



Building an Inclusive Society through Inclusive Education for Skills Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Education plays a transformative role in shaping inclusive societies where all individuals can belong and succeed. This paper explores the critical role of education policy, equity, and skills development in building an inclusive society that accommodates all learners, irrespective of their diverse abilities, backgrounds, or socio-economic status. Inclusive education is recognized as a fundamental human right and also as a critical driver of social cohesion, equity, and sustainable development. The study examines existing education policies that aim to foster inclusion and highlights the mechanisms through which equitable access to quality education for marginalized populations, including learners with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and economically disadvantaged groups can be achieved. The paper emphasizes equity as the foundation of inclusion, stressing the need for fairness in resource allocation rather than uniform treatment for all. Additionally, it highlights the importance of developing cognitive, socio-emotional, vocational, and digital skills for diverse learners through the integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction. It was suggested among others that federal and state government should increase education funding to enhance inclusivity, provide assistive technologies, integrate inclusive education into teacher training to strengthen teacher capacity, and promote community engagement and sensitization to transform cultural attitudes toward educational equity. This paper concluded that realizing inclusion demands collaborative efforts among government, educators, families, and communities in operationalizing inclusive education policies to ensure that every learner is empowered with the skills to thrive in a diverse society.

Keywords: Education Policy, Equity, Inclusive Education, Inclusive Society, Skills Development

Introduction

Education remains one of the most powerful instruments for social transformation and national development. It is an effective tool for national progress, as it empowers individuals with knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate effectively in economic, political, and social life (Bobmanuel & Mbaekwe, 2023). Education is thus a transformative process that guides individuals and society toward developmental change. However, the benefits of education are often unequally distributed, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria,

where learners with special educational needs and other marginalized groups continue to experience exclusion (Olibie, Eziuzo, & Enueme, 2013; Nwogu, 2015). These inequities limit opportunities for personal development and undermine national goals of inclusivity.

An inclusive society, by contrast, is one that deliberately values human diversity and seeks to remove barriers created by differences in race, gender, ability, background, or circumstance are systematically override (Lutfiyya & Bartlett, 2020). Rather than viewing diversity as a limitation, inclusive society embraces it as a fundamental and enriching part of the human experience. Education systems play a central role in building this society by embedding equity through adaptive teaching methods, accessible infrastructure, and targeted support mechanisms to create an environment that meet the diverse needs of all learners instead of expecting everyone to conform to all-size-fit-all standard. Inclusive education, therefore, is both a moral imperative and a strategic developmental approach that emphasizes fairness for all learners.

Inclusive education has therefore become a cornerstone of modern educational reform, reflecting a global commitment to ensuring that all learners, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, receive equitable opportunities to learn and thrive. This principle is rooted in social justice and human right, seeking to dismantle the barriers that have historically excluded marginalized groups from active participation in mainstream education and society at large. The benefits of inclusive education extend beyond individual learners, as it fosters empathy, social cohesion, and mutual respect, preparing students for participation in diverse, real-world environments. Inclusive education also promotes innovation and economic participation by enabling all members of society to contribute fully (Mbaba, Orlunga & Echeonwu, 2024). Ram (2024) stated that inclusive education is foundational to an inclusive society because it cultivates environments where difference is valued, social justice is actualized, and equitable opportunity is the norm rather than the exception.

Globally, this vision is featured in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 4 (SDG 4), which calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, Nigeria’s Revised National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) reaffirms this goal, emphasizing access, participation, and achievement for all learners within a single, unified education system. The policy reframed how government and educators think about inclusion, not as a separate program for special learners but as a philosophy advocating for education systems that accommodate the diverse needs of all students within their local communities. These is in line with global commitments such as the

international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Education for All (EFA) framework.

Despite these significant policies, many education systems, especially in developing countries, continues to face substantial challenges in translating inclusive education policy into practice. In Nigeria, for instance, the National Policy on Inclusive Education, revised in 2023, provides a comprehensive legal and strategic framework aimed at mainstreaming inclusion across all levels of education (Federal Ministry of Education, Nigeria, 2023). However, disparities persist in access, resource allocation, and the quality of inclusive practices, especially for students with special educational needs and other marginalized groups. Many schools face limited teacher training, infrastructural deficits, and more importantly prevailing negative attitudes about disability and difference act as a silent but powerful barrier to full participation (Mutaza &Maqbool, 2024; Angwaomaodoko,2023; Obi,2025).

