Barriers to Inclusive Education in Nigeria: Policy, Practice and Counselling Perspectives

**Abstract**

Inclusive education embodies a vision where every learner is afforded the chance to thrive, fostering not only personal growth but also contributing to the development of inclusive societies. The concept of Inclusive education has been characterised by its commitment to providing equitable learning opportunities for all students regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or disabilities. With these ambitious objectives, Inclusive education has emerged as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of quality education worldwide. This paper examined various issues, challenges in administration, management and counselling implications in providing Inclusive education. As a fundamental human right, Inclusive education has gained recognition as a cornerstone of equitable and quality education globally. However, the journey towards its effective implementation in Nigeria has been marked by numerous challenges, thus suggesting administrative management and counselling strategies as other options. Drawing on extensive research and empirical evidence, this paper highlights the various obstacles hindering the full realisation of inclusive education in Nigeria. It explores the complex interplay between policy frameworks, institutional practices, societal attitudes, and resource allocation. Moreover, it highlights the impact of these barriers on marginalised learners, emphasising the urgent need for transformative change. The concept of inclusive education includes all learners, but it may be interpreted differently according to the context. For example, while it covers children excluded on the basis of language, gender, ethnicity, disability and other factors, it can focus on children with disabilities only. In presenting a holistic analysis, this paper also sheds light on promising initiatives and best practices that have emerged within the Nigerian context. These exemplars demonstrate that inclusive education is not only an ethical imperative but also an attainable goal when stakeholders collaborate with determination and purpose. Recommendations suggested includes: re-evaluation of policies and a reinvigoration of practices to dismantle the barriers that limit the potential of inclusive education, and employing counselling strategies in order to address the problems in Nigeria. It underscores the pivotal role of policymakers, educators, parents, and communities in fostering an inclusive society where every learner, regardless of their background or abilities, can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the nation's development.

***Keywords****: Curriculum change, emergent global issues, Inclusive education, Nigeria*

**Introduction**

The introduction of inclusive education in a global context remains a challenge in our societies. It has remained an unanswered question as to whether or not the predictive outcome of inclusive education in the education systems is thought to be successfully implemented or not (Mdikana, 2022; Makuya & Sedibe, 2021). Moreover,the concept of Inclusive education has been characterised by its commitment to providing equitable learning opportunities for all students regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, or disabilities. With these ambitious objectives, Inclusive education has emerged as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of quality education worldwide (UNESCO, 2009). With the Dakar declaration, it became apparent that the neglected groups will no longer suffer from segregation in terms of education. Thus, a number of individuals were termed *as a* special target group and would henceforth be included in the educational programme, so that they too could live up to the societal expectations and functionally contribute to the development of their nation. Inclusive education embodies a vision where every learner is afforded the chance to thrive, fostering not only personal growth but also contributing to the development of inclusive societies (Ainscow & Miles, 2008). According to Sambo and Gambo (2015), the concept of inclusive education includes all learners, but it may be interpreted differently according to the context. For example, while it covers children excluded on the basis of language, gender, ethnicity, disability and other factors, it can focus on children with disabilities only. However, the challenge towards realising inclusive education in Nigeria, like in many other countries, has encountered various setbacks, both in terms of policy development and practical implementation.

Inclusive education in Nigeria is still in its early stages and is faced with several challenges, including a lack of understanding and awareness, inadequate resources and infrastructure, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Despite the challenges, there are several opportunities for developing inclusive education in Nigeria (Angwaomaodoko, 2023; Kusimo & Chidozie, 2019)

 Nigeria, a country renowned for its rich cultural diversity, faces the daunting task of reconciling its commitment to inclusive education with the complexities of its educational landscape. With a population exceeding 200 million (World Bank, 2021), Nigeria boasts a youthful demographic, making access to quality education a pivotal factor for national development (UNESCO, 2020). In this context, inclusive education represents a powerful means to harness the diverse talents and potential of its citizens, promoting social cohesion and sustainable progress. The global initiatives of Education for All and inclusive education have created many unique problems as countries around the world find ways to implement inclusive policies in order to truly be inclusive to all students (Hollings, 2021; Sharma et al., 2019). Despite the undeniable importance of inclusive education, Nigeria confronts a range of barriers that hinder its effective implementation. From a policy perspective, the legal and regulatory framework has been criticised for its inadequacies in ensuring the rights and needs of students with disabilities. Furthermore, issues of funding and resource allocation have perpetuated disparities, limiting the capacity of schools to provide necessary support services (UNESCO, 2017). These policy-related impediments have a profound impact on the practical aspects of inclusive education.

