

Creating Awareness for Inclusive Learning of Parents and Caregivers through Early Childhood Education Programme in Nigeria

Abioye Jemimah A.I

Department of Early Childhood Care and Education

Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo

Oyo State, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines creating awareness for inclusive education among parents and caregivers through early childhood education programme. Inclusive education is essential for providing equitable learning opportunities for all children, regardless of their abilities or socio-economic backgrounds. However, creating awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers through early childhood education programs in Nigeria is a critical step towards ensuring equitable and high-quality education for all children. Despite the significant challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, lack of awareness, and socio-cultural barriers, the potential benefits of fostering an inclusive education system are profound. Parental involvement plays a pivotal role in the educational and developmental outcomes of children. When parents and caregivers are actively engaged and informed about the importance of inclusive learning, they can better support their children's educational journey. Effective early childhood education programs that incorporate community engagement and parental education can bridge the gap between policy and practice, leading to more inclusive and supportive learning environments. To achieve this, it is essential to increase public investment in early childhood education, enhance teacher training and professional development, and implement comprehensive awareness campaigns. These initiatives should aim to educate parents and caregivers about the significance of inclusive education and provide them with the necessary tools and resources to contribute effectively. Therefore, government should allocate more financial resources to early childhood education to improve infrastructure, provide adequate learning materials, and ensure the availability of specialized services and support for inclusive education. They should introduce incentives for private sector involvement and public-private partnerships to enhance the reach and quality of early childhood education

Keywords: Creating, Inclusive, Caregivers, Early Childhood, Involvement

Introduction

Inclusive learning, which involves providing equitable educational opportunities for all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, is a critical aspect of contemporary education. Its significance lies in fostering a learning environment where every child can thrive, contributing to their overall development and societal inclusion (Ainscow, 2020). In the context of early childhood education, inclusive learning is particularly crucial as it sets the foundation for lifelong learning and development (UNESCO, 2021).

In Nigeria, the importance of early childhood education has been increasingly recognized, yet the implementation of inclusive practices remains a challenge. Despite various educational policies aimed at promoting inclusivity, there is a significant gap in awareness and practice, particularly among parents and caregivers who play a pivotal role in the early years of a child's life (Oladipo, 2018). Parents and caregivers are often the first educators of children, and their involvement in early childhood education can significantly influence children's learning outcomes and social development (Epstein, 2011).

The Nigerian educational landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities for promoting inclusive learning. According to the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), many Nigerian children still face barriers to accessing quality education due to socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural constraints (UBEC, 2019). Additionally, there is a lack of awareness and understanding among parents and caregivers about the principles and benefits of inclusive learning, which further hinders its effective implementation (Ajayi, 2019).

Research indicates that parents and caregivers' involvement is crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. When parents and caregivers are informed and engaged, they can advocate for their children's needs, support learning at home, and collaborate with educators to create an inclusive environment (Hornby, 2011). However, in Nigeria, many parents and caregivers are not adequately equipped with the knowledge and resources needed to support inclusive learning due to a lack of targeted educational programs and awareness campaigns (Ekeh&Oladayo, 2013).

This study aims to address this gap by exploring strategies to create awareness among parents and caregivers about inclusive learning through early childhood education programs. By focusing on the Nigerian context, the study seeks to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current levels of awareness, identify effective methods for promoting inclusive learning, and provide recommendations for policy and practice. The overarching goal is to empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge and tools necessary to support their children's education, thereby enhancing the overall quality and inclusivity of early childhood education in Nigeria.

The Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education involves a procedural approach to educate all school age children/ youths in a general school setting where everybody belongs, accepted and supported notwithstanding his abilities or disability conditions. Inclusive education is basically a procedure or all about the practice of carrying out educational and ancillary services for children with special needs in an inclusive education setting. This practice as pointed out by Ajuwon (2018) anchors on the notion that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture. What this implies then is that both children with disabilities and their peers without disabilities benefit from their experience of being together in the same school.

Inclusive education especially targets those children traditionally excluded from general education for reasons of gender, geographic remoteness, ethnicity, poverty, and disability (Abosi, and Koay, 2018). The principle of inclusion promotes the idea that in order to receive a quality education that is equal and accessible; children must be educated to the best of a community's ability in a general education classroom. Inclusive education is moreover a method of creating communities, schools, and societies free of discrimination.

