INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS.

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Abstract

This empirical study delves into the pivotal role of inclusive education in facilitating sustainable development in Nigeria. The Nigerian education system is currently beset with a multitude of challenges, such as unequal access, insufficient infrastructure, and pervasive systemic exclusion. Inclusive education presents a promising approach to addressing these critical issues. By integrating individuals of varying abilities, diverse socioeconomic statuses, and differing cultural backgrounds, inclusive education fosters equality, celebrates diversity, and promotes social cohesion fundamental pillars required for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within the country. Utilizing a blend of qualitative and quantitative data, this research evaluates the present state of inclusive education in Nigeria, identifies its challenges, and examines its potential to catalyse sustainable development. The primary data was analysed using standard deviation for the research questions and t-test statistics for the hypothesis. Two research questions and a null hypothesis guided the study and was tested at a 0.05 level of significance. The research instrument used for data collection is a 4 point rating scale, while t-test of simple linear correlation statistic was used to test the hypothesis. The results of the study revealed several significant challenges that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria. The findings

suggest that, although some strides have been made, substantial investments and comprehensive reforms are indispensable to unlocking the full potential of inclusive education in Nigeria. Recommendations include; Increase Funding for Inclusive Education, Expand Teacher Training Programs, Promote Awareness Campaigns and Strengthen Policy Implementation

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Sustainable Development, Challenges and prospect.

Introduction

Inclusive education is a conceptual framework that champions the principle of equitable access to education for all children, irrespective of their physical, cognitive, or social limitations. The United Nations (UN) advocates for inclusive education as a core component of its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which strives to ensure equitable and high-quality education for all and promote lifelong learning opportunities by 2030. However, in the context of Nigeria, inclusive education faces an array of formidable obstacles, including inadequate infrastructure, entrenched cultural prejudices, and institutional challenges. Despite these barriers, inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a crucial instrument for fostering sustainable development in Nigeria, particularly by addressing pressing issues such as inequality, poverty, and social marginalization. The primary objective of this study is to empirically examine the intricate relationship between inclusive education and sustainable development within the Nigerian context. The research aims to explore how inclusive education can contribute to the attainment of sustainable development by fostering equity, driving economic growth, promoting social integration, and encouraging environmental sustainability.

According to Obizue (2020), inclusive education is an educational paradigm that strives to accommodate the varied and diverse needs of all learners, with particular emphasis on those who are often marginalized or who have special educational requirements. This concept underscores the importance of ensuring that every student, irrespective of their physical, mental, or social challenges, has equal access to quality education. According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive education is not merely about the inclusion of students with disabilities or those from disadvantaged backgrounds into the educational system; rather, it is an all-encompassing approach that aims to create equitable learning opportunities for every student. This system ensures that learners with differing abilities and backgrounds are provided with the necessary resources, support, and tools to succeed within the same educational environment, fostering an environment where no one is left behind. Inclusive education has a dual function: it seeks to address the specific educational needs of individuals while also playing a key

role in promoting social integration, cohesion, and respect for diversity. By placing a strong emphasis on inclusion, it moves beyond the physical integration of students into mainstream schools to encompass pedagogical strategies that acknowledge and celebrate differences, while simultaneously seeking to diminish inequality. This approach nurtures an understanding of diversity, tolerance, and mutual respect among students, thus providing them with the skills necessary for positive social interaction and fostering a more inclusive society at large. Moreover, inclusive education ensures that all learners, irrespective of their background or challenges, have the opportunity to develop their full potential within a supportive and nurturing learning environment. Inclusive education also reinforces the broader concept of social justice, as it works toward the elimination of discriminatory practices and the dismantling of barriers that prevent marginalized groups, including those with disabilities, from accessing quality education. It recognizes that traditional educational systems often perpetuate inequalities, and as such, seeks to implement reforms that provide equitable opportunities for all learners. The importance of inclusive education cannot be overstated, as it is not only essential for the individual development of marginalized learners but also for the creation of an equitable and just society, where diversity is celebrated and every individual is empowered to contribute meaningfully to the community.

