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Availability and Challenges of Inclusive Lower Primary Education Schools

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ABSTRACT

Despite the importance of inclusive education to children, parents, and society, it is worrisome. It is pertinent to note that there is paucity and no up-to-date literature on the availability of inclusive education schools, especially in Nigeria, as this call for a holistic investigation into the availability of inclusive education schools, especially at the lower primary education level. The research design for the study is Mixed methods (triangulation Quan + Qual). Data were collected from primary data sources mainly documents. The Inclusive Education Schools Availability Checklist (IESAC) was used to collect data. Descriptive statistics of simple percentages and thematic were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that inclusive education primary schools are available in Lagos while Osun, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, and Ekiti do not have inclusive education primary schools. Lagos State has 31 inclusive education units, while Osun, Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, and Ekiti have no unit for inclusive education. It concluded that only Lagos State has a point for realizing and making education available to all children (able and special needs). Meanwhile, Lagos State is still faced with challenges such as underfunding, lack of adequate resources, and many others. Hence, the government at all levels should make provisions for the effective implementation of inclusive education policy through the establishment of inclusive education schools across the states.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first stage of formal education is lower primary education, which many scholars have termed the “foundational level” upon which every level of formal education is built. The position of lower primary education covering primary I – III in Nigeria makes it the best option to introduce inclusive education since inclusive education is garnered to make education available and accessible to every child without any form of discrimination either from teachers or peers. Nigerian government joined their counterpart to adopt inclusive education as enshrined in the National Policy on Education in the year 2004 (Etor *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, it is expected that inclusive education should have gained ground in Nigeria after seventeen years of adoption as an educational provision.

Southwest Nigeria has proven to show interest in providing quality education to its children, which is evident in their always embracing any educational practices that can provide quality education. One of the importance of this study is to provide empirical data on the availability of and challenges facing inclusive lower primary education in Southwest Nigeria, and the second importance is to further contribute to the existing body of knowledge on inclusive lower primary education literature in Nigeria and lastly, provide recommendations that will guide education stakeholders such as parents, teachers, government, and NGO on inclusive lower primary education.

Primary education is the first formal education stage, which focuses on the learning activities that can promote holistic development (physical, intellectual and language, and socio-emotional) of children. Scholars had identified the importance of primary education such as brain development, social skills, and literacy skills. (Adetoro, 2014; Olufunke & Olaleye, 2014). It is, however, important to note that failure to deliver quality primary education to children has a long-lasting negative impact on children and society. Just like many countries of the world, the Nigerian government also understands and appreciates the importance of primary education, and this is reflected in the eight objectives of primary education as stated in the National Policy on Education (Adetoro, 2014; Olufunke & Olaleye, 2014).

Nigerian government ensured that primary education is free to all its citizens in government-owned schools as well as allowed private individuals to establish and provide primary education to complement the government in ensuring that quality primary education is available. Nigerian government divided primary education into two stages: lower primary and upper primary education. The focus of this study is on the former stage which is known as lower primary education. The lower primary is the first three stages of formal education which spans three years (Primary I-III). Lower primary education covers the last stage of early childhood education, which happens to end at the age of eight (Salami & Egbedeyi, 2018).

At the stage of lower primary education, children are open to learning new behavior which can either make or mar their future, therefore, the education that children will receive must lead to holistic development; that will prepare them for future challenges, social acceptance of themselves and others without any iota of biases or discrimination, social awareness among others. Due to the importance of lower primary education on children’s holistic development, then it becomes imperative to introduce inclusive education to them early; to prepare them to adapt, interact and accept their peers either with special needs or regular. Also, if the right to quality and equal access to education is to be achieved then inclusive education is necessary for children (Hamzat & Morenikeji, 2019; Salami, 2013).

