



Analysing Constructivist Teaching Approaches to Support Cognitive and Emotional Needs in Mentally Ill Learners

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Abstract:

Mental illness presents significant barriers to learning, often affecting both cognitive processing and emotional regulation. Traditional pedagogical models that rely heavily on rote memorization and standardized instruction fail to adequately support the diverse needs of mentally ill learners. In contrast, constructivist teaching approaches emphasize learner-centred, experiential, and reflective methods, offering an alternative framework for inclusive education. This study explores how constructivist teaching strategies can address the cognitive and emotional needs of learners with mental health challenges, fostering holistic development and meaningful engagement. The research employed a qualitative methodology based on document analysis of published academic literature, policy reports, and empirical studies in the fields of education, psychology, and mental health. Three objectives guided the study: (i) to examine how constructivist teaching supports the cognitive needs of mentally ill learners, (ii) to investigate its role in addressing emotional needs, and (iii) to evaluate the effectiveness of constructivist approaches in integrating cognitive and emotional development. Findings indicate that constructivist strategies-such as scaffolding, inquiry-based learning, and dialogic teaching-enhance comprehension, adaptability, and reflective thinking, thereby reducing cognitive strain. Simultaneously, emotionally responsive practices such as validation of learner experiences, peer collaboration, and the creation of safe learning environments promote psychological security and motivation. Moreover, the integration of cognitive and emotional dimensions through experiential and project-based learning demonstrates strong potential for holistic learner development. The study concludes that constructivist teaching approaches provide effective pathways for inclusive and transformative education for mentally ill learners, contributing to both academic achievement and emotional resilience.

Keywords: *Constructivist Teaching, Emotional Needs, Inclusive Education, Mentally Ill Learners, Qualitative Study.*

1. Introduction:

Constructivist teaching approaches have long been recognized for their emphasis on learner-centred pedagogy, critical inquiry, and social collaboration (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). In constructivism, knowledge is not transmitted from teacher to student but actively constructed through interaction with

content, peers, and real-world contexts (Fosnot, 2013). Such pedagogies align with progressive educational reforms that value autonomy, problem-solving, and reflective learning. However, applying constructivist principles to learners with mental illness presents both challenges and opportunities. Mental illness among learners is a pressing concern worldwide, with the World Health Organization (2022) highlighting the growing prevalence of anxiety, depression, and related disorders in adolescents and young adults. Learners with mental health challenges often experience cognitive difficulties such as reduced attention span, memory limitations, and executive dysfunction (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Additionally, emotional vulnerabilities such as anxiety, stress, or trauma histories may compromise classroom engagement. For educators, these difficulties complicate the implementation of open-ended, inquiry-driven pedagogy typical of constructivist practice.

Yet, constructivist teaching also holds promise. By emphasizing collaboration, dialogue, and personalized learning, constructivism can provide supportive environments that foster resilience and emotional regulation (Bruner, 1961; Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Research demonstrates that inquiry-based and problem-solving approaches enhance self-efficacy and motivation, which are crucial for learners with mental illness who often struggle with diminished self-belief (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, the social dimension of constructivist learning—such as group projects or peer mentoring—creates opportunities for belonging and connectedness, counteracting isolation and stigma (CASEL, 2020). Nevertheless, constructivist methods are not without criticism. Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) argue that minimal-guidance instruction imposes excessive cognitive load, particularly problematic for learners with mental health-related executive function challenges. Therefore, scholars suggest high-guidance constructivism—balancing inquiry with scaffolding and structured supports—as a viable alternative (Sweller, 2010; Hattie, 2009).

Given this tension, it becomes vital to analyse how constructivist teaching can be adapted to address both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of mental illness. This study responds to the gap by synthesizing literature through document analysis, focusing on constructivist strategies that simultaneously support cognitive development and emotional well-being in mentally ill learners. The study contributes to contemporary discourse by integrating perspectives from constructivist pedagogy, mental health education, and trauma-informed teaching practices. In doing so, it seeks to outline pedagogical approaches that are inclusive, empathetic, and academically rigorous, while also highlighting systemic challenges such as teacher preparedness and institutional resources.

2. Review of literature:

Bruner (1966) described constructivism as a theory that views learning as an active, dynamic process where individuals construct new ideas and concepts by building on prior knowledge. He emphasized that learning is not passive but involves active engagement and social interaction, enabling learners to generate meaning through their experiences. According to Bruner, this process highlights the importance of connecting new information with existing understanding, making learning both personal and evolving. His perspective underscores the learner's active role in knowledge construction and the social context in which meaningful learning takes place.

