

Development of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

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Abstract

Efforts to expand equitable access to education in Nigeria have gradually shaped the development of inclusive education policies at both the federal and state levels. Originally rooted in special education approaches, this concept has evolved under the influence of international laws. While previous research has documented these policy efforts, there is limited comparative analysis of how state policies align with federal directives and how contextual factors influence their development. Guided by models of disability, namely the medical, charity, social, and human rights models, this study examines the development of inclusive education policies across six Nigerian states. Using a qualitative document analysis approach, it analyzes federal policy texts and state-level documents selected for their official status, relevance, and recency. The comparative analysis explores various aspects of policy development, including legal frameworks, funding mechanisms, community engagement, and pedagogical innovation. Findings reveal notable differences in the direction of state policies. While national policy advocates a rights-based approach, states implement federal recommendations unevenly, often prioritizing local concerns and resource limitations. Some states, such as Lagos, Edo, Enugu, and Kwara, showcase emerging innovative practices, particularly the integration of digital learning tools to overcome pedagogical barriers. However, implementation remains incomplete, often confined to basic education and rarely extending to private schools. The study indicates that Nigeria's inclusive education policy is gradually moving towards social and human rights models, though achieving full alignment will require clearer federal guidance, improved coordination, and sustained investment to ensure access and participation for all.

Keywords: inclusive education, educational policy, Nigeria, special education, educational development

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Introduction

Nigeria appears to place great importance on inclusive education, supported by policy and legislative frameworks at both national and international levels (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). The concept of inclusive education is embedded in federal and state policies aimed at addressing educational inequalities. Indeed, according to the Federal Government of Nigeria, inclusive education is regarded as a fundamental human right that aligns with international initiatives promoting the right to education for all, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006 and the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (FME, 2023).

According to Nigeria's National Policy on Inclusive Education, inclusive education is a concept that involves overcoming barriers to learning opportunities, intending to ensure equitable access to quality education whilst catering for the diversity of learners within the same environment (FME, 2023). These perspectives are based on the need to make education accessible to all children, regardless of their differences, to help them realize their potential. Thus, since the first National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1977, the Nigerian government has affirmed its commitment to guaranteeing access to equitable, high-quality education for all its citizens, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Section 8 of the policy proposes to provide equal educational opportunities for gifted learners and those with disabilities, so that they may contribute to the nation's socio-economic and technological development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977, Section 8). At the state level, several educational policies have been developed to support marginalized groups, for example, in Plateau, Lagos, Bauchi and Kwara.

Furthermore, this commitment is reflected in numerous federal educational reforms, such as the Universal Primary Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004; UPE, 1976) programme and the National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria (2015). As the names suggest, these are comprehensive government initiatives aimed at achieving universal basic education and addressing special educational needs.

Recently, a dedicated national policy on inclusive education was adopted in Nigeria and designated the National Policy on Inclusive Education (NPIE) in 2023. This new policy (NPIE) is aligned with global best practice in the field of special education, which emphasizes the education of all children within the same learning environment, with adaptations to take account of each child's individual needs (NPIE, 2023). The policy thus aims to move away from the system of special education for learners with disabilities in favour of an approach that promotes equal access for all to an education free from all forms of discrimination. It also calls on institutions to adapt schools and wider society so that they welcome, manage and celebrate everyone's differences.

However, despite governments' efforts to implement the inclusive education policy across the country, the policy's implementation faces significant challenges.

Firstly, according to numerous studies, the challenge of funding is a fundamental obstacle to the implementation of education policies in the country (Ajuwon, 2008; Eskay & Oboegbulem, 2013; Fabunmi, 2005). According to the authors, the allocation of just 2 percent of consolidated intervention funds to the education of learners with disabilities in basic education does not demonstrate a political commitment to genuine educational inclusion and will not provide the necessary resources. According to Angwaomaodoko

(2023b), most states struggle to access these funds, as the law requires them to contribute 50 percent in the form of taxes or projects before they can benefit from them.

Secondly, there is a gap between policy intentions and their implementation. The inclusive education policy is a federal policy that must be adopted in all states. However, the majority of the states have not yet adopted it. According to an education monitoring report published by UNESCO, only 8 of the 36 states have implemented an inclusive education policy (Pinnock, 2020).

Although the fields of special and inclusive education have been the subject of numerous studies in Nigeria since the first national policy on education in 1977, no study has yet been conducted specifically on the six geopolitical regions. At the regional level, to the best of our knowledge, only one study has analyzed inclusive education practices in South-West Nigeria by exploring the attitudes of teachers and parents towards addressing special educational needs (Adeniyi & Adeyemi, 2015).