The process of giving free and equal education to all children irrespective of whom they are; is known as inclusive education. Inclusive education has been defined by various

researchers and scholars in and outside Nigeria with a common bottom line which is education for both regular and special educational needs children in the mainstream or regular school with a one-trained professional teacher with special needs assistant teachers (Okongo *et al.*, 2015). The feature of inclusive education is that children from different backgrounds and needs must learn from one source of knowledge (teacher) within the same classroom. As established by literature inclusive education has numerous benefits not only to the pupils but every educational stakeholder (Salami & Egbedeyi, 2018; Salami, 2013; Fakolade & Adeniyi, 2009). Hence, this practice should begin at the lower primary education to create a sense of belonging, acceptance, and empathy between regular and special needs children in a classroom and outside the classroom (Odebiyi, 2014; Garuba, 2013).

Inclusive lower primary education can be defined as the educational practice which takes place from primary I-III in a regular classroom or school setting which allows both regular and special needs children to participate in the learning activities. The importance of inclusive lower primary education has social, economic, and academic benefits for the pupils, teachers, and society (Okongo *et al.*, 2015). The social benefits as identified by literature are: special needs pupils develop language more effectively if they are with pupils who speak normally and appropriately, promote good moral and acceptable behavior from the pupils and better socialization with regular pupils, improve self-respect and self-esteem for pupils with special needs. Children display empathy and love for one another; pupils understand and respect individual differences (Egbedeyi, 2020).

Having established the importance of inclusive lower primary education, the Nigerian government in the year 2004 first recognized inclusive education in the National Policy on Education as one of the provisions for special needs children. Many researchers had investigated inclusive education, for instance, Fakolade and Adeniyi (2009) discovered that one out of 36 states in Nigeria had started inclusive education while other states coming up, however, Salami (2013) reported that only four states like Abia, Lagos, Oyo and Plateau in Nigeria, claimed to practice inclusive but integration education. To this study, availability connotes the establishment of inclusive education schools, this establishment covers making the existing regular primary schools conform to the requirement or building of new structures to accommodate inclusive education in Nigeria, yet there are no studies based on the literature available to the researchers as at the period of this research work that examined the establishment of inclusive lower primary school in Nigeria. Therefore, the past seventeen (17) years ought to have improved the implementation of inclusive education, including the establishment of new or modified existing schools for lower primary pupils in Nigeria, especially in the Southwest region.

Southwest Nigeria over the years is known to be a hub of formal education in Nigeria because the region had produced prominent people in all spheres of life. This feat could be traced to the early embrace and introduction of free formal education to her citizens during the defaulted regional government. Southwest Nigeria has six States which are Oyo, Lagos, Ogun, Ekiti, Ondo, and Osun states with a population of about 27millions according to the 2006 population census. The choice of the southwest is based on the quest for formal education which makes the region stand out, therefore, it is not out of place to expect such a region that is known to love formal education not to embrace and implement inclusive education. Thus, the study aims to know if inclusive education is available and the state of it. Also, the study is interested in providing empirical data which can either create new or add to the existing body of knowledge.

Despite efforts by the government and other relevant stakeholders towards accelerating and implementing Education for All policies and principles, Nigeria's inclusive education practices are still faced with myriads of challenges among them are negative attitudes and behavior of educators, policymakers, peers, and parents towards the nature and potentials of challenged children to learn and acquire skill; More importantly, underfunding poses a major threat to inclusive education is lack of funding. UNESCO stated that funding is considered a major limitation to the implementation and practice of inclusion. Inclusive education gulps up a huge sum of money as there will be a provision of learning resources or equipment for all categories of learners irrespective of their peculiarities. Hence, inadequate funding serves as a major barrier to achieving Education for all policies (Maulida, 2019).

More so, Cortiella (2009) identified the paucity of educational resources; lack of inclusive schools, inadequate facilities, and lack of teachers and shortage of professionally trained qualified staff, lack of modern learning or instructional materials as challenges facing practices of inclusive education. Another constraint is the attitudinal problems of the policymakers who do not understand the concept and need for inclusive education.

