



Challenges and strategic interventions of inclusive education of children with disabilities in Nigeria: An evaluation of United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) role (2015-2023)

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study investigates challenges hindering inclusive education policies for children with disabilities in Nigeria, specifically evaluating UNICEF interventions (2015–2023). Adopting a mixed-methods design with 400 questionnaire respondents and key informant interviews, the research analyzes implementation barriers. Findings indicate that despite policy commitments, significant obstacles persist: 80.6% of respondents cited insufficient trained staff, followed by financial constraints (76.5%) and inadequate infrastructure (73.4%). Additionally, cultural resistance (54.3%) and policy inconsistency (58%) impede progress, with 52% questioning the sustainability of initiatives without external aid. To address these gaps, stakeholders prioritized expanding teacher training (85.3%), improving facility accessibility (80.1%), and increasing funding (74.9%). The study concludes that achieving global equity standards requires a coordinated, culturally responsive strategy rooted in stronger government ownership and multisectoral collaboration.

Keywords: Inclusive education, children with disabilities, UNICEF, Nigeria, educational policy, teacher training, accessibility, sustainability.

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Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right, enshrined in international legal instruments and essential for both individual empowerment and societal progress (Cernomorî, 2023). This right is especially critical for vulnerable populations, such as children with disabilities, who frequently encounter significant obstacles in accessing quality education (Duminică & Puran, 2018). Moreover, the adoption of the Sustainable

Development Goals particularly Goal 4 has reinforced the global commitment to ensuring inclusive and equitable education for all by 2030 (Broderick, 2018). This objective highlights the importance of fully integrating marginalized groups into educational systems, ensuring that no one is excluded (Polisca, 2022).

Moreover, the prevalent curriculum and teaching methodologies often do not align with the diverse needs of children with disabilities (Fareo, 2020). Conventional educational approaches can



inadvertently marginalize these learners, necessitating substantial curricular reforms to foster a more inclusive environment (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). UNICEF's role in advocating for and facilitating these reforms is critical, as is its initiative in training educators to adopt and implement inclusive teaching practices effectively (Uko, 2019). Another major barrier is the societal attitudes and stigmas associated with disabilities, which can lead to discrimination and exclusion from educational opportunities (Miringa, 2023). These cultural perceptions can significantly hinder the progress towards a more inclusive educational system (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). UNICEF's strategies address these issues through targeted awareness campaigns and community engagement efforts aimed at altering perceptions and advocating for a universally inclusive educational ethos (Nwankwo & Nnatu, 2018). Funding also plays a crucial role in the landscape of inclusive education (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). Adequate and sustainable financial resources are essential for the continuity and expansion of educational programs that cater to children with disabilities (Garba, 2020). This includes not only infrastructural improvements but also specialized training for educators, the provision of adapted learning materials, and comprehensive support services (Nwankwo & Nnatu, 2018). Financial constraints are a persistent challenge, requiring innovative solutions and strategic partnerships to overcome (Ahmed, Isiaka, & Tauheed, 2024).

In addition to domestic efforts, international influences play a pivotal role in shaping the policies and practices of inclusive education in Nigeria (Edokhamhen, 2023). The ratification of international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) commits Nigeria to uphold the educational rights of individuals with disabilities (Umeh, 2018). UNICEF, leveraging its global platform, facilitates the translation of these international mandates into actionable national policies (Olayinka, 2022). This involves not only advocacy but also technical support and capacity building, which are crucial for aligning Nigeria's educational strategies with global best

practices (Umeh, 2024). Furthermore, international donor agencies and non-governmental organizations contribute by providing funding and expertise, thus reinforcing the efforts to implement inclusive education systems (Fareo, 2020).

Looking forward, the trajectory of inclusive education in Nigeria hinges on continuous innovation and adaptability (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). Emerging technologies such as adaptive learning software and accessible educational materials present new opportunities for enhancing learning experiences for children with disabilities (Osalusi & Oyewole, 2016). UNICEF is strategically positioned to advocate for and support the integration of these technologies into the Nigerian educational framework (Nwozor & Okhillu, 2022). This approach is anticipated to not only improve accessibility but also to personalize learning, catering to the unique needs of each student (Aimua & Paul, 2021).

