

CLASSROOM-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL AND INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING DIVERSE LEARNING NEEDS AMONG LEARNERS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SETTINGS

Aneke, Anthonia Olunwa

Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education
Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

ABSTRACT

The study examined classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies for managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings. The study was carried out in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State. Five research questions guided the study. The population of the study consisted of 220 early childhood education teachers. No sampling was used because the population was manageable. The instrument for data collection was Classroom Instructional and Inclusive Practices in Teaching Questionnaire (CIDIPT). The instrument was validated by three experts in the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach Alpha method and a coefficient value of 0.82 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings of the study revealed that teachers agreed that differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, and multimodal teaching were actively used in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings. The study also revealed that regular teacher training and provision of instructional materials were key strategies for enhancing effective implementation of inclusive instructional practices. The study contributed to knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of classroom-based instructional strategies in promoting inclusive early childhood education practices. The study also highlighted practical strategies for improving teaching effectiveness in diverse classrooms. It was recommended that teachers should be regularly trained on inclusive instructional strategies to enhance effective classroom practice.

Keywords: Differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, multimodal teaching, inclusive education

Introduction

Classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies have become fundamental in addressing the diverse learning needs of learners in early childhood education settings. Early childhood education constitutes a critical stage in human development during which foundational cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills are established. Contemporary early childhood classrooms are increasingly characterized by diversity in learners' abilities, developmental levels, socio-cultural backgrounds, language proficiencies, and learning styles. This growing heterogeneity necessitates the adoption of responsive, flexible, and learner-centered instructional approaches that ensure equitable access to quality education and meaningful participation for all learners. The global emphasis on inclusive education further underscores the need for effective strategies that promote equity, participation, and a sense of belonging in learning environments (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2022).

Diverse learning needs in early childhood education encompass a wide spectrum of differences, including developmental delays, disabilities, giftedness, and variations in socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Addressing these differences requires the

integration of classroom-based instructional strategies that are adaptable and inclusive. Differentiated instruction has been widely recognized as an effective approach for meeting learners' varied needs through the modification of content, instructional processes, learning products, and classroom environments (Mayer, 2020). This approach ensures that instruction is aligned with learners' readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles, thereby enhancing engagement and improving learning outcomes. In a similar vein, scaffolding provides structured and temporary support that enables learners to accomplish tasks beyond their independent capabilities. Through modeling, guided interaction, and gradual withdrawal of assistance, scaffolding fosters independence and promotes cognitive development among learners (Vygotsky, 1978).

In addition, play-based learning serves as a developmentally appropriate instructional strategy that facilitates active engagement and experiential learning in early childhood settings. Through play, learners explore their environment, interact with peers, and construct knowledge in meaningful ways (Tomlinson, 2021). This approach not only supports cognitive development but also enhances social interaction and inclusion among learners with diverse abilities. Complementing this strategy is the use of multimodal teaching approaches, which involve the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods to present instructional content. Multimodal instruction accommodates diverse learning styles and enhances comprehension by providing multiple pathways for learning and expression (Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Furthermore, cooperative and collaborative learning strategies play a significant role in fostering inclusive classroom environments. These approaches involve structured group activities that encourage interaction, peer support, and shared learning experiences. Through collaboration, learners develop essential social skills, empathy, and mutual respect, which are critical for inclusive education (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). Individualized instruction also contributes to managing diverse learning needs by tailoring educational experiences to the specific strengths and challenges of each learner. This may involve the development of individualized learning plans and targeted interventions designed to support learners with special educational needs as well as those with exceptional abilities (Hall, Meyer, & Rose, 2012). The integration of assistive technology further enhances inclusive practices by providing tools and resources that facilitate access to learning for learners with disabilities and other special needs. Assistive technologies according to Black & Wiliam (2018) supported communication, participation, and independent learning, thereby reducing barriers to inclusion. In addition, the establishment of a flexible classroom environment, characterized by adaptive physical arrangements, diverse instructional materials, and supportive classroom routines, creates a conducive atmosphere for learning. Such environments accommodate learners' varying needs and promote active engagement and participation. Equally important is the use of formative assessment and continuous feedback, which enable educators to monitor learners' progress, identify learning gaps, and adjust instructional strategies accordingly. These assessment practices ensure that teaching remains responsive to the dynamic needs of learners and supports improved learning outcomes (Edyburn, 2021).