Our research is therefore relevant in that it aims to provide an overview of inclusive education in Nigeria, across the six geopolitical zones, to understand its various dimensions within the context of a federal and diverse country. As previously mentioned, the federal states have constitutional authority to oversee and administer education. Through a study of six states (Bauchi, Edo, Enugu, Kaduna, Kwara and Lagos), each situated within a wider geopolitical zone, we seek to understand how inclusive education policies are formulated in the regions, the specific trends and characteristics of these policies, and the factors that underpin them.

In fact, the study will reveal the regional dynamics that influence the development of inclusive education policies.

Objectives of the Study

- Describe the historical evolution of inclusive education policy in Nigeria.
- Examine the dimensions of inclusive education policy in Nigeria.
- Analyze how inclusive education policies have been developed in selected Nigerian states representing the six geopolitical zones.

Research Questions

- How is inclusive education developed at the federal and state levels?
- What implementation strategies are adopted by states?

Literature Review

Research on inclusive education in Nigeria has evolved considerably over the past three decades, reflecting changing national priorities and increasing influence from international frameworks. Early studies primarily focused on the historical foundations of special education and the socio-political factors shaping educational policy, while more recent research has examined policy implementation, stakeholder perceptions, teacher preparedness, legal reforms, and the extent to which inclusive education aligns with global human rights principles. Collectively, the literature demonstrates that although Nigeria has made notable

progress in developing inclusive education policies, significant challenges continue to hinder effective implementation across the country.

The earliest studies emphasized the historical and contextual factors that influenced the development of inclusive education. Obiakor et al. (1990) and Obiakor (1998) argued that cultural beliefs, poverty, political instability, corruption, and regional inequalities constrained the implementation of Nigeria's early special education policies. Similarly, Fabunmi (2005) demonstrated that historical experiences, dating from the colonial period through the post-independence era, continued to shape educational planning and policy development. These studies consistently recommended stronger legislation, increased funding, continuous policy evaluation, and greater recognition of Nigeria's cultural and regional diversity when designing educational reforms.

As inclusive education became increasingly associated with international human rights discourse, researchers shifted their attention toward legal and policy frameworks. Ajuwon (2008) examined the philosophical, sociological, and legal barriers to inclusion and found that inadequate teacher preparation, limited resources, and persistent social prejudice remained major obstacles. Likewise, Akinbola (2010) argued that although international human rights instruments recognize every child's right to education, Nigeria's legal framework has yet to provide sufficient protection for children with disabilities. Other scholars also highlighted structural and socio-political barriers that continue to affect policy implementation, despite repeated revisions of the National Policy on Education and the introduction of initiatives such as the Universal Basic Education programme.

Teacher preparedness has emerged as one of the most widely studied themes in the literature. Several studies indicate that teachers generally support the principles of inclusive education but often lack the professional knowledge and practical skills required to implement it effectively. Surveys conducted by Fakolade et al. (2009), Ajuwon (2012), and Onu et al. (2012) found that professionally trained teachers demonstrate more positive attitudes toward inclusion than untrained teachers and that continuous professional development significantly improves teachers' confidence and competence. However, many teachers still rely on outdated instructional methods and report insufficient training for working with learners with disabilities.

Another recurring concern in the literature is the lack of adequate educational resources and infrastructure. Studies consistently report shortages of specialist teachers, assistive technologies, accessible school buildings, Braille materials, hearing aids, adapted toilets, and other facilities necessary for inclusive learning environments. These shortages undermine policy implementation and contribute to unequal educational opportunities for learners with disabilities. Eskay et al. (2013) further observed that the absence of clear legislative support, combined with insufficient funding and difficulties identifying diverse learning needs, has slowed the transition from segregated special education to genuinely inclusive schooling.

Overall, the literature reveals a gradual shift in Nigerian inclusive education from a predominantly medical and charity-oriented understanding of disability toward social and human rights perspectives. While policy documents increasingly reflect international commitments to inclusion, implementation continues to be shaped by contextual realities, including political commitment, financial capacity, cultural attitudes, institutional readiness, and teacher competence. Most existing studies focus on individual states, specific stakeholder groups, or particular implementation challenges, resulting in a fragmented understanding of

policy development. Comparatively little research has examined how state policies relate to the federal framework or how different contextual conditions influence policy evolution across multiple states. This study addresses that gap by providing a comparative analysis of inclusive education policies across six Nigerian states, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the development of inclusive education policy within Nigeria's education system.

