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Assessment of the Effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems in the Implementation of Special Needs Education Programs in Rivers State, Nigeria

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Abstract
This paper examined the Effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems in implementing special needs education programs in Rivers State, Nigeria. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) remains a critical instrument for ensuring quality, accountability, and continuous improvement in Special Needs Education (SNE). In Nigeria, policy frameworks inspired by global commitments such as those advanced by UNESCO and reinforced through national legislation, including the National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018), demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusive education. However, a persistent gap exists between policy intentions and practical outcomes. This study assesses the effectiveness of existing M&E systems in SNE programs, with a focus on their capacity to support meaningful implementation and improved learning outcomes. Adopting a descriptive survey design, the study population consists of education officers, special educators, and school administrators in Rivers State, Nigeria, which is estimated to be 1815. A random sampling technique was used to select 300 respondents among education officers, special educators, and school administrators. A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument for the study; the instrument was validated by experts in Special Needs Education and Measurement and Evaluation. Combach Alpha reliability technique was used, reliability coefficient of 0.8 was obtained. The instrument was directly administered to the respondents by the authors. Mean and Standard Deviation were used to answer the research questions. Findings indicated that while M&E frameworks are structurally present, their effectiveness is constrained by inadequate funding, limited technical expertise, etc. The study concludes that M&E systems in SNE programs often function more as procedural obligations than as transformative tools for educational improvement. It recommended the institutionalization of participatory and data-driven M&E practices, strengthened capacity building, among others.

Keywords: Educational Accountability, Evaluation, Inclusive Education, Monitoring, Special Needs Education.

Introduction

The emergence of Special Needs Education (SNE) has significantly transformed educational systems globally by ensuring that learners with disabilities receive appropriate educational services tailored to their unique learning needs. Special Needs Education encompasses educational programs and support services designed for learners with hearing impairment, visual impairment, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, physical disabilities, learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, and multiple disabilities (UNESCO UIS, 2011; UNESCO, 2022). These learners need special approaches to instruction, learning materials that can be adapted, assistive technology, and supportive learning environments to realize their learning potential. Historically, people with disabilities and learners with special educational needs were not included in mainstream education because of the attitudes of society, lack of educational provisions, and weak policy implementation. Inclusive education is now recognized as the concept of educational equity and social justice at the world level. The Salamanca Statement of 1994 highlighted that all children are to be educated despite their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other needs. Likewise, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) has a principle of inclusive education that is considered as a right for all persons with disabilities. This is also reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal 4

(SDG 4): Inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Education is a means of passing on information, skills, values and attitudes that are needed for a person to be an active member of society. There are a number of international conventions and national policies which recognise and protect the right to education. Nigeria has shown commitment in these global initiatives by implementing several educational policies and laws. The National Policy on Education states that the right to quality education for persons with disabilities is guaranteed, and the National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) outlines the guidelines for inclusive educational practices. Moreover, the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018 aims to eradicate any discrimination or restriction against PWDs and provide equal access to educational opportunities. Despite the efforts, the implementation of SNE programmes in Nigeria is still beset with challenges. Researchers have determined that some challenges of social work in Kenyan schools include poor infrastructure, lack of qualified personnel, lack of adequate instructional materials, inadequate funding, and weak policy implementation mechanisms. These difficulties have given rise to fears about the effectiveness of systems for monitoring and evaluating educational programmes. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) are frequently confused and used synonymously, but represent two different functional aspects of program management. Monitoring is an ongoing, internal process and is used to track the day-to-day implementation of activities, giving real-time feedback. Monitoring in Special Needs Education (SNE) in Nigeria can involve the supply of braille materials, attendance of teachers, or the presence of assistive technology in classrooms (Ogunode & Yunusa, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Monitoring asks the question: “Are we doing things right?” and is based on outputs and compliance indicators. Evaluation, on the other hand, is regular and cumulative, with a focus on the overall effect and sustainability of the program (Ijede & Alade, 2023). For instance, when assessing Nigeria's Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and the 2023 Inclusive Education policy, it is important to look at and evaluate whether the policies have made a difference in the quality of life and learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Evaluation answers the question: “Are we doing the right things?” (UNESCO, 2021; Rodra, 2015).

