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Repositioning Special Needs Education in Nigeria through Systems Strengthening, Teacher Capacity Development, and Community Partnerships

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Abstract

Special needs education in Nigeria is in a paradoxical position: it is constitutionally guaranteed yet chronically under-resourced; it is legislatively enshrined but socially neglected. Children and young people with disabilities are being systematically excluded from excellent education despite federal policy tools such as the National Policy on Education and Nigeria's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). This article investigates structural and institutional inadequacies that have compromised the provision of special needs education (SNE) in Nigeria, and suggests a tripartite reform paradigm based on systems improvement, teacher capacity building and community collaborations. Drawing on empirical data, comparative policy analysis and literature from sub-Saharan Africa and global disability studies, this paper argues that repositioning SNE in Nigeria requires sustained dismantling of fragmented governance structures, investment in specialised teacher preparation and cultivation of community-driven advocacy ecosystems. The study further argues that until there is congruence of legislative intent with resource allocation, assessment infrastructure and community participation, the inclusive education objective in Nigeria would remain aspirational rather than operational. The recommendations are aimed at policy makers, educational administrators, teacher training institutions, civil society organisations and international development partners committed to developing equitable and disability responsive education systems in Nigeria.

Keywords: Special Needs Education, Repositioning, Teacher Capacity Development, Systems Strengthening, Community Partnerships.

Introduction

Education is universally recognised as a basic human right and as a strong tool of social and economic transformation. For children and young people with disabilities, however, the realisation of this right remains deeply inequitable. Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa and the largest economy, with an estimated 25 million people living with one form of disability or another (World Health Organization (WHO), 2023). Within this demographic, children of school age constitute a disproportionately large yet always marginalised sector of the educational system. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2021), children with disabilities in sub-Saharan Africa are over twice as likely to be out of school compared to their non-disabled classmates. Nigeria is one of the most severe cases of educational exclusion on the continent.

SNE in Nigeria's formal education architecture has existed for several decades. SNE is defined in this study as the range of educational provisions, services, methodologies and support systems designed to meet the diverse educational needs of learners with physical, sensory, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. In Nigeria, the promulgation of laws such as the Nigerians with Disability Decree of 1993, which was later replaced by the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2019, and the National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of

Education [FME], 2013), have established a normative environment for the inclusion of learners with special needs. However, implementation has been significantly fragmented, under-resourced, and detached from global best practices and local community realities (Adeniyi & Omolayo, 2021; Eleweke & Rodda, 2002).

The ongoing gap between policy articulation and on-the-ground practice in Nigerian SNE is not just an administrative failure; it is a representation of deeper structural weaknesses across the education system. These include poor teacher training on disability-responsive pedagogy, non-existence of comprehensive assessment and identification systems, chronic underfunding of SNE units and schools, social stigma associated with disability in many Nigerian communities and the near-total absence of meaningful community participation in educational planning for learners with special needs (Obiakor et al., 2010; Umar, 2019).

This paper is an opinion conference paper. It is based on empirical evidence and comparative analysis. It makes three related points: first, that the Nigerian SNE system needs urgent structural reforms, through systems strengthening; second, that teacher capacity development is an essential pillar of any credible reform agenda; and third, that community partnerships need to be re-positioned as drivers of sustainable inclusion. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 situates Nigeria's SNE landscape within its historical and policy context. Section 3 analyses the diagnostic challenges facing the sector. Sections 4, 5 and 6 develop the tripartite reform framework. Section 7 provides a synthesis and policy recommendations. Section 8 concludes with reflections on the way forward.

Historical and Policy Context of Special Needs Education in Nigeria

The history of special needs education in Nigeria has a connection with the history of missionary work in Nigeria. The first organised provisions for learners with disabilities were put in place by Christian missionaries who constructed schools for the blind and deaf, mostly in the southwestern portion of the country, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Ile Ife School for the Blind, founded in 1946 by the Sudan Interior Mission and the Wesley School for the Deaf in Lagos, established in 1957, are major institutional roots of SNE in Nigeria (Ajuwon, 2008; Obiakor et al., 2010). The architecture of these institutions was mainly segregationist, built on the concept that learners with disabilities were better served in specialised, distinct surroundings.

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, the federal government began to take on more responsibility for education, but accommodations for disability remained peripheral to the dominant educational debate. The 1976 Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiative was an ambitious plan for mass education with few provisions for learners with impairments. SNE was not explicitly recognised in Nigeria's formal educational framework until the National Policy on Education of 1977 and its amendments in 1981, 1998, 2004 and 2013 (FME, 2013).