Notwithstanding the recognized importance of these classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies, their effective implementation in early childhood education settings continues to face several challenges. These challenges include inadequate teacher preparation, limited availability of instructional resources, large class sizes, and insufficient policy support. Such constraints hinder the ability of educators to fully implement inclusive practices and address the diverse needs of learners. Addressing these

challenges requires sustained efforts in professional development, policy formulation, and resource allocation to strengthen inclusive education practices. In view of the foregoing, contemporary research has increasingly emphasized the importance of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies in addressing the diverse learning needs of learners in early childhood education settings. Existing studies by UNESCO (2020) highlighted the effectiveness of approaches such as differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, and the integration of assistive technologies in promoting inclusive learning environments and improving learner outcomes. Recent scholarly contributions have also underscored the role of multimodal teaching, collaborative learning, and formative assessment in enhancing participation, engagement, and achievement among diverse groups of learners. These developments reflect a growing global commitment to inclusive education and the need for pedagogical practices that accommodate variability among learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2019).

However, despite these advances, gaps remain in the existing body of knowledge. Many studies have examined inclusive education and instructional strategies as separate constructs, with limited attention given to their integrated application within real classroom contexts, particularly in early childhood education settings (Tomlinson, 2021). In addition, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how these strategies are practically implemented by teachers in managing diverse learning needs in specific educational contexts, especially in developing regions. Issues relating to contextual constraints such as inadequate resources, large class sizes, and varying levels of teacher preparedness have not been adequately addressed in the literature (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, limited focus has been placed on the combined effectiveness of multiple instructional strategies in fostering inclusive practices and improving holistic learning outcomes among young learners. It is against this backdrop, this study focuses on classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies for managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings. The study seeks to bridge the identified gaps by providing a more integrated understanding of these strategies and their practical application in inclusive classrooms. It is expected that the findings will contribute to the advancement of knowledge on effective instructional practices that promote inclusivity and enhance learning outcomes for all learners.

Statement of the Problem

The effective management of diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings remains a critical concern in contemporary educational practice. Ideally, early childhood classrooms are expected to provide inclusive, supportive, and learner-centered environments where classroom-based instructional strategies are systematically adapted to accommodate the varying abilities, backgrounds, and learning styles of all learners. In such settings, teachers are expected to employ differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, multimodal teaching approaches, and continuous assessment practices to ensure equitable participation, meaningful engagement, and optimal learning outcomes for every child. Furthermore, inclusive education frameworks emphasize that all learners, regardless of differences in ability or background, should have equal access to quality education within well-resourced and effectively managed classrooms.

However, the reality in many early childhood education settings reflects significant deviations from these expectations. Classrooms often remain characterized by uniform teaching approaches that do not adequately address individual differences among learners.

Many teachers experience challenges in implementing inclusive instructional strategies due to limited professional training, inadequate instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient institutional support. As a result, learners with diverse needs, including those with developmental delays, disabilities, or varying learning styles, may not receive the necessary support required for effective learning and participation. This situation contributes to reduced engagement, unequal learning opportunities, and suboptimal educational outcomes among affected learners. The gap between the expected inclusive classroom practices and the realities of instructional delivery highlights a persistent challenge in early childhood education. Despite the recognized importance of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies, there is limited evidence on the extent to which these strategies are effectively utilized in managing diverse learning needs within early childhood settings. Consequently, the problem of this study is that inadequate implementation of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies continue to hinder the effective management of diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies for managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. examine differentiated instruction in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings;
2. examine scaffolding in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings;
3. examine play-based learning in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings;
4. examine multimodal teaching in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings;
5. identify strategies to enhance the implementation of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How is differentiated instruction used in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings?
2. How is scaffolding used in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings?
3. How is play-based learning used in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings?
4. How is multimodal teaching used in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings?
5. What strategies can be used to enhance the implementation of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings?

