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Teaching Children with Learning Disabilities: Exploring the Challenges of Regular Teachers in Anambra State

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges regular primary school teachers face as they teach children with learning disabilities in Awka, Anambra State. Phenomenological research design was employed in the study, and 15 teachers who teach pupils with learning disabilities were purposively sampled. Data were obtained through face-to-face interviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis. Findings revealed that four themes emerged: teaching and learning related challenges, behavioural and attitudinal challenges, instructional and structural challenges, and parental/home-related challenges. It was concluded that regular primary school teachers faced notable instructional, behavioural, structural, and collaborative difficulties when teaching pupils with LDs. Recommendations were made.

Keywords: Inclusive education, learning disabilities, regular schools, instructional challenges, behavioural challenges, structural challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Merely enrolling a child in school does not guarantee retention and meaningful education. The true measure of success lies in ensuring that every child learns. This crucial responsibility falls on the shoulders of teachers tasked with making provisions for all learners to be able to learn in their classrooms. The responsibility is sometimes immense, as the classroom is made up of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, varying learning abilities, and personal educational needs (Nwosu et al., 2025). Though these are complexities, teachers are tasked with making these learning environments inclusive and effective, where no child is left behind (UNESCO; the Global Education Monitoring Report, cited in Ingram, 2024).

Under inclusive education policies, pupils with and without disabilities are intentionally placed in the same classroom to promote equity, reduce discrimination, and enhance social participation. As a result, regular teachers are responsible for teaching

children with learning disabilities, even though many of them have not received specialized training for this role. This policy context underscores the additional demands placed on regular teachers and explains why they encounter the daily realities and challenges of teaching pupils with learning disabilities. This requires not just professional skill but also a positive attitude towards inclusion, flexibility, patience, empathy, and a strong commitment to educational equity (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024; Nwosu et al., 2021).

In regular classrooms, there are pupils who find it difficult to learn without extra supports from their teachers and other significant persons in their lives. Some of them do not exhibit any facial or sensory symptoms, yet their impairments nonetheless impact their capacity to learn like any other child. This group according to Iaia (2024) is known as special learning disabilities (SLD) in accordance with Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). The term learning disabilities (LD) was first coined by Samuel Kirk in 1960 and later applied to his 1962 textbook on exceptional children (Orim & Ezekiel, 2017). It rapidly became popular with professionals and parents, which in turn resulted in the establishment of advocacy organizations such as the Learning Disabilities Association of America. LD received official recognition in the 1975 Education of All Handicapped Children Act that designated LD as a condition for special education funding. The U.S. Office of Education (USOE) published an official definition of LD in 1977, which continues to impact educational policy and law today (Preston, et al., 2015).

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (UNICEF, cited in Dhamodharan, 2024) describes LD as a heterogeneous group of disorders characterized by notable difficulties in the acquisition and use of speaking, listening, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. Ghimire (2017) similarly describes LD as diverse range of conditions characterized by challenges with reading, writing, spelling, and critical thinking. These conditions are innate to each person and are thought to result from problems with the central nervous system. In Nigeria the greater percentage of children with disabilities falls under the learning disabilities (LDs) category with more than 25% of Nigerian students affected (Orim & Ezekiel, 2017).

The significant impact of this disability in pupils, necessitate early detection, and intervention for these pupils so they can be successful in their learning. Early detection of LD allows for timely intervention and the application of appropriate instructional strategies (Padhy, 2016). Instructional strategies encompass the various methods teachers employ to support students in their learning process, serving as essential tools for promoting effective teaching and learning outcomes (Amosa et al., 2015). For pupils with LD, instructional strategies go beyond general pedagogy to differentiated learning that allows teachers to support their learning. Several evidence-based instructional strategies have been shown to improve academic performance among students with LD. These include explicit instruction, peer tutoring, the use of graphic organizers, self-regulation training, chunking of tasks, and the integration of assistive technologies such as text-to-speech programs and audiobooks (Graham et al., 2017; Mayo Clinic Staff, 2023). These strategies help address common difficulties in reading, writing, and mathematics and offer targeted support in memory, attention, and comprehension. Instructional strategies not only address the

academic challenges of pupils with learning disabilities but also serve as a foundational element of inclusive education. They ensure students with learning difficulties are included in mainstream classrooms without compromising educational standards.

