


## **INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR LEARNERS WITH SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SETTING IN NIGERIA**

  
**UMAR, A.T. (PhD)**  
*Department of Special Education*  
*Bayero University, Kano*  
*umartaura@gmail.com*  


### **ABSTRACT**

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*It is an indisputable fact that for more than a decade, the world trend has tilted towards inclusive education as opposed to educating the special needs learners in segregated settings which was hitherto the known practice. The focus now is on inclusivity so as to pave the way for social interaction and respect among all categories of learners in the same learning environment. Accordingly, this paper attempted to highlight what special needs learners are all about with particular emphasis on learners with learning disabilities. Besides, inclusive education as a means of combating discriminatory practice has been clearly expressed. The justification for inclusive education has been extensively elaborated. The issue of inclusive classroom in particular and inclusive setting in general have also been clarified. Equally dwelt upon, are some of the specific instructional strategies that are used essentially in ameliorating if not completely eliminating the learning difficulties experienced by some students who are learning alongside their peers in the same classroom. Finally, it concluded by drawing the attention of teachers both regular and special to be conscious of the existence of students with specific learning disabilities in their inclusive classrooms and try as much as possible to provide for their learning needs and peculiarities.*

**Keywords:** *Special Needs Learners, Learning Disabilities, Inclusive Education, Inclusive Setting and Instructional Strategies.*

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### **Introduction**

The fact that some learners whether at primary or post primary levels experienced specific difficulties in learning can hardly be contested. To be précised, quite a reasonable number of school children have been found to have learning disabilities in the specific areas of reading, writing, spelling and mathematics disabilities (Ibrahim, 2018; Tukur, 2018 and Dogo, Vandeh and Ozegya, 2019). Unless learning problems in these areas are addressed, such children will be lagging behind thereby finding it difficult to learn. Looking at the varieties of specific learning disabilities, it is very clear that children with learning disabilities exist in the schools. Children with specific learning disabilities are mostly of normal intelligence but tend to under achieve in some specific areas of developmental and academic activities.

Actually, learners with learning disabilities particularly children also have assorted problems in the areas of sensory, language, motor, memory and perception among others. Adequate teacher preparation is imperative in handling learners in an inclusive setting. Therefore, the teacher of learners with learning disabilities should be skilful, well-prepared and competent enough to handle them effectively in both inclusive and special settings respectively. It has also been cautioned that teaching such categories of learners calls for extra care, patience, emotional balance, emotional maturity, understanding, courage, dedication and commitment (Garuba, 2001). The essence is to make the learner benefit maximally from the teaching learning process.

### **Concepts of Special Needs Learners**

It is pertinent to mention that a special needs learner or child is otherwise referred to as an exceptional child. An exceptional child is one who has special learning needs either because of significant sensory deficit or unusual high intellectual ability or both. He is exceptional in terms of his significant deviations in sensory functioning or in intellectual ability. The deviation is substantial and could be below or above average (Ozaji et al, 2016). The Salamanca statement and framework for action called for inclusion to be the norm and that ordinary schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions (UNESCO, 1994). It is used to describe all those children and youth whose needs arise from disabilities or learning difficulties (papagrigoraki, 2016). In line with this definition therefore, a lot of in spite of the fact that quite a great number of them are left without the necessary special education identification and recognition. Therefore, those children could be considered as children with special educational needs.

### **Learners with Learning Disabilities**

Among special needs learners are those with special learning disabilities which refer to conditions of significant discrepancy between intellectual capacity and actual educational achievement manifested in forms of unusual difficulties in reading, writing, spelling and mathematical abilities (Garuba, 2001). Also, learning disabilities impede on people's ability to think and remember, speak, write well, spell, read, organize information and perform mathematics tasks (Ozaji, et al, 2016). Thus, learning disabilities could be regarded as inability to perform at a level commensurate with evident potentials even though there is no apparent and visible handicapping condition. Children with learning disabilities also are those who manifest educationally significant discrepancy between their estimated intellectual potential and their genuine level of performance (Lere, 2009). Essentially, the presence of learning disabilities is evident when there is a marked difference between what a child is expected to and what he/she is actually doing given his/her potentials.

### **Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is an alternative to learning in segregated settings whereby learners with special learning needs are educated alongside their normal peers in the regular school or classroom. The essence is to ensure the promotion of equitability in learning, equalization of learning opportunities for all learners, ensuring functional learning for all learners regardless of their abilities and social background (UNESCO, 1994). It is also a system that brings all children in the same regular classroom for teaching and learning. In fact, inclusive education is considered as a great equalizer since it has been found to be the most effective means of gaining equality and has been gaining ground worldwide (Okoli, 2014). Thus, it is a means of discouraging segregation in all its ramifications. Inclusive education is a means of welcoming all children without discrimination into regular or ordinary schools with the aim of creating environments that are responsive to their differing developmental capacities, needs and potentials (Obani, 2006).

