Relevance of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) for Students with Special Needs in an Inclusive Education

*Dahiru, Z.A.

Department of Special Education, Federal College of Education (Technical) Bichi, Kano State.

*Corresponding author email: zulaihadahiru6@gmail.com

Abstract

Inclusive counseling plays a vital role in addressing the diverse psychological, academic, and emotional needs of students with special needs (SEN). With the increasing push for inclusive education worldwide, there is a growing emphasis on developing and implementing counseling strategies that are equitable, accessible, and responsive to the varied needs of these learners. This journal article explores recent inclusive counseling strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), peer mediation, collaborative multidisciplinary approaches, assistive technology, and social-emotional learning (SEL), all of which enhance participation and reduce marginalization. Using evidence from recent studies (2023–2025), the article critically examines the effectiveness and limitations of each approach while offering practical recommendations for school counselors, teachers, and policymakers. It concludes that successful inclusive counseling requires systemic collaboration, proper counselor training, and early intervention to ensure all students receive the support they need.

Keywords: Diverse Psychological, Academic, Emotional, Learning, Special Needs

Introduction

Inclusive education aims to remove all barriers to learning and participation for students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. In this framework, inclusive counseling becomes a cornerstone ensuring that students with special needs are not only included physically but are supported emotionally, socially, and psychologically within mainstream educational settings. As the prevalence of children diagnosed with special educational needs continues to rise globally, the role of school counselors has evolved to meet the increasing demand for personalized and inclusive support systems Oswal et al. (2025). Counselors are no longer merely reactive professionals who address behavioral issues; rather, they are proactive agents of change, playing a critical role in fostering inclusive school cultures through personalized interventions, advocacy, collaboration with stakeholders, and the use of technology Petersson-Bloom et al. (2022). The shift from segregation to inclusion has brought new challenges. Students with learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), emotional and behavioral disorders, sensory impairments, and intellectual disabilities often face stigmatization, social exclusion, and reduced access to psychological services. Without intentional and inclusive counseling frameworks, these students risk falling further behind academically and socially Papadopoulos et al. (2024).

Recent researches conducted shows that Universal Design for Learning not only enhances students' mental health and well-being but also positively influences academic performance, peer relationships, and resilience Cipriano et al. (2023). Moreover, global initiatives such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasize inclusive and equitable quality education, reinforcing the urgency for inclusive psychological and emotional support structures.

This article provides a detailed review of the most effective Universal Design for Learning used in contemporary education systems. It draws from recent empirical and theoretical studies from 2023 to 2025 to guide practice and policy in inclusive counseling, particularly within primary and secondary school environments. Emphasis is placed on evidence-based interventions that promote equity, access, and participation, while also discussing systemic challenges such as lack of training, insufficient resources, and cultural barriers.

Core Inclusive Counseling Strategies

Inclusive counseling requires a combination of evidence-based methods tailored to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This section outlines five core strategies proven effective in recent studies (2023–2025): Universal Design for Learning (UDL), assistive technology (AT), peer-mediated interventions, multidisciplinary collaboration, and social-emotional learning (SEL).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

UDL is a proactive educational framework that ensures access to learning for all students by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. Although originally designed for classroom instruction, UDL principles have been adapted to counseling sessions to enhance accessibility and responsiveness (Murray and Lombardi, 2023). For instance, counselors may offer both verbal and visual resources during sessions or allow students to express emotions through drawing, storytelling, or typing.

Research indicates that when counseling is delivered using UDL strategies, students with cognitive and communication challenges experience increased participation and reduced anxiety Oswal et al. (2025). A recent study by Schmermbeck et al. (2024) found that embedding UDL principles into school counseling not only supports students with autism and ADHD but also benefits neurotypical students, fostering a more inclusive environment for all.

Moreover, UDL encourages personalization. For example, a counselor may adapt session content based on a student's learning profile, using visual schedules or simplified language to enhance comprehension Papadopoulos et al. (2024). This approach aligns with inclusive practices that reject the "one-size-fits-all" model and instead promote individualized support.

Assistive Technology (AT)

Assistive technologies are tools and systems designed to increase the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities. In inclusive counseling, AT plays a pivotal role in ensuring students with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments can access counseling resources and participate fully in therapeutic processes. Recent innovations include speech-to-text software, communication boards, noise-reduction headphones, and even AI-powered apps that help track mood or behavior Yenduri et al. (2023). These tools allow counselors to tailor interventions, making sessions more interactive and student-centered. Papadopoulos et al. (2024) emphasize that AT must be integrated thoughtfully within counseling. For example, a nonverbal student might use a tablet-based communication app to express their feelings, allowing the counselor to build rapport and develop strategies based on the student's expressed needs. Furthermore, schools that invest in inclusive AT infrastructure often report higher levels of engagement among students with learning and speech impairments (Special Olympics Global Center, 2024). Despite its promise, AT presents challenges, including cost, lack of training, and concerns over student privacy. Counselors must work with IT staff and parents to ensure ethical and effective use of these tools (Yenduri et al., 2024).

