

**POLICY ON INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IMPLEMENTATION AND PRACTICE OF
INCLUSIVENESS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTRES IN BAYELSA
CENTRAL SENATORIAL DISTRICT.**

By

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between the policy on inclusive education implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres (ECECs) in public primary schools in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. To achieve the purpose of this study, three specific objectives and corresponding research questions were formulated. Three null hypotheses were also postulated to guide the study. A correlational research design was adopted. The population of the study comprised 351 head teachers. A sample size of 151 head teachers was selected through purposive sampling. Caregivers were used as raters to respond on the practice of inclusiveness in the ECECs, with one caregiver purposively selected per school to correspond with the number of head teachers. The instruments used for the study were the Policy on Inclusive Education Implementation Questionnaire (PIEIQ) and the Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (PIECEQ). The instruments were subjected to face validity by experts. A trial testing technique was used to determine the reliability of the instruments, and Cronbach's Alpha analysis yielded coefficients of 0.91 and 0.82, respectively. To administer the questionnaire, the researcher and two research assistants were briefed before visiting the various schools. Simple linear regression was used to answer the research questions and test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed a significant relationship between the presence of inclusively trained teachers, infrastructural facilities, and instructional materials for implementation, and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among other things, that the provision of inclusive infrastructural facilities for the implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education should be a collaborative effort between the government and non-governmental organisations.

KEYWORDS: Inclusiveness, Policy, Inclusive Education, Early Childhood Education, Implementation.

Inclusive education is not just an educational philosophy but also a fundamental human right. It embodies the spirit of diversity, recognizing and respecting the unique strengths and needs of every learner (Revised National Policy on Inclusive Education in Nigeria, 2023).

Inclusive education is "Education for All." It involves removing barriers to learning and ensuring the inclusion of all learners who would otherwise be excluded due to marginalization and segregation. However, it is important to state clearly that inclusive education is an organized program aimed at integrating individuals with special needs into the mainstream educational system. The goal is to unlock their innate potential, enabling them to lead fulfilling lives and contribute meaningfully to society. Inclusive education is a process designed to offer quality education to all while respecting diversity. It facilitates learning and enhances access, inclusion, and participation for both teachers and learners from diverse backgrounds in the teaching/learning process. It ensures that the education system adapts to the learners, enabling them to reach their full potential, rather than expecting learners to adapt to the system. It is a process of strengthening the education system to reach out to all learners (Operti et al., 2014). Inclusive education (IE) in the early years enhances young children's learning, socialization, and development. Yet, children with disabilities are often isolated, excluded, or marginalized in early childhood education. The National Policy on Inclusive Education is essential to adopt a holistic approach with a unified system that encompasses formal, non-formal, segregated, and mainstream education. The National Policy on Inclusive Education provides broad guidelines, while procedures are more specific, detailing how these guidelines should be implemented. Practices are the most specific, representing the actual application or adaptation function effectively in society. Implementing inclusive education is not about increasing the educational budget but about continuous, systemic, and sustained transformation of educational design, culture, and values (UNICEF, 2015). Inclusive practice refers to a teaching style that acknowledges and makes space for the different ways in which children learn. It accepts that children have diverse learning needs, and different teaching techniques may benefit them based on their individual needs. Inclusive education means that all children, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or challenges, are placed in the same general education classroom to learn together with their peers. UNESCO (2015) emphasized that inclusion ensures all learners have access to quality education that meets their basic learning needs in a way that prevents discrimination or exclusion within or outside the school system. Ajuwon (2012) defined inclusive education as a process that enhances the capacity of the education system to reach out to diverse learners. Therefore, all learners have the right to be educated in the same classroom of a mainstream school, except in severe cases that require special schools. Shyman (2015) also viewed inclusive education through the lens of social justice, asserting that all individuals, regardless of exceptionality, are entitled to the opportunity to be included in regular classroom environments.

The UNESCO Salamanca Statement calls on the international community to endorse inclusive schools by implementing practical and strategic changes. The statement begins with a commitment to Education for All, recognizing the necessity and urgency of providing education for all children, young people, and adults "within the regular education system." It asserts that children with special educational needs must have access to regular schools. Regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all. They provide an effective education for the majority of children, improve efficiency, and ultimately increase the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system (UNESCO, 2020). The statement calls on UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, and the World Bank to endorse this approach. It urges the United Nations and its specialized agencies to strengthen their inputs for technical cooperation and improve networking to offer more efficient support for integrated special needs education. Non-governmental organizations are encouraged to collaborate with national bodies and become more involved in all aspects of inclusive education. UNESCO is

tasked with ensuring that special needs education forms part of every discussion related to education for all, enhancing teacher education in this field with support from teacher unions and associations. It also calls for stimulating academic research in inclusive education, disseminating findings, and using the results to create expanded programs for inclusive schools.