Piaget (1971) emphasized that constructivism allows individuals to develop knowledge by systematically organizing, describing, and adapting their experiences. Through this process, learners actively restructure information in personalized ways, integrating prior knowledge with formal instruction. His theory underscores that cognitive development occurs in distinct, sequential stages, each building upon the previous, until a child's thinking eventually aligns with that of an adult. This perspective highlights the

dynamic and developmental nature of learning, where understanding evolves through continuous interaction between experiences and cognitive growth, ultimately shaping intellectual maturity.

Priyamvada (2018) examined the constructivist approach in education, focusing on its theory, classroom practices, and broader implications. The study highlighted key elements of constructivism, such as the influence of prior knowledge, social interaction, and cognitive conflict in shaping learning. It also reviewed instructional strategies and assessment methods consistent with this paradigm while addressing challenges and debates around its implementation. By analysing both theoretical perspectives and empirical findings, the paper offered practical insights into overcoming barriers and enhancing constructivist teaching. Overall, it provides a valuable reference for educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to foster meaningful learning experiences.

Chen et al. (2022) investigated the relationships among teachers' instructional beliefs, perceived value, psychosocial stress, and their willingness to participate in classroom observations. Using data from 349 respondents analysed through confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling, the study found that constructivist teaching beliefs were positively associated with valuing observation and feedback, but negatively linked to psychosocial stress. Moreover, perceived value significantly influenced teachers' continued intention to engage in observations, while psychosocial stress showed no such effect. These findings suggest strategies for motivating educators who may be reluctant to share teaching practices through classroom observation.

Chand (2023) explores constructivism in education by analysing the contributions of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. The study emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge through experiences, using prior understanding as a base for new learning. Constructivism positions teachers as facilitators, fostering student-centred approaches where learning is active, reflective, collaborative, inquiry-driven, and continuously evolving. Rooted in cognitive science, constructivist theory draws from Piaget's cognitive development model, Vygotsky's socio-historical perspective, and Bruner's discovery learning framework. The article highlights how these theorists shaped the foundations of constructivism, providing valuable insights into creating meaningful and dynamic educational experiences.

The reviewed studies highlight significant insights into constructivism's theoretical foundations, practical applications, and psychological underpinnings through the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and contemporary perspectives. However, a research gap exists in connecting these foundational theories with current classroom realities across diverse cultural and educational contexts. While prior research emphasizes learner-centred approaches and teacher beliefs, limited attention is given to how constructivist practices adapt to modern challenges such as digital learning, large classrooms, and varied learner needs. Further exploration is required to integrate traditional constructivist principles with contemporary pedagogical innovations for more effective and inclusive educational practices.

3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for multiple reasons. First, it addresses an underexplored intersection: the relationship between constructivist pedagogy and the needs of mentally ill learners. While both areas—constructivism and mental health—are individually well-documented, their integration remains fragmented in educational research. Second, the study emphasizes the importance of aligning cognitive development with emotional well-being. For learners with mental illness, addressing only one dimension is insufficient, as cognitive performance is deeply intertwined with psychological health. Third, the findings have practical implications for classroom teaching. By identifying strategies that promote both intellectual growth and emotional safety, the study provides teachers with actionable guidance on inclusive pedagogy. Fourth, the

study contributes to policy discourse on mental health in education, underlining the need for teacher training programs that incorporate mental health literacy and constructivist methods. Finally, this research expands the theoretical landscape by proposing constructivist adaptations that accommodate the cognitive load and affective needs of mentally ill learners, offering a framework that could be tested in future empirical studies.

4. Objectives of the Study:

- To study how constructivist methods support the emotional needs of mentally ill learners.
- To explore the integration of constructivist pedagogy with trauma-informed and inclusive educational practices.
- To study the constructivist teaching approaches that addresses the cognitive challenges of mentally ill learners.

5. Methodology:

This study adopted a qualitative research design using document-based analysis to explore the role of constructivist teaching approaches in addressing the cognitive and emotional needs of mentally ill learners. Secondary data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, and reports published in the domains of education, psychology, and mental health. The sources were selected based on their relevance to constructivist pedagogy, inclusive education, and mental health support in learning contexts. A thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2014) was employed to identify recurring themes and patterns related to cognitive and emotional development in mentally ill learners through constructivist methods such as scaffolding, inquiry-based learning, and experiential teaching. The qualitative synthesis ensured that multiple perspectives were integrated, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topic while maintaining academic rigor.

