



Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation Challenges of Positive Reinforcement for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Junior Schools in Thika West Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract: This study examined teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement and the contextual challenges affecting its implementation for learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive junior schools in Thika West Sub-County, Kenya. Data were collected from 12 teachers using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, complemented by document analysis across four participating schools. Teachers reported strongly favourable perceptions of positive reinforcement's usefulness (overall perception mean = 4.00, SD = 0.80), most strongly agreeing that it improves classroom behaviour ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.49$) and increases learners' motivation to participate ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.51$). However, perceived adequacy of training on positive reinforcement received the lowest rating of any perception item ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.24$), and perceived institutional support was similarly modest ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 1.07$). Teachers identified large class sizes (91.7%, $M = 4.67$), inadequate training (83.3%, $M = 4.42$), and limited teaching and learning resources (75.0%, $M = 4.17$) as the most frequently and strongly reported implementation challenges. Qualitative interview evidence and document analysis corroborated and contextualised these patterns, showing that favourable attitudes toward positive reinforcement coexisted with self-reported gaps in practical training and variable school-level documentation of reinforcement practice. The findings suggest that positive teacher attitudes, while a necessary condition, are not sufficient for consistent implementation of positive reinforcement in the absence of adequate training and institutional support, an attitude-implementation gap with direct implications for teacher professional development policy in inclusive junior schools.

Keywords: teacher perceptions; implementation challenges; positive reinforcement; autism spectrum disorder; inclusive education; Kenya

How to cite this work (APA):

Kuria, C. M., Kinyua, J. N. & Njoroge, E. (2026). Teachers' Perceptions and Implementation Challenges of Positive Reinforcement for Learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Inclusive Junior Schools in Thika West Sub-County, Kenya. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 10(3), 1760 – 1768. <https://doi.org/10.59765/nvpr>

1. Introduction

Positive reinforcement is widely recognised as a useful, non-punitive behavioural-support approach for learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms. However, whether teachers actually

implement reinforcement strategies consistently depends not only on their technical knowledge of behavioural principles but also on their attitudes toward the approach and the classroom, school and family conditions within which they work. Teachers' perceptions of a behavioural intervention, their belief in its usefulness, their confidence in applying it, and their sense of institutional support are widely regarded in the literature as important, but not

sufficient, preconditions for effective implementation. This article reports empirical evidence on both dimensions of teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement and the contextual challenges they reported facing when implementing it among teachers of learners with ASD in inclusive junior schools in Thika West Sub-County, Kenya, and examines the relationship between the two.

The introduction and implementation of inclusive education in Kenya has increased the demand on teachers to respond effectively to the diverse behavioural and learning needs of learners with ASD. Positive reinforcement offers teachers a structured, evidence-based means of doing so. However, the existence of an evidence-based approach does not guarantee that teachers perceive it as usable in their own classrooms, nor that classroom, resource and institutional conditions permit its consistent application. Challenges associated with teacher preparedness, class size, resource availability, and access to specialist and administrative support may all influence whether, and how, structured reinforcement practices are implemented. Despite the recognised importance of positive reinforcement, limited empirical evidence exists in Thika West Sub-County specifically regarding teachers' perceptions of the approach and the contextual challenges affecting its implementation; a gap this article addresses.

The following research objectives guided this study:

1. To explore teachers' perceptions regarding the use of positive reinforcement strategies in managing the classroom behaviour of learners with ASD.
2. To identify the challenges teachers encounter when implementing positive reinforcement strategies for learners with ASD.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher perceptions

