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An Overview of Inclusive Education and Its Significance for Equitable Learning Opportunities

***Oji, E.C., Thompson, E., & Umoh, S.**

Department of Special Needs Education Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni Port
Harcourt, Rivers State.

***Corresponding author email:** ojisonscontract@yahoo.com

Abstract

Inclusive education has become a key framework for advancing equity and social justice in education. This paper presents an overview of inclusive education, exploring its principles, policy foundations, and relevance to equitable learning in diverse classrooms. It highlights the importance of inclusive practices in promoting access, participation, and achievement for all learners regardless of individual differences. The study discusses barriers to effective inclusion, such as inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and weak policy enforcement. It concludes that inclusive education is indispensable for achieving sustainable development and educational equity, requiring systemic commitment, continuous professional development, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Equitable Learning; Diversity; Participation; Educational Policy

Introduction

Education is globally recognized as a fundamental human right and a catalyst for social and economic transformation. Inclusive education which has to do with creating teaching practices, school policies, and learning environments that actively welcome and support every child seeks to ensure that all learners regardless of disability, socioeconomic background, language, or cultural differences learn together in the same classrooms and are given equitable opportunities to succeed. A central idea in this approach is that many obstacles to learning do not arise from the learners themselves, but from the way schools are organized and instruction is delivered. Therefore, schools are expected to adjust their pedagogy, resources, physical and social environments to respond to the full diversity of learners instead of isolating or excluding children who face challenges (UNESCO, 2024; Florian & Spratt, 2023).

Inclusive education is more than providing physical access, such as ramps or assistive devices. It involves rethinking classroom instruction, nurturing positive social and emotional relationships, valuing cultural diversity, and developing school policies that support full participation. In this way, inclusive education transforms schools into communities where differences are treated as assets, and every learner has genuine opportunities to participate and benefit from quality learning experiences. The movement for inclusive education is supported by several theoretical perspectives that explain how schools can foster equitable and meaningful learning opportunities for all. These perspectives shift attention away from viewing learning difficulties as inherent to the individual and toward recognizing the role of systemic and environmental barriers.

A major influence is the Social Model of Disability, which argues that disability largely results from obstacles in the environment such as inaccessible buildings, rigid curricula, and negative attitudes rather than solely from a person's impairment (Shakespeare, 2018). This model encourages schools to dismantle such barriers so that all students can participate equitably.

Another guiding framework is the Capability Approach, which highlights the importance of expanding each learner's freedom to pursue valued goals in life. It calls on educators to create enabling conditions such as flexible instruction, supportive relationships, and adequate resources that help students develop their full potential (Terzi et al., 2025). From this perspective, inclusion is not merely about placing students in the same classroom but about ensuring they can achieve meaningful learning outcomes. A further principle is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL emphasizes that curricula, assessments, and learning spaces should be designed from the outset to be flexible and accessible to the widest range of learners, rather than being modified later for a select few (Meyer et al., 2014). By offering multiple ways for students to access information, demonstrate understanding, and remain engaged, UDL supports effective participation for all, including those with disabilities or learning differences.

Across these theories, core principles such as: access, participation, equity, belonging, and improved outcomes for all learners consistently emerge. Among these, belonging stands out as particularly powerful, referring to students' sense of being accepted, respected, and valued within the classroom community. Studies indicate that a strong sense of belonging enhances students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement (Allen et al., 2021). In practice, inclusive education relies on several key strategies such as: designing curricula and classrooms proactively in line with UDL principles to accommodate diverse needs from the start; applying differentiated instruction that adjusts teaching, assessment, and engagement approaches to match students' strengths and challenges; providing support services and accommodations such as assistive technologies, specialist educators, peer mentoring, and flexible pacing; enacting inclusive policies and institutional practices that include professional development for teachers, strong leadership, consistent monitoring, and meaningful collaboration with families and communities. Together, these theoretical perspectives and practical strategies guide schools in reshaping teaching and learning so that every child, regardless of disability, language, gender, or background, can thrive.

This paper focused on an overview of inclusive education, it highlights the importance of inclusive practices in promoting access, participation, and achievement for all learners regardless of individual differences. The study discusses barriers to effective inclusion, such as inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and weak policy enforcement.

