



Evidence-Based Teaching Practices in Autism Education Examining Teacher Knowledge, Use, and Professional Characteristics

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Abstract

The current study focused on teachers' knowledge of and reported use of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in autism education and the differences between those results based on teacher characteristics. A quantitative, cross-sectional design was used in the study, and data from 369 teachers who have experience in teaching autistic students were used in the study. The information comprised EBP knowledge and use scores, as well as teacher characteristics of teaching position, education level, autism specific teaching experience, initial teacher education, continuing professional development, training intensity, school characteristics and access to professional support. There were significant differences between practices in descriptive data, comparisons of groups and post hoc analyses. Teachers reported higher knowledge and use of familiar, classroom-based interventions (such as visual supports, social stories, reinforcement, and modelling, prompting), and less specialized interventions were less familiar or less used. There was a significant amount of variation across all of these factors (teaching role, autism-specific experience, training intensity, CPD, and professional support), and those teachers with more autism specific experience or more intensive training, or with more frequent autism specific professional support, had better EBP outcomes. The results overall underscore the need for autism-specific teacher preparation, ongoing teacher professional development, and frequent autism-specific support from specialists to enhance EBP knowledge and implementation.

Keywords:

- Autism education
- Evidence-based practices
- Teacher knowledge
- Professional development
- Teacher characteristics

1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental disorder that presents with a range of differences in social communication, social interaction, behaviors, and patterns of interest that can result in a variety of educational needs in students with ASD. In school, students need individualized approaches, structured learning environments, communication assistance, behavioral intervention, and inclusive classroom modifications. Thus, the role of teachers is crucial in the field of implementing knowledge of autism in education in the classroom. Past studies have shown that teachers' knowledge, readiness, and comfort with autism can impact the quality of support they offer autistic students (Gomez-Mari et al., 2021; Hamrick et al., 2021). Teachers' perceptions of autism and their capacity to build supportive relationships and to design appropriate classroom strategies are also important factors in effective inclusion (Bolourian et al., 2022). Thus, there is a need to enhance the knowledge and competence of teachers in autism education in inclusive and special education systems (Derguy et al., 2023).

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are educational and behavioral strategies that have been shown to be effective in improving important outcomes in autistic learners through systematic research. The most common methods are applied behavior analysis (ABA), reinforcement, prompting, discrete trial training, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), social stories, modelling, visual supports, and structured teaching methods like TEACCH. As has been demonstrated by research, teachers have very different knowledge and understandings of the strategies. For instance, Fennell and Dillenburger found that teachers varied in their knowledge of ABA and Garrard et al. found that translating research-supported practices into real classrooms is still a challenge (Fennell & Dillenburger, 2018; Garrard et al., 2021). Teacher beliefs about EBPs are also considered significant as attitudes about evidence-based strategies impact implementation (Basckin et al., 2021). However, attitudes of general and special education teachers towards EBPs also indicate the importance of professional context for autism education (Garman-McClaine, 2024).

Understanding of an evidence-based intervention does not always lead to consistent use in the classroom. A teacher can identify or comprehend an intervention but face challenges with time, materials, training, or school culture, or feel the intervention may be too difficult or not confident enough in the intervention. Dynia et al. found that there was variation in the use of EBPs among early childhood special education teachers, and Fishman et al. found that intentions to use best practices can lead to meaningful information about the actual implementation behavior (Dynia et al., 2020; Fishman et al., 2018). In addition, recent evidence indicates that teachers already implement some of the evidence-based practices without necessarily being aware of the formal terms (Dervan et al., 2025). These studies in various educational settings also suggest that knowledge and practice were found to be in deficit, highlighting the need for considering both aspects separately (Alatifi et al., 2023; Alhossein, 2021).

Professional characteristics including education level, teaching role, years of experience, autism-specific teaching experience, initial teacher preparation, and continuing professional development have an influence on teachers' knowledge and use of EBPs. Differences in knowledge and implementation of autism-related EBPs were found to be related to teacher characteristics suggesting that professional background shapes classroom implementation (Barry et al., 2022). Professional training can enhance readiness by adding to conceptual understanding as well as to practical readiness. Implementation is also influenced by context factors such as access to specialist support, organisational resources, collaboration and opportunities for ongoing professional learning. In addition, the barriers and facilitators reported by teachers who work with autistic students highlight that the interaction between individual and environmental factors impacts the use of EBP (Harbin et al., 2026).