Monitoring and evaluation are a two-way street; resources do not just get “spent” in SNE, but invested well. If not, there is a risk for programs to experience leakage in implementation (misuse of funds or materials), and outcomes not to be achieved for learners (Seahi Publications, 2024; Plan Nigeria, 2023). Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems are vital to the success of an educational programme in helping to ensure that it meets its aims. Monitoring entails the ongoing gathering and analysis of data on programme implementation, while evaluation is the systematic analysis of the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impact of programmes. Monitoring and evaluation offer important decision-making, accountability, planning and programme improvement information together. Monitoring is an ongoing systematic process of gathering information on programme implementation. It includes monitoring, assessment, deviation detection, and feedback for corrections. Monitoring gives stakeholders feedback on the implementation of planned activities and on the effective use of resources (Kusek & Rist, 2019). Educational monitoring is directed at factors like teacher attendance, participation of learners, quality of instruction, implementation of curriculum, utilization of resources, and achievement of learners. Evaluation is a systematic process of measuring the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, impact, and sustainability of a programme. It aims to ascertain the level of achievement of programme goals. Evaluation is the process of gathering and disseminating information that can be useful to decision-making, according to Stufflebeam and Shinkfield (2017). The outcomes of the evaluations provide information to policymakers to inform decisions around whether a programme should continue, be modified, expanded, or discontinued. Special Needs Education (SNE) is defined as a system of instruction designed to support the learning needs of learners with physical, sensory, cognitive and socio-emotional disabilities (National Policy on Special Needs Education, 2015; Ogunode & Yunusa, 2022). While the SNE system was once a charity-based model, it has now become a rights-based model supported by legal instruments like the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and the National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) (Plan Nigeria, 2023; Rodra, 2015). The need to monitor and evaluate effectively is especially critical in Special Needs Education, where learners' needs are diverse and individual. The implementation of the programme, the learner's progress, the effectiveness of the teacher, the use of resources, and the overall educational outcomes must be continually evaluated by the educational authorities. Investments in policy development and programme implementation can be large, but if there are no effective monitoring and evaluation systems in place, then the programmes may not address the needs of learners with disabilities. The educational service delivery in Rivers State has been improved through the use of school supervision, quality assurance and educational reforms. However, there are some concerns about the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems in the Special Needs Education programmes. It is noted that there is a paradox in the empirical landscape of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in the implementation of Special Needs Education (SNE) programs in Nigeria, since quality M&E is well correlated with the success of a program worldwide, but its implementation in the SNE program in Nigeria is underdeveloped (Ogunode & Yunusa, 2021; Osuji, 2024). This section is an analysis of the Nigerian and international studies to determine the successes, problem areas, and the gap in research.

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Empirical studies support the importance of M&E as a key factor in educational quality. However, a positive relationship was established by Ogunode and Yunusa (2021) between effective M&E planning and successful project implementation in educational programs in Nigeria. Likewise, a study conducted in Nigeria in 2024 showed that the variance in public health NGOs' organizational performance could be predicted by around 55.8% of M&E design, confirming that when M&E is used as a strategic tool, not merely as a compliance requirement, it presents a positive impact on service delivery (Ogunode & Yunusa, 2021). In the SNE context, Osuji (2024) has revealed that inclusive education practices, if taken with proper monitoring, positively affect cognitive development and academic engagement of learners with disabilities. The results suggest that M&E is not just about bureaucracy; it is a crucial tool for equity and learning outcomes in the education system (Osuji, 2024).

