited challenging behaviors. Significant time is lost managing behavior rather than providing instructions, which negatively affects learning. Common challenging behaviors exhibited by learners with MID include: agitation, aggression, self-injurious behavior, distraction, inappropriate sexual mannerism, vandalism, impulsivity, temper tantrums, hyperactivity, truancy, tardiness, and social-emotional behaviors (Belanger, 2012). Participation is important to human dignity, and it refers to the act of taking part in the activities of a group (UNESCO, 2004). Academic participation is equated with discussion, which typically involves lengthy conversation with the whole class and short exchanges between instructors and students, or within small groups of students (University of Waterloo, 2018). For classroom practices, academic participation refers to the learner actively taking part in the learning activities in class, which includes answering and posing questions, doing assignments, participating in group activities and being able to seek help when faced with difficulty (Mnyanyi, 2010).

Academic participation relates to classroom participation. Classroom participation is otherwise referred to as ideal class discussion. The "*ideal class discussion*" is one in which all students are participating, learning and listening to others' ideas, comments, and questions (Mahdikhani *et al.*, 2015). Active participation of students and teachers is key to effective classroom management and helps initiate learners into innovative ways to engage in classroom activities (Chaitanya, 2023).

## 2. Brief Literature Review

Below is a brief literature review on challenging behaviours exhibited by learners with ID.

### 2.1 The Types of Challenging Behaviours Exhibited by Learners with Mild Intellectual Disabilities

Challenging behaviour is behaviour of such an intensity, frequency or duration to threaten the quality of life and/or the physical safety of an individual or others. They include verbal, physical aggression and self-injurious behavior (Amanda *et al.*, 2013). It is a deviation from the conduct that is appropriate for a specific age (Kirk *et al.*, 2003). It ranges from acts of aggression to difficulty following directions or paying attention (Kaiser & Rasinsky, 2010). Irish national teachers' organization research found that a perusal of the behaviour records of most primary schools provides aggressive,

threatening, disruptive, running away and destructive behaviour (Carr & Chearra, 2004). Challenging behaviors (CBs) among children with intellectual disabilities (ID), such as stereotyped behaviour (stereotypy) and self-injurious behaviour (SIB), are widespread, dangerous, progressive in nature, and can interfere significantly with an individual's quality of life (Medeiros, 2015). Research on behavioral disorders in multiple handicapped Egyptian children found that the prevalence of emotional and behavioural problems in handicapped children with intellectual disability (ID) is higher than that in the general child population (Elhamid *et al.*, 2008). Significant behavioral problems occur co-morbidly among children with intellectual disability, negatively impacting educational learning and other areas of functioning (Bakare, 2010).

Many learners with ID exhibit disruptive behaviors. A disruptive behavior implies learner behaviour that inhibits the achievement of the teacher's purposes. It could interfere with the teaching and learning activities, interfere with the rights of other learners to learn, or behaviour that destroys property in the classroom (Marais & Meier, 2010).

A study conducted in Uganda about behaviour modification found that common behaviour patterns among young girls and boys involve stealing, truancy, disobedience and insubordination, lying, lateness, rudeness, destructiveness, sex offences/harassment and cruelty (Guez & Allen, 2000). This research aims to investigate the challenging behaviours exhibited by learners with Intellectual disabilities in Kitui County, Kenya.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This is mixed-method research that adopted a descriptive research design. A research design is the conceptual structure within which research is conducted. It provides a collection of relevant evidence with minimal expenditure of effort, time and money (Orodho *et al.*, 2016). The design involves examining people who differ on a single key characteristic at a specific point in time or over a short period. Data are collected simultaneously from people who are similar on other characteristics but differ on a key factor of interest, such as behaviour (Kendra, 2019).

#### **3.1 Location of the Study**

The study was carried out in selected special schools in Kitui County. These schools are located in Mwingi West Sub-County, Kitui Central Sub-County and Mwingi Central Sub-County.

#### **3.2 Sampling Techniques**

The study employed purposive, stratified and simple random sampling techniques. In the purposive sampling technique, the investigator relies on his/her expertise or expert judgment to select units that are representative of the population (Orodho *et al.*, 2016). The technique was used to pick three head teachers from the three selected schools.

The stratified sampling technique selects samples in such a way that subgroups in the population will be represented (Nzabalirwa *et al.*, 2016). The population is divided into several subgroups or strata. The researcher then selects the final subjects proportionally from the different strata (Blakstad, 2017). For the students, a stratified sampling technique was used for various classes. The simple random sampling technique is a procedure in which all individuals in the population have an equal and independent chance of being selected. Samples yield data that can be generalized to a larger target population (Orodho *et al.*, 2016). It was used to select 35 teachers, 7 from A, 17 from B, and 11 from C special schools for intellectual disability. The stratified sampling technique was used to select 19 pupils from A, 24 from B, and 28 from C Special Schools. This makes a total of 71 pupils' respondents for the sample size. Learners with ID were identified using standardized tests. Therefore, the instruments which were used for this purpose are the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Second Edition (WIAT-III) and AAMR Adaptive Behaviour Scale-School: Second Edition (Abs-s:2).

