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Angwaomaodoko, Ejuchegahi Anthony

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A Critique of Inclusive Education Policy and the Extent of Its Implementation in Nigeria

Ejuchegahi Anthony Angwaomaodoko ¹

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Corresponding Author:

ejuchegahi.angwaomaodoko@gmail.com

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Abstract. Nigeria is one nation that has embraced inclusive education as the educational approach for meeting the educational needs of diverse learners within the same classroom. Over the years, the Nigerian government has adopted policies, among which the Universal Basic Education Act in 2004 and the Child's Rights Act (CRA) launched in 2003 have been more prominent. These policies specify the rights of children with disabilities to have equal educational opportunities as their counterparts that are not having disabilities. The Nigerian laws and guidelines on inclusive education in Africa remain the best, but one of the significant challenges that the country has faced in implementing these policies across educational institutions. Implementation requires a synergy between the three tiers of government, yet several challenges have hampered these processes; some of the challenges include funding, curriculum modification, teacher training, and the all-around restructuring of the Nigerian educational system. Despite the challenges confronting the overall implementation of inclusive education policies, states such as Lagos, Kaduna, Kwara, Enugu and Jigawa have made massive strides in developing and implementing their respective domestic inclusive policies. Therefore, the collaboration of all stakeholders in the education system is essential to enable inclusive education implementation in Nigeria. Thus, more attention should be placed on policy implementation, monitoring and follow-up to ensure the development of inclusive education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Policies; Implementation; Universal Basic Education; Children with Disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

The development of an educational institution that provides equity in meeting the educational needs of different learners within the same institution has been a focal educational agenda within the last four decades, with many countries adopting Inclusive education as a means of catering for the educational needs of diverse categories of children in respective of the ability or disabilities.

Inclusive education, as it were, targets all forms of marginalised groups besides the non-marginalised group, thus ensuring that educational institutions foster unity among all categories of learners. The major challenge that has hindered the progress of inclusive education is restricted to not only the development of robust policies and laws that exclusively capture children with disabilities but also the extent of the implementation of this policy, considering the vast finances and infrastructural development that are required for the execution of inclusive Education policies [1].

More importantly, policies and laws are crucial for the success of inclusive education, considering that they represent the action plan for actualising this educational strategy.

At the international level, the non-binding declarations by nations of the world orchestrated by the United Nations (UN) have been at the centre stage for developing inclusive education. Despite the efforts of the United Nations in propelling policies on inclusive education, the success of this educational strategy is hinged on the follow-up actions in the implementation process. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Education (1960) represents the first conference that specifically tackles discrimination in education, while other frameworks, such as the Salamanca statements and United Nations rights of persons with disabilities, were more specific to individuals with disabilities. The Salamanca framework was adopted by 177 countries around the world, which enabled the reforming

of educational systems around the world in conformity with the framework to provide equity in access to quality education [2-6].

"The statement and Framework for action of the 1994 world conference on special needs education in Salamanca, Spain, further established the principle that 'schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions' and therefore that 'children and youth with special educational needs should be included in the educational arrangements made for the majority of children" [6, 7].

This framework showcases the significance of accommodating diversities within our educational system.

Adopting an inclusive policy that exclusively accommodates all categories of people with disabilities has proven difficult, with only 11 countries currently having an inclusive policy that is robust enough to capture a wide range of disabilities. In comparison, only 16 countries mention inclusive education in their educational law [6].

Developing nations are more vulnerable to little or no implementation of inclusive educational policies, with Nigeria among these countries.

Izah [8] noted Nigeria's lack of preparation for inclusive education, bearing in mind that the country still needs to implement special education schools within the government fully; as such, the term is still seen theoretically.

According to UNESCO, the Nigerian educational system is managed by three tiers of governance: federal, state, and local government. Therefore, the success of inclusive education should and should be tied to the collaborative efforts between the three tiers of governance and the private sector.