The ongoing evaluation of educational practices, informed by robust data and feedback mechanisms, will enable the iterative improvement of strategies to ensure they remain effective and responsive to the evolving needs of society (Miringa, 2023). By fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, stakeholders can better address the challenges that lie ahead, ensuring that the educational system becomes truly inclusive for all children (Jacob, 2022). The actual implementation of inclusive education policies in Nigeria has been characterized by inconsistency and delays, with a noticeable disparity between policy formulation and practical application (Angwaomaodoko, 2023). This research aims to critically examine the strategic approaches adopted by UNICEF from 2015 to 2023, focusing particularly on how these initiatives have navigated the challenges of policy and practice within the Nigerian educational sector (Oyekan, Ayorinde, & Adenuga, 2023).

By exploring the broader socio-political and economic factors that influence educational policies, this study will provide valuable insights into the complexities of implementing inclusive

education in a developing country like Nigeria. Factors such as political will, economic stability, and prevailing social norms play substantial roles in shaping the educational landscape and determining the success of inclusive policies. This research aims to make a significant contribution to the academic discourse on inclusive education. It seeks to offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and organizations like UNICEF, aimed at enhancing the efficacy of educational strategies. By systematically analyzing both the successes and the shortcomings of current approaches, the study advocates for the development and implementation of more robust and effective educational strategies. These strategies should ensure that all children, particularly those with disabilities, receive the quality education they rightfully deserve and are entitled to under global human rights standards.

Theoretical Framework

Inclusive Education Theory

Inclusive Education Theory is grounded in the principle that all children regardless of their physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional differences should learn together in mainstream educational environments. The theory posits that education systems should adapt to meet the diverse needs of all learners, rather than requiring learners to conform to rigid, standardized educational models (Ainscow, 2020). This concept emerged strongly in the late 20th century in response to the broader global advocacy for human rights, equality, and education for all.

Its development is closely tied to international policy frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), which emphasize the right of children with disabilities to access quality education in inclusive settings (Byrne, 2022). Scholars such as Danforth and Naraian (2015), Graham (2020), and Slee (2018) have expanded on these foundations to define

inclusive education as a transformative approach built on the values of diversity, equity, and participation. These values stress the importance of recognizing individual differences, ensuring equal access to learning opportunities, and involving all students in every aspect of school life. Inclusive Education Theory requires systemic changes in curriculum design, teaching methods, teacher training, infrastructure, and societal attitudes. Implementation often involves teacher development programs, curriculum modifications, and physical accessibility improvements. Organizations such as UNICEF and WHO have operationalized these principles through various interventions across developing countries, including Nigeria (UNICEF, 2019; WHO, 2021).

Critique of the Theory

While Inclusive Education Theory offers a comprehensive vision for equitable education, it is not without limitations. One key critique is the practical challenge of implementation, particularly in low-resource settings where infrastructural and financial constraints are severe. In such contexts, ensuring physical accessibility, adapting curricula, and training teachers adequately often fall short due to limited state capacity. Another limitation is the idealistic assumption of system readiness. The theory tends to assume that schools and policymakers are uniformly willing and prepared to embrace inclusive practices. However, in many cases, resistance from educators, lack of community awareness, and deep-rooted cultural stigmas about disability can obstruct implementation.

Additionally, the theory may underemphasize the complexities of intersectionality. It focuses primarily on disability as a single axis of exclusion, sometimes overlooking how other factors such as poverty, gender, or ethnicity interact to further marginalize learners. Despite these criticisms, Inclusive Education Theory remains a powerful tool for diagnosing exclusion and formulating strategies for more inclusive learning environments, particularly when

adapted to the local context.