The National Policy on Education was revised in 2004, which was very important. It provided for special education at pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels and recommended the construction of special units in ordinary schools, a cautious step toward inclusive education models. Critics have constantly observed that these laws have been underfunded and selectively applied with considerable differences between urban and rural areas and the six geopolitical zones of the country (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002; Nwoye, 2016). At the international level, Nigeria's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010 and the following passage of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act in 2019 provided a fresh legal impetus. The Act also created the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD) and required educational institutions to make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. However, four years after the passing of the Act, the implementation provisions are only partially operationalised, especially in the domain of education (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Onuoha, 2021). Further, Nigeria's linkage with the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 4 that calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for everyone, has also offered rhetorical momentum for reform. However, ideological alignment without economic commitment and institutional change resulted in what scholars call 'paper inclusion': official endorsement of inclusive values without the substantive prerequisites for their realisation (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

Diagnostic Challenges facing Special Needs Education in Nigeria

Structural Fragmentation and Governance Deficits

One of the most intractable obstacles for SNE in Nigeria is the structural dispersion of governance authority among federal, state and local government levels. In Nigeria's federal system, Education is a concurrent item on the legislative list. This means that the federal government and the 36 state governments share responsibility for educational policy and finance. In reality, this has led to considerable disparities in the quality, scope and resourcing of SNE across states (Adeniyi & Omolayo, 2021). While some states, especially Lagos, Oyo and Edo, have made small expenditures in disability-responsive education, some have hardly developed functional SNE units in their state school system. The Special Education Division of the Federal Ministry of Education is the main coordinating body for SNE of the federal government. In the past, the Division has been characterised by a lack of adequate staffing, budgetary allocation and institutional power. This leads to a situation where national policy goals exceed the institutional capacity to transform them into coordinated state-level action (Nwoye, 2016; Umar, 2019).

Inadequate Funding and Resource Allocation

Nigeria's investment in education as a percentage of GDP and national budget has regularly failed to meet the 15–20% of national budgets which UNESCO recommends for education. SNE gets a disproportionately small percentage of the education budget. In the 2022 federal education budget, less than 1% of the total education expenditure was allocated to special needs provisions. This low figure is indicative of the low political salience of disability issues and the lack of robust advocacy mechanisms that could influence budget priorities (Avoke, 2021; Onuoha, 2021). The lack of funding for SNE has a ripple effect of deficiencies: insufficient infrastructure for mobility and sensory accessibility, lack of specialised instructional materials such as Braille textbooks and sign language resources, shortage of assistive technologies, and an inability to attract and retain qualified special education teachers. These resource limits are most keenly felt in rural and conflict-affected areas, where education systems are already overstretched (UNICEF, 2021; WHO, 2023).

The Teacher Preparation Crisis

The teacher training institutes in Nigeria such as the Colleges of Education and the faculties of education in the universities have not sufficiently trained a generation of teachers who can recognise, support and teach learners with varied disabilities effectively. The minimum standards of the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) for special education programs are still aspirational and not consistently enforced. Many teachers deployed to regular classrooms have no training whatsoever in disability-inclusive pedagogy (Obiakor et al., 2010; Okoye & Umar, 2021). A national audit of teacher competencies by the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC, 2020) revealed that less than 12% of primary school teachers in Nigeria had received formal training to support learners with learning disabilities, visual impairments or autism spectrum conditions. The divide is not simply technical, but philosophical: many teachers have stigmatising attitudes about the educability of persons with disabilities, sometimes influenced by broader social and cultural narratives (Umar, 2019).

Social Stigma and Community Exclusion

In many Nigerian cultures, disability is seen as spiritual causation, familial punishment or social humiliation. These attitudes that cross ethnic, religious and socio-economic boundaries directly contribute to the educational exclusion of children with disabilities as families hide or limit the movement of children with visible impairments (Ajuwon, 2008; Nwoye, 2016). Parents of children with disabilities often say that community attitudes, religious leaders, or even healthcare staff discourage them from enrolling their children in school, framing disability in non-educational terms. Community exclusion means that not only are children with disabilities not enrolled in school, but they also remain invisible in educational data systems, planning procedures and resource allocation frameworks. What is rarely supported is rarely counted and what is rarely counted cannot be reformed (WHO, 2023).

