

Teachers' Classroom Management Strategies for Inclusive Learner Engagement in Private Secondary Schools in Rivers State

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>The study was on teachers’ classroom management strategies in promoting inclusive learners’ engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State with focus on teachers’ modelling of positive behaviour, consistent and fair discipline and teacher – student relationship. The study was led by three research questions and three associated null hypotheses. The study was anchored on Bandura’s Social Learning Theory. Descriptive survey research design was utilised. The population was 9,778 responders made up of 1,813 principals and 7,965 teachers in private secondary schools in Rivers State. A sample of 85 respondents including 10 principals and 75 instructors was selected from five recognised inclusive private secondary schools using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire entitled "Strategies Adopted by Teachers in Balancing Empathy and Authority in Inclusive Classrooms Questionnaire (SATBEAICQ)" which was constructed on a four-point rating scale. The reliability coefficients of Cronbach's alpha were .84, .79, and .88 for the three clusters of this investigation, suggesting acceptable internal consistency for the instrument. All 85 questionnaires were successfully administered, retrieved and found eligible for analysis, giving a response rate of 100%. The study questions were answered in terms of mean and standard deviation and the hypotheses were tested using independent samples *t*-test at 0.05 level of significance. The findings showed that teachers were generally promoting inclusive learner involvement through modelling positive conduct, consistent and fair disciplinary methods and strong teacher–student connections. The results also showed that the mean ratings of teachers and principals on these classroom management practices were not statistically significant. The study indicated that these strategies are critical to building supportive, inclusive, and engaging learning environments that promote student engagement and learning outcomes. Therefore, it recommended that the owners and administrators of private secondary schools institutionalise continuous professional development, mentoring and reflective practice programmes to enhance teachers’ competencies in modelling positive behaviour, implementing equitable disciplinary practices and fostering trusting relationships that support inclusive education.</i> Keywords: Classroom Management, Learner Engagement, Inclusive Classrooms, Positive Behaviour Modelling, Discipline, Teacher-Student Relationships.
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Introduction

Learner engagement, understood as the extent to which students are behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively invested in classroom activities, is widely recognised as one of the strongest proximal predictors of academic achievement, social development, and school retention (Karasova & Nehyba, 2023). In inclusive classrooms,

where learners bring markedly different abilities, backgrounds, and support needs into the same learning space, engagement cannot be assumed; it must be actively cultivated through the teacher's deliberate classroom management practice. Bandura's (1977b) Social Learning Theory offers a compelling account of how this cultivation

occurs: because much of human behaviour is acquired through the observation and imitation of significant others, the teacher functions as a continuous behavioural reference point whose conduct, whether respectful or dismissive, consistent or erratic, relationally warm or distant, is absorbed by students as an implicit standard for their own participation and conduct in the classroom. Three classroom management strategies are of particular importance in translating this observational mechanism into sustained inclusive engagement: teachers' modelling of positive behaviour, the maintenance of consistent fair discipline, and the deliberate building of strong teacher-student relationships.

Teacher modelling of positive behaviour refers to the deliberate and consistent demonstration by teachers of the social, emotional, and ethical standards they wish to see enacted by their students. Löper and Hellmich (2024), drawing on social referencing theory, found that teachers function as the primary relational reference point in inclusive classrooms, with their observable conduct toward all students, and especially toward those with learning difficulties, continuously used by the rest of the class as an interpretive guide for how to regard and engage with diverse peers. Cañamero-Hernández et al. (2024) similarly established that the qualities of an effective inclusive teacher, empathy, patience, respect, and adaptability, are not privately held dispositions but interpersonally enacted competencies that must be visibly modelled in the daily life of the classroom. Llorent et al. (2024), in a multilevel study involving 294 teachers and 3,550 secondary school students, found that inclusive teaching practice was significantly associated with the development of students' own social and emotional competencies, confirming that a teacher's modelled conduct has direct, measurable consequences for how students learn to engage with one another. Calandri et al. (2025) further confirmed that teachers' modelled emotional intelligence, encompassing empathy and emotional regulation, produces simultaneous gains in classroom management quality and student engagement, while Wilkins et al. (2023) identified the modelling of positive interactions and inclusive language as an evidence-based strategy associated with improved school connectedness among K-12 students.