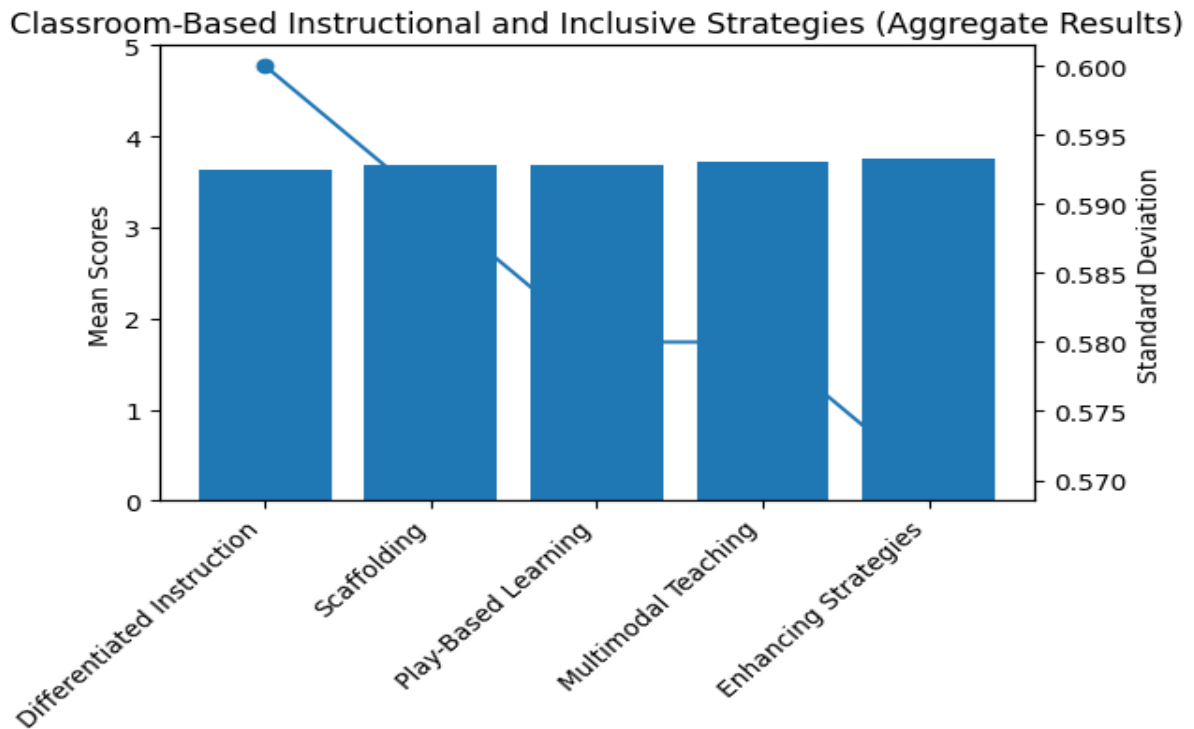


Figure 1: Teachers’ Responses on Instructional and Inclusive Strategies in Early Childhood Education

The above chart presents a visual summary of early childhood education teachers’ responses on classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies for managing diverse learning needs. The bar chart shows that all strategies recorded high mean scores ranging from 3.64 to 3.76, indicating a generally high level of agreement among respondents on the use of differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, multimodal teaching, and enhancing strategies. The line graph of standard deviation shows low variation in responses, suggesting consistency in the opinions of teachers. Overall, the chart indicates that these instructional and inclusive strategies are actively used and widely accepted in early childhood education settings.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to obtain information from early childhood education teachers on classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies used in managing diverse learning needs in their natural school settings. The study was carried out in Nsukka Education Zone, Enugu State, Nigeria. The area was selected because it has a sufficient number of early childhood education centres where issues relating to learner diversity and inclusive classroom practices are evident. The population of the study comprised 220 early childhood education teachers in public primary schools in Nsukka Education Zone. Since the population was manageable, the entire population of 220 teachers was used as the sample size; hence, no sampling technique was employed. The instrument for data collection was Classroom Instructional and Inclusive Practices in Teaching Questionnaire (CIDIPT). The instrument was validated by three experts in the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Faculty of Education, University