Relevance of the theory to the study

Inclusive Education Theory is highly relevant to this study, which examines the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education in Nigeria, with a focus on UNICEF's interventions from 2015 to 2023. The theory serves as a critical framework for analyzing both the structural barriers and potential solutions within the Nigerian educational landscape. In particular, the theory aligns with the study's goal of evaluating policy implementation, as it provides criteria such as participation, access, equity, and systemic responsiveness that can be used to assess the alignment between Nigeria's inclusive education efforts and international benchmarks like the CRPD. It also offers a conceptual basis for assessing UNICEF's programs, including their strategies on teacher training, provision of inclusive materials, and community awareness campaigns. Moreover, the theory supports the study's intent to uncover institutional and societal barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, inflexible curricula, and negative perceptions of disability that hinder educational inclusion in Nigeria. Inclusive Education Theory not only helps to diagnose these issues but also offers actionable pathways for improvement, including the need for stakeholder collaboration, increased resource allocation, and systemic reforms. By anchoring this research in Inclusive Education Theory, the study aims to provide evidence-based recommendations that promote access, participation, and meaningful learning outcomes for all children especially those with disabilities within an inclusive educational environment.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to examine UNICEF's efforts in promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods allows for a detailed and balanced

understanding of the subject matter by combining numerical data with personal and institutional experiences.

The qualitative aspect of the study involved the use of interviews. Interviews were conducted with selected stakeholders, including policymakers, teachers, and community representatives, to gather their views on the implementation and challenges of inclusive education. In addition, relevant documents such as policy reports, government publications, and UNICEF strategy papers were reviewed to support the findings and provide background information. This helped identify the progress made, gaps in implementation, and how existing efforts align with global standards such as the Salamanca Statement and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The quantitative aspect consisted of questionnaire distribution to a sample of education professionals, special educators, and UNICEF programme officers. The questionnaires were designed to collect data on participants' backgrounds, knowledge of inclusive education policies, and experiences with inclusive practices. The data collected were analyzed using appropriate statistical tools to identify common patterns, challenges, and the overall impact of UNICEF's interventions. The choice of a mixed-methods design is based on the need to combine factual data with personal experiences to provide a clearer picture of the situation. This approach allows the researcher to draw reliable conclusions and make practical recommendations for improving inclusive education in Nigeria.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents findings obtained from both questionnaire responses and key informant interviews. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 387 were retrieved and valid for analysis, representing a 96.8% response rate. This relatively high retrieval rate was achieved through personal administration and on-the-spot collection, which minimized non-responses. In addition, qualitative interviews

were conducted with teachers, special educators, government officials, and community

representatives to complement the quantitative findings and provide deeper contextual insights.

Table 1.1: Respondents' View on Primary Barriers to Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies in Nigeria
(Multiple responses)

Barrier	Frequency	% of Respondents (N = 387)
Insufficient trained staff	312	80.6%
Financial constraints	296	76.5%
Lack of infrastructure	284	73.4%
Policy inconsistency	232	59.9%
Cultural resistance	210	54.3%
Others (e.g., lack of political will)	96	24.8%

Source: Field Survey, June 2025

Note. Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N = 387). Cumulative percentages exceed 100%.

Table 1.1 shows that the most frequently cited challenge was “insufficient trained staff” (80.6%), followed by “financial constraints” (76.5%) and “lack of infrastructure” (73.4%). Interview respondents confirmed this, with one educator stating: “We’re willing to help these children, but most teachers don’t have the skills

or materials.” Another participant noted: “Even when policies are in place, they are often poorly communicated or inconsistently applied across states.” These findings reveal that a combination of resource deficits, training gaps, and weak enforcement hinders the success of inclusive education policies.

Table 1.2: Perceived Significance of Barriers to UNICEF's Educational Initiatives

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very significant	182	47.00%
Significant	128	33.00%
Moderately significant	41	10.50%
Slightly significant	24	6.25%
Not significant	13	3.25%
Total	387	100%

Source: Field Survey, June 2025

As shown in Table 1.2, 80% of respondents rated the barriers as either “very significant” or “significant.” This aligns with interviews, where one UNICEF field officer said: “Policy adoption is often not matched with resources, especially at

the local government level.” The data reflect a strong consensus that these challenges are deeply rooted and require urgent institutional and community-level attention.

Table 1.3: Respondents’ Perception of UNICEF’s Impact on Reducing Discrimination and Stigma

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very significant impact	83	21.50%
Moderate impact	137	35.50%
Little to no impact	108	28.00%
Negative impact	58	15.00%
Total	387	100%

Source: Field Survey, June 2025

Table 1.3 reveals mixed opinions on UNICEF’s role in addressing stigma. A total of 57% acknowledged a positive impact, but 43% felt the effect was minimal or negative. One community leader said: “Awareness is better in cities, but

many rural families still hide their children.” These findings suggest that while progress has been made, awareness campaigns must be deepened and localized, especially in rural and conservative communities.