In practice, Nigerian schools often grapple with challenges related to teacher training, classroom accommodations, and infrastructure accessibility, which can leave marginalised learners on the periphery (Salau & Fashiku, 2019). Additionally, societal attitudes and community involvement can either serve as catalysts or stumbling blocks in the quest for inclusive education (Okoro, 2018). As a result, the very individuals who could benefit most from inclusive education are often the ones left behind.

From the views of administration and management experts ( Sambo & Gambo, 2015), the Administration and Management of inclusive education in Nigeria have the following implications: creation of a positive culture that promotes diversity, development of a shared school vision that values inclusive education. Encouraging ownership of inclusive policies among school administrators and staff, encouraging support from all members of the school community and commitment to equalising educational opportunities for children with special needs, among others.(www.iiste.org)fujrepac.fuduttsinma.edu.ng). Therefore, this paper endeavours to shed light on the multifaceted landscape of inclusive education in Nigeria, meticulously examining the barriers that hinder its realisation. By adopting a dual perspective—policy and practice— it becomes a proactive approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Moreover, through the analysis of real-world experiences and best practices within the Nigerian context, a transformative approach that reinvigorates policies and practices to create an inclusive educational ecosystem where every learner can flourish.

**The Concept of Inclusive Education in Nigeria**

The idea and promotion of inclusive education in Nigeria is not merely a matter of policy compliance; it represents a moral and developmental imperative. It is within our collective power to address these barriers and create an educational environment that truly leaves no one behind. Education is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realising other human rights. As an empowerment right, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalised adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities. It is the responsibility of the school to close these gaps between children of different backgrounds. Many schools provide wraparound services that help meet the needs of struggling families, including healthcare, clothing and food, and childcare for after-school hours. A teacher can make a huge difference in a student's life by connecting the family with available resources.

**Inclusive Education in Nigeria: Historical Development**

Nigeria, like many other nations, has made strides in the journey towards inclusive education. Over the years, significant policy developments have occurred. For instance, the National Policy on Education in Nigeria, last revised in 2013, explicitly highlights the commitment to inclusive education and the need to provide equal educational opportunities for all learners (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). However, policy implementation has often fallen short of these ideals. The National Policy on Counselling (2018) also states that Section Seven of the policy states that persons with special needs are usually provided with inclusive education services that will continually require functional counselling services.

**Inclusive Education and Its Global Significance**

Inclusive education, defined as the practice of educating all students in regular classrooms, regardless of their differences in abilities, has gained prominence as a fundamental human right and a means to achieve equitable and quality education worldwide (UNESCO, 2009). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) explicitly recognises inclusive education as an essential component of ensuring the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This global recognition underscores the moral and legal imperative of inclusive education.

**Barriers to Inclusive Education in Nigeria: Policy Perspective**

Critics have pointed out shortcomings in Nigeria's legal and regulatory framework concerning inclusive education. Iyamu and Ohiwerei (2020) noted that, while policies exist, there are inconsistencies and inadequacies in enforcing the rights and needs of students with disabilities. The lack of clear guidelines and mechanisms for policy enforcement has contributed to the persistence of barriers (Iyamu & Ohiwerei, 2020).

In practice, Nigerian schools encounter numerous challenges that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. Teacher training and professional development have been identified as critical areas in need of improvement (Salau & Fashiku, 2019). Teachers often lack the knowledge and skills required to accommodate diverse learning needs (Salau & Fashiku, 2019). Additionally, issues related to infrastructure, classroom accommodations, and resource allocation have been documented as practical barriers (Iyamu & Ohiwerei, 2020).

**Societal Attitudes and Community Involvement in Nigeria**

The success of inclusive education is not solely dependent on policy and school practices but also on societal attitudes and community involvement. Okoro (2018) emphasised the role of societal beliefs and attitudes in shaping the experiences of students with disabilities. Positive attitudes and active community participation can facilitate the inclusion of marginalised learners, while negative attitudes can reinforce exclusion.

**Promising Initiatives and Best Practices**

Despite the challenges, Nigeria has seen the emergence of promising initiatives and best practices within the context of inclusive education. These exemplars demonstrate that progress is possible. For instance, some schools have adopted innovative teaching methods and assistive technologies to support students with disabilities (Iyamu & Ohiwerei, 2020). Additionally, community-based organisations and advocacy groups have played a crucial role in raising awareness and promoting inclusivity (Okoro, 2018).

