INTEGRATING SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN INTO INCLUSIVE MAINSTREAMING EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS IN LAGOS STATE, NIGERIA

By

Dr. Akeredolu Olukemi O
Federal College of Education (Technical), Akoka, Lagos
08033570518
olukemiakeredolu045@gmail.com

ALADE Olayinka Samson
Department of Early Childhood Care and Education,
Corona College of Education, Apapa, Lagos
Samson.alade@coronaschools.org
07012942163

Abstract

This study examined the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream classrooms in Lagos State, Nigeria, focusing on implementation, challenges, teacher preparedness and strategies for improvement. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The respondents comprised 220 teachers and school administrators selected through purposive and simple random sampling. Stratified random sampling was used to select 40 public primary schools to ensure representation across the study area. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores, with a criterion mean of 2.50. Findings indicated that inclusive education was being practised, although respondents identified substantial implementation challenges. The grand mean for challenges was 3.18, with inadequate infrastructure, insufficient instructional materials, large class sizes and limited government support among the concerns raised. Teacher preparedness had a grand mean of 2.84, suggesting a need for further training. Respondents strongly supported proposed improvement strategies, reflected in a grand mean of 3.35, including increased funding, teacher training, assistive resources and stakeholder collaboration. The study concluded that systemic constraints limit the effectiveness of inclusive education in Lagos State. It recommended increased investment, sustained capacity building and stronger implementation of inclusive education policies.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Integration; Special needs; Mainstream classrooms and Public Schools

Introduction

Education is central to national development and social inclusion. Inclusive education seeks to address the diverse learning needs of all children and to enable them to learn together, with appropriate support. UNESCO (2020) describes it as a process of responding to learner diversity

and reducing barriers to participation and achievement. In practice, this involves more than enrolling children with disabilities or other learning needs in mainstream classrooms: schools must also provide accessible environments, suitable teaching resources and instructional support.

Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that every child has a right to quality education without discrimination. It is reflected in international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. These frameworks encourage governments to develop education systems in which learners, regardless of disability, gender, ethnicity or social background, can participate and learn.

Nigeria has expressed its commitment to inclusive education through policies and legislation, including the National Policy on Education (2013), the National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015) and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018). The National Policy on Education advocates equal educational opportunities for all learners, including those with special educational needs and disabilities. The Lagos State Inclusive Education Policy (2018) similarly supports access to quality education for children with disabilities within mainstream schools. However, these policy frameworks do not ensure effective implementation. The integration of children with special needs into public primary schools remains uneven and may be limited by gaps in teacher preparation, school resources and support services.

Studies have identified challenges that may hinder inclusive education in Nigeria, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teacher training, insufficient funding and negative attitudes towards disability (Akinbola, 2010; Omede, 2016). Many teachers have limited preparation in inclusive teaching methods, while mainstream classrooms may lack accessible infrastructure, appropriate materials and trained support personnel (Ajuwon, 2018; Adebayo & Onifade, 2020; Ogunyemi & Omotayo, 2021; Angwaomaodoko, 2023). These constraints can make it difficult for teachers to respond effectively to learners' diverse needs.

Research has also highlighted teachers' concerns about their confidence and access to resources. Adebayo and Onifade (2020) and Ogunyemi and Omotayo (2021) found that teachers in Lagos struggled to support children with diverse learning needs. Eke (2022) reported that teachers often relied on improvisation and peer collaboration without structured training. Parental and community attitudes may also affect enrolment and participation. Oboegbulem and Ugwu (2019)

noted that stigma and misconceptions about disability can contribute to resistance among some families. Together, these factors may lead to exclusion, segregation or integration without adequate support. This study therefore examines the implementation of inclusive education in public schools in Lagos State, the challenges affecting it, teachers' preparedness and strategies for improving the participation of children with special needs.

The study draws on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views learning as a socially mediated process developed through interaction and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). A key concept is the Zone of Proximal Development: the difference between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Scaffolding through teacher support, peer interaction, modelling and dialogue can help learners participate in tasks suited to their developing abilities. In inclusive classrooms, these ideas support practices such as differentiated instruction and cooperative learning. Appropriate support can enable children with diverse needs to take part in shared learning activities and interact meaningfully with their peers (Bruster, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Although Nigeria and Lagos State have adopted policies supporting inclusive education, children with special needs may still face barriers to meaningful participation in public schools. Classrooms may lack accessible facilities, adaptive furniture, suitable learning materials and other forms of support required to accommodate diverse needs. Teachers may also have limited training in inclusive pedagogy, while large classes and inadequate support services can make individualized instruction difficult.