Teachers' perceptions influence their willingness to use behavioural support, their confidence in doing so, and the consistency of implementation. Reinforcement-based strategies are generally viewed by teachers as supportive and learner-focused rather than punitive, which may make them more readily accepted in inclusive classrooms (Schreibman et al., 2015). However, positive attitudes do not automatically translate into confident or technically consistent practice. In a systematic review of 57 studies of teachers' self-efficacy in educating autistic learners, Petersson-Bloom and Hansson (2025) found that many teachers expressed positive attitudes toward teaching learners with autism but lacked confidence in doing so

without adequate training, resources and support, and that confidence was greater where practical professional development and supportive leadership were present, although the review's reliance on self-report measures limits what it can establish about actual classroom practice. Similarly, in a systematic review of educators' attitudes toward including learners with ASD, Russell et al. (2023) found that positive attitudes alone did not ensure effective inclusive practice, particularly where resources and specialist support were scarce. Perceptions may also diverge from learners' actual needs: Esqueda Villegas et al. (2024) found that teachers tended to interpret learners' needs through their own experience and assumptions, which did not always align with learners' actual support needs, underscoring that teacher perceptions should be considered alongside, not as a substitute for, direct observational evidence.

2.2 Implementation challenges

Effective implementation of positive reinforcement requires teachers to identify appropriate target behaviours, select meaningful reinforcers, deliver them consistently, and monitor learner responses, all of which depend on adequate knowledge, time, resources and support (Mutisya, 2019). Inadequate training, limited collaboration with special-education colleagues, and resource shortages have been identified as barriers to effective inclusion for learners with ASD (Al Jaffal, 2022), a finding echoed in the Kenyan context by studies emphasising teacher readiness and training as prerequisites for individualised support (Mwaura & Kamere, 2023; Mwaura & Wambugu, 2022) and by evidence linking overcrowded classrooms, limited resources and teacher preparedness to constrained behavioural support in Kenyan inclusive classrooms (Chege & Wambui, 2023). More broadly, practitioner competence and confidence have been identified as central to the effective implementation of evidence-based behavioural practices (Dillenburger et al., 2021), while workload, institutional support and professional development have been identified as key contextual considerations shaping inclusive-education implementation more generally (Engelbrecht et al., 2021).

2.3 Research gap

While this literature establishes, separately, that teachers tend to view positive reinforcement favourably and that implementation is shaped by training, resources, class size and institutional support, few studies have examined teachers' perceptions and their reported implementation challenges together, within the same sample, in a way that allows the relationship between the two to be considered. This gap is particularly pronounced in Kenyan inclusive junior schools, where context-specific evidence on both

dimensions and on how they relate to one another has been limited. The present study addressed this gap directly.

2.4 Theoretical and conceptual grounding

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory provided the primary conceptual lens for the challenges examined in this article, conceptualising learner behaviour and teacher practice as shaped by nested, interacting environmental systems rather than by the teacher's knowledge or attitude in isolation. At the proximal level, classroom conditions (class size, available time) and teacher characteristics (training, confidence) shape what a teacher can do; at the institutional level, school leadership, administrative support, and access to specialist collaboration shape what a teacher is enabled to do; and at the family level, parental involvement and home-school consistency shape whether reinforcement is reinforced (or undermined) beyond the classroom. Applied Behaviour Analysis (Cooper et al., 2020) further frames why favourable attitudes are not, by themselves, sufficient: systematic implementation requires the practical competence to identify target behaviours, select individualised reinforcers, deliver them contingently, and monitor learner responses — competencies that depend on training and support rather than on attitude alone. Together, these frameworks underpin this article's central argument: that teachers' perceptions and the contextual conditions for implementation are conceptually distinct and must be examined as such, rather than treated as interchangeable evidence of one another.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and participants

Data relevant to this article were drawn from the 12 participating teachers (100% response rate) across four purposively selected inclusive junior schools in Thika West Sub-County, Kiambu County, Kenya (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Semi-structured interviews with teachers, four school administrators, and participating parents/caregivers provided complementary qualitative evidence, and a document-analysis checklist was applied across the four schools.