Table 1.4: Perceived Sustainability of UNICEF’s Inclusive Education Initiatives without External Support

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Not sustainable	201	52.00%
Moderately sustainable	140	35.00%
Highly sustainable	50	13.00%
Total	387	100%

Source: Field Survey, June 2025

More than half the respondents (52%) believe UNICEF’s initiatives are not sustainable without continued external support. Interviews

confirmed this concern. A special educator remarked: “Once the donor project ends, we go back to old methods. There’s no handover

system.” This highlights the need for stronger institutional integration and governmental

ownership of inclusive education efforts.

Table 1.5: Most Critical Needs to Improve Inclusive Education in Nigeria
(Multiple responses)

Need	Frequency	% of Respondents (N = 387)
Training for educators	330	85.3%
More accessible facilities	310	80.1%
Policy advocacy	278	71.8%
Public awareness campaigns	250	64.6%
Financial support for families	235	60.7%

Source: Field Survey, June 2025

Note. Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages are based on the total number of respondents (N = 387). Cumulative percentages exceed 100%.

Table 1.5 reflects respondents’ views on the most pressing areas needing improvement. “Training for educators” (85.3%) ranked highest. An interviewee observed: “Some teachers still see disability as a burden, not a responsibility.

Without training, inclusive education is just a policy on paper.” The findings confirm that capacity-building and inclusive infrastructure remain top priorities.

Table 1.6: Suggested Strategies to Improve UNICEF’s Inclusive Education Initiatives
(Multiple responses allowed)

Strategy	Frequency	% of Respondents (N = 387)
Expand training programmes	330	85.3%
Improve facility accessibility	310	80.1%
Increase funding allocations	290	74.9%
Enhance stakeholder collaboration	280	72.4%
Strengthen policy enforcement	250	64.6%

Source: Field Survey, June 2025

Respondents emphasized the need for practical, scalable actions training, infrastructure, funding, and better coordination. One policy analyst

stated: “Inclusive education cannot succeed without shared commitment from ministries, NGOs, and local communities.” These findings

suggest that future efforts must be multi-stakeholder and locally grounded.

Discussion of Findings

This study set out to explore the major challenges hindering the implementation of inclusive education policies for children with disabilities in Nigeria, and to propose actionable strategies to improve future programmes and policies. The findings from both the questionnaire and interviews reveal a web of institutional, infrastructural, and socio-cultural barriers that continue to undermine the realization of inclusive education, despite existing policy commitments and intervention efforts, particularly by UNICEF.

Regarding the identification of challenges, the findings show that the most frequently reported barriers were insufficient trained staff (80.6%), financial constraints (76.5%), and lack of infrastructure (73.4%). Since respondents were allowed to select more than one challenge, these percentages represent the proportion of respondents who highlighted each barrier rather than mutually exclusive categories. In addition to these leading constraints, respondents also mentioned related infrastructural issues such as poor electricity supply, inadequate access to clean water, and weak transportation systems, which though not the central focus of this study, further illustrate how basic services intersect with education outcomes. The survey results are strongly reinforced by interview data, where multiple stakeholders noted that teachers lack specialized training to handle learners with diverse needs, and that public schools remain poorly equipped to support inclusive learning. These challenges are consistent with earlier studies which found that many Nigerian teachers have limited awareness of inclusive pedagogies due to inadequate pre-service and in-service training (Angwaomaodoko, 2023; Shah, 2020). Furthermore, Angwaomaodoko (2023) emphasized that resource limitations in schools, such as a lack of ramps, accessible toilets, and learning aids, remain a major barrier to accessibility and participation for children with

disabilities.

Another key finding is the presence of cultural and attitudinal barriers. Over half of the respondents (54.3%) identified cultural resistance as a hindrance to inclusive education, and a combined 43.0% of respondents felt that UNICEF's programmes had had little (28.0%) or even negative (15.0%) impact in changing societal perceptions. Interviewees described situations where children with disabilities were hidden at home due to stigma, especially in rural areas. These findings are supported by the work of Adebayo (2023), who observed that negative societal beliefs, combined with low parental awareness, significantly reduce school enrolment among children with disabilities in Nigeria. Additionally, the inconsistent enforcement of education policies across different states was cited by 59.9% of respondents, echoing Obizue and Enomah's (2025) assertion that policy fragmentation and lack of accountability mechanisms weaken implementation outcomes.

