

Inclusive Education Policies and Implications for Persons with Special Needs in Nigeria

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Abstract

Inclusive education policy is a global agenda aimed at ensuring no child is denied equitable and quality education regardless of their educational needs or their location. In Nigeria, policies and frameworks such as National Policy on Education and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act have been established to provide a foundation for promoting inclusive education practices. The policies, aligned with the Education for All (EFA) goals, emphasize equal education rights, accessibility, teachers training and the removal of all barriers that may hinder the education of all persons with disabilities. Despite these frameworks, implementation processes in Nigeria face numerous challenges, including insufficient funding, infrastructural barriers, and a lack of trained personnel. This paper recommends that in overcoming these challenges, government should increase funding for inclusive education and enhance teachers' training. The authors conclude that given the importance of inclusive education in achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) related to quality education, collaboration among government, educators, families, and communities is essential to make inclusive education a reality in Nigeria.

Keywords: education, inclusive education, Nigeria, policies, persons with disabilities

Introduction

The fundamental principle in contemporary educational practice is the recognition that equitable learning environments must accommodate all learners irrespective of gender, disabilities, religion, social status, and ethnic background through inclusive, supportive structure. Inclusive education promotes equal opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, to learn together in ordinary preschool, primary and secondary schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities, supported by appropriate networks (Bright-George, 2022). Since gaining global attention through the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework of Action, inclusive education has evolved into a process of empowering the educational systems to reach all learners and forming the bedrock for achieving Education for All (EFA). In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), inclusive education is not merely about placing students with special needs in regular classrooms but involves providing adequate support systems to ensure impactful learning for all students.

Furthermore, inclusive education is an approach that involves educating students with disabilities in a general classroom alongside their peers, and providing all necessary support and services needed by the students in the regular classroom. Inclusive education, according to Bobmanuel and Mbaekwe (2023), is an educational system that allows learners with special learning needs in the regular classroom notwithstanding their disabilities, but with appropriate provision of support services and placement that special education provides to meet their educational needs. Unlike earlier approaches such as integration and mainstreaming, which primarily focused on physical placement, inclusive education represents a broader and more progressive concept. Unlike integration and mainstreaming, which primarily focused on placing students with disabilities into regular classrooms, inclusive education emphasizes creating an enabling learning environment that meet diverse needs. It seeks to ensure equal access to quality education by providing appropriate support, resources, and teaching strategies to every student, regardless of their abilities and challenges (Ajobiewe, 2013).

In Nigeria, inclusive education polices have been developed in line with global frameworks, particularly the Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which advocate for “inclusive and equitable quality education for all”. However, despite these policies, persons with special needs face significant barriers in accessing quality education. This paper examines the essence of inclusive education policies, analyzes their implementation in Nigeria, discusses implications for persons with special needs, and addresses the challenges faced in their realization.

Strategies for achieving inclusive education in Nigeria

The implementation of inclusive education policies in Nigeria is crucial for promoting equal access to quality education for persons with special needs. The following are necessary to achieve this:

- i. Increase funding: allocate resources for infrastructure, training, and support services.
- ii. Teacher training: provide ongoing training and support for teachers.
- iii. Awareness campaigns: promote understanding and acceptance of persons with special needs.
- iv. Policy enforcement: strengthen implementation and monitoring of inclusive education policies.
- v. By adopting inclusive education policies, Nigeria can create a more equitable and supportive learning environment, empowering persons with special needs to reach their full potential.

Inclusive education policy framework in Nigeria

Inclusive education policies in Nigeria are designed to ensure that every child, regardless of their ability, disability, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status, has access to quality education in a least restrictive learning environment. Nigeria has implemented various policies to promote inclusive education, ensuring equal access to quality education for all citizens, particularly those with special needs. These policies reflect Nigeria’s commitment to international frameworks like the UN Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities, and also align with Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes inclusive and equitable education for all. The Nigerian government in 1977 enacted a National Policy of Education

which brought a significant turning point in the education of persons with special needs in Nigeria (Nimmak, 2017).

In formulating and articulating the educational policy, the Nigerian government since 1977 has recognized, to a large extent, the need for the education of children with special needs hence reviewing the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004 & 2013) and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004, which aimed at creating inclusive and compulsory primary education for persons with special needs, just like their peers without special needs, and enable them contribute their quota to the development of the nation and their communities in particular. In 2015, the federal government enacted the National Policy on Special Needs Education which emphasizes principles of least restrictive environment, zero reject, and total inclusion, promoting access, equity, and maximizing the potential of individuals with special needs (FME, 2015).

