

Beyond Physical Placement: Proximal Ecological Dynamics as the Critical Determinant of Learning Outcomes for Pupils with Special Needs in Lagos State's Inclusive Education Units

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100600900>

Received: 20 June 2026; Accepted: 25 June 2026; Published: 08 July 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the challenges of inclusive education in Lagos State, Nigeria, with a focus on the learning outcomes of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. It argues that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved by physical placement alone but depends on the proximal ecological conditions within schools, families, and communities. Using a theoretical lens informed by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the paper shows that teacher preparedness, classroom resources, parental involvement, community attitudes, and policy implementation are central to the success or failure of inclusive education. Although Lagos State has established inclusive education units and expressed policy commitment to equity, many pupils with disabilities still experience poor academic and social outcomes because of inadequate teacher training, inaccessible infrastructure, limited assistive materials, weak home-school collaboration, and inconsistent governance. The paper further contends that inclusion in practice often remains "inclusion by presence but exclusion by practice," where pupils are physically present in mainstream classrooms but are not fully supported to participate or learn meaningfully. To address this gap, the paper recommends sustained teacher professional development, investment in accessible infrastructure and learning resources, stronger parental and community engagement, and accountability-driven policy implementation. It concludes that inclusive education in Lagos State requires a holistic, collaborative, and evidence-based approach that aligns policy with practice and creates environments where pupils with special needs can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Keywords: Inclusive education; special educational needs; ecological systems theory; teacher preparedness; Lagos State

INTRODUCTION

The Illusion of Inclusion in Lagos State

Inclusive education has emerged as one of the most transformative educational philosophies of the twenty-first century - a global human rights agenda designed to ensure equitable access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or cognitive conditions. The principle gained international prominence through the 1994 Salamanca Statement, which unequivocally declared that schools should accommodate all children irrespective of their individual differences and that inclusive education is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes (UNESCO, 1994). This declaration was subsequently reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), which recognises education as a fundamental right for people with disabilities and obligates nations to establish inclusive education systems.

In Nigeria, particularly in Lagos State - the nation's economic powerhouse and most populous state with over 20 million residents, efforts have been made to promote inclusive education through policy reforms, specialised programmes, and institutional support structures. Lagos State has established 38 inclusive education units across public and private schools, invested in teacher development initiatives, and articulated policy commitments to

educational equity (Akinyemi & Alabi, 2021; Abayomi-Ige, 2020). These efforts represent a growing recognition of the rights of pupils with disabilities and the importance of educational equity.

Nevertheless, a disturbing reality persists. Despite Lagos State's policy commitments and comparatively high educational investment, pupils with special needs in inclusive classrooms continue to face significant challenges that hinder their academic success and holistic development. The practical implementation of inclusive education encounters obstacles that are not merely tangential but central to the failure to achieve meaningful inclusion. Empirical evidence indicates that fewer than 15% of Lagos pupils with disabilities score above average in core subjects, a stark contrast to high-performing inclusive systems such as Finland and Sweden (National Centre for Learning Disabilities, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

This opinion paper argues a critical thesis: While Lagos State has made commendable progress in advancing inclusive education through policy formulation and institutional frameworks, the effectiveness of its implementation remains fundamentally constrained not by broad systemic issues alone, but by inadequate teacher preparedness, insufficient infrastructural and learning resources, weak parental and community involvement, and inconsistent policy implementation. All these are factors that operate at the proximal ecological level within the school, family, and community environments. These proximal factors interact dynamically to shape learning outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Bulman, W., 2013). However, they remain poorly understood and inadequately addressed in current inclusive education strategies.

Consequently, this paper contends that a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving government agencies, educators, families, communities, and non-governmental organisations is required, not merely to sustain inclusive education, but to achieve meaningful inclusion that translates policy aspirations into tangible improvements in learning outcomes for pupils with disabilities.