These conditions may limit children's access to equitable learning opportunities and widen the gap between policy commitments and classroom practice. They may also reduce opportunities for children with and without disabilities to learn and interact together. Therefore, evidence is needed on the extent to which inclusive education is implemented in Lagos State public schools, the challenges teachers and administrators encounter, teachers' preparedness, and strategies that could strengthen inclusion. This study addresses these issues to identify practical ways to support the participation and learning of children with special needs.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in public primary schools in Lagos State, Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates the extent of implementation, the challenges affecting inclusion, teachers' and schools' preparedness, and strategies for strengthening inclusive education.

Research Objectives

The study sought to:

1. examine the extent to which inclusive education is implemented in public primary schools in Lagos State;
2. identify the challenges affecting the integration of children with special needs in these schools;
3. assess teacher preparedness, school infrastructure and policy implementation in supporting inclusive education; and
4. identify strategies for improving inclusive education practices.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study:

1. To what extent is inclusive education implemented in public primary schools in Lagos State?
2. What challenges affect the integration of children with special needs in these schools?
3. How adequate are teacher preparation, school infrastructure and policy implementation in supporting inclusive education?
4. What strategies could improve inclusive education practices in public primary schools in Lagos State?

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the implementation of inclusive education, the challenges schools encounter and possible opportunities for improvement. The study population comprised early-years teachers, special education experts and school administrators. A sample of 220 respondents was selected using

purposive and random sampling techniques. The data-collection instruments consisted of a questionnaire and an interview guide. Experts in early childhood care and education reviewed the instruments for clarity, relevance, and suitability, and pilot testing assessed their reliability. Questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages and mean scores, alongside the inferential statistics appropriate to the research questions. Interview data were analysed thematically.

DATA ANALYSIS

Research Question 1: To what extent are inclusive education policies practiced in Lagos State public primary schools?					
S/N	**Item**	**High Extent**	**Moderate Extent**	**Low Extent**	**Mean**
1.	Inclusive education is practiced in my school	100 (45.9%)	90 (40.95%)	30 (13.6%)	3.07
2.	Special needs children are enrolled in mainstream classrooms	95 (43.2%)	88 (40%)	37 (16.8%)	2.97
3.	My school has policies supporting inclusive education	97 (44.1%)	92 (41.8%)	31 (14.1%)	3.5
4.	Inclusive education is effectively implemented in Lagos State	89 (40.4%)	91 (41.4%)	40 (18.7%)	2.94
5.	There is awareness of inclusive education among staff	103 (46.8%)	89 (40.5%)	28 (12.7%)	3.10
Grand Mean					**3.03 Agree**
Research Question 2: What challenges affect integration of special needs children?					
6.	Lack of teaching aids and materials affects inclusive education	111 (50.4%)	84 (38.2%)	25 (11.4%)	
7.	Inadequate infrastructure (ramps, aids, etc.) is a major challenge	127 (53.2%)	80 (36.4%)	23 (10.5%)	3.22
8.	Large class size hinders effective inclusion	103 (46.8%)	92 (41.8%)	25 (11.4%)	3.25
9.	Teachers lack adequate training in special needs education	119 (54.1%)	79 (35.9%)	22 (10%)	3.25
10.	Government support for inclusive education is insufficient	122 (50.5%)	78 (35.5%)	20 (9.1%)	3.30
11.	Negative social attitudes of teachers affect inclusion	99 (45%)	93 (42.3%)	28 (12.7%)	3.09
Grand Mean					**3.20 Agree**
Research Question 3: How prepared are teachers for inclusive education?					
		Highly Prepared	**Moderately Prepared**	**Not Prepared**	**Mean**
12.	I feel confident teaching students with	43	52 (23.2%)	105	2.88

