

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND PROVISION OF LEARNING RESOURCES FOR INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: ENHANCING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN KATSINA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Inclusive early childhood education is essential for promoting equitable learning opportunities and improving developmental outcomes for children with special needs. The paper examines the role of strategic planning and the provision of learning resources in enhancing educational outcomes for children with special needs in Katsina state, Nigeria. It highlights strategic planning as a systematic process for setting goals, allocating resources, implementing inclusive policies and monitoring educational progress. Effective planning enables educational administrators to identify resource needs, address service gaps and create supportive learning environments that accommodates diverse learners. The paper emphasizes the importance of accessible learning resources, including adapted instructional materials, assistive technologies, communication aids, sensory tools and inclusive infrastructure in fostering participation, engagement and academic achievement. It also discusses strategic planning frameworks such as SWOT Analysis and the Logic Model as tools for improving decision making and accountability in inclusive education. Key challenges identified include inadequate teacher training, limited learning resources, overcrowded classrooms and negative societal attitude toward disability. The paper concludes that sustained investment in strategic planning and resources provision is critical for achieving inclusive, equitable and quality early childhood education for all learners. To address these barriers, the paper recommends differentiated instruction, assistive technology integration, continuous professional development, individualized education plans and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, Learning Resources, Inclusive Early Childhood Education.

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) represents a critical stage in human development, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, social participation, and overall well-being. The period from birth to eight years is characterized by rapid cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth, making it a crucial phase for educational intervention and support (UNICEF, 2024). For children with special needs, access to quality early childhood education is particularly

important because early identification, intervention and support can significantly improve developmental and educational outcomes.

Inclusive early childhood education has emerged as a global educational priority, emphasizing the right of all children, regardless of ability, disability, socioeconomic status, language, or cultural background, to learn together in supportive and responsive learning environments. According to UNESCO (2026), inclusive education recognises the uniqueness of every learner and seeks to ensure that educational systems accommodate diverse learning needs rather than requiring learners to adapt to rigid educational structures. This approach aligns with the principles of equity, social justice and equal educational opportunity, which are central to contemporary educational policies and international development agendas.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of inclusive education, many early childhood centres continue to face significant challenges in providing adequate learning resources for children with special needs. Learning resources encompass a wide range of materials and supports, including adapted instructional materials, assistive technologies, sensory tools, communication aids, accessible classroom infrastructure and specialized teaching resources.

The availability and effective utilization of these resources play a crucial role in facilitating meaningful participation, engagement and learning among children with diverse abilities. UNICEF (2025) notes that children with disabilities remain among the most educationally marginalized groups worldwide due to persistent barriers such as inadequate educational resources, limited policy implementation, discrimination and insufficient support services.

Strategic planning has become an essential mechanism for addressing these challenges and ensuring the successful implementation of inclusive education initiatives. Strategic planning involves the systematic identification of educational goals, resource requirements, implementation strategies and evaluation mechanisms necessary to achieve desired educational outcomes. In the context of inclusive early childhood education, strategic planning enables educational administrators, policymakers and practitioners to anticipate the diverse needs of learners, allocate resources efficiently and create supportive learning environments that foster inclusion and participation. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that effective inclusive early childhood programmes require coordinated efforts among governments, educational institutions, families and communities to identify children's needs early and provide integrated support services.

The provision of appropriate learning resources is a critical component of strategic educational planning. Educational research consistently demonstrates that access to high-quality and accessible learning materials enhances children's cognitive development, language acquisition, social interaction and academic achievement. For children with special needs, specialized resources such as assistive technologies, individualized learning materials, alternative communication systems and sensory supports can significantly improve learning experiences and educational outcomes. Furthermore, resource availability contributes to the implementation of differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

principles, enabling educators to accommodate diverse learning styles and abilities within inclusive classrooms.

