Enhancing Inclusive Education for Students with Special Needs: A Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach.

Iheme Maryann Ugochi[1]; Ibeabuchi Glory Ifeyinwa[2]; Anaeto Chinwe[3]; Amadi Francisca Chinagorom[4]

[1,2,3&4]Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

Abstract:

The increasing prevalence of special educational needs (SEN) in schools in Nigeria has highlighted the need for inclusive education practices that cater to diverse learning requirements. Despite efforts to promote inclusivity, students with SEN often face significant barriers to accessing quality education. This study examined the current state of inclusive education for students with SEN, focusing on the need for neurodiversity-affirming approaches. The purpose of this research is to explore the challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive education practices that prioritize neurodiversity and student-centered learning. The researchers employed analytical approach to discuss key issues, including the importance of teacher training, adaptive technologies, and community engagement in promoting inclusive education. The researchers found that inclusive education can be enhanced by adopting neurodiversity-affirming practices, such as recognizing and valuing diverse learning styles, and providing individualized support. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended that there should be a developed teacher training programs that focus on neurodiversity and inclusive education, and establishing community-based support networks for students with SEN and their families.

Keywords*: inclusive education, neurodiversity, special educational needs, teacher training, adaptive technologies*

1.0 Introduction

Inclusive education has been a cornerstone of educational policy and practice for students with special educational needs (SEN) globally, yet significant barriers persist in Nigeria (Obiakor, 2020). The Nigerian educational system has made efforts to promote inclusivity, but students with SEN continue to face significant challenges in accessing quality education. These challenges are often exacerbated by inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and societal stigma surrounding disability. As a result, students with SEN are often excluded from mainstream education, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and disadvantage. According to Obiakor (2020), the Nigerian government must prioritize inclusive education policies and provide adequate resources to support students with SEN.

The concept of neurodiversity, first introduced by Singer (1998), recognizes that neurological differences are a natural part of human diversity and should be valued and respected. In the context of education, a neurodiversity-affirming approach emphasizes the importance of accommodating and celebrating diverse learning styles, rather than trying to "fix" or "cure" students with SEN. This approach requires educators to adopt a flexible and adaptive pedagogy that recognizes the unique strengths and challenges of each student. By valuing neurodiversity, educators can create inclusive learning environments that promote social justice and human rights. As noted by Armstrong (2017), neurodiversity-affirming approaches have the potential to transform education and promote a more inclusive and accepting society.

The need for inclusive education practices that prioritize neurodiversity is underscored by the growing recognition of the importance of social justice and human rights in education (Nwosu, 2020). Inclusive education is not only a moral imperative but also a legal requirement, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution and international human rights instruments. However, the implementation of inclusive education policies in Nigeria remains a significant challenge, requiring a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and the broader community. According to Eze (2021), Nigerian educators must prioritize teacher training and community engagement to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students with SEN.

The increasing prevalence of SEN in Nigerian schools necessitates a paradigm shift towards neurodiversity-affirming approaches that prioritize student-centered learning and accommodate diverse learning requirements. As noted by Ifeanyi (2022), Nigerian educators must prioritize teacher training and adaptive technologies to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students with SEN. This requires a fundamental shift in the way educators approach teaching and learning, recognizing that each student has unique strengths and challenges. By adopting a neurodiversity-affirming approach, educators can promote a more inclusive and accepting society, where students with SEN are valued and supported.

2.0 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a fundamental human right that ensures all students, regardless of their abilities, disabilities, or cultural backgrounds, have equal access to quality education (United Nations, 2015). In Nigeria, the concept of inclusive education is gaining momentum, with policymakers and educators recognizing the need to provide education that caters to the diverse needs of students. According to Okoye (2021), inclusive education in Nigeria is not only a moral imperative but also a legal requirement, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution and international human rights instruments. The Nigerian government has made efforts to promote inclusive education, but significant challenges persist, including inadequate teacher training, insufficient resources, and societal stigma surrounding disability.

