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A Conceptual Model for Designing Experiential Learning for Neurodiverse Secondary School Students in Resource-Limited Settings

Ginikachi Prisca Ifenatuora [1*], Olanrewaju Awoyemi [2], Fadeke Adeola Atobatele [3]
[1] Rose of Sharon College Lagos State, Nigeria
[2] Launchforth Group of Schools, Matogun, Lagos, Nigeria
[3] Independent Researcher, Nigeria

* Corresponding Author: **Ginikachi Prisca Ifenatuora**

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Abstract
This paper proposes a conceptual model for designing experiential learning tailored to neurodiverse secondary school students in resource-limited settings. Drawing upon experiential learning theory, social constructivism, and universal design principles, the model seeks to address the limitations of traditional education systems that often marginalize neurodiverse learners. The paper begins by contextualizing the significance of neurodiversity in education and the challenges posed by infrastructural, pedagogical, and policy deficits in under-resourced environments. It then introduces a methodological approach grounded in design thinking, incorporating empathy mapping, stakeholder engagement, and iterative development to ensure responsiveness to local needs. The proposed model emphasizes learner-centered design, community involvement, and flexible delivery methods, providing practical pathways for inclusive, experiential engagement. Implementation scenarios illustrate how the model can be adapted to real-world classroom settings, supported by teachers, caregivers, and peers. The paper concludes with implications for educational practice and policy, and outlines directions for future research, including empirical validation and longitudinal impact studies.

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Keywords: Neurodiversity, Experiential Learning, Inclusive Education, Resource-Limited Settings, Conceptual Model, Design Thinking

1. Introduction
1.1 Background and Rationale
Neurodiversity is a concept that recognizes and respects neurological differences as natural variations of the human experience [1]. It encompasses a range of conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and other cognitive and learning differences [2]. These neurodevelopmental variations influence how individuals perceive the world, process information, and interact with their environment [3]. While neurodivergent individuals may face unique challenges in traditional educational settings, they also possess diverse strengths and capabilities that can flourish in inclusive and adaptive learning environments [4]. Embracing neurodiversity involves moving away from deficit-focused models and instead designing systems that acknowledge and respond to a variety of cognitive styles [5].

Experiential learning, which is characterized by active engagement, reflection, and real-world problem-solving, offers a powerful pedagogical strategy that aligns with the needs of neurodiverse learners. Experiential learning fosters deep understanding and sustained engagement by prioritizing hands-on activities, social collaboration, and personal reflection [6]. This approach supports learners in connecting theoretical knowledge to practical experiences, thereby enhancing retention and application [7]. For neurodivergent students, who may struggle with passive instruction and rigid curricula, experiential learning provides a dynamic and responsive framework that can adapt to individual learning profiles.

The interactive and sensory-rich nature of experiential tasks also helps bridge communication and cognitive gaps often present in more traditional classroom settings [8, 9]. However, implementing experiential learning in resource-limited settings poses significant challenges. These environments may lack physical infrastructure, trained educators, or access to learning materials and assistive technologies that support diverse needs [10]. Furthermore, sociocultural stigmas around neurodevelopmental differences can hinder the adoption of inclusive practices. Without targeted interventions, neurodiverse students in such contexts remain at risk of educational marginalization. This highlights the urgent need for scalable, contextually relevant models that promote experiential learning while accommodating the complexities of neurodiversity and resource scarcity. Establishing such models requires a nuanced understanding of both pedagogical theory and on-the-ground realities [11].

1.2 Problem statement and research gap

Mainstream educational approaches, particularly in resource-constrained settings, tend to emphasize standardized testing, rote memorization, and teacher-centered instruction. These systems are often ill-equipped to meet the needs of neurodiverse learners, whose educational success depends on personalized, flexible, and multi-sensory engagement strategies. Traditional models frequently overlook the importance of differentiated instruction and individualized learning pathways, leading to poor academic outcomes, social exclusion, and high dropout rates among neurodiverse students. Moreover, there is limited integration of inclusive design principles within national education policies and school-level practices, further exacerbating disparities in access and achievement.

Despite a growing body of research affirming the benefits of experiential learning, few studies have focused on its application for neurodiverse populations—especially in low-resource contexts. Existing models of experiential education are predominantly designed for general student populations and often require substantial material and human resources for successful implementation. This leaves a significant knowledge gap around how to design cost-effective, scalable, and culturally adaptable experiential learning models that center the needs of neurodivergent learners. Furthermore, there is a lack of frameworks that explicitly incorporate neurodiverse perspectives into the design and evaluation of learning experiences.