Conceptual Framework

Models of Disability

The development of inclusive education is linked to four models of disability (Save the Children, 2016). The history of models for understanding disability provides a better understanding of how the concept of inclusive education has gradually evolved. Each period has shaped a particular way of viewing learners with disabilities and determining the place they should occupy in schools.

The Charitable Model (1800–1900)

Religious organizations have exerted a significant influence on the care and education of people with disabilities (Kiran, 2024). Indeed, the charitable model is rooted in the belief that people with disabilities are in a pitiable condition and, consequently, require assistance. From a religious perspective, caring for people with disabilities was seen as a way of putting God's love into practice, sometimes leading to the establishment of special schools or orphanages where basic education could be provided. In some contexts, these services were provided in collaboration with charitable organizations, particularly in the form of alms or temporary aid (Retief et al., 2018). Nevertheless, according to Slee (2011), this practice has been criticized for reinforcing exclusion and discrimination.

The Medical Model of Disability (1900–1970)

The medical model of disability views disability as a pathology (Chalise, 2024). This model was developed in connection with the education of people with physical and intellectual impairments in residential schools (Nordstrom, 1986), which, according to Parsons (1951) and Slee (2011), primarily required specialized medical intervention for specific impairments. Armstrong et al. (2010) noted that educating children with disabilities was comparable to solving a technical problem that requires identifying the nature of the problem before administering a remedy. The authors argue that, although the approach is rigorous and demanding in terms of human and material resources, it prioritizes the diagnosis of health problems over education. Portalier (2021) noted the role of European specialists in the education of marginalized children within the educational system of the time.

The Social Model of Disability (1980–2000)

The social model of disability emerged in the 1970s, viewing disability as a barrier arising from the environment (UNESCO, 2020). This model differs from the medical model in that it perceives disability as a mechanism used against minorities to reinforce their discrimination within society.

Consequently, disability has become a social phenomenon, creating barriers for people with disabilities (Kopito, 2024). Thus, social practices act as an obstacle preventing people with disabilities from participating in everyday civic activities (Kiran, 2024). Indeed, the focus is no longer on individual differences and personal deficits, but rather on transforming society so that it meets specific needs; and as long as society does not challenge its view of disability, people with disabilities will continue to face social exclusion (Slee, 2011). The social model is said to have made it possible to challenge the relationship between power, politics and social control, giving rise to the human rights-based approach to inclusion (UNESCO, 2020).

The Human Rights Model (2000–2025)

The human rights approach is primarily enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and is further underpinned by the principle of education that is available, accessible, appropriate and adaptable (UNESCO, 2020). Under the provisions of the Convention, states are responsible for providing an environment conducive to the exercise of the rights of persons with disabilities, including support mechanisms that facilitate their independent living. This model has helped to universalize the rights of these individuals by consolidating them through legal and policy frameworks (Boucher et al., 2011).

In summary, these models have gradually shifted the perspective on disability from a logic of charity and individual correction to an approach based on equality, social justice and the full and equal participation of all learners.

Methodology

A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted. Qualitative research involves understanding concepts and describing the complex nature of human beings. It seeks to answer questions that are difficult to address using quantitative methodologies (Fortin & Gagnon, 2022). It involves an in-depth examination and explanation of the meaning of a social or human issue through the collection of non-numerical data, from which themes and underlying principles can be deduced. Furthermore, the approach emphasizes the content of the documents in order to reveal themes and groups of salient concepts that help to interpret the situation under study (Fortin & Gagnon, 2022).

Rationale for the Selection of States

The Federal Republic of Nigeria gained independence on 1 October 1960. Administratively, it comprises thirty-six states and a federal capital territory, divided into six geopolitical zones reflecting diverse ethnocultural affinities (National Population Commission, 2000). According to the National Constitution, each state constitutes a quasi-independent entity with executive, legislative and judicial powers enabling it to formulate and implement public policies, particularly in the areas of education, security, health and the economy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

For our study, six states were carefully selected on the basis of the following three criteria: their location within geopolitical zones, the existence of an inclusive education policy, and the adoption of a legislative framework supporting the education of people with disabilities.