### **Justifications for Inclusive Education**

Basically, inclusive education for learners with specific learning disabilities has a number of justifications. One of such justifications is that of enhancing social interactions among the learners. It helps in inculcating the spirit of team work, togetherness and cooperation. In fact, it has been rightly posited that inclusive education creates opportunities for making friends, cooperation and understanding among learners (Obani, 2002). Thus, inclusion has the tendency to minimize fears as well as encourage respect and understanding among learners (Ladipo, 2002).

Besides, the issue of labelling learners with learning disabilities as dull or backwards individuals will certainly be reduced under inclusive education arrangement. This is because when they are placed in segregated settings, learners with learning disabilities may be treated with contempt and ridicule by their so called normal counterparts. However, inclusion is said to have replaced the age-long segregation placement (Knight, 1999), and that segregation itself gives room for discrimination, creates avenue for communication gap as well as induces inferiority complex (Adebiyi, 2003).

The need for inclusion was also borne out of consideration that children in the segregated settings could not achieve academically better than their counterparts in the regular schools settings. In fact, it has been strongly asserted that special schools and classes provide and that inclusive schools provide second rate to education and that inclusive schools provide benefits for all learners (Abang, 2003). Thus, the inclusion of learners with learning disabilities is justified in view of the fact such learners can cope with most of the curriculum; they have problems with some specific aspects of the curriculum. For example, a child with spelling difficulty may not necessarily have difficulty in solving mathematical problems. Children in this group

are usually taught in regular schools but with extra assistance in their areas of difficulty.

The fundamental principle of inclusive education is that all children should learn together wherever possible regardless of their learning needs, diversities and peculiarities. In this respect inclusion is regarded as a programme that helps all children to learn the meaning of equal worth and equal right. In essence, as long as a single student who has not broken any law is excluded from the mainstream school life and opportunities, all students become vulnerable to discriminatory treatment. The UNESCO proclamation emphasises among other things that regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all (UNESCO, 1994).

### **Instructional Strategies**

Certainly, for inclusive education to prosper, teachers need to be acquainted with the strategies for handling special needs children who are attend regular schools. The following are some of the ways of handling children with learning disabilities in the classroom. One of the fundamental strategies is popularly known as **Drilling Technique**. This technique requires a teacher to make the child repeat a response several times over and over until he reaches a stage when the response can be made without error. It is otherwise referred to as repeated reading. In essence, it is a procedure designed to increase fluency, accuracy of expression and confidence in reading (Lerner & Kline, 2006). In an inclusive classroom, it can be in form of passages read through several times until a satisfactory level of fluency is reached. The teacher is expected to spend few minutes to ensure that the learners understand the learning material well. Poor readers for example can be made to read a passage along with the teacher over and over until reading mastery is achieved. This strategy goes in line with skinner's operant conditioning (Skinner, 1989). Therefore, when used appropriately, the fluency and comprehension level of the learner is likely to improve. Drilling is a better method to improve students' phonetic transcription and word stress mastery during pronunciation. Besides, it may help students to remember new items. It is also possibly the time in the lesson when students are more reliant on the teacher Thus, when used appropriately drilling remains a helpful technique in an inclusive classroom (Basuki, 2018).

It is pertinent to mention that **Multisensory approach** can be employed in teaching learners with learning disabilities. In this technique, children are assisted by their teachers to learn by seeing, writing, feeling and calling out the words. The rationale behind this is to enable learners to understand, remember and use the words meaningfully. Multisensory approach is otherwise known as VAKT (Visual-Auditory-Kinesthetic-Tactile). Actually, it is a technique that helps children to learn through more than one sense. Sensory activities such as tracing, hearing, writing and

seeing represent the four modalities ( Taura & Tukur, 2019). Learners are assisted to read as well as trace the word. The learners continue this training until they can write the word correctly on a sheet of paper. Before attaining to this level, it has been strongly advised that learners should be helped in the class to choose and trace any word the teacher has written with crayon (Okeke, 2001). Multi- sensory techniques stimulates the brain in a variety of ways so that each sensory system becomes more developed and higher functioning. This improves the essential functions of the brain such as listening skills, movement, vision, tactile recognition and conceptualization. Therefore, using multi sensory teaching strategy entails helping a child to learn through more than one sense.

The use of **Collaborative teaching technique** is also very crucial as far as teaching learners with learning disabilities in an inclusive setting is concerned. Collaboration takes place when members of an inclusive learning community work together to support one another and assist students to succeed in the classroom. In this context, the lesson plans need to be modified to suit the learning needs of the students. Collaborative learning has been found to develop higher level thinking skills in students as well as boosting their confidence and self-esteem. Through collaboration, ideas can be shared and new better strategies developed. Problems can be solved, students' progress can be better monitored and their outcomes evaluated (Voutsas, 2011 cited in Bouillet, 2013). Collaboration provides room for teachers in the inclusive educational arrangement and other school personnel to discuss and exchange views, share ideas, brainstorm and work cooperatively to achieve a common goal. The essence is to ensure that learning needs of all the students both the special and non special needs counterparts are as much as possible provided.

