



Inclusive Education for Students with Special Need in Nigeria: Rhetoric or Reality?

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ABSTRACT

Background: The goal of inclusive education is to implement strategies that maximize a child's learning environment. However, in Nigeria, a number of issues, such as a lack of funding, political unpredictability, and resource constraints, consistently impede the successful implementation of these programmes.

Objective: The present study examined the discrepancy that exists between policy and practice regarding inclusive education for students with special needs in Nigeria.

Method: The researcher adopted a descriptive survey research design. The study population is drawn from students with special needs in Nigeria using a simple random selection method to choose one school from each zone, and 25 teachers were chosen using a purposive sample methodology, for a total of 100 participants. This study used a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire to produce the data. The mentioned hypotheses were investigated using simple regression analysis.

Results: The findings of the study demonstrated that inclusive education in secondary schools in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria, is significantly impacted by educational policies for children with special needs. However, problems such as resource limits, teacher training deficits, and cultural stigmas continue to hamper complete implementation.

Conclusion: In conclusion, inclusive education is significantly impacted by educational policies for children with special needs in the study area.

Unique Contribution: This study provides fresh empirical insight into the persistent gaps between inclusive education policies and their practical implementation in Nigeria. By presenting updated evidence from Lagos State Educational District V, it contributes to the ongoing discourse on how educational policies shape the lived realities of students with special needs, offering stakeholders valuable guidance for strengthening inclusive education practice.

Key Recommendation: It has been recommended that that civil society, non-profit organisations, government agencies, and educational stakeholders launch awareness campaigns to debunk myths and stereotypes about children with disabilities, take part in advocacy work to encourage societal acceptance of inclusive education and dispel preconceived notions that obstruct its implementation, and push for higher funding allotments to support the staff, resources, and infrastructure required for inclusive education.

Keywords: Policy implementation, Teacher training, Resource constraints, Cultural stigmas



INTRODUCTION

In 1994, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) held a conference in Salamanca, Spain to discuss how to promote inclusive education globally. The conference came up with the landmark Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action which advocated for all children, especially those with special needs, to learn together in mainstream schools, recognising education as a fundamental human right and calling for systemic changes to support diverse learners (Nwafor, & Odoemelam, 2016; Nwafor, et al. 2022).

Since the UNESCO conference in Salamanca in 1994, inclusive education has been a priority in educational research. UNESCO (1994) reiterates its commitment to the necessity and urgency of providing inclusive education for people with special educational needs. This was said by the delegates of the World Conference on exceptional needs education in Salamanca. This covers all age groups children, adolescents, and adults in the setting of conventional education. Research on inclusive practices was further encouraged by the support of 92 countries and 25 international organisations for inclusive education (UNESCO, 1994). Culture influences many different interpretations of inclusive practice (Amr, Al-Natour, & Al-Abdallat, 2016). The idea of inclusive education originated from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which has been instrumental in advancing the inclusion of kids with special needs into our mainstream school system.

According to UNESCO (2005), inclusive education is a pedagogical approach that endeavours to adjust the framework and milieu of education to accommodate the diverse needs of students. Furthermore, it makes the case for equitable opportunities for all students with different types of disabilities, including social, emotional, and physical ones. With 177 countries worldwide signing the Rights for Persons with Disabilities in the last few decades, the inclusive educational approach is starting to gain acceptance on a global scale as a means of ensuring high-quality education for all students, regardless of whether or not these children have a disability (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). Obi, Mensah, and Avoke (2007) claim that inclusion represents a significant departure from the conventional segregated approach to teaching disabled children, which entails modifying curriculum to meet the requirements of students with impairments. The Nigerian government has legally endorsed and sanctioned the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in order to advance the cause of inclusive education in Nigeria (Ogunode & Yunusa, 2022). The Nigerian government put into effect the National Policy on Special Needs Education in 2015 (Ogunode and Yunusa 2022).