Inclusive education is a commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate, considering his abilities and disabilities. As revealed by Obani (214) the goal of inclusive education is not to erase (or deny the existence of) differences, but to enable all students to belong to an educational community that values and validates their individuality.

Early childhood education in Nigeria

Early childhood education (ECE) in Nigeria is a critical phase in the educational development of children, typically encompassing the ages from birth to eight years old. This stage is foundational for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, providing the necessary skills and knowledge that prepare children for primary education and lifelong learning (UNICEF, 2019).

The formal establishment of early childhood education in Nigeria can be traced back to the early 20th century, primarily driven by missionary efforts and later by governmental initiatives. Over the years, the Nigerian government has recognized the importance of ECE through various policies and programs. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 2004 marked a significant milestone by formally incorporating pre-primary education into the national educational framework. This policy emphasized the need to provide free and compulsory basic education, which includes early childhood care and education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004).

In 2013, the Early Childhood Development (ECD) policy was introduced to further address the needs of children under the age of five. This policy highlights the importance of a holistic approach to child

development, integrating health, nutrition, protection, and early learning (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013). Despite these policy advancements, the implementation and accessibility of quality early childhood education in Nigeria face numerous challenges.

Awareness for Inclusive Education among Parents and Caregivers

Awareness for inclusive education refers to efforts aimed at increasing understanding and recognition of the importance of providing equitable educational opportunities for all students, regardless of their diverse abilities, backgrounds, or characteristics (Ajuwon, 2018). Inclusive education emphasizes the value of accommodating individual learning needs, promoting diversity, and fostering a sense of belonging for every student within the school community. Raising awareness for inclusive education among parents and caregivers is crucial for ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities or differences, have equal opportunities to learn and thrive in school environments (Ajuwon, 2018). Here according to Ajuwon(2018) are some strategies to promote awareness.

- **Workshops and Information Sessions:** Organize workshops or information sessions specifically tailored for parents and caregivers to educate them about the importance and benefits of inclusive education. These sessions can cover topics such as understanding diverse learning needs, fostering acceptance and empathy, and advocating for inclusive policies.
- **Collaboration with Schools:** Partner with schools to facilitate discussions and training sessions on inclusive education for parents and caregivers. Schools can provide insights into their inclusive practices and resources available to support students with diverse needs.
- **Community Events:** Host community events focused on inclusive education, such as panel discussions, film screenings, or awareness campaigns. These events can bring together parents, caregivers, educators, and community members to share experiences, resources, and strategies for promoting inclusion.
- **Online Resources:** Develop and disseminate online resources, including articles, videos, webinars, and downloadable guides, to provide information and support to parents and caregivers interested in inclusive education. These resources should be easily accessible and user-friendly.
- **Peer Support Networks:** Establish peer support networks or parent groups for families of children with diverse needs. These networks can serve as valuable platforms for sharing experiences, seeking advice, and building a sense of community among parents and caregivers.
- **Advocacy Campaigns:** Launch advocacy campaigns to raise awareness about the rights of children with disabilities and the importance of inclusive education. Encourage parents and caregivers to become advocates for inclusive policies and practices within their schools and communities.
- **Partnerships with Disability Organizations:** Collaborate with disability advocacy organizations to amplify efforts in promoting inclusive education. These organizations often have valuable expertise and resources that can support awareness-raising initiatives.
- **Cultural Sensitivity Training:** Provide cultural sensitivity training to parents and caregivers to help them understand and appreciate diversity in all its forms. Emphasize the importance of creating inclusive environments that celebrate differences and promote belonging.
- **Parent Education Programs:** Offer parent education programs focused on topics related to inclusive education, such as understanding Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), supporting social and emotional development, and accessing assistive technologies.
- **Feedback and Evaluation:** Continuously gather feedback from parents and caregivers to assess the effectiveness of awareness-raising efforts and identify areas for improvement. Evaluation data can inform future strategies and ensure that initiatives are responsive to the needs of the community.

By implementing these strategies, communities can foster greater awareness, acceptance, and support for inclusive education among parents and caregivers, ultimately contributing to the success and well-being of all students.