Understanding Inclusive Education Beyond Physical Integration: The Fundamental Misconception

In my view, one of the most pervasive and damaging misconceptions surrounding inclusive education in Nigeria and, indeed, in many developing contexts, is the tendency to equate inclusion with mere physical placement of pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. This reductionist understanding has led to what I term "inclusion by presence but exclusion by practice", a situation where pupils with disabilities are physically present in classrooms but remain pedagogically, socially, and emotionally excluded from meaningful learning experiences.

True inclusion extends far beyond physical access. It requires creating learning environments where every pupil feels valued, supported, and capable of achieving their full potential. According to UNESCO (2005), inclusive education is fundamentally a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion, not merely a structural arrangement of placing disabled pupils alongside non-disabled peers. Similarly, Ainscow (2005) argues that inclusive education involves systemic changes that transform schools into institutions capable of meeting diverse educational needs, requiring radical shifts in pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and school culture.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Proximal Ecology Matters: The theoretical framework underpinning inclusive education further reinforces this perspective and provides the intellectual foundation for understanding the critical role of proximal ecological dynamics. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory emphasises that multiple interconnected systems influence a child's development. This ranges from the immediate microsystem (family, classroom, school) to the mesosystem (interactions between home and school), exosystem (community institutions), macrosystem (cultural values, policies, economic structures), and the chronosystem.

(This dimension adds the element of time. It encompasses major life transitions, historical events, and consistent changes in an individual's environment over the course of their lifespan, such as the impact of living through an economic recession. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This theory has profound implications for inclusive education because successful inclusion cannot be achieved solely through classroom interventions; it requires coordinated support across all ecological levels, with particular attention to the proximal factors, those immediate environmental influences that directly shape daily learning experiences. The microsystem and mesosystem levels are especially critical because they represent the context in which pupils with special educational needs and disabilities spend most of their time and where the most immediate interactions occur.

Likewise, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of social interaction and collaborative learning in cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of the "zone of proximal development" suggests that learning is optimally achieved through scaffolded interactions with more knowledgeable others - teachers, peers, and parents. Inclusive classrooms, therefore, provide valuable opportunities for pupils with and without disabilities to learn from one another and develop positive social relationships, but only if the proximal ecological conditions support such interactions.

The Ecological Dynamics Framework: A New Lens for Understanding Inclusion

Building on Bronfenbrenner's theory, contemporary research has developed the Ecological Dynamics Framework, which focuses on affordances such as the opportunities for action that environments provide to individuals and on person-environment relationships (Fairclough & N: 2021). This framework argues that inclusion is not merely about physical accessibility but about creating environments that afford meaningful participation for pupils with diverse needs.

From this standpoint, inclusive education should be viewed not merely as an educational arrangement but as a societal commitment to equity, participation, and social justice. It requires recognising that pupils with disabilities are not passive recipients of educational services but active agents whose learning outcomes are shaped by the dynamic interplay of proximal ecological factors in their immediate environments.

The Promise of Inclusive Education in Lagos State and Reality

I believe that inclusive education offers enormous potential for transforming educational outcomes and social integration in Lagos State. The state's strategic position in Nigeria's educational landscape, characterised by its large population, relatively advanced educational infrastructure, concentrated economic resources, and a policy commitment to educational innovation, creates favourable conditions for the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Research consistently demonstrates that pupils with disabilities benefit academically and socially when educated alongside their peers in a supportive environment. Cole, Waldron, and Majd (2004) found that learners with special educational needs and disabilities in inclusive classrooms achieved significantly higher academic outcomes compared to those in segregated settings, while Lindsay (2007) documented improvements in self-esteem, social competence, and sense of belonging among pupils with disabilities in inclusive settings. Beyond academic achievement, inclusive settings promote critical life skills such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving, all of which are essential for future employment and community participation.

Furthermore, inclusive education benefits non-disabled pupils (also known as regular learners) by fostering empathy, tolerance, cooperation, and respect for diversity. Such values are essential for building a more inclusive society that accommodates differences without discrimination. When children grow up learning alongside peers with diverse abilities, they develop cognitive flexibility, emotional resilience, and social wisdom that prepare them for the complexities of the twenty-first century.