3.2 Instruments

A structured teacher questionnaire measured perceptions using a five-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree to 1 = Strongly Disagree) across six statements concerning the perceived benefit, motivational value, comparative effectiveness (versus punishment), teacher confidence, training adequacy, and institutional support for positive

reinforcement. A second set of items asked teachers to identify implementation challenges (multiple selection permitted) and to rate the extent to which each affected implementation on a five-point scale (5 = Very great extent to 1 = Not at all). Semi-structured interview guides explored teachers', administrators' and parents'/caregivers' experiences and perceptions in greater depth. A document-analysis checklist recorded the presence or absence of six categories of behaviour-support documentation (Individualised Education Plans, Behaviour Intervention Plans, behaviour-monitoring records, documented reinforcement strategies, lesson plans showing reinforcement, and learner progress reports) in each school.

3.3 Data analysis

Questionnaire data were analysed descriptively (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, and rank ordering of statements/challenges by mean score) using SPSS. Interview data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach using NVivo software. Document-analysis data were summarised using a Document Support Index (DSI), calculated per school as the number of the six document categories present divided by six, expressed as a percentage.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mount Kenya University Ethics Review Committee and a research licence from NACOSTI, with further authorisation from county/sub-county education offices and participating school heads. Written informed consent was obtained from teachers, administrators and parents/caregivers; participant identities were protected through coding (e.g., "Teacher T07," "Administrator A02," "Parent P03") rather than names.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Teachers' perceptions of positive reinforcement

All 12 teachers (100.0%) either agreed or strongly agreed that positive reinforcement improves classroom behaviour among learners with ASD ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 0.49$, ranked 1st of six statements), and all 12 similarly agreed or strongly agreed that it increases learners' motivation to participate in classroom activities ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.51$, ranked 2nd). Eleven teachers (91.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that positive reinforcement is more effective than punishment in managing learners with ASD ($M = 4.42$,

SD = 0.67, ranked 3rd), with one teacher (8.3%) neutral and none disagreeing.

Teacher confidence was rated somewhat lower: nine teachers (75.0%) agreed or strongly agreed that they felt confident using positive reinforcement strategies, two (16.7%) were neutral, and one (8.3%) disagreed (M = 3.92, SD = 0.79, ranked 4th). Perceived institutional support was more mixed: six teachers (50.0%) agreed or strongly agreed their school provided adequate support,

three (25.0%) were neutral, and three (25.0%) disagreed or strongly disagreed (M = 3.33, SD = 1.07, ranked 5th). The lowest-rated statement concerned training adequacy: only five teachers (41.7%) agreed or strongly agreed they had received adequate training on positive reinforcement, two (16.7%) were neutral, and five (41.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed (M = 3.08, SD = 1.24, ranked 6th of 6). The overall mean across all six perception statements was 4.00 (SD = 0.80).

Table 1: Teachers' Perceptions of Positive Reinforcement (n = 12), Ranked by Mean

Statement	M	SD	Rank
Positive reinforcement improves classroom behaviour among learners with ASD	4.67	0.49	1
Positive reinforcement increases learners' motivation to participate in classroom activities	4.58	0.51	2
Positive reinforcement is more effective than punishment in managing learners with ASD	4.42	0.67	3
I feel confident using positive reinforcement strategies in my classroom	3.92	0.79	4
My school provides adequate support for implementing positive reinforcement strategies	3.33	1.07	5
I have received adequate training on positive reinforcement strategies	3.08	1.24	6
Overall	4.00	0.80	—

This pattern indicates a clear internal ordering: teachers' agreement was strongest for statements concerning the perceived benefit of positive reinforcement (behaviour improvement, motivation, comparative effectiveness) and weakest for statements concerning their own preparedness and support (training, institutional support) to implement it, the two lowest-ranked items of the six.

