

ADDRESSING DISPARITIES IN ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Disparities in access to quality education for students with special needs persist globally, limiting their academic and social development. This paper reviews special needs education and needs of students with special needs. Some barriers to the implementation of special needs education were stated such as; socio-economic challenges, inadequate teacher training, insufficient assistive technology and ineffective policy implementation. The opinions from the review appeared to indicate that despite the existence of inclusive education policies in schools in Nigeria; many schools lack the necessary infrastructure, teaching materials and trained personnel to support students with disabilities effectively. In addition, financial constraints and societal attitudes further hinder the successful implementation of inclusive practices in the country. The paper suggested that improved access to education and assistive technologies can enhance learning experiences of students with special needs. Emerging best practices emphasize a multi-faceted approach that integrates technology, professional development and policy reform to create a more inclusive education system was advocated by the writer. It underscores the importance of collaboration among educators, policymakers and communities in fostering an inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the paper concluded that addressing disparities requires a holistic approach that prioritizes accessibility, teacher competence, increase funding for inclusive schools

Keywords: Assistive technology, disparities, quality education, special needs education,

Introduction

In Nigeria, despite the existence of legal frameworks and policies designed to promote inclusive education, students with special needs continue to face substantial barriers to accessing quality education. Key policies such as the Implementation Strategy for the National Youth Policy (2001), the National Blueprint for Adult and Non-Formal Education (2008), and the National Policy on Special Needs Education (2015) were intended to improve educational outcomes for persons with disabilities. However, research suggests that these policies have not been effectively implemented, leading to minimal improvements in access and equality for students with disabilities (Adebisi, Liman, & Longpoe, 2015; Obiakor & Offor, 2011). Globally, efforts such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasize inclusive education as a fundamental human right (United Nations, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Nigeria, as a signatory to the Salamanca Statement on Inclusive Education (1994), committed to providing education for all, including learners with disabilities. Yet, practical evidence reveals that inclusive education remains largely unfulfilled in Nigerian schools. Many public schools lack ramps or elevators for wheelchair users, Braille machines for visually impaired learners, and sign language interpreters for students with hearing impairments (Ozaji, 2005; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF 2021). These structural and systemic gaps demonstrate that "Education for All" remains an ideal rather than a reality in the Nigerian context. Educational disparities

refer to differences in the quality of education, learning outcomes, available resources, or opportunities afforded to students, often influenced by disability, socioeconomic status, or geographic location. These disparities significantly affect students with special needs, whose academic and social experiences are shaped by environmental and institutional limitations. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), quality education involves access to trained teachers, inclusive and adaptive curricula, appropriate learning materials, and a supportive school environment that accommodates diverse learners. It should promote academic success, social inclusion, and critical thinking among all learners, regardless of physical or intellectual differences. When these elements are absent, learners with disabilities are disproportionately disadvantaged.

Students with special needs are those requiring individualized support or accommodations due to conditions such as learning disabilities, intellectual impairments, autism spectrum disorders, sensory or physical impairments. The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD, 2021) emphasizes that these students often need assistive technologies, personalized instructional methods, and inclusive teaching environments to succeed academically and socially. Despite the right to education being enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution and international treaties, students with special needs still face multiple systemic barriers. These include inadequate funding for special education programs, shortage of trained special education teachers, absence of inclusive teaching materials, and societal stigma against disabilities. Research has consistently shown that students with disabilities in Nigeria are at a greater risk of academic underachievement, social exclusion, and emotional difficulties, often resulting in higher dropout rates and limited future opportunities (National Council on Disability, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). To address these persistent disparities, it is necessary to go beyond policy formulation to practical implementation. Strategic measures could include mandatory budgetary allocations to special education, corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributions toward inclusive education, periodic teacher training in special education, provision of assistive technologies, and the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws. Such reforms are essential to ensure that all Nigerian students regardless of disability status—have access to meaningful and quality education. This paper explores key concepts such as special education, barriers to quality education for students with special needs, the impact of educational disparities, and practical strategies to promote inclusive educational practices in Nigerian schools.

Concept of Special Needs Education

Special needs education has evolved over time to mean an educational programme that is designed to meet the diverse needs of students who face challenges in learning due to physical, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, dyslexia, Down syndrome, sensory impairments (e.g., blindness or hearing loss) and intellectual disabilities. The primary objective of special needs education is to ensure that students with disabilities have access to equitable education that allows them to reach their full academic, social and personal potential. Historically, students with disabilities were often excluded from mainstream educational settings and placed in separate, specialized institutions. However, over the past decades, there has been a significant struggle and little shift toward the provision of inclusive education for such students. This struggle for inclusive education is aimed to integrate all students with special needs into general education classrooms whenever possible. Inclusive education is rooted in the belief that all