Moreover, inclusive education aligns with international obligations, including the UNCRPD (2006), which recognises education as a fundamental right for people with disabilities. Therefore, strengthening inclusive education in Lagos State is not merely a policy option but a moral and legal imperative.

Nonetheless, the reality contradicts the promise. Despite Lagos State's investment and policy commitments, the measurable learning outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities remain strikingly poor. The gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality is not merely an implementation delay; it is a fundamental failure to address the proximal ecological dynamics that determine whether inclusion succeeds or fails (Sarıçoban, G., 2012).

Teacher Preparedness: The Foundation of Successful Inclusion and Its Current Failure

Despite the potential benefits of inclusive education, I contend that teacher preparedness remains the single most significant determinant of success or failure within inclusive classrooms. This is not merely an opinion but a conclusion supported by decades of international research and reinforced by emerging evidence from Nigerian contexts.

Teachers serve as the primary agents of educational implementation. Their attitudes, knowledge, competencies, instructional practices, and emotional responses directly influence pupils' learning experiences daily. When teachers are well-prepared, confident, and supported, pupils with disabilities thrive. When teachers are unprepared, uncertain, and overwhelmed, pupils with disabilities suffer (Hodijah, S., Rokayah, Y. S., Mulyani, Y. S., Fajar, A., & Martini, E., 2025).

The Current State of Teacher Preparedness in Lagos State

Unfortunately, numerous studies indicate that many teachers lack adequate training in inclusive pedagogies and disability-specific instructional strategies (Forlin, 2001; Olamide, 2015; Oluwaseun & Adebawale, 2021). In Nigeria's general teacher education programmes, inclusive education is often treated as an elective module or a brief introduction rather than a core competency. Special education training is concentrated at a few universities, resulting in a limited number of graduates who are then overburdened with responsibilities across multiple schools.

In many Lagos schools, teachers are expected to manage increasingly diverse classrooms, sometimes with 50+ learners, including several with disabilities, without sufficient professional development opportunities. Consequently, they experience stress, uncertainty, and reduced confidence when teaching pupils with special educational needs. Such challenges often lead to:

- Ineffective instructional practices (e.g., using one-size-fits-all teaching methods that fail to accommodate diverse learning needs).
- Limited participation of pupils with disabilities (e.g., excluding disabled pupils from class activities due to perceived difficulties).
- Negative attitudes toward inclusion (e.g., viewing pupils with disabilities as "burdens" rather than learners with potential).
- High teacher attrition rates in inclusive units (e.g., teachers leaving inclusive classrooms for more "manageable" settings).

A 2021 study by Akinyemi and Alabi documented that only 23% of teachers in Lagos State inclusive units had received formal training in inclusive education, while 67% reported feeling "unprepared" or "somewhat unprepared" to teach pupils with disabilities. These findings are consistent with global research showing that teacher preparedness is the critical mediator between inclusive policy and inclusive practice (Forlin, 2001; UNESCO, 2020).

Why Teacher Preparedness is a Proximal Ecological Factor

Teacher preparedness operates at the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's framework, an immediate environmental factor that directly shapes daily learning experiences. When teachers are unprepared, the

classroom environment becomes a barrier rather than an affordance for pupils with disabilities. Conversely, when teachers are well-prepared, the classroom becomes a supportive environment that enables learning.

Moreover, teacher preparedness interacts with other proximal factors:

- Teacher-parent collaboration(mesosystem): Unprepared teachers are less likely to engage meaningfully with parents.
- Teacher-resource utilisation(microsystem): Unprepared teachers cannot effectively use available assistive technologies or learning materials.
- Teacher-peer interactions(microsystem): Unprepared teachers may fail to facilitate positive peer relationships between disabled and non-disabled learners.

