



African Population and
Health Research Center

POLICY BRIEF



SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A CALL FOR DIFFERENTIATED AND INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION

Introduction

Global and continental efforts have been put in place to support foundational learning and improve reading levels for learners in basic education. This includes the recent “[Ending Learning Poverty](#)” campaign launched by the African Union in September 2024 to mobilize resources, advocate for policy change, and drive community-level engagement to ensure that every child has access to quality education. Further efforts in the past include intervention programs such as [Tusome](#) early grade literacy program that was implemented at scale, and led to the subsequent adoption of the model in the development of competency based curriculum in Kenya. In addition, response to intervention programs to support learners struggling with reading have been designed such as the [Developing Readers Program](#), and campaigns heightened with the aim of leaving no learner behind. Despite these efforts, learning poverty still persists in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). For instance, [89% of 10-year-old](#) children in SSA cannot read and understand simple text while in [Kenya](#), 2 in 10 class 8 learners and 3 in 10 grade 6 learners cannot meet expectations in reading grade 3 English text.

Response to intervention (RTI) strategies and programs can be leveraged and utilized across different learning scenarios from supporting [learners who are gifted](#) to those with [learning disabilities](#). To support learners with learning difficulties such as reading, a tiered approach to instruction is adopted. At tier 1, the teacher gives instruction at the whole group/class level using

curriculum prescribed materials. At tier 2, the teacher puts the learners who are struggling with learning into smaller groups for targeted instruction while at tier 3, more intense and individualized instruction is given to the learners who are not able to benefit through instruction at tier 2 level.

Reading gains may be achieved through the RTI programs. However, some learners may remain non-readers even after targeted small group tier 2 remedial instruction. While there may be other factors leading to non-achievement, such as failure to attend remediation program lessons, socio-cultural as well as health-related, these learners who fail to record any reading achievement after a structured intervention may include those suspected to have reading disabilities. Pertaining to whether learners suspected to have reading disabilities achieve reading, a number of research questions remain unanswered: Can learners with reading disabilities achieve learning gains? How can teacher professional development (TPD) be leveraged to equip teachers with inclusive pedagogical approaches? How can individualized education programs (IEP) and differentiated instruction be utilized to benefit learners suspected to have reading disabilities? And finally, what is the role of functional assessment in support for learners with reading disabilities.

This policy brief focuses on support for learners with learning disabilities and attempts to respond to the questions by proposing a theory of change on differentiated and individualized instruction. The proposed roadmap requires key players to play certain

roles in a concerted efforts strategy to achieve improved learning outcomes for learners with reading difficulties. For instance, the Ministry of Education, Teachers Service Commission and the teacher could work collaboratively to achieve the desired goal.

Our Study

The African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) is a premier research-to-policy institution, generating evidence, strengthening research and related capacity in the African research and development ecosystem, and engaging policy to inform action on health and development. The Center's education research is guided by the signature issue approach, which focuses on making Africa's education systems more inclusive, equitable, and adaptable. Its recent [research project](#) aimed to design and test a remedial program targeting learners with reading difficulties in grade 2 and 3 in 15 public primary schools in Kiambu county, with an intention to provide evidence that informs design and implementation of future response to intervention programs, scale up, and policies related to instructional practices.

The Findings

The design phase findings show that the remedial program reported reading gains after the 13 weeks of intervention, with the proportion of learners with reading difficulties [reducing from baseline to endline](#). For instance, the learners in the non-reader category reduced from **43.3%** to **18.9%**; those in the beginning readers category (those reading 1-9 correct words per minute) reduced from **23.1%**

to **20.8%**; while those in the intermediate category reduced from **33.5%** to **22.8%**. In addition, there were notable transitions across the reading levels between baseline and endline. About **58.9%** of learners in the non-reader category at baseline progressed to the subsequent levels after 13 weeks of remedial sessions. Further, about **70.4%** of learners in the beginning reader category at baseline progressed to the intermediate (**32.7%**) and emergent (**37.8%**) categories at the end line. Lastly, about **71.5%** of learners in the intermediate category progressed to the emergent level (17-44 correct words per minute), while **0.2%** of students progressed to the fluent level (reading more than 44 correct words per minute).

Despite the notable reading achievements, the results also showed that some learners still could not read even after the 13 weeks of small group (tier 2) structured intervention. Specifically, **160** out of the **847** learners (**18.9%**) could not read any correct word at the endline assessment of early-grade reading. This takes us back to the unanswered research question - can we say that learners who fail to record any reading achievement (remain non-readers) after a structured intervention are suspected of having a reading disability (dyslexia)? Can they achieve learning gains? This leads to a further exploratory question, 'How?'.

This policy brief addresses the need for stakeholder engagement, policy actions, and a concerted effort to rethink the identification strategies of learners with reading disabilities, inclusive instructional strategies, and teacher capacity strengthening. Further, proposing a theory of differentiated and individualized instruction as the theory of change and a roadmap to achieving foundational learning skills for learners with learning disabilities.

