

Barriers Affecting Mathematics Achievement among Students with Physical Disabilities in Inclusive Secondary Schools in Ondo State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the barriers to mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all public secondary schools in Ondo State, while the sample consisted of 150 respondents selected from inclusive public secondary schools. A structured questionnaire was used for data collection. The instrument was validated by experts in mathematics education, special education, and measurement and evaluation. Its reliability was established through a pilot study using Cronbach's Alpha. Data collected were analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation. The findings revealed that students with physical disabilities faced school-based, teacher-related, learner-related, and support-related barriers in learning mathematics. Major barriers included inaccessible classrooms, poor seating arrangements, lack of ramps, inadequate teacher preparation, unsuitable teaching methods, physical fatigue, slow writing speed, low confidence, lack of assistive devices, and unsuitable examination arrangements. The study concluded that mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities could improve when inclusive schools provide accessible facilities, trained teachers, adapted instructional materials, counselling support, peer support, and fair assessment conditions.

Keywords: Mathematics achievement, Physical disabilities, inclusive education, secondary schools,

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Introduction

Mathematics occupies a central position in secondary education because it provides the foundation for scientific reasoning, technological literacy, problem-solving, and progression into many careers in science, technology, engineering, business, and vocational fields. In Nigeria, mathematics is a compulsory subject at the secondary school level and remains a key requirement for transition into higher education and many professional pathways. However, students' achievement in mathematics has remained a persistent concern, particularly among learners who experience structural, instructional, social, and personal barriers within the school system. While poor mathematics achievement is often discussed in relation to teaching methods, learner motivation, school resources, and assessment practices, less attention has been given to the experiences of students with physical disabilities who learn mathematics in inclusive secondary school settings.

Inclusive education is based on the principle that all learners, regardless of disability, gender, background, or learning need, should have equitable access to quality education within the same learning environment. Nigeria's inclusive education policy direction recognises the need to remove barriers that prevent learners with disabilities from participating meaningfully in schooling (Federal Ministry of Education, 2017). Nevertheless, the existence of policy does not automatically translate into effective classroom inclusion. Studies on inclusive education have shown that learners with disabilities continue to face barriers such as inaccessible school buildings, inadequate instructional materials, limited assistive technology, insufficient teacher preparation, negative attitudes, and weak institutional support (Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024; World Bank, 2020). These barriers may be more pronounced in mathematics classrooms where learning often requires active participation, use of mathematical instruments, board work, written computation, peer interaction, and sustained classroom engagement.

Students with physical disabilities are not necessarily limited in intellectual capacity; rather, their academic achievement may be constrained by the interaction between their impairments and the learning environment. The social model of disability suggests that disability becomes educationally limiting when schools fail to provide accessible facilities, flexible pedagogy, reasonable accommodation, and supportive attitudes. For example, a student with mobility impairment may struggle to reach classrooms, sit comfortably, access the board, participate in group tasks, or complete examinations within the expected time if the school environment is not properly adapted. In mathematics, such difficulties can reduce participation, concentration, confidence, and performance, even when the learner has the cognitive ability to succeed.

Research in inclusive mathematics education emphasises that effective mathematics learning for students with disabilities depends not only on placement in regular classrooms but also on the quality of support provided within those classrooms. Vodičková, Mitašíková, and Slavíčková (2023) identified responsive teaching, instructional accommodation, school-family collaboration, and institutional support as important factors for inclusive mathematics education. Similarly, studies on Universal Design for Learning show that students with disabilities benefit when teachers use multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression in STEM-related subjects (Schreffler et al., 2019). This implies that mathematics teachers in inclusive classrooms need to move beyond one-way explanation and adopt flexible strategies such as differentiated instruction, adapted materials, peer-supported learning, accessible classroom arrangements, and alternative ways for students to demonstrate understanding.