of Nigeria, Nsukka. The instrument was structured on a four-point rating scale and was designed to elicit information from the respondents on the variables under study. Their observations and corrections were used to improve the clarity and quality of the instrument. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha method, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating that the instrument, was reliable for the study. Data were collected through direct administration of the questionnaire by the researcher with the assistance of trained research assistants. The copies of the instrument were retrieved after completion to ensure a high response rate. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The results were presented in tables for clarity and ease of interpretation. The decision rule for the study was based on a benchmark mean of 3.00. Any item with a mean score of 3.00 and above was regarded as Agree, while any item with a mean score below 3.00 was regarded as Disagree.

Results

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses of Early Childhood Education Teachers on Differentiated Instruction in Managing Diverse Learning Needs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (X̄)	Std Dev (SD)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Teachers vary instructional content based on learners' ability levels	3.70	0.58	3.00	3	A
2	Teachers group learners according to their learning abilities	3.55	0.62	3.00	7	A
3	Teachers provide different tasks for learners with different abilities	3.80	0.55	3.00	1	A
4	Teachers adjust teaching methods to suit learners' learning styles	3.60	0.60	3.00	5	A
5	Teachers use flexible assessment methods for learners	3.75	0.57	3.00	2	A
6	Teachers simplify learning materials for lower ability learners	3.50	0.65	3.00	8	A
7	Teachers provide enrichment activities for advanced learners	3.65	0.59	3.00	4	A
8	Teachers use continuous feedback to support learners' progress	3.60	0.60	3.00	6	A
Aggregate Score		3.64	0.60	3.00		A

Data in Table 1 showed that responses from early childhood education teachers indicate agreement that differentiated instruction is used in managing diverse learning needs in early childhood education settings. This is reflected in the aggregate mean score of 3.64, which is higher than the mean set of 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.60 showing closeness in responses among respondents. The findings further show that providing different tasks for learners with varying abilities ranked highest, while simplifying learning materials for lower-ability learners ranked lowest. Overall, the findings indicate that differentiated instruction is actively applied by teachers to support diverse learners in early childhood education classrooms.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses of Early Childhood Education Teachers on Scaffolding in Managing Diverse Learning Needs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (SD)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Teachers guide learners step-by-step when introducing new concepts	3.78	0.56	3.00	2	A
2	Teachers provide hints and prompts to support learners' understanding	3.70	0.60	3.00	4	A
3	Teachers break tasks into smaller manageable steps	3.82	0.54	3.00	1	A
4	Teachers model activities before learners attempt them	3.75	0.58	3.00	3	A
5	Teachers gradually reduce support as learners gain confidence	3.60	0.62	3.00	7	A
6	Teachers use peer support to assist struggling learners	3.65	0.59	3.00	6	A
7	Teachers repeat instructions when learners find tasks difficult	3.68	0.57	3.00	5	A
8	Teachers encourage learners to complete tasks independently after guidance	3.55	0.64	3.00	8	A
Aggregate Score		3.69	0.59	3.00		A

Data in Table 2 showed that early childhood education teachers agree that scaffolding is used in managing diverse learning needs in early childhood education settings. This is indicated by the aggregate mean score of 3.69, which is above the mean set of 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.59 showing consistency in responses. The findings further reveal that breaking tasks into smaller steps ranked highest, while encouraging learners to work independently after guidance ranked lowest. Overall, the result indicates that teachers actively use scaffolding strategies to support learners with diverse abilities in early childhood classrooms.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses of Early Childhood Education Teachers on Play-Based Learning in Managing Diverse Learning Needs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (SD)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Teachers use play activities to introduce new concepts	3.85	0.52	3.00	1	A
2	Teachers use role play to support learning among pupils	3.70	0.58	3.00	4	A
3	Teachers integrate games into lesson delivery	3.78	0.55	3.00	2	A
4	Teachers use songs and rhymes to enhance understanding	3.72	0.57	3.00	3	A
5	Teachers allow learners to explore learning materials through play	3.65	0.60	3.00	6	A
6	Teachers use outdoor play to support social learning	3.60	0.62	3.00	7	A
7	Teachers organize group play to	3.68	0.59	3.00	5	A

	encourage peer interaction					
8	Teachers use play-based activities to support learners with difficulties	3.55	0.64	3.00	8	A
Aggregate Score		3.69	0.58	3.00		A