The overall objective of Guidance and Counselling is to facilitate the positive development of individuals, to make them effective, functional and efficient in their present and future activities. It is also one of the principles of Guidance and Counselling to prevent problems, accidents, worries, regret and waste, etc, from happening, rather than solving them. More importantly, the major goal of Guidance and Counselling programme or services within the educational setting is to enhance positive academic achievement and performance of stakeholders generally. It focuses on the provision of updated, adequate and useful information on; Academic, career/vocational, as well as personal and social issues, which might jeopardise their academic progress and also affect others; students, parents/guardians, teachers, schools and the larger communities.

Similarly, the blueprint on Guidance and Counselling (2000), National Counselling Policy FmoE (2018) stressed that Guidance and Counselling services should be initiated and sustained, right from pre-primary school level up to tertiary levels of Education. This is in recognition of the importance and role which the services will have not only on the individuals, but on the society in general. Mallum (2005), sees guidance as an organised effort on the part of the schools to help students understand themselves and the world around them. He further defined it as an individual-oriented service with assists each student to specifically understand the following:

1. His/her own special interests, aptitudes and skills.
2. His/her career and vocational opportunities.

iii. The need to emphasise the dignity of work.

iv. His/her potential

 v. Opportunities for personal and social growth.

It is important for the school authorities and guidance counsellors to pay particular attention to issues which affect the students academically, personally or socially. This is in consideration of the fact that, learners (students are in their adolescence stages, a periods they are undergoing physical, intellectual, emotional and social changes,) such as; as a result of these changes life become very delicate, Unique, full of hopes, and ambitious in their conducts, Reaction to issues that affects them educationally, academically, socially, they tend to be rebellious to their friends, family, parents, school authorities and the society., They like freedom and develop interests in opposite sex relationship. They feel they can do whatever they like; it is a period of discoveries (Akinade, 2012; Arijesuyo, 2012). )..

Unfortunately, some of the changes result in delinquent behaviours; stealing, smoking, fighting, drug addiction, etc. At these stages, they need tolerance, care, guidance and should be encouraged to attain economic independence, be exposed to a variety of careers, vocations, be challenged to take studies seriously, receive moral training, orientation, etc.

This is the period these categories of students require guidance and counselling services that should focus on academic, career, vocational, personal and social issues

**Barriers to Inclusive Education in Nigeria: Policy Perspective**

Policy frameworks in Nigeria, while recognising the importance of inclusive education, often fall short of translating these ideals into effective practices. Despite clear intentions, there are numerous barriers at the policy level that hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education. There are many factors that were identified by various researchers as responsible for the various challenges affecting effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria, and some of them include the following;

1. Insufficient Legal framework: One of the prominent barriers is the inadequacy of the legal and regulatory framework. While Nigeria has ratified international agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that advocate for inclusive education, domestic laws often lack specific guidelines and mechanisms for enforcement (Iyamu & Ohiwerei, 2020). This legal gap results in uncertainty and inconsistencies, making it challenging to ensure the rights and needs of students with disabilities.
2. Funding Challenges: Another major challenge lies in the allocation of resources. Inclusive education demands adequate financial backing to provide necessary support services, adaptive materials, and accessible facilities (UNESCO, 2017). However, in Nigeria, limited budgetary allocations to the education sector, coupled with the inefficient utilisation of funds, hinder the provision of these essential resources, further impeding the implementation of inclusive education.
3. Untrained Educators: Picture this: enthusiastic but untrained educators thrown into inclusive classrooms. It's a recipe for chaos. Nigeria grapples with a shortage of teachers equipped with the skills to cater to diverse learning needs (Salau & Fashiku, 2019). In these classrooms, educators often find themselves ill-prepared to handle the unique challenges that students with disabilities bring to the table.
4. Infrastructure Inferno: The flames of frustration rise higher when you consider the state of infrastructure. Many schools lack the necessary accommodations, turning inclusive education into an uphill battle. Students with disabilities face obstacles like inaccessible buildings and classrooms (Iyamu & Ohiwerei, 2020). It's as if the system is designed to keep them on the outskirts of learning.
5. Infrastructure and Accessibility Concerns: On the infrastructure front, inclusive education faces some lukewarm hurdles. Schools in Nigeria often lack the necessary accommodations and resources for students with disabilities (Iyamu & Ohiwerei, 2020). This includes everything from ramps for wheelchair access to adapted learning materials. These limitations hinder the seamless integration of students with disabilities into mainstream education.
6. Impact on Marginalised Learners: Marginalised learners, particularly those with disabilities or special needs, bear the brunt of the challenges and barriers within Nigeria's inclusive education system. This section delves into the profound impact these hurdles have on their educational journey.
7. Academic Disparities: The consequences are strikingly evident in the academic realm. Research has shown that students with disabilities in inclusive settings often lag behind their peers in terms of academic performance (Obi, 2016). The lack of tailored support, untrained educators, and inaccessible resources hinders their ability to thrive academically. As a result, they often grapple with lower educational attainment, further entrenching cycles of marginalisation (Salau & Fashiku, 2019).
8. Psychosocial Challenges: Marginalised learners also face significant psychosocial challenges. Negative experiences within the educational environment, including discrimination and isolation, can have long-lasting effects on their self-esteem and mental well-being (Okoro, 2018). These learners are more likely to experience feelings of exclusion and may become disengaged from the learning process.
9. Limited Future Opportunities: Perhaps the most poignant impact is on future opportunities. When marginalised learners do not receive the necessary support and accommodations, their access to higher education and employment becomes severely constrained. This perpetuates a cycle of dependency on social welfare systems, contributing to a broader societal issue (Salau & Fashiku, 2019).
10. Educators in need of Guidance and Counselling intervention: One of the pivotal but warm challenges is the lack of adequate teacher training. Many educators, while passionate, find themselves unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms (Salau & Fashiku, 2019). This gap in training often leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed and students struggling to receive the support they require.