Despite the proven benefits, M&E faces structural problems that make it less effective in Nigeria. The study conducted in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, and Ondo showed that 55% of the teachers in the government-owned special schools indicated that there were inadequate resources for them, while 51% indicated that there were limited professional development opportunities for them (Osuji, 2024). These gaps directly hinder M&E because there is currently no standardized set of tools that will allow tracking of students with multiple disabilities. In addition, Namiji et al (2025) points out that many M&E supervisors are not pedagogically trained and tend to conduct compliance-based inspections. This is the case in Northern Nigeria, especially in Zamfara State, where special educators are not adequately trained to administer and interpret tests that cater for the needs of different types of students (Sani, 2025). The National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023) is very sound and substantial, but empirical reviews have shown a policy-practice gap (Plan Nigeria, 2023). Ogunode (2020) highlights the following barriers: Inadequate Funding, Insecurity, and Cultural Stigmas. The theoretical framework for this study is the Systems Theory by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968), which states that any organization or program consists of interrelated and interdependent components that should work harmoniously to accomplish a common goal. When applied to Special Needs Education (SNE) in Nigeria, the system can be described as inputs (funding, Special Education Teachers, Assistive Technology), processes (Pedagogy, classroom management, teachers' training), and outputs (Student learning, social inclusion, retention) (Ogunode & Yunusa, 2022). One of the most important tenets in Systems Theory is the functional feedback loop, which enables a system to self-regulate. In Nigeria's SNE programs, this feedback is through Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E). Effective M&E detects so-called “systemic leaks” (e.g., mismanagement of the 2% Universal Basic Education (UBE) special needs fund, shortage of braille materials, under-trained personnel, etc.) and informs timely corrective actions (Rodra, 2015; Ogunode&Yunusa, 2022). However, when the M&E feedback loop is not working well because the necessary funding is not available, there is a lack of trained evaluators, or data collection is not well done, the system will suffer from entropy (degradation), which will lead to poor educational quality, ineffective interventions, and the continued marginalization of learners with disabilities (Ijede & Alade, 2023). Systems Theory therefore offers a structural lens to view SNE as a dynamic system and emphasizes the critical importance of M&E in ensuring system health and accountability (UNESCO, 2021). In addition to Systems Theory, Results-Based Management (RBM) is a strategic management approach used to ensure that activities, processes, and outputs have a meaningful impact on desired results (United Nations Development Programme. (2009). RBM is not about the activity but about the outcomes, from “activities” (e.g., building ramps / distributing textbooks) to the results (e.g., higher enrolment, better learning outcomes, social inclusion of students with disabilities) (Plan Nigeria, 2023). When implemented in the Nigerian context, RBM is in line with the National Policy on Inclusive Education 2023, which has a focus on measurable impact rather than adherence to procedures (Plan Nigeria, 2023). Unfortunately, current education monitoring systems lack the power to report on the inputs and activities taking place in education, but do not have the capacity to show whether any changes in educational quality, equity, and learning outcomes are occurring as a result of the intervention. Results-based M&E focuses on systematic monitoring and use of evidence to gauge progress towards intended results (Kusek & Rist, 2004). This study uses the theory of RBM to assess whether Nigerian M&E is impact-based or a mere “box-ticking” exercise in the administration (Ijede & Alade, 2023; Ogunode&Yunusa, 2022). In this context, the study looks at the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems for the implementation of SENPs in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Although the Nigerian government has been spending more on inclusive education and special education policies, the number of learners with disabilities who still experience challenges accessing quality education is huge. These barriers include a lack of instructional materials, lack of qualified personnel, poor learning environment, and lack of support services. A major issue is that monitoring and evaluation activities of SNEP programmes are likely to fall short of identifying and addressing these challenges. Monitoring visits are not conducted regularly, lessons learnt from the evaluation are not used in decision-making, and there are weak data collection systems in many cases. There is therefore some doubt that current monitoring and evaluation systems are making a meaningful contribution to better learning results in SEN programmes. This study was therefore undertaken to assess the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems in Special Needs Education programmes in Rivers State, Nigeria.

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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems in special needs programmes in Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine how monitoring and evaluation systems are implemented in Special Needs Education programmes.
2. Identify the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation systems in improving educational outcomes.
3. Identify challenges affecting the implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems.
4. Suggest strategies for improving monitoring and evaluation systems in Special Needs Education programmes.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How are monitoring and evaluation systems implemented in Special Needs Education programmes in Rivers State?
2. How effective are monitoring and evaluation systems in improving educational outcomes?
3. What challenges affect the implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems?
4. What strategies can improve monitoring and evaluation systems in Special Needs Education programmes?