There is a consensus that equity should be considered in the provision of education, which underscores the importance of inclusive education in Nigerian education while taking note that the country ranks among the highest in terms of the number of out-of-school children, which is currently estimated at 10.5 million plus children out of school [9] and a massive chunk of children out of school being those with disabilities and as at today some Nigerian Media such as Arise News, Channels and TVC and other bodies have reported that Nigeria has over 20 million out of school children. The successful implementation of inclu-

sive education policy is dependent on several factors, such as the engagement of teachers qualified in the teaching of both mainstream and special needs children, engagement of advanced technology in education, and infrastructural development, among many other factors which for a country like Nigeria that has been plagued by corruption since independence seems a bit far-fetched. Therefore, the current study is centred on the extent to which Nigerian inclusive education policies have been implemented while also considering the challenges encountered in the implementation process.

The scope of this paper includes:

- The Nigerian Education System and its funding;
- Nigerian Policy on Inclusive Education;
- Nigerian Implementation of Inclusive Education and Progress made;
- Challenge of implementation of inclusive education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nigerian Educational System. Nigeria currently practices the 6-3-3-4 educational system, which includes six years of primary school education, three years of junior secondary school, three years of senior secondary school, and four years of tertiary education. However, the six years of primary education and the three years of junior secondary education are merged to form a child's primary education, thus creating a 9-3-4 system. The governance of Education within Nigeria is the function of the three tiers of administration (Federal, State and Local government) and the private sector. The Federal Ministry of Education is the highest authority in education within the country and manages the nation's educational affairs.

Universal primary education is the arm saddled with governing basic education on a Federal level (Primary and Junior secondary school).

The Federal Ministry of Education, through the Universal Basic Education, disburses intervention funds for primary education, which represents the education between pre-primary and junior secondary school [10].

The state Ministry of Education, through the State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB), governs and monitors the affairs of Basic education at the state level. At the same time, the Local

Education Authorities (LEAs) manage the responsibilities of primary education at the local government level.

Universal Basic Education was established in response to ensuring access for all categories of learners with free nine years of uninterrupted primary education for diverse types of learners.

The funding for the successful implementation of the UBE Act shall be from three primary sources:

1. Federal Government grant of not <2% of its consolidated revenue fund (CRF) or through donations from international donors and contributions in the form of Federal guaranteed credit [11]. 2% of the 2% consolidated revenue fund (CRF) that UBE benefits are expected to cater to children with disabilities. This fund has been disbursed to SUBEB since 2015, following the commissioning of UBE [11].

2. The state government can only be beneficiary of a Federal Government grant for implementing UBE at the state level if the state could contribute a minimum of 50% of the amount budgeted for the particular project. This condition aims to ensure the state's commitment towards the actualisation of the scheme [11]. However, several states within the country do not make provisions for funds to meet the 50% target benchmark given by the federal government for claiming UBE revenue in the actualisation of inclusive education projects. For instance, in 2018, only 13 states could access the 2% UBE fund to educate children with disabilities [12].

3. The local Government is expected to contribute its quota towards actualising such schemes [11].

According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, at the state level (in Nigeria), most state governments have a few functional special schools that accommodate students with one or two impairments. Less financially buoyant states have just one or two special schools that offer boarding and day services to children with disabilities. Among the most notable states mentioned are Enugu, Lagos, Jigawa, and Kano, which have sought to promote inclusive settings or encourage children with disabilities to attend school.

Enugu state supports three schools serving special education centres, which integrate disabled and non-disabled children. The Educational Sector Support Programme in Nigeria (ESSPN) pio-

neered the project in partnership with the Department for International Development.

However, the state has yet to access the Universal Basic Education (UBEC) fund to procure assistive devices and other learning materials to implement inclusive activities for children with disabilities. Lagos State has established a few inclusive education primary schools that provide a setting for children with disabilities to learn alongside their non-disabled peers.

Some schools accommodate children with disabilities and those without disabilities in the same class, while others are in separate courses.

Nigerian Policy on Inclusive Education. The first mention of inclusive education in Nigeria could be traced back to the country's first National Policy on Education in 1977, despite the term inclusive education not being used then. The policy was, however, inclusive as it was designed to guarantee access to education for all categories of learners, which remains a child's fundamental right irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. The policy exemplifies the desire of the Nigerian government to meet the educational needs of a diverse group of learners, which places the policy within the boundary of inclusive education.

The Nigerian constitution is a pointer to the direction the Nigerian government wants to take as it regards equity in providing education for all learners.

