

## Multilevel Classroom Management in Heterogeneous Learning Environments: Systems, Supports, and Sustainability

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### ABSTRACT

Multilevel classroom management represents a critical yet complex challenge in India's diverse educational landscape, where teachers increasingly encounter heterogeneous learning groups within single classrooms. This chapter examines evidence-based strategies for managing mixed-ability classrooms, explores positive behavior support systems as systematic alternatives to reactive discipline, analyzes classroom structures and routines as preventive management tools, investigates peer-mediated learning systems that leverage student interaction for academic and behavioral support, and addresses teacher well-being as essential to sustainable classroom management. Drawing on empirical research from Indian contexts alongside international evidence, the chapter demonstrates that effective multilevel classroom management combines proactive behavioral support systems, clear structures and routines creating predictability, strategic use of peer learning (33.5% national implementation rate in India), and deliberate attention to teacher psychological well-being (addressing 70% prevalence of emotional exhaustion among Indian teachers). The chapter argues that sustainable classroom management requires moving beyond individual teacher adaptation to systemic approaches embedding multilevel strategies, professional development, institutional support, and recognition that teacher well-being is prerequisite to equitable learning environments for all students.

**Keywords:** *Multilevel Classroom Management, Heterogeneous Learning Environments*

### I. Introduction: The Challenge of Heterogeneous Classrooms in India

Indian classrooms represent extraordinary diversity: students across multiple grade levels (particularly in rural multigrade settings), vast differences in academic readiness and learning pace, varied linguistic backgrounds, diverse socioeconomic circumstances, differing disabilities and learning needs, and heterogeneous behavioral readiness (Qangule et al., 2025). Managing such heterogeneous groups presents what teachers describe as "complex and demanding" challenges undermining teacher self-efficacy, particularly in multigrade settings lacking training, policy guidelines, and systemic support (Qangule et al., 2025).

The consequences are profound. Teachers experience "fragmented attention, disengagement, and instructional breakdowns" while simultaneously facing elevated stress, emotional exhaustion (70% of Indian teachers report emotional exhaustion), and burnout affecting their ability to manage classrooms effectively (Qangule et al., 2025; Pandey, 2024). When teachers

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**Received: November 02, 2025; Revision Received: November 15, 2025; Accepted: December 20, 2025**

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are "overworked or emotionally drained, classroom dynamics deteriorate and student mental health suffers" as teacher irritability rises and their ability to engage students weakens (India's teachers are burning out, and students are paying the price, 2025). Yet evidence demonstrates that systematic, multilevel classroom management, combining proactive behavioral support, clear structures and routines, strategic peer learning, and teacher support, produces measurable improvements in behavior, academic outcomes, attendance, and overall school climate (Implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2025; The Effects of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2012).

### **II. Foundations of Multilevel Classroom Management**

#### **A. Understanding Multilevel Management Systems**

Multilevel classroom management diverges from traditional reactive discipline (responding to misbehavior after it occurs) toward proactive, preventive, and systems-based approaches addressing multiple dimensions simultaneously (Implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2025). Teachers in heterogeneous classrooms employ "adaptive strategies such as rule-setting, modelling, reinforcement, learner movement, relationship-building, and grade splitting" reflecting "emerging situational efficacy" (Qangule et al., 2025, p. 12).

However, research reveals that inconsistent implementation of these strategies highlights "the absence of systematic professional development and institutional support tailored to multigrade contexts" (Qangule et al., 2025, p. 15). Improving multilevel classroom management requires "professional development directly addressing unique pedagogical and behavioural challenges" and "structured, context-specific training fostering consistent application of management strategies" (Qangule et al., 2025, p. 18).

#### **B. Mixed-Ability Grouping and Differentiated Management**

Mixed-ability classrooms require teachers to simultaneously address students at different developmental levels, paces, and behavioral readiness. Research identifies key challenges: resource limitations, managing student diversity, assessment difficulties, increased workload, and parental involvement issues (Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2024). Teachers report that "variety in the classroom makes it highly challenging to implement lesson plans effectively since teachers must take care of each student individually" (Mixed Ability Classrooms in India, 2018, p. 5).

