



Perceived Challenges of Implementing the National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria

Défis potentiels dans la mise en œuvre de la politique nationale d'éducation inclusive au Nigéria

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Abstract

This paper examines the perceived challenges associated with the implementation of Nigeria's National Policy on Inclusive Education (NPIE). Anchored on the principles outlined in the Salamanca Framework and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the NPIE aims to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities. The study investigates the extent of policy implementation across Nigerian states and identifies major obstacles hindering its success. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions with key education stakeholders, supplemented by secondary sources. Findings revealed that only a few states—such as Enugu, Kwara, Kaduna, Jigawa, and Lagos—have made significant strides in adopting and implementing inclusive education policies. However, the study highlights persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, shortage of trained teachers, lack of infrastructure and assistive resources, and deeply rooted societal stigma towards people with disabilities. These barriers significantly impede the realization of inclusive education goals. The paper concludes by recommending increased government commitment to funding, teacher training, stakeholder collaboration, infrastructure development, and ongoing policy monitoring to foster a more inclusive educational environment across Nigeria.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Nigeria, challenges, national policy

Résumé:

Cet article examine les défis potentiels associés à la mise en œuvre de la politique nationale d'éducation inclusive au Nigéria (NPIE). Fondée sur les principes énoncés dans le cadre de la déclaration de Salamanque et de la Convention des Nations Unies relative aux droits des personnes handicapées, la politique NPIE vise à garantir un accès équitable à une éducation de qualité pour tous les apprenants, y compris ceux qui souffrent d'un handicap. L'étude examine l'étendue de la mise en œuvre de cette politique dans les États nigériens et identifie les principaux obstacles à sa réussite. En utilisant une approche qualitative, les données ont été collectées par le biais d'entretiens et de discussions de groupe avec des acteurs clés de l'éducation, complétées par des sources secondaires. Les résultats ont révélé que seuls quelques États - comme Enugu, Kwara, Kaduna, Jigawa et Lagos - ont fait des progrès significatifs

dans l'adoption et la mise en œuvre de politiques d'éducation inclusive. Toutefois, l'étude met en évidence des difficultés persistantes, notamment un financement inadéquat, une pénurie d'enseignants qualifiés, un manque d'infrastructures et de ressources auxiliaires, ainsi qu'une stigmatisation sociétale profondément enracinée à l'égard des personnes handicapées. Ces obstacles entravent considérablement la réalisation des objectifs de l'éducation inclusive. L'article conclut en recommandant un engagement accru du gouvernement en matière de financement, de formation des enseignants, de collaboration avec les parties prenantes, de développement des infrastructures et de suivi permanent des politiques afin de favoriser un environnement éducatif plus inclusif dans tout le Nigéria.

Mots clés : éducation inclusive, Nigéria, défis, politique nationale

Introduction

Nigeria's National Policy on Inclusive Education (NPIE) aims to ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds, have access to quality, free education and a safe learning environment. This policy, along with the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24), emphasizes that schools must be inclusive and accessible to all children. The policy also mandates the training of special education teachers and the regular monitoring of students with special needs. The policy guarantees education for all without discrimination, including those with disabilities, the disadvantaged, and the gifted and talented. Furthermore, the NPIE recognizes the importance of special education services for children with disabilities, including those with physical, sensory, mental, and emotional impairments. It emphasizes the importance of educating children with special needs in regular schools alongside their non-disabled peers. To enhance teaching and learning, the policy requires the training of special education teachers to effectively support diverse learners. For effective monitoring, the NPIE emphasizes the need for regular census and monitoring of students with special needs to ensure appropriate educational provisions.

This paper explores the efforts made by some state governments in the implementation of inclusive education as well as the challenges of implementing the NPIE in Nigeria.

The Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education is a type of education that ensures that all children -irrespective of their strengths or weaknesses - are part of the mainstream educational system. It is a pedagogical and policy framework that seeks to accommodate all learners regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. It is rooted in the principles of equity, participation, and non-discrimination. While the concept of inclusion may vary in interpretation, it is widely understood to refer to how much a school or community embraces and values children with special needs as equal and contributing members (Lakshmi, 2018). Inclusive education involves integrating students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms originally intended for their non-disabled peers (Kugelmass, 2004). This approach is rooted in the principle of social justice, promoting equal educational opportunities for all children, regardless of any physical, intellectual, emotional, or learning challenges they may face (Loreman et al., 2005). It represents a purposeful effort to acknowledge the commonalities among learners while also respecting and accommodating their individual differences (Norwich, 1996). According to Lipsky and Gartner (1997), inclusive education should not be viewed merely as a modification of special education, but rather as part of a broader effort to restructure the public education system to address the evolving needs of society. They

emphasized that this model benefits both students with disabilities and their typically developing peers. Similarly, Olufunke and Oluremi (2014) argued that the idea of "inclusiveness" opposes the segregation of students with special needs into separate schools or classrooms. Instead, it supports their right to equal social, civil, and educational opportunities, highlighting that inclusive settings equip these students with practical skills applicable both within and beyond the classroom. Inclusive education is a process of reorganization of schools or learning environment to accommodate rural populations, those infected and affected by HIV and AIDS, those with disabilities and difficulties in learning and as well provide learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2009; Mbaba, Orlunga and Echeonwu , 2024).

Inclusive education promotes the comprehensive enhancement of schools to ensure they can meet the learning needs of every child. A significant boost to this approach came from the 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education held in Salamanca, Spain, which stressed that schools must be prepared to serve all students, irrespective of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or linguistic differences. The Salamanca Statement (1994) became a key milestone, advocating for educational systems that welcome and support all learners, regardless of their individual characteristics.

Drawing from the various yet interconnected definitions of inclusive education, it can be summarized as a purposeful approach to address the individual needs of each child within a mainstream school environment. Regardless of disabilities, all students are encouraged to engage fully in every aspect of school life. The core objective of inclusive education is to eliminate long-standing forms of exclusion both within schools and in society by creating or adapting laws, policies, and administrative practices to support educational restructuring. Ultimately, inclusive education focuses on ensuring students' presence, active participation, and academic success. It is worthy to note that inclusive form of education is increasingly becoming recognized as a necessary approach to achieving equity in education. It goes beyond integrating learners with disabilities into regular classrooms and encompasses a broader vision of reforming the educational system to serve all learners (UNESCO, 2009).

Key Principles of Inclusive Education

The key principles of inclusive education are as follows:

- Acknowledges that all children can learn.
- Acknowledges and respects differences in children; age, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, HIV & TB status etc.
- Enables education structures, systems and methodologies to meet the needs of all children.
- It is part of a wider strategy to promote an inclusive society.
- It is a dynamic process that is constantly evolving.

Theoretical Framework

Inclusive education is grounded in social justice theory, constructivism, and the human rights-based approach to education. Social justice theory advocates for the dismantling of systemic barriers that marginalize specific groups (Fraser, 2008). Constructivist theory supports inclusive practices by emphasizing the active role of learners in constructing knowledge within supportive environments (Vygotsky, 1978).

Rationale for Inclusive Education in Nigeria

According to UNESCO (1994), regular schools with an inclusive orientation are most effective in combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all. The provision of inclusive education for persons with special needs can promote better academic and social interaction among the students, thereby breaking down barriers of discrimination. Quality education for all children can only be achieved when children with special needs are welcome and accommodated without discrimination and disparities which promote national development. Inclusive education welcomes diversity among all learners. Likewise, it removes barriers to any kind of educational practices, caters for the unique needs and learning styles of individuals, and provides all students with greater opportunities for academic and social achievement. Inclusive education is premised on the fact that if the right to education for all is to be upheld, all learners must have access to quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives because education is not only about making schools available to those who are already able to access it, but it is about being proactive in identifying barriers and obstacles learners encounter in attempting to access opportunities for quality education as well as removing those barriers that lead to exclusion in national development (Isiguzo, Iroham & Muthivhi, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The Salamanca Framework, endorsed by 177 countries, played a significant role in transforming global education systems to promote equal access to quality learning opportunities. The 1994 World Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca, Spain, reinforced the idea that schools should welcome all children - regardless of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, linguistic, or other differences. It also emphasized that children and youth with special educational needs should be integrated into the same educational settings as their peers. In line with this framework, the Nigerian government (through the Federal Ministry of Education) developed a National Policy on Inclusive Education (NPiE), revised in 2023. The policy builds upon the previous iterations like the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the 2004 Universal Basic Education Act, which also addressed special needs education.