Methodology

A descriptive survey research design employing a representative sample was used because it can be used to collect data systematically and describe current trends on the effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) in Nigerian Special Needs Education (SNE) programmes. The three target groups are the stakeholders directly involved in planning, delivering, or overseeing the SNE programmes: M&E Officers from the State Ministries of Education and the Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) in the States; Special Education Teachers and School Administrators in government-owned special schools; and Policy Advocates from the Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs) who monitor and track the implementation of SNE policy. There are about 1,815 people in total. The respondents were randomly selected from the population, resulting in 300 respondents. The main instrument is the Monitoring and Evaluation Effectiveness Assessment Scale (MEEAS), which is a self-developed questionnaire with a 4-point Likert scale. There are four clusters of the questionnaire: Cluster A – Demographics (age, gender, years of experience, school type). Availability and Quality of M&E Tools: Digital vs. manual tracking, availability of indicators Cluster B). Cluster C – Personnel Capacity: SNE training, qualifications, and specialised knowledge. Cluster D – Environmental barriers: Funding adequacy, security challenges, and data management infrastructure. The face and content validation was done by three (3) experts, two each from the Measurement and Evaluation and Special Needs Education Sections of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. A pilot study was done with 20 non-sampled respondents, and Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.8 was obtained, which was considered to have high internal consistency. The instrument was given to the respondents by the researchers and retrieved on-site. Descriptive statistics (mean scores) were used to analyze the data. The mean score of 2.50 was chosen as the benchmark on the 4-point Likert scale for agreement or disagreement.

Results and Findings

The data obtained from the 300 respondents, consisting of education officers, special educators, and school administrators, were analyzed using the mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions. The criterion mean for the decision-making was 2.50. Mean scores of ≥ 2.50 were considered Agreed; those < 2.50 were considered Disagreed.

Research Question 1: How are monitoring and evaluation systems implemented in Special Needs Education programmes in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Ratings on the Extent of Implementation of M&E Systems in Special Needs Education Programmes in Rivers State.

S/N	Items	Mean (x)–	SD	Decision
1.	Regular monitoring visits are conducted in schools implementing SNE programmes.	2.78	0.89	Agreed
2.	Schools maintain records and reports relating to SNE programme activities.	3.01	0.83	Agreed
3.	Monitoring guidelines for Special Needs Education are available and utilized.	2.61	0.92	Agreed
4.	Evaluation reports are prepared periodically.	2.56	0.96	Agreed
5.	Findings from monitoring activities are communicated to	2.43	1.01	Disagreed

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	relevant stakeholders.			
6.	Monitoring activities are conducted consistently across schools.	2.31	0.94	Disagreed
	Grand Mean	**2.62**	**0.93**	**Agreed**

The results in Table 1 indicate a moderate level of implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems in Special Needs Education programmes in Rivers State (Grand Mean = 2.62). Respondents were unanimous that monitoring visits and record-keeping were in place, and that monitoring guidelines and evaluation reports were prepared. They did disagree that there is consistent monitoring of activities and that findings are effectively communicated to stakeholders. This indicates that M&E structures do exist but are not fully implemented and have a disjointed nature.

Research Question 2: How effective are monitoring and evaluation systems in improving educational outcomes?

Table 2: Mean Ratings on the Effectiveness of Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

S/N	Items	Mean (x)−	SD	Decision
1.	M&E systems improve teacher accountability in SNE programmes.	3.18	0.78	Agreed
2.	M&E enhances resource utilization and transparency.	3.06	0.82	Agreed
3.	M&E findings contribute to educational planning and decision-making.	2.98	0.84	Agreed
4.	M&E systems improve learners' academic performance.	2.64	0.91	Agreed
5.	M&E contributes to the social inclusion of learners with disabilities.	2.59	0.89	Agreed
6.	Evaluation findings are regularly used to improve programme implementation.	2.37	0.95	Disagreed
	Grand Mean	**2.80**	**0.87**	**Agreed**

The results indicate that monitoring and evaluation systems are viewed as moderately effective in improving accountability, making systems transparent, improving planning processes, and supporting learners' educational outcomes (Grand Mean = 2.80). Respondents disagreed, however, that the results of the evaluation are consistently used to enhance the programme implementation. This means that although useful information is obtained from M&E, its application in practice is insufficient.

Research Question 3: What challenges affect the implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems?

Table 3: Mean Ratings on Challenges Affecting Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

S/N	Items	Mean (x)−	SD	Decision
1.	Inadequate funding limits effective monitoring activities.	3.45	0.68	Agreed
2.	There is a shortage of trained M&E personnel in SNE programmes.	3.31	0.72	Agreed
3.	Weak data management systems hinder effective evaluation.	3.26	0.75	Agreed
4.	Limited availability of assistive technologies affects monitoring processes.	3.18	0.79	Agreed
5.	Stakeholder participation in M&E activities is inadequate.	3.09	0.81	Agreed
6.	Irregular supervision and school visits affect programme effectiveness.	3.37	0.70	Agreed
	Grand Mean	**3.28**	**0.74**	**Agreed**

Table 3 indicates that the respondents agreed very strongly that there were some factors which impede the effective implementation of the monitoring and evaluation system in Special Needs Education programmes (Grand Mean = 3.28). The key challenges found are lack of funds, lack of trained staff, poor data management, lack of stakeholder involvement, lack of assistive technologies, and poor supervision. The most important issue was inadequate funding among these.