	special needs	(19.5%)		(47.3%)	
13.	I have received adequate training in inclusive education	50 (22.7%)	27 (12.3)	138 (65.0%)	2.78
14.	I use differentiated instruction strategies in my teaching	70 (31 8%)	92 (41.8%)	58 (26. 4%)	2.96
15.	I can effectively manage diverse learners in my classroom	67 (30.5%)	63 (28.6%)	90 (40.9%)	2.88
16.	I require further training to teach children with special needs	108 (49.1%)	82 (37.3%)	18 (8.2%)	2.30
Grand Mean					**2.96 Agree**
Research Question 4: What strategies can enhance effective inclusion?					
		SA	**A**	**D**	**SD**
17.	Regular teacher training will improve inclusive education	118 (53.6%)	74 (33.6%)	18 (8.2%)	10 (4.5%)
18.	Provision of assistive devices will enhance learning environment	112 (50.9%)	79 (35.9%)	18 (8.2%)	11 (5.0%)
19.	Government funding is essential for successful inclusion	120 (54.5%)	76 (34.5%)	15 (6.8%)	9 (4.1%)
20.	Collaboration with specialists improves outcomes	105 (47.7%)	85 (38.6%)	18 (8.2%)	12 (5.5%)
21.	Parental involvement supports inclusive education	98 (44.5%)	89 (40.5%)	21 (9.5%)	12 (5.5%)
Grand Mean					**3.32 Agree**
Open-Ended Questions					
22.	Have you received training in inclusive education?				
23.	What are the major challenges you face in teaching students with special needs?				
24.	What strategies do you suggest to improve inclusive education in Lagos State?				
25.	What type of training or support do you need to effectively teach children with special needs?				

Data Interpretation

Research Question 1: To what extent is inclusive education practised in Lagos State public primary schools?

Most respondents (70.3%) indicated that inclusive education was practised in their schools, while approximately 20.0% reported a low or moderate level of practice. The grand mean of 2.98 suggests general agreement that Lagos State public primary schools practise inclusive education, although implementation may not be optimal. Respondents' reports of open admission policies indicate that children with special needs can be enrolled; however, enrolment alone does not establish that schools provide the support required for meaningful inclusion.

Research Question 2: What challenges affect the integration of children with special needs?

Respondents identified several challenges to integration. Respondents reported inadequate infrastructure and teaching aids (78.6%), inadequate teacher training (47.7%), weak policy enforcement (50.0%), and negative societal attitudes (42.3%). The grand mean of 3.18 indicates general agreement that these and other challenges affect inclusive education. The responses point to barriers involving resources, teacher preparation, policy implementation and community attitudes.

Research Question 3: How prepared are teachers to support inclusive education?

The findings suggest mixed teacher preparedness. While 42.7% of respondents said teachers were confident teaching children with special needs, 35.0% reported that teachers had received government-sponsored training in inclusive education. The grand mean of 2.84 indicates moderate preparedness overall. These results suggest that further training and support may be needed. Check the interpretation of the training-needs item against its exact wording and mean score.

Research Question 4: What strategies can enhance inclusive education?

Respondents supported regular teacher training, the provision of assistive devices, increased government funding, collaboration with specialists and greater parental involvement. More than 70% supported collaboration with specialists and parental involvement. The grand mean of 3.35 indicates strong agreement with the proposed strategies for improving inclusive education.

Discussion of Findings

The findings suggest that inclusive education is practised in Lagos State public primary schools, but that implementation may be partial. Although respondents reported that children with special needs could be admitted, they also identified inadequate facilities, teaching resources and teacher preparation as barriers to effective participation. This distinction matters: enrolment alone does not show that learners receive suitable support or are fully included in classroom activities.

Teacher preparedness was moderate overall. While some respondents reported teacher confidence, fewer indicated that teachers had received government-sponsored training. This points to a need for sustained pre-service and in-service preparation in inclusive pedagogy. The findings are consistent with studies by Ajuwon (2018), Adebayo and Onifade (2020), and Ogunyemi and Omotayo (2021), which highlight the importance of teacher preparation for implementing

inclusive education. Appropriate training can help teachers plan instruction, communicate with families and specialists, and respond to learners' varied needs.

Inadequate infrastructure and teaching aids were the most frequently reported challenges. These findings align with Obi and Ashi (2016), who identified resource shortages and insufficiently qualified personnel as constraints on inclusive education in Nigeria. Adeniyi, Owolabi and Olojede (2015) also found that materials, staffing and teachers' attitudes influence inclusive education in Lagos State. More recent studies cited in the manuscript similarly report gaps in accessible facilities and adaptive learning environments (Adeoye, 2025; Alabi et al., 2026). Such barriers may limit learners' access to classroom activities and increase the demands placed on teachers.