This paper aims to address how education policy, inclusive education and skills development can translate into effective strategies that promote equitable access to learning and skill acquisition for all learners. While policies articulate the vision for inclusion, actual learning environments often fail to meet the needs of all learners equally, resulting in persistent educational inequities and skill gaps. Bridging this divide is critical to building a truly inclusive society where education functions as a vehicle for empowerment and social mobility.

Overview of Education Policies and Inclusive Education in Nigeria

Education policy in Nigeria has evolved through a persistent trajectory aimed at enhancing access, quality, and equity within the education system. Since independence, the Federal government has recognized education as both a fundamental human right and a vital key to national development, as reflected in policies such as the National Policy on Education (NPE), first introduced in 1977 and most recently revised in 2022 (FME, 2022). The NPE outlines the nation's philosophy of education based on principles of equality, inclusiveness, and lifelong learning, serving as a guiding framework for the country's educational aspirations (FME, 2022).

The introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Act in 2004 further marked a significant milestone, reinforcing Nigeria's commitment to providing free and compulsory basic education for all children (Ezewuzie, 2025). Although the UBE scheme led to increased enrolment rates, it also exposed structural and systemic issues such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher training, and limited access for children with disabilities or residing in remote areas (Universal Basic Education commission 2021; Glory Ifezue Foundation. 2025).

These challenges prompt the necessity of adopting targeted and inclusive approaches to ensure the meaningful participation of marginalized groups in education (Asabe, Ibi, & Dorathy, 2025).

In response to these realities, the Revised National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) was formulated as a framework for mainstreaming inclusion across all levels of education and aligning with international commitments like Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (FME, 2023; UN, 2006). The 2023 policy emphasizes strategies for identifying and addressing barriers to learning such as curriculum adaptation, flexible pedagogy, assistive technology, and active community participation. It also advocates for the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, designed to create accessible educational environments that accommodate diverse learner needs.

Despite these progressive frameworks, implementation has faced significant obstacles. Funding deficits, insufficient teacher capacity building, weak monitoring systems, and sociocultural stigmas hinder progress and often lead to physical inaccessibility of schools and inadequate adaptation of instructional materials for learners with special needs (Javed, Hussan & Tufail 2024; Angwaomaodoko, 2023). Moreover, inclusive education is often misconstrued as education solely for persons with disabilities, neglecting the broader spectrum of learner diversity and hindering comprehensive inclusion efforts (UNESCO, 2020). Nevertheless, collaborative efforts from both government agencies and civil society organizations, such as programs by the Glory Ifezue Foundation and initiatives like the Partnership for Learning for All (PLANE), have contributed to incremental improvements through teacher training, community engagement, and provision of assistive devices (The Guardian, 2025; African New Page, 2025; Glory Ifezue Foundation, 2025). These initiatives recognize that sustainable progress depends on stakeholder's collaboration involving the state, educational institutions, families, and communities.

However, Nigeria's education policy framework reflects deliberate steps towards inclusion. Yet, translating policy into practice remains an ongoing challenge. Effective realization of inclusive education requires increased funding, teacher empowerment, and robust accountability mechanisms. Also, sustained political will and coordinated stakeholder synergy are essential for achieving equitable educational opportunities for all Nigerian learners (Olaleye & Adeoye, 2024).

Skill Development for All Learners

The development of relevant skills for all learners is a fundamental pillar of inclusive education and essential for sustainable national development. In today's rapidly changing world, driven by technological innovation and socio-economic transformation, education systems must equip learners with competencies that enable them to participate productively in both economy and society. Nigeria's Revised National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) explicitly advocates for skill acquisition that goes beyond cognitive knowledge, but include socio-emotional, vocational, and digital competencies. This holistic approach empowers all learners regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, to succeed in the 21st century (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023).