One major concern that emerged is the sustainability of UNICEF's initiatives. More than half of the respondents (53.7%) believed the programmes would not continue successfully without donor support. This view was echoed in interviews, where stakeholders expressed concern that gains often reverse once external funding ends. Obizue and Enomah (2025) stress that donor-funded initiatives in developing countries often fail to produce long-term impact unless governments assume financial and operational responsibility.

Turning to strategies, the findings also identified clear strategies for strengthening inclusive education in Nigeria. Respondents overwhelmingly prioritized the training of educators (85.3%) and the improvement of physical infrastructure (80.1%) as top needs. This view was reinforced by interviewees, who noted that equipping teachers with inclusive pedagogical skills and adapting school facilities are the most foundational elements of successful inclusion. These findings are supported by Tomori (2020), who emphasized that inclusive teacher education is critical in shaping teacher

attitudes and building competence for managing diverse classrooms. Policy-related strategies also featured prominently. Approximately 71.8% of respondents stressed the need for robust policy advocacy, while 74.9% called for increased funding allocations. Interview participants pointed out that although inclusive education appears in national policy frameworks, its implementation is often not prioritized in budgetary decisions. This echoes Angwaomaodoko (2023), who reported that despite national commitments, inclusive education receives little direct funding in most state education budgets. Furthermore, the study found that 64.6% of respondents believed that targeted public awareness campaigns were essential to change mindsets and reduce stigma. This view aligns with Adebayo's (2023) findings, which revealed that community engagement and family-level awareness are essential to expanding access for children with disabilities.

Another major recommendation from both the survey and interviews was the need for greater stakeholder collaboration and stronger monitoring systems. About 72.4% of respondents emphasized the importance of working closely with communities, government agencies, and civil society organizations. Respondents also stressed that inclusive education initiatives must be integrated into national planning systems, and not run as separate donor-dependent projects. As Obizue and Enomah (2025) argue, inclusion must be embedded across all levels of education governance, from school-based management to national ministries, in order to ensure continuity and effectiveness.

The findings of this study confirm that the challenges facing inclusive education in Nigeria are both deep-rooted and multi-layered. However, they also reveal a roadmap for progress, grounded in practical recommendations from education stakeholders. By investing in teacher training, strengthening school infrastructure, enforcing inclusive policy frameworks, improving community awareness, and addressing the broader socio-infrastructural

environment in which schools operate, Nigeria can take concrete steps toward creating an education system where all children regardless of ability can learn, grow, and thrive.

Conclusion

This study examined the challenges and opportunities associated with the implementation of inclusive education policies for children with disabilities in Nigeria, with a particular focus on UNICEF's interventions between 2015 and 2023. Key challenges identified include insufficient trained personnel, inadequate infrastructure, cultural stigma, policy inconsistency, and limited sustainability of donor-funded initiatives. These barriers reflect broader systemic weaknesses and a lack of integration between national policies and local realities. While UNICEF has made valuable contributions especially in awareness creation, teacher training, and policy support these efforts have not fully addressed the deep-rooted structural and cultural obstacles that hinder full inclusion. Nevertheless, the study also revealed that there are clear, actionable strategies for improving the inclusiveness and sustainability of educational systems in Nigeria. These include strengthening teacher training, improving physical access to schools, increasing funding and policy enforcement, engaging communities more effectively, and building stronger partnerships between government agencies and development partners. If these recommendations are systematically adopted and implemented, Nigeria can make significant progress in providing equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all children, regardless of disability status.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to guide policymakers, UNICEF, and other stakeholders in strengthening inclusive education systems in Nigeria:

- i. Government and stakeholders should strengthen teacher training and capacity-building in inclusive pedagogy to address the shortage of skilled staff.
- ii. Inclusive education policies should be backed by sustainable funding, strong monitoring, and consistent implementation across all regions.

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