The central aim of the policy is to ensure that all learners, including those with disabilities and from diverse backgrounds, have access to quality education regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. It is further aimed at promoting a positive learning environment. This policy, along with the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Article 24), emphasizes that schools must be inclusive and accessible to all children.

Purpose of the study

The study was carried out to:

1. The number of states in Nigeria that have commenced implementation of the National Policy on Inclusive Education
2. Ascertain the challenges on implementing the National Policy on Inclusive Education

Research questions

The following research questions were raised to guide this study:

1. How many states in Nigeria have commenced the implementation of the National Policy on Inclusive Education?
2. What are the challenges of implementing the National Policy on Inclusive Education?

Methodology

This study used primary and secondary data. The primary data was qualitative. It was collected from educational stakeholders in Nigeria (Key stakeholders in inclusive education include teachers, school administrators, parents of children with physical and intellectual disabilities, and members of communities). Specifically, interviews and focused group discussions were strategies used for data collection. Open-ended questions were asked respondents and their responses were recorded for analysis. The secondary source included relevant publications from the Federal Government of Nigeria, International Development Partners and other scholars.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1: How many states in Nigeria have commenced the implementation of the National Policy on Inclusive Education?

Findings revealed that at least five states in Nigeria have adopted inclusive education policies. They are still among the leading states in implementing the Federal inclusive education policy: Enugu, Kwara, Kaduna, Jigawa and Lagos. These states have made substantial efforts to implement inclusion agenda.

Based on the available information, Enugu State officially adopted its localized inclusive education policy in 2014. This policy aims to promote the enrollment of children with disabilities in public schools (SAVI, 2015). Additionally, school administrators have been made aware of the importance of inclusive education. The state has begun implementing this policy through a peer-to-peer initiative in two Local Government Areas, focusing on enrolling, retaining, and ensuring the graduation of out-of-school children with disabilities and at-risk girls (Angwaomaodoko, 2023).

Likewise, Kwara State has made significant progress in advancing inclusive education, even with limited resources. An Inclusive Education Committee has been established and is actively working to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, have access to education. This committee has created a strategic work plan, which has been incorporated into the state's education budget. It has also broadened its scope by involving additional Ministries—such as Finance, Planning, and Health—that were not initially part of the initiative.

Kaduna State has made notable progress in promoting inclusive education. The government is dedicated to improving educational access and inclusion, evident in recent policies aimed at boosting school enrollment. One such policy prohibits schools from charging any form of fees, although it's uncertain whether the government will provide financial support to offset this change. Civil society organizations, under the Open Government Partnership (OGP), have been actively advocating for the enforcement of inclusive education policies at both national and state levels. Additionally, the DFID-supported ECP-PERL program has collaborated with the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development and disability advocacy groups to push for policy implementation.

In 2018, ECP-PERL facilitated a dialogue involving School-Based Management Committees (SBMCs), Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs), media, civil society organizations, and community leaders to evaluate their contributions to educational development. This initiative led to town hall meetings in all 23 Local Government Areas of the state, where a diverse group of stakeholders—including persons with disabilities, women, children, parents, educators, and religious and traditional leaders—contributed to shaping a new inclusive education policy.