students, regardless of their abilities, should have the opportunity to learn in the same environment, with appropriate accommodations and modifications to support their individual needs (UNESCO, 2019). The key components of special needs education include Individualized Education Programmes (IEPs) and the use of various support services such as; speech therapy, occupational therapy and psychological counseling. IEP is a legal document developed for each student with special needs by specialists in the students' area of disabilities. The programme outlines specific learning goals, instructional strategies and accommodations for each student. These approaches help to ensure that each student receives appropriate level of support based on his/her unique needs and abilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In addition to these academic supports, special needs education also focuses on social integration to promote the development of social skills, emotional well-being and independence in the student. The goal is not only to help students with disabilities succeed academically, but also to prepare them for adulthood, which will enable them participate fully in the society's activities. However, the challenges of providing adequate support and ensuring equitable opportunities for all students with disabilities remain insignificant in the minds of persons with disabilities due to several government and societal barriers.

Barriers to Access Quality Education for Students with Special Needs

Students with special needs often faced significant barriers that limit their access to quality education. These barriers are multifaceted and involve systemic issues within the education system such as; societal attitudes and challenges related to resources and infrastructure provisions. Even though progress has been made in recent times with the provision of special education commissions in many states of the federation with an executive secretary at the federal level to coordinate their activities, many students with disabilities continued to experience disparities in educational opportunities which often negatively affect their academics, social and emotional development. The following are some of the barriers faced by students with special needs in accessing quality education.

Poor Funding and Resources: A serious barrier to the provision of quality education to students with special needs is the poor funding and resources for learning by students with special needs. It is not a hearsay that special education programmes require substantial financial supports and resources to enable the implementers (teachers) provide individualized support, modified accommodations and appropriate teaching materials to the learners. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2017) states that, in Nigeria, many special education schools are faced with poor budgetary allocation that often leads to insufficient poor allocation of resources for special education services. Similarly, U.S. Government Accountability Office (2018) states that schools in economically disadvantaged areas are particularly affected by poor funding, often resulting in overcrowded classrooms, insufficiently trained staff and limited access to necessary assistive technologies. These financial limitations not only hinder the ability to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities, but also lead to denial of essential services, ultimately affecting students' learning outcomes and overall educational experience. Poor funding for special education and the actual costs of delivering quality services is a serious barrier to implementation of special needs education in schools. In most government special or inclusive schools, specialist teachers are either absent or inadequate to provide therapeutic services and integrate assistive technologies into the teaching process.

Poor Teacher Training and Professional Development: Another critical barrier to quality education for students with special needs is the poor preparation of special education teachers for effective implementation of the programme. While many teachers receive basic training in general education, only a small percentage is adequately trained in special education to handle specialized materials, strategies and tools required to teach students with disabilities. According to Florian (2014), no fewer than 10% of teachers in mainstream classrooms receive specialized training in special education, which severely limits their ability to effectively support students with learning disabilities. The lack of ongoing professional development opportunities shows that many teachers are not equipped to keep up with the latest research, inclusive teaching methods and technological tools available for students with special needs. Teachers who lack specialized knowledge often struggle to adapt teaching methods, provide individualized support or incorporate assistive technologies into their lessons to meet the needs of the individual learners. Many of these teachers often become frustrated when they discovered they cannot meet up with the task having a student with disabilities in their classroom.

Societal Stigmatization and Discrimination same here: Societal attitudes toward disability continue to be a serious barrier to the inclusion of students with special needs in mainstream education. Despite legal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Education for All (EFA), which promote inclusive education, many students with disabilities in Nigeria are often subject to stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion. Misconceptions about capabilities of individuals with disabilities contribute to negative stereotypes, which can lead to segregation, lower expectations and a lack of support by teachers and even parents (UNESCO, 2019). For example, in some communities in Nigeria, many students with disabilities are often placed in separate classrooms or specialized schools where they receive less comprehensive education and have fewer opportunities for social interaction with their peers with the same school. This segregation not only reinforces societal stigma, but also limit development of essential social skills which are necessary for integration into the broader community. Inclusive education, where students with disabilities learn alongside their non-disabled peers, has been shown to have numerous benefits, both academically and socially, but societal attitudes often prevent the widespread adoption of such practices.

Limited Access to Assistive Technology: Assistive technology plays a crucial role in helping students with special needs access the curriculum and participate in classroom activities. Technology tools such as; screen readers, speech-to-text software, adaptive keyboards and communication devices enable students with physical or cognitive disabilities to engage more fully with their education. However, many schools lack the funding to provide these technologies. This creates a barrier to educational success. Without access to such technology, students with learning disabilities, sensory impairments or physical disabilities are often unable to fully participate in classroom activities to succeed academically. Furthermore, lack of assistive technology can exacerbate inequalities, as students from wealthier districts are more likely to have access to these resources, while those in underserved communities are left behind (World Health Organization, 2020).