Educational administrators play a pivotal role in ensuring the effective planning, procurement, distribution, and utilization of learning resources. Their responsibilities extend beyond resource acquisition to include policy development, staff training, stakeholder collaboration, monitoring, and continuous evaluation of resource effectiveness. UNESCO (2026) highlights that inclusive learning environments require not only accessible materials and technologies but also supportive policies, trained educators, family engagement, and effective leadership. Consequently, strategic planning for resource provision must adopt a holistic perspective that integrates administrative, pedagogical and community-based approaches. Moreover, the global commitment to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocates inclusive and equitable quality education for all, underscores the necessity of investing in resource provision for children with special needs. Achieving inclusive educational goals requires intentional planning and sustained investment in both human and material resources. UNICEF (2021) further emphasizes that educational systems must collect relevant data, strengthen monitoring frameworks and provide accessible learning environments to ensure that no child is excluded from educational opportunities.

This paper explores the role of strategic planning in the provision of learning resources for inclusive early childhood education and examines how such efforts contribute to enhancing educational outcomes for children with special needs. The discussion highlights key concepts, theoretical perspectives, policy frameworks, resource planning strategies, implementation challenges and evidence-based practices that support inclusive and equitable early childhood learning environments. Through this analysis, the chapter seeks to provide practical insights for educational administrators, policymakers, researchers and practitioners committed to advancing inclusive education and improving learning outcomes for all children.

Concept of Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is a systematic and future-oriented process through which organizations establish their long-term goals, identify priorities, allocate resources and develop strategies for achieving desired outcomes. It involves analyzing the internal and external environment, determining organizational strengths and weaknesses, identifying opportunities and challenges and designing appropriate courses of action to achieve institutional objectives (UNESCO, 2025). Strategic planning is not merely concerned with predicting the future but with preparing organizations to respond effectively to changing circumstances through informed decision-making and purposeful action.

In the field of education, strategic planning serves as a critical management tool for guiding policy formulation, resource allocation, and programme implementation and performance evaluation. According to UNESCO (2025), educational strategic planning is a forward-looking and systematic process that utilizes data and evidence to establish goals, priorities and strategies while estimating the resources required to meet learners' needs and societal

expectations. This process ensures that educational institutions and systems operate efficiently and remain responsive to emerging educational demands.

Strategic planning typically involves several interrelated stages, including environmental scanning, goal setting, strategy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. These stages enable educational leaders and administrators to align institutional resources with organizational objectives while promoting accountability and continuous improvement (Carron et al., 2010). Furthermore, strategic planning facilitates stakeholder participation by engaging policymakers, educators, parents, communities and other relevant actors in the planning process, thereby enhancing ownership and commitment to educational goals. Within the context of inclusive early childhood education, strategic planning is essential for ensuring the effective provision of learning resources, specialized support services and accessible learning environments for children with special needs. Through strategic planning, educational administrators can anticipate resource requirements, identify gaps in service delivery, mobilize available resources and develop sustainable interventions that promote equity and inclusion. Consequently, strategic planning serves as a foundation for improving educational quality and enhancing learning outcomes for all children, particularly those requiring additional support to participate fully in educational activities.

Provision of Learning Resources

The provision of learning resources refers to the systematic process of acquiring, allocating, distributing, and utilizing educational materials, facilities, technologies and support services that facilitate effective teaching and learning. Learning resources encompass a wide range of instructional materials, including textbooks, visual aids, digital technologies, assistive devices, educational toys, manipulative, classroom equipment and other materials that support learners' cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (UNESCO, 2020).

The availability and adequacy of learning resources are fundamental determinants of educational quality and learner achievement. Learning resources create opportunities for active engagement, experiential learning, skill acquisition and knowledge construction. According to UNESCO (2020), educational resources are essential components of learning environments because they provide learners with access to information, facilitate interaction with content, and support the achievement of educational objectives. Similarly, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2024) emphasizes that access to appropriate learning materials is critical for promoting equitable and inclusive education, particularly for vulnerable and marginalized learners.

In inclusive early childhood education, the provision of learning resources extends beyond conventional instructional materials to include specialized and adaptive resources that address the diverse needs of children with special needs. Such resources may include assistive technologies, Braille materials, hearing aids, augmentative and alternative communication devices, sensory learning tools, adaptive furniture, and individualized instructional materials.

These resources help remove learning barriers, enhance participation and promote equal access to educational opportunities for all learners (UNESCO, 2024).