The Nigerian 1999 constitution noted that the government should ensure equal and satisfactory educational opportunities at all levels [13]. The constitution states that "government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy and shall, as practicable, provide free education at all levels" [13, p. 466]. Implementing the 1999 constitution as regards the previously mentioned subject birthed the establishment of Universal Basic Education (UBE), launched in 2000, and the Child's Rights Act (CRA), established in 2003. UBE and CRA aimed to ensure the right to quality education for all children, which led to the National Policy of Education amendment in 2014. The National Policy of Education [14] states that:

"Access to education shall be provided and inclusive education or integration of special classes and units into ordinary/public schools under UBE scheme. Persons with special needs and learning disability shall be provided with inclusive education service in schools which normal person attend,

in age-appropriate general educational classes directly supervised by general teachers" (p. 65).

In furtherance of the National Policy of Education, some strategies were adopted to ensure the provision of quality education for all categories of learners, and these strategies are:

- to ensure accessibility,
- adapt the curricula and learning materials,
- rehabilitate and upgrade special schools,
- improve teachers' training and
- create a safe and appropriate learning environment.

Since 2018, States have been encouraged to develop their inclusive education policy from the national policy. 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: Lagos, Kaduna, Kwara, Enugu and Jigawa.

Nigerian Implementation of Inclusive Education and Progress Made. Nigerian laws and policies on inclusive education among African countries remain the best. Yet, the nation faces the challenge of implementing these policies in its educational institutions, particularly in primary education, which is the foundation of learning [15].

The Nigerian laws and policy on inclusive education accentuate the protection of the educational needs of its citizens, and the 2004 passing into law of the free compulsory primary education through the Universal Basic Education Act reflects the steps taken by the Nigerian government in ensuring that all her citizens have access to primary education irrespective of disabilities. The success of inclusive education in Nigeria is tied to how well these policies are implemented within states.

Some states have shown remarkable progress in their implementation of inclusive education policies.

Enugu approved its own domesticated inclusive education policy within the state in 2014. The state inclusive education policy seeks to encourage children with disabilities into public schools. At the same time, school leaders are being made aware of the significance of inclusive education. The state has taken necessary steps in implementing inclusive education through the peer-to-peer project in two Local Governments, with the project targeted at out-of-school children with

disabilities and vulnerable female children with a focus on their access, retention and completion of their education [6].

On the other hand, Kwara State has taken massive steps in implementing inclusive education despite minimal resources and aid programmes being made available. The state Inclusive Education committee has been actively working to ensure that education is provided for all children, with more attention being placed on children with albinism.

The inclusive education work plan has been included in the state budget for education and other related ministries such as the Ministry for finances, planning and health. The state has carried out its implementation against discrimination against albino children through awareness programmes across radio and TV programs and has called on the heads of schools to allocate sufficient time to albino students during tests and exams due to their visual impairment. The state policy on people with albinism also covers the uniform of albino students to cover all areas of their body and the provision of head caps to prevent sunburn. As we speak, in Kwara State, the albino child right is currently before the state house of assembly subject to approval. In addition, SUBEB has introduced ramps into new school construction to cater to disabled children to reduce segregation [6].

Kaduna state is another state that has shown remarkable efforts in implementing inclusive education with noteworthy success to show for it. The public schools in the state are not allowed to collect any fee [16], while the UK Department for International Development (DFID) programme has been tirelessly working with women's affairs & social development and also with the network of people with disabilities to ensure the implementation of both national and state inclusive education policies.

The Kaduna new policy on inclusive education is geared towards granting access to children with disabilities into mainstream schools and also creating quality education for other marginalised groups schools such as *Almajiri*, Nomadic, and children suffering from albinism and one step which the Kaduna state government has taken to execute inclusive education policies is through cash transfer to parents who sent their female children to school and the disbursement of scholarship for children with disabilities. Some other achievements made by the Kaduna Gov-

ernment, as regards the encouragement of children with disabilities into inclusive schools, are:

1. Training teachers from inclusive schools on sign language and braille, also covering the attitude of teachers with disabilities and boosting their confidence to deal with children with disabilities.
2. Infrastructural modification of inclusive education schools.
3. Purchase of teaching and learning support materials and machinery such as tricycles, braille and white canes [6].