The statement concludes that inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and the enjoyment of human rights. In education, this is reflected in bringing about "genuine equalization of opportunity." Special needs education incorporates proven teaching methods that benefit all children. It assumes that human differences are normal and that learning must be adapted to meet the child's needs, rather than forcing the child to fit the process. The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together whenever possible. Ordinary schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their children, offering a continuum of support and services to address these needs. Inclusive schools are the "most effective" in fostering solidarity between children with special needs and their peers. Countries with few or no special schools should establish inclusive schools instead of special schools (UNESCO, 2020). This highlights the importance of inclusive education policies. Educational policies aim to improve the quality of life for citizens, address individual needs, and meet community demands. They also account for the complexity and sophistication required to prepare individuals to be useful to themselves and society (Awokoya, 2017). The policy statement seeks to establish an all-inclusive education system that guarantees the right of every child to quality education. This policy aims to achieve Education for All, irrespective of individual strengths, weaknesses, hopes, or expectations. UNESCO (2020) views inclusion as "a dynamic approach to responding positively to pupils' diversity, seeing individual differences not as problems but as opportunities for enriching learning." It is about changing and improving the way education works. The inclusive education initiative has gained recognition for its benefits and aims to ensure all learners are included in the classroom and provided with quality learning, as presented in the Revised Nigerian National Policy on Inclusive Education (2023). Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that if the right to education for all is to be upheld, all learners must have access to quality education that meets their basic learning needs and enriches their lives. Education is not just about making schools available to those who can already access them; it is about proactively identifying and addressing barriers and obstacles that hinder learners from accessing opportunities for quality education. Effective strategies and proactive actions must be taken by relevant stakeholders to create an enabling environment for all (p. 5). The implementation of inclusive education is closely tied to having quality, motivated teachers in early childhood settings, supported by continuous resources and training. Teachers play a crucial role in educating children, especially in supporting the implementation of educational policies and programs. Carrington et al. (2017) argued that implementing inclusive education involves all aspects of school management, including the curriculum, learning facilities, teacher competency, student assessment, infrastructure, community/stakeholder participation, and financing.

In the realm of education, inclusivity is a vital principle that drives academic and social development. Inclusive education ensures that all preschoolers, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, can fully participate in the learning process. The term "Inclusive Infrastructure" refers to creating physical spaces that meet the diverse needs of preschoolers, accommodating all abilities, and fostering an environment where everyone can thrive. Designing schools for all abilities requires prioritizing accessibility, safety, and inclusivity. These principles form the foundation upon which architects and educators can create spaces that cater to the diverse needs of children. By adhering to universal design principles, flexibility, safety, sensory

considerations, and collaboration, we can build schools that empower all to reach their full potential and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society (Narsaiah, 2018). Bhat (2017) highlighted that inadequate infrastructure and the lack of supportive assistive technology are major barriers to inclusion. Sarao (2016) added that restrictive curricula, inappropriate infrastructural facilities, lack of awareness, untrained teachers, and negative attitudes are significant hurdles to the expansion of inclusive education. Teachers are crucial in providing quality education for all children. Across the globe, teachers are dedicated to ensuring the right to education for all children, focusing not only on specific teaching skills and strategies but also developing a reflective attitude and inclusive values. Teachers must believe that all children have the right to attend mainstream education and analyze their school and classroom settings, reflecting on how to make them accessible and meaningful for all. This process must be ongoing, as communities, cultures, interests, needs, and abilities evolve. As a result, all children should feel equally valued in inclusive classrooms. The inclusive teacher must be capable of incorporating and supporting all preschoolers, regardless of their challenges, in achieving educational goals. As shown in figure 1

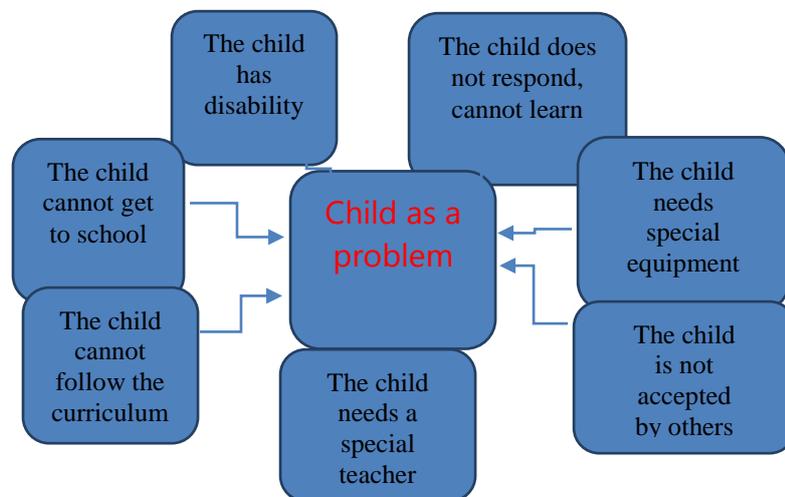


Figure 1: Child as problem' diagram
Source: Disability Action Council (2003)