Significance of Inclusive Education for Equitable Learning Environments

Inclusive education is increasingly regarded as central to achieving fairness and justice in schools for all learners. Its significance can be seen across several dimensions:

Reduces Educational Disparities

Inclusive education helps close long-standing gaps in access and achievement among marginalized groups. Learners with disabilities, those from low-income families, minority language speakers, and neurodivergent students have historically experienced lower attainment, higher dropout rates, and limited access to quality instruction compared to their peers (UNESCO, 2024). These inequities often arise not from individual deficits but from structural barriers such as rigid curricula, inaccessible environments, and insufficient teacher preparation.

Inclusive education addresses these challenges by aligning pedagogy, resources, and school cultures to meet the needs of all learners. Practices such as differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning, and culturally responsive teaching empower teachers to adapt lessons so no learner is excluded (Ainscow et al., 2020). Schuelka et al. (2023) found that classrooms adopting inclusive practices such as cooperative learning, formative assessment, and peer mentoring reported higher participation, stronger learning outcomes, and lower dropout risks. By reducing barriers and fostering equitable access, inclusion becomes not just a moral obligation but a research-informed pathway to educational justice and fairness to all learners.

Equity and Social Justice

Inclusive education is widely recognized as a human right that upholds the dignity and participation of marginalized learners. It reflects international agreements such as the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)**, which requires governments to provide equitable and inclusive education for all children (United Nations, 2006). This principle also aligns with **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)**, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all (UNESCO, 2024). These global commitments have been translated into national laws and policies by many countries ensuring non-discriminatory access to schooling and support services (Waisath et al., 2022). Thus, inclusive education is not only a pedagogical approach but also a legal and ethical responsibility for states that seek to advance social justice and equity.

Promotes Higher Educational Quality

By responding to the needs of diverse learners, inclusive education compels schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers in inclusive classrooms often use differentiated instruction, flexible lesson planning, and formative assessment to ensure meaningful participation for every student. These strategies make instruction clearer, more engaging, and more responsive, not only for students with disabilities but for all learners (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2019).

The OECD (2023) reports that schools with strong inclusive practices tend to achieve higher overall learning outcomes. Similarly, Slee (2022) argues that inclusion pushes teachers and institutions toward reflective, innovative pedagogy, raising standards across education systems. In this way, inclusive education becomes a catalyst for both equity and quality improvement.

Prepares Learners for Diverse Societies

Inclusive education helps prepare students to live in today's interconnected, multicultural societies. By learning together, children with and without disabilities gain experience collaborating, communicating, and respecting differences. Such interactions foster empathy, teamwork, and mutual understanding skills that are critical for success in modern communities (Sharma & Salend, 2023). Inclusion also reduces stigma and fosters friendships, improving the self-esteem of all learners. Teachers benefit as well, since inclusive settings encourage collaboration through co-teaching and professional learning communities, which enhances their capacity to respond to diversity (Ainscow et al., 2020). Ultimately, inclusive classrooms cultivate socially responsible citizens capable of contributing to more cohesive societies.

Efficiency and System Strengthening

Inclusive education is not only a moral imperative but also an effective way to build stronger education systems. Historically, separate schools for marginalized groups have led to fragmented services and high costs. By embedding inclusive strategies such as UDL, differentiated instruction, and targeted supports into mainstream schools, governments can reach more learners without duplicating resources (Pather & Agbenyega, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). This integration strengthens the system as a whole by making curricula more flexible, teacher training more responsive, and infrastructure more accessible, ensuring system-wide reforms that benefits every learner, not just those with additional needs.

Enables Innovation in Pedagogy and Learning Environments

Inclusive education also drives innovation. Teachers and schools seeking to accommodate diverse learners often experiment with new approaches such as peer-assisted learning, team teaching, and UDL-based lesson planning (Ainscow & Messiou, 2021). These innovations make classrooms more interactive and adaptable, while also encouraging ongoing professional growth (Florian & Spratt, 2023).

Beyond pedagogy, inclusive reforms have spurred advances in classroom design, technology integration, and multi-sensory resources that benefit all students (UNESCO, 2024). A study in the Philippines showed that collaborative lesson study led to the adoption of student-centered pedagogy, digital tools, and flexible classroom arrangements that improved learning for all (Capulong et al., 2022). This demonstrates that inclusion is a driver of creativity and systemic improvement.