While considerable research has explored teacher knowledge, attitudes, and implementation of autism-related

practices, further research is warranted to better understand the relationships between professional characteristics and knowledge and reported implementation of evidence-based practices. The goals of the current study are to evaluate teachers' knowledge of evidence-based practices in autism education, identify the extent to which teachers report using evidence-based practices, examine the relationship between teacher knowledge and reported use of evidence-based practices and examine professional characteristics that are related to teacher knowledge and implementation of evidence-based practices in the area of autism education.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research design was a quantitative, cross-sectional data research design to investigate knowledge and reported use of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in autism education by teachers and their association with professional characteristics. A current survey of teachers who had experience working with autistic students was conducted.

2.2 Dataset and Study Participants

The dataset consisted of 369 records of teachers and was created to study variations in EBP knowledge and application among teacher characteristics. Participants were in various teaching positions, levels of education, special training experience in autism, training background and school environment (Barry et al., 2022). The professional development and access to specialist support services were also included in the dataset.

2.3 Study Variables

The knowledge of EBPs among teachers and the reported EBPs use were the primary outcome variables and were summarized with the composite measures of MeanKnowledge and MeanUse. Specific variables related to the practice included ABA, prompting, reinforcement, PECS, social stories, TEACCH, modelling, visual supports, discrete trial teaching, and task analysis. Professional characteristics were age, sex, teaching position, education level, years of autism teaching experience, initial teacher education, continuing professional development, hours of training, school characteristics, and access to professional support.

2.4 Data Preparation

The data were filtered to remove missing data, duplicate data, coding errors and implausible data. Categorical variables were checked and recoded where necessary and composite knowledge and use scores were verified. Before inferential analysis, variable distributions were also checked.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Categorical variables were summarized using frequencies and percentages, whereas means and standard deviations were used to describe continuous and composite variables. The relationship between teacher knowledge and reported EBP use was measured using correlation analysis. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used to compare the use and knowledge among professional groups. The analyses with multiple linear regression were performed on MeanKnowledge and MeanUse separately in order to determine the significant professional predictors. The statistical significance was predetermined to be $p < 0.05$.

3. Results

3.1 Professional Characteristics of Participants

The research involved 369 teachers in mainstream primary schools. The highest percentage of the professional groups was general education teachers, then special education teachers and autism class teachers. The sample reflected a wide range of ages, educational levels, experience of working with autism, and professional training mostly female. Access to autism-specific continuing professional development (CPD) and external professional support was also highly varied. Table 1 provides an overview of the main demographic and professional features of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Sex	Male	44	12.2
	Female	311	86.1
	Prefer not to say	6	1.7
Teaching position	General education teacher	207	57.8
	Special education teacher	62	17.3
	Learning support teacher	18	5.0
	Principal-teacher	28	7.8

	Autism class teacher	43	12.0
Education level	Bachelor's degree	140	39.1
	Professional master's in education	35	9.8
	Postgraduate certificate/diploma	117	32.7
	Master's degree	Remaining participants	—

3.2 Teacher Knowledge of Evidence-Based Practices

There was a wide range of teacher knowledge of individual autism practices. Among the evidence-based approaches, knowledge was highest for visual supports ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.10$), social stories/social narratives ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.09$), reinforcement ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.19$), exercise ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.14$), social skills training ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.28$), modelling ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.38$), and prompting ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 1.30$). Knowledge about some more specialized practices, on the contrary, was at a rather low level. In total, 28 of the 37 autism practices evaluated were in the “very little” and “slight” knowledge levels. Overall, Figure 1 shows a higher level of knowledge for items that are easily implemented in the classroom (e.g., visual supports and social stories) and lower scores for more specialized behavioral interventions.