Effective strategies include: flexible grouping based on readiness, curriculum adaptation, collaborative planning, and enhancing student engagement (Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2024). When implemented effectively, differentiation leads to "improved student progress, positive changes in classroom dynamics, increased teacher satisfaction, and greater inclusivity" (Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2024, p. 22).

### **III. Positive Behavior Support Systems**

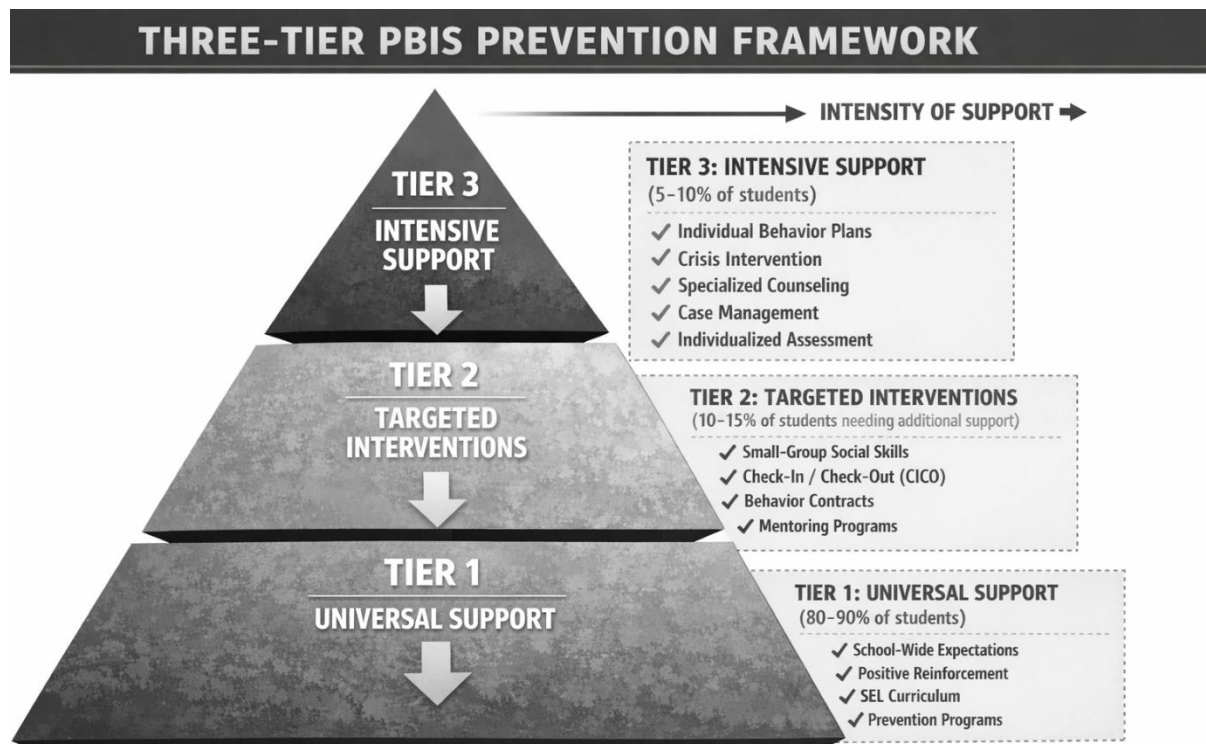
#### **A. PBIS Framework and Evidence of Effectiveness**

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) represents a proactive, data-based, multitiered system promoting positive school climate while preventing behavioral problems

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(Malloy et al., 2018). PBIS differs fundamentally from traditional discipline: rather than reacting after misbehavior, PBIS establishes universal expectations, teaches behavior explicitly, reinforces positive behavior consistently, and uses data to identify students needing additional support (Malloy et al., 2018).

*Figure 1: Three-Tier PBIS Prevention Framework*



### B. PBIS Outcomes in Schools

Empirical evidence demonstrates PBIS effectiveness across multiple outcomes:

**Behavioral Improvements:** Schools implementing PBIS report significant decreases in behavioral incidents and office referrals. One study found teacher satisfaction with behavior increased from 46% to 87% after PBIS implementation (Implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2025). Longitudinal data from McNabb Elementary tracked discipline referrals from 2006-2012, revealing that "PBIS had a significant effect on discipline referrals within the school" (The Effects of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 2012, p. 45).