The role of parents and caregivers in early childhood education

The involvement of parents and caregivers in early childhood education (ECE) is pivotal to the developmental outcomes of children. Their role encompasses a range of activities, from direct educational support to providing a nurturing and stimulating environment that fosters learning and growth. Research consistently underscores the positive impact of active parental and caregiver engagement on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Epstein, 2011).

- **Direct Educational Support:** Parents and caregivers serve as the first educators in a child's life, setting the foundation for future learning. Their involvement in educational activities at home, such as reading aloud, storytelling, and engaging in educational games, significantly enhances children's literacy and numeracy skills (Sylva et al., 2004). These early interactions are crucial for cognitive development and lay the groundwork for formal schooling. In Nigeria, however, there is often a lack of awareness and understanding among parents about the importance of their role in early education. Many parents do not engage in educational activities with their children due to various socio-economic constraints or a lack of knowledge about effective early learning practices (Ekeh&Oladayo, 2013). Therefore, raising awareness and providing resources and training to parents can help bridge this gap and improve educational outcomes for children.
- **Creating a Nurturing and Stimulating Environment:** The home environment plays a crucial role in a child's early development. A nurturing and stimulating environment that includes safe spaces for play, access to educational materials, and positive interactions with adults supports children's overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Parents and caregivers can foster such an environment by being attentive to children's needs, encouraging exploration, and providing appropriate learning materials and experiences. In many Nigerian households, particularly in rural areas, the home environment may lack the necessary resources to support early learning. This can be attributed to economic hardships and limited access to educational materials (Akinrotimi& Olowe, 2016). Community-based programs and support from non-governmental organizations can help provide families with the resources they need to create a more conducive learning environment at home.
- **Collaboration with Educators:** Effective collaboration between parents, caregivers, and educators is essential for enhancing the quality of early childhood education. This partnership ensures that there is continuity between home and school learning experiences, which is beneficial for the child's development (Epstein, 2011). Parents and caregivers who actively communicate with teachers and participate in school activities contribute to a more supportive and cohesive educational experience for their children. In Nigeria, fostering such collaboration can be challenging due to cultural norms and practices that may limit parental involvement in school affairs (Okoro&Ezeokoli, 2019). Schools and early childhood education centers need to adopt inclusive practices that welcome and encourage parental participation, such as regular parent-teacher meetings, workshops, and community events.
- **Advocacy and Support:** Parents and caregivers also play a critical role as advocates for their children's education. By being informed and engaged, they can advocate for better educational policies, resources, and support services. This advocacy is particularly important in contexts where educational systems face significant challenges, such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and lack of trained teachers (UNESCO, 2020). In Nigeria, empowering parents and caregivers to become advocates requires building their capacity through education and awareness programs. Such initiatives can help them understand their rights and the importance of their involvement in their children's education, enabling them to demand better services and support from the government and other stakeholders (Ogunyemi&Ragpot, 2017).

Current challenges in promoting inclusive learning in Nigeria

Promoting inclusive learning in Nigeria faces a myriad of challenges, reflecting broader socio-economic, cultural, and systemic issues. Despite significant efforts by the government and various stakeholders, numerous barriers continue to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education.

These challenges can be categorized into infrastructural, policy-related, socio-cultural, and resource-based issues.

