

# Diversity of Learners, their Special Learning Needs and Inclusive Education: Perspectives of Teachers in Public Secondary Schools in Kwara State, Nigeria.

Olaniyi Bouwoye, Adedayo Adesokan

Department of Special Education, Kwara State University, Malete, Ilorin, Nigeria

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.802089>

Received: 31 January 2024; Revised: 11 February 2024; Accepted: 15 February 2024; Published: 14 March 2024

## ABSTRACT

The study was aimed at building knowledge base for addressing learners' special learning needs and for promoting inclusive education. The purpose of the study was to provide a rich description of public secondary schools' teachers' perspectives on their learners and on inclusive education. The study adopted quantitative design to investigate teachers' awareness and knowledge of diversity of learners in their classrooms, including the teachers' understanding of their learners' special learning needs as well as the teachers' perspectives on their experiences with implementation of inclusive education

The population for the study comprised all teachers in public secondary schools in Kwara State, Nigeria, and by convenient sampling method drew a sample of one hundred and forty-five teachers. The instrument for data gathering was a questionnaire which contained descriptive statements responded to by respondents who indicated their degrees of agreement on a four-point; liker-type scale. Data collected were analysed and with the use of the descriptive statistics of percentage frequencies and mean response scores to answer the research questions and to arrive at the achievement of the study objectives.

The results revealed that teachers involved in the study were generally aware of learners' diversity in their classrooms. To strengthen this awareness, the teachers also indicated their knowledge regarding the manifestations of the diversity in terms of the learners' ability and activity levels as well as behavioural tendencies. Teacher-respondents reported some learners as gifted and talented, some as more active than others, some aggressive or withdrawn in behaviors, some with speech and language difficulties as well as auditory, visual and orthopaedic impairments, while some are with other disabilities.

The results of the study have implications for pre-service and in-service training of teachers as well as better structuring of schools' physical infrastructure in order to promote better access, participation and belongingness for pupils with disabilities.

**Keywords:** diversity, teachers, learners, disabilities, special learning needs, access, participation, inclusive education

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Legislations regarding special education needs and inclusive education are in place, in Nigeria. However, implementation mechanisms are facing a number of challenges. Major challenge is with the capacities of teachers who are implementing the legislations. Research study by Bojuwoye (2021) revealed that many teachers, especially in public schools, are not fully aware of the diverse nature of learners and that they work with learners who need extra support, require different programs of learning or different teaching strategies

in order to reach their full educational potentials.

Research works by Salend, (2005) and Pearson Education (2010) note that today's classroom is diverse as it comprised learners from virtually all walks of life with some from different cultural and or religious backgrounds; some gifted and talented, while others may be from different socio-economic backgrounds and some with a disability Teachers are expected to be aware of this diversity in learners in their classrooms and to be prepared to educate all despite the fact that they are not of the same level of knowledge, ability, competence, emotions or behavior tendencies. To educate the learners appropriately teachers must know them very well enough. According to Salend (2005), the first step in adapting everyday classroom is to be aware of the individuality of each learner in order to facilitate his or her learning needs. UNESCO (2014) also asserts that, for inclusion to achieve its objectives, education practices must be child-centered and a teacher must be aware of every factor that may be affecting every learner in the classroom. Teachers should be aware of whatever barriers to learning a learner is confronted with and should be prepared to adapt his or her teaching methods to accommodate learners' special learning needs.

In order to adopt appropriate teaching strategy for learners with disabilities, a teacher must first be capable of identifying the learners' special learning needs by carrying out an assessment (Pearson Education, 2010). At the heart of "best practice", in educating learners with disabilities is the use of assessment information to improve instruction, to support learning and generally classroom procedures (Salend, 2005). The implication of this statement is that teachers must find out where each of their learners is academically, socially, and culturally in order to determine how best to facilitate learning (Gildner, 2001). A logical consequence of this realization is that teachers need to acquire skills in curriculum-based and learner assessment including assessing learning styles, cooperative learning strategies and facilitating peer tutoring, or social skills training (Gildner, 2001). Moreover, since all learners have difficulty at one time or another, or to one degree or another, teachers are likely to meet learners with some type of problems in their classrooms. Therefore, having an understanding of learners and appropriate skills for identifying learners' special learning needs (or barriers to learning) are very important for all teachers if the teachers are to facilitate effective learning (Gildner, 2001).

A very important consideration in the education of children with disabilities is the fact that they must be educated in the least restrictive environment, or an educational setting that is as similar as possible to the one in which children who do not have a disability are being educated (Salend, 2005). In this regard, learners with disabilities or learners with special learning needs should be taught full-time in general education classrooms, by regular education teachers and specialist(s). That is, learners with disabilities should be taught in inclusive education system. This is what the Nigerian policy on inclusive education (FME, 2015) envisage and expect that every teacher, in Nigeria, working in the public schools should possess appropriate awareness, knowledge capacities and skills or competencies to practice inclusive education.