Sustainable Development and Social Cohesion

Finally, inclusive education plays a vital role in sustainable development. By breaking cycles of exclusion and ensuring equitable access to schooling, it supports national growth and social stability (Obi & Yakubu, 2022). When learners from diverse backgrounds share classrooms, they develop respect and empathy that strengthen democratic values and civic participation (Ainscow & Messiou, 2021). Thus, inclusion should be seen not only as an educational reform but as a long-term social investment that advances the Sustainable Development Goals and builds more equitable, cohesive societies.

Barriers to Effective Inclusive Education

Inadequate Teacher Training as a Barrier to Effective Inclusive Education

The effectiveness of inclusive education is largely dependent on the quality and depth of teacher preparation. However, many pre-service and professional development programmes continue to neglect the methodology, skills and attitudes necessary for accommodating learner diversity. Across several educational systems, including those in Nigeria, teacher education curricula still give insufficient attention to inclusive pedagogy, universal design for learning (UDL), and differentiated assessment techniques (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Due to poor training, many teachers enter classrooms without the competence or confidence to identify and address the individual learning needs of students with disabilities (World Bank, 2025). This knowledge gap

not only limits effective instruction but also reinforces misconceptions about the feasibility of inclusive education, leading some teachers to view inclusion as burdensome or impractical (Ahmed et al., 2021).

Most times, professional development for teachers often compounds this challenge, as training programmes are irregular, theoretical, and disconnected from real classroom experiences. Without consistent mentoring, peer collaboration, and feedback mechanisms, such initiatives rarely translate into meaningful pedagogical change (World Bank, 2021). Empirical evidence highlights that continuous, context-responsive training supported by adequate resources and school leadership yields more sustainable improvements in inclusive practice (UNESCO, 2023). Nevertheless, systemic challenges such as shortage of special education professionals, support staff, coupled with large class sizes, undermine even well-intended training efforts, leaving teachers ill-equipped to implement inclusive strategies effectively (World Bank, 2025).

In many African contexts, including Nigeria, the inadequacy of teacher preparation is consistently identified as a fundamental obstacle to achieving inclusive education (Adeniyi & Olojede, 2024). Most educators report minimal exposure to inclusive methodologies during their training, while opportunities for in-service learning remain irregular and poorly coordinated (UNESCO, 2023). To bridge this gap, teacher education institutions must redesign their curricula to embed inclusive pedagogy, practical instructional adaptations, and the effective use of assistive technology. Achieving this goal requires strong policy direction, systematic investment in teacher capacity, and institutional commitment to sustained professional learning which is a key ingredients for building equitable, accessible, and truly inclusive education systems (World Bank, 2025).

Insufficient Resources as a Barrier to Effective Inclusive Education

The pursuit of inclusive education is fundamentally dependent on the equitable provision and effective utilization of resources across all levels of the education system. However, inadequate financial resources continue to pose one of the most persistent challenges to realizing the goals of inclusive education globally, particularly within developing contexts (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2025). Many schools practicing inclusive education are constrained by underfunded budgets that limit their capacity to procure essential instructional materials, develop accessible infrastructure, or acquire assistive technologies tailored to the needs of learners with disabilities. The absence of, or inadequate tactile learning materials, hearing aids, Braille textbooks, and digital accessibility tools often translates into systemic exclusion, making it difficult for learners with sensory or cognitive impairments to participate meaningfully in learning processes (Ademola & Bello, 2024). Beyond material deprivation, insufficient funding makes it difficult for schools to adapt their physical environments such as installing ramps, accessible toilets, and ergonomic seating which are necessary for ensuring that every learner can move freely and engage fully in educational spaces.

The shortage of skilled human resources essential for implementing inclusive practices effectively due to insufficient funds is of great concern. Many education systems lack sufficient numbers of special educators, school psychologists, speech therapists, and classroom aides who can provide targeted support to learners with special needs (Ainscow & Miles, 2022). Consequently, the responsibility for meeting diverse learner needs often falls solely on mainstream teachers, who themselves may lack the training and capacity to differentiate instruction in overcrowded classrooms (UNICEF, 2022). Moreover, the scarcity of continuous professional development initiatives limits teachers' ability to acquire up-to-date pedagogical techniques, especially those related to assistive technology integration and adaptive assessment strategies (World Bank, 2021). The cumulative effect of these limitations occasioned by insufficient financial resources has resulted to many schools adopting a "one-size-fits-all" approach to teaching, which undermines the principles of equity, participation, and individualized learning that underpin inclusive education.