Research Question 4: What strategies can improve monitoring and evaluation systems in Special Needs Education programmes?

Table 4: Mean Ratings on Strategies for Strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation Systems

S/N	Items	Mean (x)−	SD	Decision
1.	Government should provide adequate funding for M&E activities.	3.56	0.62	Agreed
2.	Regular training should be organized for M&E personnel and teachers.	3.49	0.66	Agreed
3.	Digital technologies should be integrated into M&E processes.	3.28	0.71	Agreed

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4.	Stakeholders should be actively involved in monitoring activities.	3.22	0.75	Agreed
5.	Evaluation findings should be used for educational planning and policy decisions.	3.40	0.68	Agreed
6.	A comprehensive database on learners with special needs should be established.	3.35	0.73	Agreed
	Grand Mean	**3.38**	**0.69**	**Agreed**

The results revealed a high level of agreement on how to enhance the monitoring and evaluation mechanism in Special Needs Education programmes (Grand Mean = 3.38). The respondents pointed out the importance of increasing government funding, ongoing capacity development, incorporating digital technologies, involving stakeholders, applying evaluation results, and creating an overall database containing learners with special requirements. The strategy of adequate funding was the one most highly rated.

Discussion of Findings

The study findings were discussed in the context of the four research questions which guided the study and existing literature on Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and Special Needs Education (SNE). The study showed moderate implementation of the monitoring and evaluation system in Special Needs Education programmes in Rivers State. The respondents confirmed that monitoring visits are carried out, records and reports on programme activities are kept, monitoring guidelines are available, and the programme reports are prepared regularly. They also noted that monitoring activities do not take place regularly throughout schools and that the results of monitoring activities are not effectively shared with school stakeholders. The result indicates that while there are structures in place for monitoring and evaluation in the educational system, the processes of carrying them out are not necessarily regular and are not always sufficient to ensure the level of accountability and programme improvement required. Monitoring frameworks are in place but not well implemented, suggesting that there is a disconnect between policy intent and execution. This discovery was consistent with UNESCO's report (2020), which found that despite the setting up of educational quality assurance structures in many developing countries, the implementation of monitoring activities is ineffective and inconsistent, and this is largely attributed to resource limitations and inefficiencies in administrative processes. Ogunode and Yunusa (2022) also noted that monitoring and evaluation in Nigeria have been mostly characterised by less-than-regular supervision, inadequate follow-up systems, and limited dissemination of findings. In the realm of Special Needs Education, monitoring that is inconsistent can lead to the delayed identification of learners' needs, poor tracking of individualized interventions, and a decreased effectiveness of the programme. The study also found that monitoring and evaluation systems have a positive impact on teacher accountability, transparency of the use of resources, learning planning and, at some level, on the improvement of learners' academic achievement and social inclusion. However, the respondents reported that the results of the evaluations were seldom used to enhance the programme implementation. The finding suggests that monitoring and evaluation activities produce information which is useful, but there is an insufficient culture of evidence-based decision-making in the educational system. Evaluation reports are frequently lost in desk drawer syndrome, and are not used as strategic tools to enhance educational practice and policy. This is consistent with the recommendations of Kusek and Rist (2019) that monitoring and evaluation systems are only effective when they can be used to inform programme design, implementation, and policy changes. Likewise, Mertens (2020) pointed out that the evaluation results should inspire ongoing improvement, and not procedural obligations. If results aren't effectively used in evaluating learning, this can reduce possibilities for addressing implementation issues and enhancing learning results for learners with special needs. Additionally, the discovery reinforces Ainscow's (2020) claim that inclusive education is best fostered in a setting where data is regularly leveraged to uncover obstacles to learning and design effective interventions to address them. The effectiveness of M&E systems in SNE programmes is therefore closely linked to the readiness of stakeholders to take action based on the evidence generated as well. It was found that the problems with regard to the implementation of monitoring and evaluation systems in Special Needs Education programmes were that they lacked adequate funding, experienced a shortage of trained staff, had weak data management systems, did not have enough stakeholder participation, had limited availability of assistive technologies, and had irregular supervision. Of all these factors, lack of funding was the most prominent problem. This discovery is a pointer to the ongoing problems facing educational administration in Nigeria. Financial resources are needed for the training of monitors and evaluators, for the transport of monitors and evaluators, for logistics, and for the management and periodic evaluation of the data. If there is not enough funding to monitor activities, the frequency and effectiveness of their monitoring are diminished. This is in line with the study by Ijede and Alade (2023), which revealed that financial input plays a significant role in reducing the effectiveness of monitoring in educational programmes. Similarly, UNESCO (2020) reported that inadequate investment in inclusive education has affected the capacity of education systems to build proper monitoring systems to support learners with disabilities. The scarcity of trained monitoring staff in this study is also in line with Osuji's (2024) findings that many educational