Some teachers believe that all learners benefit from inclusive education because inclusion creates an authentic microcosm of the society the learners will be participating in after their formal education or when they graduate from school (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Karten, 2010; Mergler, Carrington, Kimber, & Bland (2016). According to Yeo Lay See, Maureen Neihart, Chong Wan Har, and Vivien Huan (2010) the benefits of inclusive education extend to all including learners with special needs, typically developing learners, and, even, their teachers. Learners with special needs participate in the real world, learn to adapt, find social acceptance, and attain success in learning. Typically developing learners or the so-called "normal learners" benefit as they develop awareness of diversity and, more importantly, heart strengths such as compassion (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Karten, 2010). Teachers benefit as they find themselves positively stretched in catering pedagogically to a range of abilities in the classroom, develop collaborative relationships with the regular class teachers (or Allied Educators – AEDs) and special education teachers (Teachers Trained in Special Needs – TTSNs) and sharpen skills in differentiating

instruction and in managing challenging learner behaviors. As further opined by Florian and Rouse (2009), to practice inclusion successfully in the classroom, this may involve the teacher gaining an understanding of the socio-cultural factors that produce individual differences, or specialist knowledge about disabilities and learners' learning needs, awareness of suitable educational as well as social issues that can affect children's learning. Furthermore, teacher competences for inclusive education practices should also include skills relevant to the improvement of teaching and learning for all, including the capacity to reduce barriers to learning and participation (Florian & Rouse, 2009). It is further contended that generally teacher competence in inclusive education should involve a multifaceted pedagogical skills that recognize how teaching should take account of children's individual characteristics; the learning that takes place outside school and learners' previous knowledge, individual and cultural experiences and interests (Florian and Rouse, 2009).

### **Barriers to Inclusive Education and Teachers' Attitudes to Inclusion.**

Research studies (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Parasuram, 2006) have revealed that there are a number of factors (either operating alone or combined with one another) that directly or indirectly influence the effectiveness and success of the implementation of inclusive education. A few of these factors revolve around teachers' awareness and knowledge capacities regarding diversity of pupils in the classrooms and teachers' competences for inclusive education (including skills relevant for acceptance of pupils with disabilities and for the improvement of teaching and learning as well as capacity to reduce barriers to learning and participation by pupils with disabilities). Other factors include class size, physical infrastructure, inadequate resources and lack of adequate teacher preparation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). However, the most critical component for successful inclusive education have been identified as teachers' attitudes towards the principle of inclusion of learners with disabilities (Avramidis et al, 2002). In this connection Parasuram (2006) notes that attitudes are important insofar as they predict, guide and influence people's behavior. Other researchers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Larrivee & Cook, 1979), also agree with the contention that teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education are very important variable in the implementation of successful inclusive education.

Many research studies especially on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education have revealed both positive and negative attitudes and the teachers' beliefs about their ability to teach pupils with disabilities in regular education classrooms (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Larrivee & Cook, 1979; Parasuram, 2006). In the main, the research has further shown that teachers' initial negative attitudes to inclusive education may be due to inexperience but are likely to change as the teachers gain experience and expertise which are more likely to develop through participating in the implementation of inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Larrivee & Cook, 1979; Parasuram, 2006). Avramidis and Norwich (2002) further assert that the presence or absence of positive attitudes and a sense of commitment to the principles of inclusion are likely to turn teachers toward making or avoiding efforts to effectively teach learners with disabilities

### **Problem Statement**

There are many factors that affect, directly or indirectly, the success of inclusive education. These factors may act individually or in combination with one another. Since it is very important that teachers should know their learners well enough, therefore, teachers should have a certain level of awareness and or knowledge about the diverse nature of the population of learners in their classrooms. Also included as pre-requisite for teachers is certain level of competence on how to identify learners with special learning needs as well as skills for implementing inclusive education, Teachers also need appropriate knowledge capacity on how to apply multifaceted pedagogical strategies that recognize how teaching should take account of learners' individual characteristics as well as skills relevant for the improvement of teaching and learning for all, including capacity to reduce barriers to learning and to ensure participation by all learners. From the extant literature, on Nigeria, consulted by the authors of this study, it is not clear as to whether teachers in

public schools are aware of the diversity in their learners, the variety of their learners' learning needs as well as the teachers' perceptions and their competencies regarding the implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, the problem of this study is the investigation of public secondary school teachers' awareness of diversity of learners in their classrooms. The investigation also include the teachers' awareness of the manifestations of the learners' diversity, teachers' knowledge regarding the link between learners' learning needs and potential to learn, their attitudes towards disabilities and inclusive education and their perceived barriers to inclusive education.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What were the nature of teacher-respondents' awareness of the diversity in learners in their classrooms?
2. What were the nature of the teacher-respondents' knowledge capacity regarding the links between learners' special learning needs and their potentials to learn?
3. What were the teacher-respondents' attitudes to disabilities and inclusive education for learners living with disabilities?
4. What were the teacher-respondents' perceived challenges or obstacles to the implantation of inclusive education?

## METHODOLOGY

The study was a landmark project aimed at obtaining comprehensive information on teachers' perspectives regarding diversity of pupils in their class-rooms and inclusive education practices in their schools. This was with a view to building a knowledge-base for the promotion of inclusive education in Nigeria. Thus, in order to provide fairly rich description of the teachers' perspectives on their learners the study utilized a research design that was quantitative in approach.