Consistent fair discipline, the second strategy of interest, concerns the predictable and equitable exercise of teacher authority in ways that maintain classroom order without alienating the very learners whose inclusion is most fragile. The United States Department of Education (2023) has articulated the fair administration of student discipline as a guiding principle for safe, inclusive, and supportive school climates, a position grounded in extensive evidence that disciplinary practices applied consistently and with

sensitivity to students' diverse circumstances are foundational to genuine inclusion. Losen and Skiba (2010) argued that disciplinary systems which apply rules uniformly without accounting for the individual and contextual factors underlying behavioural infractions risk perpetuating the very exclusions that inclusive education seeks to overcome, while Gregory and Fergus (2017) found that schools in which teachers apply rules consistently while demonstrating genuine understanding of students' circumstances report fewer behavioural incidents, stronger student-teacher relationships, and more inclusive classroom climates. Okonofua et al. (2016) demonstrated in a landmark field experiment that a brief intervention encouraging an empathic rather than punitive disciplinary mindset nearly halved student suspension rates over an academic year, a finding subsequently extended by Okonofua et al. (2022) in a larger, multi-city replication that found empathic discipline reduced suspension disparities specifically among the student groups most vulnerable to disproportionate sanctioning. Lodi et al. (2022), in a systematic review of 34 studies, confirmed that restorative disciplinary practices consistently reduce suspensions, improve school climate, and strengthen teacher-student relationships, positioning consistency and fairness as engagement-preserving rather than merely order-preserving classroom management functions.

Teacher-student relationship building, the third strategy examined in this study, is widely established in the literature as the relational infrastructure upon which inclusive learner engagement depends. Hamre and Pianta (2001) demonstrated that early positive teacher-child relationships shape children's academic and behavioural trajectories well into later schooling, while Wubbels et al. (2006), through decades of research on the interpersonal dimensions of classroom management, found that both teacher influence (structure) and proximity (warmth) are independently associated with positive student outcomes, confirming that authority and empathy operate as complements rather than alternatives in the teacher-student relationship. Nicolay et al. (2025) found that a caring and attentive teacher-student relationship is associated with improved student wellbeing, emotion regulation, social inclusion, and motivation, with the strongest effects observed among students with special educational needs, while Shawler et al. (2025) confirmed that the empathic quality of teacher-student interactions directly produces the psychological safety and sense of belonging that inclusive classrooms require for full participation. Aldrup et al. (2022), in a systematic review of teacher empathy, established that the capacity to read and respond sensitively to students' individual signals is a core dimension of relationship-building and, by extension, of professional teaching quality. Endedijk et al. (2022), drawing on 297

studies and nearly 1,500 effect sizes, found that the quality of the teacher-student relationship exerts a demonstrable influence on the quality of peer relationships within the classroom, terming the teacher “the invisible hand” in the classroom’s social fabric, while Rucinski et al. (2024), synthesising evidence from nearly 30,000 students across 87 studies, confirmed that teacher-student relationship quality remains associated with students’ social competence with peers across the full span of schooling, including the secondary level.

Collectively, the modelling of positive behaviour, the maintenance of consistent fair discipline, and the building of strong teacher-student relationships represent three interlocking classroom management strategies through which teachers create the behavioural, relational, and disciplinary conditions for sustained inclusive learner engagement. This study, therefore, examined the extent to which these three strategies promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

Inclusive classrooms in private secondary schools are expected to sustain the active behavioural, emotional, and cognitive participation of every learner, regardless of ability, background, or need. In practice, however, learner disengagement, manifesting as withdrawal, disruptive conduct, absenteeism, or passive non-participation, remains a persistent challenge in classrooms where students with markedly different needs are taught together. Teachers are routinely required to manage this diversity through their own classroom conduct, their disciplinary decisions, and the quality of the relationships they build with individual students, yet comparatively little is known about the extent to which these specific classroom management practices actually sustain engagement among diverse learners.