4.2 Implementation challenges

Teachers identified large class sizes as the most frequently reported implementation challenge (11 teachers, 91.7%; M = 4.67, SD = 0.49, ranked 1st), followed by lack of training on ASD and positive reinforcement (10 teachers, 83.3%; M = 4.42, SD = 0.67,

ranked 2nd), and limited teaching and learning resources (9 teachers, 75.0%; M = 4.17, SD = 0.72, ranked 3rd). Time constraints due to heavy workload were reported by 8 teachers (66.7%; M = 3.92, SD = 0.79, ranked 4th), limited parental support by 6 teachers (50.0%; M = 3.42, SD = 0.90, ranked 5th), inadequate administrative support by 5 teachers (41.7%; M = 3.17, SD = 0.94, ranked 6th), and inconsistent learner attendance by 4 teachers (33.3%; M = 2.83, SD = 0.94, ranked 7th and lowest). Because teachers could identify more than one challenge, frequencies do not sum to 12 or 100%. The overall mean across all seven challenge items was 3.80 (SD = 0.78).

Table 2: Implementation Challenges Reported by Teachers (n = 12), Ranked by Mean

Challenge	f	%	M	SD	Rank
Large class sizes	11	91.7	4.67	0.49	1
Lack of training on 10 ASD and positive reinforcement		83.3	4.42	0.67	2
Limited teaching 9 and learning resources		75.0	4.17	0.72	3
Time constraints 8 due to heavy workload		66.7	3.92	0.79	4
Limited parental 6 support		50.0	3.42	0.90	5
Inadequate 5 administrative support		41.7	3.17	0.94	6
Inconsistent 4 learner attendance		33.3	2.83	0.94	7
Overall	—	—	3.80	0.78	—

The two most prominent challenges, class size and training, map directly onto the two lowest-rated perception items above (institutional support and training adequacy), a point taken up in the mixed-methods integration below.

4.3 Qualitative findings and document evidence

Interview evidence (thematic analysis of 22 participants: 12 teachers, 4 administrators, 6 parents/caregivers, following Braun & Clarke, 2006) generated themes directly relevant to Objectives Three and Four.

On training (Theme: "Inadequate Teacher Training Limited Effective Implementation"). Teachers described relying substantially on experience rather than formal preparation:

"Most of what I know is what I have gained through experience. During my teacher training, we discussed inclusive education as practice but were not instructed on how to use the reinforcement strategies, specifically for learners with autism." (Teacher T11)

"At times I do not know what to reward a learner. Practical training would help us to apply these practices well." (Teacher T04)

An administrator corroborated this from the institutional perspective:

"Teachers are willing to support learners with ASD, but many teachers require more training in the specialised areas of managing behaviour and classroom management." (Administrator A03)

On class size (Theme: "Large Class Sizes Reduced the Consistency of Reinforcement"). Teachers linked class size directly to the practical difficulty of delivering reinforcement immediately and individually:

"With more than seventy learners in one class, it becomes difficult to notice every positive behaviour immediately. Sometimes the opportunity to reinforce the learner passes before I can respond." (Teacher T08)

"Positive reinforcement works best when it is immediate, but large classes make that very difficult because every learner needs attention." (Teacher T02)

An administrator situated this as a systemic, not individual, constraint:

"Teachers are committed, but overcrowded classrooms limit the consistency with which reinforcement strategies can be implemented." (Administrator A01)

On parental support (Theme: "Parental Support Reinforced Positive Behaviour at Home"). Participating parents described home-school consistency as valuable:

"The teacher encouraged me to praise my child whenever he completed his homework. After some time, he started doing his assignments without being reminded every day." (Parent P03)

"When the school and home used the same rewards, my child became more cooperative and less resistant to following routines." (Parent P05)

On institutional and government support (Theme: "Need for Greater Government and Institutional Support").