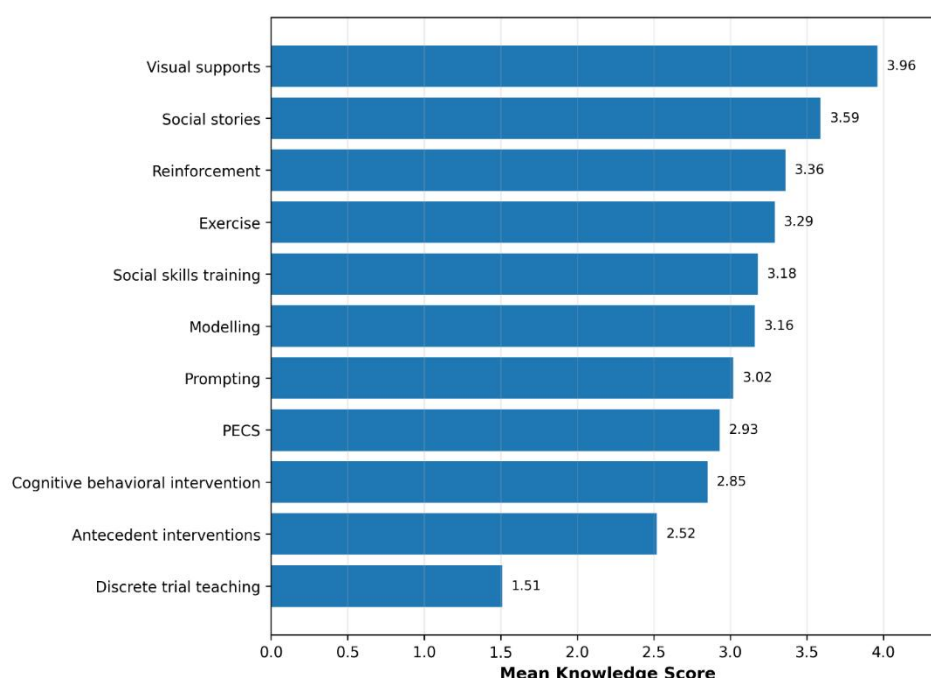


Figure 1. Mean Teacher Knowledge Scores for Selected Autism Evidence-Based Practices

3.3 Reported Use of Evidence-Based Practices

Use of the practices in the classroom also varied widely across reported uses. The six practices scores had a mean score of 3.00 or higher, reflecting some use of the practice. Social stories/social narratives were the most frequently used practice ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.21$), followed by reinforcement ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.28$), exercise ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.24$), modelling ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.33$), and sensory rooms ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.42$). Four of these were identified as evidence-based: social stories, reinforcement, exercise and modelling. Some other EBPs, such as discrete trial teaching, naturalistic interventions, functional communication, time delay, and video modelling, were rarely used. Table 2 reveals that more familiar special intervention practices typically were more frequently reported to be used in the classroom, while less familiar practices were used less frequently.

Table 2. Knowledge and Reported Use of Selected Autism Practices

Practice	EBP Status	Knowledge M (SD)	Use M (SD)
Visual supports	EBP	3.96 (1.10)	—
Social stories/social narratives	EBP	3.59 (1.09)	3.44 (1.21)

Reinforcement	EBP	3.36 (1.19)	3.41 (1.28)
Exercise	EBP	3.29 (1.14)	3.34 (1.24)
Modelling	EBP	3.16 (1.38)	3.16 (1.33)
Prompting	EBP	3.02 (1.30)	—
PECS	EBP	2.93 (1.30)	2.39 (1.33)
Cognitive behavioral intervention	EBP	2.85 (1.13)	2.59 (1.26)
Antecedent interventions	EBP	2.52 (1.32)	2.37 (1.37)
Discrete trial teaching	EBP	1.51 (0.99)	1.41 (0.90)

3.4 Knowledge–Use Pattern Across Evidence-Based Practices

There was considerable agreement in knowledge and reported use between the practice-specific scores as shown in the descriptive comparison. Social stories, reinforcement, exercise and modelling had comparatively high knowledge and high implementation scores. In contrast, the discrete trial teaching and some highly targeted behavioral practices had low scores for both dimensions. While there is an important knowledge-to-practice relationship, no unsupported correlation statistic is introduced because the published analysis was not reported. In Figure 2 a descriptive trend of increasing familiarity related to increasingly frequent use is reflected for all the items, particularly for modelling, exercise, and reinforcement.

