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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The study was carried out on inclusive education policy in Nigeria: challenges and the way forward. Inclusive education is recognized globally as both a human right and a strategic approach to improving equity and quality in education. Anchored in international frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Nigeria has also enacted domestic policies including the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act 2004, the National Policy on Education (2014), and the National Policy on Inclusive Education (2017, revised 2023). Despite these commitments, implementation remains inconsistent. The study identifies major challenges hindering inclusive education such as policy fragmentation and weak coordination, inadequate and irregular financing, limited teacher capacity in inclusive pedagogy, poor infrastructure and inaccessible learning materials, rigid assessment systems, weak data management, socio-cultural barriers, insecurity, and lack of accountability mechanisms. Evidence shows that while some progress has been made, particularly in urban areas and through NGO interventions, systemic gaps persist across rural and conflict-affected regions. The study proposes strategies including harmonization of policies across federal, state, and local levels, sustainable financing, teacher training in inclusive pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), improved infrastructure and assistive technologies, culturally sensitive community sensitization, strengthened school safety, robust data systems, and accountability indicators for school leaders. It concluded that inclusive education is not merely a policy aspiration but a human rights imperative and a national development priority. Ensuring its effective implementation will foster equity, social justice, and sustainable educational transformation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Policy Implementation, Educational Challenges, Equity & Access

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Introduction

Inclusive education is both a human right and a practical strategy for improving education system quality and equity. Globally, it is established in Sustainable Development Goal 4, which commits countries to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2020). This goal underscores the priority of removing barriers to participation and learning for all children, including those with disabilities and other vulnerabilities.

Today in Nigeria special educators, psychologist, parent of students with disabilities, policy makers and other stakeholders continue to debate on the benefit and challenges of education (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002). The discussions have been shaped largely by the principles of inclusion which stresses that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from other remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups" (The Salamanca Statement and Frame work for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994). Inclusive education is an approach that looks into how to transform education systems in order to remove the barriers that prevent pupils from participating fully in education (Abubakar, Faruna & Abdulkadir, 2023)

These inclusive ideals are anchored in the legal and policy landscape. The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act 2004 guarantees free and compulsory basic education for all school-age children (Universal Basic Education Commission [UBEC], 2004). The Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018 prohibits exclusion, mandates accessibility, and promotes reasonable accommodations across public services—including education (Federal Ministry of Justice, 2018). Nigeria also ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), reinforcing the right to inclusive education (United Nations, 2007). More recently, the Federal Ministry of Education's revised National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) reflects renewed intent to institutionalize inclusive practice across education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023).

Despite these policy commitments, implementation remains uneven. Nigeria hosts one of the world's largest populations of out-of-school children, and foundational learning deficits are widespread (UNICEF, 2024). Insecurity including school kidnappings and attacks further depresses access and retention, while conflict and internal displacement disrupt learning continuity, especially in the North-East and North-West regions (Reuters, 2024). These challenges intersect sharply with disability, poverty, gender, and language, magnifying exclusion in mainstream classrooms.

Understanding why inclusive policies have not translated consistently into

classroom practice and how to close these gaps is therefore critical for Nigeria's federal, state, and local education authorities, as well as NGOs and development partners. Global evidence emphasizes that achieving inclusion requires not only coherent policy frameworks but also adequate financing, teacher capacity in inclusive pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), robust data systems, and accountability mechanisms that monitor enrollment, participation, accommodations, and learning outcomes for all learners (UNESCO, 2020; Global Campaign for Education, 2020).

Conceptual Clarifications

Inclusive education refers to a systematic process of reforming and restructuring schools, teaching methods, curricula, and policies so that all learners irrespective of their socio-economic background, disability, gender, language, ethnicity, or displacement status can learn together in the same environment and achieve their full potential without segregation or discrimination (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This approach emphasizes the removal of barriers to learning and participation, ensuring that diversity is viewed as a resource rather than a challenge.

While special needs education focuses on providing specialized or individualized support services, often in separate or specially adapted environments for learners with disabilities (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), inclusive education is broader. It integrates such specialized supports into mainstream classrooms and complements them with strategies to address wider barriers such as poverty, gender inequality, linguistic diversity, and health-related challenges (Peters, 2004). In this sense, inclusive education is not limited to disability it is a holistic educational reform strategy.

