



Teachers' Strategies for Balancing Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms: Clear Expectations, Differentiation and Collaborative Learning in Private Secondary Schools in Rivers State

SEMENTARI, Tamunoibim Mary-Gab^{1*} & OSUJI, Catherine U., Ph.D²

^{1,2}Department of Educational Management, Rivers State University, Nkpulu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This study explored teachers' tactics for balancing empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State, focusing on setting clear expectations and boundaries, employing differentiated instruction, and encouraging collaborative learning. The study was based on Baumrind's Authoritative Style Theory and was led by three research questions, three null hypotheses. Descriptive survey research design was employed. The population included 9,778 respondents, 1,813 principals and 7,965 teachers of private secondary schools in Rivers State. Using purposive sample technique, 85 respondents consisting of 10 principals and 75 instructors were selected from five inclusive private secondary schools. The data was obtained using a questionnaire devised by the researcher, *Strategies Adopted by Teachers in Balancing Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms Questionnaire (SATBEAICQ)*. The instrument was developed on a four-point rating scale and the Cronbach alpha reliability values for the three clusters were 0.86, 0.76 and 0.82 respectively. The 85 copies of the questionnaire distributed were all retrieved and found appropriate for analysis. This translated to a 100% response rate. The study questions were answered using mean and standard deviation and the hypotheses were tested using the independent samples t-test at 0.05 level of significance. The findings indicated that teachers frequently combined empathy and authority in the inclusive classroom through setting clear standards and boundaries, differentiating instructional approaches, and fostering collaborative learning. Results also indicated there was no statistically significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on these initiatives. The study indicated that evidence-based instructional approaches such as these are critical to the development of inclusive, supportive, and well-managed learning environments. It therefore recommended that school proprietors and administrators should provide sustained professional development programmes to strengthen the teachers' competencies in communicating behavioural expectations, implementing differentiated instruction and facilitating collaborative learning to enhance inclusive classroom practices.

Keywords: Empathy, Authority, Inclusive Classrooms, Clear Expectations, Differentiation, Collaborative Learning.

*Corresponding author: SEMENTARI, Tamunoibim Mary-Gab

Department of Educational Management, Rivers State University, Nkpulu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State

Introduction

Inclusive education has evolved into one of the most significant reform movements in global educational policy and practice, requiring schools to respond to diversity of

ability, disability, socio-economic background, language, and emotional need as a normal feature of classroom life rather than an exception to be managed (Ainscow, 2020). Within this reform agenda, one of the most persistent challenges

confronting classroom teachers is that of balancing empathy, the capacity to understand and share the feelings and perspectives of students, with authority, the capacity to set and enforce rules and maintain order, in ways that serve rather than undermine the learning of every child (Aldrup et al., 2022). Teachers in inclusive classrooms are routinely required to hold both orientations at once: sufficient warmth to make diverse learners feel seen and safe, and sufficient structure to keep the classroom purposeful and productive. Several scholars argue that neither disposition is sufficient on its own; empathy without structure risks dissolving into permissiveness, while authority without empathy risks hardening into coercive control (Baumrind, 1966; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019).

Among the concrete classroom strategies through which teachers operationalise this empathy-authority balance, three are of particular importance: the setting of clear expectations and boundaries, the adoption of differentiated instruction, and the promotion of collaborative learning. Clear expectations refer to the explicit, consistently communicated academic and behavioural standards that guide students' conduct and participation, while boundaries define the relational and structural limits that keep the classroom a safe and purposeful space for all its members. Chow et al. (2024) observed that a focused environment with clear social and behavioural expectations provides a secure setting within which students learn to manage their emotions and navigate conflict, a function that is especially important for learners with special educational needs who require the additional security of structure to participate meaningfully. In a landmark field experiment, Okonofua et al. (2016) found that a brief intervention encouraging teachers to adopt an empathic rather than punitive disciplinary mindset nearly halved student suspension rates over an academic year, and that previously suspended students who had been under the empathic-mindset condition no longer rated their teachers as less respectful than their never-suspended peers, demonstrating that the enforcement of boundaries and the maintenance of empathic relationships are mutually reinforcing rather than competing goals. Wilkins et al. (2023) similarly established a direct association between high academic expectations and the relational safety that characterises inclusive, connected school environments, while Margas (2023) and Vantieghem et al. (2023) linked the clarity of classroom norms and teachers' inclusive competences to the broader social climate that either enables or constrains the participation of diverse learners. Chiu et al. (2023) further found that teachers equipped with the professional knowledge and skill to set and maintain clear expectations in diverse classrooms are significantly more confident and effective in inclusive instruction, underscoring that expectation-setting is a teachable professional competence rather than a purely intuitive disposition.