Teaching pupils with learning disabilities has over the years, posed a great challenge to their teachers. Asmaveedu (2021) found that teacher of learners with learning disabilities face challenges such as adapting curriculum, managing time, and handling behavioral issues without adequate support. They also struggle with low student motivation, poor self-esteem, and emotional instability among learners. Additionally, pressure from parents and a lack of specialized training further complicate effective teaching. Another study by Mnyanyi (2023) highlighted large class sizes, insufficient time and materials, adapting teaching aids and instruction to meet different learning paces and disability needs within limited instructional periods, as some challenges teachers are faced with. Additionally, researchers have noted that the challenges students with LDS face in schools is exacerbated by teachers' lack of inclusive education competence (Eyo & Nkanga, 2020)

The successful education of pupils with learning disabilities largely depends on the instructional strategies employed by their teachers. However, implementing these strategies is often accompanied by a range of challenges that hinder effective teaching and learning in regular schools. Despite national and international commitments to inclusive education, children with LDs are underserved in regular schools not necessarily because they cannot learn but because teachers lack the competence to teach them. More so, literature within the Nigerian context has emphasized identification of pupils with LDs without exploring everyday instructional experiences and challenges of teachers who teach them. This creates a gap on context-specific and teacher-centred evidence on how students with LDs are taught in Nigerian regular classes. Hence, our study focuses on the challenges Nigerian regular teachers face in teaching children with LDs. The research question that guided this study is: What are the challenges faced by teachers of pupils with learning disabilities in Anambra state?

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design. Specifically, a phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers who work with pupils with learning disabilities. According to Bonyadi (2023), phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that seeks to describe how individuals experience and interpret events in their everyday contexts, focusing on the meanings they attach to those experiences. A phenomenological research design therefore involves gathering rich, first-hand reports from participants and analyzing these reports to uncover the essential structure of their shared experiences.

This design was appropriate for the present study because it enabled an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive and navigate the challenges associated with teaching pupils with learning disabilities. By allowing teachers to articulate their experiences in their own words, the phenomenological approach provided the depth and detail needed to comprehensively understand the realities they face in the classroom.

Sampling Procedures and Data Collection

The population of the study comprised all primary school teachers in Anambra State, totaling 9,120 public school primary teachers, as reported by the Anambra State Universal Basic Education Board (ASUBEB, January 2025). From this population, 15 teachers were purposively selected. This sample size was deemed appropriate for the qualitative design, as recent studies indicate that 12–15 participants are often sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, particularly in relatively homogeneous populations, where additional interviews are unlikely to yield new themes (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). The inclusion criteria required that participants be primary school teachers with a minimum of seven years of teaching experience and have pupils diagnosed with learning disabilities in their classes. This ensured that participants possessed adequate practical exposure to the instructional challenges under investigation.

The processes in data collection, included seeking the consent of the respondents, and explaining the purpose of the study to the respondents. Only teachers who gave their consent were included in the study. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes, was conducted in English, and was recorded using a phone recorder. The recordings were later transcribed verbatim.

Instrument

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the selected participants. All the participants were asked the same interview question. A structured interview protocol with the central question: "What challenges do you face when implementing instructional strategies for pupils with learning disabilities, and how do you overcome them?" guided the data collection.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis after verbatim transcription was done. Each participant's data was examined independently to capture their unique perspectives. Key emergent concepts were identified and organized into sub-themes. These sub-themes were then synthesized into broader themes that captured the collective experiences of the participants. The themes in this study were inductively derived, emerging from participants' responses rather than pre-determined categories. For example: from the manuscripts, verbatim expressions like; "*I bring them to my table, I ask them questions to know how far they understood what was taught*" was coded "one-on-one teaching", and "*Group them into five… you mix them together, then ask them to study within themselves*" was coded "peer and group learning". These were later classified under the theme of "individualized and small-group support". There was no restriction on the number of emerging themes and sub-themes until they are exhausted.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Challenges teachers face in teaching pupils with learning disabilities