There is no gain saying the fact that **differentiated instruction** is a significant factor for participation in inclusive programme by children with learning disabilities. It has been clarified that this type of instruction entails teaching flexibility whereby a teacher plans and implements varied approaches to address learning contents, learning processes, learning styles, practical procedures and assessment tools and presentation strategies (Ozaji, unachukwu & Kolo, 2016). In essence, this engenders a proactive learning environment and inclusivity because differentiating instruction provides children with learning disabilities opportunities to realize their weaknesses, experience timely remediation and maximize their strengths. In differentiated instruction teachers must know the learners in the class, understanding not only such things about each learner as the learning style and learning preferences but also showing concern for each student by tailoring instruction to meet the needs of each individual student ( Bender, 2002). Thus, general education teachers can differentiate instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners in the education class including those with learning disabilities.

Closely related to the issue of differentiated instruction, is **Instructional Grouping Strategy**. In teaching learners with learning disabilities within an inclusive

classroom, the presence of a variety of instructional groupings is very vital. Since inclusive teachers in most cases teach quite a reasonable number of students, therefore, formation of instructional groups will go a long way in making them to attend specific instructional and individual learning needs of the students. Effective grouping of students in inclusive classes is very essential and meaningful in the sense that it is an instruction that is offered in a small group as well as teacher-led. In fact, for learners with learning disabilities to benefit from the lesson being presented in the inclusive classroom, teachers have been strongly advised that the general education classroom should be restructured to facilitate as much as possible various small groups instructional arrangement (Bender, 2002).

It is relevant to emphasise that **Direct Instruction** is crucial for teaching learners with learning disabilities in an inclusive setting. Direct instruction is based on the basic philosophies and assumptions that all students are teachable and have the potentials to improve academically. Besides, lower performing and less advantaged students should be taught at an accelerated pace to catch up with their higher performing peers (Liem & Martin, 2013). In fact, it is a teacher directed strategy in which teachers use explicit techniques to teach specific skills to their students. Teachers may use direct instruction to prepare students for an activity in which students work collaboratively on a group project with guidance and coaching from the teacher as needed. The features of direct instruction include; problem solving strategy, specific correction procedures, scaffolding from teacher and review of previously taught concepts (Milaham, 2020). Essentially, direct instruction is implemented through carefully planned lessons in which students are provided with substantial and yet gradually reduced guidance (Liem & Martin, 2013). Many inclusive education teachers who have formed reading and language arts study groups in the inclusive class may easily incorporate the direct instruction curriculum into their lower or average classroom reading groups. This instructional strategy works for Students with learning disabilities as it does for a variety of other groups of students (Bende, 2002).

A very important strategy that has also been considered as worthwhile and instrumental in teaching learners with learning disabilities in an inclusive classroom is **Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies**. Actually, peer assisted learning strategies (PALS) is an instructional approach that uses classmates as tutors who exchange the roles of coaches and players. This technique was found to improve the reading comprehension of English Language learners with learning disabilities at kindergarten level and middle school students improved their skills in charting and graphing. (Smith, 2007). Peer-assisted learning strategies involve implementation of teachers prepared instructions for students to use with their peers. Under this educational arrangement, the teacher engages in the critical reading skills of fluency, comprehension, summarizing, predicting and paraphrasing. The teacher pairs the students with similar abilities where one is somewhat more advanced than the other to work together to improve their academic skills (Milaham, 2020). A very important

consideration is that in spite of the usefulness of this approach, it is designed to supplement, not to replace regular instructional routines or elements of the standard-based curriculum. Hence, before classmates work together, the teacher instructs the students about the application of the strategy, the role each pair will exchange play, when to take turns and how to provide correct feedback. They practice the instructional routines with the entire class until they demonstrate understanding of their roles and responsibilities (Smith, 2007). To ensure effective use of this approach to learning, students should be actively involved in learning as the technique has consistently proved to be effective, boosting gains in learning. It is strongly believed that peer tutoring is an effective method by which students with various disabilities are successfully integrated into inclusive general education classroom since students can learn from one another than they do when instructed by the teacher (Bender, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be stated that undoubtedly learners with learning disabilities need to be included /in the regular schools /classrooms in view of the fact that their learning needs can be more adequately met. Certainly, if teachers are well trained in handling individuals with learning disabilities it will go a long way in sustaining them in the classroom on the one hand, and on the other hand, it will greatly reduce the number of children who may drop out of schools arising from ineffective instruction. On this note therefore, relevant and appropriate instructional strategies should be employed in inclusive classroom settings. In fact, in special needs education, it is expected that every child should be educated to the highest extent possible. Thus, children with learning disabilities have the tendency of learning more and benefit from peers. However, effective participation of learners with learning disabilities in an inclusive education programme also requires teachers to among other things teach in a simplified manner. It also entails adjusting content and providing instructional support. Therefore, teachers who are inclusive are expected to understand their roles in supporting all learners as well as creating and nurturing inclusive learning environments.

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