Lack of Support Services: Support services such as; speech therapy, occupational therapy, counseling and social skills training are critical for helping students with special needs succeed in school. However, these services are often limited, especially in underfunded school districts. Many students with disabilities require specialized services that go beyond the general curriculum and without access to such services, their educational development can be significantly hindered. In some cases, some students may not receive the full range of services outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP), either due to shortage of staff or a lack of resources. This can create gaps in their educational experiences, thereby preventing them from reaching their academic and social goals. Study by U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2018) revealed that special education schools are often understaffed and overburdened, particularly in rural or low-income areas, further limiting the support available to students with special needs.

Overcrowded Classrooms: Overcrowded classrooms present another significant barrier for students with special needs. Students who require individualized instruction or stay in a smaller class sizes often find it difficult to thrive in environments where there is insufficient teacher-student interaction due to over crowdedness. Overcrowding in a class makes it challenging for teachers to give students the personalized attention they need, particularly those with disabilities who may require additional time and support to understand the material. Research by World Health Organization, (2020) indicates that smaller class sizes and individualized instruction are crucial for students with special needs, as this allows for targeted interventions and accommodations that are essential for academic success. In overcrowded classrooms, students with disabilities are at risk of falling behind academically and socially, as their unique needs are often overlooked due to the sheer number of students the teacher must manage.

Impact of Educational Disparities on Students with Special Needs

Educational disparities have long been a significant issue in educational systems worldwide and for students with special needs in particular, Students with disabilities are more likely to face numerous challenges that hinder their academic achievement, social integration and long-term life outcomes. These challenges are a result of systemic barriers, insufficient resources, and negative societal attitudes toward disability. This section explores the impact that educational disparities have on students with special needs. It focuses on academic performance, social development, future employment opportunities and emotional well-being of students with special needs in school.

Academic Underachievement: One of the most direct impacts of educational disparities on students with special needs is academic underachievement. Due to inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of personalized attention, many students with disabilities struggle to meet academic standards. According to a report by the U.S. Department of Education (2020), students with disabilities have lower graduation rates compared to their peers without disabilities, and are more likely to perform below grade level in critical areas such as reading, mathematics, and writing. Lack of appropriate accommodations and modifications often prevents students with special needs from fully accessing the curriculum. For instance, a student with dyslexia may require specialized reading instruction, but if the school lacks the resources or expertise to provide such support, the student may fall behind in literacy. Similarly, students with physical disabilities might struggle with classrooms that are not adequately accessible, hindering their ability to engage with learning materials. These academic disparities are exacerbated in underfunded schools or schools in disadvantaged areas, where special education

services are often under-resourced. Research by UNESCO (2019) show that students with special needs who are educated in inclusive classrooms, where they interact with non-disabled peers, tend to perform better academically and have higher expectations for their own success. However, the lack of inclusivity in many educational systems limits the opportunities for these students to thrive.

Social Isolation and Emotional Well-being: Another significant impact of educational disparities is social isolation. Students with special needs, particularly those placed in segregated settings or schools, often have fewer opportunities to engage with their typically developing peers. This lack of social interaction can contribute to feelings of loneliness, exclusion, and low self-esteem. The National Council on Disability (2018) found that social isolation is a common challenge faced by students with disabilities, particularly in environments where there is a lack of inclusive practices. Socialization is an essential aspect of a student's development, and educational disparities can severely limit these opportunities. When students with disabilities are not integrated into general education settings, they may miss out on the chance to develop crucial social skills, which can affect their long-term emotional well-being and sense of belonging. Students who feel isolated are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and behavioral challenges, which can further hinder their academic success and quality of life (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Furthermore, the stigma surrounding disability can contribute to negative perceptions of students with special needs. Society's misunderstanding of disability often leads to discrimination, which may be reflected in the attitudes of peers, teachers, and even school administrators. These discriminatory attitudes can affect students' self-confidence and motivation, making it harder for them to achieve success both in and outside the classroom.

Limited Future Employment Opportunities: Educational disparities also have long-lasting consequences for the future of students with special needs, particularly in terms of employment opportunities. A lack of quality education and the skills needed to succeed in the workforce limits these students' potential for securing meaningful, well-paying jobs. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021), individuals with disabilities are significantly more likely to be unemployed or underemployed compared to those without disabilities. The impact of educational disparities on future employment prospects can be seen in the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. Those who do not receive the support they need during their school years are less likely to graduate, further limiting their opportunities for higher education or vocational training. Without access to these pathways, students with disabilities may face significant barriers when entering the job market. Even when they are able to secure employment, their jobs may be low-paying or part-time, with limited opportunities for career advancement. In contrast, students who receive proper accommodations, inclusive education, and career readiness programmes are better equipped to succeed in the workforce. These students are more likely to graduate, pursue higher education, and enter careers that provide them with financial stability and social mobility (National Council on Disability, 2018). However, due to the lack of adequate resources and supports, many students with special needs are denied these opportunities.