**Academic Achievement:** Schools implementing PBIS show measurable academic gains. One study reported standardized test scores increased from 65% to 81% benchmark achievement from fall to spring following PBIS implementation (Implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2025). Improved behavior management and positive school climate create environments where students focus more effectively on learning.

**School Climate and Attendance:** PBIS implementation improves overall school climate with higher student satisfaction, improved teacher morale, and stronger staff-student relationships

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(Malloy et al., 2018). Studies demonstrate association between PBIS and increased student attendance with reduced problem behaviors (Malloy et al., 2018).

Teacher Collective Efficacy: PBIS implementation increases teachers' collective efficacy, their shared belief in their ability to accomplish goals (Does SWPBIS Increase Teachers' Collective Efficacy? 2021). "Teachers in schools with high collective efficacy implement more consistent positive behavior support practices than teachers in schools with lower efficacy" and "persist more in efforts to regulate behavior problems" (Does SWPBIS Increase Teachers' Collective Efficacy?, 2021, p. 8).

### C. PBIS Implementation in Indian Context

While PBIS implementation remains limited in India, the framework aligns with existing Indian initiatives emphasizing positive behavior, character education, and safe school environments. Implementing PBIS in Indian schools requires:

1. Universal Expectations Development: Clear behavioral expectations (respect, responsibility, safety) taught explicitly across classrooms
2. Teacher Training: Professional development in behavior teaching, positive reinforcement, and data-based decision making
3. Monitoring Systems: Regular data collection on behavior incidents identifying patterns and progress
4. Tier 2 and 3 Supports: Additional targeted interventions for students not responding to universal support

## IV. Classroom Structures and Routines

### A. The Power of Predictability in Heterogeneous Classrooms

Structured routines create secure, predictable learning environments reducing anxiety and fostering self-regulation and attentiveness (Examining the Impact of Structured Routines on Behavior and Attentiveness, 2025). Research demonstrates that "structured routines are directly linked to improved focus and behavioral outcomes" with students in classrooms with established daily schedules reporting "fewer tardiness and off-task behaviors" (Examining the Impact of Structured Routines on Behavior and Attentiveness, 2025, p. 28).

In heterogeneous classrooms, structured routines are particularly essential. When students across ability levels experience consistent routines, all benefit: low-achieving students receive predictability supporting self-regulation, high-achieving students experience reduced anxiety enabling focus on challenging tasks, and teachers manage classroom simultaneously (Mitchell et al., 2017, cited in Examining the Impact of Structured Routines on Behavior and Attentiveness, 2025).

**Table 1: Examples of Classroom Routines Supporting Heterogeneous Learning**

Routine Category	Purpose	Examples	Heterogeneous Benefit
Entry/Exit Routines	Smooth transitions	Quiet entry signal, morning check-in, dismissal protocol	All students know expectations, reduce

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Routine Category	Purpose	Examples	Heterogeneous Benefit
			disruption, and establish predictability
Learning Time Routines	Manage instructional pacing	Transition signals, grouping procedures, and material distribution	Students at different paces follow familiar patterns; reduces management burden
Attention Signals	Focus student attention	Bell/chime, raised hand signal, visual cues	All students respond consistently regardless of ability level
Independent Work Routines	Support self-directed learning	Movement permission, asking for help procedures, and completion verification	Students can work at their own pace while following clear structures
Group Work Routines	Facilitate collaboration	Group roles, noise level expectations, and material sharing	Enables peer learning while maintaining behavioral structure
Behavior Reinforcement Routines	Acknowledge positive behavior	Praise protocols, reward systems, and behaviour-specific feedback	All students understand and respond to positive reinforcement

### B. Pacing Strategies in Heterogeneous Classrooms

Pacing, the instructional speed and rhythm, directly impacts heterogeneous classroom management. Teachers report using strategies including: "varying the pace and level of instructions, giving extra activities to advanced students while providing additional support to struggling students, and changing pairs frequently to prevent labeling" (Challenges in Mixed Ability Classes and Strategies Utilized, 2025, p. 38).