In Rivers State, the practice of inclusive education in private secondary schools is still evolving, and existing research on classroom management in the state has tended to focus on broad administrative or policy dimensions rather than on the concrete, day-to-day strategies, modelling, discipline, and relationship-building, through which individual teachers either sustain or undermine learner engagement in mixed-ability, inclusive settings. 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. Such unevenness at the administrative level plausibly filters down into the classroom, where the successful translation of inclusive policy into day-to-day teacher practice depends

heavily on how well change and innovation are managed at the institutional level (Nwuke & Osuji, 2024), and where even well-resourced technological or supervisory interventions in Rivers State schools require deliberate institutional oversight to translate into effective classroom practice (Nwuke & Yellowe, 2025). This gap is of practical concern because disengaged learners, particularly those with special educational needs, are at heightened risk of academic underachievement, social isolation, and eventual school withdrawal. It is against this background that the present study investigated the extent to which teachers’ modelling of positive behaviour, consistent fair discipline, and the building of strong teacher-student relationships promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine teachers’ classroom management strategies for inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. assess the extent to which teachers’ modelling of positive behaviour promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. determine the extent to which consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.
3. find out the extent to which teachers’ building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does teachers’ modelling of positive behaviour promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does consistent fair discipline promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State?
3. To what extent does teachers’ building of strong relationships with students promote inclusive learner engagement 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 teachers’ modelling of positive behaviour promotes inclusive learner engagement 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 consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement 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' building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design was adopted because the study collected data from a sample of teachers and principals to describe teachers' classroom management strategies for the engagement of inclusive learners in private secondary schools in Rivers State (Fraenkel et al., 2011).

The population of the survey was 9,778 respondents consisting of 1,813 principals and 7,965 instructors in private secondary schools in Rivers State, obtained 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 Educational Management, Special Needs and Inclusive Education and Measurement and Evaluation of Rivers State University. The internal consistency of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha method on a trial test of 20 teachers and school heads in Enugu State which is outside the study area, which yielded reliability coefficients of 0.84, 0.79 and 0.88 for the three clusters of the instrument relevant to this study.

The researcher and two trained research assistants administered 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 teachers' modelling of positive behaviour promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Responses on the Extent Teachers' Modelling of Positive Behaviour Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
1	Teachers consistently model respectful and considerate behaviour in the classroom, setting an example for students.	2.50	1.35	High Extent	3.05	1.11	High Extent
2	Teachers demonstrate patience and understanding when interacting with students, reinforcing positive behaviour.	3.10	1.20	High Extent	2.77	1.15	High Extent
3	Teachers show how to handle conflicts calmly and fairly, balancing authority with empathy.	3.30	1.06	High Extent	2.89	1.12	High Extent
4	Teachers exhibit positive communication skills that encourage students to express themselves respectfully.	2.70	1.16	High Extent	3.04	1.12	High Extent
5	Teachers model appropriate emotional responses, showing how to manage frustration and disappointment in a constructive way.	3.00	1.05	High Extent	2.99	1.01	High Extent
6	Teachers encourage students to emulate positive behaviours by demonstrating fairness and consistency in their actions.	3.20	1.32	High Extent	3.00	1.10	High Extent

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
7	Teachers actively demonstrate inclusive behaviour, treating all students with fairness, dignity, and understanding.	3.30	0.82	High Extent	2.93	1.22	High Extent
	Grand Mean & S.D.	3.01	1.14		2.95	1.12	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

As shown in Table 1, the mean responses of both principals and teachers on all the seven items were above the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean values were 3.01 and 2.95 for principals and teachers respectively. This means that teachers' example of positive behaviour enhances inclusive student engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State to a large extent. Thus the answer to research question one is that teachers' modelling of positive behaviour fosters inclusive learner engagement to a high extent.

Research Question 2: To what extent does consistent fair discipline promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Responses on the Extent Consistent Fair Discipline Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
8	Teachers apply classroom rules and consequences consistently to all students, regardless of their abilities.	2.90	1.29	High Extent	3.17	1.07	High Extent
9	Teachers ensure that disciplinary actions are fair and just, considering the diverse needs of students in the classroom.	3.00	1.05	High Extent	3.07	1.06	High Extent
10	Teachers maintain a calm and empathetic approach when addressing misbehaviour, balancing authority with understanding.	2.80	1.14	High Extent	2.84	1.23	High Extent
11	Teachers provide clear explanations for disciplinary actions, ensuring students understand the reasoning behind them.	3.30	0.67	High Extent	3.07	1.08	High Extent
12	Teachers handle disciplinary issues with consistency, while taking individual circumstances into account when necessary.	3.10	1.20	High Extent	3.47	0.79	High Extent
13	Teachers balance firm discipline with opportunities for students to express their feelings and perspectives.	3.10	0.74	High Extent	3.17	1.06	High Extent
14	Teachers demonstrate empathy when enforcing rules, showing an understanding of the challenges faced by students with diverse needs.	3.20	1.32	High Extent	3.03	0.96	High Extent
15	Teachers ensure that consequences for misbehaviour are reasonable and aligned with the expectations set for all students in the classroom.	2.70	0.92	High Extent	3.27	0.93	High Extent
	Grand Mean & S.D.	3.01	1.04		3.14	1.02	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 shows that the mean responses of both principals and teachers on all eight items exceeded the criterion mean, with grand mean values of 3.01 for principals and 3.14 for teachers. This indicates that, to a high extent, consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State. The answer to research question two, therefore, is that consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement to a high extent.