Furthermore, the Kid Rights Act mandates that every child have access to free, required, and necessary education. To achieve the goals outlined in the Child Rights Act statutes, Nigeria enacted the prohibition of discrimination against persons with disabilities bill in January 2019 (Ogunode & Yunusa, 2022). Inclusive education is seen as a way to support students with disabilities in general education settings in some developing nations, such as Nigeria (Adetoro 2014). Special education is defined as a structured training plan created especially for people (including adults and children) with special needs under Nigeria's National Policy on Education (NPE) (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2004, p. 47). Furthermore, according to NPE (2013), special education is a customised educational plan created to meet the particular requirements of



each individual with special needs that cannot be met by general educational needs. This is in contrast to the global standard, which defines inclusive education as "a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners" (UNESCO, 2001).

Regardless of the understanding of inclusive education in the Nigerian educational system, various gaps must be filled. For instance, Egaga and Aderibigbe (2015) asserted that many schools in Nigeria, both private and public, lack adequate facilities to practice inclusivity in their facilities. Aside from this, some of these schools do not have enough educational resources to support the learning of non-disabled students, not to mention having facilities for children living with disabilities. In addition, these studies, such as Garuba (2003), Adetoro (2014), and Okoli (2014), have argued that there is still a high level of marginalization between students with and without disabilities. The implication for this is that there seems to be a long way for the Nigerian educational system to go in achieving inclusivity. While old studies such as Garuba (2003) and Ajuwon (2008) have considered the start of inclusivity in Nigerian schools, there is a need to systematically present more recent empirical data on the reality of inclusive education in Nigeria, hence, the present study.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study is to investigate the state of inclusive education for students with special needs in Lagos State Educational District. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. determine the extent to which inclusive education is practiced in public senior secondary schools in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria.
- ii. explore the impact of educational policies regarding special needs students on inclusive education practice in public senior secondary schools in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive Education

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2016) defines inclusive education as "a continuous process to eliminate barriers to education and promote reform in the culture, policy, and practice in schools to include all students." It also refers to the fundamental right to education and a value placed on the wellbeing, autonomy, dignity, and contribution of students to society. Most of the school day is spent in a mainstream classroom alongside peers who have impairments and other disadvantages if the school practices inclusive education (Schuelka 2018). However, although their peers without disabilities benefit from being exposed to children with a variety of features, talents, and temperaments, children with impairments benefit more from learning in a conventional classroom (Ajuwon 2008). By providing equal opportunities and resources for all students to learn in a physical environment alongside their classmates, inclusive education seeks to achieve its goals (Oke, Samuel, & Ezeh 2023). When kids with special needs spend the majority of their time alongside students without special needs, this is known as inclusion in the classroom (Nanjwan et al., 2019). Not only do kids with disabilities gain from inclusive education; it also benefits all kids who were denied admission to school because of learning disabilities, disadvantages, or exclusions because of location, parent's socioeconomic status, race, religion, or exceptional talent



that the regular curriculum wasn't sufficiently challenging enough for (Oke, Samuel, & Ezeh 2023). It is assumed that the goal of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion, which results from attitudes towards and reactions to differences in ability, gender, colour, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion (Ainscow 2020).

Special Need Students

Most youngsters can study in standard classrooms without the need for special support teachers. However, there is a subset of people in our communities and schools who live in such harsh conditions that they are unable to benefit from the general regular educational program and thus need special education programs in order to deal with life's circumstances (Oluremi 2015). In literature, such persons are referred to as youngsters with unique educational requirements. Children with special educational needs, according to Wang (2009), are exceptional or differently challenged children who may be below or above average in terms of their physical, social, or intellectual abilities. As a result, they require specially planned and routinely monitored arrangements for physical settings. According to Wang (2009), segregation was the first step in the education of children with special needs. However, there are drawbacks to the segregation system, including its refusal to acknowledge the inclusion of children with special needs in their communities and society at large. This implies that segregation places extra limitations and social disadvantages on the social expectations that adults and teenagers have in later life.