Jigawa State SUBEB has implemented activities to implement the new inclusive education policy by providing teaching and learning materials in some schools, setting Nomadic Education, and raising awareness through radio jingles against the discrimination of disabled children.

Schools in Edo State have also made progress in implementing inclusive education.

Lagos State has shown the most remarkable progress in implementing inclusive education, with the state adopting a law against the discrimination of people with disabilities [17] and a disabled law graduate instrumental in drafting the ordinance [18].

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

1. 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.
2. 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 into 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.
3. The state began creating more inclusive secondary education schools, a significant development. An example of such a school is the Ibejulekki Junior and Senior Secondary School.
4. The state had utilised the fund from UBEC to procure instructional materials, facilities and other equipment.

Lagos State made substantive progress through the internal revenue generation for improving the education of children with disabilities via the 'adopt-a-school' policy.

Faith organisations, corporate organisations and individuals have contributed to the state to support the project [6].

Implementation of Inclusive Education in Nigeria. The success of inclusive education in Nigeria is not only restricted to the adoption of policy but also to the implementation and follow-up of these policies. Nigeria's provision of primary schooling is a functional role of the three tiers of government (Federal, State and Local Government), which implies that there has to be a synergy between the tiers of government to guarantee access to quality education. Despite the effort that some states have put in to implement the national inclusive education policies, several states still need to catch up.

Lawal and Isah [1] noted that the complete implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria is dependent on the holistic, systematic reform of the funding, structure, method utilised in teaching, a system of school planting and the removal of all hurdles that will obstruct children with particular need from acquiring equal educational opportunities as other able children. The authors further noted that a conducive environment is essential for the thriving of children with disabilities, which would require the collaboration of parents, family and the community at large for the success of inclusive education.

The author [19] noted that "Nigerian education is characterised by overcrowded classrooms, abysmal learner-teacher ratio, absence of basic teaching and learning materials, infrastructural and teacher incompetence in terms of innovation, reflective teaching and learning approaches and poor learning environment" (p. 60). Implementing inclusive education in Nigeria requires overcoming the challenges that have remained a burden. Some of the challenges that have hampered the progress of the Nigerian educational system and the implementation of inclusive education are as follows:

1. *Funding.* The lack of proper funding has been recognised as one of the significant challenges in implementing inclusive education goals while bearing in mind that financial resources are essential to meet the educational needs of diverse learners. Funding for primary education in Nige-

ria falls to the three tiers of government. Yet, the state has a much more significant role in implementing laudable projects by the federal government. A similar view was held by Ejere [20], who noted that funding remains a lingering problem despite the responsibilities of funding UBE being a shared responsibility of the three tiers of governance. The funds required to renovate school buildings, primarily in dilapidated condition, the library building, and other facilities are hardly disbursed.

2. Curriculum Modification. The accommodation of diverse learners within the same classroom requires constant curriculum review to meet the diverse needs of different learners. The Nigerian curriculum at the moment is a one-size-fits-all curriculum which might not accommodate the needs of varying learners and is not even suitable for training children with disability [19]. Therefore, the modification of the curriculum should be geared at improving the lives of different categories of learners.

Teachers need to be more competent to teach in an inclusive setting: Teachers remain integral to the success of inclusive education in Nigeria. Eskay [21] noted that due to inadequate training of teachers, they need more competencies and necessary skills for teaching students in an inclusive setting. This is not to blame the teachers, as the government should be responsible for the constant training of teachers on teaching students with diverse needs. More so, the training of teachers to utilise assistive devices in teaching children with disabilities should be considered a priority. Notably, most teachers still need to learn about inclusive education, which could significantly affect their performance in educating different categories of learners. Therefore, teachers should be trained, and the curriculum of teachers' education (NCE, B.ed) should be amended to have courses on inclusive education within the curriculum to better prepare them for a future of teaching in an inclusive setting.

Infrastructural Modification: The classrooms in most public schools in the country are dilapidated and are not accessible to children with disabilities. Thus, classrooms and school structures must be re-modified to enable access for children with disabilities.