Administrators identified resourcing and specialist capacity as system-level needs:

"Government have been doing well to get inclusive education across the schools, but schools need more trained specialists, teaching resources and ongoing professional development." (Administrator A04)

"You cannot implement inclusive education without providing sufficient funding. Schools need to have enough to support teachers if they are to effectively implement programmes for supporting behaviour." (Administrator A02)

A teacher's account tied training directly to confidence, echoing the questionnaire's lowest-rated perception item:

"If there are workshops on regular training of autism and positive reinforcement, it will enhance confidence of teachers and will help us to assist learners better." (Teacher T10)

4.4 Document evidence

Document analysis across the four participating schools found a Document Support Index (DSI), the proportion of six behaviour-support document categories present, of 100.0% in School A, 83.3% in Schools B and C, and 33.3% in School D (average DSI = 75.0%). Individualised Education Plans were present in three of four schools and Behaviour Intervention Plans in two of four; notably, documentation specifically indicating positive reinforcement was present in only two of the four schools (Schools A and B), including in Schools C and D where teachers nonetheless reported using positive reinforcement strategies in the questionnaire. This document-level evidence indicates that teachers' reported use of reinforcement was not always accompanied by corresponding formal school documentation.

4.5 Mixed-methods integration

Three points of convergence, and one point requiring caution, emerge from considering the quantitative and qualitative evidence together.

First, the questionnaire and interview evidence converge on training as a genuine, not merely statistical, gap: the lowest-rated perception item (training adequacy, $M = 3.08$) is corroborated in teachers' own words ("we...were not instructed on how to use the reinforcement strategies, specifically for learners with autism," Teacher T11), and the second-highest-rated challenge (lack of training, 83.3%, $M = 4.42$) is the same construct described from a different angle. This is a case where the quantitative ranking and the qualitative account describe the same underlying condition, strengthening confidence in the finding beyond what either source would support alone.

Second, class size shows similar convergence: it was both the single most frequently and strongly rated implementation challenge (91.7%, $M = 4.67$) and the subject of the most concrete, mechanism-specific qualitative accounts (e.g., Teacher T08's description of the reinforcement "opportunity" passing before a large class permits a response). The qualitative evidence here does more than corroborate the ranking; it explains why class size functions as a barrier: immediacy is a defining feature of effective reinforcement delivery, and large classes structurally work against immediacy.

Third, the document analysis complements rather than simply confirms the questionnaire and interview evidence: it shows that the training and institutional-support gaps identified by teachers have a visible institutional counterpart — variable, and in two schools absent, formal documentation of reinforcement practice — suggesting the gap is not solely a matter of individual teacher confidence but is reflected in how (or whether) schools formally record and support the practice at all.

The point requiring caution concerns the relationship between the strongly favourable perception items (behaviour improvement, motivation, comparative effectiveness — all $M \geq 4.42$) and the training/support items (both $M < 3.35$). The data do not establish a statistically tested relationship between these two sets of scores; no correlation or inferential test between perception and challenge scores was conducted in the source study. What can be said, on a descriptive basis, is that teachers who rated positive reinforcement highly on usefulness did not, as a group, rate their own training or institutional support nearly as highly, and several individual teachers' interview accounts (e.g., Teacher T04, Teacher T11) describe exactly this combination of belief in the approach alongside uncertainty in applying it. This is best characterised as an observed pattern consistent with an attitude-implementation gap, not as a

demonstrated causal or statistical relationship, and it should be read with that distinction in mind.

4.6 Discussion of Findings

The overall pattern of strong agreement on the perceived value of positive reinforcement, alongside markedly weaker agreement on training adequacy and institutional support, indicates an important distinction between teachers' belief in an intervention's usefulness and their perceived preparedness to implement it systematically. Positive perceptions alone do not establish the actual role of a behavioural intervention in practice; they indicate acceptance, confidence and perceived practicality, which are necessary but not sufficient conditions for consistent implementation. This distinction is consistent with international literature: reviews of teacher self-efficacy and attitudes toward autism inclusion have similarly found that positive attitudes commonly coexist with limited confidence and preparedness in the absence of practical training and support (Petersson-Bloom & Hansson, 2025; Russell et al., 2023), and that positive attitudes alone do not ensure effective inclusive practice where resources and specialist support are scarce (Russell et al., 2023). The Kenyan literature reviewed here similarly links teacher preparedness and training directly to the delivery of individualised behavioural interventions (Mwaura & Wambugu, 2022; Mwaura & Kamere, 2023) and identifies overcrowded classrooms and limited resources as constraints operating alongside, not instead of, teacher attitudes (Chege & Wambui, 2023).