Special Need Students and Inclusive Education in Nigeria

The goal of education is to implement strategies that maximize a child's learning environment. Because the characteristics of students with special needs limit their access to learning environments, it's critical to develop alternative strategies for supporting these children (Oluremi, 2015). One such strategy is inclusion, which is an educational system that brings together both students with special educational needs and ordinary students in a single learning environment. Thanks to this school plan, students with special needs lived with their parents or guardians and attended school in the community. As pointed out by Olufunke and Oluremi (2014), inclusion could be either partial or full. The complete integration of all students—including those who require substantial behavioural and intellectual support—into regular classroom settings is referred to as full inclusion. It also implies the elimination of certain special classes. The provision of special education is a service that is fully incorporated into daily activities, including the design, ambiance, curriculum, and strategies of the classroom. Rather than taking students out of the main classroom, it focuses on meeting their specific needs by providing the right kind of support. The term "partial inclusion" describes the approach of teaching special needs pupils in mainstream classes but removing them when they need specialised treatments, such as speech therapy. Currently, in Nigeria, the prevailing approach to education is primarily integrated/mainstreaming rather than truly inclusive education (Olufunke & Oluremi 2014). Inclusionary education contributes significantly to the prosperity of Nigerian communities, claim Strully & Strully (1996). The younger generation is shown that a community is made up of a diverse range of people and that no certain student type is preferable to another by combining students with and without special needs. Inclusive education will lower barriers to friendship



between children with and without special needs by instilling the values of cooperation and teamwork that are essential for community development (Oluremi 2015).

Trends of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

Nigeria accepts the inclusionary approach in the Federal Republic's National Policy on Education. The policy stipulates those students with exceptional needs must be included in regular classrooms and that all levels of exceptional students must get free education (Oluremi 2015). All children will have equal access to education, regardless of their physical, sensory, mental, psychological, or emotional issues. These are clearly high standards intended to raise the calibre of special education services (Oluremi, 2015). Nonetheless, special schools in Nigeria are sporadically named after specific disabilities that stigmatise students who attend them and are sparsely distributed around the nation. According to Adetoro (2014), a few examples are "Schools for the Blind," "Schools for the Deaf and Dumb," and "Schools for the Handicapped." Adetoro (2014) reports that the majority of these special schools are either privately held by individuals, non-governmental organisations, or religious institutions, with the government managing just a small number of them (at most one per senatorial district, or five total in a state). Even worse, the cultural stereotype of ignorant parents believing that crippled children are "children from idols" made inclusive education in Nigeria a myth rather than a reality, Adetoro (2014). Additionally, Okoli (2014) asserts that there is global evidence demonstrating that disabled and handicapped children can and are learning, debunking the myth that these children are bad, to blame for their problems, incapable of learning, and benefiting neither society nor themselves.

Challenges of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

There are questions about inclusive education in Nigeria because the national policy on education (NPE) did not significantly impede it in favour of focusing more on special education. The efforts of education stakeholders in both public and private schools to raise public awareness of inclusive education have clearly yielded ambiguous answers in the context of developing nations such as Nigeria. Even with limited resources, a few public and private schools are beginning to use inclusive education practices (Egaga and Aderibigbe 2015; Okoro, & Nwafor, 2015). According to this statement, inclusion is an intentional and focused approach that seeks to include students or groups who have historically been marginalised or excluded from educational programmes. Garuba (2003) notes that there has been a discernible lack of progress in Nigeria's implementation of inclusive education. Integration continues to be a major focus in the development of special education programs, particularly at the legislative level. In certain Nigerian schools, inclusive education is still being worked on and is not yet fully adopted. In his argument, Onwubolu (2017) noted that the initial approach to schooling children with special needs in Nigeria has been recognised as the widespread practice of separating these children from their traditional peers. Nigerian politicians, or policymakers, are in charge of creating policies. However, a number of issues, such as a lack of funding, political unpredictability, and resource constraints, consistently impede the successful implementation of these programmes.