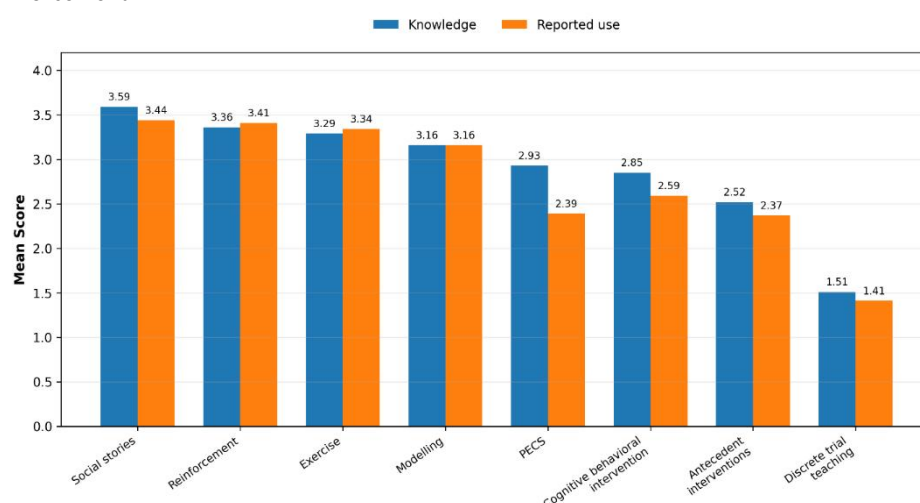


Figure 2. Comparison of Mean Knowledge and Reported Use Scores Across Selected EBPs

3.5 Knowledge and Use Across Professional Characteristics

There were substantial variations in knowledge and use across some of the professional attributes. Teacher position was significantly associated with both knowledge, $F(4,203) = 6.20$, $p < .001$, and use, $F(4,203) = 6.71$, $p < .001$. The scores for general education teachers were the lowest scores for knowledge ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 0.76$) and use ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 0.48$), while autism class teachers had the highest scores for knowledge ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.98$) and use ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 0.70$). There were no statistically significant differences by education level for either knowledge or use. Higher levels of autism-specific experience, training, and CPD exposure and professional support were generally related to more positive EBP outcomes. As shown in Table 3, there is a clear professional role gradient with autism class and special education teachers indicating more knowledge than general education teachers and reporting higher use of EBP.

Table 3. Knowledge and Use of EBPs According to Teaching Position

Teaching Position	Knowledge M (SD)	Use M (SD)
General education teacher	2.31 (0.75)	2.14 (0.64)
Special education teacher	2.78 (0.87)	2.51 (0.73)

Learning support teacher	2.69 (0.58)	2.41 (0.57)
Principal-teacher	2.82 (0.84)	2.54 (0.70)
Autism class teacher	3.02 (0.98)	2.80 (0.70)
ANOVA	$F(4,203) = 6.20, p < .001$	$F(4,203) = 6.71, p < .001$

3.6 Influence of Training, Experience, and Professional Support

The features that were identified as being particularly important were training and access to professional support. The teachers who had received 9 or more hours of autism training during initial teacher education scored significantly higher than the teachers who had received 1–3 hours ($M = 3.32, SD = 0.59$ versus $M = 2.45, SD = 0.84$, respectively; $p < .001$). Their use scores were also higher ($M = 3.03$ vs. $2.16, p < .001$). Likewise, teachers who had received the 30+ hours of CPD expressed higher levels of knowledge and use than those who had received up to 0-5 hours of CPD. Professional support was positively correlated with knowledge, with teachers who received support seven or more times a year having means of 3.79 and teachers who had no professional support having means of 2.24; and with means of use, 3.39 and 2.03 respectively. Figure 3 illustrates an increasing trend in EBP knowledge and use as frequency of professional support increased, with the highest levels of knowledge and use among teachers who received support seven or more times per year.