Peer-Mediated Interventions

Peer support programs like "buddy systems," "circle of friends," and "peer tutoring" are increasingly used within inclusive counseling frameworks to promote social connectedness and reduce isolation. These interventions involve training selected peers to support students with special needs during school activities and social interactions. Marymount University (2025) found that peer-mediated programs, when paired with counselor supervision, significantly improved the self-esteem and communication skills of students with developmental delays. Peer interaction also benefits neurotypical students by fostering empathy, patience, and inclusivity. From a counseling perspective, peer programs can be used as follow-ups to individual sessions. For instance, after working on social skills with a student with autism, a counselor may pair them with a trained peer to practice those skills in real-life contexts. According to Oswal et al. (2025), such integration between peer support and professional counseling leads to more sustainable social gains.

Multidisciplinary Collaboration

Inclusive counseling cannot function in isolation. Effective support for students with special needs requires a multidisciplinary team, including special educators, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, administrators, and families. Stankeviciene and Michalik (2024) describe how the Educational Psychology Services in Hillingdon, UK, collaborate with Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) and Mental Health Learning Support Assistants (MeLSAs) to deliver coordinated, early-intervention counseling. This holistic approach has resulted in fewer disciplinary referrals and improved student engagement. School counselors play a central role in coordinating these efforts, ensuring that each student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) reflects both academic and emotional goals. However, a 2023 report by the PEAL Center noted that only 40% of school

counselors in the U.S. receive formal training in collaborative inclusive practices (PEAL Center, 2023), indicating a gap between policy and implementation.

a. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) focuses on helping students develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making. For students with special needs, SEL can be a critical component of inclusive counseling.

Cipriano et al. (2023) found that students with disabilities who participated in SEL-based counseling programs demonstrated significant improvements in peer relationships and emotional control. These programs also help reduce bullying and classroom conflict, fostering a more supportive school climate.

Inclusive counselors often adapt SEL curricula by simplifying language, using visual prompts, or involving sensory tools. For example, an SEL lesson on anger management may involve role-play scenarios using puppets or storyboards to help students with autism better understand emotional triggers and responses.

Moreover, embedding SEL within counseling enables schools to shift from a deficit-focused model to a strengths-based approach, where students are recognized for their emotional growth and resilience Yenduri et al. (2023).

Challenges in Implementing Universal Design Learning (UDL) in an Inclusive Education.

While inclusive counseling offers a promising framework, its implementation remains inconsistent across schools and countries. Challenges range from systemic underfunding to limited professional training and cultural stigma toward disability.

(i) Inadequate Training and Awareness

A significant barrier is the lack of counselor training in inclusive practices. According to Oswal et al. (2025), only about 35% of school counselors in low- and middle-income countries receive formal instruction on disability-inclusive counseling. Many rely on outdated generalist techniques that fail to address the unique psychological needs of students with special needs.

Murray and Lombardi (2023) highlight the importance of professional development programs, stating, "Without structured training in inclusive practices, counselors may unintentionally reinforce exclusion rather than challenge it" (p. 18).

(ii) Resource and Technology Gaps

Assistive technologies (AT) and adaptive materials are often unavailable or underutilized, especially in under-resourced schools. Even in regions where AT exists, counselors may lack the technical skills to integrate these tools into their sessions effectively Papadopoulos et al. (2024). The result is a digital divide, where some students benefit from innovations, while others remain excluded.

(iii) Cultural and Societal Stigma

Cultural attitudes toward disability can influence both counselor behavior and student participation. In many societies, disabilities are still seen as taboo, leading families to hide or minimize their child's condition (Stankeviciene and Michalik, 2024). Counselors working in such environments may face resistance when advocating for inclusion or encounter difficulty gaining parental cooperation.

(iv) Overloaded Caseloads

Another common problem is high counselor-to-student ratios. In Nigeria, for example, the average secondary school counselor handles more than 500 students—a workload that severely limits individualized attention (PEAL Center, 2023). In such contexts, inclusive counseling may be deprioritized in favor of general behavioral management or crisis intervention.

Real-World Case Studies
Nigeria: Inclusive Counseling in Public Schools

Despite systemic challenges, several Nigerian schools have piloted inclusive counseling programs. A notable example is the Kaduna State Inclusive Education Initiative, launched in 2023, which trained 150 counselors in adaptive SEL techniques and trauma-informed care (Marymount University, 2025). Evaluation reports showed reduced dropout rates among students with learning disabilities and increased parental engagement.