Within the Nigerian context and other sub-Saharan African education systems, the issue of inadequate resources is both structural and systemic. Studies indicate that public schools often depend on irregular government subventions or donor-funded projects to sustain inclusive practices, making such interventions unsustainable in the long term (Adeniyi & Olojede, 2024). Furthermore, poor budget allocation for inclusive education and weak institutional accountability mechanisms raises concern, as funds allocated for inclusive education rarely translate into tangible classroom improvements (UNESCO, 2023). Addressing these challenges demands a multi-level approach that combines increased government investment with transparent resource management, collaborative partnerships, and context-specific innovations, as resource sufficiency is not merely a logistical issue, but represents the moral and operational foundation upon which equitable and inclusive learning environments can be constructed (World Bank, 2025)

Weak Policy Enforcement as a Barrier to Effective Inclusive Education

While the adoption of inclusive education policies has gained global momentum, the persistent challenge of weak policy enforcement continues to undermine the realization of inclusive educational systems. In many countries, including Nigeria, inclusive education frameworks exist largely as policy statements rather than actionable mandates (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2025). The absence of strong enforcement mechanisms, coupled with limited institutional accountability, has resulted in a wide gap between policy intent and classroom practice. Although national legislations and international conventions such as the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* promote equitable education, their implementation remains inconsistent due to administrative inefficiencies, insufficient financial commitment, and weak coordination among stakeholders (Ainscow & Miles, 2022). Consequently, inclusive education often functions as a policy ideal rather than an operational reality, leaving many learners with disabilities or special needs without the necessary support to participate effectively in mainstream education (UNICEF, 2022). The weak nature of policy enforcement is also reflected in the fragmented nature of institutional responsibilities within education systems. Ministries of education, school boards, and teacher training institutions often operate in silos, with limited communication and overlapping mandates that hinder coherent implementation (UNESCO, 2023). In many cases, policies are not accompanied by clear operational guidelines, measurable indicators, or sanctions for non-compliance, allowing schools to interpret inclusion according to their capacity or convenience (Adeniyi & Olojede, 2024). Furthermore, inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms make it difficult to assess progress or identify systemic barriers that impede inclusive practice. Without structured supervision, data collection, and performance assessment, even well-conceived policies risk becoming symbolic documents that lack transformative impact (World Bank, 2025). The absence of strong institutional frameworks also discourages teachers from prioritizing inclusion, as there are few incentives or accountability measures tied to inclusive outcomes.

In the Nigerian context, weak policy enforcement is compounded by limited political will, inconsistent funding, and limited stakeholder engagement. Although frameworks such as the *National Policy on Inclusive Education* and the *Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2018* provide a legal foundation, enforcement remains minimal due to inadequate follow-up and poor inter-ministerial coordination (Ademola & Bello, 2024). Many schools continue to operate without the infrastructure, personnel, or resources that these policies mandate, revealing a disconnection between legislative provisions and ground-level realities. Strengthening policy enforcement therefore requires an integrated and multi-sectoral approach, one that ensures consistent budgetary allocation, continuous teacher training, and robust monitoring systems to track implementation. More importantly, the institutionalization of accountability mechanisms, such as periodic policy audits and inclusive education benchmarks, will ensure that inclusive education transitions from rhetoric to practice.

Conclusion

Inclusive education remains central to achieving equitable learning opportunities. It requires a systemic transformation of educational structures to embrace diversity, equity, and participation. The success of inclusion depends on collective responsibility from teachers, policymakers, families, and communities, working together to create supportive and responsive learning environments. By fostering inclusion, societies can ensure that every learner irrespective of difference realizes their potential and contributes meaningfully to national development.

Recommendation

1. Teacher preparation institutions should integrate inclusive pedagogy, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiated instruction into their curricula.
2. Governments and education stakeholders should provide ongoing, practical professional development programs that equip teachers with adaptive instructional competencies and positive attitudes toward inclusion.
3. Adequate funding should be allocated for assistive technologies, specialized learning materials, accessible infrastructure, and human resources such as special educators and classroom aides.
4. Transparent resource management and budget monitoring mechanisms must be established to ensure that funds reach the intended beneficiaries.
5. Existing inclusive education policies should be operationalized through clear implementation frameworks, measurable indicators, and enforcement mechanisms.
6. Educational research institutions should conduct continuous studies to evaluate the impact of inclusive practices and identify context-specific strategies that enhance learning for diverse populations.

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