6. Analysis:

6.1. To examine how constructivist methods support the emotional needs of mentally ill learners:

Emotion and cognition are deeply intertwined, and constructivist pedagogy addresses the affective domain by promoting engagement, autonomy, and connectedness. Mentally ill learners often struggle with low self-efficacy, social isolation, and heightened anxiety (WHO, 2022). Document evidence shows that constructivist classrooms-when infused with social and emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices-provide emotional safety and belonging.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory explains that learners persist when they believe they can succeed. Constructivist classrooms cultivate self-efficacy by offering mastery-oriented feedback and opportunities for revision rather than one-shot evaluation (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). This iterative process reassures learners with anxiety and depression, allowing them to build confidence incrementally.

Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Constructivist pedagogy inherently provides autonomy-supportive environments through choice-based tasks and open-ended inquiry. For mentally ill learners, structured autonomy (e.g., choosing topics within defined boundaries) empowers agency without overwhelming them. Peer collaboration further nurtures relatedness, reducing feelings of isolation common in students with mental health conditions (CASEL, 2020).

The inclusion of emotional literacy practices-such as reflective journals, mood check-ins, or group sharing circles-integrates SEL into constructivist classrooms. These practices normalize emotional expression and provide coping mechanisms, aligning with trauma-informed teaching guidelines (SAMHSA, 2014). For example, peer projects that include reflective dialogue allow students to voice emotional struggles, building empathy and resilience.

Document analysis also reveals that emotionally responsive constructivism requires safe classroom climates. Predictable routines, clear expectations, and respectful norms reduce anxiety triggers. Trauma-informed adaptations-such as allowing learners to opt out of high-stress presentations or using restorative dialogue for conflict-make collaborative learning more accessible (CASEL, 2020). Thus, constructivist teaching supports emotional needs by embedding autonomy, belonging, and emotional literacy within collaborative and inquiry-driven learning.

6.2. To explore the integration of constructivist pedagogy with trauma-informed and inclusive educational practices:

A growing body of scholarship emphasizes intersectional approaches that combine constructivism with trauma-informed and inclusive pedagogy. Mentally ill learners often experience trauma, stigma, or social exclusion, requiring environments that prioritize psychological safety (SAMHSA, 2014).

Documents analysed highlight several integrative strategies. First, trauma-informed constructivism advocates predictable structures alongside open inquiry. For example, teachers can maintain consistent classroom rituals (entry routines, clear agendas) while encouraging student-led questioning. This balance creates safety while sustaining engagement (Fosnot, 2013).

Second, inclusive constructivism incorporates Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. By offering multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression, UDL ensures that mentally ill learners can access content in ways that align with their strengths (CAST, 2018). For instance, learners with anxiety may prefer written reflections over oral presentations, and constructivist pedagogy can flexibly accommodate these preferences.

Third, documents emphasize the importance of collaborative learning with differentiated roles. In group tasks, mentally ill learners may excel in certain roles (e.g., researcher, note-taker) while avoiding stress-inducing roles (e.g., public speaker). Inclusive constructivist models validate these choices while still promoting group accountability (Hattie, 2009).

Finally, trauma-informed integration requires teacher empathy and awareness. Constructivist teachers are not mental health professionals, but their responsiveness to student cues-such as providing quiet spaces or offering flexible deadlines-creates psychologically safe environments (WHO, 2022). Thus, document analysis confirms that combining constructivism with trauma-informed and inclusive practices enhances both academic and emotional outcomes for mentally ill learners.

6.3. Constructivist Teaching Approaches That Address the Cognitive Challenges of Mentally Ill Learners:

Constructivist teaching approaches emphasize learner engagement in active meaning-making, but mentally ill learners often encounter difficulties such as reduced working memory, executive dysfunction, and concentration lapses (APA, 2022). Document analysis reveals that effective constructivist strategies must incorporate structured scaffolding to mitigate cognitive overload.

Kirschner et al. (2006) argue that minimally guided instruction often fails to support learners with limited cognitive resources. For mentally ill students, this issue is amplified. Instead, guided constructivism—which combines inquiry with explicit scaffolds such as worked examples, graphic organizers, and guided notes—reduces extraneous cognitive load (Sweller, 2010). For instance, inquiry-based science lessons with step-by-step questioning have been shown to support learners with ADHD and anxiety by making tasks predictable and cognitively accessible (Hattie, 2009).

Another key constructivist principle relevant to this population is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Learners with mental illness benefit when teachers calibrate tasks slightly beyond their independent capability but provide timely scaffolds. This balance prevents both under-stimulation (which risks disengagement) and over-complexity (which risks frustration). Document evidence suggests that peer collaboration within the ZPD also supports cognitive development, as peers can model coping strategies and provide immediate clarification (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

Cognitive supports such as retrieval practice, distributed learning, and multimodal representation further enhance constructivist approaches. Sweller (2010) emphasizes that presenting information through multiple modalities (visual, verbal, and kinesthetic) reduces reliance on a single channel, compensating for cognitive limitations often associated with depression and anxiety. Additionally, retrieval-based tasks embedded within inquiry projects improve long-term retention, offering mentally ill learners multiple entry points for success.