THEORETICAL FARMWORK

The social learning theory of Albert Bandura has been adopted in this study since it focuses on the holistic learning of students in the context of a favourable learning environment (Bandura, 1965). According to the theory, children learn through observation and motivation. When children are encouraged by their teachers as well as the provision of adequate teaching facilities, they will learn effectively (Bandura, 1965). In addition to this, learners' attention is determined by the learning of care that they get from people around them. In the present study, this theory helps to stress the need for an effective classroom setting to support learning among students with special needs. It also focuses on the efficacy of school polies in ensuring that no form of discrimination is practiced towards students with special needs.

METHOD

The researcher adopted a descriptive survey research design. This facilitates the data delivery about the effects of the independent variables. Consequently, the researcher did not change any of the parameters and instead provided the data exactly as they occurred. The study's target group consisted of teachers in senior secondary schools in Lagos State Education District V. This group consisted of the district's 3,514 teachers. All secondary school teachers in the district were considered for the study, but only those teaching senior secondary schools were surveyed. Ajeromi/Ifelodun, Amuwo-Odofin, Badagry, and Ojo zone make up District V. The study sample consisted of one hundred teachers using a simple random sampling technique. With the simple random sampling technique, one school from each zone, and purposive sampling approach was employed to select twenty-five teachers from the four zones, for a total of one hundred participants.

Instrumentation

One of the self-developed research instruments used in the study was the Special Need Students Inclusive Education Questionnaire (SNSIEQ). To assess inclusive education and students with special needs in Nigeria, the five scale components were developed. On a four-point Likert scale, the responses are: strongly disagree (SD), disagree (D), agree (A), and strongly agree (SA). After appropriate validation, the questionnaire's reliability score of 0.72 shows how highly reliable the created items were.

The researchers were allowed to visit the schools in person with permission from the administrators, and two trained research assistants assisted them in giving the participants the questionnaire. The respondents received suitable explanations about the study's significance and the privacy of their responses. Data collection and analysis were done using Simple Regression Analysis. Using proportionate stratified sampling and basic random sampling techniques, the sample was created. Of the 2% of the zone's schools selected, two instructors were chosen at random.



Hypothesis 1: The inclusive education of public senior secondary schools in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria, is not significantly impacted by educational policies regarding special needs pupils.

Table 4.6: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.775 ^a	.739	.715	.67845

a. Predictors: (Constant), Inclusive Education

Table 4.7: ANOVA^a

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	4.691	1	4.691	13.637	.000b
	Residual	33.724	98	.344		
	Total	38.415	99			

a. Dependent Variable: Inclusive Education

b. Predictors: (Constant), Educational Policy

Table 4.8: Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.679	.063		13.156	.000
	Educational Policy	.242	.029	.775	5.439	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Inclusive Education

According to the research, the model summary of educational policy for special needs children has no significant impact on inclusive education in public senior high schools in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria.

With an F-value of 45.553, an R-value of 0.775, and an R² of 0.739, the table demonstrates a high degree of fitness. The educational policy's regression model's R² of 73.9% explains the policy.

The table's R-value of 0.775 further demonstrated that the independent variable (i.e., the educational policy on inclusive education) had a significant and positive impact on the dependent variable. This contributes to the validity of the regression result that the hypothesis states. Furthermore, because the results' P-value was less than 0.05, they showed that educational policy ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.05$) had a positive and statistically significant impact on inclusive education at a 95% confidence level.

In light of this, it can be inferred that educational policy influences inclusive education because the F-sig (p-value) of 0.000 is less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis that had previously suggested that special needs education policies did not significantly impact inclusive education in public senior high schools in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria, was rejected.



DISCUSSION

With an F-value of 45.553, an R-value of 0.775, and a R^2 of 0.739, the hypotheses exhibit a high degree of fitness. The R^2 of 73.9% shows that educational policy explains a substantial percentage of inclusive education in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria. According to the coefficient analysis, educational policy has a positive and statistically significant impact on inclusive education ($\beta = 0.242$, $p < 0.05$). The F-sig. (p-value) of 0.000 being less than 0.05 shows that the effect is significant. Consequently, it is determined that educational policies regarding children with special needs do have a significant impact on inclusive education, rejecting the null hypothesis.

