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Abstract

Purpose: The goals of this study were to document and compare how pupils with mild learning difficulties in Grades 1–3 are taught and assessed in two Lagos private elementary schools (Soc, 2013; SeedO, 2025), both of which lacked formal special education (SEN) programs and relied on uniform written examinations, and to examine challenges related to differentiation and continuity across grades. By replicating the 2013 protocol at a different school in 2025, I was able to examine consistencies and inconsistencies in instructional and assessment practices across sites and time.

Methodology: The study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach because it supports low-inference, practice-near accounts and rich descriptions of schooling as it unfolds in natural settings (Sandelowski, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2020). I employed a qualitative multiple-case study design, examining two Lagos primary schools at different time points in order to compare instructional and assessment practices and identify patterns of continuity and variation across sites and time (Yin, 2018). By using the same semi-structured interview guide and classroom observation protocol at both sites, I held instruments and procedures constant and examined whether themes identified in 2013 reappeared in a different school in 2025. Consistent with naturalistic inquiry, I prioritized participants' perspectives in situ and generated thick description to illuminate how learners and teachers experienced teaching and assessment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Walliman, 2017).

Findings: The study revealed from the analysis that teachers understood mild learning difficulties mainly by comparing pupils to their peers and explained these difficulties largely through home, developmental, and contextual factors. Teachers believed that pupils with mild learning difficulties could improve and eventually catch up if given enough time and support. They used strategies such as re-teaching, multimodal instruction, and one-on-one support to help pupils, but these practices were not applied consistently. Instructional time was frequently limited by administrative tasks, classroom routines, and resource constraints, which reduced opportunities for sustained support. Assessment practices remained the same for all pupils, creating a mismatch between adapted instruction and standardized evaluation. In addition, specialist support was either absent or inconsistent and not well connected to classroom teaching. Overall, the findings show that while teachers demonstrated strong intentions to support pupils with mild learning difficulties, structural factors such as time, assessment systems, and limited specialist capacity constrained the consistency and effectiveness of these efforts across both schools and time periods.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice, and Policy: Using a socio-cultural constructivist framework, this study shows that learning is shaped by interaction, engagement, and instructional context rather than passive transmission. The findings validate this perspective by demonstrating that pupils with mild learning difficulties respond positively to re-teaching, multimodal instruction, and individualized support, but that their learning opportunities are constrained by time, task structures, and assessment formats. The study extends inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction by showing that while teachers attempt to respond to learner variability, these efforts are limited by organizational conditions, revealing an intention-implementation gap. To address challenges, teachers should plan for differentiation in advance rather than relying on spontaneous support, use multiple instructional methods consistently, and align assessment with instruction by incorporating oral, visual, and performance-based responses. Recommendations include teachers anticipating learner variability and structure opportunities for small group or individualized support within lessons. In addition, for policy, the study highlights the need for systemic changes that protect instructional time, reduce administrative burden, and align assessment policies with inclusive practices. Policymakers should support the integration of specialist services into classroom instruction, promote flexible assessment systems, and ensure that school structures enable sustained and equitable support for pupils with diverse learning needs.

Keywords: Difficulties, Primary Education, Literacy, Numeracy, Lagos

JEL Classification: I21, I24

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INTRODUCTION

General Introduction

Beginning in 1999, Nigeria expanded access to basic education, including in Lagos State, leading to rapid growth in enrollment across public, private, and low cost private primary schools. In Lagos, low cost private schools are fee charging schools serving low income communities and now educate a substantial proportion of children in the early primary grades (EDOREN, 2014; Unterhalter et al., 2018). Despite these reforms, there has been limited research examining instructional practices in Nigerian primary schools. Onukaogu (1997) characterized instruction as predominantly whole class and reliant on written forms of assessment, leaving little understanding of how teaching and assessment are enacted in early grades, particularly for pupils with mild learning difficulties.