- **Infrastructural Challenges:** One of the most pressing issues is the inadequate infrastructure across educational institutions. Many schools, especially in rural areas, lack the basic facilities needed to support inclusive learning. This includes insufficient classrooms, lack of accessible buildings for children with physical disabilities, and absence of essential learning materials (Oladipo, 2018). Without appropriate infrastructure, creating an environment that accommodates all learners is nearly impossible.
- **Policy and Implementation Gaps:** While Nigeria has established policies aimed at promoting inclusive education, such as the National Policy on Education, the implementation of these policies remains inconsistent and weak. There is often a significant gap between policy formulation and actual practice due to inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (Ajayi, 2019). Additionally, bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of coordination among various governmental and non-governmental bodies further complicate the effective implementation of inclusive education policies (Eke, 2020).
- **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Cultural attitudes and beliefs significantly impact the promotion of inclusive learning. In many communities, there is a stigma attached to disabilities and special educational needs, leading to the marginalization of affected children (Obiakor&Offor, 2011). These cultural perceptions often result in discrimination and exclusion of children with disabilities from mainstream education. Efforts to change these deep-seated cultural attitudes require sustained community engagement and education.
- **Lack of Teacher Training and Professional Development:** The quality of teaching is crucial for the success of inclusive education. However, many teachers in Nigeria are not adequately trained to handle the diverse needs of learners in an inclusive classroom (Adebayo, 2019). There is a lack of specialized training programs focusing on inclusive education principles and strategies. Furthermore, continuous professional development opportunities for in-service teachers are limited, which affects their ability to effectively implement inclusive practices (Akinrotimi& Olowe, 2016).
- **Financial Constraints:** Limited funding is a significant obstacle to inclusive education in Nigeria. The allocation of financial resources to the education sector is often insufficient to meet the demands of implementing inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020). Schools struggle with budget constraints that limit their ability to improve infrastructure, provide specialized training for teachers, and procure necessary learning materials and assistive devices for children with special needs.
- **Lack of Public Awareness:** There is a general lack of awareness and understanding of inclusive education among parents, caregivers, and the broader community. Many parents are unaware of the benefits of inclusive learning and the rights of their children to access quality education regardless of their abilities (Ekeh&Oladayo, 2013). Raising awareness through targeted campaigns and community outreach programs is essential to garner support for inclusive education initiatives.
- **Lack of Inclusive Curriculum and Assessment:** The curriculum used in many Nigerian schools is not adapted to meet the diverse needs of all learners. There is a need for a more flexible and inclusive curriculum that accommodates different learning styles and abilities (Adedoyin, 2020). Additionally, assessment methods often do not cater to the unique needs of children with disabilities, making it challenging to accurately measure their progress and achievements.

Early childhood education and parental involvement in Nigeria and other similar contexts

The importance of early childhood education (ECE) and parental involvement has been widely recognized and studied across different contexts, including Nigeria. Previous studies have highlighted the critical role of these factors in the holistic development of children and their long-term academic success. This review synthesizes research findings from Nigeria and other similar contexts, focusing on the impact of early childhood education, the role of parental involvement, and the challenges faced in these domains.

Several studies have underscored the significance of ECE in Nigeria. According to Akinrotimi and Olowe (2016), ECE in Nigeria is essential for laying the foundation for lifelong learning and development. Their research highlights that children who receive quality early education are better prepared for primary school, both academically and socially. However, the study also identifies significant challenges, including inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, and a lack of qualified teachers. Ota and Akinwole (2017) further discuss the infrastructural challenges facing ECE in Nigeria. Their study reveals that many early childhood centers lack basic amenities such as safe drinking water, proper sanitation, and sufficient learning materials. This inadequacy hinders the effective delivery of early childhood education and affects the quality of education that children receive.

Parental involvement in ECE is a critical factor that influences children's educational outcomes. Ekeh and Oladayo (2013) conducted a study that highlights the strategies for improving parental involvement in Nigeria. They found that active parental participation in early learning activities positively impacts children's cognitive and social development. However, the study also points out that many parents in Nigeria are not adequately involved in their children's education due to a lack of awareness and understanding of their role. Similarly, Okoro and Ezeokoli (2019) emphasize the importance of parental involvement in developing basic science and technology skills among Nigerian children. Their research indicates that children whose parents are actively engaged in their education tend to perform better academically. The study suggests that schools should implement programs to educate parents on the importance of their involvement and provide them with the necessary resources to support their children's learning.

Research from other similar contexts, such as other African countries and developing regions, provides additional insights into the impact of ECE and parental involvement. For instance, a study by Aboud and Yousafzai (2015) in Bangladesh found that parental involvement in early learning activities significantly enhances children's developmental outcomes. The study highlights the importance of educating parents about early childhood development and providing them with practical strategies to support their children's learning. In South Africa, a study by Atmore, van Niekerk, and Ashley-Cooper (2012) examines the challenges and opportunities in ECE. The researchers found that parental involvement is crucial for the success of early childhood programs. However, similar to Nigeria, the study identifies barriers such as socio-economic constraints, lack of awareness, and limited access to resources that hinder effective parental engagement.