Differentiated instruction, the second strategy of interest, involves the proactive adjustment of content, process,

product, and learning environment in response to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2017). Alnahdi et al. (2022) described differentiation as a comprehensive reconceptualisation of the learning environment that simultaneously honours the individuality of each learner and sustains the structured academic accountability that effective inclusive instruction requires, and found that teachers' implementation of differentiated and individualised practices measurably improved students' perceptions of academic, social, and emotional inclusion, benefits that were most pronounced among students with special educational needs. Nketsia et al. (2024) confirmed that differentiation has achieved broad international consensus as the preeminent inclusive pedagogical approach, while Lindner et al. (2021) documented the breadth of differentiation as a professional strategy spanning grouping, assessment modification, content adjustment, and individualised feedback and support. Celik (2020) found that differentiated instruction transformed classrooms from spaces of passive compliance into ones of active, engaged participation, and Letzel et al. (2020) established that teachers' attitudes toward learner diversity, more than technical skill alone, predict the extent to which they adopt differentiated practices. Pozas et al. (2021, 2022) reported that differentiated instruction produced positive effects on secondary school students' well-being, social inclusion, and academic self-concept, and that teacher interest in the practice is itself a significant predictor of its implementation, while Lindner and Schwab (2020) identified reflective adaptability, the capacity to continuously monitor and adjust instruction in response to student need, as the core disposition underlying effective differentiation. Rajak and Dey (2025), however, cautioned that resource constraints, large class sizes, and limited planning time remain significant barriers to the sustained implementation of differentiation, particularly in under-resourced educational contexts.

Collaborative learning, the third strategy examined in this study, involves students working together in structured groups toward shared academic and social goals, with the teacher deliberately designing, facilitating, and monitoring productive peer interaction (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Stalmach et al. (2024) found that cooperative learning designed to foster positive peer interaction advances academic achievement, social relationships, and motivation simultaneously, confirming that collaboration is not a compromise between learning and inclusion but a strategy that advances both. Garrote et al. (2017) documented that students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms are at persistently higher risk of social exclusion and fewer peer interactions, underscoring the urgency of deliberate, teacher-facilitated collaborative structures to address this pattern. Calandri et al. (2025) found that teacher empathy and emotional support are directly implicated in the quality of collaborative classroom practice, enabling the relationally safe climate within which diverse learners can

participate confidently in group work, while Lindner et al. (2022) confirmed that teachers' active promotion of high-quality peer contact through collaborative structures directly improves the attitudes of typically developing students toward peers with special educational needs. Ainscow and Miles (2008) argued that collaborative learning is among the most powerful tools available to inclusive educators because it repositions the social dynamics of the classroom so that every learner's contribution becomes indispensable, thereby dismantling the stigma associated with difference. Despite these documented benefits, Stalmach et al. (2024) also identified time constraints, curriculum rigidity, and inadequate teacher training as persistent barriers to the effective implementation of collaborative learning, particularly in resource-constrained school contexts such as those that characterise many private secondary schools in Nigeria.

Collectively, the setting of clear expectations and boundaries, the adoption of differentiation, and the promotion of collaborative learning represent complementary strategies through which teachers translate the abstract ideal of balancing empathy and authority into concrete, observable classroom practice. This study, therefore, examined the extent to which these three strategies balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Inclusive education requires teachers in private secondary schools to accommodate students with varying abilities, disabilities, and learning styles while simultaneously maintaining the order and structure necessary for effective learning. Among the most critical challenges this presents is that of balancing empathy, which enables teachers to understand and connect with students' diverse emotional and social needs, with authority, which enables them to maintain discipline and manage classroom behaviour effectively. Teachers are routinely confronted with the competing demands of showing compassion toward learners with diverse needs while enforcing the rules and standards that keep the classroom functioning cohesively.