Over the past 17 years, national assessments conducted by the Universal Basic Education Commission, along with studies in Lagos State, have consistently shown that many pupils perform below minimum proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy (UBEC, 2008, 2011, 2025; EDOREN, 2014). Between 50 percent and 70 percent of pupils in early primary grades fail to meet foundational benchmarks, and more than half do not achieve expected standards in reading and numeracy. These trends persist across time, indicating a systemic issue rather than a temporary decline. Evidence from Lagos State further shows that fewer than half of pupils meet minimum proficiency standards, raising concerns about the effectiveness of instructional practices, particularly for pupils with learning difficulties.

Policy analyses also highlight systemic constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional materials, weak supervision, and a shortage of professionally qualified teachers (Ejere, 2011; Sooter, 2013). As a result, reforms have emphasized access over instructional quality, limiting schools' ability to respond to diverse learner needs (Odinko, 2012). Within these classroom contexts, some pupils experience persistent difficulties with literacy, numeracy, attention, memory, or processing information, requiring additional instructional support and flexible assessment practices. These learning needs are commonly described in this study as mild learning difficulties. Against this backdrop, this study examines how teachers address the learning needs of pupils with mild learning difficulties in Grades 1–3 and how instruction is structured to support them across two schools and time points.

Mild Learning Difficulties

Mild learning difficulties (MLD) refer to learning challenges that may affect how students access, process, retain, or demonstrate understanding within classroom settings. These difficulties are often seen in areas such as literacy, numeracy, attention, memory, reasoning, or processing speed, but do not necessarily indicate severe intellectual disability (Liang & Li, 2019; Varghese et al., 2021). Students with MLD may require additional time, scaffolded instruction, flexible assessment practices, and differentiated support to participate meaningfully in classroom learning. When these supports are absent, students may struggle academically and experience frustration, anxiety, or reduced confidence in learning (Feraco et al., 2024; Iaia et al., 2024).

Rather than viewing learning difficulties solely as deficits within the learner, this study recognizes that classroom structures, instructional approaches, and assessment practices can either support or

constrain students' opportunities to learn. Many students with mild learning difficulties can succeed within general education classrooms when instruction is responsive, multimodal, and appropriately scaffolded (Gabriel & Börnert-Ringleb, 2023). Therefore, instructional support should include differentiated teaching, explicit strategy instruction, guided practice, frequent checks for understanding, and opportunities for students to demonstrate learning in multiple ways (Department of Education, 2025).

Identification of mild learning difficulties should also involve multiple forms of evidence, including classroom observations, curriculum-based measures, work samples, and ongoing assessment, rather than relying only on standardized testing (Glazzard et al., 2010; Börnert-Ringleb & Wilbert, 2018). Because learning is influenced by factors such as language, prior educational opportunities, health, and classroom context, assessment and instruction should remain flexible and responsive to learner variability (Winstanley, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Despite expanded access to basic education in Nigeria since 1999, many pupils in the early primary grades continue to perform below expected literacy and numeracy levels. While prior research has examined issues of access, policy, and intervention outcomes, far less attention has been given to what happens inside everyday classrooms for pupils with mild learning difficulties in Grades 1–3.

Teachers often recognize that some pupils need slower pacing, reteaching, multimodal instruction, and additional support. However, these inclusive practices are frequently difficult to sustain within school systems that rely heavily on whole-class instruction, uniform written assessments, limited instructional time, and minimal specialist support. As a result, an intention–implementation gap exists in which teachers attempt to support struggling learners, but classroom structures and assessment practices limit how consistently differentiated instruction can be implemented.

Little is therefore known about how teachers currently navigate this tension between inclusive intentions and rigid instructional systems in everyday classroom practice, particularly in Nigerian elementary schools serving pupils with mild learning difficulties. Understanding how instruction and assessment are enacted in these contexts is important for identifying the structural conditions that either support or constrain meaningful learning opportunities for these pupils.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by key concepts including mild learning difficulties, instructional practices, assessment routines, and learner variability. Mild learning difficulties are understood as differences in learning pace and comprehension that emerge within classroom contexts rather than through formal diagnostic criteria. Instruction refers to how teachers organize teaching, including methods, pacing, and support strategies. Assessment refers to how pupil learning is evaluated through written examinations and other formats. These concepts are interconnected, as instructional approaches and assessment formats shape pupils' opportunities to learn and demonstrate understanding. This study examines how these elements interact within early primary classrooms.