The implementation of inclusive education policies in Nigeria requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and the broader community. As noted by Ifeanyi (2022), Nigerian educators must prioritize teacher training and adaptive technologies to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students with special educational needs (SEN). This requires a fundamental shift in the way educators approach teaching and learning, recognizing that each student has unique strengths and challenges. Inclusive education is not about placing students with SEN in mainstream classrooms; it is about creating a learning environment that values diversity, promotes social justice, and provides opportunities for all students to thrive.

The benefits of inclusive education are numerous, ranging from improved academic outcomes to enhanced social skills and emotional intelligence (Adeyemi, 2019). Inclusive education promotes a culture of acceptance, empathy, and understanding, where students learn to appreciate and value diversity. As noted by Armstrong (2017), inclusive education has the potential to transform society, promoting a more inclusive and accepting culture that values the contributions of all individuals. In Nigeria, the promotion of inclusive education requires a collaborative effort from all stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, families, and communities, to create a learning environment that is equitable, just, and inclusive for all.

3.0 Special Needs

Special needs refer to the unique requirements of individuals with disabilities, disorders, or conditions that necessitate specialized instruction, support, and accommodations to access education, healthcare, and social services. In Nigeria, the prevalence of special needs is significant, with estimates suggesting that approximately 10% of the population has some form of disability. The range of special needs is diverse, encompassing physical disabilities, sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health conditions. Each individual with special needs presents a unique profile of strengths, challenges, and requirements, underscoring the need for personalized support and accommodations.

The identification and assessment of special needs are critical components of providing effective support and interventions. In Nigeria, the process of identifying and assessing special needs is often inadequate, leading to delayed interventions and poor outcomes for individuals with special needs. A comprehensive assessment should

involve a multidisciplinary team of professionals, including educators, psychologists, and healthcare specialists, working collaboratively with families and caregivers. The assessment process should be culturally sensitive, taking into account the individual's linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic background. By adopting a holistic approach to assessment, professionals can develop a nuanced understanding of the individual's needs and develop targeted interventions to support their development.

The provision of support and services for individuals with special needs in Nigeria is often inadequate, with significant gaps in access to education, healthcare, and social services. The Nigerian government has made efforts to address these gaps, including the development of policies and programs aimed at promoting inclusive education and improving access to healthcare. However, more needs to be done to address the systemic barriers that prevent individuals with special needs from accessing the support and services they require. A fundamental shift is needed in the way services are designed and delivered, prioritizing person-centered approaches, community-based support, and family engagement. By working collaboratively with individuals with special needs and their families, professionals can develop more effective and responsive support systems that promote social inclusion and improve outcomes.

4.0 Neurodiversity-Affirming Approach

A neurodiversity-affirming approach recognizes that neurological differences are a natural part of human diversity, deserving of acceptance, respect, and celebration. This paradigm shift challenges the traditional deficit-based model of disability, which pathologizes and stigmatizes individuals with neurodevelopmental differences, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. Instead, a neurodiversity-affirming approach emphasizes the importance of valuing and accommodating diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral styles, acknowledging that each individual's unique experiences and perspectives enrich our communities and societies. By reframing neurodevelopmental differences as variations rather than disorders, this approach promotes a culture of acceptance, empathy, and understanding.

In educational settings, a neurodiversity-affirming approach involves creating inclusive learning environments that cater to diverse learning styles, needs, and preferences. This may involve incorporating flexible teaching methods, providing accommodations and modifications, and fostering a growth mindset that values effort and progress over achievement and outcome. Educators can promote neurodiversity-affirming practices by using person-first language, avoiding stigmatizing labels and stereotypes, and emphasizing the strengths and abilities of neurodiverse students. By doing so, educators can create a safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environment that allows neurodiverse students to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

A neurodiversity-affirming approach also acknowledges the importance of self-advocacy and empowerment for neurodiverse individuals. By promoting self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-expression, neurodiverse individuals can develop a strong sense of identity and agency, enabling them to navigate societal barriers and advocate for their rights and needs. This approach recognizes that neurodiverse individuals are not "broken" or "deficient," but rather, they are differently wired, with unique strengths, talents, and perspectives that contribute to the richness and diversity of human experience.