However, funding inconsistencies and societal stigma continue to hinder full implementation, particularly in rural areas.

United Kingdom: Whole-School Inclusion Models

In the UK, the Hillingdon Borough piloted a multidisciplinary counseling program that included trained Emotional

Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs), school psychologists, and behavior mentors. According to Stankeviciene and Michalik (2024), this approach resulted in a 28% decrease in emotional outbursts among students with autism over a two-year period. Their success was attributed to regular team meetings, consistent parent communication, and embedded UDL practices.

United States: Technology and Equity-Focused Counseling
In California, inclusive school counselors are increasingly using digital platforms like "Second Step" and "Mood Meter" to deliver SEL to students with disabilities. Cipriano et al. (2023) found that students with ADHD and sensory integration disorders responded particularly well to gamified emotional tracking tools. Nevertheless, equity concerns persist due to disparities in device access and broadband coverage across socioeconomic groups.

Ethical Considerations in Using UDL in an Inclusive Education
a. Informed Consent and Confidentiality
Counselors must ensure that students with cognitive or communication impairments understand their rights. This involves using simplified language, visual aids, or caregiver support during the consent process Papadopoulos et al. (2024). Failure to do so risks violating ethical standards and undermining student autonomy.
b. Culturally Responsive Practice
Inclusive counseling must respect students' cultural contexts. For instance, a child from a collectivist culture may prioritize family harmony over individual expression, which could influence how they respond to counseling goals. Murray and Lombardi (2023) stress the need for culturally responsive counseling frameworks, especially when working with multilingual or refugee students.
c. Avoiding Stereotyping
It is essential to avoid treating students with disabilities as a monolithic group. As Petersson-Bloom et al. (2022). Caution, "Labels such as 'special needs' must not replace nuanced understanding of each student's lived experience" (p. 9). Ethical counselors take time to build individualized profiles that emphasize strengths rather than deficits

Recommendations
I.   Implement multiple means of Representation: Use diverse teaching materials (visual, auditory, the tactile) to ensure students with varying learning needs can acceess and understand content
II. Provide multiple means of Engagement: Incorporate learner choice and interactive activities to enhance motivation and promote active participation among students with special needs.
III. Offer Multiple Means of Expressions: Allows students to demonstrate their understanding through various modalities such as oral Presentations, written assignments or multimedia Projects, Accommodating diverse communication strenths.
IV. Provide Professional Development on UDL Principles: Equip educators with ongoing training and support to design and deliver lessons that address the need of all learners effectively.
V.   Integrate Assistive Technology and Tools: Employ appropriate assistive technologies, including speech-to-test software and screen readers, to facilitate accessibility and support student participation.

Future Directions
Global Collaboration on Inclusive Counseling
There is a need for global platforms where school counselors can share inclusive strategies, tools, and culturally adapted practices. Initiatives like UNESCO's Inclusive Education Network (2024) are beginning to foster such exchange, but more targeted counselor-specific forums are required.

Expansion of Digital Counseling Platforms
Digital mental health tools tailored for students with disabilities are growing, but still underused. Future work should focus on developing culturally sensitive, accessible platforms that support multiple disabilities and languages. Hybrid counseling models—combining in-person and remote services—may offer scalable solutions to areas with few trained professionals Yenduri et al. (2023).

Research on Marginalized Subgroups
More studies are needed on counseling strategies for children with multiple or intersecting needs—e.g., students who are disabled and from minority ethnic groups, or girls with autism who are often underdiagnosed. Inclusive counseling must evolve beyond general disability support into intersectional, individualized practice Petersson-Bloom et al. (2022).

Conclusion
Inclusive counseling is more than a set of techniques—it is a philosophy grounded in equity, empathy, and

empowerment. For students with special needs, inclusive counseling ensures that they are not merely present in school, but supported to thrive emotionally, socially, and academically. This article has explored key inclusive counseling strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), assistive technologies, peer-mediated interventions, multidisciplinary collaboration, and social-emotional learning (SEL). These strategies, backed by recent research from 2023 to 2025, demonstrate that inclusive counseling contributes to better mental health, greater school engagement, and improved social outcomes. However, barriers such as undertraining, limited resources, stigma, and policy gaps persist. To overcome them, this paper has recommended professional training, integration of counseling in Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), peer advocacy, stronger parent-counselor partnerships, and policy reform. Looking ahead, the expansion of digital tools, global collaboration, and intersectional research can further strengthen the effectiveness of inclusive counseling. For true inclusion to be realized, mental health services must be seen as essential—not optional—in every child's right to education. Inclusive counseling is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

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