The conceptual framework of inclusive education is underpinned by some principles which include:

i. Equity and Non-Discrimination**:** Every learner is entitled to equal rights and opportunities regardless of differences. This principle is grounded in human rights instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), both of which Nigeria has ratified (United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 2007).
ii. Universal Design for Learning (UDL)**:** UDL is an instructional approach that anticipates learner variability and designs curricula, teaching methods, materials, and assessment strategies to be flexible from the outset, thereby reducing barriers to learning (CAST, 2018). For example, providing text in multiple formats audio, large print, and Braille allows broader access.
iii. Reasonable Accommodation**:** This involves making appropriate and necessary modifications to enable learners with disabilities to participate fully in education, without imposing a disproportionate burden on the

institution. Examples include building ramps, providing large-print learning materials, or granting extra time in examinations.

iv. Participation and Agency: Learners and their communities should have an active role in shaping educational experiences, ensuring that schooling reflects local needs and contexts (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). This fosters ownership, cultural relevance, and sustainability of inclusive practices.
v. Systemic Change: Inclusion is not an "add-on" but must be embedded within the entire education system policy formulation, financing mechanisms, teacher professional development, curriculum design, data collection, and accountability frameworks must all reflect inclusive values (UNESCO, 2017).

Policy and Institutional Landscape in Nigeria

Nigeria's education system operates under a federal structure of governance, with responsibilities distributed across federal, state, and local government levels. The Federal Ministry of Education (FME) provides overall policy direction, coordination, and regulation, while State Ministries of Education (SMoEs) adapt federal policies to their local contexts, and Local Government Education Authorities (LGEAs) oversee grassroots implementation, particularly at the basic education level (Odukoya, 2009; World Bank, 2020). This multi-tiered governance arrangement has direct implications for inclusive education: while the federal government sets standards and issues national policies, states and local governments bear the responsibility for implementation, often with limited resources and capacity.

Over the past two decades, national education frameworks have increasingly emphasized inclusive education. The National Policy on Education (NPE), first formulated in 1977 and revised several times (most recently in 2014), recognizes the right of every Nigerian child to education and explicitly provides for the education of children with special needs (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). It highlights equal access, special education services, and integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools where feasible.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act of 2004 further institutionalized the right to free and compulsory basic education for all Nigerian children, mandating equitable access and measures to promote inclusive schooling (UBEC, 2004). Through the UBE framework, the government allocates intervention funds to states and local governments, some of which are earmarked for special and inclusive education programs, though utilization has often been suboptimal due to weak monitoring and political factors (Agboola, 2022).

In addition, the Federal Ministry of Education has developed specialized guidelines and strategies for inclusive and special needs education. For instance, the National Policy on Inclusive Education

(2017, revised 2023) provides a framework for integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream schools while ensuring the provision of reasonable accommodations and assistive technologies (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). Some states, such as Lagos and Kaduna, have also introduced state-level inclusive education policies and programs, reflecting an increasing subnational commitment (UNICEF, 2021).

Nigeria has also made legal and international commitments to inclusive education. Domestically, the Child Rights Act (2003) guarantees every child's right to education, protection, and development (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2003). The Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018) explicitly prohibits the denial of education to persons with disabilities and sets accessibility requirements for schools (Federal Ministry of Justice, 2018). Internationally, Nigeria is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), both of which obligate state parties to ensure inclusive and equitable education (United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 2007). Nigeria has also endorsed the Education 2030 Framework for Action, reinforcing its commitment to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on inclusive and equitable quality education (UNESCO, 2017).

Despite these progressive frameworks, implementation challenges persist. Policy execution depends largely on state and local government capacity, budgetary allocations, and school-level leadership (Okeke & Mazibuko, 2016). Disparities in resources across regions mean that while some urban schools demonstrate promising inclusive practices, rural and conflict-affected areas face chronic shortages of trained teachers, assistive devices, and accessible infrastructure. As a result, Nigeria's inclusive education landscape is characterized by heterogeneity: there are isolated pockets of effective practice supported by NGOs, donor agencies, and forward-looking state initiatives, but systemwide consistency remains limited (Akinbola, 2010; UNICEF, 2021).

Inclusive Education Policy in Nigeria

Attempts to entrench an inclusive education policy in Nigeria dates back to 1976 when the Universal Primary Education was introduced although with little success. In 1977, the first National Policy on Education was formulated. This document contained some provisions for special education including the idea of equalizing education for all children irrespective of their physical, mental, and emotional state (Garuba cited in Omede, 2016). One of the first states in Nigeria to move forward with the dictates for the education of children with special needs in the 1977 National Policy on Education was Plateau State; by enacting the Plateau State Handicapped Law in 1981 which makes the education of children with disabilities compulsory with a provision for the rehabilitation of adults with disabilities. In the arena of education, national policies,

especially in developing countries, are driven by international organization manifestos especially those from the United Nations International Children and Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nation Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declarations. From the late 1980s UNICEF began to take on the issue of education for children as a central goal.