The need for inclusivity, gave room for the establishment of the National Policy of Inclusive Education in 2017, which acknowledged the need for inclusive education and provided guidance for implementation. Also, the Child Rights Act outlines that every child has right to free, compulsory and basic education (Omede, 2016; Ogunode & Yunusa, 2022). This policy aims to promote Nigeria's educational practices with global standards, ensuring that every child has the right to quality education. The inclusive education policy gave specific action guidelines for both federal and state government and requested that states review their education policy to align with that of the National Inclusive Education Policy. Between 2016 to 2025, several states have implemented, and continuing to implement elements of their own inclusive education policies; including states like Lagos, Kano, Ekiti, Bauchi, Ondo, Kogi, Anambra, Jigawa, Kwara and Plateau (UNESCO, 2020).

In 2019, President Buhari signed the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act into law. The law stated the requirements to adequate delivery of inclusive education for people with disabilities, supporting their educational and social inclusion rights. This was the first law on people with disabilities in Nigeria. The educational provisions of the Disability Act include:

- Individuals with disabilities are entitled to free quality education to secondary school level.
- All public schools, whether primary, secondary or tertiary, shall be run to be inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities. Accordingly, every school should have trained personnel to cater for the educational development of persons with disabilities and special facilities for effective education of persons with disabilities.
- Braille, sign language and other skills for communicating with persons with disabilities shall form part of the curricula of primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.
- The commission shall provide educational assistive devices.
- The education of special needs personnel should be highly subsidized.
- Government shall ensure that the education of persons with disabilities are delivered in the most appropriate language, mode and means of communication for the individual, and in the environment, which maximize academic and social development (PLAC, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Overview of the current state of inclusive education policy in Nigeria

Inclusive education in Nigeria has made significant policy advances but remain in the early stage of full realization. Nigeria is a signatory of several key international treaties and conventions seeking inclusive education, including Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), the Dakar Framework for Action (2000), and the UN Convention on the Right of Person with Disabilities 2006 (Ejuchegahi, 2023). In line with being a signatory to these international treaties on inclusive education, the Nigeria government has also made significant strides by initiating inclusive policies such as the National Policy on Education in 2013, the National Policy on Special Needs Education in 2015 (FME, 2015), the National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria (FME, 2017), and the Discrimination Against Person with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act in 2019.

Most recently, under the administration of President Bola Tinubu, the National Policy on Inclusive Education was updated and reinforced in 2023 to better align with global standards, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the Nigeria's obligations under the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, aiming to remove barriers, ensure equity, and provide quality education for all, particularly for learners with disabilities and those from disadvantaged background (Federal Ministry of Education (FME), 2023). The current framework seeks to:

- i. Promote equitable access to learning environments for every child regardless of gender, disability, or socioeconomic status.
- ii. Enhance public awareness, and provide teacher training.
- iii. Rehabilitate and upgrade school facilities to accommodate diverse learners' needs.
- iv. Encourage meaningful involvement of families and community advocates in policy implementation.
- v. Inculcate inclusive education modules into teacher training programmes.
- vi. Upgrade school infrastructures to be accessible and supportive of all students. (Federal Ministry of Education (FME), 2023, Commonwealth scholarships, 2024).

Despite numerous policies, significant gaps remain between policy and practical implementation in Nigeria; starting from the Nigeria Universal Basic Education (UBE) system which was basically implemented for special children to ensure equitable access to quality education for all school-aged children, regardless of physical or learning disabilities (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). The UBE system has been more of segregation and exclusion rather than inclusion, despite the donation of 2% of the country's Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) since 2005 for establishment of special schools and for implementation of inclusive education (Onwazurike, 2023; UBEC, 2018). This commitment by the federal government was to make schools effectively inclusive by renovating and equipping special schools or making modifications of physical facilities to accommodate the learning needs of all learners in an inclusive setting. Unfortunately, research shows that the UBE programme lacks the core aim of inclusive education which is to remove all forms of segregation and ensuring quality education for all learners regardless of their disabilities in the same learning environment.

At the secondary school level, government policies emphasize the important role of school administrators and teachers in fostering equity and inclusion. These educational leaders serve

as the middle-man between policy and practice, translating inclusive education principles into actionable strategies for students with special needs (Difoni et al., 2024). However, in practice, there are lots of barriers to full inclusion at this level. These include inadequate facilities and learning equipment, prevalent negative attitudes from both teachers and peers, and shortage of trained support personnel capable of assisting students with special needs adjust successfully within mainstream secondary schools. Consequently, only a limited number of secondary schools have effectively implemented inclusive practices, highlighting the need for enhanced resources, professional development, and attitudinal change to promote inclusion.

Lastly at the tertiary institution level, little has been done in line with global practices of accommodating individuals with special needs. Some inclusive strategies to promote equity has been put in place thus:

The JAMB equal opportunity group (JEOG) established in 2017, facilitates accessible admissions for candidates with disabilities and tracks their progress (FME, 2023).

Tertiary institutions since 2024, are required to register at least a 5% annual increase in admissions of students with disabilities (FME, 2023).