Literature Review

Inclusive education has emerged as a central theme in discussions surrounding educational reform in Nigeria, reflecting both the aspirations for social equity and the need to meet international development targets, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A growing body of literature has highlighted the progress made and the challenges that remain in the pursuit of inclusive education in Nigeria. Scholars such as Akinlaye (2018) and Nwaokoro (2020), have explored the various obstacles that hinder the full realization of inclusive education in the country, despite the efforts made by the government. In addition, the relationship between inclusive education and sustainable development in Nigeria has been the subject of critical inquiry, revealing a complex but promising connection. Akpan (2019), provides an insightful analysis of the Nigerian education system's attempt to integrate inclusive education practices. Despite official policies that support the inclusion of children with special needs into regular classrooms, significant barriers persist. These include inadequate teacher training, the absence of specialized educational resources, and a lack of physical infrastructure that is accessible to children with disabilities. These limitations are particularly evident in public schools, where the infrastructure is often outdated and ill-equipped to cater to the needs of students with physical disabilities. As a result, many children with special educational needs are still excluded from mainstream classrooms or

placed in suboptimal learning environments. Moreover, the National Policy on Education (2013), articulates the necessity of integrating children with special needs into regular schools, but the implementation of this policy remains inconsistent across different regions of the country. In rural areas, where educational resources are often scarce, the situation is even more challenging, further exacerbating disparities in educational access and quality.

The World Bank's (2020) report underscores the continued challenges within Nigeria's education system. Despite significant efforts to improve access to education and meet international development goals, Nigeria,'s education sector grapples with persistent issues such as high dropout rates, particularly in rural regions. Children with disabilities, in particular, face compounded barriers to accessing quality education. The report highlights that many schools are not equipped with the necessary infrastructure or trained personnel to adequately support students with special needs. As a result, many children, particularly those from marginalized communities, are left behind, impeding the country's ability to fully realize the potential of inclusive education. The failure to ensure equitable access to education for all children undermines Nigeria's progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning

opportunities for all." The relationship between inclusive education and sustainable development in Nigeria has been explored by various researchers, including Akinlaye (2018) and Nwaokoro (2020). Both studies emphasize that inclusive education is not only essential for promoting social equity and justice but also plays a crucial role in advancing the broader objectives of sustainable development. Nwaokoro (2020) specifically highlights the potential of inclusive education to address inequality, particularly in marginalized communities, by providing all children with an opportunity to learn and thrive in an inclusive educational environment. By fostering educational access for children with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, inclusive education can contribute to breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion, thereby fostering more sustainable and equitable development outcomes.

The role of inclusive education in promoting economic development is also a significant theme in the literature. Inclusive education enables individuals to acquire the skills necessary to participate in the workforce, thus contributing to economic growth.

Studies by Nnanna (2021) and Akpan (2019), have noted that inclusive education helps equip young people with the skills and knowledge needed for employment and entrepreneurship, which are key drivers of national economic prosperity. By addressing educational disparities and ensuring that all

students, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education, inclusive education plays a vital role in nurturing a skilled workforce that can contribute to the country's economic development and social stability. However, the literature also indicates that achieving the full potential of inclusive education in Nigeria requires addressing several systemic issues. The lack of a comprehensive national strategy for inclusive education, coupled with insufficient resources and political will, poses significant challenges. While policies exist, their effective implementation remains a matter of concern, particularly in regions with limited resources and infrastructure. Moreover, the socio-cultural attitudes towards disabilities in Nigeria further complicate efforts to promote inclusive education. There remains a deep-seated stigma attached to disabilities, which often results in the marginalization of children with special needs within educational settings. Despite these challenges, the potential of inclusive education to bridge the gap between inequality and sustainable development is clear. Inclusive education offers a pathway to social justice by ensuring that all children, irrespective of their background, have access to quality education. Furthermore, inclusive education can also enhance social cohesion by fostering tolerance and understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. These outcomes are essential for promoting peaceful coexistence and sustainable development in Nigeria. While Nigeria has made significant strides toward integrating inclusive education within its educational system, the literature reveals that much work remains to be done. The implementation of inclusive education policies is still inconsistent, and significant barriers such as inadequate resources, infrastructure, and teacher training continue to hinder progress. Nonetheless, the studies reviewed highlight the critical role that inclusive education can play in advancing sustainable development, particularly by reducing inequality, promoting economic growth, and fostering social cohesion. To fully realize the potential of inclusive education in Nigeria, it is imperative that the government and other stakeholders make concerted efforts to address the barriers that impede its effectiveness. By doing so, Nigeria can ensure that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the country's sustainable development goals.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, as defined by the United Nations (UN), is development that fulfils the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition emphasizes the long-term perspective of development, which must balance the economic, social, and environmental dimensions to ensure that progress is sustainable, equitable, and does not deplete the planet's resources. The UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,

which was formalized in 2015, introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—a universal call to action for ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all. The SDGs encompass 17 global goals aimed at achieving these objectives, with each goal addressing a critical challenge that affects humanity and the environment. Education, as outlined in SDG 4, is central to the achievement of sustainable development. The goal advocates for inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as the promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all. Education empowers individuals by providing them with the skills, knowledge, and capacities necessary to participate fully in economic, social, and civic life. Moreover, it fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and innovation skills that are essential for addressing the challenges of a rapidly changing world. An educated population is better equipped to adapt to economic shifts, engage in environmental conservation, and contribute to the well-being of society, thereby reinforcing the foundation for sustainable development.

Sustainable development is inextricably linked to the idea of equity. Inequitable access to education exacerbates social and economic inequalities, hindering progress toward the SDGs. When certain groups particularly marginalized communities are excluded from quality education, the cycle of poverty and inequality persists. Thus, inclusive education plays a pivotal role in

promoting sustainable development by offering a means to reduce inequalities in education, thereby enabling all individuals to contribute to and benefit from the broader development process (Martins, 2018). In addition, education is a powerful tool for fostering environmental sustainability. By providing students with a comprehensive understanding of environmental issues, education empowers them to adopt sustainable practices and advocate for policies that prioritize the health of the planet. Moreover, it raises awareness of the interconnections between environmental, economic, and social systems, encouraging a holistic approach to sustainability.

Through inclusive education, individuals are not only prepared to engage with their immediate environment but also to think critically about global challenges such as climate change, resource depletion, and biodiversity loss. Ibe (2021), asserts that inclusive education and sustainable development are deeply interconnected. Inclusive education ensures that every individual, regardless of their background or abilities, is given the tools to contribute to the achievement of the SDGs. By promoting equality, fostering economic development, and raising awareness about environmental sustainability, inclusive education provides the foundation for long-term societal progress and the realization of a more sustainable future for all. To Okwu (2020), inclusive education represents not just a

pathway to educational equity, but a crucial mechanism for achieving sustainable development by nurturing individuals who are informed, empowered, and capable of contributing to the collective well-being of society. The alignment of inclusive education with sustainable development underscores the importance of creating educational systems that are accessible, equitable, and forward-thinking, fostering a generation of individuals prepared to meet the challenges of an ever-evolving world.

The Link between Inclusive Education and Sustainable Development

Inclusive education is a cornerstone of sustainable development, as it plays an essential role in addressing some of the most profound challenges faced by nations like Nigeria. One of the central issues hampering Nigeria's development is inequality whether economic, social, or cultural. The Nigerian education system has long been marked by disparities in access and quality, leaving many groups, particularly those with disabilities and those from marginalized communities, excluded from the educational mainstream (Obizue, 2020). Inclusive education directly addresses these inequities, making it a powerful tool for fostering sustainable development. Inclusive education promotes the core principles of sustainable development by fostering equality, economic growth, social cohesion, environmental awareness, and peace. Each of these aspects is intricately interwoven with the achievement of the United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This section delves into how inclusive education contributes to the following fundamental pillars of sustainable development:

1. Social Inclusion

Social inclusion is one of the most significant benefits that inclusive education provides, particularly in a diverse society like Nigeria's. Inclusive education ensures that all children, irrespective of their background, abilities, or challenges, are integrated into the general education system. This approach directly counters the marginalization of vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities, those from economically disadvantaged families, and ethnic minorities, all of whom have historically faced barriers to education. In Nigeria, social exclusion is rampant, with many children in rural areas or from lower socio-economic backgrounds often denied access to quality education. Inclusive education seeks to rectify this situation by creating an environment where diversity is not only accepted but also celebrated. By placing children from various backgrounds together in a shared learning environment, inclusive education fosters mutual understanding and empathy, while simultaneously challenging prejudices and discrimination. This not only benefits the individual students but also promotes broader societal integration, helping to build a more cohesive, tolerant, and just society. According to Akpan (2019), by reducing social exclusion, inclusive education

contributes to the broader social fabric of society, paving the way for greater equality. Through inclusive practices, all members of society have the opportunity to participate meaningfully in social, political, and economic life. The benefits of social inclusion are far-reaching: they help reduce poverty, promote gender equality, and ensure that marginalized voices are heard. Ultimately, inclusive education is a vehicle for advancing social justice, which is indispensable for sustainable development.

2. Economic Growth

Education is universally recognized as one of the most powerful drivers of economic growth, and inclusive education is no exception. The fundamental connection between education and economic growth lies in the fact that education equips individuals with the skills, knowledge, and competencies needed to participate effectively in the labor market. In Nigeria, where a significant portion of the population is young and increasingly tech-savvy, ensuring that all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to quality education is paramount for driving long-term economic prosperity (Akinlaye, 2021). Inclusive education, by fostering equitable access to education, enables marginalized individuals to acquire the necessary skills for gainful employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation. As more individuals from diverse backgrounds become equipped with essential skills, they are better positioned to contribute to the country's economic development. For

instance, students with disabilities, who might otherwise be excluded from formal education, can benefit from inclusive education policies that provide specialized resources and teaching methods. In doing so, inclusive education ensures that all individuals have the opportunity to succeed, thereby contributing to a more productive and innovative workforce. Furthermore, the economic advantages of inclusive education extend beyond individual development. A more educated population promotes a more diversified economy, with a broader array of talents and skills available to drive sectors such as technology, agriculture, industry, and services. As education levels rise and more individuals are empowered to start businesses, the economy grows, fostering entrepreneurial activity, creating jobs, and reducing poverty. Thus, inclusive education is both a direct and indirect contributor to sustained economic growth.

3. Environmental Sustainability

In addition to its role in fostering social inclusion and economic growth, inclusive education is increasingly recognized as a critical tool for advancing environmental sustainability. Education can raise awareness of pressing environmental issues such as climate change, pollution, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity. Through inclusive educational practices, individuals from all walks of life, including those with disabilities, are empowered to learn about the importance of environmental conservation, resource management, and sustainable living

practices. Inclusive education enables all members of society to access knowledge about environmental issues, thereby broadening participation in efforts to combat environmental degradation. This is particularly crucial in countries like Nigeria, where environmental challenges such as deforestation, soil erosion, and desertification are exacerbated by both rapid population growth and climate change (Nwokoro, 2020). By promoting environmental education across all segments of society, inclusive education plays a role in fostering more responsible consumption, sustainable production, and greater ecological awareness among the population. Moreover, inclusive education helps to foster the mind-set that environmental sustainability is a collective responsibility. It empowers communities to come together to tackle environmental challenges in a more inclusive manner. For instance, local initiatives focused on tree planting, waste management, and sustainable farming can involve people from diverse backgrounds, including those with disabilities, thereby contributing to a more environmentally conscious society. Through this collective participation, inclusive education fosters a sense of ownership and shared responsibility in preserving the planet for future generations.