Effective pacing requires:

- Pre-assessment identifying student readiness levels (Differentiation: Achieving Success in Mixed-Ability Classroom, 2019)
- Flexible pacing allowing students working below grade level additional time while extending advanced learners
- Transition management ensuring smooth movement between pace changes reducing behavioral disruption
- Tiered assignments where all students engage with core content at appropriate challenge levels (Differentiation: Achieving Success in Mixed-Ability Classroom, 2019)

### V. Peer-Mediated Learning Systems

#### A. Peer Learning Implementation in India

Peer learning, students learning through interaction with peers rather than solely from teachers, represents a powerful management and instructional strategy in heterogeneous classrooms. Analysis of UDISEPlus 2021-22 data reveals peer learning implementation varies across India: primary schools averaging 42-88% adoption rates, with Punjab highest (75.1-88.2%) and some

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regions demonstrating lower rates (The Significance of Peer Learning in School Education in India, 2023). National average implementation stands at 33.5%, indicating "positive trend towards embracing collaborative learning" with room for expansion (The Significance of Peer Learning in School Education in India, 2023, p. 12).

### **B. Peer-Mediated Strategies for Heterogeneous Classrooms**

Research identifies effective peer-mediated strategies:

**Peer Tutoring/Cooperative Learning:** "In-class peer-tutoring" and "mixed-ability group projects where students receive different roles" (Challenges in Mixed Ability Classes and Strategies Utilized, 2025, p. 38) enable advanced students to deepen understanding through teaching while supporting struggling peers. This particularly benefits "slow learners who need teacher instruction or group interaction" through "upgraded learning through peer teaching" (Differentiation: Achieving Success in Mixed-Ability Classroom, 2019, p. 25).

**Flexible Grouping:** Teachers employ grouping by interest, ability, and learning style. "Grouping by interest creates variety in class and increases engagement; grouping by ability allows students to learn at comfortable pace; grouping by learning style helps students learn through preferred modalities" (Differentiation: Achieving Success in Mixed-Ability Classroom, 2019, p. 24). Flexible grouping "prevents labeling" by rotating students through different grouping configurations (Challenges in Mixed Ability Classes and Strategies Utilized, 2025, p. 39).

**Behavioral Benefits:** Peer-mediated learning provides behavioral benefits beyond academics: increased engagement reduces off-task behavior, positive peer interactions develop social skills, and distributed attention reduces teacher stress. When students engage productively with peers, teachers can attend to students needing additional support (Teaching All Students to High Standards in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, n.d.).

### **C. Challenges and Implementation Barriers**

Despite potential, peer learning implementation faces obstacles: "lack of policy integration, limited teacher awareness, and hierarchical school cultures" (How peer-led teacher training is reshaping classrooms, 2025). Additionally, inconsistent quality results when peer teachers lack training: peer educators require selection criteria (life skills, leadership, communication, responsibility), structured training, ongoing supportive supervision, and feedback systems (Implementation outcomes of peer education programme, 2024).

## **VI. Managing Multigrade and Mixed-Ability Classrooms**

### **A. Specific Challenges in Multigrade Settings**

Multigrade classrooms, combining students from multiple grades with one teacher, present amplified heterogeneity challenges. Teachers face: multiple curricula simultaneously, diverse developmental levels within grades, behavioral differences across ages, and limited policy guidance (One teacher, many grades, 2025). A study of Foundation Phase multigrade teachers revealed teachers "perceive multigrade classroom management as complex and demanding, primarily due to limited training, insufficient policy guidelines, and behavioural challenges" (Qangule et al., 2025, p. 8).

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**Table 2: Grade-Splitting and Multigrade Management Strategies**

Strategy	Implementation	Mixed-Ability Benefit
Grade Splitting	The teacher works with one grade, while others engage in independent activities	Allows focused instruction for specific grade level, while others maintain behavioral engagement through structured independent work
Parallel Independent Tasks	Multiple grades working on related content at different levels	All grades engaged simultaneously; reduced transitions; efficiency
Rotating Small Groups	Teacher cycles through grade-specific instruction, while others collaborate	Targeted instruction, while peer support maintains engagement for other grades
Cross-Grade Peer Learning	Older students support younger students' learning	Behavioral support through mentoring, reduced teacher load, and developmental benefits for both groups

### B. Evidence from Karnataka's Nali Kali Programme

Karnataka's Nali-Kali (joyful learning) programme demonstrates multigrade management in practice. Designed to revolutionize rural education through activity-based, student-centric curriculum, Nali-Kali addresses multigrade classroom challenges by: "promoting activity-based curriculum, individual care, and student-centered learning with special attention to children from different grades and learning abilities" (Pushing Multi-grade Classrooms in Learning Sector, 2025).