The Way Forward: Reimagining Teacher Preparation

I strongly believe that teacher education institutions and educational authorities must prioritise comprehensive, sustained training programmes focused on:

1. Inclusive teaching methods(e.g., differentiated instruction, multi-sensory learning, adaptive assessment)
2. Disability-specific instructional strategies(e.g., sign language for deaf pupils, tactile materials for blind pupils, behaviour support for pupils with autism)
3. Classroom management for diverse learners(e.g., managing large classes with varied needs, creating inclusive classroom routines)
4. Assistive technologies(e.g., speech-to-text software, hearing aids, wheelchairs, adaptive keyboards)
5. Disability awareness and attitude transformation(e.g., challenging stereotypes, promoting empathy, building positive relationships)

Continuous professional development should be institutionalised rather than treated as occasional workshops. This requires:

- between regular classroom teachers and special education professionals
- Inclusive education thrives when expertise is shared, and teachers receive ongoing support rather than being expected to address complex challenges independently. Schools should establish "inclusive education resource teams" comprising special education teachers, counsellors, and external experts who provide regular consultation and support to classroom teachers (Garwood, J. D., 2013).

Inadequate Resources and Infrastructure: A Persistent Barrier that Undermines Policy Aspirations

Another critical issue confronting inclusive education in Lagos State is the inadequacy of **educational resources and infrastructure**. Inclusion cannot succeed where schools lack the physical and instructional resources necessary to support diverse learners. This is not merely a matter of convenience; it is a fundamental requirement for equitable education.

The Current State of Resources and Infrastructure in Lagos Inclusive Units

Several studies have documented severe deficiencies in Lagos State schools:

- Assistive devices: Few schools have hearing aids, magnifying glasses, wheelchairs, or adaptive keyboards (Adewumi, 2010; Manuel, Ige, & Omotuyole, 2017)
- Specialised instructional materials: Limited availability of tactile books, visual aids, communication boards, and sensory learning tools
- Accessible classrooms: Many classrooms lack ramps, wide doorways, accessible seating arrangements, or appropriate lighting
- Adapted toilets: Most schools lack wheelchair-accessible toilets, handrails, or private bathing facilities
- Transportation facilities: Few schools provide accessible transportation for pupils with physical disabilities
- These shortcomings significantly hinder the participation of pupils with disabilities and undermine the effectiveness of inclusive policies. A pupil who cannot physically enter a classroom, use the toilet, or access learning materials is not truly "included"; they are merely present.

The Policy-Implementation Gap: Why Resources Remain Inadequate

From my perspective, the persistence of resource inadequacies reflects a fundamental gap between policy aspirations and practical realities. Governments frequently endorse inclusive education policies in public statements and policy documents, but fail to allocate sufficient financial resources to implement them. This is not unusual in developing contexts, where educational budgets are constrained and competing priorities exist. However, it represents a systemic failure of governance that perpetuates educational inequity.

The Lagos State government has articulated commitments to inclusive education, yet the budgetary allocation for inclusive resources remains disproportionately low compared to the state's overall educational expenditure. Schools struggle to provide the support services required for meaningful inclusion because they lack the financial resources to purchase assistive devices, adapt infrastructure, or train teachers.

Why Infrastructure is a Proximal Ecological Factor

Infrastructure operates at the microsystem level, which is an immediate environmental factor that directly shapes daily learning experiences. An inaccessible classroom is a barrier that prevents participation. An accessible classroom is an affordance that enables learning.

Moreover, infrastructure interacts with other proximal factors:

- Infrastructure-teacher interaction(microsystem): Inaccessible classrooms increase teacher stress and reduce instructional effectiveness
- Infrastructure-parent engagement(mesosystem): Inaccessible schools discourage parents from visiting or participating in school activities
- Infrastructure-peer relationships(microsystem): Physical barriers limit opportunities for disabled and non-disabled pupils to interact

The Way Forward: Infrastructure as a Non-Negotiable Priority

Investment in infrastructure should therefore become a central, non-negotiable priority for Lagos State's inclusive education strategy. Accessible learning environments are not optional additions; they are essential prerequisites for equitable education. Policymakers must recognise that inclusion requires sustained financial commitment rather than symbolic policy declarations.