This paper addresses this critical gap by proposing a conceptual model that integrates the principles of experiential learning with the unique cognitive, emotional, and social needs of neurodiverse students in resource-limited settings. It seeks to move beyond theoretical advocacy for inclusion by offering a practical, context-sensitive framework grounded in empirical research and participatory design methodologies. In doing so, the paper contributes to a more equitable and responsive educational landscape, where all learners—regardless of neurological profile or economic background—can thrive through meaningful and engaging learning experiences.

1.3 Purpose and Objectives

The central purpose of this paper is to develop a conceptual model that informs the design of experiential learning for neurodiverse secondary school students in settings constrained by limited educational resources. This model is intended to be both theoretically grounded and practically viable, providing a flexible framework for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. By situating neurodiverse learners at the core of the model, the paper seeks to facilitate the development of learning environments that are not only inclusive but also transformative, enabling students to harness their unique strengths through active and reflective engagement with their learning context.

The specific objectives of this paper are threefold. First, it aims to synthesize relevant theoretical and empirical literature on experiential learning and neurodiversity, with attention to the particular barriers present in under-resourced educational systems. Second, it seeks to articulate design criteria that are responsive to both pedagogical best practices and the lived realities of neurodiverse learners in marginalized contexts. Third, the paper presents and discusses a conceptual model that can guide the creation, adaptation, and evaluation of experiential learning interventions across diverse low-resource educational settings. These objectives collectively contribute to advancing the discourse around inclusive education in developmentally and economically constrained environments.

2. Theoretical and contextual foundations

2.1 Theories Underpinning Experiential Learning

Kolb's experiential learning theory posits that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, emphasizing a cyclical model that includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation [12]. This model promotes learner autonomy and continuous interaction with the learning environment, making it particularly effective for individuals who benefit from practical, hands-on engagement. For neurodiverse students, the opportunity to process learning through physical experience and personal reflection supports both cognitive and emotional development, aligning with varied learning preferences and processing styles [13].

Vygotsky's social constructivism further reinforces the importance of experiential approaches by highlighting the role of social interaction and cultural context in the construction of knowledge [14]. The theory introduces the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, suggesting that learning occurs most effectively when students are guided through tasks slightly beyond their current capability by more knowledgeable peers or facilitators [15]. This scaffolding process fosters collaborative learning environments that are essential for neurodiverse learners, who often benefit from structured yet flexible support systems that promote peer interaction and guided discovery [16].

Complementing these theories, Universal Design for Learning principles provide a practical framework for developing flexible instructional methods that accommodate learner variability. By emphasizing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression, this approach ensures that all learners—regardless of cognitive or sensory differences—can access and participate in meaningful educational experiences [17]. These principles align with experiential learning by advocating for diverse formats of content delivery and student response. Together, these theoretical perspectives inform the development of inclusive experiential learning models, ensuring both the accessibility and effectiveness of educational interventions designed for neurodiverse students [18].

2.2 Understanding neurodiversity in education

Neurodiversity encompasses a range of neurological differences that affect how individuals perceive, process, and respond to information. Common neurodevelopmental conditions include autism, attention-related disorders, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and language-based learning differences. These conditions influence attention span, memory retention, social communication, and sensory perception, often requiring tailored instructional approaches. Understanding these differences is critical for designing learning experiences that not only accommodate but also empower students to leverage their strengths in the classroom.

Students who process sensory input differently may find traditional classrooms overwhelming or inaccessible. For instance, some learners may be hypersensitive to noise, light, or touch, while others may exhibit hyposensitivity and require additional sensory stimulation to stay engaged. Cognitive differences also manifest in varied executive functioning abilities, including challenges with organization, impulse control, and task persistence. These factors significantly impact academic performance when educational systems are designed with a one-size-fits-all mentality. As such, educational environments must be intentionally constructed to be flexible and responsive to individual learner profiles [19].

Inclusive education policies have increasingly emphasized the need for school systems to support students with diverse learning needs. Yet, implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in settings where diagnostic services, teacher training, and individualized education plans are limited [20]. Many schools lack the expertise or resources to identify and support neurodiverse learners effectively, leading to a reliance on exclusionary practices or inadequate classroom accommodations. A foundational understanding of neurodiversity—grounded in respect for learner difference rather than remediation—must inform policy development, curriculum design, and teacher preparation. This paradigm shift is essential for promoting genuine inclusion and academic success for all students.