National standards and quality assurance policies for inclusive education in tertiary institution are being developed to ensure expansion on the number of accessible institutions and providing quality facilities (Okoye & Adirika, 2019).

In spite of this little progress, students with special needs still face a lot of challenges in accessing quality education in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The physical environment of most tertiary institution is disability unfriendly; there is limited access to assistive technology; the libraries are inaccessible and are technology unfriendly; there is shortage of trained lecturers which affects students with special needs' adjustment to the educational system. A field survey carried out at Rivers State University revealed issues faced by students with disabilities to include:

- i. Inaccessible physical infrastructure such as lecture halls, libraries, lecturer's offices, campus bus services, buildings lacking ramps or elevators.
- ii. Lack of assistive technologies and specialized learning materials.
- iii. Sudden change of lecture venue.
- iv. Negative attitude of both lecturers and students.
- v. Inadequate disability support unit and lack of disability counselling unit (Personal observation, Rivers State University, 2025).

Challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria

Despite the comprehensive policy frameworks, Nigeria faces persistent challenges in making inclusive education effective and widespread. Some of the key issues are:

a. Insufficient funding: Limited budget allocation often falls short of what is needed to support inclusive education, limiting the procurement of adaptive learning materials, teacher recruitment, and infrastructural adjustments.

b. Infrastructural barriers: Many schools in Nigeria lacks physical accessible facilities such as ramps, Braille signage, or disability-friendly toilets, and do not have sufficient learning aids like Perkin braille, white/mobility cane, hearing aids, wheel chairs, assistive technologies, among others, hindering the implementation of inclusive education.

c. Lack of trained personnel: There is lack of adequate knowledge on inclusive pedagogies, special needs identification, and adaptive instructional strategies by the general school teacher and school administrators. Due to this ignorance, there is poor delivery of inclusive education in schools.

d. Inconsistent policy implementation and policy misinterpretation: Gaps in policy enforcement and lack of co-ordination among government agencies and stakeholders affect service delivery. Also, the planning process is hampered by inadequate professionalism and, at times, political interference, which can lead to misapplication or misunderstanding of policy objectives.

e. Weak enforcement and governance: The high level of corruption, weak monitoring system, and lack of accountability mechanisms make it difficult to enforce policy provisions effectively, leading to inconsistencies across state and regions.

f. Curriculum limitation: Challenges in curriculum adaptation and the need for educational restructuring hinder the integration of diverse learners. The existing curricula often do not accommodate the full range of learners with disabilities needs.

g. Societal stigma and discrimination: Students with special needs often face stigma and discrimination, which limit their access to education and social inclusion.

h. Limited support services: Schools may not have sufficient access to therapists, aides, or support personnel who can assist teachers and students in inclusive settings.

i. Cultural and language barriers: Cultural beliefs and practices can sometimes create barriers to inclusive education; example is the belief that disability is a curse or punishment. Students with diverse needs sometimes face linguistic challenges, teachers may lack training to accommodate these differences.

j. Financial constraints and corruption: Poorly allocated funding and poor/reluctant political-will contribute greatly to inadequate resources, infrastructure, and teacher professional development. Most political office holders in Nigeria see their appointment as a get rich scheme, an opportunity to amass wealth for themselves thereby diverting public funds. This has no doubt affected the implementation and realization of inclusive education in Nigeria. These challenges underscore the need for increased investment in inclusive education, teacher training, and infrastructure development to create a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students (Mbaba et al., 2024).

Implications of inclusive education policy for persons with special needs

Inclusive education policies in Nigeria significantly impact persons with special needs in various positive ways (Ajuwon, 2008; Orlunga & Alikor, 2023). These policies:

i. Increase access to quality education and reduce exclusion. The policy ensures free and compulsory education for persons with special needs by mandating that all schools should be inclusive and accessible. This aims to reduce out-of-school children with special needs by promoting their learning and development.

ii. Protect the rights of persons with special needs and promote their social and academic inclusion, fostering a sense of belonging and equality.

iii. Facilitate improved academic achievements, thereby enhancing future education and employment opportunities.

iv. Encourage social inclusion and acceptance by enabling students with special needs to learn alongside their peers without special needs, which helps reduce or remove stigmatization and discrimination.

v. Support empowerment and economic development through skill acquisition, enabling persons with special needs to become more functional and independent member of society, contributing their own quota to economic development, sustainable growth and reducing the burdens associated with exclusion.

vi. Provide legal and policy safeguards reinforced by laws such as the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act, promoting accountability in educational access and equity.

By promoting inclusive education, Nigeria can foster equal educational opportunities, social inclusion, and empowerment, ultimately benefitting individuals with special needs and the society as a whole. However, realizing these benefits fully depends on overcoming political challenges and ensuring effective resource allocation and capacity building.