Research Question 3: To what extent does teachers' building of strong relationships with students promote inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean Responses on the Extent Teachers' Building of Strong Relationships with Students Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

S/N	Item Statement	Principals = 10			Teachers = 75		
		Mean	S.D	Rmk	Mean	S.D	Rmk
16	Teachers take time to understand the individual needs and challenges of their students, building a foundation of trust and respect.	3.70	0.46	High Extent	3.17	0.95	High Extent
17	Teachers establish open lines of communication with students, encouraging them to share their thoughts and concerns.	3.20	0.98	High Extent	3.27	0.92	High Extent
18	Teachers show genuine care for students' well-being, balancing empathy with maintaining classroom authority.	2.90	0.70	High Extent	3.19	1.01	High Extent
19	Teachers actively listen to students, demonstrating understanding and compassion while maintaining clear expectations.	2.60	1.02	High Extent	2.99	0.99	High Extent
20	Teachers create a supportive classroom environment where students feel valued and safe, enabling effective learning.	2.70	1.10	High Extent	3.00	1.10	High Extent
21	Teachers foster positive teacher-student relationships by offering guidance and support when students face academic or personal challenges.	3.70	0.64	High Extent	3.21	1.00	High Extent
22	Teachers use their relationships with students to promote a sense of responsibility and accountability while showing empathy and understanding.	3.40	0.92	High Extent	2.99	1.05	High Extent
Grand Mean & S.D.		3.17	0.83		3.12	1.00	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 shows that the mean responses of both principals and teachers on all seven items exceeded the criterion mean, with grand mean values of 3.17 for principals and 3.12 for teachers. This indicates that, to a high extent, teachers' building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State. The answer to research question three, therefore, is that teachers' building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement 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 teachers' modelling of positive behaviour promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 4: t-test Analysis on Extent to which Teachers' Modelling of Positive Behaviour Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Teachers	75	2.95	1.12	83	0.159	0.874	Not Significant
Principals	10	3.01	1.14				

Source: Research Data, 2026

Table 4 shows that the mean rating of teachers ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 1.12$) was not significantly different from that of principals ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(83) = 0.159$, $p = 0.874$. 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' modelling of positive behaviour promotes inclusive learner engagement 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 consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 5: t-test Analysis on Extent to which Consistent Fair Discipline Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Teachers	75	3.14	1.02	83	0.378	0.707	Not Significant
Principals	10	3.01	1.04				

Source: Research Data, 2026

Table 5 shows that the mean rating of teachers ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 1.02$) was not significantly different from that of principals ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.04$), $t(83) = 0.378$, $p = 0.707$. 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 consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement 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' building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Table 6: t-test Analysis on Extent to which Teachers' Building of Strong Relationships with Students Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

Status	n	Mean	SD	df	t-value	Sig.	Decision
Teachers	75	3.12	1.00	83	0.151	0.880	Not Significant
Principals	10	3.17	0.83				

Source: Research Data, 2026

Table 6 shows that the mean rating of teachers ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.00$) was not significantly different from that of principals ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.83$), $t(83) = 0.151$, $p = 0.880$. 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' building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement in private secondary schools in Rivers State.