Viewed through Applied Behaviour Analysis (Cooper et al., 2020), this pattern is unsurprising: systematic reinforcement requires practical competence in identifying meaningful reinforcers, delivering them contingently, and monitoring learner responses — competence that general awareness or favourable attitude toward the approach does not by itself confer. Viewed through Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the challenges identified — class size and time at the classroom level, training and administrative support at the institutional level, and parental involvement at the family level — indicate that implementation is shaped by nested, interacting conditions rather than by teacher attitude in isolation. The document-analysis finding that reinforcement documentation was absent in two of four schools despite reported reinforcement use reinforces this ecological reading: the gap is visible not only in individual teachers' self-reported confidence but in school-level systems for recording and supporting the practice.

4.7 Implications for inclusive education and teacher practice

These findings suggest that interventions aimed solely at persuading teachers of positive reinforcement's value are unlikely to be the binding constraint on implementation in this setting, since teachers already hold favourable views. The more consequential targets for policy and practice are the two lowest-rated and most frequently reported constraints identified here: practical, applied training specific to reinforcement techniques for learners with ASD (rather than general inclusive-education awareness), and structural conditions — class size and institutional/administrative support — that determine whether favourable attitudes can be translated into consistent, individualised practice. The variable school-level documentation of reinforcement practice further suggests that strengthening simple, low-burden behaviour-tracking and documentation systems could support both consistency of practice and continuity of institutional memory across staff changes.

4.8 Limitations

This article has several limitations. The sample of 12 teachers and 4 schools was purposively selected and relatively small, and the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable beyond similar inclusive junior-school contexts. Perception and challenge data were self-reported, which may be subject to social-desirability or recall effects. Critically, no inferential statistical test of the relationship between teachers' perception scores and their implementation-challenge scores was conducted; the attitude-implementation gap discussed in this article is a descriptive and interpretive pattern drawn from comparing two sets of mean ratings and corroborating qualitative accounts, not a statistically tested association, and should not be read as establishing a measured correlation or causal relationship between the two constructs. Finally, document analysis covered only four schools and six broad document categories and does not establish that the presence or absence of documentation caused, rather than merely accompanied, differences in reinforcement practice.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Teachers in the participating inclusive junior schools generally held favourable perceptions of positive reinforcement, most strongly endorsing its perceived benefit for classroom behaviour and learner motivation. However, teachers rated their own training and their schools' institutional support for implementation considerably lower, and identified large class sizes, inadequate training and limited resources as their most significant implementation challenges. Qualitative and

documentary evidence corroborated and contextualised this pattern, indicating that favourable teacher attitudes toward positive reinforcement coexisted with self-reported gaps in practical preparation and variable institutional support for the practice. The findings indicate that positive teacher perceptions, while an important enabling condition, are not on their own sufficient for consistent implementation of positive reinforcement for learners with ASD in inclusive junior school settings.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Teacher-training providers and school administrators should prioritise practical, applied professional development in positive-reinforcement techniques specifically for learners with ASD, rather than relying on general inclusive-education awareness alone, given that training adequacy was both the lowest-rated perception item ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.24$) and the second-most-cited implementation challenge (83.3%, $M = 4.42$).
2. School administrators should explore feasible strategies for addressing class-size-related constraints on the delivery of individualised reinforcement, given that large class sizes were the most frequently and most strongly reported implementation challenge (91.7%, $M = 4.67$).
3. School administrators should support the development of simple, low-burden behaviour-tracking and documentation systems, given that documentation specifically indicating positive reinforcement was present in only two of the four participating schools despite teachers in all four schools reporting its use.
4. Future researchers should employ validated teacher self-efficacy measures together with formal correlational or multivariate statistical analysis to establish more precisely how teachers' perceptions and contextual implementation conditions jointly relate to actual implementation fidelity, since no such inferential test was conducted in the present study.

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