4. Peace and Social Cohesion

According to Nnanna (2021), one of the most profound impacts of inclusive education is its ability to promote peace and social cohesion. By encouraging understanding, empathy, and collaboration among individuals from diverse backgrounds, inclusive education helps to bridge social divides. In societies marked by ethnic, religious, or socio-economic tensions, inclusive education fosters mutual respect and cooperation, essential ingredients for long-term peace and stability. In Nigeria, a nation with a complex ethnic composition and a history of political and religious strife, promoting peace through education is a vital component of sustainable development. Inclusive education brings together children from various backgrounds whether they are from different ethnic groups, communities, or social classes into a shared learning space. By facilitating interaction among diverse groups, inclusive education enables students to appreciate differences, resolve conflicts constructively, and work together toward common goals (Ibe, 2021). These interactions cultivate empathy and solidarity, which are essential for societal harmony and peaceful coexistence. In addition to fostering interpersonal relationships, inclusive education plays a role in reducing violence and intolerance by teaching students the values of tolerance, dialogue, and respect for diversity. As students are taught the importance of collaboration and understanding in school, they carry these values with them into their communities, promoting social cohesion and reducing the likelihood of conflict. In the broader context, peace and social cohesion are indispensable

for sustainable development, as they create a stable and secure environment in which economic, social, and environmental initiatives can flourish. The link between inclusive education and sustainable development is clear and multifaceted. Inclusive education directly addresses many of the challenges that hinder Nigeria's development, including inequality, social exclusion, and a lack of access to quality education. By promoting social inclusion, economic growth, environmental sustainability, and peace, inclusive education lays the foundation for a more just, prosperous, and stable society (Obizue, 2020). In Nigeria, the promotion of inclusive education is not just an educational policy; it is a critical strategy for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. By ensuring that all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to quality education, Nigeria can cultivate a more equitable society, foster economic growth, protect the environment, and promote peace. Ultimately, inclusive education is a crucial pathway to sustainable development, providing the tools necessary to build a better future for all.

Opportunities for Inclusive Education in Nigeria

Despite the many challenges hindering the effective implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria, several promising opportunities exist that can help to enhance its accessibility, quality, and impact on sustainable development. The integration of inclusive education into the national education system holds considerable potential to foster a more equitable society and to contribute to Nigeria's broader developmental goals. The following opportunities were identified in the study as crucial to advancing inclusive education in the country:

1. Policy Support

The Nigerian government has demonstrated a commitment to inclusive education through various policy frameworks, most notably the National Policy on Education (2013) and the 2018 Inclusive Education for All Action Plan. These policy documents provide a foundation for integrating children with disabilities and those from marginalized backgrounds into mainstream education. They outline specific strategies for improving access to quality education, promoting social inclusion, and ensuring that educational services cater to the diverse needs of all learners. However, while these policies are promising, their implementation has often been inconsistent and underfunded. This presents an opportunity for stronger enforcement, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms to ensure that policies are not only adopted but also effectively executed. To capitalize on the potential of inclusive education, the government must strengthen its political will to prioritize inclusive education in the national agenda. This includes allocating more resources to the education sector, ensuring that inclusive education policies are adequately funded, and

developing clear guidelines for schools and educators on how to support students with disabilities or special educational needs. A more robust system of policy enforcement would also encourage regional governments to align their practices with national objectives, creating a more cohesive approach to inclusive education across the country.