In Rivers State, the practice of inclusive education in private secondary schools is still evolving, and comparatively little is known about the specific, concrete strategies through which teachers manage to balance these two demands. Existing research on classroom management often emphasises empathy or authority in isolation, leaving a gap in the understanding of how teachers integrate both in practice, particularly through such observable strategies as expectation-setting, differentiation, and collaborative learning. This gap is of practical concern because a failure to balance empathy and authority may adversely affect the learning experience, emotional well-being, and academic success of students, particularly those with special

educational needs. Osuji and Semenitari (2024) found that school administrators' strategies for implementing the National Policy on Inclusive Education in secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis remain uneven, a finding corroborated by their follow-up study (Osuji & Semenitari, 2025), which showed that administrators' perceived implementation strategies vary considerably across schools. This unevenness is consistent with broader evidence that the successful implementation of reforms in Rivers State-owned educational institutions depends heavily on how well change and innovation are managed at the institutional level (Nwuke & Osuji, 2024), and that even well-resourced technological interventions in Rivers State schools require deliberate institutional supervision to translate into effective classroom practice (Nwuke & Yellowe, 2025). It is against this background that the present study investigated the extent to which the setting of clear expectations and boundaries, the adoption of differentiation, and the promotion of collaborative learning by teachers balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine teachers' strategies for balancing empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Assess the extent to which the setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. Determine the extent to which the adoption of differentiation by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.
3. Find out the extent to which teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does the setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does the adoption of differentiation by teachers balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State?
3. To what extent does teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which the adoption of differentiation by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Ho3: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was appropriate for the study because data was collected from a sample of teachers and principals to describe the strategies adopted by teachers in balancing empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

The study population comprised of 9,778 respondents (1,813 principals and 7,965 instructors) in private secondary schools in Rivers State collected from the National Association of Proprietors of Private Schools (NAPPS), Rivers State Office. The study sample comprised of 85 respondents made up of 10 administrators and 75 instructors selected from five chosen inclusive private secondary schools in Rivers State by purposive sampling technique. The technique was considered adequate as the study focused on inclusive private secondary

schools which are few and contain the qualities important to this investigation.

The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Strategies Adopted by Teachers in Balancing Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms Questionnaire (SATBEAICQ)". The questionnaire was structured on a 4-point rating scale of Very High Extent (4 points), High Extent (3 points), Low Extent (2 points) and Very Low Extent (1 point). The tool was verified by three specialists in the field of Educational Management, Special Needs and Inclusive Education and Measurement and Evaluation from Rivers State University. The internal consistency of the instrument was established by the Cronbach Alpha method on a trial test of 20 teachers and school heads in Enugu State outside the study area, the reliability coefficients of 0.86, 0.76 and 0.82 for the three clusters of the instrument relevant to this study.

The researcher and two research assistants trained in research methodology distributed a total of 85 copies of the questionnaire to the respondents. All 85 copies were successfully retrieved and found usable for data analysis (100% retrieval rate). To answer the study questions, the mean and standard deviation were used. The decision rule was that any item with mean score of 2.50 and above was considered as "High Extent" while mean scores below 2.50 were considered as "Low Extent". The independent t-test statistic was used to assess the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. Null hypotheses were rejected if calculated t-value was greater than the crucial value otherwise they were not discarded.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does the setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Responses on the Extent Setting of Clear Expectations and Boundaries by Teachers Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
1	Teachers in your school clearly communicate classroom expectations and rules to students with diverse needs.	3.30	0.95	High Extent	3.00	1.07	High Extent
2	Teachers consistently enforce classroom boundaries while maintaining a supportive and understanding approach.	3.20	1.03	High Extent	3.20	1.04	High Extent
3	Teachers provide students with clear guidelines on acceptable behaviour in an inclusive classroom.	3.60	0.84	High Extent	3.39	0.75	High Extent
4	Teachers balance setting boundaries with offering personalized support to students with different learning needs.	2.80	1.32	High Extent	3.12	0.99	High Extent

5	Teachers ensure that students understand the consequences of their actions while demonstrating care and empathy.	3.80	0.42	High Extent	3.12	0.99	High Extent
6	Teachers use structured routines and schedules to create a sense of security and respect in the classroom.	3.30	0.95	High Extent	3.25	1.09	High Extent
7	Teachers adapt their approach to setting expectations based on the diverse needs and abilities of students.	2.70	1.34	High Extent	3.20	0.90	High Extent
8	Teachers offer positive reinforcement to encourage students to meet classroom expectations while fostering a compassionate environment.	2.80	1.32	High Extent	3.25	0.93	High Extent
	Grand Mean & S.D.	3.19	1.02		3.19	0.97	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

As shown in Table 1, the mean responses of both principals and teachers on all the eight items were above the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean values of 3.19 for principals and 3.19 for teachers indicated that. This shows that the setting of clear standards and boundaries by instructors greatly balances empathy with power in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State. Thus, the

response to the first research question is that establishing clear standards and boundaries balances empathy with power in inclusive classrooms to a high extent.