The targeted population for the study was all teachers in public secondary schools in Kwara state, Nigeria. The justification for involving teachers in the study was that, apart from the learners, teachers constitute a very important factor in any educational process. Research shows that effective teachers are the most important factor contributing to learner achievement (Pearson Education, 2010). It is further argued that, although curricula, reduced class size, funding, family and community involvement all contribute to school improvement and learner achievement, the most influential factor is the teacher (Pearson Education, 2010). Teachers are critically important for schools implementing inclusive education. Thus, seeking information from teachers about school programs is highly desirable.

A study sample of one hundred and forty-five (145) public secondary school teachers (47 male and 98 female teachers) was obtained by convenient sampling method. Due to finance and time constraint the researchers opted to collect data quickly from the teachers who were readily available, easy to reach and get in touch with within the geographical area of study as at the time the study was being conducted. The convenient sampling is a non-probability sampling method which researchers adopt in order to select participants because they are easily accessible, available and willing to be involved in the study (Creswell, 2012).

Quantitative data was collected for the study by use of a questionnaire which contained descriptive statements on teachers' awareness and knowledge of diversity in their learners as well as their perspectives on the implementation of inclusive education. The response format to the questionnaire statements was coded on a four-point Liker-type scale ranging from Strongly Agreed (SA – with a score of 4); Agreed (A-3), Disagreed (D-2), to Strongly Disagreed (SD-with a score of 1). Teachers were to respond to each of these descriptive statements by indicating the degree of their agreement with the statement.

The researchers observed content validity and also established reliability for the study instrument, Content validity was by constructing all the important items or statements on the study instrument and ensuring that all domains of the study objectives were covered by these statements to the satisfaction of a panel of experts in Psychology. Special and Inclusive Education. Reliability of the study instrument was established by the administration of the draft questionnaire once to a sample of teachers who did not participate in the final study. A calculated Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.78 was obtained to indicate an acceptable degree of internal consistency reliability.

The data collected for the study were analysed and the results of data analysis yielded percentage frequencies and mean response scores of agreement (or disagreement). Thus, the descriptive statistics of percentage frequencies and the mean response scores were used to answer the research questions for the study.

The researchers adhered to all the relevant ethical guidelines for involving human subjects in research studies. Thus, the researchers sought ethical clearance from the university to conduct the study. Permission to conduct research in the schools involved in the study was also sought from the management authorities of the schools. The teacher-respondents were provided with adequate information about the research and were informed that participation was voluntary and that information supplied was for research purpose only and would be treated as confidential information. The respondents were made to sign informed consent agreement before participating in the research.

## RESULTS

The descriptive statistics of percentage frequencies and means were used for presenting the results in tables and according to the research questions.

### Research Question One (1):

What were the nature of the teacher-respondents’ awareness of diversity in learners in their classrooms?

The responses, of the teachers involved in this study, to the questionnaire statements regarding their awareness of diversity or differentiations in learners in their classrooms are displayed in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: Teacher- respondents’ responses to questionnaire statements on awareness of learners’ diversity in their classrooms

S/N	Statements on the Questionnaire	Respondents (145)	Responses		Total Mean Response Scores
			Agree	Disagree	
1	I am aware that today’s classrooms are diverse comprising learners from different cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds; some gifted, talented and some with disabilities	Male (47)	44(93.4)	3(6.4)	3.4
		Female (98)	88(89.8)	10(10.2)	3.4
2	I am aware that learners in my classroom may also be different in terms of activity levels and attention spans as some are more active than others, some have speech and language difficulties, some are hard of hearing, some are aggressive or withdrawn in behaviors, some with or thopaedic and other disabilities	Male (47)	38(80.8)	9(9.1)	3
		Female (98)	81(82.7)	17(17.3)	3.2

\*Note: The figures in parentheses are in percentages.

Table 1 above displays information regarding respondents’ responses to the questionnaire statements. The teacher-respondents reported their views on the diversity or differences in the learners in their classrooms by agreeing with the statements on the questionnaire which indicated that the teachers of this study were aware of the diverse or different kinds of learners in their classrooms. The percentage frequencies of agreement responses for male (93.4%/) and female (89.53%) teachers, or the mean response scores of 3.4 for both the male and the female respondents, are above the mean to indicate that the teachers, involved in this study, endorsed the statement on the questionnaire indicating that they are aware that learners in their classrooms may be different in many ways. To further strengthen this awareness of diversity in learners in their classrooms, the teacher-respondents also reported their awareness of the manifestations of the diversity or differences in the learners by endorsing the statement that indicated that they are aware that learners in their classrooms may be different in terms of the learners’ different levels of abilities, actions and attention spans. The percentage frequencies of agreement responses of the teachers for both male (80.8%) and female (82.7%) teachers, or the mean response scores for males (3.0) and for females (3.2) respondents, all of which are above the means, are clear indications of the respondents’ endorsement of the questionnaire statement stating that some learners in their classrooms may be described as more active than others, some may be said to be more aggressive or withdrawn in behavior while some may be living with other types of disability.

**Research Question Two (2):**

What were the nature of teacher-respondents’ knowledge capacity regarding the links between learners’ special learning needs and their potentials to learn?.

One important objective of this study was to find out from the teacher-respondents their awareness of the links or relationships between disabilities and potential to learn Thus, the teacher-respondents of this study were to report on their knowledge not only on the manifestations of the differences in learners in their classrooms but also on whether they were aware that disabilities can cause barriers to learning or that specific learning need(s) can be caused by particular disability or disabilities.