2. Community Engagement

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities play an essential role in advocating for inclusive education and bridging the gaps left by governmental institutions. NGOs, community-based organizations, and grassroots movements have been instrumental in raising awareness about the importance of inclusive education, providing support to marginalized groups, and pushing for policy changes. These organizations often operate on the ground, directly engaging with schools, parents, and communities to promote inclusivity. Collaborative efforts between governments, schools, NGOs, and local communities have the potential to address the barriers to inclusive education and create a more supportive environment for all learners, particularly those with disabilities. Community engagement also plays a critical role in challenging societal attitudes and cultural biases toward disability. By educating parents, teachers, and students about the benefits of inclusion, NGOs can help shift cultural perceptions that stigmatize children with disabilities. Additionally, local communities are often in a better position to identify the unique needs of their members and tailor interventions to suit local contexts. Increased collaboration between schools and communities can lead to innovative solutions that enhance the learning environment for all students, including those with special needs.

3. Technology Integration

Technological advancements offer significant opportunities for improving inclusive education in Nigeria, particularly for students with disabilities. The use of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, braille materials, and voice recognition software, can greatly enhance the learning experience for students with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments. These technologies enable students to access learning materials that might otherwise be inaccessible, allowing them to participate more fully in the classroom and to engage with educational content in a way that suits their individual needs. Incorporating technology into the classroom also promotes digital literacy, an essential skill in today's increasingly technology-driven world. By investing in technology infrastructure, schools can provide students with disabilities with tools that enhance their learning outcomes, contributing to greater academic success and future employability. Furthermore, the use of technology can help alleviate some of the challenges posed by inadequate infrastructure, as assistive technologies can often be more affordable

and scalable than physical adaptations to the school environment. While the use of technology holds considerable promise, it is important to recognize that access to such tools is not universal in Nigeria. Therefore, the government must prioritize the provision of assistive technologies in schools, particularly in under-resourced areas. Teacher training on how to effectively integrate technology into their classrooms is also essential to ensure that educators are equipped to support students with disabilities in using these tools to enhance their learning experience.

4. International Partnerships

International partnerships represent another key opportunity for advancing inclusive education in Nigeria. The country can draw valuable lessons from other nations that have successfully implemented inclusive education systems. By fostering partnerships with international organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, Nigeria can access technical assistance, financial resources, and knowledge-sharing opportunities that can help strengthen its inclusive education policies and practices. Additionally, through collaboration with other countries, Nigeria can learn from best practices in inclusive education, particularly those that have effectively integrated students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms. These partnerships could also provide opportunities for teacher exchange programs, where Nigerian educators can gain exposure to successful inclusive education models

from around the world. Such international collaborations could help build local capacity for inclusive education, particularly in the areas of curriculum development, teacher training, and resource mobilization. By leveraging international support and expertise, Nigeria can improve its approach to inclusive education, ensuring that it aligns with global standards while addressing the unique challenges faced within the Nigerian context. These partnerships also present an opportunity to increase funding for inclusive education programs, which could help mitigate the financial constraints that currently limit the accessibility of quality education for students with disabilities.

Statement of the problem.

Despite the recognized importance and vibrant policies on inclusive education, several challenges that hinder its effectiveness and objectives in Nigeria has become issue of discourse and outcry to stakeholders. Issues such as inadequate teacher training, absence of specialised educational resources, lack of physical infrastructure and unequal funding are some of the problems observed by the researcher. These issues raise critical questions on how to achieve sustainable development through inclusive education in the Nigerian context. The study seeks to examine the… intricate relationship between inclusive education and sustainable development within the Nigerian context. The research aims to explore how inclusive education can contribute to the attainment of sustainable development by

fostering equity, driving economic growth, promoting social integration, and encouraging environmental sustainability.

Research Questions

Two research questions were formulated to guide the studies:

1. What are the ways inclusive education can contribute to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria?

2**.** What are the challenges of inclusive education towards attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria?

Hypothesis

A null hypothesis was postulated to guide the study;

There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of teachers and students on the ways inclusive education can contribute to; as well as its challenges towards attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively investigate the role of inclusive education in promoting sustainable development in Nigeria. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study offers a comprehensive analysis of the current state of inclusive education in Nigeria, identifies the challenges impeding its effectiveness, and assesses its potential to contribute to the realization of the SDGs.