Respondents also identified weak policy enforcement and negative societal attitudes as concerns. These findings suggest that policy commitments need to be matched with implementation, monitoring, and community engagement. Increased public funding, collaboration with non-governmental organisations, access to assistive resources, and cooperation among schools, families, specialists and communities may help address the challenges identified. Overall, the results point to a gap between inclusive education commitments and reported school-level conditions; further evidence would be needed to determine how consistently policies are implemented across schools.

Conclusion

The study concludes that inclusive education is practised in Lagos State public primary schools, but inadequate resources, limited teacher preparation, and weak policy enforcement constrain its implementation. Respondents identified teacher training, assistive resources, increased funding and collaboration among stakeholders as important strategies for strengthening inclusion. The findings describe reported practices and challenges; they do not directly establish the effects of inclusion on pupils' learning outcomes. Improving implementation will require sustained support for teachers and schools, accessible learning environments and effective monitoring of inclusive education policies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Increase government investment:** Provide adequate funding for accessible infrastructure, assistive devices and learning materials suited to learners' diverse needs.
2. **Provide ongoing teacher development:** Offer regular training in inclusive teaching strategies and strengthen special needs education coverage in teacher education programmes.
3. **Improve school accessibility:** Upgrade school facilities to support access and participation for learners with disabilities, including ramps and appropriate learning equipment.
4. **Strengthen policy implementation:** Establish monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess how schools implement inclusive education policies.
5. **Employ specialist support personnel:** Recruit qualified special education professionals and other support staff to work with classroom teachers.
6. **Promote awareness and acceptance:** Run community- and school-based awareness programmes to reduce stigma and encourage positive attitudes toward disability.
7. **Support stakeholder collaboration:** Strengthen cooperation among teachers, parents, school administrators, specialists and government agencies to coordinate support for learners.

References

Adebayo, A., & Onifade, C. A. (2020). Challenges of inclusive education in early childhood settings in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Research and Development, 15*(2), 45–56.

Akinbola, B. R. (2010). The right to inclusive education in Nigeria: Meeting the needs and challenges of children with disabilities. *African Journal of Special Educational Needs, 2*(2), 1–10.

Adeniyi, S. O., Owolabi, J. O., & Olojede, K. (2015). Determinants of successful inclusive education practice in Lagos State, Nigeria. *World Journal of Education*, 5(2), 26–32.

Adeoye, A. A. (2025). Improvement of inclusion of students with special educational needs in Lagos State. University of East London.

Ajuwon, P. M. (2018). Inclusive education for students with disabilities in Nigeria: Benefits, challenges, and policy implications. *International Journal of Special Education*, 23(3), 11-16.

Alabi, O. A., Alabi, A. S., Adedeji, B. T., Orekan, A. A., Oke, T. I. & Oyenigba, B. A. (2026). Architectural design and spatial requirements for special children's schools in Lagos. Discover Education.

Angwaomaodoko, E. A. (2023). Challenges and opportunities of inclusive education in Nigeria. Path of Science, 9(7), 1001–1009.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design. Harvard University Press.

Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act. (2018). Federal Government of Nigeria.

Eke, C. E. (2022). Building teacher capacity for inclusive practice in Nigeria's early years classrooms. *Nigerian Journal of Educational Research, 15*(1), 72–83.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN). (2013). National Policy on Education (6th ed.). Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) Press.

Obi, F. B., & Ashi, M. M. (2016). Inclusive education in Nigeria: Access and equity. *Journal of Education and Practice*, *7*(5), 168-171.

Oboegbulem, A., & Ugwu, R. (2019). Societal attitudes and inclusive practices in Nigerian schools: Bridging the gap. *Journal of Special Needs Education, 5*(1), 25–36.

Ogunyemi, A. O., & Omotayo, F. I. (2021). Teachers' preparedness and attitudes towards inclusive education in Lagos State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 25*(11), 1301–1315.

Omede, A. A. (2016). Policy and practice of inclusive education in Nigeria: An analysis of challenges and strategies for improvement. *Journal of Education and Practice, 7*(8), 70–77.

Taiwo, A. S., & Oluwafemi, O. O. (2025). Inclusive education in early childhood care in Nigeria. Faculty of Education Journal.

United Nations. (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. https://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf

UNESCO. (2020). Global education monitoring report 2020: Inclusion and education – All means all. UNESCO.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Harvard University Press.