Effective provision of learning resources requires strategic planning, adequate funding, proper management, and continuous evaluation to ensure that resources are available, accessible, relevant, and appropriately utilized. Educational administrators and policymakers play a crucial role in identifying resource needs, mobilizing support, coordinating procurement processes and monitoring resource utilization to maximize educational outcomes. Consequently, the provision of learning resources constitutes a vital element of educational administration and planning, particularly in fostering inclusive learning environments that support the academic and developmental needs of children with special needs

Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) refers to an educational approach that ensures all young children, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural identities, languages, or developmental characteristics, have equitable access to quality learning opportunities within the same educational environment. The concept is grounded in the principle that every child has the right to participate fully in early learning experiences and to receive the support necessary to achieve their developmental and educational potential (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive Early Childhood Education emphasizes the creation of learning environments that recognize, value and accommodate diversity among learners. Rather than segregating children with special needs into separate educational settings, inclusion promotes their participation alongside typically developing peers in age-appropriate classrooms. This approach involves adapting curricula, instructional strategies, assessment methods, learning resources and physical environments to meet the diverse needs of all children (UNESCO, 2024). Inclusion is therefore not merely about physical placement in regular classrooms but about ensuring meaningful participation, engagement and learning for every child. According to the joint position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC), (2019) said inclusion in early childhood education is characterized by three interrelated dimensions: access, participation, and support. Access involves removing barriers to learning and ensuring that children can engage with educational activities; participation refers to active involvement in learning experiences and social interactions; while support encompasses the specialized services, accommodations, and resources necessary to facilitate successful learning outcomes (DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

The importance of Inclusive Early Childhood Education lies in its potential to foster cognitive, social, emotional and language development while promoting acceptance, respect for diversity, and social belonging among children. Research indicates that inclusive settings provide opportunities for positive peer interactions, improved social competence and enhanced self-esteem and better educational outcomes for children with and without disabilities (UNESCO, 2020). Furthermore, early inclusion contributes to the realization of educational equity and

aligns with international commitments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which advocate inclusive and equitable quality education for all.

Effective implementation of Inclusive Early Childhood Education requires strategic planning, adequate funding, trained personnel, family engagement, accessible infrastructure and the provision of appropriate learning resources and support services. Consequently, inclusive early childhood education serves as a foundation for building equitable educational systems that recognize diversity as a strength and ensure that no child is excluded from learning opportunities because of disability or other differences (Division for Early Childhood, & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019).

Children with Special Needs

Children with special needs are children who require additional educational, developmental, behavioural, medical, emotional, or social support beyond what is typically provided to their peers in order to achieve their full potential. These children may experience physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, learning, emotional, or communication disabilities that affect their participation and performance in educational and social environments (UNICEF, 2022). Children with special needs are individuals who, due to disabilities, developmental delays, learning difficulties, behavioural conditions, or other exceptional characteristics, require specialized educational services, accommodations and support to participate effectively and achieve success in educational settings (UNESCO, 2020; WHO & UNICEF, 2022).

The concept of special needs encompasses a broad spectrum of conditions and characteristics. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (2022), children with disabilities may include those with visual impairments, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and multiple disabilities. Some children may also be identified as having special educational needs due to giftedness, behavioral challenges, chronic health conditions, or developmental delays that require specialized educational interventions and support services.

From an educational perspective, children with special needs are learners who require modifications in instructional methods, curriculum delivery, learning resources, assessment procedures, or educational environments to facilitate effective learning and participation. The concept is closely linked to the principle of inclusive education, which emphasizes the right of every child to access quality education within supportive and accommodating learning environments regardless of individual differences (UNESCO, 2020). Rather than viewing disability solely as an individual limitation, contemporary perspectives recognize that environmental, social and institutional barriers often contribute significantly to the challenges experienced by children with special needs. The early identification and support of children with special needs are particularly important during the early childhood years, as this developmental stage provides critical opportunities for intervention and skill development.

Research indicates that timely access to specialized services, appropriate learning resources, assistive technologies and inclusive educational practices can significantly improve children's cognitive, social, emotional and academic outcomes (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Consequently, educational systems are increasingly encouraged to adopt child-centered approaches that recognize individual strengths, address diverse learning needs and promote full participation in educational activities.

Understanding the concept of children with special needs is essential for educational administrators, teachers, policymakers, and caregivers because it informs the planning, provision, and management of inclusive educational services. Effective support for these children requires collaborative efforts among schools, families, communities, and support professionals to create equitable learning opportunities and foster positive developmental outcomes (United Nations Children's Fund, 2022).