## VII. Teacher Well-Being: Essential Foundation for Sustainable Classroom Management

### A. The Prevalence and Impact of Teacher Burnout

Teacher well-being represents critical but under-addressed dimension of sustainable classroom management. Research on 356 Indian teachers in Rajasthan reveals: 70% experience emotional exhaustion; 65% report reduced personal achievement; teacher burnout is widespread particularly in demanding classroom contexts (Pandey, 2024; Enhancing psychological well-being of school teachers in India, 2023).

When teachers experience burnout, consequences extend directly to students: "When teachers are overworked or emotionally drained, it significantly impacts classroom dynamics and student mental health... their ability to manage class and keep students engaged weakens; irritability rises; the tone shifts" (India's teachers are burning out, and students are paying the price, 2025, p. 8).

### B. Causes and Manifestations of Burnout in Indian Contexts

Research identifies major stressors: "excessive workload, lack of autonomy, poor or irregular eating habits, long hours, frequent syllabus changes, constant classroom vigilance, and pressure to appear endlessly energetic" (Burnout Among School Teachers in India, 2024). Teachers describe working evening hours replying to parent WhatsApp messages, preparing lessons, and managing household duties, "a double shift, and sometimes a triple one" (India's teachers are burning out, and students are paying the price, 2025, p. 6).

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Manifestations include: emotional fatigue, depersonalization (emotional detachment), collapsing sense of achievement, and diminished job satisfaction (Pandey, 2024). The consequence: teachers "who once went the extra mile may now simply try to get through the day" (India's teachers are burning out, and students are paying the price, 2025, p. 9).

### **C. Teacher Well-Being and Classroom Management Quality**

Research on teacher energy management reveals: "Energy management positively impacts psychological well-being with stress mediating the relationship" (Enhancing psychological well-being of school teachers in India, 2023). Teachers with higher energy and thriving report greater capacity to implement consistent, patient, positive classroom management approaches.

PBIS research similarly demonstrates: when collective teacher efficacy increases (through PBIS training and support), teachers implement more consistent positive behavior practices and persist longer in addressing behavior problems (Does SWPBIS Increase Teachers' Collective Efficacy?, 2021).

### **D. Strategies Supporting Teacher Well-Being**

Research identifies institutional approaches that require "intent more than funding":

Institutional Support Strategies (India's teachers are burning out, and students are paying the price, 2025):

- Short breaks or planning periods to recharge
- Flexible schedules where possible
- More activity-based or collaborative learning distributing classroom load
- Cultures where teachers openly discuss challenges
- Need-based mental health workshops providing practical coping strategies

Energy Management Approaches (Enhancing psychological well-being of school teachers in India, 2023):