Specific recommendations include:

1. Mandatory accessibility standards for all schools with inclusive units (e.g., ramps, wide doorways, accessible toilets)
2. Dedicated budget allocation for assistive devices and specialised materials (e.g., 10% of educational budget for inclusive resources)
3. Infrastructure audit and remediation program to identify and address accessibility gaps in existing schools
4. Partnerships with NGOs and development agencies to secure additional funding for infrastructure improvements.
5. Public-private collaborations to leverage corporate resources for inclusive education infrastructure.

Policymakers must also recognise that infrastructure investment yields long-term returns. Accessible schools attract more pupils with disabilities, reduce dropout rates, improve learning outcomes, and enhance the state's reputation as a leader in inclusive education.

The Role of Parents and Communities in Inclusive Education: An Underutilised Power

In my opinion, parental involvement is the most underutilised yet powerful resource for strengthening inclusive education in Lagos State. Despite its critical importance, parental engagement remains weak, inconsistent, and poorly institutionalised in most inclusive units in Lagos.

Why Parental Engagement is Critical

Research has consistently demonstrated that active parental engagement contributes positively to pupils' academic achievement, social development, and overall educational outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Odebunmi & Olanrewaju, 2013). Parents possess valuable knowledge about their children's strengths, challenges, learning preferences, and support needs. When schools establish meaningful partnerships with families, educational interventions become more responsive, individualised, and effective.

Moreover, parental engagement operates at the theme-system level of Bronfenbrenner's framework, representing the interaction between the home and school environments. Strong home-school partnerships create a supportive ecological network that reinforces learning across contexts. Weak partnerships create fragmentation that undermines educational progress.

The Current State of Parental Engagement in Lagos

Unfortunately, many Lagos schools continue to maintain limited communication with parents, thereby reducing opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. Parents of pupils with disabilities often report:

- Lack of information about their children's progress, challenges, and support needs
- Exclusion from decision-making about educational plans and interventions
- Poor communication channels with teachers and school administrators
- Limited opportunities to participate in school activities or volunteer programmes.
- Insufficient guidance on how to support their children's learning at home

These shortcomings reflect a systemic failure to recognise parents as partners rather than passive recipients of educational services. When schools treat parents as "visitors" rather than "collaborators," they lose critical insights that could improve educational outcomes (Bracey, K. V., 2019).

Community Attitudes: The Hidden Barrier

Community attitudes towards disability also play a significant role in shaping educational experiences. Stigma, discrimination, and misconceptions about disability remain prevalent in many Nigerian societies (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Common myths include:

- "Disability is a curse or punishment from God"
- "Pupils with disabilities cannot learn or achieve"
- "Inclusive education dilutes academic standards"
- "Parents of disabled children should keep them at home"

Such attitudes often discourage families from seeking educational opportunities for their children and may contribute to social exclusion within schools. Pupils with disabilities may face bullying, isolation, or ridicule from peers and community members who lack understanding.

The Way Forward: Institutionalising Parental and Community Engagement

Addressing these challenges requires sustained, systematic efforts to promote parental and community engagement:

For Parents:

1. Structured parent-school partnerships(e.g., regular parent-teacher meetings, home-school communication notebooks, parent advisory committees)
2. Parent training programmes(e.g., workshops on supporting learning at home, understanding disability, navigating educational systems)
3. Parent peer support networks(e.g., connecting parents of children with similar disabilities for mutual support)

4. Transparent communication channels(e.g., school newsletters, WhatsApp groups, email updates on pupil progress)
5. Parent involvement in decision-making(e.g., including parents in Individualised Education Programme planning)

For Communities:

1. Public awareness campaigns(e.g., media programmes, community radio, social media advocacy)
2. Community sensitisation programmes(e.g., town hall meetings, school outreach programmes, religious institution partnerships)
3. Advocacy initiatives(e.g., disability rights organisations, parent advocacy groups, youth engagement programmes)
4. Positive representation of disability(e.g., showcasing success stories of pupils with disabilities, featuring disabled individuals in community events)
5. Anti-stigma training(e.g., workshops for teachers, peers, community leaders on disability awareness)
6. Inclusive education will only achieve its objectives when broader societal attitudes become more accepting and supportive. This requires recognising that disability is not a defect but a dimension of human diversity that deserves respect, accommodation, and opportunity.