Despite the growing attention to inclusive education, there remains a noticeable research gap in the Nigerian context regarding the specific barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools. Many studies

discuss inclusive education generally, while others focus on students with special educational needs as a broad group. However, students with physical disabilities may experience unique barriers related to mobility, classroom accessibility, writing speed, fatigue, seating position, examination conditions, and participation in mathematics-related classroom activities. These barriers may differ from those experienced by students with visual, hearing, intellectual, or learning disabilities. Therefore, focusing specifically on students with physical disabilities allows for a clearer understanding of how school-based, teacher-related, learner-related, and policy-related factors influence their achievement in mathematics.

Ondo State provides a relevant context for this investigation because inclusive education in Nigerian states is shaped by differences in school infrastructure, teacher capacity, resource availability, administrative commitment, and community attitudes. In many inclusive secondary schools, the extent to which learners with physical disabilities are supported may depend on the availability of ramps, accessible toilets, suitable furniture, trained teachers, assistive devices, counselling services, and flexible assessment practices. Where these supports are weak or absent, students with physical disabilities may attend school physically but remain academically excluded from full participation in mathematics learning. This study is therefore important because it seeks to identify the major barriers to mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The findings are expected to provide evidence that can guide teachers, school administrators, policymakers, parents, and inclusive education stakeholders in improving mathematics learning opportunities for students with physical disabilities.

Statement of the Problem

Mathematics is a core subject in Nigerian secondary schools and an important requirement for students' academic progression, career opportunities, and participation in science, technology, and vocational fields. However, achievement in mathematics remains a major concern among many secondary school students. For students with physical disabilities, the problem may be more serious because their learning difficulties are often not caused by lack of ability, but by barriers within the school environment. In inclusive secondary schools, such students are expected to learn mathematics alongside their peers, yet many schools may not provide the necessary physical, instructional, and emotional support that enables them to participate fully in mathematics lessons.

Although inclusive education is intended to give all learners equal access to quality education, its implementation in many Nigerian schools still faces practical challenges. Students with physical disabilities may experience inaccessible classrooms, unsuitable seating arrangements, lack of ramps, overcrowded classes, limited assistive devices, poor teacher preparation, negative attitudes, and inadequate individual support. These barriers can affect how they move around the school, copy notes, participate in board work, use mathematical instruments, engage in group activities, complete assignments, and perform during tests and examinations. As a result, their achievement in mathematics may be negatively affected, even when they possess the ability to understand mathematical concepts.

Existing studies have shown that students with disabilities often face barriers related to school facilities, teaching methods, communication, social attitudes, and lack of reasonable accommodation (Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024; World Bank, 2020). In mathematics education, inclusive teaching requires more than placing learners with disabilities in regular classrooms. It requires flexible instructional strategies, accessible materials, teacher support, peer assistance, and a classroom environment that allows all learners to demonstrate understanding in different ways (Schreffler et al., 2019; Vodičková et al., 2023). Where these supports are absent, students with physical disabilities may be physically present in inclusive classrooms but academically excluded from meaningful participation in mathematics learning.

The problem is that little is known about the specific barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. Many available studies discuss inclusive education generally or focus on students with disabilities as one broad group. This makes it difficult to understand the peculiar challenges faced by students with physical disabilities in mathematics classrooms. Their challenges may include mobility difficulties, fatigue, writing speed, classroom positioning, access to learning materials, examination conditions, and teacher expectations. Without empirical evidence on these barriers, teachers, school administrators, policymakers, and parents may not be able to provide appropriate support.

Therefore, this study is necessary to investigate the barriers to mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The study seeks to identify the school-based, teacher-related, learner-related, and support-related factors that hinder their achievement in mathematics. Findings from the study will provide useful information for improving inclusive mathematics teaching, strengthening school support systems, and promoting equal learning opportunities for students with physical disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the barriers to mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. identify the school-based barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools;
2. examine the teacher-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities;
3. determine the learner-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities;
4. investigate the support-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities; and
5. examine the relationship between identified barriers and mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the school-based barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State?
2. What are the teacher-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools?
3. What are the learner-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools?
4. What are the support-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools?
5. What is the relationship between the identified barriers and mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools?