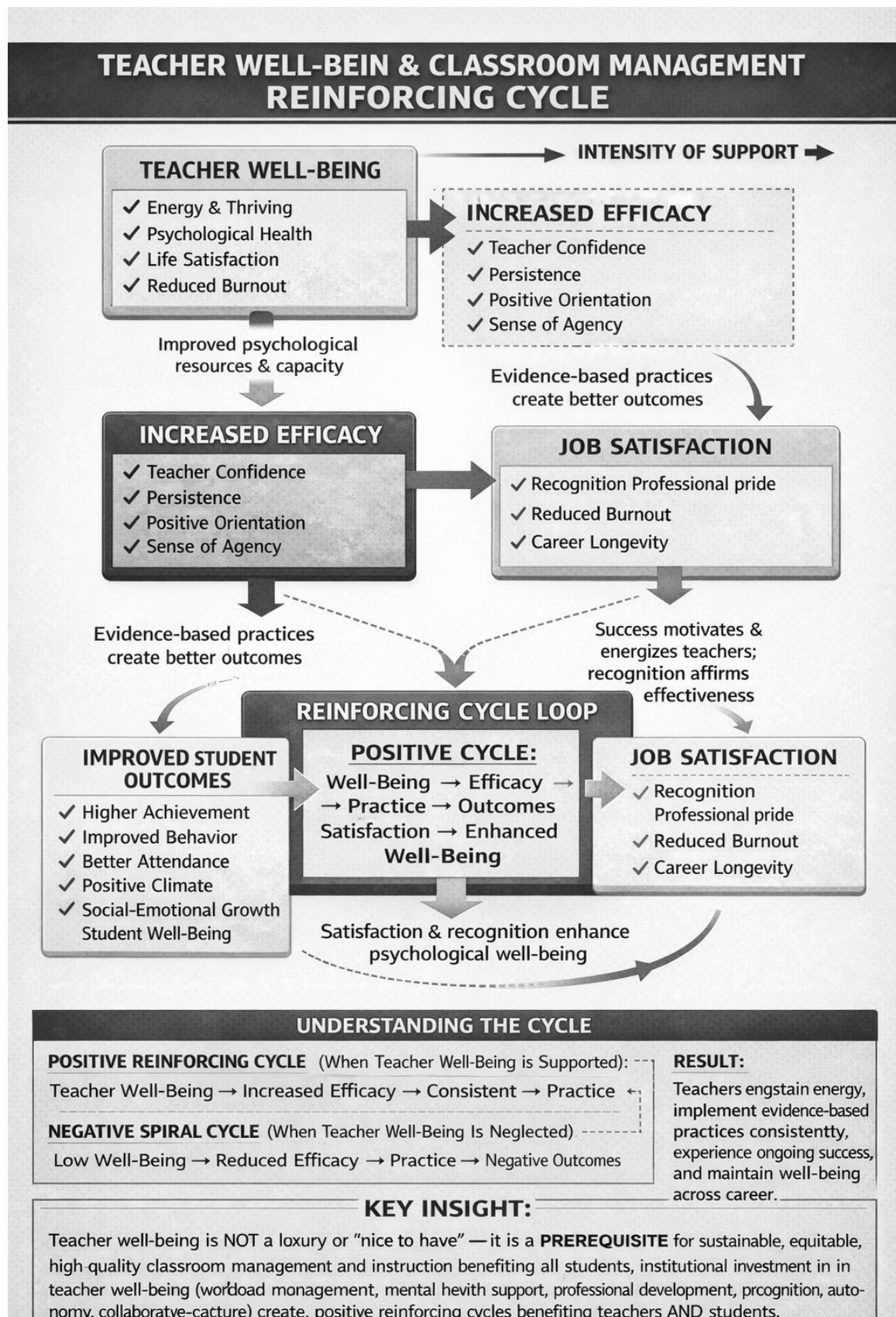
- Regular physical activity and healthy eating support
- Protected personal time and family engagement
- Recognition and celebration of teacher accomplishments
- Professional development opportunities avoiding cascade loss

Workload Management:

- Reduced class size or co-teacher support in multigrade settings
- Administrative time protected for planning
- Curriculum flexibility allowing teacher choice
- Parent communication managed through formal channels (reducing personal WhatsApp burden)

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Figure 2: Teacher Well-Being and Classroom Management Cycle



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### VIII. Integrated Multilevel Management Framework

#### A. Systems Approach to Classroom Management

Effective multilevel classroom management integrates across dimensions:

**Table 3: Integrated Multilevel Management Components**

Dimension	Universal Level (All Students)	Targeted Level (10-15% Needing Support)	Intensive Level (5-10% Complex Needs)
Behavioral Support	Explicit teaching of expectations, positive reinforcement, and consistent consequences	Small group social-emotional skills; behavioral contracts; CICO (Check-In/Check-Out)	Individual behavior plans; counseling; crisis protocols
Structures/Routines	Clear entry/exit/transition routines; consistent schedules	Additional practice of routines, visual supports, and modified pacing	Highly individualized routines; 1:1 support during transitions
Peer Systems	Collaborative learning; cooperative groups; peer tutoring	Structured peer partnerships; monitored peer interactions	Individual support (not peer-mediated); modified grouping
Teacher Support	Professional development in management; team planning time	Coaching in specific strategies; small group supervision	Specialized consultation; mental health support for teachers

#### B. Implementation Quality and Fidelity

Research emphasizes that management strategy effectiveness depends on implementation quality. "Structured routines improved focus and behavioral outcomes" specifically when teachers "consistently implement effective routines with professional development ensuring they consistently implement management strategies" (Examining the Impact of Structured Routines on Behavior and Attentiveness, 2025; Qangule et al., 2025).