Other factors are shortage of resources which include classrooms, desks, textbooks such as talking books for the blind, Braille machines for the blind, and classrooms constructed using ramps to facilitate the movements of students with physical disabilities such as the lame and failure to embrace the assistive technology as most schools still use outdated technology to do even office work, hence cannot afford computer-based assistive technology for their students with special Educational needs such as large prints, on-screen reading, compact discs, and also talking calculators (Kamble & Gaiwad, 2021; Rahmat, 2021; Palma *et al.*, 2021). The infrastructural deficit in schools makes it difficult to access quality and meaningful educational programs. All these factors should therefore be critically investigated to achieve the vision of making education available and accessible to all children irrespective of their peculiarities.

EFA Nigerian Report Cards revealed that education in Nigeria is still faced with challenges that can mar the effectiveness of inclusive education policies and practices and these include a lack of adequate available reliable and up-to-date baseline data to facilitate effective planning: inappropriate socio-cultural and religious practices; Massive neglect in the development of functional school libraries over the years and Erratic and inadequate funding of projects and programs. Identified challenges facing effective inclusive education and these include ridicule by other students, teacher's inability to use the individualized instructional methods of teaching, the expensive nature of inclusive education, lack of understanding of the concept and definition of inclusive education, lack of accurate data on the number of children with disabilities.

The chief proponents of the classical liberal theory of equal opportunities are Sherman and Wood (1982). The theory affirms the place and need for equal opportunities in education for all eligible learners irrespective of socioeconomic, political, or ethnic background (Faddilah, 2022). The theory posited that every learner is embedded with the potential to acquire knowledge and skills. Hence, educational policies and programs should be designed to meet learners' needs and aspirations and remove contending issues that could impede the holistic development of such individuals. Among the contending, factors are socio-economic factors, sociocultural factors, geographical factors, and school-based factors as this limit the learning ability, and optimum utilization of inherent potentials of learners with a disability to take since disability is not inability (Akinyi *et al.*, 2015). It is therefore expedient to note that inclusive education will enhance the socio-emotional development of challenged learners. Their social interaction with other categories of learners will help to improve their self-

esteem, social belonging, and participation among others. The theory demands that opportunities be made available for individuals to go through all levels of education (primary, secondary, and tertiary) to which access will not be determined by the disability of the learners but based on the individual's capability.

Educational provisions that consider all categories of learners will provide the basis for even economic opportunities where all classes, races, and gender could benefit economically from excellent academic performance. The theory further states that social mobility will be promoted by an equal opportunity for all citizens to education. Researchers have strongly given total support to the government for free and compulsory Primary education for all categories of children.

This has brought a paradigm shift to educational processes in the areas of curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and groupings of pupils. The onus is therefore also on other relevant stakeholders such as local communities, parent groups, associations of special needs persons, churches, and community leaders to relentlessly work for the inclusion of special needs children into local schools in partnership with the government and professionals.

The main objective of the study was to find out the availability and challenges of inclusive education schools in southwest Nigeria, and the specific objective is to report the total number of inclusive lower primary education schools available.

The study will answer the following question:

- (i) Is inclusive lower primary education school available in Southwest Nigeria?
- (ii) How many inclusive lower primary education schools are available in Southwest Nigeria?
- (iii) What are the challenges facing inclusive lower primary education in Southwest Nigeria?

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This research adopted mixed methods. Mixed methods allow robust submission or reporting of research findings as reported by various scholars. The advantage of mixed methods outweighed the disadvantages, one of the advantages of mixed methods is that it provides rich information on a studied phenomenon and creates a deeper understanding of the research study while one of its advantages, is that it is time-consuming.

In this study, the triangulation type of QUAN + qual mixed methods were employed. Quan + qual implied that researchers collected more quantitative data than qualitative data. To collect quantitative data, the descriptive survey research design was used. Descriptive survey research design as described by various scholars is the research design that describes a given phenomenon without manipulating the independent variable (Egbedeyi, 2020).