The hypothesis's findings continuously point to the importance of educational policy in influencing inclusive education in Lagos State Educational District V, Nigeria. The high R^2 values indicate that the existence of educational policies may account for a significant portion of inclusive education. This implies that educational policies still have impacts on how inclusive education is practiced in Nigeria. More so, this shows that there is a limit in the rate at which discrimination is engaged among the students. In the findings of Wang (2009), segregation was the first step in the education of children with special needs. However, there are drawbacks to the segregation system, including its refusal to acknowledge the inclusion of children with special needs in their communities and society at large. In another related findings, Olufunke and Oluremi (2014), inclusion could be either partial or full. The complete integration of all students including those who require substantial behavioural and intellectual support into regular classroom settings is referred to as full inclusion. In the present study, and in the works of Olufunke and Oluremi (2014), inclusive education is still partially practiced and should be improved as a way of ensuring quality delivery.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discussion on inclusive education in Nigeria indicates both progress and persistent challenges. Global support for inclusive education has grown since the 1994 Salamanca summit, as evidenced by UNESCO's leadership and the signing of related agreements by a number of countries, including Nigeria. Despite these auspicious beginnings, the translation of inclusive education ideals into actual practices finds hurdles in the Nigerian setting. Despite its declaration of dedication to inclusivity, the national education strategy has not been easily implemented in practice. Challenges emerge in resource allocation, teacher training, and public attitudes. There are issues with the comprehensive integration of inclusive education into the educational landscape because of the emphasis on special education in policy and practice. Furthermore, the general public's reluctance to embrace inclusive education is fuelled by cultural preconceptions and stigmas associated with disabilities, which leads to a preference for segregated special schools. Other developing nations' experiences highlight the need for focused initiatives in resource mobilisation, community engagement, and policy improvement. Addressing the different issues requires a holistic approach that combines legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, and collaborative actions comprising government authorities, NGOs, and local communities. Although Nigeria has made progress in enacting anti-discrimination laws and creating the National Policy on Special Needs Education, inclusive education will require ongoing dedication. It demands a shift in cultural attitudes, improved infrastructure, and



continuous investment in teacher capacity building. Nigeria is still in the process of moving towards inclusive education, which is characterised by the necessity for group efforts, flexible strategies, and a never-ending quest for equitable educational opportunities for everyone, regardless of background or aptitude.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The policymakers (legislators) and the agencies responsible for the implementation of laws in Nigeria should look beyond rhetoric to design and implement complete legislation that will be useful to the special children in Nigeria. They should also improve the implementation of existing rules relating to inclusive education and ensure that they comply with international norms. In addition to advocating for increased budget allocations to support the infrastructure, supplies, and staff required for inclusive education, government agencies, educational stakeholders, non-profit organisations, and civil society should run awareness campaigns to debunk cultural myths and stereotypes associated with children with disabilities. These efforts should also focus on promoting societal acceptance of inclusive education and challenging preconceived notions that obstruct its implementation.

In addition, government organisations and other stakeholders in education should endeavour to create curricula that fit a range of learning requirements and styles. They should also promote the integration of inclusive education concepts into teacher preparation initiatives and curriculum development projects. Existing policies relating to inclusive education and ensuring they conform to international criteria. To promote community involvement in the inclusive education process, government agencies, educational stakeholders, non-profit organisations, and civil society should reach out to parents, local leaders, and community organisations for support. They should also establish community-based support networks for parents of children with special needs.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Sewanu Jesukon Isaac conceived the study, including the design, Michael Elijah Kusika collated the data, and Shedrack Okiki Ajiboye handled the analysis and interpretation, while Sewanu, Shedrack and Michael initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.



Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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