Firstly, we selected the states based on their membership of the country's various geopolitical zones. In other words, each of the states represents a geopolitical region of Nigeria, thereby allowing us to take into account the regional dynamics that characterize them. The states include Bauchi in the north-east, Edo in the south-south, Enugu in the south-east, Kwara in the north-central, Kaduna in the north-west and Lagos in the south-west (National Population Commission, 2000).

Secondly, we considered the adoption of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Prohibition Act 2018, as this is the national legislation that sets out the requirements for the inclusive education of people with disabilities. It lays the foundation for the development of inclusive education policy in the country (Adejoro, 2024). The Act provides for free public education up to secondary level and the provision of infrastructure to support their education, thereby laying the cornerstone for the development of inclusive education policies at the State level. However, of the thirty-six states, only twenty have adopted the Act (Adejoro, 2024).

Finally, our third criterion concerns those states that have developed an inclusive education policy following the adoption of the law (Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Prohibition Act 2018). According to a UNESCO Global Monitoring Report on Education, only eight Nigerian states are reported to have drawn up some form of education policy, namely Bauchi, Borno, Edo, Enugu, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kwara and Lagos (Pinnock, 2020).

Results and Discussion

Historical Evolution of Inclusive Education in Nigeria

The development of Nigeria's National Policy on Inclusive Education reflects a gradual shift from segregated special education toward a more inclusive education system. The 2017 National Policy on Inclusive Education was developed to harmonize national efforts to improve access to quality education for all learners. It was influenced by international commitments such as the Salamanca Declaration of 1994 and the Dakar World Education Forum of 2000 (FME, 2017). It established inclusive education based on the principles of social justice, equity, non-discrimination, and recognition of learners' diverse educational needs.

As a national commitment, inclusive education is a fundamental philosophy aimed at removing all forms of barriers to education so that every learner can flourish and succeed at school, and the Nigerian government appears committed to ensuring that no citizen is left behind.

Our analysis will be based on five main themes, namely: policy guidelines, teacher training, digital teaching and learning, collaboration, and the issue of policy funding. These themes will enable us to understand the nature of the policies in the six states.

Policy Orientations

Firstly, the policy orientations underpinning inclusive education policy vary from one state to another. On the one hand, some states have a singular vision of inclusive education and recognize education as a fundamental right of every child. This is the case in Kwara State, where the first policy aimed to include children and young people with albinism in mainstream state schools. The policy provides all the necessary support for the education of

those with albinism, such as the provision of clothing and assistive devices, as well as covering their transport costs. Similarly, the KwaraLEARN initiative aims to transform primary education through the integration of digital tools. Thanks to the programme, around 3,500 teachers in state primary schools have already been trained in the use of digital tools in teaching to improve academic outcomes. Furthermore, some states offer both the full inclusion of pupils with special needs in mainstream schools and segregated education for learners with disabilities. This hybrid approach is implemented in Bauchi, Enugu, Kaduna, Lagos, and Edo. For example, in Bauchi State, educational centres catering exclusively for children and young people with disabilities have been established in every town, such as in Yelwa and Azare. Similarly, in Edo State, there are Edo Progressive Schools for children in rural areas, as well as the EDOBEST initiative, which aims to provide basic education for all through the digitalization of learning.

Human Resources

The quality and quantity of teachers are central elements of the policies examined. Several studies have revealed various obstacles related to this issue. According to numerous studies, most teachers lack the skills required to cater to specific needs (Ajuwon, 2008; Angwaomaodoko, 2023a, 2023b). The situation is complex in state schools, where there is a high pupil-to-teacher ratio. For example, the teacher-pupil ratio was 1:73 in Kaduna and 1:79 in Bauchi, respectively (Alabelewe, 2024; Owolabi, 2023).

However, the states do provide initial and in-service training for teachers in special educational needs. In Lagos and Kaduna, teacher training programmes focus on specialization in sign language and the development of positive attitudes towards disability. In contrast, training in Kwara, Edo, and Enugu focuses on the acquisition of technological skills.

Digital Education

Digital teaching and learning have been highlighted as essential components of inclusive education for achieving basic numeracy and literacy in certain states. For example, in the states of Kwara, Edo, Kaduna, and Lagos, digital tools are integrated into teaching and learning in State primary schools. In other states, such as Bauchi and Enugu, there are digital schools dedicated to the acquisition of basic numeracy and literacy skills for children aged between six and fifteen. In Enugu State, for example, the construction of 260 Enugu Smart Green Schools in each constituency has already begun. Accessible and free from pre-school through to lower secondary level, the State's objective is to break down inequalities and exclusion in order to achieve basic education based on experiential learning.