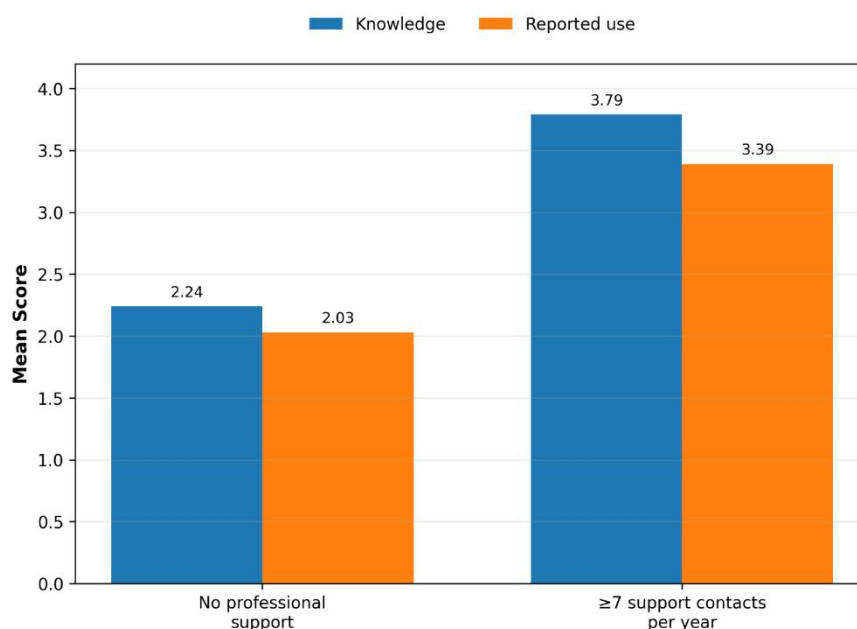


Figure 3. Mean EBP Knowledge and Use According to Frequency of Professional Support

3.7 Summary of Key Findings

Overall, teachers were more familiar with and more likely to use well-known, classroom-based EBPs than specific behavioral interventions. Important sources of variation included professional role, autism-specific experience, training intensity, CPD and access to external professional support. Bonferroni comparisons were particularly used to highlight differences between general education teachers and autism/special education teachers and between teachers receiving limited versus extensive training and professional support. Table 4 also reveals that the differences were largest for intensive autism-specific training and frequent professional support, indicating that the greater the amount of professional learning opportunities, the higher the EBP knowledge and classroom implementation.

Figure 4 summarizes the overall results and illustrates that higher autism-specific specialization, greater training intensity, and frequent access to professional support were consistently associated with stronger EBP knowledge and reported use.

Table 4. Major Significant Post-Hoc Comparisons for EBP Knowledge and Use

Factor	Comparison	Outcome	Mean Difference Pattern	p-value
Teaching position	General vs. special education	Knowledge	2.31 vs. 2.78	.014

Teaching position	General vs. autism class	Knowledge	2.31 vs. 3.02	.001
Teaching position	General vs. autism class	Use	2.14 vs. 2.80	<.001
Autism experience	1–3 vs. 12–15 years	Knowledge	2.31 vs. 3.09	.005
ITE training	1–3 vs. ≥9 hours	Knowledge	2.45 vs. 3.32	<.001
ITE training	1–3 vs. ≥9 hours	Use	2.16 vs. 3.03	<.001
CPD	0–5 vs. 30+ hours	Knowledge	2.27 vs. 2.97	.002
CPD	0–5 vs. 30+ hours	Use	2.08 vs. 2.71	<.001
Professional support	None vs. ≥7 times/year	Knowledge	2.24 vs. 3.79	.003
Professional support	None vs. ≥7 times/year	Use	2.03 vs. 3.39	.001

4. Discussion

The results showed that teachers' knowledge and reported use of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in autism education varied widely by practice and professional characteristics. Generally, scores for knowledge and use of more familiar classroom-based strategies such as visual supports, social stories, reinforcement, modelling, and prompting were higher, while more specialized interventions were less familiar and less used. Also, differences were found according to teaching role, autism-specific experience, professional training, continuing professional development (CPD) and access to specialist support.