Through this investigation, the paper seeks to offer valuable insights into the ways in which inclusive education can be leveraged as a catalyst for sustainable development in Nigeria. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques, the study seeks to capture a wide range of perspectives from key stakeholders involved in the education system. The quantitative component of the study focuses on gathering statistical data, while the qualitative component aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities, challenges, and opportunities associated with inclusive education in the Nigerian context. This approach allows for a robust analysis of the impact of inclusive education on sustainable development, encompassing both numerical data and rich, context-specific insights.

Data Collection

To explore the experiences and perceptions of various stakeholders involved in the educational process, a multi-faceted data collection strategy was employed. The following methods were utilized:

1. **Survey**: A structured questionnaire was administered to a diverse sample comprising 300 teachers, 300 students from schools across Nigeria. The aim of the survey was to assess the participants' experiences with and perspectives on inclusive education, with particular focus on their perceptions of accessibility, inclusivity, and the overall effectiveness of inclusive practices in their schools. The

survey questions covered a broad range of topics, including the availability of resources for inclusive education, teacher preparedness, infrastructure adequacy, and the overall inclusion of students with disabilities or special educational needs.

2. **Document Analysis**: In addition to primary data collected through surveys and interviews, the study also included a review of relevant secondary data sources. These included government policy documents, reports from international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Bank, and academic literature related to inclusive education and sustainable development. The aim of the document analysis was to contextualize the primary data, identify policy trends, and assess the alignment between governmental objectives and the practical realities of inclusive education in Nigeria.

3.

This secondary data also provided a broader understanding of global perspectives on inclusive education, further enriching the study's findings. The primary data was analysed using standard deviation for the research questions and t-test statistics for the hypothesis. Two research questions and a null hypothesis guided the study and was tested at a 0.05 level of significance. The research instrument used for data collection is a 4 point rating scale, The instrument was validated by three specialist; two in educational management and planing and one from education measurement and evaluation. The reliability of the instrument was established at 0.78 using cronnbach alpha statistics. Mean rating was used to answer the two research questions while t-test of simple linear correlation statistic was used to test the hypothesis.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

What are the ways inclusive education can contribute to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean ratings of teachers and students on the ways inclusive education can contribute to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria?

	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	X	SD	Decision
1. Fostering Equity	300	220	50	30	4.6	0.82	Agree
2. Driving Economic Growth	340	200	30	30	4.8	0.84	Agree
3. Promoting Social Integration	310	250	20	20	4.2	0.80	Agree
4. Encouraging Environmental sustainability	300	220	40	40	4.7	0.81	Agree
Grand Total					4.6	0.82	

Table 1: shows a very high mean rating by the respondents to the items listed. This means that both teachers and students agreed to the items listed above as the ways inclusive education can contribute to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria. The grand mean of 4.6 and SD of 0.82 was obtained for all the four items, Thus indicating that the respondents generally agree with all the items.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2:

What are the challenges of inclusive education towards attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria?

	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	X	SD	Disagree
1. Inadequate Teacher Training	320	240	30	10	4.4	0.78	Agree
2. Absence of Specialised Educational Resources	360	220	10	10	4.9	0.85	Agree
3. Lack of Physical Infrastructure	320	240	30	10	4.4	0.78	Agree
4. Unequal Funding in Rural and Urban schools	300	230	40	30	4.8	0.85	Agree
Grand mean and SD					4.7	0.82	

Table 2: shows a very high mean rating by the respondents to the items listed. This means that both teachers and students agreed to the items listed above. The grand mean of 4.7 and SD of 0.82

was obtained for all the items, Thus indicating that the respondents generally agree with all the items as the challenges of inclusive education for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Testing of Hypotheses.