### **3.3 Research Instruments**

The main tools of data collection were questionnaires and an interview schedule.

#### **3.3.1 Questionnaire**

A questionnaire collects data over a large sample and saves time (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). They gather data while allowing measurement against a particular viewpoint (Orodho, *et al.*, 2016). Questionnaires can be given to a large number of people at the same time (Creswell, 2005). This is why it was preferred.

#### **3.3.2 Interview Schedule**

An interview schedule is a set of questions a researcher asks when interviewing respondents. It makes it possible to obtain the data required to meet specific objectives of the study (Orodho *et al.*, 2016). An interview can produce in-depth data not possible with a questionnaire, and the reason for a particular response can be determined (Cohen *et al.*, 2001).

#### **3.3.3 Standardized Test of Intelligence and Adaptive Behaviour Checklist**

Learners with MID were identified using standardized tests of intelligence and direct assessment, structured observations to confirm significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, as expressed through conceptual, practical and social skills Standardized test has a number of important social applications for the classification, selection, evaluation and diagnosis of persons (Orodho & Nzabalirwa, 2016).

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

As noted earlier, this research aimed at establishing the types of challenging behaviours exhibited by learners with mild intellectual disabilities in selected special schools in Kitui County.

##### 4.1 Challenging Behaviours Exhibited by Learners with Intellectual Disabilities

Teachers were presented with a 5-point Likert scale to give their perceptions on challenging behaviors exhibited by learners with intellectual disabilities. The scale ranged from 1 to 5, with one representing strongly disagree, two denoting disagree, three representing undecided, four agree and five strongly agree. The scale had a midpoint score of 3. Any score above 3 indicated that the respondent agreed with the statement, while scores below 3 signified that the respondent disagreed with the statement (Wanjohi & Syokau, 2021). Quantitative data were collected and analyzed using SPSS Software. The table below represents the means and standard deviations obtained from the analysis.

**Table 1:** Challenging behaviours exhibited by learners with mild intellectual disabilities

Children with intellectual disability...	SA		A		UD		D		SD		Mean	Std. Dev.
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Exhibit varied challenging behaviour trends	16	59.3	10	37.0	1	3.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	4.556	.577
Score lower in tests than 'normal' peers due to behaviour challenges	15	55.6	8	29.6	0	0.0	4	14.8	0	0.0	4.259	1.060
Display behaviour challenges during learning	13	48.1	11	40.7	0	0.0	3	11.1	0	0.0	4.259	.944
Display socially inappropriate behaviours	8	29.6	16	59.3	0	0.0	3	11.1	0	0.0	4.07	.874
Social adjustment difficulty	6	22.2	18	66.7	0	0.0	3	11.1	0	0.0	4.00	.832
Unable to obey rules and regulations during lessons due to	8	29.6	12	44.4	1	3.7	5	18.5	1	3.7	3.778	1.188
Use their challenging behaviours to reduce productivity to avoid following classroom instructions.	5	18.5	15	55.6	2	7.4	5	18.5	0	0.0	3.741	.984
Difficulties adjusting to change due to behaviour challenge.	6	22.2	14	51.9	1	3.7	6	22.2	0	0.0	3.741	1.060
Exhibit socio-emotional problems	7	25.9	12	44.4	1	3.7	6	22.2	1	3.7	3.667	1.209
Disrupt teachers and peers during the lesson proceeding	5	18.5	12	44.4	0	0.0	7	25.9	3	11.1	3.333	1.359
Prefer being alone and may not cooperate in a teamwork	1	3.7	15	55.6	0	0.0	9	33.3	2	7.4	3.148	1.167

**Key:** SA-Strongly Agree; A-Agree; UD-Undecided; D-Disagree; SA-Strongly Disagree

As shown above, the mean scores obtained on the teacher responses ranged between 4.556 and 3.148. The highest ranked statements were that children with intellectual

disability exhibit varied challenging behaviour trends in their learning process in the classroom (4.556). The lowest ranked statements were children with intellectual disability prefer being alone and may not cooperate in teamwork during classroom learning proceedings (3.148); and have trouble with teachers and peers during lesson proceedings due to behaviour challenges they exhibit (3.333). The results show that the majority of the teachers were aware that learners with intellectual disability exhibit challenging behaviours which interfere with their learning, and that of others.

All children may experience attention problems at times; however, children with intellectual disability are more likely to demonstrate short attention span, short-term memory problems, and difficulty with motivation and distractibility (Murray & Zoe, 2020). A significant challenge faced by children with intellectual disability is the difficulty of paying attention to classroom instruction long enough to acquire the information they need to effectively participate in learning activities (Udeme *et al.*, 2021). Further, learners with intellectual disability are at increased risk for emotional and behavioural problems (Katarina *et al.*, 2012).