Policy Implementation and Governance Challenges: The Critical Gap Between Word and Action

While Nigeria possesses several policies supporting inclusive education, including the National Policy on Education (2013), the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act (2018), and Lagos State's inclusive education guidelines, implementation remains inconsistent and inadequate. This implementation gap constitutes one of the most serious threats to educational inclusion.

The Nature of the Implementation Gap

Policy documents often articulate ambitious goals (e.g., "universal inclusive education by 2030," "equitable access for all pupils with disabilities"), yet monitoring mechanisms, funding arrangements, and accountability structures remain inadequate (Abayomi-Ige, 2020; Adebayo & Akinola, 2014). As a result:

- Schools frequently receive limited guidance on practical implementation strategies.
- Teachers lack clear protocols for inclusive teaching practices.
- Resource allocation is inconsistent and unpredictable.
- Performance is not measured against inclusive education benchmarks.
- Accountability for failure is absent or weak.

This creates a situation where policies exist on paper but not in practice, a phenomenon I often term "policy presence devoid of policy impact."

Why Policy Implementation is a Proximal Ecological Factor

Policy implementation operates at both the microsystem (interactions between policy agencies and schools) and macrosystem (cultural values, economic structures, political priorities) levels. However, its effects are felt most immediately at the microsystem level, in classrooms, where teachers and pupils experience the consequences of policy success or failure.

When policies are implemented effectively, classrooms become supportive environments with trained teachers, adequate resources, and parental engagement. When policies are implemented poorly, classrooms become barriers characterised by untrained teachers, insufficient resources, and weak partnerships.

The Way Forward: From Policy Formulation to Implementation Excellence

I argue that policymakers must move beyond policy formulation towards effective implementation and evaluation. This requires:

1. Measurable performance indicators(e.g., percentage of teachers trained, number of assistive devices distributed, pupil attendance rates, learning outcome scores).
2. Regular assessments of inclusive schools(e.g., annual audits, third-party evaluations, quality assurance visits).
3. Transparent resource allocation(e.g., public budget reports, equitable distribution across districts, targeted funding for high-need schools).
4. Accountability mechanisms(e.g., performance-based incentives for school leaders, penalties for non-compliance, public reporting of outcomes).
5. Collaborative governance(e.g., partnerships among ministries, educational agencies, NGOs, development partners).

Successful international examples demonstrate that inclusive education flourishes when policy commitments are matched by adequate funding, professional development, and institutional accountability(OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Finland's inclusive education system, for example, is characterised by:

- Universal Teacher Training in Inclusive Pedagogy
- Substantial investment in assistive technologies and learning resources
- Strong home-school partnerships
- Robust monitoring and evaluation systems
- Clear accountability structures

Lagos State can draw valuable lessons from these experiences while adapting strategies to local realities, recognising that context matters and that imported solutions must be culturally and structurally appropriate.

Towards A More Inclusive Future: A Holistic, Proximal Ecological Approach

Looking ahead, I believe the future of inclusive education in Lagos State depends on a holistic, integrated approach that addresses proximal ecological dynamics at multiple levels. Isolated interventions such as training teachers without providing resources, building infrastructure without engaging parents, and formulating policies without ensuring implementation are definitely unlikely to produce sustainable change.