Table 2 below displays teachers’ responses to questionnaire statements on their awareness of links, or relationships, between learners’ disabilities and potentials to learn.

Table 2: Teacher-respondents’ responses to questionnaire statements regarding their awareness of links between learners’ disabilities and potentials to learn.

S/N	Statements on the Questionnaire	Respondents (N=145)	Responses		Total Response Mean Scores
			Agree	Disagree	
1	I am not aware that these differences in learners also means different learning needs or different barriers to learning	Male (47)	20(42.6)	27(57.5)	1.9
		Female (98)	33(33.7)	65(66.3)	1.7
2	I am aware that these differences in learners are linked to learners’ ability or potentials to learn, or that disability may cause challenges or barriers to learning	Male (47)	38(80.8)	9(19.2)	2.9
		Female (98)	80(81.6)	18(18.)	3.0

\*Note: The figures in parentheses are in percentages.

Table 2 above displays information on the responses of the teachers to the questionnaire statement (No. 1 on Table 2 above) indicating that they did not agree that they are not aware of the links or the relationship

between disabilities and learners’ potentials to learn. In this connection, the teacher-respondents’ percentage frequencies of agreement responses for male (42.6) and female (33,7), or the mean response scores of agreement of 1.9 and 1.7 respectively, are below the means indicating that the teacher-respondents did not endorse the questionnaire statement which states that the teachers were not aware of the links between learners’ disabilities and their potential to learn. To further drive this point home the teacher-respondents were emphatic in their responses to the second statements (No. 2 on Table 2 above) that they were aware that differences in learning needs of learners may be linked to their disabilities. The teacher-respondents endorsed the questionnaire statement (No.2 in Table 2 above) that they were aware that the differences in the learners may be linked to their potentials to learn. This may be considered as an indication that the teacher-respondents were aware of the links between disabilities and potentials to learn or that disabilities create (or cause) barriers to learning. The percentage frequencies of agreement responses for male (80.8%) and female (81.7%) teacher-respondents, or the mean response scores of 2.9 (males) and 3.0 (females), all of which are above the means are indications that the teachers were aware that these differences in learners may also mean differences in learning needs of the pupils. or that disabilities may be related to (or cause) different barriers to learning.

**Research Question 3: What were the teacher-respondents’ attitudes to disabilities or inclusive education for people living with disabilities?**

The teacher-respondents of this study reported on their attitudes to disabilities or inclusive education for learners living with disabilities. In this regard, they were presented with questionnaire statements that tried to evoke their beliefs, emotions and their reactions or attitudes towards disabilities or learners living with disabilities. Table 3 below displays information on teacher-respondents’ responses to the questionnaire statements. The teacher-respondents’ responses to questionnaire statements indicate their attitudes towards disabilities or inclusive education for learners living with disabilities.

Table 3: Teacher-respondents’ responses to questionnaire statements on their attitudes to disabilities or learners living with disabilities.

S/N	Statements on the Questionnaire	Respondents (145)	Responses		Total Mean Response Scores
			Agree	Disagree	
1	My responsibility as a classroom teacher is to teach as if learners in my classroom are not different in terms of abilities, actions, or behavior tendencies,	Male (47)	26(55.3)	21(44.7)	2.2
		Female (98)	72(73.5)	26(26.5)	3.2
2	I would prefer that learners with challenges or disabilities should be educated in special schools rather than general education classrooms	Male (47)	33(70.2)	14(29.8)	3.1
		Female (98)	81(82.7)	17(17.3)	3.4
3	I don’t see how learners with learning challenges can enjoy full membership of their classrooms or participate in all learning activities of their classrooms even if there is need to make some adjustments to classroom procedures.	Male (47)	15(31.9)	32(68.1)	1.4
		Female (98)	26(26.5)	72(73.5)	1.2

4	I don't know how learners with different learning challenges or living with disabilities can be educated in the same classroom with learners without disabilities	Male (47)	19(40.4)	28(59.6)	1.6
		Female (98)	41(41.8)	55(57.2)	1.7
5	Am ready to implement inclusive education, if appropriate material resources and support are provided	Male (47)	44(93.6)	3(6.4)	3.8
		Female (98)	86(87.8)	12(12.3)	3.5

\*Note: The figures in parentheses are in percentages

Teacher-respondents' responses to questionnaire statements indicating teachers' attitudes to disabilities or inclusive education for learners with disabilities are as in the following:

1. Male teacher-respondents were not strongly in support of the questionnaire statement stating that teachers' responsibility is to teach as if learners are not different in their ability and action levels or learning needs, whereas close to three-quarter of their female counterparts endorsed the questionnaire statement (male and female teachers' percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 55.3% and 73.5% or the mean response scores of agreement responses of 2.2 and 3.2 respectively);

2. Almost all teacher-respondents of this study, however, endorsed the questionnaire statement stating that they would prefer that, learners with learning challenges or disabilities be educated only in special schools (male and female teachers' percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 70.2% and 82.7% or the mean response scores, of agreement responses, of 3.1 and 3.4 respectively);