Community Engagement

Analyses have highlighted the vital role of communities in the state's inclusive policies. These organizations are involved in raising public awareness and organizing training workshops on inclusive education. Their participation has led to successes in the states of Kaduna, Edo, and Bauchi. In contrast to the community-based approach, the states of Kwara and Enugu have relied on the establishment of special committees to promote and manage inclusive education.

Similarly, there have been significant collaborations between the states and private individuals, civil society organizations, international organizations and dedicated associations in the implementation of inclusive education policies across all states. For example, Sightsavers is active in Kaduna, Volontaire International in Enugu, the World Bank and the African Development Bank in Bauchi, the World Bank in Edo, the Albino Foundation in Kwara and Kaduna, and charitable organizations and private individuals in Lagos. These commitments have given rise to numerous initiatives that promote inclusive practices.

Funding of Inclusive Education

We found that, except for Bauchi State, which relies solely on international communities, the other states rely partly on federal funds (2% of the federal government's intervention funds) dedicated to special education. However, according to Agwaomaodoko (2023b), these funds are not readily accessible, particularly as the mechanism requires a matching contribution between the federal government and the states in order to benefit from them. As a result, each state appears to be left behind and must therefore go to great lengths to achieve the goal of inclusive education. This is the case in Kwara State, where the government has developed various strategies, including the establishment of a dedicated state fund based on individual or collective donations, the Universal Basic Education Commission fund, and the development of a technical partnership with the private sector.

The funding strategy differs in Lagos State, where, apart from its reliance on federal funds, the Lagos State Government calls on organizations or individuals to adopt schools. According to a recent study, the 2025 budget allocation in Lagos and Edo states falls well short of national and international benchmarks. In other words, 7.8% and 6.4% respectively, compared with the 26% threshold set by UNESCO and Nigeria (Edo State Government, 2025; Nduihe, 2024). However, Enugu funds inclusive education through dedicated state budget allocations. According to the state's annual budgets for 2025, Enugu is among the states that have exceeded the national and international allocation threshold of 26% (Nduihe, 2024). According to data revealed by Nduihe (2024), the state allocated 32.99% of its state budget to education in 2025.

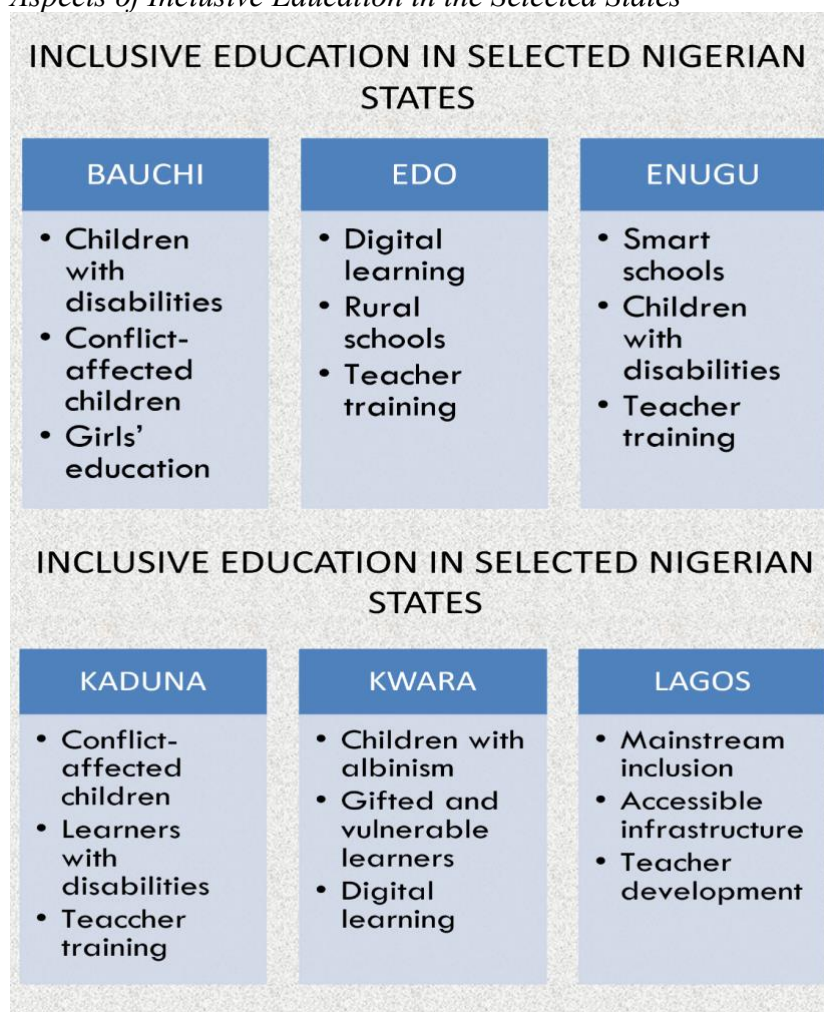
Another new development concerns the approach taken by Kaduna, which has secured a loan at a subsidized rate to promote inclusivity and equity in education (Ministry of Finance, Nigeria, 2025).