From the table above, the majority of the learners with intellectual disabilities had short attention spans and unpredictable social-emotional behaviour, associated with limitations in intellectual functioning (Loveless, 2020). This significantly affects learning, with a lot of time being wasted managing behaviors to the expense of teaching.

Qualitative data were collected from head teachers through interviews. Below are relevant extracts from their responses.

*"Needless to say, the majority of learners can be verbally aggressive, while others are physically aggressive. We waste a lot of time managing the behaviour at the expense of teaching. Teachers complain of teacher 'burn out' out of this. There is also a disconnect between school and home as far as behavior management is concerned. Collaboration is missing." (Headteacher 1)*

*"My teachers have been complaining that some learners portray 'out of seat' behavior and are at times disruptive to peers and to the teachers. They have to be occasionally redirected by the teacher, both verbally and physically. This significantly affects learning. Some of my teachers are not trained on how to teach learners with intellectual disabilities. They need in-service training. This is quite a concern that needs urgent intervention". (Headteacher 2)*

*"Apart from the cognitive domain challenges, these children are typical in other areas. They are adolescents with great sexual related changes. Many exhibit inappropriate sex mannerisms in class. This is a challenge, especially in our African culture. Some parents are ashamed of discussing sexual mannerisms with teachers. Collaboration is affected. There is a disconnect between home and school." (Headteacher 3)*

Looking at the above responses, there is clear corroboration between quantitative data and qualitative responses from the interviews. One of the challenging behaviours includes verbal and physical aggression. This aggression could be directed at other students or at teachers as well. Research indicates that 10 % of learners with intellectual disabilities exhibit challenging, aggressive behaviors due to unmet needs and communication difficulties (Royston *et al.*, 2023). Due to co-occurring psychopathology, the learners have a high chance of aggression. It is quite a concern that, according to research, there is a lack of structured clinical assessment for this population, including where and when this behavior is likely to be exhibited (Bogaard *et al.*, 2017). Sadly, a literature review by Bodryzlova *et al.* (2025) shows that in recent years, research in this area has greatly reduced. Not much attention is being given to it despite its significant negative effect on the education of learners with intellectual disabilities.

Another challenging behaviour found in this research includes inappropriate sexual mannerisms. Research indicates that individuals with Intellectual Disability have similar sexual needs and experiences as their typically developing peers. In fact, they have a bigger risk of risky sexual behavior because they lack understanding of sexuality (Chamidah, 2021). On top of that, it affects learning and teaching, especially because many teachers and parents are not comfortable discussing the topic with students. Precisely, learners with intellectual disabilities are not provided with appropriate information to be able to understand their own bodies and sexuality. They are commonly discouraged or even reprimanded for attempting to express themselves sexually. Due to this, sexual abuses owing to low sexual assertiveness are also highly probable (Brkik-Jovanovic, 2021).

Another challenging behaviour reported is social-emotional difficulties. Learners with ID, according to research, have difficulties in communication and emotional expression. This leads to frustration. They also have social challenges, including misrepresentation of social cues. On the same note, they have higher chances of developing anxiety, depression and low self-esteem compared to typically developing peers. Forming peer relationships is equally difficult (Badawy, 2024). Challenges with emotions and peer relationships affect the way these learners participate in the classroom. Some teaching strategies require working in groups, including cooperative learning. Learners with Intellectual challenges usually have a challenge with the strategy. Cooperative learning enhances social acceptance of learners with intellectual disability (Wilton & Townsend, 1998). On the same note, there is a negative correlation between emotional symptoms and both academic and social self-esteem (Badaway, 2024).

Another emergent theme in this research is the wastage of time in behavior management instead of teaching. A lot of time is spent redirecting learners' behavior both physically and verbally. When this is done, there is a loss of quality teaching time. This negatively affects the education of learners with intellectual disabilities. Effective behavior management techniques ensure little time is wasted responding to disruptions from students and behavioral issues. On the same note, it emerged that some teachers are

not adequately trained to teach learners with intellectual disabilities, including addressing challenging behaviors (Lakhan, 2014). As suggested by one of the respondents, retraining is important to ameliorate the situation. Teachers also lack support from fellow teachers and parental participation. The disconnect between home and school equally worsens the situation (Chesaro, 2020).

## **5. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations**

In this research, it is evident that there exists a myriad of challenging behaviors in classes of learners with intellectual behaviors. This negatively affects academic participation and learning for learners with intellectual disability. It is necessary that teachers occasionally get retrained through structured in-service training on how to manage challenging behaviors. Collaboration should be enhanced between various stakeholders, especially between teachers and parents. Inclusive education is encouraged so that learners with intellectual disabilities can learn from typically developing behavior models. Further, it is important that the Ministry of Education ensure that teacher training institutions ensure that aspiring general education teachers and special education teachers get some basic training on how to manage challenging behaviors in both typically developing learners and those with intellectual disabilities.

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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