3. Teacher-respondents of this study did not endorse the questionnaire statement stating that teachers lacked knowledge capacity regarding how to make learners living with disabilities enjoy full membership of their classrooms and to participate fully in all their classrooms' learning activities (percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 31.9% and 26.5% for male and female teachers respectively or the mean response score of agreement of 1.4 and 1.2 respectively are all below the means);

4. The teacher-respondents also did not endorse the questionnaire statement that teachers do not know how learners with different learning challenges or living with disabilities could be educated in the same classroom with learners without disabilities (percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 40.4% and 41.8% for male and female teachers respectively, or the mean response scores, of agreement, of 1.6 and 1.7 respectively are all below the means);

5. Almost all the teacher-respondents involved in this study expressed their readiness to implement inclusive education if their schools provide appropriate material resources and support (male and female teachers' percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 93.6% and 87.8% respectively or mean response scores of agreement responses of 3.8 and 3.5 respectively all above the means).

#### Research Question Four)

#### What were the teacher-respondents' perceived Challenges to implementation of Inclusive Education

Table 4 below displays information on the study subjects' responses to the questionnaire statements regarding challenges to implementing inclusive education.



Table 4: Teacher-respondents’ responses to questionnaire statements on challenges or Barriers to implementing inclusive education

	Statement on the Questionnaire	Respondents (145)	Responses		Total Response Mean Scores
			Agree	Disagree	
1	We are not trained in our teacher-preparation program to identify learners with special education or learning needs and this is affecting our roles in implementation of inclusive education.	Male (47)	31(65.9)	16(34.1)	2.8
		Female (98)	53(54.1)	45(45.9)	2.1
2	Teachers are not given in-service training to equip them with skills for implementing inclusive education	Male (47)	32(89.3)	5(10.7)	3.3
		Female (98)	90(91.9)	8(8.1)	3.6
3	Many schools implementing inclusive education lack adequate resources or support for the learners	Male (47)	32(89.3)	5(10.7)	3.3
		Female (98)	90(91.9)	8(8.1)	3.6
4	There must be changes to how schools are structured and to work (both physically and emotionally), to accept and welcome pupils as strategy for the provision of equal educational opportunity for all irrespective of disabilities.	Male (47)	40(85.1)	7(14.9)	3.2
		Female (98)	89(89.8)	10(10.2)	3.3
5	Non-modification of the general education curriculum can make the implementation of inclusive education not feasible.	Male (47)	43(91.5)	4(8.5)	3.6
		Female (98)	91(92.9)	7(7.1)	3.7

\*Note: The figures in parentheses are in percentages

Table 4 above displays information on the responses of teachers to the questionnaire statements on challenges to implementation of inclusive education.

In terms of training teachers for the implementation of inclusive education in public schools, male teacher-respondents of this study agreed with the questionnaire statement that teachers were not trained for the implementation of inclusive education, The female teachers appeared not to seriously supported this notion. The male and female teachers’ percentage frequencies of agreement responses (65.9% males and 54.1% females) or the mean response scores (2.8 for males and 2.1 for females respectively) are indications that participants of this study were of the view that lack of training of teachers could be a major challenge to implementation of inclusive education. Both male and female teachers endorsed the statement that teachers should be giving in-service training and be equipped with appropriate skills for the implementation of inclusive education (male and female teachers’ percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 89.3 and 91.9% or the mean response scores, of agreement response of 3.3 and 3.6 respectively are all higher than the means. Thus, it could be said that the respondents of this study considered lack of training of teachers for the implementation of inclusive education as a major challenge to inclusive education.

The teacher-respondents also considered lack of adequate resources and or support services as challenges to the implementation of inclusive education. Both the male and female teacher-respondents of this study endorsed the questionnaire statement regarding the need for the schools to be equipped with adequate resources for practising inclusive education (male and female teachers' percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 89.3% and 91% or the mean response 4scores of 3.3 and 3.6 respectively).

Furthermore, the respondents of this study regarded the non-restructuring of the schools' physical infrastructure such that the schools or the classrooms can be accessible and conducive for education for all learners, irrespective of disabilities, a major challenge for the implementation of inclusive education. In this regard, the respondents endorsed the questionnaire statement stating that how schools are structured to accept, welcome and educate all learners irrespective of disabilities impact seriously on the effectiveness of implementing inclusive education (male and female teachers' percentage frequencies, of agreement responses, of 85.1% and 89.8% or mean response scores of agreement responses of 3.2 and 3.3 respectively).

The respondents also noted that lack of modification of the schools' general education curricular offerings could negatively impact the implementation of inclusive education. Thus, the teacher-respondents of this study endorsed the questionnaire statement that the modification of general education curriculum could make implementation of inclusive education feasible (male and female teacher-respondents' percentage frequencies of agreement responses of 91.5% and 92.9% or the mean response scores of agreement responses of 3.7 and 3.8 respectively).

## SUMMARY OF IMPORTANT STUDY FINDINGS

Teachers are aware that learners in their classrooms are diverse. Teachers are aware of diversity in learners in terms of their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds. Teachers are also aware of other manifestations of diversity in learners especially in terms of their abilities (as some pupils are gifted and talented), some pupils are more active than others, some are aggressive or withdrawn in behaviors, some have speech, language, hearing and visual difficulties, while some are living with other disabilities;

Teacher-respondents also are knowledgeable of the links between disabilities and learners' potentials to learn. For instance, teachers are aware that disabilities can cause barriers to learning or be responsible for the different learning needs of learners.