Discussion of Findings

Extent Teachers' Modelling of Positive Behaviour Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

The result on research question and hypothesis one revealed that, to a high extent, teachers' modelling of positive

behaviour promotes inclusive learner engagement, with no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers. This finding is grounded in Bandura's (1977b) Social Learning Theory, which holds that individuals learn not only through direct instruction but through the observation and internalisation of behaviours demonstrated by significant others. In the classroom, the teacher occupies a position of high observational salience, so that the manner in which conflict is handled, difficulty is met, and diverse students are treated is continuously absorbed by the class as a normative standard for engagement. The finding is consistent with Löper and Hellmich (2024), who found that teachers' role-model behaviour and the quality of the student-teacher relationship directly shape students' attitudes toward diverse peers, and with Cañamero-Hernández et al. (2024),

who confirmed that the personal and interpersonal qualities of inclusive teachers must be visibly and consistently enacted rather than merely held as private dispositions. It also aligns with Llorent et al. (2024), whose multilevel study found that inclusive teaching practice is significantly related to the development of students' own social and emotional competencies, and with Calandri et al. (2025), who established that teachers' modelled emotional intelligence produces simultaneous gains in classroom management quality and student engagement.

Extent Consistent Fair Discipline Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

The result on research question and hypothesis two revealed that, to a high extent, consistent fair discipline promotes inclusive learner engagement, with no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers. This finding agrees with Losen and Skiba (2010), who argued that disciplinary systems applying rules uniformly without regard for students' diverse circumstances risk perpetuating the very exclusions that inclusive education seeks to overcome, and with Gregory and Fergus (2017), who found that schools in which teachers apply rules consistently while demonstrating genuine understanding of students' circumstances report fewer behavioural incidents and more inclusive classroom climates. It is further consistent with Okonofua et al. (2016) and their subsequent multi-city replication (Okonofua et al., 2022), which found that empathic, non-punitive disciplinary approaches significantly reduce suspension rates and disciplinary disparities among the most vulnerable student groups, and with Lodi et al. (2022), whose systematic review of restorative disciplinary practices confirmed consistent improvements in school climate and teacher-student relationships. The finding also reflects the guiding principle articulated by the United States Department of Education (2023), which identifies the fair administration of discipline as foundational to safe and inclusive school climates.

Extent Teachers' Building of Strong Relationships with Students Promotes Inclusive Learner Engagement

The result on research question and hypothesis three revealed that, to a high extent, teachers' building of strong relationships with students promotes inclusive learner engagement, with no significant difference between the mean ratings of principals and teachers. This finding is consistent with Hamre and Pianta (2001), who demonstrated that early positive teacher-child relationships shape children's academic and behavioural trajectories well into later schooling, and with Wubbels et al. (2006), whose research on the interpersonal dimensions of classroom management found that both teacher structure and warmth are independently associated with positive student

outcomes. It also aligns with Nicolay et al. (2025), who found that caring and attentive teacher-student relationships are associated with improved wellbeing, motivation, and social inclusion, particularly among students with special educational needs, and with Shawler et al. (2025), who confirmed that empathic teacher-student interactions produce the psychological safety that inclusive participation requires. The finding further agrees with Aldrup et al. (2022), Endedijk et al. (2022), and Rucinski et al. (2024), whose systematic and meta-analytic evidence collectively establishes teacher-student relationship quality as a sustained predictor of students' social competence and engagement across the full span of schooling.

Conclusion

The study concluded that teachers' modelling of positive behaviour, consistent fair discipline, and the building of strong teacher-student relationships are, to a high extent, effective classroom management strategies for promoting inclusive learner engagement 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 central to effective inclusive classroom management. When teachers consistently model respectful conduct, apply discipline fairly and predictably, and invest deliberately in individual relationships with students, they create the behavioural, relational, and disciplinary conditions under which diverse learners remain actively engaged in classroom life.

Recommendations

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

1. School administrators and principals of private secondary schools in Rivers State should establish institutional norms that explicitly recognise teachers' conduct as the primary modelled curriculum of the inclusive classroom, supporting teachers through mentoring and reflective practice to sustain the emotional regulation and respectful communication that effective modelling requires.
2. School management and teachers in private secondary schools in Rivers State should transition from predominantly punitive and reactive disciplinary practices toward consistent, transparent, and empathically grounded disciplinary frameworks that preserve rather than undermine learner engagement.
3. Principals and school management of private secondary schools in Rivers State should formally recognise teacher-student relationship building as a professional priority, allocating structured time for teachers to invest in

knowing their students individually as a foundation for sustained inclusive engagement.

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