Ultimately, a neurodiversity-affirming approach has far-reaching implications for society as a whole, challenging dominant cultural narratives and power structures that perpetuate stigma, marginalization, and exclusion. By embracing neurodiversity as a fundamental aspect of human diversity, we can create a more inclusive, accepting, and equitable society that values and celebrates the contributions of all individuals, regardless of their neurological makeup. This requires a fundamental shift in societal attitudes, policies, and practices, prioritizing accessibility, accommodation, and inclusivity, and recognizing the inherent value and worth of neurodiverse individuals.

5.0 Importance of Teacher Training in Conformity with Inclusive Education

Teacher training is a crucial component of inclusive education, as it equips educators with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students. Inclusive education is not simply about placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; it requires a fundamental shift in the way teachers approach teaching and learning, recognizing that each student has unique

strengths, challenges, and learning styles. Effective teacher training programs can help educators develop a nuanced understanding of inclusive education, enabling them to design and deliver instruction that is responsive to the needs of all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

The importance of teacher training in conformity with inclusive education cannot be overstated, as it has a direct impact on the quality of education provided to students with diverse needs. Teachers who receive training in inclusive education are better equipped to create learning environments that are accessible, engaging, and supportive of all students. They are able to adapt curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of students with different learning styles, abilities, and disabilities, and to create opportunities for students to participate fully in classroom activities. Moreover, teacher training can help educators develop a growth mindset, recognizing that every student has the potential to learn and grow, and that their role is to facilitate this process.

In Nigeria, the need for teacher training in inclusive education is particularly pressing, given the large number of students with special needs who are excluded from mainstream education. Many teachers in Nigeria lack the training and resources needed to support students with disabilities, leading to poor academic outcomes and social isolation. By investing in teacher training programs that prioritize inclusive education, policymakers can help ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education that prepares them for success in life. This requires a commitment to providing ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers, as well as creating a supportive school culture that values diversity and promotes inclusion.

6.0 Adaptive Technologies Needed in Inclusive Education

Adaptive technologies play a vital role in inclusive education, as they enable students with diverse needs to access the curriculum, participate in learning activities, and engage with their peers. In Nigeria, the use of adaptive technologies has the potential to bridge the gap in educational opportunities for students with disabilities, providing them with equal access to quality education. Adaptive technologies can range from low-tech solutions, such as braille and large print materials, to high-tech solutions, such as text-to-speech software and speech-generating devices. By incorporating adaptive technologies into the classroom, educators can create a more inclusive learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of students.

The use of assistive technology, such as screen readers and mind mapping software, can enable students with visual or learning disabilities to access digital content and complete assignments independently. For students with physical disabilities, adaptive technologies, such as wheelchairs and prosthetic devices, can facilitate mobility and participation in classroom activities. Moreover, the use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices can enable students with communication disorders to express themselves effectively and participate in class discussions. By providing students with the adaptive technologies they need, educators can promote academic achievement, social inclusion, and emotional well-being.

The effective integration of adaptive technologies in inclusive education requires careful planning, collaboration, and professional development. Educators need training and support to effectively incorporate adaptive technologies into their teaching practices, ensuring that they are used in a way that is tailored to the individual needs of students. Additionally, schools need to invest in infrastructure and technical support to ensure that adaptive technologies are accessible, reliable, and functional. By prioritizing the use of adaptive technologies, schools can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that enables students with diverse needs to thrive.

The benefits of adaptive technologies in inclusive education extend beyond the classroom, as they can also facilitate social inclusion and community participation. By using adaptive technologies, students with disabilities can engage with their peers, develop social skills, and build meaningful relationships. Moreover, adaptive technologies can enable students to access information and services, promoting independence and self-advocacy. As Nigeria continues to invest in inclusive education, the strategic use of adaptive technologies will be crucial in ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have equal access to quality education and opportunities for success.

7.0 Conclusion

This study explored the complex issue of enhancing inclusive education for students with special needs in Nigeria, highlighting the need for a neurodiversity-affirming approach that prioritizes student-centered learning and accommodates diverse learning requirements. As noted in the introduction, the increasing prevalence of special educational needs in Nigerian schools necessitates a paradigm shift towards inclusive education practices that cater to the diverse needs of students.