Thus, constructivist teaching can support cognitive needs when redesigned around scaffolding, peer-assisted learning, and multimodal inputs. These findings demonstrate that structured constructivism is preferable to minimal guidance for mentally ill learners.

7. Findings

The analysis of constructivist teaching approaches in addressing the needs of mentally ill learners revealed several key insights aligned with the first three objectives of the study.

7.1. Supporting the emotional needs of mentally ill learners using constructivist frameworks:

Constructivist teaching was also found to be instrumental in promoting emotional well-being by emphasizing learner autonomy, supportive peer interactions, and safe classroom environments. Emotional security was enhanced when teachers employed dialogic teaching, encouraged reflective practices, and validated learners' perspectives. These practices not only minimized feelings of isolation but also reinforced self-worth and self-efficacy, which are critical for learners managing mental health challenges (Vygotsky, 1978).

7.2. Effectiveness of constructivist approaches in integrating cognitive and emotional development:

The findings indicate that constructivist methods are particularly effective when cognitive and emotional needs are addressed simultaneously. Integrating reflective dialogue, experiential learning, and collaborative problem-solving provided learners with opportunities to develop both intellectual and emotional resilience. By connecting abstract concepts to personal experiences, learners were able to contextualize knowledge in emotionally meaningful ways, thereby enhancing motivation and long-term retention. This dual focus supports holistic learning outcomes and contributes to both academic and psychosocial development.

7.3. Addressing the cognitive needs of mentally ill learners through constructivist teaching approaches:

The findings suggest that constructivist methods such as scaffolding, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative tasks effectively promote cognitive engagement among mentally ill learners. These approaches encourage learners to construct knowledge through personal experiences rather than rote memorization, which reduces cognitive overload and enhances comprehension. For example, the use of project-based learning allows learners to work at their own pace, thereby accommodating cognitive difficulties such as impaired memory or attention deficits. Such strategies foster critical thinking and adaptability while respecting the unique cognitive capacities of learners (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

Overall, the study concludes that constructivist teaching approaches hold strong potential for addressing the intertwined cognitive and emotional needs of mentally ill learners, fostering inclusive and transformative educational environments.

8. Discussion:

This study demonstrates that constructivist teaching approaches, when adapted, can effectively meet the cognitive and emotional needs of mentally ill learners. The findings align with existing theories: Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD supports the role of scaffolding, while Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory validates the motivational impact of mastery-oriented feedback. Similarly, Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory explains why autonomy-supportive constructivism promotes engagement. The integration of trauma-informed principles confirms SAMHSA's (2014) argument that predictability and safety are prerequisites for meaningful learning. Furthermore, UDL frameworks (CAST, 2018) reinforce that constructivism thrives when learners are given flexible options for engagement and expression. These synergies highlight that constructivist pedagogy is not incompatible with mental health needs; rather, it can be optimized by embedding inclusive and trauma-responsive strategies. However, the limitations noted-teacher preparedness, time constraints, and institutional resource gaps-mirror global concerns raised by WHO (2022). Constructivism cannot function in isolation; it requires systemic support through teacher training, policy reforms, and collaboration between educators and mental health professionals. Constructivist teaching offers a viable pathway to address the dual challenges of cognition and emotion in mentally ill learners. Its success depends on structured scaffolding, emotional literacy, inclusive design, and systemic support.

9. Conclusion:

This qualitative study, through document analysis, has explored how constructivist teaching approaches can support the cognitive and emotional needs of mentally ill learners. The findings affirm that constructivism, when applied with scaffolding, SEL integration, and trauma-informed practices, enhances both academic performance and psychological safety. Constructivist approaches are most effective when they balance inquiry with guidance, provide autonomy within structure, and embed inclusive design principles. For mentally ill learners, these strategies reduce cognitive load, foster self-efficacy, and create emotionally safe learning spaces. However, limitations such as teacher preparedness, systemic barriers, and stigma underscore the need for broader educational reforms. The study concludes that constructivist teaching, far from being unsuitable for mentally ill learners, holds transformative potential when thoughtfully adapted. Future research should involve classroom-based qualitative studies with direct teacher and learner voices, expanding beyond document analysis. Ultimately, constructivist pedagogy offers a promising framework for advancing inclusive and empathetic education in the context of growing mental health challenges.

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