The phenomenological qualitative approach was used to collect qualitative data. The phenomenological approach is the description of a phenomenon in words, to provide clarity and understanding of the phenomenon. Given the importance of inclusive lower primary education to regular, special needs children, parents, and teachers, it is necessary to report the availability in Southwest Nigeria. The population of the study was all six states in Southwest Nigeria. The researchers are interested to know the total number of inclusive lower primary education in Southwest, Nigeria. Two instruments; self-designed were used in this study. The first instrument titled "Inclusive Education Schools Availability Checklist (IESAC)" was used to collect quantitative data.

The instrument was subjected to face and content by the experts in the Department of Special Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. The second instrument titled "Key informant Interview guide" was used to collect qualitative data. To complete the research work, the researchers collected letters of introduction from the Department of Early Childhood and

Educational Foundations, University of Ibadan, Ibadan Nigeria which detailed the purpose of the study, each of the letters was presented at the State Universal Basic Education office to request for the list of inclusive lower primary education schools in each state.

The information collected was recorded in the checklist by the researchers. For the qualitative data, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select one lower primary school teacher from each state, the criteria used for the selection were: the teacher must be willing to participate in the study, he or she must be teaching in a public-owned primary school in any of the Southwest States, and he or she must be teaching in any of the lower primary classes. It is necessary to point out that each interview lasted for a minimum of one hour, and to guide against data attrition, the interview was recorded using a phone recorder. At the end of the selection, 6 lower primary school teachers participated in the study. The interview of the respondents spanned six weeks, the interview was conducted alongside the visitation to the SUBEB office in each state.

The quantitative method was analyzed using descriptive statistics of frequency and percentage count. While the qualitative data were first transcribed by the researchers, we ensured that we crosscheck our notes after the individual transcription of the voice recording to ensure that there was no misrepresentation of respondents' ideas, then, the transcription data were summarised by one of the researchers, before the data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Research question one: Is inclusive lower primary education school available in Southwest Nigeria?

Table 1 shows the availability of inclusive schools in Southwest Nigeria. The detailed analysis reveals that inclusive lower primary education schools are not available in the majority of Southwest Nigeria which accounts for 83.3% while available in one state which accounts for 16.7%. This implies that inclusive lower primary education schools are available in Southwest Nigeria.

Table 1. Inclusive lower primary education school's availability in Southwest Nigeria.

Item	Available	Not Available
Inclusive lower primary education school	1 (16.7%)	5 (83.3%)

3.2. Research question two: How many inclusive lower primary education schools are available in Southwest Nigeria?

Table 2 shows the number of inclusive lower primary education schools in Southwest Nigeria. The detailed analysis reveals that the whole of Southwest Nigeria has 31 inclusive education units.

Table 2. The number of inclusive lower primary schools in Southwest Nigeria.

Item	Number
Inclusive lower primary education school	31

3.3. Research question three: What are the challenges facing inclusive lower primary education in Southwest Nigeria?

The theme of this research is the challenges facing inclusive lower primary education in Southwest Nigeria. Some of the responses reveal that inclusive education is faced with a myriad of challenges. Some of the challenges identified include underfunding of education, negative attitude of educators, peers, policymakers, and society among others; lack of accurate data for decision making; infrastructural deficit, and lack of adequate educational resources among others. The explicit responses are as follows:

- (i) Teacher A: *The school is facing lots of challenges. We do not have enough spacious classrooms that can accommodate all students. So, teachers are finding it difficult to manage the overpopulated class and this can even allow an easy spread of contagious diseases. More so, there are not enough teachers and teaching aids. Most times we only demonstrate instead of using teaching aids and other gadgets.*
- (ii) Teacher B: *Well, the major problems confronting the school are the attitude of the government and other stakeholders to challenge children as well as the lack of resources to teach various categories of children. Government and other stakeholders do not make provisions for children even the children in regular classrooms.*
- (iii) Teacher C: *The school is not operating on inclusive education policies because of the cost implications. The school will have to provide all resources for different categories of children, and this is a lot of money. More so, the teachers are not well trained to handle and manage children in inclusive classes. Many of the teachers are trained and specialize in a particular field and this affects the implementation of inclusive education policies and programs.*
- (iv) Teacher D: *The school is faced with several challenges, and these include underfunding, lack of adequate resources, poor attitude of education stakeholders towards special children, lack of quality human resources, lack of unified curriculum that considers different categories of learners in inclusive schools, and infrastructural deficit among others. These are the factors limiting the school from operating fully-fledged inclusive education.*