Research Method

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because the study examined the barriers to mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive public secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The design enabled the researcher to collect relevant information from respondents and describe the existing barriers that affected the learning and achievement of students with physical disabilities in mathematics.

The population of the study consisted of all public secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. The study focused on inclusive public secondary schools where students with physical disabilities were enrolled and taught alongside other students. The target respondents included students with physical disabilities, mathematics teachers, and school administrators who were familiar with the learning experiences and challenges of students with physical disabilities in mathematics classrooms.

The sample size for the study was 150 respondents. The respondents were selected from public secondary schools in Ondo State. A multistage sampling procedure was used in selecting the sample. First, some local government areas were selected from the senatorial districts in Ondo State to ensure fair representation. Second, public secondary schools with students with physical disabilities were identified from the selected local government areas. Lastly, students with physical disabilities, mathematics teachers, and relevant school administrators were selected from the identified schools. This procedure helped the researcher to obtain respondents who could provide useful information on the barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities.

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "Barriers to Mathematics Achievement among Students with Physical Disabilities Questionnaire" (BMA SPDQ). The questionnaire was designed to gather information on different barriers affecting students with physical disabilities in mathematics learning. It was divided into sections. Section A contained demographic information such as gender, class level, school location, type of physical disability, and category of respondent. Other sections contained items on school-based barriers, teacher-related barriers, learner-related barriers, and support-related barriers. The items were structured using a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.

The instrument was validated by experts in mathematics education, special education, and measurement and evaluation. The experts examined the questionnaire to ensure that the items were clear, relevant, and suitable for the purpose of the study. Their comments and suggestions were used to improve the final copy of the instrument before it was administered to the respondents.

The reliability of the instrument was established through a pilot study. The pilot study was carried out among respondents who were not part of the main study. The responses obtained from the pilot test were analysed using Cronbach's Alpha to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. The reliability result showed that the instrument was suitable for data collection.

Data were collected by the researcher with the help of trained research assistants. Permission was obtained from the appropriate school authorities before the questionnaire was administered. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and their participation was voluntary. They were also assured that their responses would be treated with confidentiality and used only for academic purposes.

The data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the demographic information of the respondents. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used for decision-making. Any item with a mean score of 2.50 and above was accepted as a barrier, while any item with a mean score below 2.50 was rejected. Since the study was guided only by research questions, no hypothesis was formulated or tested.

Results

Research Question One: What are the school-based barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State?

Table 1: school-based barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State

S/N	Items on School-Based Barriers	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Classrooms were not easily accessible to students with physical disabilities.	3.21	0.74	Accepted
2	The seating arrangement in mathematics classrooms did not support students with physical disabilities.	3.04	0.81	Accepted
3	Lack of ramps and accessible school facilities affected students' participation in mathematics lessons.	3.18	0.77	Accepted
4	Overcrowded classrooms made it difficult for students with physical disabilities to learn mathematics effectively.	2.93	0.86	Accepted
5	The school environment did not provide enough support for students with physical disabilities during mathematics lessons.	3.11	0.79	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.09		Accepted

Table 1 showed that all the items on school-based barriers had mean scores above the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean of 3.09 indicated that school-based barriers affected mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State. This means that issues such as inaccessible classrooms, poor seating arrangements, lack of ramps, overcrowded classrooms, and weak school support made mathematics learning more difficult for students with physical disabilities.

Research Question Two: What are the teacher-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State?

Table 2: teacher-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State

S/N	Items on Teacher-Related Barriers	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Some mathematics teachers did not have adequate training on how to teach students with physical disabilities.	3.17	0.72	Accepted
2	Mathematics teachers did not always use teaching methods that supported students with physical disabilities.	3.01	0.83	Accepted
3	Students with physical disabilities did not always receive enough individual attention during mathematics lessons.	2.88	0.89	Accepted
4	Some teachers had low expectations of students with physical disabilities in mathematics.	2.76	0.91	Accepted
5	Mathematics teachers rarely used adapted instructional materials for students with physical disabilities.	3.09	0.78	Accepted
Grand Mean		2.98		Accepted

Table 2 revealed that all the teacher-related barrier items were accepted because their mean scores were above 2.50. The grand mean of 2.98 showed that teacher-related barriers affected the mathematics achievement of students with physical disabilities. This implies that inadequate teacher training, unsuitable teaching methods, limited individual attention, low expectations, and poor use of adapted materials contributed to the difficulties experienced by students with physical disabilities in mathematics classrooms.