Research Question 2: To what extent does the adoption of differentiation by teachers balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Responses on the Extent Adoption of Differentiation by Teachers Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
9	Teachers modify their teaching methods to cater to the diverse learning styles and needs of students in the classroom.	3.30	1.25	High Extent	3.41	0.84	High Extent
10	Teachers use varied instructional strategies to ensure all students, regardless of ability, feel supported and engaged.	3.10	0.99	High Extent	3.05	1.13	High Extent
11	Teachers provide different levels of tasks and assignments to accommodate the varying abilities of students in an inclusive classroom.	3.80	0.42	High Extent	3.32	0.87	High Extent
12	Teachers adjust their communication methods to ensure understanding and empathy for students with different learning needs.	3.30	0.95	High Extent	2.95	1.09	High Extent
13	Teachers create personalized learning opportunities to balance authority with a caring approach for individual students.	3.40	0.70	High Extent	3.09	1.19	High Extent
14	Teachers offer different types of assessments to accommodate students' abilities while maintaining clear expectations.	3.10	0.74	High Extent	3.37	1.02	High Extent
15	Teachers encourage active participation from all students by adapting classroom activities to their strengths and needs.	2.90	1.29	High Extent	3.33	1.08	High Extent
	Grand Mean & S.D.	3.27	0.91		3.22	1.03	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 reveals that the mean responses on items 9-15 for both principals and teachers were above the criterion mean, with an overall mean score of 3.27 for principals and 3.22 for

teachers. This suggests that the amount to which instructors apply differentiation balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers

State. Thus, the response to research question two is that the use of differentiation balances empathy and authority to a high amount in inclusive classrooms.

Research Question 3: To what extent does teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balance empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean Responses on the Extent Teachers' Promotion of Collaborative Learning Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
16	Teachers encourage students to work together in groups, fostering an environment of mutual support and respect.	3.70	0.67	High Extent	3.15	1.11	High Extent
17	Teachers create opportunities for students to collaborate on tasks that require both independent thinking and teamwork.	3.10	0.74	High Extent	3.47	0.89	High Extent
18	Teachers promote a sense of shared responsibility among students, balancing guidance with autonomy.	3.40	0.70	High Extent	3.12	1.16	High Extent
19	Teachers guide group discussions in a way that ensures all students, regardless of ability, are included and heard.	3.10	0.70	High Extent	3.00	1.08	High Extent
20	Teachers monitor group work to ensure that each student contributes equally while providing empathetic support when needed.	2.90	1.10	High Extent	3.37	0.88	High Extent
21	Teachers promote positive peer interactions, encouraging students to help and learn from one another.	3.00	1.15	High Extent	3.11	1.07	High Extent
22	Teachers set clear roles and expectations within group activities to maintain order while encouraging cooperative learning.	2.70	0.95	High Extent	3.47	0.79	High Extent
23	Teachers provide constructive feedback to students during collaborative activities, ensuring the balance of authority and support.	2.60	1.26	High Extent	3.08	1.04	High Extent
	Grand Mean & S.D.	3.06	0.91		3.22	1.00	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 shows that the mean responses of both principals and teachers on items 16-23 exceeded the criterion mean, with grand mean values of 3.06 for principals and 3.22 for teachers. This indicates that, to a high extent, teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State. The answer to research question three, therefore, is that teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms to a high extent.

Hypotheses Testing

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 4: t-test Analysis on Extent to which the Setting of Clear Expectations and Boundaries by Teachers Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Teachers	75	3.19	0.97	83	0.000	1.000	Not Significant
Principals	10	3.19	1.02				

Source: Research Data, 2026

Table 4 shows that the mean rating of teachers (M = 3.19, SD = 0.97) was not significantly different from that of principals (M = 3.19, SD = 1.02), $t(83) = 0.000$, $p = 1.000$. Since the p-

value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not rejected. There is, therefore, no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the

extent to which setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which the adoption of

differentiation by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 5: t-test Analysis on Extent to which Adoption of Differentiation by Teachers Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Teachers	75	3.22	1.03	83	0.146	0.884	Not Significant
Principals	10	3.27	0.91				

Source: Research Data, 2026

Table 5 shows that the mean rating of teachers ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.03$) was not significantly different from that of principals ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(83) = 0.146$, $p = 0.884$. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not rejected. There is, therefore, no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which the adoption of differentiation by teachers

balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Ho3: There is no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 6: t-test Analysis on Extent to which Teachers' Promotion of Collaborative Learning Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Teachers	75	3.22	1.00	83	0.480	0.633	Not Significant
Principals	10	3.06	0.91				