This revised policy (Leadership, 2019) promotes the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream schools and aims to improve access to education for marginalized groups such as Almajiri, street, and nomadic children. It also includes specific measures to address the educational needs of children with albinism. The policy aligns with and localizes national inclusive education goals. To support girls' education, the government is providing cash transfers to families who enroll girls in school (with support from GPE) and has introduced a scholarship scheme for girls and persons with disabilities.

In Jigawa, findings revealed that the State Government has signed the new National Disability Law (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019), and radio jingles are being aired to discourage discrimination against children with disability. A committee was set up by the state government to raise funds for supporting people with disability in the state. The State Universal Basic Education Board is implementing some activities related to the new National IE Policy, increasing support to children with disabilities through more provision of teaching and learning materials in schools (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020).

Findings also show that Lagos State has made significant strides in promoting disability inclusion. The state has enacted a disability law and established a dedicated agency to oversee disability-related issues, which is backed by the government. Furthermore, active civil society groups and supportive media have empowered persons with disabilities to advocate for their rights, leading to several large-scale campaigns focused on disability inclusion (Pinnock, 2016; Lagos Guardian, 2017). In 2011, one of the few students with disabilities who made it through a university law degree was instrumental in drafting Lagos State's Special Peoples Law (Laws Nigeria, 2018). Our findings also revealed that CSOs are currently making frantic efforts to ensure the implementation of the National Inclusive Education Policy in Lagos State. Domestication of the NIEP was achieved through the formation of a state level Inclusive Education Committee. The IE Committee has continued to meet, and conduct regular sensitisation on the need to enrol every child in public schools. The State government is making provisions for increased access and equity in education with emphasis on improving quality. A number of inputs have been provided by government to boost disability-inclusive education.

Some of the contributions made by the State government in boosting inclusive education within the state are:

- *Infrastructural improvement through the renovation of schools to include ramps for children with disabilities and the expansion of access to public schools through the establishment of more public schools.*
- *Under the previous inclusive education approach, the state had set up primary education schools to cater to children with and without disabilities within the same classes or separated in-to different classes. At the same time, buses were mobilised under the SBMCs to transport these children to and from school. However, transportation is not available in all locations.*
- *The state began creating more inclusive sec-ondary education schools, a significant develop-ment. An example of such a school is the Ibeju-lekki Junior and Senior Secondary School.*
- *The state had utilised the fund from UBEC to procure instructional materials, facilities and other equipment.*

Research Question Two: What are the challenges of implementing the National Policy on Inclusive Education?

The study found that a major obstacle to implementing the National Inclusive Education Policy across all government levels is the lack of sufficient funding and resources. This aligns with Omede's (2016) argument that financial limitations are a primary barrier to inclusive education in Nigeria. Due to these funding challenges, the necessary infrastructure and conditions for effective inclusive education are often lacking. Similarly, Angwaomaodoko (2023) emphasizes that inclusive education demands financial investment to address the needs of diverse learners, yet funding allocations in Nigeria remain inadequate. As a result, critical support services—such as additional teachers and assistive technologies—are not adequately provided.

Findings also revealed that the lack of qualified teachers and insufficient training in inclusive education practices is a significant barrier to effectively implementing the National Inclusive Education Policy (NIEP). This supports Angwaomaodoko's (2023) assertion that many teachers lack the necessary skills to teach in inclusive environments. Teachers play a crucial role in the success of inclusive education in Nigeria. Similarly, Eskay and Oboegbulem (2013) pointed out that many educators are not adequately trained and therefore lack the competencies needed to teach students with diverse learning needs. However, this gap should not be blamed on the teachers themselves; rather, it is the government's responsibility to ensure they receive regular training. Special emphasis should be placed on equipping teachers with the skills to use assistive technologies when teaching children with disabilities. Unfortunately, many teachers remain unfamiliar with the principles of inclusive education, which can hinder their ability to effectively teach diverse learners. As a result, teacher training programs should be updated to include courses on inclusive education to better prepare educators for inclusive classrooms.