Research Question Three: What are the learner-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State?

Table 3: learner-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State

S/N	Items on Learner-Related Barriers	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Students with physical disabilities sometimes felt discouraged during mathematics lessons.	2.95	0.84	Accepted
2	Physical fatigue affected students' concentration during mathematics classes.	3.08	0.80	Accepted
3	Slow writing speed made it difficult for some students with physical disabilities to complete mathematics tasks on time.	3.24	0.69	Accepted
4	Some students with physical disabilities lacked confidence in solving mathematics problems.	2.89	0.88	Accepted
5	Irregular attendance affected the mathematics achievement of some students with physical disabilities.	2.71	0.93	Accepted
Grand Mean		2.97		Accepted

Table 3 showed that learner-related barriers also affected mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities. The grand mean of 2.97 was above the criterion mean of 2.50. This means that discouragement, physical fatigue, slow writing speed, low confidence, and irregular attendance were barriers that limited students' active participation and performance in mathematics.

Research Question Four: What are the support-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State?

Table 4: support-related barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State

S/N	Items on Support-Related Barriers	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Assistive devices were not adequately available for students with physical disabilities.	3.26	0.71	Accepted
2	Students with physical disabilities did not receive enough counselling support in school.	2.94	0.86	Accepted
3	Peer support was not always available during mathematics learning activities.	2.82	0.90	Accepted
4	Parents did not always provide enough academic support for mathematics learning at home.	2.67	0.95	Accepted
5	Examination arrangements did not fully consider the needs of students with physical disabilities.	3.13	0.76	Accepted
Grand Mean		2.96		Accepted

Table 4 indicated that support-related barriers affected mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities. The grand mean of 2.96 showed that respondents agreed with the listed items. This suggests that lack of assistive devices, inadequate counselling, weak peer support, limited parental support, and unsuitable examination arrangements created difficulties for students with physical disabilities in mathematics.

Research Question Five: What is the relationship between the identified barriers and mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State?

Table 5: relationship between the identified barriers and mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State

S/N	Items on Barriers and Mathematics Achievement	Mean	SD	Decision
1	School-based barriers reduced students' active participation in mathematics lessons.	3.20	0.75	Accepted
2	Teacher-related barriers affected students' understanding of mathematics concepts.	3.05	0.79	Accepted
3	Learner-related barriers reduced students' confidence in mathematics.	2.91	0.87	Accepted
4	Support-related barriers affected students' performance in mathematics tests and examinations.	3.14	0.73	Accepted
5	The combined barriers negatively affected mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities.	3.28	0.68	Accepted
Grand Mean		3.12		Accepted

Table 5 showed that the identified barriers had a negative relationship with mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities. The grand mean of 3.12 was above the criterion mean, showing that respondents agreed that school-based, teacher-related, learner-related, and support-related barriers reduced students' participation, understanding, confidence, and performance in mathematics. This means that mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities may improve when these barriers are reduced or removed.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding showed that school-based barriers affected mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State. These barriers included inaccessible classrooms, poor seating arrangements, lack of ramps, overcrowded classrooms and inadequate school support. This finding agreed with Bani Odeh and Lach (2024), who reported that children with disabilities often face barriers related to school infrastructure, physical access and institutional support. It also supported the World Bank (2020), which observed that persons with disabilities in Nigeria still experience barriers that limit their full participation. This implies that inclusion should go beyond placing students in regular classrooms to providing accessible and supportive learning environments. The second finding revealed that teacher-related barriers affected students' achievement in mathematics. Inadequate teacher training, unsuitable teaching methods, limited individual attention and poor use of adapted instructional materials were identified as major challenges. This agreed with Vodičková, Mitašíková and Slavíčková (2023), who noted that inclusive mathematics education depends on teacher support, appropriate teaching methods and responsiveness to learners' needs. It also agreed with Schreffler, Vasquez, Chini and James (2019), who stated that students with disabilities benefit from flexible instructional methods. This shows that mathematics teachers need adequate training and support to teach students with physical disabilities effectively.