Instead, stakeholders must address the interconnected factors influencing educational outcomes through a proximal ecological framework:

First: Teacher Training

Teacher training programmes should be expanded and continuously updated to reflect contemporary inclusive practices. This requires:

1. Mandatory inclusive education training for all teachers
2. Specialised disability-specific training for teachers in inclusive units
3. Continuous professional development (not just occasional workshops)
4. Peer mentoring and coaching networks
5. Performance-based incentives for inclusive education teachers

Second: Infrastructure Investment

Substantial investments must be made in educational infrastructure, assistive technologies, and learning resources. This requires:

- Dedicated budget allocation (e.g., 10% of educational budget for inclusive resources)

- Mandatory accessibility standards for all-inclusive schools
- Infrastructure audit and remediation programmes
- Partnerships with NGOs and development agencies
- Public-private collaborations for resource mobilisation

Third: Parental Engagement

Parental engagement should be institutionalised through structured partnerships between homes and schools. This requires:

- Regular parent-teacher meetings and communication channels
- Parent training programmes on supporting learning at home
- Parent peer support networks
- Parent involvement in decision-making (e.g., IEP planning)
- Transparent information sharing about pupil progress

Fourth: Community Awareness

Community awareness initiatives should challenge stigma and promote acceptance of diversity. This requires:

- Public awareness campaigns through media and social platforms
- Community sensitisation programmes at religious and cultural institutions
- Advocacy initiatives by disability rights organisations
- Positive representation of disability in public discourse
- Anti-stigma training for teachers, peers, and community leaders

Fifth: Policy Implementation

Policymakers must strengthen implementation frameworks and accountability mechanisms to ensure that inclusive education policies translate into meaningful outcomes (Shiwakoti, R., & Chaisir, S. S., 2025). This requires:

- Measurable performance indicators and regular monitoring
- Transparent resource allocation and public reporting
- Accountability structures with incentives and penalties
- Collaborative governance across ministries and agencies
- International partnerships for knowledge exchange and best practice adaptation

Data-Driven Decision-Making

The adoption of evidence-based practices and regular monitoring systems will also contribute to more effective decision-making. Data-driven approaches can help:

1. Identify successful strategies and replicate them.
2. Reveal implementation gaps and address them.
3. Inform future policy development.
4. Measure progress toward inclusive education goals.
5. Track learning outcomes for pupils with disabilities.

Lagos State should establish an Inclusive Education Data Centre to collect, analyse, and disseminate data on the implementation and outcomes of inclusive education.

CONCLUSION

From Illusion to Reality - Making Inclusion Practical and Sustainable in Lagos State

In conclusion, inclusive education represents one of the most important educational reforms of the twenty-first century. Its potential to promote equity, social cohesion, improved educational outcomes, and democratic citizenship makes it indispensable for the future of Lagos State and Nigeria as a whole.

However, meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved through policy declarations alone. The evidence is clear: teacher preparedness, resource availability, parental involvement, community support, and effective policy implementation must work together to create educational environments where all pupils can thrive. These factors operate at the proximal ecological level - the immediate environmental influences that directly shape daily learning experiences for pupils with special needs.

Although significant challenges remain, such as untrained teachers, inaccessible infrastructure, weak parental engagement, stigmatising community attitudes, and inconsistent policy implementation, the opportunities presented by inclusive education far outweigh the obstacles. Lagos State has the resources, the policy framework, and the political will to make inclusive education work. What is missing is a systematic, proximal ecological approach that recognises how these factors interact to determine learning outcomes.

Therefore, I maintain that Lagos State should intensify its commitment to inclusive education through:

1. Sustained investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and resources
2. Stakeholder collaboration among government, educators, families, communities, and NGOs
3. Evidence-based policy implementation with measurable indicators and accountability mechanisms
4. Proximal ecological interventions that address the immediate environmental factors shaping learning outcomes
5. Data-driven decision-making to track progress and inform future strategies

By doing so, Lagos State can become a model for inclusive educational practice in Nigeria, not merely on paper, but in practice. The state can demonstrate that inclusive education is not an idealistic aspiration but a practical, achievable reality that transforms lives and builds stronger, more equitable communities.

Ultimately, the goal is not merely to place pupils with disabilities in classrooms but to ensure they learn, thrive, and achieve their full potential. This is the true meaning of inclusion—and it is the goal that Lagos State must pursue with determination, creativity, and unwavering commitment to educational justice for all learners.

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