The ability of the inclusive teacher to handle preschoolers as a challenge results in the practice of inclusiveness in early childhood education (Disability Action Council, 2003). Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2020) showed that during the initial period of work as a teacher, it is important for young teachers to cope with children with special needs. If such contacts are made systematically, it improves the attitudes of young teachers and their behavior in the classroom. The authors also emphasized that the number of training sessions and teachers' experience in working with children with special needs directly affect their attitudes toward inclusion. Teacher training is crucial as teachers play a key role in addressing students' needs and seeking the necessary support resources. Schools must create opportunities using activities, space, and materials so that all preschoolers can learn. These could include large tables, technology, manipulatives, visual aids, a positive behavior management system, high-interest leveled books, job charts, student information binders, games, and popsicle sticks, among others.

Onojah and Okoro (2023), in a study on instructional materials for teaching and learning mathematics for preschool children with hearing impairment, revealed that mathematics teachers rarely utilize instructional materials when teaching preschool children with hearing impairments. The implication is that the use of instructional materials is essential for effective teaching and learning. The study also identified that the unavailability of instructional materials, poor knowledge of teachers on improvisation of materials, and overpopulation in classrooms are some of the challenges hindering the effective use of instructional materials. Inclusive practice in Early Childhood Education is an approach to teaching, learning, and assessment that ensures every preschooler has equal access to educational opportunities and can participate fully in learning, regardless of their differences and needs. This approach involves creating a supportive and inclusive environment where all preschoolers feel valued, respected, and included. Additionally, it requires using various teaching methods and materials that cater to different learning styles, providing additional support for preschoolers with special needs, and removing barriers to learning, such as discrimination and prejudice (Owens, 2012). Moreover, the ultimate goal of inclusive practice is to provide all preschoolers with the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential. Inclusive practice aims to minimize or remove barriers to learning and provide support to facilitate the success of all learners, while ensuring that teaching standards are not compromised. The inclusive ethos is one that should include all learners, without exception, enabling each individual learner in a specific environment to reach their full potential through participation, not only in the curriculum but also in extracurricular activities (Diamond & Hong, 2019).

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

People with disabilities are frequently believed to be less capable, incapable of learning, or becoming independent. Financial constraints also play a significant role in the ability of schools or families to make suitable adaptations and provide adequate resources. However, inappropriate classroom seating arrangements, adaptive learning materials, assistive devices, basic technology, support staff, trained teachers, availability of infrastructural facilities, material resources, disability-friendly environments, appropriate facilities and equipment for the teaching/learning process, curriculum modification, early identification, parental understanding, class size, community attitudes, the medical model of disability, conscious and unconscious biases, societal attitudes, awareness of inclusive education, and accurate census of persons with disabilities, along with human and material support factors, are yet to be adequately addressed to ensure the feasibility of inclusive education in the study area.

Inclusive education, which is aimed at integrating individuals with special needs and those without impairments to learn together in the same classroom environment, has largely failed, especially at the implementation stage. This failure is largely due to the complacency of both government and other state actors who are responsible for overseeing the country's educational affairs. Based on this scenario, the study seeks to examine the policy on inclusive education implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in early childhood education centers in the Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- To examine the relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.
- To examine the relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.
- To examine the relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?
- What is the relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?
- What is the relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- There is no significant relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.
- There is no significant relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.
- There is no significant relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a correlational research design. The population of the study consisted of 351 head teachers in all Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. A sample size of 151 head teachers was chosen for the study through purposive sampling technique. Caregivers were used as raters to respond on the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres, with one caregiver selected per school corresponding to the number of head teachers. A researcher-developed instrument titled “Policy on Inclusive Education Implementation Questionnaire (PIEQ)” for head teachers and “Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Questionnaire (PIECEQ)” for caregivers (raters) were used to gather data for the study. Face validity was adopted, and a trial testing technique was used to determine the reliability of the instruments, which were subjected to Cronbach Alpha Analysis, yielding an alpha coefficient of 0.91 and 0.82, respectively.

To administer the questionnaire, two research assistants were briefed by the researcher before visiting the different schools. Simple linear regression was used to answer the research questions and test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The following guide was used to interpret the results: +1.00 = perfect positive linear relationship, +0.50 to 0.99 = high (strong) positive linear relationship, +0.1 to 0.49 = weak (low) positive linear relationship, -0.1 to -0.49 = weak (low) negative relationship, -0.50 to -0.99 = high negative relationship, -1.00 = perfect negative relationship (Ratner, 2009). To test the null hypotheses, the p-value was compared with the alpha-value (0.05); if the p-value is less than the alpha-value, the null hypothesis was rejected, but if the p-value is greater than the alpha-value, the null hypothesis was retained.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and the practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?