Evaluation and Conclusion. Nigeria still has a massive job in implementing inclusive education while bearing in mind that the state shoulders a more significant stake in the implementation

process. However, most of these states still need to catch up in adopting their domesticated inclusive policy. The success of this policy falls on something other than adopting the approach but the all-round restructuring of the Nigerian education system, particularly the public schools, which the government has regarded as centres for inclusive education. Public schools in Nigeria are massively plagued by poor infrastructure, assistive technology and facilities to cater for children with special needs. It is pertinent to note that just lumping children with disabilities into the same class as those without disabilities does not make the setting inclusive. Still, meeting the diverse needs of each learner is what makes the environment inclusive.

More so, the influx of diverse learners would strain the current facilities. As such, the Nigerian government must allocate adequate funds to implement an inclusive education policy. The 2% UBEC budgeted for children with disabilities is insufficient to meet the challenges of restructuring our public schools, and funding is also considered a prerequisite for the success of inclusive education.

From the forgoing and our study so far, we have established that Inclusive education is an approach that focuses on providing quality education to all students, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, religion, affiliations, backgrounds, abilities, or disabilities. We have established in this study that Nigeria, like many other countries, has adopted inclusive education policies to ensure equitable educational opportunities for all learners. This critical evaluation will, therefore, assess the extent of implementing inclusive education policy in Nigeria, identifying its strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths of Inclusive Education Policy in Nigeria:

1. **Legal Framework:** From this study, we established that the Nigerian government has enacted the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018 to promote and protect the rights of persons with disabilities. This legal framework emphasises the importance of inclusive education and provides a foundation for its implementation.

2. **Policy Guidelines:** The National Policy on Education (NPE) guides inclusive education implementation in Nigeria. It highlights the need for

inclusive practices, early detection of disabilities, and promoting inclusive learning environments.

3. Teacher Education: Nigeria has tried to train teachers in inclusive education through pre-service and in-service training programs. Teachers have the knowledge and skills to cater to diverse learners in inclusive classrooms.

Weaknesses of Inclusive Education Policy in Nigeria:

1. Limited Infrastructure and Resources. In this study, we also established that the need for adequate infrastructure, learning materials, and assistive devices poses significant challenges to implementing inclusive education in Nigeria. Many schools still lack inclusive facilities, such as ramps, accessible toilets, and specialised tools, hindering the participation of students with disabilities.

2. Insufficient Funding. Inclusive education requires financial resources to accommodate the needs of diverse learners. However, the allocation of funds for inclusive schooling in Nigeria still needs to be improved. This limits the provision of necessary support services, including additional teaching staff and assistive technologies.

3. Attitudinal Barriers. Negative attitudes and misconceptions towards disability persist in Nigerian society, creating barriers to the implementation of inclusive education. Stigma and discrimination lead to exclusion and marginalisation of students with disabilities, impeding their access to quality education.

CONCLUSIONS

While Nigeria has demonstrated commitment to inclusive education by implementing legal

frameworks and policy guidelines, significant challenges hamper its effectiveness. Insufficient infrastructure, limited resources, inadequate funding, and persistent attitudinal barriers hinder Nigeria's full realisation of inclusive education. The government needs to prioritise allocating resources, raise awareness, and promote positive attitudes towards disability to create an inclusive educational system that caters to the diverse needs of all learners.

Nigeria has taken significant steps to implement inclusive education policies, promoting equal access to education. However, notable challenges in infrastructure, funding, support systems, and societal attitudes hinder the successful implementation of inclusive education. To address these issues, the government should prioritise increased financing for inclusive education, improve infrastructure, and foster awareness campaigns to challenge societal biases and promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, capacity-building programs and continued professional development for educators and other stakeholders are crucial to ensuring the effective implementation of inclusive education policy in Nigeria.

This study has determined that inclusive education is vital to ensuring equitable and quality teaching for all individuals, including those with disabilities or diverse learning needs. Nigeria has implemented inclusive education policies to promote equal educational opportunities.

Therefore, the collaboration of all stakeholders in the education system is essential to implement inclusive education in Nigeria. In addition, more attention should be placed on policy implementation, monitoring and follow-up to ensure the development of inclusive schooling in the country.

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