2.3 Constraints in resource-limited settings

Educational systems in resource-limited settings often struggle with infrastructure deficits, including inadequate classroom space, insufficient teaching materials, and unreliable access to electricity or internet connectivity [21]. These limitations are compounded by a shortage of trained educators, many of whom lack the professional development needed to implement inclusive or experiential pedagogies [22]. Teachers may be burdened with large class sizes and standardized curricula that leave little room for innovation or individualized instruction. These systemic constraints reduce the capacity of schools to adapt to the needs of neurodiverse learners and implement active, student-centered approaches [23, 24].

Cultural attitudes also influence the treatment and inclusion of neurodiverse students in many under-resourced communities. In some contexts, neurological differences are misunderstood or stigmatized, leading to discrimination, isolation, or denial of educational opportunities. Families may be reluctant to seek support for their children due to fear of social exclusion or a lack of awareness about available resources. Educators, too, may internalize these cultural narratives, viewing neurodivergence as a deficit rather than a difference. These socio-cultural barriers hinder progress toward inclusive education, necessitating community-based awareness and advocacy efforts as part of any educational reform initiative [25, 26].

Policy and funding limitations present additional obstacles. Governments may lack the political will or fiscal capacity to prioritize inclusive education, particularly in regions facing broader economic or humanitarian crises [27]. National education strategies often fail to allocate sufficient resources for the implementation of specialized programs, training modules, or inclusive curricula. International support, while beneficial, is frequently project-based and unsustainable. Without long-term investment and structural commitment, inclusive educational reform—including experiential learning initiatives—remains difficult to institutionalize. Overcoming these challenges requires not only resource mobilization but also innovative, low-cost models adaptable to local contexts and grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy [28].

3. Methodological approach to model development

3.1 Design Thinking as a Methodological Lens

Design thinking offers a human-centered approach that is well-suited for developing educational models tailored to the nuanced needs of neurodiverse learners. At the core of this methodology is empathy—understanding the experiences, motivations, and challenges of stakeholders, particularly students, educators, and caregivers. Empathy mapping, an early stage in the design thinking process, enables researchers to capture the lived realities of neurodiverse students in resource-limited settings by identifying what they think, feel, see, hear, and do within the learning environment. This technique facilitates deeper engagement with the diverse cognitive, emotional, and sensory profiles of learners, allowing for the design of interventions that are both inclusive and contextually grounded. Including stakeholders in the design process not only validates their experiences but also ensures the model reflects authentic needs rather than top-down assumptions.

Once the needs are clearly understood, the model creation process follows an iterative cycle of ideation, prototyping, testing, and refinement. Iteration allows for flexibility and responsiveness to feedback, which is critical when designing for contexts where needs are dynamic and resources are constrained. Through this process, multiple conceptual drafts of the model can be explored and evaluated against both theoretical frameworks and practical realities.

Prototypes may begin as visual schematics or narrative descriptions, gradually evolving through collaborative validation sessions with educators and domain experts. These iterations make the model more robust by exposing weaknesses early and facilitating evidence-based improvements. Ultimately, design thinking fosters innovation by blending creative problem-solving with structured inquiry, making it particularly valuable for addressing the complex intersection of neurodiversity and educational inequality.

3.2 Data Sources and knowledge integration

The development of the conceptual model draws upon a diverse array of data sources to ensure it is both evidence-informed and contextually valid. A comprehensive literature synthesis forms the foundation of this approach, encompassing peer-reviewed research, policy documents, and case studies on experiential learning, inclusive education, and neurodiversity.

This synthesis enables the identification of best practices, theoretical gaps, and practical strategies that have been tested in varied educational environments. It also offers insights into the structural, pedagogical, and relational dimensions of learning that can be leveraged to support neurodiverse students. By integrating findings across disciplines, the model is positioned within a broader intellectual framework that enhances its relevance and academic rigor.