Enhancing Educational Outcomes for Children with Special Needs

Enhancing educational outcomes for children with special needs refers to improving their academic achievement, cognitive development, social skills, communication abilities and overall participation in learning through the provision of appropriate educational support, inclusive practices, specialized interventions, and accessible learning resources. The goal is to ensure that children with diverse learning needs achieve their full potential and participate meaningfully in educational activities alongside their peers (UNESCO, 2020). Effective strategies such as early intervention, individualized instruction, assistive technologies and inclusive learning environments have been shown to significantly improve educational outcomes and overall development for children with special needs (WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Enhancing educational outcomes for children with special needs involves improving their learning, development, participation and academic success through inclusive educational practices, appropriate learning resources and individualized support services (UNESCO, 2020; WHO & UNICEF, 2022). Such efforts help ensure equitable access to quality education and enable children to achieve their full developmental potential.

Strategic Planning Models

Strategic planning models support schools in systematically improving educational outcomes for children with special needs by aligning resources, goals and instructional practices with learner needs. The SWOT analysis model helps educators assess internal strengths and weaknesses alongside external opportunities and threats to design more responsive inclusive education strategies (Bryson, 2018). The Logic Model clarifies how inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes connect, making it easier to plan and evaluate interventions that support academic and developmental progress for learners with disabilities (Moore et al., 2017). In addition, inclusive education action planning frameworks emphasize setting measurable goals, stakeholder collaboration and continuous improvement to ensure that support services are effectively implemented and sustained (Institute on Community Integration, 2024). Together,

these models promote evidence-based decision-making and accountability in special needs education.

The SWOT Analysis model is a strategic planning tool used to evaluate internal Strengths and Weaknesses, as well as external Opportunities and Threats. In education, it helps schools assess their capacity to support learners with special needs and identify areas for improvement in inclusive practices, resource allocation and policy implementation (Bryson, 2018). The Logic Model is a structured framework that shows the relationship between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes. It is widely used in education to plan, implement and evaluate interventions by clarifying how specific resources and teaching strategies lead to improved learner outcomes, including academic achievement and social inclusion for children with special needs (Moore et al., 2017).

Categories of Learning Resources for Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) and Children with Special Needs

Learning resources for inclusive Early Childhood Education can be grouped into key categories that support access, participation and development for children with special needs.

- 1) **Human Resources:** This category includes teachers, special education specialists, therapists, caregivers and teacher aides. They are the most critical resource because they provide individualized instruction, early identification of learning needs, and continuous developmental support (Friend & Bursuck, 2019).
- 2) **Instructional and Curriculum Materials:** These include adapted textbooks, visual aids, manipulative, picture schedules and differentiated learning activities. Such materials help simplify content and make learning more concrete and accessible for young children with diverse learning needs (Tomlinson, 2017).
- 3) **Assistive Technology Resources:** Assistive technologies include communication boards, hearing aids, speech-to-text tools and interactive learning devices. These tools reduce barriers to learning and enhance communication, participation, and independence (Alper & Raharinirina, 2006).
- 4) **Physical and Environmental Resources:** This category refers to inclusive classroom design, accessible furniture, safe play areas, ramps and sensory-friendly environments. A supportive physical environment ensures full participation of children with mobility, sensory, or developmental challenges (UNICEF, 2021).
- 5) **Community and Support Services:** These include early intervention programs, health services, parent support groups and collaboration with NGOs. Such resources strengthen early identification and provide holistic support for children and families (UNESCO, 2020).
- 6) **Digital Learning Resources:** Digital tools such as educational apps, interactive storytelling platforms, and online learning games support engagement and individualized learning, especially when adapted to different developmental levels (UNESCO, 2020).