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administrators and supervisors are lacking in the specialized skills needed to assess programmes catering to students with varied needs. The personnel who monitor the programme need to possess special knowledge to assess the quality of the programme in Special Needs Education, where individualized teaching methods and assistive technologies are used. Furthermore, poorly designed data management systems are significant challenges for evidence-based planning and decision-making. The ability to accurately and timely gather data is essential to monitor learner progress, uncover gaps in service delivery, and empower rational resource allocation. These are exacerbated by the lack of stakeholder engagement, as parents and caregivers, disability organisations, and the community have unique perspectives and experiences to contribute to improving programme outcomes.

The study identified that stakeholders strongly backed measures including more funding for government, regular training of staff, incorporating digital technologies, involving stakeholders, effective use of monitoring and evaluation results, and comprehensive databases for learners with special needs as ways to improve monitoring and evaluation systems. This revelation highlights the need for a whole-of-school perspective to enhance the practices of M&E in the context of SNE. Supporting the development of monitoring systems, which involves institutional support as well as capacity building and technological innovation, will require financial investment. The finding aligns with the World Bank (2021) recommendations on the need to invest in human and technical resources to be able to effectively monitor education. Similarly, Kusek and Rist (2019) called for ongoing capacity building and the adoption of integrated information systems to better enhance the quality and use of monitoring information. This recommendation for the digitization of monitoring processes is in line with UNESCO (2023) who states that technology can be used to improve educational accountability by making it easier to collect, analyse and report on monitoring data in real time. Digital monitoring systems can enhance the quality of information needed for educational planning and programme improvement, in terms of its accuracy, availability and timeliness. Additionally, the focus on the importance of involving all stakeholders in the evaluation process aligns with the participatory evaluation model proposed by Mertens (2020), which calls for a more participatory evaluation process to ensure that evaluation is relevant, owned and responsive to the needs of the beneficiaries. Engaging parents/caregivers, teachers, and disability organisations in monitoring processes may result in more inclusive and contextually appropriate interventions in Special Needs Education.

Conclusion

Monitoring & evaluation (M&E) systems were found to be essential tools to make Special Needs Education programmes visible and effective. While structures are in place in Rivers State, it is still hindered by many challenges that limit their effectiveness. Increasing the quality of monitoring and evaluation through appropriate funding, professional development, involving stakeholders, and technology will make a great contribution towards inclusive and equitable quality education.

Recommendations

In light of the results and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made for strengthening the Special Needs Education programmes monitoring and evaluation system in Rivers State and improving the quality of inclusive education service delivery:

1. The government should create special Monitoring and Evaluation Units for Special Needs Education programmes in Rivers State and provide appropriate funding for monitoring and evaluation activities such as field visits, data collection, and programme assessment.
2. There should be regular capacity development and training programmes for education officers, special educators, and school leaders on current monitoring and evaluation practices for stakeholders in Special Needs Education.
3. Government to ensure digital technologies and electronic data management systems are included in monitoring and evaluation so as to make the monitoring and evaluation of educational data more efficient, accurate and accessible.
4. Educational institutions need to establish and keep an up-to-date profile of learners with special needs which can aid in evidence-based planning and decision-making. In addition, the effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and impact of Special Needs Education programmes should be evaluated through Periodic programme evaluations.

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