Source: Research Data, 2026

Table 6 shows that the mean rating of teachers ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.00$) was not significantly different from that of principals ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.91$), $t(83) = 0.480$, $p = 0.633$. Since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis was not rejected. There is, therefore, no significant difference in the mean rating of teachers and principals on the extent to which teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

Extent Setting of Clear Expectations and Boundaries by Teachers Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

The result on research question and hypothesis one revealed that, to a high extent, setting of clear expectations and boundaries by teachers balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms, and there was no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers on this strategy. This finding is grounded in Baumrind's Authoritative Style Theory (1966), which holds that the most favourable outcomes are produced by figures who combine high responsiveness with high demandingness rather than emphasising either warmth or control alone. The finding is consistent with Chow et al. (2024), who found that clear social and behavioural expectations provide the secure,

predictable environment within which students, including those with diverse needs, are best able to regulate their behaviour and engage socially and academically. It also agrees with Okonofua et al. (2016), whose empathic-mindset intervention nearly halved suspension rates while restoring previously suspended students' sense of being respected by their teachers, demonstrating that the enforcement of boundaries and the maintenance of empathic relationships reinforce rather than undermine one another. The finding further aligns with Wilkins et al. (2023), who established that high academic expectations coexist with, rather than threaten, the relational safety that defines connected and inclusive school environments.

Extent Adoption of Differentiation by Teachers Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

The finding on research question and hypothesis two showed that the use of differentiation by teachers to a high extent balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms with no significant difference existing between the mean evaluations of principals and teachers. This finding is in agreement with the finding of Alnahdi et al. (2022) who discovered that the use of differentiated and individualised methods by instructors has a measurable positive impact on students' views of academic, social and emotional inclusion, particularly for students with special educational needs. It is

also in line with Nketsia et al. (2024), who have confirmed differentiation as the most dominant inclusive educational technique globally, and with Celik (2020), who found that differentiated instruction transformed classrooms into spaces for active, affectively positive engagement. This is consistent with the findings of Pozas et al. (2021) who found that differentiated instruction positively affects the well-being, social inclusion and academic self-concept of secondary school students and Letzel et al. (2020) who showed that it is the attitudes of teachers to diversity, rather than technical skill alone, that determines the degree of differentiation adopted in practice.

Extent Teachers' Promotion of Collaborative Learning Balances Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms

The result on research question and hypothesis three revealed that, to a high extent, teachers' promotion of collaborative learning balances empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms, with no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers. This finding agrees with Stalmach et al. (2024), who found that well-designed cooperative learning advances academic achievement, social relationships, and motivation simultaneously, and with Johnson and Johnson (2009), whose social interdependence theory established that structured group tasks that link the success of each student to the success of all constitute a form of empathetic authority. The finding is also consistent with Garrote et al. (2017), who documented the persistent social exclusion risk faced by students with special educational needs, underscoring the importance of deliberate, teacher-facilitated collaboration in addressing it, and with Ainscow and Miles (2008), who argued that collaborative learning dismantles the social stigma of difference by making every learner's contribution to the group indispensable. It further aligns with Calandri et al. (2025), who found that teacher empathy and emotional support are directly implicated in the quality of collaborative classroom practice.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the setting of clear expectations and boundaries, the adoption of differentiation, and the promotion of collaborative learning by teachers are, to a high extent, effective strategies for balancing empathy and authority in inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools in Rivers State. The convergence of principals' and teachers' perceptions across all three strategies affirms that these practices are recognised across institutional roles as fundamental to effective inclusive classroom management. When teachers communicate transparent, consistently enforced expectations, proactively adjust instruction to diverse learner profiles, and structure purposeful collaborative activities, they create classrooms in which empathy and authority function as mutually reinforcing, rather than competing, professional commitments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. School owners and administrators of private secondary schools in Rivers State should invest in structured professional development programmes that equip teachers with evidence-based frameworks for simultaneously communicating clear expectations and demonstrating empathic regard for diverse learners.
2. Teachers in inclusive private secondary schools in Rivers State should receive dedicated training in the theory and practice of differentiated instruction, including how to differentiate content, process, product, and learning environment in response to the diverse readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles of students.
3. Teachers in private secondary schools in Rivers State should be trained and supported in the design and facilitation of structured collaborative learning activities that guarantee equitable participation by all learners, including those with special educational needs.

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