Table 1

Historical Development of Inclusive Education Policy in Nigeria

Policy Phase	Policy	Year	Policy Orientation
Segregation Phase	NPE	1977	Special schools for learners with disabilities
Access Phase	UBE	2000	Universal access to basic education
Integration Phase	SNE	2015	Integration of special needs learners
Inclusion Phase	NPiE	2017–2023	Inclusive education as a human right

Source: Author's adaptation.

Figure 1*Aspects of Inclusive Education in the Selected States*

Source: The author.

Conclusion

This study examined the historical development of inclusive education in Nigeria and compared key dimensions of inclusive education policy at the federal and state levels. The findings show that inclusive education has gradually evolved from a special education approach, which largely separated learners with disabilities from mainstream education, toward a broader vision based on social inclusion and human rights. This transformation has been influenced by international frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Salamanca Declaration, and Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The study identified four major dimensions of policy development: legal frameworks, financing, community engagement, and pedagogical innovation. Nigeria's inclusive education policies are supported by national and international legal instruments, but their implementation varies considerably across states. While the federal government provides a broad policy direction, states interpret and apply these recommendations according to their local priorities, resources, and circumstances.

Financing remains one of the major challenges. Although federal funding mechanisms exist, access to these resources is uneven, leaving many states to rely on their own budgets, community support, private contributions, and international initiatives. Some states, particularly Lagos and Edo, have developed innovative approaches to mobilizing resources, while community and international organizations have supported inclusive initiatives in other states. These practices demonstrate opportunities for strengthening and expanding inclusive education financing across Nigeria.

Community participation also plays an important role in supporting inclusion. Parents, individuals, civil society organizations, and local communities contribute to raising awareness, teacher training, and practical support for learners at risk of exclusion. Such involvement is essential because inclusive education cannot be achieved through government policy alone; it requires broader participation and changes in attitudes toward marginalized learners.

Pedagogical innovation, particularly the use of digital technologies, represents another emerging area of progress. States such as Kwara, Enugu, Edo, and Lagos have demonstrated efforts to use digital tools to reduce barriers to learning. However, the effective use of technology requires adequate infrastructure and continuous professional development for teachers and other education personnel.

Despite these developments, the study found that inclusive education policy in Nigeria remains partial. State policies do not consistently incorporate all federal recommendations and are often concentrated on basic education and public schools. The limited evidence concerning private education suggests that inclusive education has yet to become a comprehensive system-wide policy. Consequently, significant differences remain between the national vision of inclusion and its implementation across states.

Overall, Nigeria's inclusive education policy appears to be moving progressively from the medical and charity models toward the social and human rights models of disability. However, achieving meaningful inclusion requires more than the development of policies. The federal government needs to provide clearer guidelines, strengthen coordination among states, improve funding mechanisms, and establish effective monitoring and evaluation systems. States, in turn, need sufficient flexibility and resources to adapt national policies to their local contexts.

The 2023 policy marks a significant departure from the earlier integration and segregation approaches. Rather than expecting learners with special educational needs to fit into an existing system, it promotes an education system capable of adapting to the diverse needs of learners. The policy therefore represents a movement toward the social and human rights models of disability, with the broader goal of ensuring equal access, participation, and quality education for all learners in Nigeria (FME, 2023).

Therefore, for Nigeria to move closer to international standards of inclusive education, future policy efforts should focus on ensuring equal access, meaningful participation, and successful learning outcomes for all learners. A coordinated and sustained national strategy, supported by adequate resources, teacher preparation, community engagement, technological innovation, and systematic monitoring, will be essential for turning the country's commitment to inclusive education into consistent practice.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. Additionally, Zotero was used to store and manage some of the electronic sources. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly and Zotero, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from appropriate and systematic conduct of the research.

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