To meet these demands, education must foster a range of essential 21st-century skills that extend beyond foundational literacy and numeracy to embrace critical thinking, creativity, and digital fluency, as well as socio-emotional proficiency such as empathy and collaboration (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2021). Nigeria's national education frameworks categorize these skills into four principal domains: cognitive skills (critical thinking, literacy, numeracy), socio-emotional skills (teamwork, self-regulation, empathy), vocational and entrepreneurial skills (employability and self-reliance), and digital literacy (navigating technology-driven environments) (FME, 2023). The skill domains are integral not only for individual empowerment but also for advancing to national socio-economic development goals (World Bank, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Recognizing the diverse needs of learners, Nigeria's inclusive education framework calls for curricula that are flexible, inclusive, and responsive to learner diversity. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework offers a structured blueprint that advocate multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression to ensure diverse learners, including those with disabilities, can access, process, and demonstrate knowledge effectively (Meyer, Rose & Gordon 2014; CAST, 2024). In practice, teachers can adapt curriculum content, processes, and assessment method to accommodate learners with different abilities and interests. Also, strategies such as curriculum compacting, enrichment, and acceleration are encouraged for gifted learners to ensure full inclusion within classroom activities (Revised National Policy on Inclusive Education, 2023).

Such curricular responsiveness must be matched by teaching approaches rooted in inclusive pedagogy. Differentiated instruction is a key component, allowing teachers to tailor learning experiences through flexible grouping, scaffolding and personalized support. This adaptability

promotes equity and meaningful participation, as supported by recent empirical evidence from Nigerian settings showing enhance learner engagement and academic achievement in heterogeneous classrooms (James, Esor, Olanrewaju, Olanrewaju, & Bamidele, 2025). Globally, inclusive pedagogical methods are recognized as best practices to meeting diverse learning needs and fostering equitable educational outcomes (UNESCO, 2020).

Another important critical enabler of skill development is assistive technology, which facilitate equitable access to learning for students with disabilities. Devices such as Braille machines, hearing aids, screen readers, and speech-to-text tools, alongside trained sign language interpreters and accessible materials, enable effective participation in learning activities (Glory Ifezue Foundation, 2025). Beyond classroom integration, community-based resource centers and digital learning hubs provide essential support for educational access and continuity, particularly for learners with severe or multiple disabilities, emphasizing the need for affordable and locally available assistive solutions within Nigeria's inclusive education policy framework (Costache & Enacescu, 2025).

At the center of skill development is the role of teachers, whose knowledge and dedication directly influence learners' acquisition of essential competence. Continuous professional development equips educators to implement inclusive practices and effectively manage diverse classroom. Nigerian policy mandates the integrating of inclusive education modules in teacher training, supported by additional incentives and support systems such as peer mentoring, which foster sustained professional growth and improved instructional quality (Bobmanuel, 2022; Obizue & Enomah, 2025).

Furthermore, non-formal education platforms such as community learning hubs are vital for expanding access to literacy, numeracy, vocational, and life skills for out-of-school children and marginalized learners (UNICEF, 2022; BERA, 2024). These hubs will complement formal schooling and are particularly important in rural and underserved areas, demonstrating how inclusive education extend beyond school walls to reach all learners.

Policy Implementation Challenges in Nigeria's Inclusive Education

Despite progressive policies like the 2023 Revised National Policy on Inclusive Education, Nigeria faces significant barriers in translating these policies into classroom realities. The following challenges continue to limit effective implementation of inclusive education across the country:

1. Insufficient Funding and Resource Limitations

Inclusive education demands consistent and adequate financial investment. However, Nigeria's education sector remains underfunded, with budgetary allocations often falling well short of UNESCO's recommended 15–20% benchmark. Many schools lack essential infrastructure such as ramps, accessible toilets, and assistive devices necessary to support learners with disabilities. Furthermore, fragmented funding across various levels of government and weak accountability mechanisms result in inefficiencies and resource gaps that deny learners equal educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2023; Ajayi & Afolabi, 2021).

2. Inadequate Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Teachers play a vital role in delivering inclusive education, yet most Nigerian educators receive minimal training in inclusive pedagogy. Existing teacher education programs emphasize traditional methods, leaving many teachers ill-prepared to address diverse classroom needs. Additionally, professional development programs are poorly structured and insufficiently sustained, resulting in practicing teachers lacking the competence and confidence to implement effective inclusive instructional strategies (Bankole, Bankole, Ajayi, & Akerele, 2024; Attah, (ND).

3. Persistent Socio-Cultural Stigma and Negative Attitudes

Cultural misconceptions and negative attitudes about disability remain major barriers to inclusive education. Disability is often associated with misfortune or weakness, fueling stigma and discrimination that discourage families from enrolling children with disabilities and influence educators' low expectations. To foster an inclusive environment, ongoing advocacy, community engagement, and parental sensitization are essential to shift these attitudes and promote acceptance of inclusive education (Angwaomaodoko, 2023).