Regarding the challenges teachers face in teaching pupils with learning disabilities, four broad themes emerged from the discussions. They include: teaching and learning related challenges, behavioural and attitudinal challenges, instructional and structural challenges, and parental and home-related challenges. These themes are presented thus:

Teaching and learning related challenges: The delayed teaching pace and slow learning pace were the major themes that emerged. Most participants reported that pupils with learning disabilities learned at a slower pace. According to a teacher, *"one of the challenges faced when dealing with a child with learning disability is that what he or she is supposed to understand in a few minutes or during a lesson time, it might take the child a longer period to understand it"* (T8). Another teacher noted: "most *times they don't copy fast and their learning is is slow"* (T9). This slow pace of learning delays the teaching process, making it difficult for teachers to meet up with the scheme of work. In a bid to carry pupils along, teachers had to repeat lessons, reteach concepts, and spend more time than initially allocated. As one teacher lamented: *"It drags me back. Instead of me to be moving, I'll try to make sure they understood that one first, to carry them along, because there is no need flying… So it's a setback. They slow me down from what I need to achieve."* (T1). Another teacher emphasized how the presence of pupils with learning difficulties affected the flow of the class: *"It really affects me because it slows my teaching pace… those ones that are fast already, fast learners, you have to make the upcomers be on the same pace, which is not possible at that moment, so it affects me as a teacher."* (T10)

Behavioural and attitudinal challenges. Participants reported that pupils with learning disabilities are those that display some disruptive behaviours. Some of these pupils are just more interested in plays and do not take lessons seriously. According to a teacher: "*You know that children can play. You know that it's play that can make them to be slow in learning*" (T6). Similarly, another teacher reported their lack of the intrinsic motivation to learn, and this poses a great challenge to the teachers as most times, learning require motivation before it can successfully happen. "*The only challenge is that some of them are not putting efforts on their own. Once you are done with them, maybe that is how they stop, they just end there. Come back again, you just have to rewind again, start afresh, so most of them are not applying efforts*" (T1).

Instructional and structural challenges. Most participants expressed how they are choked with time as the time allocated for each lesson is not sufficient especially for pupils with learning disabilities. One teacher reported: "*one of the challenges we have is time. Most of the children, the period we have is not enough for them, it's too short for them to learn something… you make extra time*" (T12). In trying to carry every pupil along, they fall behind the time with scheme of works not being covered. Similarly, another teacher (T14) reported: *"When you're teaching one subject, maybe for two weeks, you know, you might not meet up with your scheme of work"*. In addition, they expressed that since the time for each lesson is not usually enough, they try to create extra time for pupils with learning disabilities and this poses as a great stressing factor as it adds to their workload, hence reducing their personal time. "*It's an additional job to you as a teacher. Because apart from your normal classroom setting, you still have to devote some time trying to help them achieve one or two things*" (T11).

Parental and home-related challenges. Our participants reported parents as a part of the challenges teachers face. Some parents were reported to show little interest in supporting their children's learning, either neglecting homework or failing to provide

guidance at home. A teacher reported: "*there are some people that their parents don't even help at all. If you give them homework, they don't care. If you don't give them, they don't care. What they know is that every blessed morning they come to school*" (T6). Another noted that lack of patience and busy schedules among parents reduced the effectiveness of home support: *"Sometimes their parents don't have patience with them. There's some of them that can't read. When I give them reading homework, they say my mother said that she doesn't have the time"* (T12). Parental involvement cannot be overemphasized as they provide support both to their children and the teachers as well. Teachers stressed that without parental involvement, their own efforts were insufficient: *"I do call their parents so that all hands must be on deck… learning involves both parents and teachers. When the teacher does her own in the classroom, and the parents do theirs at home, you'll see that the child will be doing very well"* (T9).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the challenges regular primary school teachers in Anambra State face when teaching pupils with learning disabilities. The findings revealed that teachers experience challenges ranging from instructional difficulties, behavioural and attitudinal issues, structural and workload-related problems, and inadequate parental involvement. Findings revealed slow learning and delayed teaching pace which made the teachers fall behind in the scheme of work. The teachers reported that they had to repeat lessons multiple times, alter the pace of teaching, or slow it down and even go as far as making out extra time so that pupils who have learning disabilities are not left behind. These findings are consistent with Mnyanyi (2023), who argued that adjusting teaching strategies to meet the needs of pupils with disabilities within limited instructional time presents a significant obstacle to effective learning. The constant need to reteach concepts places additional strain on teachers who are already pressed to meet curriculum targets.