Early Instructional Conditions and Pre-Primary Education

There is a substantial body of work on basic education in Nigeria; however, only 12 studies (a) focused explicitly on literacy and/or numeracy in the early years, (b) were conducted in Lagos State or in comparable urban Nigerian contexts, and (c) provided empirical evidence related to classroom instruction, assessment, or learner participation. I organized those studies into thematic groups (a) early instructional conditions and pre-primary education; (b) literacy instruction in primary classrooms; (c) mathematics instruction and learning in primary schools; and (d) policy and systemic conditions shaping classroom instruction.

I found only one study which explicitly examined the impact of pre-primary education. Odinko and Iroegbu (2005) found that children who attended pre-primary programmes prior to Primary One significantly outperformed those without such exposure in early literacy and numeracy, with urban/rural differences evident and no significant gender effects.

Inclusive Literacy Instruction in Nigerian Primary Classrooms

Earlier research on literacy instruction in Nigerian primary schools suggested that classroom practices were often examination-driven and provided limited opportunities for active learner participation. More recent studies, however, indicate that challenges surrounding inclusive classroom implementation remain persistent in Nigerian schools. Ire and Osuji (2024) conducted a study on inclusive education and cognitive development among pupils with disabilities in Nigerian primary schools. Using survey and classroom-based data from mainstream school settings, they examined how teachers implemented inclusive instructional practices for learners with disabilities. The findings showed that although teachers expressed positive attitudes toward inclusive education and recognized the importance of supporting diverse learners, implementation was constrained by inadequate teacher preparation, limited instructional support, insufficient competencies, workload demands, and broader structural challenges affecting curriculum implementation. The study concluded that institutional and instructional constraints continued to shape how inclusive support was enacted in everyday classroom practice.

In another study, Oyetunde et al. (2016) reported a quasi-experimental intervention study in five government primary schools involving 15 teachers and 140 Primary One pupils assigned to treatment and control groups. Teachers in the treatment condition received training in Whole Language-based instructional strategies and implemented an eight-week after-school reading intervention. The teachers in the control group were only involved in the pre- and post-test assessments. Post-test results showed that pupils in the treatment group demonstrated improvements in expressive language, sight-word recognition, and engagement with print, including the ability to generate language-experience stories, read simple storybooks, and produce pupil-authored storybooks.

Mathematics Instruction and Learning in Nigerian Primary Schools

Onu et al. (2012) conducted a quasi-experimental study examining the effects of metacognitive problem-solving strategy instruction on sixth grade pupils' achievement in fractions. Pupils who received explicit training in planning, monitoring, and evaluation strategies significantly outperformed those receiving conventional instruction, suggesting that persistent mathematics difficulties were linked to instructional approaches that emphasize rote procedures over strategic and reflective thinking.

Okafor and Anaduaka (2013) employed a descriptive, conceptual approach. Their paper drew on analyses of national examination performance data, curriculum documents, and existing research literature to explain the persistence of mathematics phobia among Nigerian school children. They concluded that instruction was teacher-centered, limited in classroom interaction, and produced negative societal attitudes toward mathematics contributed to students' anxiety and poor performance, and they proposed learner-centered, discussion-based instructional practices as remedies.

In contrast, Busari (2013) conducted a quantitative correlational study involving 2,283 fifth- and sixth-year elementary pupils in southwestern Nigeria. He used standardized instruments, including adapted versions of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), a mathematics-specific Test Anxiety Inventory, and a teacher-made achievement test, and applied multiple regression analysis to examine predictors of mathematics achievement. The findings showed that self-regulation was the strongest predictor, followed by test anxiety and motivation.