Data in Table 3 showed that early childhood education teachers agree that play-based learning is used in managing diverse learning needs in early childhood education settings. This is reflected in the aggregate mean score of 3.69, which is above the mean set of 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.58 indicating similarity in responses among teachers. The findings further reveal that using play activities to introduce new concepts ranked highest, while using play-based activities to support learners with difficulties ranked lowest. Overall, the result indicates that play-based learning is widely used by teachers to enhance engagement and support diverse learners in early childhood classrooms.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses of Early Childhood Education Teachers on Multimodal Teaching in Managing Diverse Learning Needs

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (SD)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Teachers use visual aids like pictures and charts to explain concepts	3.80	0.55	3.00	2	A
2	Teachers use songs and rhymes to support learning	3.75	0.57	3.00	4	A
3	Teachers use storytelling to enhance understanding	3.78	0.56	3.00	3	A
4	Teachers incorporate hands-on activities to teach concepts	3.82	0.54	3.00	1	A
5	Teachers combine auditory, visual, and kinesthetic methods in lessons	3.70	0.60	3.00	5	A
6	Teachers use physical activities to reinforce learning	3.65	0.62	3.00	7	A
7	Teachers adapt teaching materials to match different learning styles	3.68	0.59	3.00	6	A
8	Teachers use multimedia tools such as videos or slides	3.60	0.63	3.00	8	A
Aggregate Score		3.72	0.58	3.00		A

Data in Table 4 showed that early childhood education teachers agree that multimodal teaching is used to manage diverse learning needs in early childhood education settings. The aggregate mean of 3.72 exceeds the mean set of 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.58, indicating consistent responses among teachers. The findings reveal that incorporating hands-on activities ranked highest, while using multimedia tools like videos or slides ranked lowest. Overall, the results indicate that teachers actively employ multimodal teaching strategies to accommodate different learning preferences and enhance understanding among diverse learners in early childhood classrooms.

Table 5: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses of Early Childhood Education Teachers on Strategies to Enhance the Implementation of Classroom-Based Instructional and Inclusive Strategies

S/N	Item Statement	Mean (\bar{X})	Std Dev (SD)	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
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1	Regular teacher training on inclusive instructional strategies should be provided	3.85	0.52	3.00	1	A
2	Adequate instructional materials to be made available in classrooms	3.80	0.55	3.00	2	A
3	Teachers should receive support for integrating technology in teaching	3.70	0.60	3.00	5	A
4	Reduction of class size will improve effective classroom instruction	3.78	0.56	3.00	3	A
5	School management should support inclusive education practices	3.82	0.54	3.00	4	A
6	Teachers should be encouraged to use learner-centred teaching approaches	3.75	0.57	3.00	6	A
7	Continuous supervision and monitoring of classroom instruction should be ensured	3.68	0.59	3.00	7	A
8	Collaboration between teachers and parents should be strengthened	3.65	0.62	3.00	8	A
Aggregate Score		3.76	0.57	3.00		A

Data in Table 5 showed that early childhood education teachers agree that several strategies can enhance the implementation of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies in managing diverse learning needs. This is indicated by the aggregate mean score of 3.76, which is above the mean set of 3.00, with a standard deviation of 0.57 showing close agreement among respondents. The findings further reveal that provision of regular teacher training ranked highest, while strengthening collaboration between teachers and parents ranked lowest. Overall, the result shows that effective implementation of inclusive instructional strategies can be improved through training, provision of resources, and institutional support in early childhood education settings.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that differentiated instruction is used in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings through variation of tasks, grouping of learners, and adjustment of teaching content based on ability levels. Examples include giving simple counting activities to lower-ability learners while higher-ability learners engage in problem-solving tasks. The findings are in consonance with the study of Tomlinson (2021) who posited that differentiated instruction enhances academic performance by addressing learner differences. Similarly, Florian and Black-Hawkins (2019) found that inclusive teaching approaches improve participation and engagement among diverse learners.