Increased Risk of School Dropout: Educational disparities also contribute to higher dropout rates among students with special needs. The U.S. Department of Education (2020) reports that students with disabilities are more likely to drop out of school compared to their non-disabled peers. The lack of appropriate accommodations, supportive environments and a curriculum tailored to their individual needs can lead to frustration, disengagement, and, ultimately, dropping out of school. Students who feel unsupported or unchallenged in their education are less likely to remain in school, and those who experience repeated failure may develop negative attitudes toward education. As a result, these students may not complete their education, reducing their chances for future success. Early intervention and the provision of effective support systems are crucial for preventing dropout. When students receive the necessary resources, such as tutoring, emotional support, and individualized learning plans, they are more likely to stay engaged and complete their education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Long-term Socioeconomic Inequality: The educational disparities faced by students with special needs often contribute to broader socioeconomic inequalities. Education plays a crucial role in breaking the cycle of poverty and creating opportunities for upward mobility. When students with disabilities do not have access to quality education, they are more likely to face long-term financial instability. The lack of a strong educational foundation can lead to lower-paying jobs, limited career prospects, and a greater dependence on public assistance. These disparities are particularly pronounced in marginalized communities, where access to special education services is often more limited. Students with disabilities in low-income areas are more likely to experience systemic inequities that impact their access to quality education, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and social inequality. The National Council on Disability (2018) emphasizes the need for policies that address these disparities and ensure that students with special needs, regardless of their socioeconomic background, have access to the same educational opportunities as their peers.

Strategies to Address the Educational Disparities of Students with Special Needs

There are numerous strategies that can be adapted to address disparities in academic among students with special needs. These include;

Increased Funding and Resources: The first step toward addressing disparities is to ensure that schools are adequately funded to support students with special needs. This according to the U.S. Department of Education (2020) includes increasing federal and state funding for special education services and ensuring that schools are equipped with the necessary resources to provide individualized instruction and accommodations. Funding should also be directed toward expanding access to assistive technologies, ensuring that all students with disabilities have the tools they need to succeed academically.

Comprehensive Teacher Training and Professional Development: To improve the quality of education for students with special needs, teacher training programs must include comprehensive instruction on inclusive education practices. This should include training in differentiated instruction, behavioral management techniques, and the use of assistive technologies. Furthermore, teachers should be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities to stay current with research and best practices in special education. This will ensure that educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students and provide effective, individualized support.

Promoting Inclusive Education Practices: Promoting inclusive education is essential for improving access to quality education for students with special needs. Inclusive education not only benefits students with disabilities but also enhances the educational experience for all students by promoting diversity, empathy, and collaboration. Schools should prioritize inclusive practices by providing necessary accommodations, such as co-teaching models or additional support staff, to help students with special needs participate fully in general education classrooms.

Challenging Societal Attitude: Challenging societal stigma and misconceptions about disability is crucial for creating an inclusive educational environment. Schools and communities should engage in awareness campaigns that highlight the benefits of diversity and inclusion. These campaigns should educate the public about the importance of inclusive education and work to dispel stereotypes and negative attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

Expanding Access to Assistive Technology: Expanding access to assistive technology is critical for ensuring that students with disabilities can fully engage in the learning process. Schools should invest in a wide range of assistive technologies that cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities, from communication devices to adaptive learning software. Furthermore, teachers should be trained to effectively integrate these technologies into their instructional practices.

Conclusion

To address the disparities in access to quality education for students with special needs, it is essential for government to foster an equitable and inclusive educational system. To reduce significantly the challenges faced with funding, teacher training, societal stigmatization and limited access to assistive technologies, there are actionable strategies that can help mitigate these disparities. These include; increasing funding for special education, provision comprehensive teacher training, promotion of inclusive educational

practices, provision of sanction against societal stigma and expansion of access to assistive technologies. All these can help to work toward a more equitable and inclusive educational system for all students, regardless of their abilities. It can ensure that individuals with special needs have access to high-quality education which is a social and economic necessity that benefits society as a whole.

The Way Forward

Based on the conclusion reached, it is recommended that increased funding be provided for inclusive schools in order to ensure equitable access to resources, specialized services, and assistive technologies for students with special needs. This financial support is essential to creating an enabling environment where all learners, regardless of their abilities, can thrive academically and socially. In addition, there should be ongoing teacher training and professional development programmes designed to equip educators with the necessary skills to effectively support diverse learners. Such training will help foster inclusive classroom practices and promote teaching strategies that accommodate a wide range of learning needs. Furthermore, students with special needs should be fully integrated into general education settings with appropriate accommodations. These accommodations will not only support their academic achievement but also facilitate their social interaction and holistic development within the mainstream school environment.

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