The finding of research question one revealed that inclusive lower primary education schools are available in Southwest Nigeria. Though the availability is reported only in Lagos State, which is quite worrisome because the Southwest Nigeria region is usually embracing innovation informal education. Many reasons could have caused the poor availability of inclusive lower primary education schools, one of them is the government's insincerity in the provision of inclusive lower primary which is quite evident in the government's lip service to the advancement of inclusive education over the last seventeen years, especially in the Southwest where there is a belief that the region is receptive to innovation in formal education, but this notion has not translated to the establishment or convert of an existing lower primary school to provide inclusive education. Another factor that is likely to contribute to the lack of implementation of inclusive education is the unclear stand of the National Policy on Education on the provision of inclusive education either to provide or not. This finding supported that of [Fakolade and Adeniyi \(2009\)](#) discovered that one out of 36 states in Nigeria has started inclusive education while other states coming up.

The finding of research question two revealed that Southwest Nigeria has 31 inclusive education units. It is germane to point here that the 31 inclusive education units in Southwest Nigeria were found in Lagos State. It is quite unfortunate that out of six states in the region, it is Lagos State that made effort to establish an inclusive unit in some selected primary

schools in the State whereas other States in the region claimed to practice inclusive education, yet the practice has not led to the establishment of inclusive lower primary education schools talk-less of increase the number of inclusive lower primary schools. The poor outing of the States in Southwest Nigeria connotes that special needs children are left out or not adequately covered in the provision of formal education which tends to lead to no child left behind as the Nigerian government claimed to include all children. This finding supported that [Salami \(2013\)](#) reported that only four states Abia, Lagos, Oyo, and Plateau in Nigeria, claimed to practice inclusive but integration education.

The findings of the research question revealed that Nigeria's inclusive education is faced with a myriad of challenges. Some of the challenges identified include underfunding of education, negative attitude of educators, peers, policymakers, and society among others; lack of accurate data for decision making; infrastructural deficit, and lack of adequate educational resources among others. This is disheartening in Nigeria as these factors are potent forces for a disruptive and unsustainable society. This finding aligns with the study of UNESCO stated that funding is a major constraint to the practice of inclusion; stated that challenges facing effective inclusive education include ridicule by other Students, teachers' inability to use the individualized instructional method of teaching, expensive nature of inclusive education, lack of understanding of the concept and definition of inclusive education, lack of accurate data on the number of children with disabilities.

4. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that only Lagos State has keyed into the realization of making education available to all children (able and special needs). More so, the available schools are still faced with myriads of challenges thereby limiting their effectiveness. Among them are underfunding of education, negative attitude of educators, peers, policymakers, and society among others; lack of accurate data for decision making; infrastructural deficit, and lack of adequate educational resources among others. There is, however, a need for other states to start implementing and ensuring the effectiveness of inclusive education policies, programs, and practices. Based on the research findings, it is therefore recommended that:

- (i) The Southwest governments should make provisions for the effective implementation of inclusive education policy through the establishment of inclusive education schools across the southwestern states.
- (ii) There should be synergy between the government and other education stakeholders to provide realistic inclusive education practices in inclusive education schools as against inclusive education units.
- (iii) Other states in Nigeria should start full implementation of inclusive education policy through the establishment of inclusive education schools and the provision of necessary human and material resources.
- (iv) The government and non-governmental organizations should make provisions for adequate funding and availability of resources in schools.
- (v) Members of the public and other stakeholders should be sensitized on the significance of inclusive education in Nigeria.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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