The findings of the study revealed that scaffolding is used through guided instruction, step-by-step assistance, questioning, and modeling to help learners complete learning tasks. Examples include guiding learners in writing letters, counting objects, and gradually allowing independent practice. The findings are in consonance with the study of Vygotsky (1978) who posited that learning is supported through guided assistance within

the zone of proximal development. Likewise, Hall, Meyer, and Rose (2012) found that structured support systems enhance learning accessibility and learner independence.

The findings of the study revealed that play-based learning is used through games, storytelling, role play, and hands-on activities to support learning. Examples include using toy shops for number concepts, building blocks for spatial reasoning, and role-play corners for social interaction. The findings are in consonance with the study of Pyle and Danniels (2017) who posited that play-based learning enhances cognitive and social development in early childhood education. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) found that play-oriented learning improves inclusion and engagement among young learners.

The findings of the study revealed that multimodal teaching is used through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approaches to enhance understanding. Examples include using pictures for identification, songs for memorization, storytelling for language development, and physical activities for concept reinforcement. The findings are in consonance with the study of Mayer (2020) who posited that learning is improved when information is presented through multiple channels. In addition, Johnson and Johnson (2019) found that active and interactive learning approaches enhance learner understanding and collaboration.

The findings of the study revealed that strategies such as teacher training, provision of instructional materials, reduction of class size, and effective school support systems enhance the implementation of classroom-based instructional and inclusive strategies. Examples include professional development workshops, availability of teaching aids such as charts and manipulatives, and improved classroom management support. The findings are in consonance with the study of Edyburn (2021) who posited that adequate instructional support and resources improve inclusive education practices. Similarly, Black and Wiliam (2018) found that continuous professional feedback and assessment practices strengthen teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes.

Educational Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for early childhood education practice, teacher preparation, and school administration. The study implies that effective management of diverse learning needs in early childhood classrooms largely depends on teachers' ability to apply differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, and multimodal teaching. This means that teacher education programmes should place greater emphasis on practical training in inclusive and learner-centred instructional strategies to equip pre-service and in-service teachers with relevant competencies. The study also implies that schools and educational authorities must prioritize continuous professional development for early childhood education teachers, as well as the provision of adequate instructional materials and supportive learning environments. Furthermore, the findings suggest that inclusive education will be more effective when class sizes are manageable and when teachers receive adequate institutional and parental support. Overall, the study reinforces the need for a holistic approach to early childhood education that promotes equity, active participation, and individualized learning support for all learners.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that early childhood education teachers actively use differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, and multimodal teaching in managing diverse learning needs among learners in early childhood education settings. The study further established that these classroom-based

instructional and inclusive strategies are effectively applied to enhance learners' understanding, participation, and engagement in the learning process. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is influenced by the availability of instructional resources, teacher competence, and institutional support. Overall, the findings indicate that inclusive instructional practices are essential for addressing learner diversity and improving teaching and learning outcomes in early childhood education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should be provided with regular training and workshops because continuous professional development will enhance their ability to effectively implement differentiated instruction, scaffolding, play-based learning, and multimodal teaching.
2. Schools should ensure the provision of adequate instructional materials because availability of resources will support effective delivery of inclusive and learner-centred instruction.
3. Class sizes should be reduced because smaller classes will enable teachers to give individualized attention to learners with diverse learning needs.
4. School administrators should strengthen support for inclusive education practices because administrative backing will improve consistent implementation of classroom-based instructional strategies.
5. Collaboration between teachers and parents should be encouraged because strong home-school partnership will enhance learner support and improve learning outcomes in early childhood education settings.

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