In pursuance of this goal, the organization produced a binding international instrument known as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The Convention sets out 54 articles and two Optional Protocols. Part I, Article 2, Section 1 of the Convention states. "State Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status" (Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights. Nigeria has also enacted its own Child's Rights Act, Laws of the Federation 2004. Also of significant importance is the UNESCO's Declaration on Education for All (EFA) in 1990, the Salamanca Statement Framework for Action 1994, and the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. All of these forms the coherent force that influenced the adoption of National Policies on the Education of children with disabilities in Nigeria (Agunloye, Pollingue, Davou & Osagie, 2011). As a result of political instability, Nigeria was unable to formulate a coherent national policy on education, especially the education of children with special needs until 1999 when a democratic system of government began to take root again; following three decades of military dictatorship. In 1999 the Universal Basic Education (UBE) policy was adopted and enacted into law in 2004 as the UBE Act which makes a provision of 2% of its Consolidated Revenue Fund (CRF) to finance the UBE program.

Thus, the compulsory free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004, provides a legal framework within which the Federal Government supports states towards achieving uninterrupted nine-year compulsory Universal Basic Education for all children in primary and junior secondary school levels throughout the country**.** However, the actual provision for funding of the education of children with special needs, as a National Education Policy under the UBE Act, was not put into effect until 2008 (Ajuwon, 2008). This was when the policy of Inclusive Education was officially and formally adopted as an integral part of the UBE policy. Section 7 of the revised National Policy on Education (2014) explicitly recognizes that children and youth with special needs shall be provided with inclusive education services. The commitment is made to equalize educational opportunities for all children, irrespective of their physical, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities. Undoubtedly, these are lofty goals intended to improve the quality of

special education services, but much more is needed to translate the goals into concrete action.

Challenges of Inclusive Education Policy Implementation in Nigeria

Despite progressive policies and legal frameworks, the implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria faces persistent challenges that hinder equitable access and quality learning outcomes for all learners.

1. Policy Fragmentation and Weak Coordination: The implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria is often hindered by fragmented policies and weak coordination among different tiers of government. Federal, state, and local authorities sometimes develop overlapping frameworks that result in duplication, conflicting mandates, and inconsistent standards (Adebayo & Oyeniran, 2021). Moreover, poor collaboration between education, health, and social welfare sectors limits early identification of learners with special needs and obstructs the provision of holistic support services (Eleweke & Agboola, 2010).

2. Financing Constraints and Inefficient Spending: Inadequate and inconsistent funding remains a critical barrier. Despite policy commitments, allocations for inclusive education are often insufficient, irregular, or not fully released (Okeke, 2020). Available funds tend to prioritize physical expansion of schools rather than accessibility upgrades or specialized services. Expenditure on assistive technologies, continuous professional development, and support staff is minimal, while weak procurement systems and maintenance issues further reduce the effectiveness of spending (Omede, 2015).

3. Teacher Capacity and Workforce Models: Most Nigerian teachers have limited preparation in inclusive pedagogy, universal design for learning, and differentiated instruction (Oye-Lithur & Oduaran, 2021). In-service training, where available, is largely theoretical and lacks classroom-based coaching. The shortage of specialized professionals such as speech therapists, sign language interpreters, and educational psychologists further undermines service delivery, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002).

4. Infrastructure, Accessibility, and Learning Materials: Many schools in Nigeria remain physically inaccessible, lacking ramps, adapted toilets, handrails, and safe transport facilities (UNICEF, 2021). Teaching and learning resources are rarely produced in accessible formats such as Braille, large print, or audio, and digital learning materials are constrained by weak connectivity and lack of assistive devices (Adebisi et al., 2014). This restricts learners with disabilities from fully participating in classroom activities.

5. Assessment, Curriculum, and Language Barriers: The current assessment system relies heavily on high-stakes, standardized examinations that rarely provide accommodations for learners with special needs (Okeke, 2020). Curriculum pacing and density create additional challenges for students who require alternative pathways or extended learning time. Language-of-

instruction policies that prioritize English often exclude children whose home languages are different, especially in early childhood and primary school levels (Omede & Omede, 2015).

6. Data Gaps and Weak EMIS Integration: Reliable data on learners with disabilities or other vulnerabilities are limited. The Education Management Information System (EMIS) in Nigeria does not adequately disaggregate data by type of disability, gender, or socio-economic background, leading to underrepresentation and misclassification (UNESCO, 2020). Without accurate data, planning, budgeting, and program targeting are weakened (Adebayo & Oyeniran, 2021).

7. Sociocultural Norms and Stigma: Deep-rooted sociocultural beliefs and stigma against children with disabilities often discourage parents from enrolling them in schools (Eleweke & Agboola, 2010). Harmful gender norms such as early marriage and assigning domestic responsibilities to girls further limit participation in education (UNICEF, 2021). Negative community attitudes reduce social acceptance and reinforce exclusion.