The second key finding was behavioural and attitudinal challenges, which include excessive plays during class and lack of intrinsic motivation among pupils. Teachers explained that some pupils do not show interest or do not make the necessary efforts, hindering their progress in learning. This concurs with Asmaveedu's (2021) finding that low student motivation and behavioural challenges are common in students with learning disabilities. These not only slow down classroom activities but also pose as persistent barriers to their learning.

A further significant challenge identified was instructional and structural problelms. These included insufficient instructional time, excessive workloads, and being unable to balance the needs of both slow and fast learners. Teachers described the physical and emotional strain of needing to reteach content while meeting curriculum requirements, a problem identified in Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis's (2024) cross-national study, which emphasized the role of support systems to reduce teacher workload within inclusive settings.

The final theme that emerged was a lack of parental involvement and inadequate home learning support. Teachers described some parents as too busy or impatient to assist their children with homework, while others left everything regarding

their children's academic performance to teachers. This aligns with earlier research by Fletcher et al. (2018) and Ghimire (2017), which highlighted that parental involvement is a very important component of successful interventions for students with learning disabilities. Lack of support from home not only reduces pupils' progress but also adds to the strain placed on teachers.

Overall, these findings validate the acknowledgment that teaching pupils with learning disabilities in regular classrooms is not an easy task to do, hence supportive systems involving parents, school administration, and policy are required. Without such system and collaborative support, the above-mentioned challenges in this study-specifically slow learner progress, workload pressure, and home reinforcement deficiency-are likely to persist.

Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

This study, while offering valuable insights into the challenges faced by regular primary school teachers in Anambra State in teaching pupils with learning disabilities, is not without limitations. First, the study was restricted to a single geographical region-Anambra State, and the sample consisted of 15 regular primary school teachers. Therefore, the results of this study would have to be interpreted with caution in terms of their representativeness as the findings may not be adequate for generalization to other contexts within Nigeria or beyond. Second, another limitation is the mono-perspective of this study. The perspectives of other stakeholders, such as parents, pupils with learning disabilities, and school administrators, were not captured. Including these groups could have provided a more holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding inclusive education. Finally, due to time and resource constraints, the study did not involve direct or longitudinal classroom observations, which might have revealed more nuanced insights into daily teaching practices.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study have significant implications for teacher education, policy, and classroom practice. At the policy level, the results underscore the need for governments and education authorities to strengthen support for inclusive education through funding, provision of teaching resources, and assistive technologies. At the teacher education level, the findings suggest that both pre-service and in-service training should integrate practical strategies for curriculum adaptation, classroom management, and behavioural interventions. Training must also prepare teachers to manage their workloads and emotional well-being in inclusive classrooms. At the school level, administrators should ensure that teachers are supported through reduced workloads, access to resource personnel, and professional supervision. Finally, the study highlights the critical role of parental involvement in supporting pupils with learning disabilities. Schools should develop stronger parent–teacher partnerships and engage parents in workshops and sensitization programmes to build their capacity for home learning support.

In summary, although this study is limited in scope, it highlights systemic gaps in inclusive education that need urgent attention. Addressing these challenges through coordinated action by policymakers, teachers, schools, and parents will not only improve teaching conditions but also promote meaningful learning opportunities for children with

learning disabilities.

Conclusion

The study explored the several challenges that teachers face when implementing instructional strategies for pupils with learning disabilities. The findings reveal that slow learning pace, delayed teaching pace, behavioural and attitudinal challenges, limited instructional time, heavy workloads, and low parental involvement significantly hinder effective teaching and learning. It could be concluded that teachers who have students with learning disabilities in their classes face enormous challenges requiring systemic support, active parental involvement, and adaptive instructional frameworks.

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