Towards Differentiated and Individualized Instruction

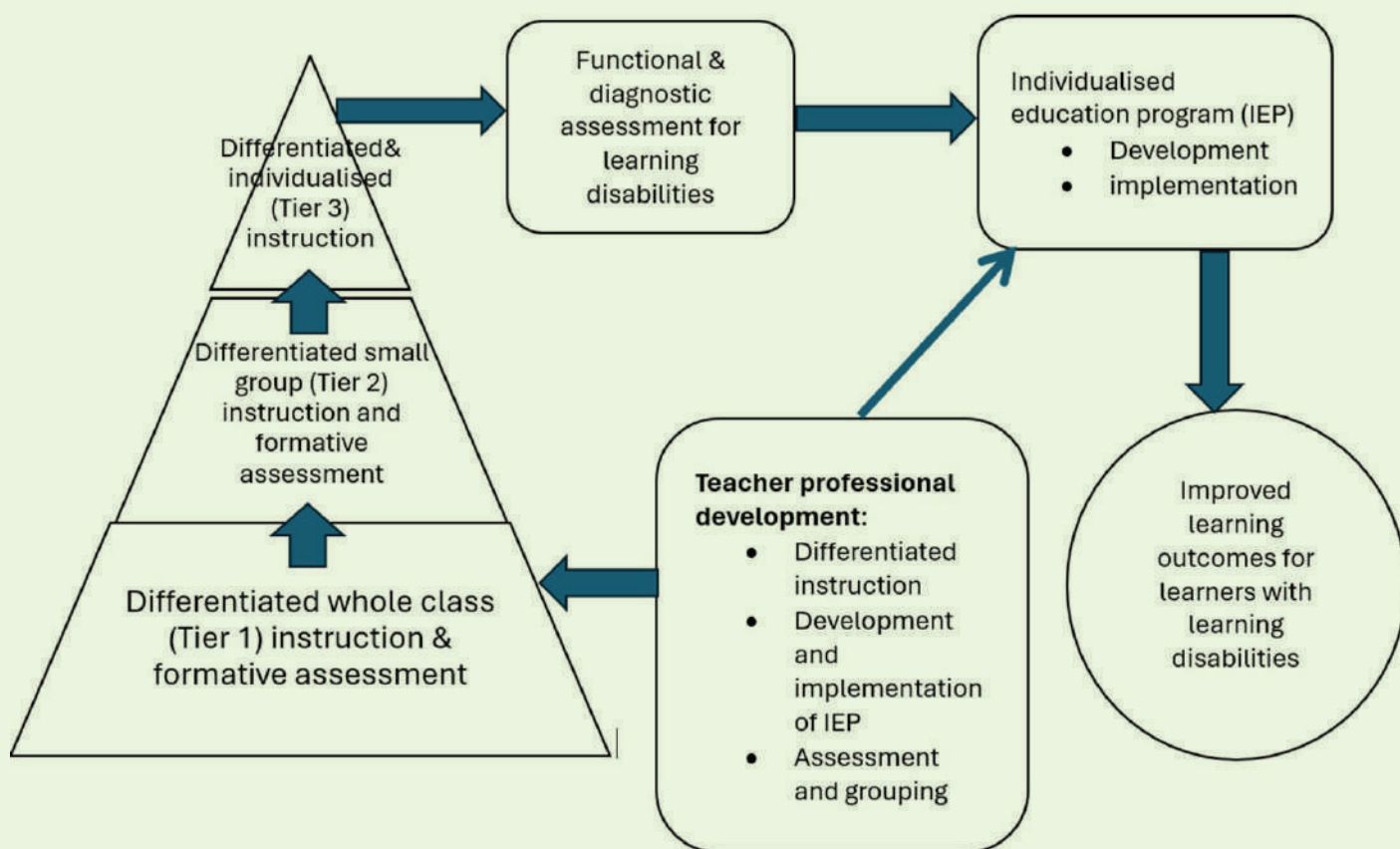


Figure 1: Theory of change: differentiated and individualized instruction

The proposed theory of change entails a systematic flow of activities and concerted efforts. These activities include instructional-related activities following a response to the intervention approach, formative assessment activities to monitor learner progress, functional assessment of learners suspected of having reading disabilities, teacher professional development on differentiated instruction, use of individualized education programs, and finally, the implementation of the IEP to achieve improved learning outcomes for learners with learning disabilities.

Policy Recommendations

1. Building teacher capacity in identifying learners with reading difficulties, differentiated instruction, and developing and implementing an individualized education program (IEP).
2. Incorporate differentiated instruction pedagogy in foundational learning classroom instruction at all tiers of instruction.
3. Provide individualized instruction to learners who do not benefit from whole group (tier 1) and small group (tier 2) instruction.
4. Provide functional and diagnostic assessment of learners who do not achieve learning gains at tier 3 of differentiated and individualized instruction.
5. Develop and implement an individualized education program to support learners with learning disabilities.

Call to Action

- The Ministry of Education (MoE) should enhance the functional assessment structures, such as the Educational Assessment and Resource Centers (EARCs) at the county level, to facilitate early identification of learners with learning difficulties and referral for early diagnosis and intervention. In addition, MoE should provide guidelines on the identification and referral process for learners with learning disabilities with specific roles for the teacher, curriculum support officers in charge of special needs education at sub-county and county levels, and the functional assessment officer at regional and national levels.
- The teachers service commission should design and implement a teacher professional development training program targeting teachers in regular schools. The program should focus on identifying learners with learning difficulties, differentiated instruction, and the development and implementation of an individualized education program. This can be incorporated within the existing teacher professional development program.

Conclusion

Learners with learning disabilities could benefit from differentiated and individualized instructions to achieve learning gains. The proposed theory of change describes a pathway toward achieving this, while detailing the critical components and the work flow dynamics. It is important to note that its success requires concerted efforts between various education stakeholders from school to the national level. In addition, stakeholders' understanding of their specific roles and attainment of required knowledge and skills in carrying out these roles is critical.



Contributors

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