The results of this study showed that teachers have divergent attitudes to disabilities or learners living with disabilities and the implementation of inclusive education. This may be because of the teachers' limited knowledge capacities because they were not trained in appropriate skills to implement inclusive education during their pre-service education preparation. The results of the study also revealed that teachers' negative attitudes to inclusive education may also be because their institutions lack resources for the education of children living with disabilities or that they received limited support from their schools' management authorities.

Teacher-respondents of this study identified several challenges or barriers to implementation of inclusive education. Among these challenges are:

- lack of pre-service training in appropriate skills for teachers to implement inclusive education,
- non-conducive physical environment that makes schools and classrooms inaccessible and welcoming for all learners irrespective of disabilities;
- non-modification of general education curriculum and adaptation of appropriate instructional strategies that makes for suitable education for all children irrespective of disabilities;
- limited or lack of resources and support for learners with disabilities or special education needs to make implementation of inclusive education possible was also indicated as a challenge.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore, with a view to ascertaining, teachers' awareness and or knowledge capacities regarding learners with special learning needs or learners living with disabilities. It is important to evaluate the viewpoints of those directly involved in the education of the children. By studying teachers' awareness or knowledge regarding diversity in their learners this could give insight into the teachers' understanding of learners with special learning needs and the inclusion of all learners in the learning activities in their schools. The main aim of the study was, therefore, to provide an insider-perspectives of the teachers' awareness or knowledge of diversity in learners in their classrooms, how the diversity is manifested, and the teachers' understanding of the links between learners' learning needs or barriers to learning and potentials to learn. The study also explored the teachers' attitudes to inclusion and the challenges or barriers they perceived as militating against effective implementation of inclusive education

All registered teachers in public secondary schools in Nigeria are expected to be familiar with the government policy on inclusive education as stated in the "National Policy on Education" (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004). The policy document contains statements on the meanings and or objectives of inclusive education in Nigeria, including that of giving concrete meaning to the idea of equalizing educational opportunities for all children irrespective of their disabilities and the provision of adequate education for all children with special education or learning needs so that they can fully play their roles in the development of the nation (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004). Apart from these documented policy statements on inclusive education, there are also public statements declaring free basic education, for all children by successive governments since the return to democratic rules in 1999. These various statements have resulted in significant movement of children, with different learning needs, into the general education classrooms of the nation's schools. In view of these developments, it has, therefore, becomes more apparent to explore how the teachers' awareness of diversity in learners and variety of their learning needs as well as how these have impacted on the way in which the learners are accepted and welcomed in the classrooms of schools implementing inclusive education.

The teachers, involved in this study, were presented with descriptive questionnaire statements on their awareness of diversity in learners in their classrooms. Their responses were in the affirmative. That is, the teachers reported that they were aware that learners in their classrooms are diverse in many ways. To further support their awareness and understanding of diversity in learners in their classrooms the teachers also endorsed the questionnaire statement that indicated how the diversity or differentiations in learners manifest including that pupils in their classrooms are different not only in term of their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds but also that the diversity is manifested in learners' abilities and learning needs with some being gifted and talented, some are more active than others, some are aggressive or withdrawn in behaviors, some have speech, language, visual and hearing difficulties while some are with other disabilities. According to Gildner (2001) by stating that they are aware of or understand the diversity in learners, this may imply that the teachers should be presumed capable of facilitating effective learning by the learners.

In order to educate pupils appropriately teachers must know the learners well enough. As Salend (2005) also contends, the first step in adapting everyday classroom is to be aware of the individuality of each learner in order to facilitate learning. UNESCO (2014) also asserts that education practices must be child-centered and teachers are expected to be aware of every factor that may be affecting learners in their classrooms and adapt teaching methods to accommodate learners' learning needs.

Earlier research studies, in Nigeria, revealed teachers' lack of awareness of and highly limited knowledge capacity regarding diversity or differentiations in their learners especially in terms of their ability and action levels and behavior tendencies (Brydges Mkandawire, 2020; Bojuwoye, 2020), This current study results

are, however, consistent with study findings by Mergler, Carrington, Kimber and Bland (2016) that teachers were aware of diversity in their students and also that they were able to report on the manifestations of the diversity not only in terms of culture, family backgrounds and socio-economic statuses, but also in terms of learners' differing abilities and actions, majority of the teacher-respondents (80.8% male and 82.% female) of this study endorsed the questionnaire statement to that effect.

The presence of diversity in learners in the general education classrooms, no doubt, affects the ways in which teachers welcome and accept the learners. Having an awareness and understanding of individual learners and their needs should feature prominently in the teachers' responses to the diversity (Mergler, Carrington, Kimber & Bland, 2016). Less than average teacher-respondents of this study ((2.6% male and 33..% female) agreed with the questionnaire statement insinuating that teachers are not aware of the links between learners' learning needs and potential to learn. On the contrary majority of the respondents of this study indicated their awareness of the learners' learning needs. Gildner, (2001) asserts that an understanding of learners and their special education or learning needs is important for all teachers since if such understanding is lacking, this, could mean that teachers cannot facilitate effective learning by the learners. Not knowing the individual needs of learners or factors affecting their learning could also mean that teachers cannot adopt curriculum to address the special education needs or reduce barriers to their learners' learning.