This requires:

- Professional development addressing context-specific challenges
- Coaching and mentoring ensuring consistent practice
- Data-based monitoring identifying implementation gaps
- Collaborative planning time for teacher teams
- Institutional support reducing competing demands

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### **IX. Challenges and Barriers to Implementation**

**Systemic Barriers:** Rigid curricula, standardized assessments, and lack of policy guidelines create pressure against implementing flexible management strategies (Qangule et al., 2025). Teachers report "adapting mono-grade curricula for mixed-ability groups without adequate guidance, adding to workload of lesson planning, content delivery, and assessment" (One teacher, many grades, 2025, p. 14).

**Resource Constraints:** Implementation requires materials, planning time, coaching, and technology, often unavailable in under-resourced schools (Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2024).

**Training Gaps:** "Absence of systematic professional development and institutional support tailored to multigrade contexts" leaves teachers developing individual adaptations rather than implementing consistent systems (Qangule et al., 2025, p. 15).

**Parental Engagement:** Parents sometimes resist differentiated approaches, preferring uniform instruction or fearing their child is "held back" or receiving insufficient challenge (Differentiated Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms, 2024).

### **X. Recommendations for Implementation**

For School Leaders:

- Implement PBIS framework with dedicated implementation team, monitoring systems, and teacher support
- Establish protected planning time for collaborative curriculum design
- Support teacher well-being through mental health resources, manageable workloads, and recognition
- Monitor classroom management quality through observations and teacher feedback

For Teachers and Teacher Educators:

- Embed classroom management into pre-service teacher education addressing heterogeneous classrooms
- Provide ongoing professional development in PBIS, peer learning strategies, and differentiation
- Create peer learning communities (PLCs) for teacher collaboration addressing specific challenges
- Model self-care and well-being practices demonstrating their importance

For Policymakers:

- Develop curriculum guidelines supporting differentiation and flexible pacing
- Mandate management-focused professional development in teacher certification
- Fund multigrade and mixed-ability classroom resources
- Establish accountability for teacher well-being as school quality indicator
- Commission research on multilevel management implementation in Indian contexts

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### Conclusion

Effective multilevel classroom management in India's heterogeneous learning environments requires moving beyond individual teacher adaptation toward systemic approaches. The evidence is compelling: PBIS implementation reduces behavioral incidents and increases academic achievement; structured routines improve focus and attentiveness; peer learning provides both academic and behavioral benefits when implemented with quality; and teacher well-being is prerequisite to sustainable classroom management.

Yet current reality reflects inadequate support. Teachers in multigrade and mixed-ability classrooms report feeling "complex and demanding" challenges without training, policy guidance, or institutional support (Qangule et al., 2025). 70% of Indian teachers experience emotional exhaustion while managing increasingly diverse student needs (Pandey, 2024). Implementation of peer learning occurs sporadically (33.5% national average) without consistent quality assurance.

Transforming this reality requires institutional commitment: policy supporting differentiation and flexible classroom structures, professional development addressing context-specific challenges, resources enabling implementation, and genuine recognition that teacher well-being is not luxury but foundation for equitable learning environments. When teachers are supported, trained, and valued, they can sustainably implement multilevel strategies creating classrooms where all students, regardless of ability, pace, or background, experience behavioral support, academic challenge, and sense of belonging.

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### **Acknowledgments**

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

**How to cite this article:** Mishra, M. & Mishra, S. (2025). Multilevel Classroom Management in Heterogeneous Learning Environments: Systems, Supports, and Sustainability. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 10(4), 135-147. DIP: 18.02.713/20251004, DOI: 10.25215/2455/1004713