The study also highlighted that a major obstacle to implementing the National Inclusive Education Policy (NIEP) is the severe lack of infrastructure and learning materials. This finding aligns with Isiguzo et al. (2023), who noted that the scarcity of essential tools such as hearing aids, braille materials, and other adaptive technologies hampers effective teaching and learning for students with disabilities. Their research in Lagos revealed that visually impaired students in inclusive classrooms lacked the specialized support they needed and often had to rely on classmates for help. Similarly, Angwaomaodoko (2023) emphasized that inadequate infrastructure, teaching resources, and assistive devices remain significant challenges in achieving inclusive education in Nigeria. Many schools still do not have accessible features like ramps, adapted toilets, or specialized equipment, making it difficult for students with disabilities to participate fully in school activities.

A key challenge to the effective implementation of inclusive education is the lack of awareness and understanding, coupled with widespread negative attitudes among educators and the general public. Misconceptions and stigma surrounding disability remain prevalent in Nigerian society, contributing to the marginalization and exclusion of students with disabilities and limiting their access to quality education. This issue is reinforced by Isiguzo et al. (2023), who emphasized that cultural beliefs about the worth of individuals with disabilities play a significant role in perpetuating stigma and discrimination both in schools and the broader community. Supporting this, Obiakor and Offor (2011), as cited in Isiguzo et al. (2023), noted that much of the stigma stems from deep-rooted cultural misconceptions—such as the belief that disabilities are curses or divine punishments—which continue to hinder the progress of inclusive education across the country. Disability is often interpreted within some Nigerian cultural beliefs as a consequence of spiritual or moral failings. It is perceived as retribution for transgressions in a previous life, the result of ancestral spirits' anger due to broken promises or

neglect, malevolent acts from witches or wizards, or punishment for violating traditional laws (Ozoji, 2004). Stigma in Nigeria is deeply rooted in these cultural narratives, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others, and influencing social norms and everyday practices—what are referred to as societal schemas. These entrenched misconceptions suggest that the conventional education system may be ill-equipped to effectively serve the needs of learners with disabilities within the Nigerian context (Eleweke, 2002).

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that inclusive education is a strategy aimed at delivering quality education to every learner, irrespective of their ethnicity, gender, religion, social background, abilities, or disabilities. Additionally, the study reveals that Nigeria, in line with many other nations, has embraced inclusive education policies to promote equal access to learning opportunities for all students. However, inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, inadequate funding, shortage of qualified teachers and general societal negative attitudes were found as major challenges hindering Nigeria's successful implementation of inclusive education.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Appeal to all state governments: State governments that have not commenced the domestication and implementation of the NPIE should be encouraged to do so.
2. Adequate Funding: Adequate funding is essential for providing the necessary resources and support for inclusive education. Therefore, the government should ensure adequate funding of education generally and inclusive education specifically.
3. Collaboration: Effective implementation of inclusive education relies heavily on the collaboration of all stakeholders, such as government bodies, educators, parents, and non-governmental organizations. In Nigeria, where education is overseen by federal, state, and local governments, achieving success in inclusive education also depends on coordinated efforts among these levels of government and active involvement from the private sector.
4. Teacher Education: Governments at all levels must prioritize training teachers in inclusive education through both pre-service and ongoing in-service programs. Educators should receive comprehensive preparation to effectively support students with various disabilities and serve as inclusion facilitators or integration specialists for one or more nearby schools. Key areas of focus in teacher training should include identifying children with disabilities, managing inclusive classrooms, applying suitable teaching strategies, using assistive technologies, developing multisensory learning materials, and assessing diverse learners. These efforts are essential in overcoming the shortage of qualified teachers equipped to meet the needs of all students in inclusive settings.
5. Policy Implementation and Monitoring: Greater emphasis should be given to the enforcement, oversight, and continuous evaluation of policies to support the advancement of inclusive education.
6. Infrastructure and Resources: Inclusion will not produce effective outcomes without the proper provision of necessary infrastructure and resources. It is crucial to address issues related to facilities, curriculum adjustments, and educational materials.

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