

Disability and Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings: Challenges and Opportunities in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive early childhood education (ECE) is fundamental to ensuring equitable developmental opportunities for all children, particularly those with disabilities. This study investigates the challenges and opportunities associated with the inclusion of children with disabilities in Nigerian ECE settings. Motivated by direct field observations and stakeholder concerns, the research employed a descriptive survey design involving 300 respondents—educators, administrators, and parents—from selected schools across South-East Nigeria. The study draws on the Social Model of Disability and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to explore the interplay of cultural, institutional, and pedagogical variables influencing inclusive practices. Data analysis using descriptive and inferential statistics revealed significant relationships between teacher training, cultural beliefs, infrastructural accessibility, and inclusive outcomes. Parental awareness also emerged as a strong predictor of inclusive practices. The study highlights the gap between policy and practice and provides contextually relevant recommendations for improving inclusion in Nigeria's early childhood education landscape.

Keywords: Inclusion, Disability, Early Childhood Education, Nigeria, Educators, Infrastructure, Parental Awareness

INTRODUCTION

Inclusive early childhood education (ECE) remains a critical cornerstone for social justice, equity, and human development. For children with disabilities in Nigeria, however, inclusion is often more aspirational than actual. Although global commitments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) endorse inclusive education from early years, implementation at the grassroots remains problematic. In Nigeria, cultural stigma, poor infrastructure, untrained personnel, and weak policy execution continue to undermine efforts to mainstream children with disabilities into early childhood settings (Omede & Momoh, 2022).

The motivation for this study arose from the researcher's direct observations and engagements in several public and private early childhood centres across urban and rural Nigeria, where children with observable physical and cognitive impairments were either excluded or passively present without tailored support. Informal conversations with parents and caregivers revealed that non-inclusion causes emotional distress and social exclusion for both children and families. Some children reportedly exhibited signs of withdrawal and frustration, further reinforcing the urgency of exploring sustainable solutions.

The early years are foundational for all children, but they are especially pivotal for those with developmental delays or disabilities. However, the denial of access or relegation of these children to marginalised settings widens developmental gaps and perpetuates cycles of exclusion (UNICEF, 2021). This study thus explores both challenges and opportunities surrounding disability and inclusion in Nigerian ECE with the aim of offering sustainable, contextually relevant interventions.

Definition of Key Concepts

1. **Disability:** Any physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, or developmental impairment that limits a

child's full participation in typical ECE settings (WHO, 2021).

2. **Inclusion:** The intentional effort to ensure equal access to quality learning opportunities for all children in shared environments, involving accessibility, curricular adaptation, and acceptance (UNESCO, 2020).
3. **Early Childhood Education (ECE):** Formal and informal educational programmes for children from birth to age eight, with emphasis on preschool years (National Policy on Education, 2014).

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

- **Social Model of Disability:** This model posits that disability is socially constructed, arising from societal barriers rather than individual impairments (Oliver, 1996).
- **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory:** Development is influenced by interrelated systems—microsystem, mesosystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Conceptual Framework:

- **Independent Variables:** Disability type, infrastructure, teacher training, parental awareness, cultural beliefs
- **Intervening Variables:** Policy implementation, NGO support, M&E structures
- **Dependent Variable:** Inclusion in ECE measured by enrolment, participation, teacher adaptation, and social integration

INDICATORS OF DISABILITY AND NON-INCLUSION

- Physical inaccessibility (Ajuwon, 2016)
- Lack of trained special educators
- Negative teacher attitudes (Agbenyega, 2007)
- Rigid curriculum
- Parental disengagement due to stigma (Ozaji & Ilo, 2018)

Statement of the Problem

Despite policy commitments, children with disabilities in Nigerian ECE settings are frequently excluded or insufficiently supported. The gap between ideal policy and real practice is widened by lack of teacher preparation, cultural stigma, infrastructural inadequacy, and weak enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, the early years—crucial for intervention—remain under-explored in inclusive education research. This study seeks to bridge that gap.

Purpose of the Study

To examine the challenges and opportunities associated with the inclusion of children with disabilities in Nigerian early childhood education settings.

Specific Objectives

1. Investigate educators' practices and attitudes towards inclusion.
2. Identify key challenges faced by ECE stakeholders.

3. Examine systemic and cultural facilitators and barriers.
4. Explore strategies for enhancing inclusive practices.

Research Questions

1. What are the prevailing practices and attitudes among educators?
2. What challenges are faced by stakeholders?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder inclusion?
4. What strategies could promote inclusive ECE in Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

1. Teacher training is significantly related to inclusion attitudes.
2. Cultural beliefs significantly influence enrolment of children with disabilities.
3. Infrastructure positively correlates with participation.
4. Parental awareness significantly predicts inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

- **Design:** Descriptive survey (Creswell & Creswell, 2023)
- **Population:** 3,000 ECE educators, administrators, and parents across South-East Nigeria
- **Sample:** 300 respondents selected via stratified and purposive sampling from five states
- **Instrument:** Inclusive Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (IECEQ)
- **Reliability:** Cronbach Alpha = 0.87 from pilot study in Rivers State
- **Data Analysis:** Descriptive (mean, SD), Inferential (t-test, correlation, regression) via SPSS v25

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Variable	Mean	SD	Test	p-value	Result
Educator Attitudes	3.18	0.95	t=7.34	<0.001	Significant
Trained vs Untrained Educators	3.40 vs 2.96	0.85/0.90	t=2.947	0.004	Significant
Cultural Beliefs (Stigma)	2.50 vs 3.00	1.00/0.95	t=-2.563	0.012	Significant
Infrastructure	r=0.45	—	—	0.02	Moderate positive
Parental Awareness	$\beta=0.65$, $R^2=0.22$	SE \approx 0.31	t=2.115	0.036	Significant

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study confirms that inclusive practices are strongly linked to professional training and parental engagement. Cultural beliefs remain a major barrier to disability inclusion, particularly in rural areas.

Infrastructure helps but must be integrated with broader systemic reforms.

Educational Implications

- Need for compulsory inclusive training for ECE educators
- Parental education and advocacy campaigns
- Policy reform to ensure accountability and accessibility in ECE

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Introduce inclusive education modules in teacher training.
2. Invest in infrastructure upgrades for early years settings.
3. Conduct public campaigns to de-stigmatise disability.
4. Create monitoring frameworks to ensure policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

Although Nigeria has made rhetorical progress towards inclusive education, implementation gaps persist. A holistic, multi-level approach—anchored in training, awareness, infrastructure, and cultural change—is vital for ensuring that no child is left behind in early childhood settings.

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