Where feasible, insights from field practitioners, educators, and subject matter experts supplement the literature review. These consultations provide valuable perspectives that often escape academic documentation, especially regarding implementation challenges and culturally nuanced understandings of neurodiversity. For instance, teachers in resource-limited schools may offer firsthand accounts of strategies they use to engage students with diverse learning profiles despite systemic limitations [29]. Such practice-based knowledge is critical for grounding the model in lived realities, making it adaptable to real-world settings. In some cases, informal interviews or participatory workshops may be employed to validate emerging components of the model and refine its application logic. This integrative approach ensures that the model does not merely theorize inclusion but actively draws from those already working within the educational systems it seeks to transform [30-32].

3.3 Criteria for model development

The conceptual model is designed according to three guiding criteria: accessibility, adaptability, and feasibility. Accessibility ensures that the model can be implemented without reliance on costly resources or specialized technologies. This criterion emphasizes low-tech, scalable approaches that can be employed even in schools lacking infrastructure or formal diagnostic support. Materials must be affordable and locally sourced where possible, and instructional strategies should be intuitive enough to be adopted with minimal training [33, 34]. The model also advocates for multilingual and multimodal delivery formats, allowing students with different sensory and cognitive profiles to engage with the content meaningfully. By foregrounding accessibility, the model aims to democratize educational innovation across socio-economic and cultural boundaries.

Adaptability and feasibility are equally essential in contexts marked by variability in resource availability and institutional readiness. Adaptability refers to the model’s capacity to be customized according to local needs, school cultures, and available personnel. For example, a school with limited teaching staff may require peer-led interventions, while another may integrate community mentors [35]. Feasibility concerns the realistic implementation of the model within existing school systems. It accounts for teacher workload, policy constraints, and classroom dynamics, ensuring that the model complements rather than complicates current practices. Together, these criteria ensure that the model is not only visionary but practical, increasing the likelihood of its adoption and sustainability in resource-limited educational settings [36, 37].

4. The proposed conceptual model

4.1 Overview of the Model Components

The conceptual model proposed in this paper is grounded on three interdependent pillars: learner-centered design, community involvement, and flexible delivery mechanisms. Learner-centered design emphasizes the importance of aligning educational content and strategies with the unique strengths, interests, and challenges of each student. This involves offering choices in learning pathways, incorporating sensory-friendly environments, and enabling students to co-create learning goals. By centering the learner, the model promotes agency, engagement, and relevance—key factors for sustaining the interest of neurodiverse students who often disengage from traditional, prescriptive teaching methods.

Community involvement ensures that the model is not isolated within the classroom but embedded in the broader socio-cultural and familial context of the learner. Families, local leaders, and caregivers play a crucial role in reinforcing learning, contributing to curriculum development, and advocating for inclusive practices. Flexible delivery, the third pillar, allows for varied modes of implementation—ranging from group-based experiential projects to individual exploration supported by low-cost resources. The model may also be represented visually through a schematic, illustrating the flow from planning and community consultation to activity design, learner participation, reflection, and adaptation. This visual framework reinforces the dynamic, iterative nature of experiential learning and highlights the cyclical engagement of stakeholders across the educational ecosystem.

4.2 Pathways of engagement and learning

The model incorporates experiential activities as a core pedagogical strategy, recognizing that active learning fosters deeper comprehension and retention. These activities may include community mapping, storytelling, role-playing, art-based projects, and problem-solving tasks tied to real-life scenarios. Each activity is designed to be hands-on, multisensory, and culturally relevant, with the flexibility to adapt content based on learners' developmental stages and interests.

For neurodiverse learners, this approach supports alternative ways of accessing and demonstrating knowledge, moving beyond traditional text-based or verbal modalities. Tasks are often organized around themes such as local history, environmental awareness, or vocational skills, which makes the learning more meaningful and integrated with the learners' everyday experiences.

Scaffolding and differentiated instruction are built into each experiential activity to ensure inclusivity. Scaffolding provides structured support through visual cues, step-by-step guidance, peer modeling, or teacher facilitation. As learners gain confidence, supports are gradually removed to promote independence. Differentiated instruction ensures that the same activity can be accessed at varying levels of complexity, allowing students to participate meaningfully regardless of ability. For example, in a gardening project, some students may engage in planning and designing garden layouts, while others may contribute by preparing soil or documenting plant growth through photography or drawing. This inclusive approach fosters collaboration, mutual respect, and a shared sense of achievement among diverse learners.