Benefits of inclusive education

The following can stand in as benefits:

- i. Most students tend to learn better in inclusive settings.
- ii. Inclusion promotes the growth of self-esteem. No student wants to be singled out or identified as different or less worthy to be part of mainstream activities.
- iii. The focus of education is on the child's abilities not disabilities.
- iv. Meaningful relationships and friendship develop as students spend quality time with one another.
- v. Teachers in inclusive schools are highly trained and skilled at delivering appropriate student-centred curriculum through differentiated activities according to ability level.
- vi. Inclusive schools value input and participation from the whole community, not just students.
- vii. Children become accepting and understanding of one another's abilities, talents, personalities and need (Atteng & Nwolu, 2015).

Similarly, Sambo and Yusuf (2022), categorized the beneficiaries of inclusive education as:

A. Students with special needs

- Friendships opportunities with fellow disabled and non-disabled.
- Preparation for full future societal integration since the disabled will not live in all disabled society but normal society.
- Greater access to general curriculum that prepares them for the world of work.
- Enhance skill acquisition and rehabilitation.
- Higher expectation from life and better self-concept.
- Introduction of lifelong learning for empowerment and employment.
- Better relationship with family members unlike special schools, where children with special needs may be kept away from home.
- High growth in social cognition.
- Development of positive personal life principles.

B. Students without special needs

- Development of empathy as daily interaction with persons with special needs will make them appreciate the person's condition without pitying them.
- Meaningful friendship.
- Acceptance of individual's uniqueness and diversities.
- Respect for all people irrespective of disabilities.
- Greater academic challenges.
- Access to better, wider and more resources as they can assess teaching resources meant for persons with special needs.

C. Teachers

- Fulfilment and satisfaction that comes with the opportunity to help diverse and more children.
- Professional efficiency and development as they may have to be constantly innovative and creative by varying teaching styles to enhance learning for all.
- Opportunity to synergize and collaborate among teachers, psychologist, and others.
- Opportunity for self-development.

D. Society

- The ultimate benefactor of any one's education whether special needs or not is "self" and "society" as education makes better and productive citizens.
- Inclusive education will lead to a reduction of fear of human differences which can be observed in some people's behaviours towards persons with disabilities.
- Inclusive education will lead to a better world for everyone, because children who learn together will also learn to live together.

Inclusive education policies in fostering national development

Difoni et al. (2024), UNESCO (2019) and World Bank (2018) listed the significant contributions of inclusive education policies to national development to include:

1. Promote equity: Inclusive education breaks down barriers to learning for children with disabilities ensuring they receive equal opportunities for personal growth and participation in society.
2. Enhancing human capital: Inclusive education ensures that all individuals regardless of abilities contribute their quota to the nation's workforce thereby boosting the nation's economic development.
3. Promoting social cohesion: Bringing children together despite their abilities, disabilities and socio-economic status to learn together in the same classroom helps foster social cohesion by reducing social exclusion.
4. Reducing poverty and dependence: Inclusive education policies through education equip individuals with skills needed for employment regardless of their disabilities, hence addressing unemployment, poverty, and vulnerability.
5. Cost effectiveness: Inclusive education is more cost-effective to maintain than segmented special education system, enabling better use of limited educational resources.

6. Aligning with global goals: Nigeria's inclusive education policies demonstrate its commitment to global agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals 4 and the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Conclusion

Inclusive education policies in Nigeria are not merely a legal obligation but essential for ensuring that all children in Nigeria, particularly those with special needs, have access to quality education. Despite strong policy frameworks backed with global standards and increasing government commitment, the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria remain more and more in theory and less in practice. While challenges remain in implementation, the benefits of inclusive education extend beyond the classroom to the community at large. It is therefore important that all stakeholders (government, educators and communities) involved in the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria be more realistic and effective in programme implementation.

Recommendations

1. Based on the challenges raised in this paper, the following recommendations are proffered:

2. Government should increase funding and resources particularly for inclusive education initiatives; any funds allocated for this cause should be mandatorily spent on accessible infrastructures, assistive technology, and adapted learning materials at all levels.

3. Government should develop a well-structured and measurable plan for implementation of its inclusive education policy. There should be effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure compliance with inclusive education policies at the federal, state and local government level.

4. Government should promote parental and community involvement in the design and delivery of inclusive education policy.

5. Government, NGOs and professional associations should promote public enlightenment campaigns to combat stigma and promote understanding of disabilities and the rights of all learners.

6. There should be systematic teacher training for administrators and teachers on inclusive education practices and integration of inclusive education modules into teacher education curricula.

7. Education regulators should ensure all new and existing educational facilities adopt universal design principles, so that the physical learning environments and learning resources are accessible to all learners.

8. Government, educational institutions and professional bodies should leverage on collaborations with international organizations, NGOs, and private sector to draw on expertise, mobilize resources, and scale up best practices for inclusive education.

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