Table 1: Responses on Relationship between Inclusive Infrastructural Facilities for Implementation and Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Remark
Inclusive Infrastructural Facilities	.831	.691	.687	Very strong linear relationship

Table 1 revealed the coefficient of relationship (R) as .831, indicating a very strong linear relationship and a coefficient of determination (R^2) of .691 showing that 69.1% of practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District can be attributed to the functionality of inclusive infrastructural facilities.

Research Question 2

What is the relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?

Table 2: Responses on Relationship between Inclusive Trained Teachers for Implementation and Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Remark
Inclusive trained teachers	.854	.729	.725	Very strong linear relationship

Table 2 revealed the coefficient of relationship (R) as .854, indicating a very strong linear relationship and a coefficient of determination (R^2) of .729 showing that 72.9% of practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District can be attributed to the effectiveness of inclusive trained teachers.

Research Question 3

What is the relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?

Table 3: Responses on Relationship between Inclusive Instructional Materials for Implementation and Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education

Variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Remark
Inclusive Instructional	.930	.865	.863	Very strong

Materials

linear
relationship

Table 3 revealed the coefficient of relationship (R) as .930, indicating a very strong linear relationship and a coefficient of determination (R^2) of .865 showing that 86.5% of practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District can be attributed to the availability, functionality and usability of inclusive instructional materials.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

Table 4: Summary of Regression Analysis on Inclusive Infrastructural Facilities for Implementation and Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Remark
Regression	10322.578	1	10322.578	165.576	.000	Sig.
Residual	4613.422	150	62.344			
Total	14936.000	151				

Table 4 shows the F-value of 165.576 and a p-value of .000, which is less than 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is a significant relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

Table 5: Summary of Regression Analysis on Inclusive Trained Teachers for Implementation and Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p-value	Remark
Regression	3204.245	1	3204.245	198.629	.000	Sig.
Residual	11890.755	150	16.132			
Total	4398.000	151				

Table 5 shows the F-value of 198.629 and a p-value of .000, which is less than 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is a significant relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

Table 6: Summary of Regression Analysis on Inclusive Instructural Materials for Implementation and Practice of Inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education

Source of Variation	Sum of	Df	Mean	F	p-value	Remark
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	Squares		Square			
Regression	377.130	1	3771.130	472.293	.000	Sig.
Residual	590.870	150	7.985			
Total	4362.000	151				

Table 5 shows the F-value of 472.293 and a p-value of .000, which is less than 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected. Hence, there is a significant relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education Centres in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 4 revealed that there is a significant relationship between inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education. This implies that it can help to ensure that all children have equal access to learning opportunities and a fair chance to develop their skills, help children to learn, develop and be engaged by recognizing their diverse interests, abilities. Learning styles and help children feel valued, understood, supported, and promote positive social relationships. This finding supports the finding of Narsaiah, (2018) that adhering to the principles of universal design, flexibility, safety, sensory considerations and collaboration, we can build schools that empower all students to reach their full potential and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Table 5 revealed that there is a significant relationship between inclusive trained teachers for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education. This shows that, inclusive trained teachers can help to create a welcoming environment for all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds interact with diverse peers, and this goes a long way to improve their social and communication skills as well as creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where children feel safe to explore and interact with their peers. This is in consonant with the findings of Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden, (2020) that during the first period of work as a teacher, it is important for young teachers to cope with special needs students.

Table 6 shows that there is a significant relationship between inclusive instructional materials for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education. This is because inclusive instructional materials can lead to better academic outcomes for children with disabilities. It ensures different pupils learning needs are met and removes barriers that prevent them from learning. This finding supports the finding of Onojah and Okoro (2023) that unavailability of instructional materials; poor knowledge of teachers on improvisation of instructional materials and overpopulation of pupils in the classroom are some of the challenges hindering the effective use of instructional materials.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it was concluded that Inclusive education implementation rejects the idea of separating students with disabilities in special schools or classrooms. Instead, it aims to create schools where all pupils learn together and inclusive educational practice should take into account the input of the government in terms of policy, adaptation in structure and curriculum and practical implementation in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provision of inclusive infrastructural facilities for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education should be done in partnership between government and non-governmental organisations
- Inclusive teachers for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education should be subjected to yearly training to equip them with implementation skills.
- For availability, functional and usability of inclusive instructional materials for implementation and practice of inclusiveness in Early Childhood Education, resource centres should be built especially in model schools.

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