4.3 Implementation Scenarios

The model's flexibility allows for a variety of implementation scenarios across different resource-limited educational contexts. In a rural school with limited infrastructure, for example, a project-based learning module could focus on improving local water conservation practices. Students may engage with community elders to gather indigenous knowledge, build simple rainwater harvesting prototypes using local materials, and present their findings through storytelling or visual displays. The activity would involve collaborative planning with teachers and caregivers and be structured around experiential tasks that align with both curricular goals and community relevance. In this scenario, students are not only learning scientific concepts but also applying them in meaningful ways that reinforce their identities and capabilities.

The model emphasizes the critical roles played by teachers, caregivers, and peers in facilitating and sustaining engagement. Teachers act as guides and co-learners, rather than authoritative figures, adapting instruction based on real-time feedback and student responses. Caregivers contribute by reinforcing learning outside the classroom, sharing cultural knowledge, and advocating for inclusive environments. Peers are integrated as learning partners and mentors, supporting cooperative tasks and modeling inclusive behavior. This collaborative ecosystem creates a learning environment that is responsive, empowering, and grounded in local realities. By valuing diverse contributions and reducing reliance on expensive tools or specialized training, the model ensures long-term viability and scalability across different under-resourced contexts.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This paper presents a novel conceptual model for designing experiential learning tailored to neurodiverse secondary school students in resource-limited settings. By integrating principles from experiential learning, inclusive education, and design thinking, the model offers a flexible and accessible framework that places learner diversity at the center of pedagogical planning. The emphasis on empathy, stakeholder engagement, and iterative design contributes to the growing body of literature that calls for adaptive, community-embedded educational strategies. The model also responds directly to the pressing challenge of educational exclusion in under-resourced environments, offering a realistic pathway toward inclusive practice without reliance on high-cost interventions or specialized infrastructure.

The conceptual contribution lies in its synthesis of theory and contextual realities to produce a model that is not only academically grounded but also practically applicable. For neurodiverse students, this model promotes equity by recognizing and accommodating diverse cognitive and sensory profiles within mainstream education. It redefines inclusion as an active, dynamic process of co-creation between learners, educators, families, and communities. The significance of this contribution is especially pronounced in environments where educational systems are not traditionally equipped to address neurodiversity. The proposed model invites a paradigm shift from deficit-based perspectives to strength-based approaches that empower learners to thrive in their educational journeys.

The model outlined in this paper has immediate implications for educators working in low-resource settings. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond rigid curricula and incorporate project-based, student-driven activities that align with learners' interests and local contexts. Training programs should be reoriented to include experiential strategies and inclusive practices, equipping educators with practical tools to recognize and respond to the varied needs of neurodiverse students. Classroom environments must be made more flexible and sensory-aware, even through small adjustments, to reduce barriers to participation. By promoting peer collaboration and learner autonomy, educators can foster more inclusive and engaging spaces that support all students' growth.

At the policy level, governments and educational planners must prioritize inclusive pedagogies within national education frameworks. This includes embedding experiential learning into official curricula, developing low-cost resource kits, and investing in capacity-building initiatives for teachers and school leaders. Partnerships with NGOs, local communities, and international organizations can mobilize additional support and technical assistance. Furthermore, inclusive education policies should move beyond theoretical commitments to ensure practical implementation strategies that are responsive to local conditions. Policies must also recognize the value of cultural knowledge and grassroots involvement in designing educational programs. This systems-level approach is essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice in neurodiverse education.

Future research should prioritize the empirical testing and validation of the proposed conceptual model. Pilot studies in diverse low-resource educational settings can help assess the model's feasibility, scalability, and impact on student outcomes. Mixed-methods approaches—combining qualitative insights from stakeholders with quantitative assessments of academic progress and engagement—would offer a comprehensive understanding of how the model functions in practice. Such studies could also explore contextual adaptations of the model across different cultural, linguistic, and geographic settings, ensuring its broader applicability. These empirical validations are essential to move the model from a conceptual tool to a tested framework ready for widespread adoption.

In addition, longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term effects of experiential learning models on neurodiverse students' educational trajectories. These could investigate how early exposure to inclusive, hands-on learning affects self-esteem, social integration, academic resilience, and post-school outcomes such as employment or further education. Longitudinal data would also shed light on how sustained teacher training and policy support influence the consistency and quality of implementation over time. By tracking change across multiple years and educational transitions, such research would contribute valuable evidence on the lasting benefits—and challenges—of inclusive experiential education in resource-constrained contexts.

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