Conclusion

Creating awareness for inclusive learning among parents and caregivers through early childhood education programs in Nigeria is a critical step towards ensuring equitable and high-quality education for all children. Despite the significant challenges such as inadequate funding, poor infrastructure, lack of awareness, and socio-cultural barriers, the potential benefits of fostering an inclusive education system are profound. Parental involvement plays a pivotal role in the educational and developmental outcomes of children. When parents and caregivers are actively engaged and informed about the importance of inclusive learning, they can better support their children's educational journey. Effective early childhood education programs that incorporate community engagement and parental education can bridge the gap between policy and practice, leading to more inclusive and supportive learning environments. To achieve this, it is essential to increase public investment in early childhood education, enhance teacher training and professional development, and implement comprehensive awareness campaigns. These initiatives should aim to educate parents and caregivers about the significance of inclusive education and provide them with the necessary tools and resources to contribute effectively.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that:

1. Government should allocate more financial resources to early childhood education to improve infrastructure, provide adequate learning materials, and ensure the availability of specialized services and support for inclusive education. They should introduce incentives for private sector

involvement and public-private partnerships to enhance the reach and quality of early childhood education

2. Curriculum planner should tailor the curriculum of early childhood education to address the specific needs and challenges faced by parents and caregivers of children with diverse needs. Incorporate content on inclusive education principles, special educational needs, and effective strategies for supporting children's learning and development.
3. Government should develop and implement comprehensive training programs for teachers focused on inclusive education principles, strategies, and practices.
4. Government should design and execute programs that educate parents and caregivers about the importance of early childhood education and inclusive learning. These programs should provide practical strategies for supporting their children's development at home.
5. Government should ensure that early childhood education centers are equipped with accessible facilities for children with disabilities, including ramps, accessible toilets, and adaptive learning materials.

References

- Abosi, O., and T. L. Koay, (2018), Attaining development goals of children with disabilities: implications for inclusive education: *International Journal of Special Education*, 23(1), p. 1-10.
- Adebayo, O. (2019). Teacher qualification and the quality of early childhood education in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Research*, 23(4), 299-311.
- Adedoyin, O. (2020). Adapting the curriculum for inclusive education in Nigeria: challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Special Education*, 35(1), 23-35.
- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education: lessons from international experiences. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(7), 675-690.
- Ajayi, O. (2019). Understanding the challenges of inclusive education in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Research*, 21(4), 211-223.
- Ajuwon, P. M. (2018): Inclusive education for students with disabilities in Nigeria: benefits, challenges and policy implications. *International Journal of Education* 23 (1) 11- 16
- Akinrotimi, A. A., & Olowe, P. K. (2016). Challenges in the implementation of early childhood education in Nigeria: the way forward. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 7(7), 33-38.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Eke, H. (2020). Policy implementation and inclusive education in Nigeria. *African Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(2), 45-56.
- Ekeh, P. U., & Oladayo, F. (2013). Parental involvement in early childhood education in Nigeria: Strategies for improvement. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 11(2), 45-56.
- Epstein, J. L. (2011). *School, family, and community partnerships: preparing educators and improving Schools*. UK. Westview Press.
- Federal Ministry of Education. (2013). *Early Childhood development policy*. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2004). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: building effective school-family partnerships*. UK. Springer.
- Obani, T.C. (2014). *Empowerment of people with special educator's perspective*. A Publication of the School of Vocational and Technical Education, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo.
- Obiakor, F. E., & Offor, M. T. (2011). Special education in Nigeria: issues, challenges, and future directions. *International Journal of Special Education*, 26(1), 12-20.
- Ogunyemi, F. T., & Ragpot, L. (2017). Work-family conflict, job satisfaction and family satisfaction among female teachers in Nigeria: an application of the work-family conflict model. *Journal of Education, Society and Behavioural Science*, 23(2), 1-12.

- Okoro, C. O., &Ezeokoli, R. N. (2019). Parental involvement in early childhood education and its impact on the development of basic science and technology skills among Nigerian children. *Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 18(3), 52-67.
- Oladipo, S. A. (2018). Challenges and prospects of implementing inclusive education in Nigeria. *African Journal of Educational Management*, 14(2), 35-50.
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project: final report*. Institute of Education, University of London.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Early childhood care and education in Nigeria: country profile*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2021). *Inclusive education: what, why, and how*. Retrieved from UNESCO website.
- UNICEF. (2019). *Early Childhood development in Nigeria*. Retrieved from UNICEF Nigeria.
- Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC). (2019). *Annual report on the state of education in Nigeria*. Abuja, Nigeria.