4. Inadequate Infrastructure and Accessibility Barriers

The physical and material environment of most Nigerian schools is not conducive to inclusion. Many school buildings lack ramps, accessible toilets, and other facilities necessary for learners with physical impairments (Universal Basic Education Commission, 2021). Furthermore, there is a shortage of specialized instructional materials, adaptive learning devices, and assistive technologies that facilitate equal participation. Also, the absence of trained support staff, such as speech therapists, occupational therapists, and special education aides further compounds the problem. Schools, especially in rural areas, operate with limited funding, making it difficult to procure essential learning resources (Okoye, 2024). Moreover, poor coordination across

ministries results in fragmented infrastructural development, deepening the gap between policy and practice (The iRede Foundation, 2022).

5. Weak Monitoring, Data Collection, and Governance Coordination

Effective policy enforcement depends on robust monitoring systems, yet Nigeria's data on learners with disabilities is often incomplete and inconsistently managed across states. Inclusive education metrics are frequently embedded within general education data, hindering targeted action. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are poorly developed, resulting in limited accountability at federal, state, and local government levels. Additionally, overlapping mandates and limited coordination among federal, state, and local agencies such as UBEC, NCCE, and NCPWD, lead to duplicated efforts and inconsistent standards, weakening overall implementation (James, Esor, Olanrewaju, Olanrewaju, & Bamidele, 2025; Orlunga & Alikor, 2023). Without strong oversight, many inclusive education initiatives exist primarily as policy documents, with limited real impact.

6. Geographic and Socioeconomic Inequities

Poverty and insecurity disproportionately affect access to inclusive education, especially in northern Nigeria and other marginalized regions. Teacher shortages, school closures, and the high cost of assistive devices or transportation create additional burdens for families. These geographic and economic disparities deepen exclusion for vulnerable groups, particularly girls and children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2025; Yusuf, 2019).

7. Curriculum Rigidity and Pedagogical Challenges

Nigeria's curriculum remains largely rigid, with limited accommodation for diverse learning styles and needs. The lack of flexibility in content delivery and assessment hinders learners who require alternative approaches to instruction. Although Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advocates for flexible teaching methods that cater for varying abilities of all learners, it's rarely integrated into lesson planning or instructional design (Ayomide & Olasunkanmi, 2025). As a result, many learners with disabilities are unable to access or engage meaningfully with the curriculum.

Conclusion

Inclusive education stands as both a moral responsibility and a strategic necessity for Nigeria's sustainable development. This paper has highlighted the urgent need to translate inclusive education policies into practical realities within classrooms, schools, and communities. Although meaningful progress has been made through reforms and targeted initiatives,

persistent challenges in funding, teacher training, infrastructure, and inter-sectoral coordination continue to hinder full implementation. These obstacles reflect deeper systemic and socio-cultural inequalities that shape how resources are distributed and how learners are supported. The National Policy on Education emphasizes that “education remains the most powerful tool for achieving social justice and equality” and a key pillar for building an inclusive society. For policies to truly translate into practice, Nigeria must address the educational barriers, inadequate facilities, and limited services that continue to marginalize learners with special needs and other vulnerable groups.

Suggestions

In line with the above discussion in this paper, the following Suggestions to facilitate the effective building of an inclusive society are hereby offered

1. **Increase Education Funding:** federal and state government Increase Education Funding need to allocate at least 15–25% of their annual budgets to education in line with UNESCO guidelines, with a large share for inclusive education. Adequate funding is vital to convert policies into reality.
2. **Integrate Inclusive Education into Teacher Training:** Inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction principles should be mandatory components of pre-service and in-service teacher education, with special focus on rural and underserved areas.
3. **Develop Accessible Infrastructure and Provide Assistive Technologies:** Ensure all new and renovated school facilities must comply with accessibility standards including ramps, tactile pathways, appropriate furniture, and visible signage to make learning environment barrier-free and equip learners with disabilities with necessary assistive devices like Braille materials, hearing aids, and digital learning tools.
4. **Enhance Community Engagement and Sensitization:** Conduct continuous awareness campaigns to reduce stigma, engage parents through support networks, and expand community learning hubs to reach out-of-school and marginalized children with literacy, vocational, and life skills training.
5. **Establish Robust Data collection and preservation Systems as well as Monitoring Mechanisms:** the education ministry should systematically collect and report comprehensive data collection disaggregated by disability, gender, and region, and create independent monitoring bodies involving civil society and researchers to evaluate and improve inclusive education policies and practices.

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