Theoretical Framework

I approached this study through a socio-cultural constructivist lens, viewing learning as an active process shaped by pupil's engagement with tasks, materials, feedback, and social interaction rather than passive knowledge transmission (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990, 2003). This perspective recognizes that learners vary in how they construct and demonstrate understanding (Gardner, 1983). I conceptualize instruction and assessment as opportunities for learning and attend to how time, task alignment, feedback, and assessment formats expand or constrain what pupils can reasonably learn (Carroll, 1963; Rosenshine, 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Guided by principles of inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Tomlinson, 2014), this framework informed my analysis of how teachers organize instruction, respond to learner variability, and structure opportunities for participation in mainstream classrooms.

To further address learner variability, this study also draws on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes designing flexible learning environments that provide multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression (CAST, 2018). UDL recognizes that pupils learn in different ways and that rigid instructional and assessment practices may create barriers to participation and achievement. Rather than expecting all pupils to learn through the same methods or demonstrate understanding in identical ways, UDL encourages the use of varied instructional supports, multimodal teaching approaches, flexible assessment practices, and multiple opportunities for participation to increase accessibility for diverse learners (CAST, 2018). Within this study, UDL complements inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction by helping explain how classroom structures and instructional practices may either support or constrain participation and learning opportunities for pupils with mild learning difficulties.

Research Gaps

Existing studies on Nigerian primary education have primarily focused on policy, intervention outcomes, mathematics achievement, or broad issues of inclusive education. For example, Oyetunde et al. (2016) examined the effects of a literacy intervention, while Ire and Osuji (2024) focused on inclusive education challenges in mainstream classrooms. Other studies emphasized mathematics performance, anxiety, motivation, or pre-primary access (Busari, 2013; Onu et al., 2012; Odinko & Iroegbu, 2005). However, little attention has been given to how teachers enact day-to-day instruction and assessment for pupils with mild learning difficulties within mainstream early primary classrooms in Lagos.

In particular, prior studies have not closely examined how teachers navigate the tension between inclusive instructional intentions and rigid classroom structures such as whole-class instruction, uniform assessments, limited instructional time, and minimal specialist support. As a result, little is known about how differentiated and inclusive practices are implemented, adapted, or constrained in everyday classroom practice. This study addresses that gap by examining how instruction and assessment are enacted for pupils with mild learning difficulties in mainstream Grades 1–3 classrooms in Lagos primary schools.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

I used qualitative research methods to conduct the present investigation. I selected a qualitative descriptive approach because it supports low-inference, practice-near accounts and rich descriptions of schooling as it unfolds in natural settings (Sandelowski, 2000; Merriam, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2020). I employed a qualitative multiple-case study design, examining two Lagos primary schools at different time points in order to compare instructional and assessment practices and identify patterns of continuity and variation across sites and time (Yin, 2018). By using the same semi-structured interview guide and classroom observation protocol at both sites, I held instruments and procedures constant and examined whether themes identified in 2013 reappeared in a different school in 2025.

Sampling Technique

I used purposive sampling to recruit class and assistant class teachers with day-to-day responsibility for Grades 1–3 who regularly planned and delivered literacy and numeracy instruction.

Sample Size

At Soc School (2013), (see Table 1), five teachers (one male, four female) consented to participate in interviews and classroom observations; a sixth eligible teacher withdrew due to scheduling constraints. At SeedO School (2025), (see Table 2), three class teachers and one assistant teacher participated. Across both sites, participants were responsible for core instruction in Grades 1–3.

Table 1: Soc School (2013)

Pseudonym	Grade level	Role	Degree
Rala	2	Class Teacher	First Degree in Business Administration Post Graduate Certificate in Education
Leekem	1	Class Teacher	First Degree in Accounting
Charieu	3	Class Teacher	First Degree in Education Second Degree in Education
Odav	2	Numeracy Teacher	First Degree in Math Post Graduate Certificate in Education
Mito	1	Numeracy Teacher	First Degree in Educational Administration Second Degree in Educational Administration

Table 2: SeedO School (2025)

Pseudonym	Grade level	Role	Degree
Jehem	1	Classroom and Numeracy Teacher	First Degree in Education
Mehje	2	Classroom and Numeracy Teacher	National Certificate of Education First Degree in Education (in view)
Law	3	Classroom and Numeracy Teacher	First Degree in Education

Data Collection Procedure

To ensure methodological consistency across both schools, I used the same interview guide and classroom observation protocols. I collected data through semi-structured individual interviews, which allowed for in-depth responses while ensuring coverage of key areas including instructional routines, adaptations for struggling learners, assessment practices, and perceived instructional challenges. I conducted systematic classroom observations of literacy and numeracy lessons at both schools.