In essence, the barriers within Nigeria's inclusive education system have a profound and far-reaching impact on marginalised learners. Their educational, psychosocial, and long-term prospects are all at stake, highlighting the urgency of addressing these issues.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the literature review reveals that while inclusive education is a recognised global imperative, Nigeria faces significant barriers in its implementation, both in terms of policy and practice. These barriers create more problems for the whole concept of an inclusive educational landscape in Nigeria.

 In view of the above-stated challenges, the following recommendations are suggested;

1. There should be a well design and sufficient Legal framework that would reduce or solve completely the prominent barriers which is the inadequacy of the legal and regulatory framework, so that what Nigeria has ratified in terms of international agreements like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that advocate for inclusive education, domestic laws often lack specific guidelines and mechanisms for enforcement could be achieved, therefore all stakeholders responsible for the implementation of the Inclusive education policy should be charge to make proactive measures, so as to ensure its success.
2. On the issue of funding challenges, which is another major obstacle, which also lies in the allocation of resources for the implementation of Inclusive education, the need to provide adequate financial backing to provide necessary support services, adaptive materials, and accessible facilities becomes highly imperative.
3. On the issue of untrained Educators: Picture which Nigeria has been grappling with, especially on shortage of teachers and more teachers to be equipped with the skills to cater to diverse learning needs, the Government should re-examine its strategies and do the needful with a view to ensuring the training of more qualified and trained teachers that would handle this programme.
4. On the issue of Infrastructure Inferno, which often leads to flames of frustration rising higher in many schools, resulting in a lack of the necessary accommodations, turning inclusive education into an uphill battle; the situation should be reversed by all stakeholders.
5. Similarly, on infrastructure and accessibility Concerns, the Government at all levels should do the needful also to provide the required infrastructural facilities that would cater for the needs of students in Nigeria. Impact on Marginalised Learners: Marginalised learners, particularly those with disabilities or special needs, bear the brunt of the challenges and barriers within Nigeria's inclusive education system. This section delves into the profound impact these hurdles have on their educational journey.
6. On prevailing Academic Disparities, research has shown that students with disabilities in inclusive settings often lag behind their peers in terms of academic performance, all efforts should be geared towards correcting the abnormality.
7. On Psychosocial Challenges, the marginalised learners also face significant psychosocial challenges. Psychological and counselling techniques should be devised to assist the students in overcoming the challenges they are facing.
8. Similarly, on limited future opportunities, perhaps the most poignant impact is on future opportunities. The marginalised learners should be given the necessary support and accommodations, and their access to higher education and employment should be made available.
9. On the need for Guidance and Counselling intervention, the Government at all levels should see to the implementation of the National Policy on Counselling in their respective schools.
10. Finally, there should be proper coordination, monitoring and evaluation regarding Inclusive education in Nigeria.

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