Challenges in Enhancing Educational Outcomes for Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) and Children with Special Needs

Enhancing educational outcomes in inclusive Early Childhood Education (ECE) for children with special needs remains a critical but complex challenge for education systems. Despite global commitments to inclusion, many early learning environments continue to face barriers such as inadequate specialist support, limited access to assistive learning resources and insufficient teacher preparation in inclusive pedagogy. These challenges are further compounded by negative societal attitudes, infrastructural constraints and uneven policy implementation, all of which can restrict meaningful participation and learning achievement for young children with disabilities. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring equitable access to quality early education and for laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and development. The following are the challenges in enhancing educational outcomes for inclusive early childhood education (iece) and children with special needs:

- 1) Limited teacher training in special education: Many teachers lack adequate preparation to effectively support diverse learning needs, which can lead to inappropriate instructional strategies and reduced learner progress (Friend & Bursuck, 2019).
- 2) Inadequate learning resources and assistive technology: Schools often face shortages of adaptive materials and assistive devices, limiting access to curriculum content for learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 2020).
- 3) Large class sizes and poor learner–teacher ratios: Overcrowded classrooms reduce individualized attention, making it difficult to address specific learning needs effectively (Ainscow, 2020).
- 4) Negative attitudes and stigma: Discriminatory beliefs and low expectations from peers or educators can hinder inclusion and academic achievement (UNICEF, 2021).

Best Practices for Enhancing Educational Outcomes for Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) and Children with Special Needs

Improving educational outcomes for children with special needs in inclusive Early Childhood Education (ECE) requires the adoption of evidence-based best practices that promote access, participation and meaningful learning for all children. Inclusive ECE settings are most effective when they intentionally adapt teaching strategies, learning environments and assessment approaches to accommodate diverse developmental needs. Best practices such as differentiated instruction, early intervention, use of assistive technologies, and strong collaboration between teachers, families and specialists help create supportive learning environments where every child can thrive. These approaches not only enhance academic and developmental outcomes but also foster social inclusion and long-term educational success. The following are the best practices for enhancing educational outcomes

- 1) Inclusive education and differentiated instruction: Adapting teaching methods, content, and assessments ensures that learners with special needs can participate meaningfully in classroom activities (Tomlinson, 2017).

- 2) Use of assistive technology: Tools such as speech-to-text software, hearing aids, and communication devices improve access to learning and promote independence (Alper & Raharinirina, 2006).
- 3) Continuous professional development for teachers: Ongoing training equips educators with skills in inclusive pedagogy, classroom management, and individualised support strategies (Friend & Bursuck, 2019).
- 4) Individualized Education Plans (IEPs): IEPs provide structured, personalised learning goals and interventions tailored to each learner's strengths and needs (Mitchell, 2014).
- 5) Collaborative support systems: Involving parents, specialists and community stakeholders improves consistency in support and strengthens learner development outcomes (UNESCO, 2020).

Policy Recommendations

To enhance educational outcomes for children with special needs in inclusive Early Childhood Education in Katsina State, the following strategic policy actions should focus on planning, resource provision, workforce development and accountability.

- 1) Strengthen Inclusive Education Policy and Strategic Planning: The government should develop and implement a clear state-level inclusive ECE strategic plan aligned with national and international frameworks. This plan should include measurable targets for enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes of children with special needs, supported by regular monitoring and evaluation systems.
 - 2) Increase Funding and Equitable Resource Allocation: Dedicated budgetary allocation for inclusive ECE should be established to ensure equitable distribution of learning materials, assistive technologies and infrastructure upgrades. Priority funding should target rural and underserved communities where access is limited.
 - 3) Improve Teacher Training and Special Education Capacity: The state should mandate pre-service and in-service training in inclusive pedagogy and special needs education for all early childhood educators. Training should emphasize differentiated instruction, classroom adaptation and child-centered learning approaches.
 - 4) Provide Assistive and Learning Resources: Schools should be equipped with age-appropriate assistive technologies (e.g., hearing aids, visual aids, communication boards) and culturally relevant instructional materials to support diverse learning needs and improve participation.
 - 5) Promote Inclusive Infrastructure Development: New and existing ECE centers should be made physically accessible through ramps, adaptive furniture, safe learning spaces and child-friendly environments that support mobility and participation for all learners.
 - 6) Strengthen Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration: The government should formalize partnerships with parents, NGOs, community leaders and health professionals to provide coordinated support services, early identification of disabilities and continuous learner support.
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- 7) Establish Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data Systems: A robust data system should be developed to track children with special needs in ECE programs, enabling evidence-based decision-making, progress tracking and accountability in service delivery.

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