The third finding showed that learner-related barriers affected mathematics achievement. These included physical fatigue, slow writing speed, low confidence, discouragement and irregular attendance. This finding supported James, Lamons, Spilka, Bustamante, Scanlon and Chini (2019), who found that students with disabilities in STEM-related courses experienced barriers affecting engagement, time management and participation. However, this does not

mean that students with physical disabilities lack mathematical ability. Rather, it shows that they need reasonable support to participate fully in mathematics lessons.

The fourth finding revealed that support-related barriers also affected mathematics achievement. Lack of assistive devices, inadequate counselling, weak peer support, limited parental support and unsuitable examination arrangements were identified as major barriers. This agreed with Schreffler et al. (2019) and Vodičková et al. (2023), who emphasised the importance of flexible learning resources, classroom support, family involvement and appropriate learning conditions in inclusive education. This finding shows that students with physical disabilities need practical support systems to succeed in mathematics.

The fifth finding showed that school-based barriers were the most commonly perceived barriers, followed by teacher-related, learner-related and support-related barriers. This suggests that the physical and organisational condition of schools played a major role in students' mathematics learning experiences. The finding agreed with Bani Odeh and Lach (2024), who explained that barriers to education for children with disabilities are often linked to the learning environment and available support.

Overall, the findings showed that students with physical disabilities faced several barriers that affected their mathematics achievement. These barriers were not caused mainly by the students' disabilities, but by weaknesses in the school system. Therefore, improving mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities requires accessible school facilities, trained mathematics teachers, adapted instructional materials, counselling support, peer support, parental involvement and fair examination arrangements.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concluded that students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State faced school-based, teacher-related, learner-related and support-related barriers that affected their achievement in mathematics. The findings showed that placing these students in regular classrooms did not automatically guarantee effective inclusion.

The study further concluded that inaccessible classrooms, poor seating arrangements, lack of ramps, inadequate teacher preparation, physical fatigue, slow writing speed, low confidence, lack of assistive devices and unsuitable examination arrangements limited students' participation and performance in mathematics. Therefore, improving mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities requires accessible school facilities, trained teachers, adapted learning materials and adequate support services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommended that:

1. The Ondo State Ministry of Education and school authorities should provide accessible classrooms, ramps, suitable furniture and safe movement spaces for students with physical disabilities.
2. Mathematics teachers should be trained on inclusive teaching methods, adapted instructional materials and flexible assessment strategies.
3. Schools should provide assistive devices, counselling support and learning materials that can help students with physical disabilities participate better in mathematics lessons.
4. Examination bodies and school authorities should make reasonable examination arrangements, such as extra time, accessible halls and suitable sitting positions.
5. Parents, teachers and students without disabilities should support students with physical disabilities through encouragement, peer assistance and regular academic support.
6. Government and education stakeholders should monitor inclusive education practices to ensure that inclusion goes beyond enrolment.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributed to knowledge by providing evidence on the barriers affecting mathematics achievement among students with physical disabilities in inclusive secondary schools in Ondo State, Nigeria. It showed that their challenges were not caused only by physical disability, but also by inaccessible school environments, inadequate teaching support, learner-related difficulties and weak support systems.

The study also added to existing knowledge by focusing specifically on students with physical disabilities in mathematics classrooms. It identified key barriers such as poor classroom access, slow writing speed, fatigue, lack of assistive devices and unsuitable examination conditions. The findings may guide teachers, school administrators, policymakers and inclusive education stakeholders in improving mathematics learning for students with physical disabilities.

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