In both schools, I conducted two classroom observations per week for approximately two months, each lasting one hour. Each observation was followed immediately by an interview with the observed teacher. Each teacher participated in four rounds of observations and four corresponding interviews, resulting in approximately four hours of observed instruction per teacher.

Statistical Analysis

I analyzed the data using qualitative descriptive methods consistent with multiple-case study research. I read interview transcripts and field notes in full to gain an overall understanding of teachers' accounts, then reread the data while writing analytic memos. I developed a preliminary codebook and applied codes systematically to interview excerpts and observation data. I constructed a framework matrix to compare themes across sites and time, summarizing patterns and identifying consistencies and variations. Findings were developed using evidence from both interviews and classroom observations.

RESULTS

Across the 2013 and 2025 studies, I identified seven recurring patterns in how teachers understood and addressed the learning needs of pupils described as having MLD. Teachers defined MLD primarily through comparison with peers' pace and level of performance. Teachers' understandings of learning differences emphasized home-based, developmental, and contextual factors. Teachers consistently believed that pupils with MLD could eventually catch up with sufficient time and instructional support. Teachers employed instructional adaptations such as re-teaching, multimodal explanations, and individualized support, but these practices were implemented unevenly. Instructional time was constrained by administrative structures and organizational routines. Assessment practices remained largely uniform across pupils despite instructional adaptation. Specialist support systems were fragile or intermittent, limiting continuity and integration with classroom instruction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

This study examined how teachers in two Lagos private primary schools addressed the learning needs of pupils with mild learning difficulties across two time points. Findings revealed consistent patterns in teacher beliefs, instructional practices, and structural constraints. While teachers demonstrated adaptive instructional strategies, their effectiveness was limited by time constraints, uniform assessment systems, and weak specialist support. The study highlights the need for systemic alignment between instruction, assessment, and support structures to improve learning outcomes for pupils with mild learning difficulties.

Conclusions

The study concludes that teachers demonstrated strong inclusive intentions and used a range of instructional adaptations to support pupils with mild learning difficulties. However, these practices were applied inconsistently due to structural constraints related to instructional time, uniform assessment practices, and limited specialist support. The replication of findings across two schools and time points indicates that these challenges are systemic rather than site-specific. Overall, an intention-implementation gap exists in which inclusive practices are present but not consistently sustained within existing school structures.

Recommendations

The study found that teachers attempted to support pupils with mild learning difficulties through re-teaching, multimodal explanations, individualized support, and differentiated instructional

strategies. However, these efforts were often constrained by limited instructional time, administrative demands, uniform assessment expectations, and insufficient specialist support. Schools should therefore reduce non-instructional workload demands during teaching periods and create structured opportunities for small-group instruction and re-teaching within the timetable so that inclusive practices can be implemented more consistently.

Teachers also attempted to adapt instruction through oral questioning, visual supports, and guided practice, but these practices were not always sustained because assessment structures emphasized uniform written responses and curriculum coverage. Schools should align assessment practices more closely with differentiated instruction by incorporating oral, visual, and performance-based responses that allow pupils with mild learning difficulties to demonstrate understanding in multiple ways.

The findings further showed that teachers expressed positive intentions toward inclusive education, but broader institutional constraints limited the consistency of implementation. Policymakers and educational authorities should therefore strengthen teacher preparation, instructional support systems, and specialist collaboration within schools to improve the sustainability of inclusive classroom practices for pupils with mild learning difficulties.

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