8. Conflict, Displacement, and School Safety: Nigeria's ongoing security challenges, including banditry and insurgency, disproportionately affect children with special needs. Displacement due to conflict and the destruction of school facilities exacerbate exclusion and disrupt learning continuity (UNESCO, 2020). Learners with disabilities are particularly vulnerable as they face additional barriers in accessing temporary learning spaces and psychosocial support (UNICEF, 2021).

9. Accountability and Incentives: School inspection and monitoring frameworks rarely include inclusive education indicators. Principals and teachers are seldom evaluated based on their ability to implement inclusive practices (Adebisi et al., 2014). Without incentives or recognition, schools have little motivation to actively enroll and support marginalized learners.

The Way Forward

While Nigeria has made notable policy commitments toward inclusive education, the persistent gaps in implementation highlight the urgent need for pragmatic strategies that move beyond policy rhetoric to measurable action. The way forward, therefore, requires a holistic and coordinated approach that strengthens governance, enhances resource allocation, builds teacher and institutional capacity, and addresses socio-cultural and infrastructural barriers. By aligning national policies with international best practices and ensuring strong monitoring mechanisms, Nigeria can transform inclusive education from a policy aspiration into a lived reality for all learners.

1. Strengthening Policy Coherence and Coordination: To address fragmentation, Nigeria should harmonize inclusive education policies across federal, state, and local levels, ensuring alignment with international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4).

2. Sustainable Financing and Efficient Resource Allocation: Inclusive education requires ring-fenced budget allocations with transparency in disbursement. Priority should shift towards accessibility retrofits, provision of assistive technologies, and recruitment of itinerant specialists rather than only physical expansion. Public-private partnerships and international donor support can supplement government funding.

3. Enhancing Teacher Capacity and Specialized Workforce Models: Teacher preparation curricula should integrate inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction. Continuous professional development must be practical, classroom-embedded, and supported by mentoring.

4. Improving Infrastructure, Accessibility, and Learning Resources: School construction and renovation guidelines must enforce accessibility standards, including ramps, accessible toilets, and safe transport. Investments in digital technology and accessible learning materials (Braille, audio, tactile, and simplified formats) are essential.

5. Inclusive Assessment and Curriculum Adaptation: Assessment policies should incorporate accommodations such as extra time, alternative formats, and flexible progression pathways. Curriculum reviews must embed inclusive principles, with recognition of local languages in early education to enhance participation and learning outcomes.

6. Strengthening Data Systems and EMIS Integration: Accurate, disaggregated data on children with disabilities and other marginalized groups is critical for planning. Integrating inclusive education indicators into Nigeria's Education Management Information System (EMIS) will enable evidence-based decision-making.

7. Tackling Sociocultural Norms and Stigma: Community sensitization campaigns are necessary to combat stigma, harmful gender norms, and cultural practices that limit children's participation. Religious and traditional leaders should be engaged as change agents to promote inclusive values.

8. Building Resilience in Conflict and Displacement Contexts: Strengthening school safety measures, psychosocial support, and flexible learning platforms (e.g., radio, mobile, and community-based learning) will ensure continuity for displaced learners.

9. Accountability and Incentive Structures: Inspection and supervision frameworks should incorporate clear inclusive education indicators. School leaders need to be held accountable for enrollment, retention, and support of learners with diverse needs.

Conclusion

Inclusive education remains a fundamental pathway toward ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all Nigerian children, regardless of ability, gender, socio-economic status, or geographical location. However, as highlighted, its effective implementation

faces significant challenges ranging from policy fragmentation and weak coordination, chronic underfunding, and limited teacher capacity, to infrastructural deficits, assessment rigidity, sociocultural barriers, and the impacts of conflict and insecurity. These systemic constraints have slowed the pace of achieving the objectives of the *National Policy on Education* and the aspirations of the *Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4)*, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach. Stronger policy harmonization, sustainable financing mechanisms, and deliberate investments in teacher professional development are essential for building a responsive and inclusive school system. Equally important are infrastructural upgrades, curriculum and assessment reforms, reliable education management information systems (EMIS), and community engagement to dismantle stigma and cultural barriers. Furthermore, ensuring safety and resilience in conflict-prone regions while embedding accountability indicators for school leaders will be critical for progress. Ultimately, the way forward for Nigeria lies in adopting a holistic, equity-driven, and context-sensitive implementation framework. By prioritizing inclusive education as a national development imperative supported by political will, robust partnerships, and evidence-based planning Nigeria can foster a system where every learner is not only enrolled but meaningfully included, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

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