Table 3: t-test of difference between the mean rating of teachers and students on the ways inclusive education can contribute to; as well as the challenges of inclusive education towards attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria

Respondents	N	x	SD	df	t-cal	t-Crit	Decision
Teachers	300	4.6	0.82				
				166	0.85	+1.96	Not Significant
Students	300	4.7	0.81				

Table 3 shows that the calculated t-value at 0.05 of significance and 166 degree of freedom is 0.85 while the critical or table value is + 1.96. Since the calculated value of t is less than critical t-value, the null hypothesis is therefore, not rejected. This means that no significant difference exists between the mean ratings of teachers and students on the ways inclusive education can contribute to; as well as its challenges towards the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria.

Discussion

The findings from this study underscore the critical role that inclusive education plays in the sustainable development of Nigeria. Despite the significant challenges, inclusive education offers transformative opportunities for addressing key issues such as inequality, poverty, and social exclusion (Obizue, 2020). By enhancing social inclusion, empowering individuals economically, and promoting environmental sustainability, inclusive education contributes directly to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To fully realize the potential of inclusive education, Nigeria must make substantial investments in educational infrastructure, teacher training, and policy implementation. The government must prioritize inclusive education as a key pillar of national development, ensuring that educational reforms are not only aspirational but also tangible and impactful. By addressing the barriers identified in this study, Nigeria can create an education system that provides equitable opportunities for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities. Akpan (2019), added that inclusive education can act as a catalyst for broader societal change. By fostering a culture of equality, tolerance, and diversity in schools, inclusive education helps to cultivate a more inclusive society. This societal

transformation is essential for promoting long-term peace, social cohesion, and stability key components for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. As the country continues its development journey, the integration of inclusive education into its educational system will be crucial in building a more just, equitable, and prosperous future for all its citizens.

Secondly, the findings of this study underscore the significant challenges that hinder the full implementation of inclusive education in Nigeria. Inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher training, cultural barriers, and insufficient funding are major obstacles that must be addressed to ensure that inclusive education can effectively contribute to sustainable development. However, despite these challenges, the study also highlights the potential for inclusive education to foster social inclusion, economic development, and greater equality in Nigeria. Addressing the identified barriers through targeted interventions and policies could significantly improve the accessibility and quality of education for all Nigerian students, including those with special needs (Martins, 2018). Through a concerted effort by the government, educators, and other stakeholders, inclusive education can play a pivotal role in advancing the country's development goals if the listed challenges are taken care of.

Recommmsendations

To effectively promote inclusive education and ensure that it contributes meaningfully to sustainable development, several key recommendations must be considered:

1. Increase Funding for Inclusive Education

2. Expand Teacher Training Programs

3. Promote Awareness Campaigns

4. Strengthen Policy Implementation

Conclusion

Inclusive education is undeniably a critical catalyst for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. It is a fundamental tool in fostering social inclusion, driving economic progress, and promoting environmental sustainability. By ensuring that all children, irrespective of their backgrounds or abilities, have access to quality education, Nigeria can create a more just and equitable society. The transformative power of inclusive education lies not only in the educational outcomes for individuals but also in its broader societal impact—strengthening social cohesion, reducing poverty, and ensuring that no one is left behind.

However, despite the clear benefits, significant barriers persist in the Nigerian education system. Inadequate infrastructure, limited teacher training, cultural biases, and insufficient funding continue to hinder the widespread implementation of inclusive education. These challenges must be addressed to unlock the full potential of inclusive education as a driver of sustainable

development. Nevertheless, this study demonstrates that there is a substantial opportunity for Nigeria to harness the power of inclusive education to catalyse positive change. By focusing on the key opportunities identified in the research policy support, community engagement, technology integration, and international partnerships—the country can build a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable education system. For inclusive education to be fully realized in Nigeria, a concerted effort from the government, educators, and communities is essential. Collaboration between all stakeholders can foster an environment where inclusive education is not merely a policy aspiration but a lived reality. The implementation of inclusive education policies must be consistent, well-funded, and supported by ongoing professional development for teachers and inclusive practices within schools. Only through such collective effort can the barriers to inclusion be overcome, and an education system that benefits all students regardless of their abilities or circumstances—be established.

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