The teachers involved in this study reported on their attitudes to disabilities and to inclusive education. This is because attitudes constitute one of the most important influences on the success and effectiveness of inclusive education. Avramidis and Norwich (2002), also note that critical components for successful inclusion are teachers' attitudes. The results of the current study indicate that teachers displayed different attitudes and concerns on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in general education classrooms. These results are consistent with earlier study findings by Carrington and Kimber (2016) that teachers' attitudes to inclusive education may be due to a variety of factors including that of the children's lack of social skills, or behavioral outburst, all of which may make the teachers feel that learners with disabilities are a burden in the classrooms. Many teachers are also reported to see themselves as unprepared to meet the needs of pupils with special education or learning needs, as many teachers are unable to modify curriculum (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002),

A major factor in the teachers' attitudes as reported by this current study has to do with lack of training and support as well as material resources for implementing inclusive education. Majority of teacher-respondents of this study (93.8% male and 87.8% female) endorsed the questionnaire statement that indicated that teachers would be willing to implement inclusive education if schools provide appropriate material resources and support. This result is also consistent with earlier study finding by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) which revealed that among several factors indicated by teachers as likely to affect the success of inclusive education are inadequate resources and lack of adequate teacher preparation. Soodat et al (1998) also state that teachers may demonstrate attitude of unwillingness to accommodate pupils with disabilities in their classrooms when they perceive that their schools lack supportive climate or lack encouragement from school management and collaboration from staff

Much earlier research findings by Lopes, Monteiro, and Sil (1994) revealed that, as consequences of lack of training, many teachers are not fully receptive to inclusion because they do not know how to differentiate instruction or what kind of support to provide to the children with disabilities or special education needs. Furthermore, Soodat, Powell, and Lehman (1998) also found that teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education may vary based on their perceptions of the specific disability of learners and the teachers' beliefs about the demands that learners' instructional and management needs could place on them. Thus, in essence, teachers may treat pupils differently based on their attitudes toward inclusion.

Finally, the respondents of this study also reported on what they perceived as challenges to effective

implementation of inclusive education. Apart from the factor of teachers' attitudes to inclusive education, other major factors reported by the respondents include poor accessibility to schools and classrooms. For instance, 85.1% male and 89.9% female respondents of this study regarded non-restructuring of physical infra-structure of schools for easy access and conducive education for learners a major challenge to inclusive education. Teacher-respondents of this study (91.5% male and 92.9% female) also reported that non-modification of the general education curriculum as a major impediment to effective implementation of inclusive education. Other factors reported as impeding implementation of inclusive education include non-adaptation of appropriate instructional strategies and limited or lack of resources and support for learners with disabilities.

Ahmad (2018) notes that people living with disabilities especially those on wheelchair or physically challenged learners often face physical barriers to accessibility and participation especially when the venues of learning activities or the classrooms are not adapted to ensure accessibility and participation of learners with a wide variety of disabilities. Ahmad (2018) notes further, that accessibility problems often make people living with disabilities feel reluctant to join peer group learning activities for fear of stigma and awkwardness. According to Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000), for success, inclusion also connotes restructuring of the physical environment of learning in order to promote access and belongingness such that all pupils irrespective of disabilities see themselves as belonging to a community. With appropriate design of school, classrooms and venues of learning activities, learners can learn and participate together without segregation.

Respondents of this study also listed inadequate or lack of resources as well as support for teachers and pupils with disabilities as constituting barriers to successful implementation of inclusive education. With teachers having access to institutional support this can influence teachers' acceptance of inclusive education principle. According to Avramidis and Norwich (2002), positive attitudes of teachers to inclusive education can also be linked to their having access to support including teaching materials and other educationally relevant resources (basic technologies or aids pertinent to supporting children with disabilities such as glasses, crutches, and Brailers) as well as special service personnel (special education teachers, teacher-assistants, etc.) and opportunity to work together and collaborate with other teachers, as in teaming or teachers support teams (Bojuwoye, 2020) – a small group of teachers coming together to find solutions to common problems.

Also linked to the issue of making learning environment accessible to students with disabilities is also the issue of modification of general education curriculum to facilitate inclusive education. In this regard general education teachers need to work closely together with special service personnel (special education teachers or inclusion specialists, Teacher-assistants) to make the modifications of curriculum, teaching methods, classroom management and even homework assignments to respond appropriately to various special learning needs of the pupils (Ahmad, 2018). It is the responsibility of school management and teachers to ensure suitable education and or learning and to assist learners to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of what has been learned by ensuring removal of all barriers to achievement. This can be through modification of general education curriculum and adaptation of appropriate instructional strategies that makes for acceptance and suitable education of all children irrespective of disabilities;

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The study explored teachers' awareness and knowledge of diversity in learners in their classrooms and the implications of this understanding of diversity for teachers' knowledge regarding learners' special education or learning needs and for their inclusion in learning activities of their classrooms. The study also examined teachers' attitudes to inclusive education as well as teachers' perceived challenges to inclusive education.