Their increased knowledge of commonly used classroom strategies indicates they are more available, visible in schools, and have been more exposed in teacher preparation and professional development. Past studies have also demonstrated that teachers' understanding of autism and autism interventions is highly varied and depends on how teachers were prepared and the learning environment (Hernández-González et al., 2022). Contemporary evidence reviews have also identified a wide variety of validated autism interventions, which means that teachers need to traverse a growing and increasingly complex evidence base (Hume et al., 2021). Thus, the extent of knowledge regarding specific interventions may be due to lack of formal education and not a lack of relevance.

Feasibility is important in implementation because of the higher reported use of practical and easily integrated strategies. Teachers are more likely to implement interventions that fit more easily into their classroom routines and do not need as many special resources. The quality of training and implementation support available within the school however, can impact intervention fidelity (Law et al., 2019). Fidelity is also key, as consistent use of high-quality teaching sequences is linked to improved delivery of intervention for autistic learners (Ruble et al., 2020). Teachers' intentions to implement inclusive practices can also be influenced by perceptions of the needs of students and classroom difficulties (Jury et al., 2021).

The descriptive pattern indicates that the more the teacher knew about EBP, the more often they used it; however, increased knowledge does not necessarily translate into use. Teachers can know about a practice, but still lack confidence, time, workload, resources, or school-level barriers. Teacher self-efficacy is especially relevant as their self-confidence in instructing autistic children and youth can impact their desire to use specialised strategies (Love et al., 2019). Implementing research also highlights the need for more than just awareness to shift evidence into routine education (Lee et al., 2025).

Important sources of variation were teaching role, autism-specific experience, intensity of training, professional support and CPD. More preparation and more specialist exposure tended to be associated with more knowledge and implementation of autism. This is reinforced by research that the use of EBPs by novice teachers is related to preparation and perceptions of their professional competence (Lukins et al., 2023). Characteristics of a person and a group can influence the adoption of EBPs in public schools (Locke et al., 2019).

The current results align with prior research indicating that both teacher and organizational conditions are important to the implementation process in schools. Implementation climate has been linked to program fidelity and student outcomes in autism-support classrooms and leadership and supportive school environments to strengthening capacity for sustaining implementation (Kratz et al., 2019; Melgarejo et al., 2020). Evidence from public elementary schools also shows that teachers and paraeducators are not consistent in implementing EBPs when working with autistic students in inclusive settings (Locke et al., 2022).

The results suggest the need for greater autism-specific material in initial teacher education and continuing CPD. The focus of training should not only be on awareness of EBPs but also on practical application, fidelity, and classroom adaptation. There is a need for regular access to specialist professionals and implementation environments that are supportive of the school. In school contexts, the importance of teacher support to autistic students has been shown to be valuable through similar evidence-based approaches (Nagpal et al., 2025).

Use of EBP was based on self-report and may not accurately capture implementation of the EBP in the classroom or intervention fidelity. Also, the cross-sectional nature is another limitation in causal interpretation. Future studies should include direct observation of the classroom, longitudinal designs, fidelity measures, and student outcomes. Intervention studies that investigate how structured training, coaching, leadership support, and implementation climate relate to sustained and effective EBP use would offer more compelling evidence.

5. Conclusion

The present study explored teachers' knowledge and whether they reported using evidence-based practices in autism education and how this differed by professional characteristics. The results indicated that teachers' knowledge was generally stronger and more prevalent with familiar and classroom-based procedures including using visual supports, social stories, reinforcement, modelling and prompting, and less prevalent and less known with more specialized procedures. The results further showed that greater EBP knowledge and use was linked to the profession, autism experience, training intensity, continued professional development, and access to specialist support. The value of special preparation and continued professional learning was highlighted as teachers in autism-specific and special education settings showed higher levels of knowledge and implementation when compared to those in general education settings. The overall pattern indicated that the more knowledge that people reported, the more use they reported, but that knowledge alone is not be enough to guarantee consistent classroom implementation. Limited resources, low confidence and/or organizational buy-in, and practical barriers can persist as challenges to EBP implementation. The results indicate that additional content on autism is required in initial teacher education, and that frequent CPD, coaching, and enhanced multidisciplinary support provision are required. Further studies are recommended to investigate implementation fidelity and the impact of teacher EBP knowledge and use in student-level outcomes using longitudinal or observational designs.

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