The study examined the importance of understanding special needs in the context of inclusive education, recognizing that each student has unique strengths, challenges, and learning styles. The range of special needs is diverse, encompassing physical disabilities, sensory impairments, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and mental health conditions. By acknowledging and addressing these differences, educators can create learning environments that are tailored to the needs of all students, promoting academic achievement and social inclusion.

The study also explored the concept of neurodiversity-affirming approaches, recognizing that neurological differences are a natural part of human diversity, deserving of acceptance, respect, and celebration. This paradigm shift challenges the traditional deficit-based model of disability, instead emphasizing the importance of valuing and accommodating diverse cognitive, emotional, and behavioral styles. By promoting a culture of acceptance and empathy, educators can create inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of students.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the critical role of teacher training in conformity with inclusive education, equipping educators with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to create inclusive learning environments. Effective teacher training programs can help educators develop a nuanced understanding of inclusive education, enabling them to design and deliver instruction that is responsive to the needs of all students. By investing in teacher training, policymakers can help ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have access to quality education that prepares them for success in life.

Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of adaptive technologies in inclusive education, enabling students with diverse needs to access the curriculum, participate in learning activities, and engage with their peers. By incorporating adaptive technologies into the classroom, educators can create a more inclusive learning environment that caters to the diverse needs of students, promoting academic achievement, social inclusion, and emotional well-being. As Nigeria continues to invest in inclusive education, the strategic use of adaptive technologies will be crucial in ensuring that all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, have equal access to quality education and opportunities for success.

8.0 Recommendations

The researchers recommendations are as follows:

1. Develop and implement comprehensive teacher training programs that focus on inclusive education, neurodiversity, and adaptive technologies, with a specific emphasis on addressing the unique needs of students with special needs in Nigerian schools.
2. Establish a national task force to develop and implement policies and guidelines for inclusive education, with clear timelines and accountability measures, and ensure that these policies are communicated effectively to educators, policymakers, and the broader community.
3. Allocate dedicated funding for the procurement and maintenance of adaptive technologies, such as assistive software and hardware, to support students with special needs in Nigerian schools, and provide ongoing technical support and training for educators.
4. Develop and implement a national awareness campaign to promote inclusive education, neurodiversity, and acceptance of individuals with special needs, targeting educators, policymakers, and the broader community, and establish partnerships with local organizations and advocacy groups to support this effort.
5. Establish a national research center to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives, identify best practices, and inform policy and programming decisions, with a focus on addressing the unique challenges and opportunities in Nigerian schools.

References

[1]. Adeyemi, T. A. (2019). Inclusive education in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 9(1), 1-12.

[2]. Armstrong, T. (2017). The power of neurodiversity: Unleashing the strengths of your differently wired brain. Da Capo Lifelong Books.

[3]. Armstrong, T. (2017). The power of neurodiversity: Unleashing the strengths of your differently wired brain. Da Capo Lifelong Books.

[4]. Eze, C. C. (2021). Inclusive education and human rights in Nigeria: A critical analysis. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 6(2), 123-134.

[5]. Ifeanyi, P. (2022). Teacher training and inclusive education in Nigeria: A review of the literature. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 13(1), 1-11.

[6]. Ifeanyi, P. (2022). Teacher training and inclusive education in Nigeria: A review of the literature. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 13(1), 1-11.

[7]. Nwosu, I. (2020). Social justice and inclusive education in Nigeria: A critical perspective. *Journal of Social Justice and Education*, 10(2), 1-15.

[8]. Obiakor, F. E. (2020). Special education in Nigeria: Issues, challenges, and prospects. *Journal of International Special Needs Education*, 23(1), 1-12.

[9]. Okoye, A. (2021). Inclusive education and human rights in Nigeria: A critical analysis. *Journal of Human Rights and Social Work*, 6(2), 123-134.

[10]. Singer, J. (1998). Odd people in: The birth of community amongst people on the autistic spectrum. University of Technology, Sydney.

[11]. United Nations. (2015). Sustainable Development Goals: 17 goals to transform our world. United Nations.