One hundred and forty-five (145) teachers drawn from public secondary schools in Kwara state were involved in the study and questionnaire employed to collect quantitative data.

The findings of the study have implications for teacher training and development and multi-faceted instructional strategies as well as for material resources and support that impacts all learners irrespective of disabilities. This conclusion is borne out of the fact that teachers, as most important stakeholders involved in children's education, need to have intimate knowledge of pupils in their classrooms and they also need to have adequate and appropriate skills to be able to identify special education or learners' learning needs. Teachers also need to be equipped with appropriate values, attitudes and skills as well as appropriate resources and support to work effectively in inclusive education system. This way they can provide appropriate support to pupils with a range of differing learning needs and suitable interventions to address problems especially of learners with special learning needs,

Teachers' attitudes to disabilities or people living with disabilities could constitute major barriers to effective implementation of inclusive education and may manifest from pity, awkwardness and fear, to low expectations about what disabled people can or cannot contribute and stereotypical (Avramids & Norwich, 2002). The negative attitudes and stereotypes are often caused by lack of knowledge and understanding. Again, the recommendation in this regard is for the training of teachers in the acquisition of appropriate skills, attitudes and values, all of which make for acceptance of learners with disabilities and for the facilitation of learning by the teachers.

Lack of access to regular schools for students with disabilities also calls for attention to physical structural design in order for the learners to feel accepted, belonged and to participate as community members of their schools. Learners with disabilities cannot learn in an inclusive classroom if they cannot enter the room, let alone the school building (Edward, 2015). learners in wheelchairs or those other mobility aides need elevators, ramps, paved pathways and lifts to get in and around buildings as well as the classrooms (Mergler, Carrington, Kimber, & Bland. 2016). School buildings and classrooms need to be designed and constructed taking into consideration the mobility and other needs of pupils with disabilities (Ahmad, 2018).

It needs not to be regarded as over-emphasis that, learners with disabilities have a need for high levels of support in their abilities to learn, to communicate and to cope reasonably independently (Bojuwoye, 2020). In the absence of support pupils with disabilities are likely to also be exposed to vulnerable situations such as to physical, verbal and sexual abuses as well as negative life events and experiences (Raghavan & Patel, 2005). To prevent these negative circumstances from happening or to reduce their effects to the barest minimum schools have a duty to adopt different strategies of support for inclusion (Raghavan & Patel, 2005). In this regard also there is need for appropriate government funding with provision of human and material resources for inclusive education to succeed. Government needs to facilitate all forms of support to people with disabilities to make them live meaningful life.

Lastly, implementation of inclusive education should not only be through building capacities of the teachers and schools or through teacher training and provision of funding by government. For the success of inclusive education there is also need for multi-sectoral involvement of all the stakeholders including NGOs, parents and community who would be expected to provide essential support and ensure that children's rights are respected and protected by giving suitable and quality education, healthcare, social services and early intervention programs.

## REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, N. A. (2018). Inclusive Education: Better and for the Best. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 7(3), 557–568.

2. Avramidis, E., & Norwich, B. (2002). **Teachers' Attitudes towards Integration/Inclusion: A Review of the Literature**. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 17, 129-147.
3. Avramidis, E., Bayliss, P., & Burden, R. (2000). Student teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special educational needs in the ordinary school. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 16(3), 277-93.
4. Bojuwoye, O (2020). Difficulties with Implementing Policy Provisions on Special and Inclusive Education in Nigerian Schools – Teachers' Views *The Journal of the International Association of Special Education*, 20(1), 1-11
5. Brydges, C. & Mkandawire, P. (2018). Perceptions and experiences of inclusive education among parents of children with disabilities in Lagos, Nigeria, *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24 (3), 645 – 659.
6. Creswell J. W. (2003). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*, (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage
7. Edward, G. (2015). Teachers' knowledge and perceived challenges of teaching children with autism in Tanzania regular primary schools. *International Journal of Academic Research and Reflection*, 3(5), 36–47.
8. Federal Ministry of Education (2004). *National Policy on Education: Section 7- Special Needs Education*. Government Printers; Abuja, Nigeria.
9. Gildner, C. (2001). *Enjoy Teaching: Helpful Hints for the Classroom*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, USA.
10. Lopes, J. A., Monteiro, I., & Sil, V. (2004). Teachers' perceptions about teaching problem students in regular classrooms. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 27(4), 394-419.
11. Mergler, A., Carrington, S., Kimber, M., & Bland, D. (2016). *Inclusive Values: Exploring the Perspectives of Pre-Service Teachers*. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(4). 20-39
12. Pearson Education. (2010). *High incidence disabilities – overview and general information*. Prentice Hall, Pearson, USA.
13. Raghavan, R. and Patel, P. (2005). *Assessment and diagnosis, in learning disabilities and mental health: A nursing perspective*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, USA.
14. Salend, S. J. (2005). *Creating inclusive classrooms effective and reflective practices for all students*. Merrill Prentice Hall, Columbus, Ohio, USA.
15. Soodak, L., Podell, D., & Lehman, L. (1998). Teacher, student, and school attributes as predictors of teachers' responses to inclusion. *Journal of Special Education*, 31(4), 480-497
16. UNESCO (2014). *Inclusive education*. [portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=11891&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=11891&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (25 August 2014)