Systems Strengthening: Building the Institutional Architecture for Inclusive SNE

Systems strengthening is the foundation of any genuine SNE reform plan in Nigeria, which involves building the capacity, coherence and accountability of educational institutions to deliver disability-responsive services. This argument is based on the World Health Organization's concept of health systems strengthening that has been extended to educational contexts by authors such as Ainscow (2020) and Operti et al. (2014). Systems thinking recognises that even the best-intentioned intervention by a person will not achieve lasting change if the institutional framework in

which it is nested is dysfunctional. Systems strengthening is the foundation of any genuine SNE reform plan in Nigeria, which involves building the capacity, coherence and accountability of educational institutions to deliver disability-responsive services. This argument is based on the World Health Organization's concept of health systems strengthening that has been extended to educational contexts by authors such as Ainscow (2020) and Oportti et al. (2014). Systems thinking recognises that even the best-intentioned intervention by a person will not achieve lasting change if the institutional framework in which it is nested is dysfunctional.

Four specific systems-level interventions are proposed here.

1. Firstly, Nigeria must establish a dedicated and empowered National SNE Coordination Agency distinct from but complementary to the NCPWD with a clear mandate, statutory funding stream, and the authority to set and enforce minimum standards for SNE across all 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. This agency should operate on a co-governance model, with representation from disabled persons' organizations (DPOs), parent advocacy groups, state education ministries, and development partners (Oportti et al., 2014).
2. Secondly, Nigeria urgently needs a comprehensive national database of learners with disabilities a School Disability Census that disaggregates data by disability type, geographic location, gender, age, and educational level. Current data on disability and education in Nigeria are fragmentary, inconsistent, and largely unreliable. Without credible population-level data, resource allocation, program planning, and policy advocacy remain evidence-free exercises (Human Rights Watch, 2022; WHO, 2023).
3. Thirdly, state governments must be incentivized through a conditional grants mechanism to establish minimum standards for SNE infrastructure, including accessible school buildings, dedicated resource rooms, assistive device libraries, and itinerant specialist teacher networks. The Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) matching-grant mechanism provides a useful administrative template for such a conditional funding architecture, though it would require specific SNE-related conditionalities and monitoring protocols (UBEC, 2020).
4. Fourthly, and perhaps most critically, the legal framework governing SNE must be actively enforced. The Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2019 contains explicit provisions mandating educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. The failure of the NCPWD and the Federal Ministry of Education to develop and publish implementing regulations for these provisions four years after the Act's passage represents a critical governance gap that undermines the rule of law in educational inclusion (Onuoha, 2021).

Teacher Capacity Development: The Human Capital Imperative

No school system can be better than the quality of its teachers. This often-cited truism in the general education reform discourse is particularly potent in the special needs education context, where the teacher's knowledge, attitude and pedagogical skills directly determine educational outcomes for learners with disabilities. Teacher capacity building for SNE in Nigeria must be seen as a fundamental redesign of how the teaching profession conceives of its connection with learner diversity (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020) and not only as a training exercise. The reform of teacher preparation for SNE in Nigeria needs to be approached at three interrelated levels, pre-service training, in-service professional development and attitudinal change.

Pre-Service Training Reform:

All Colleges of Education and university faculties of education in Nigeria should be mandated to include a minimum of two compulsory courses in special and inclusive education in their core curriculum for all teacher education students (not just those specialising in special education). These courses should provide training in disability awareness, universal design for learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, basics of assistive technology, and the statutory rights of learners with disabilities. This reform, already implemented in several African nations like Kenya and South Africa (Avoke, 2021) would mean that all newly certified teachers will have at least basic competence in disability-responsive pedagogy. Furthermore, the NTI (National Teachers' Institute) and NCCE should work together to develop a nationally standardised Special Education Competency Framework that outlines the knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of teachers at different levels of specialisation ranging from general classroom teachers to itinerant specialists to school-based SNE coordinators. A framework based on UNESCO's (2020) Teacher Competency Framework for Inclusive Education would provide a consistent benchmark for pre-service preparation and in-service assessment.

In-Service Professional Development

There is a need for a planned and sustained in-service professional development program for the existing over 700,000 primary school teachers already in service across Nigeria (FME, 2022). The UBEC-NTI Continuing Professional Development (CPD) model provides a feasible framework for delivery of modular, school-based training in inclusive and special needs education. Each module should be supported by school-based mentoring, peer learning clusters and access to specialised consultants, particularly in locations where there are concentrations of learners with specific disability types. The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially expedited the rapid growth of Nigeria's mobile and e-learning infrastructure, creating more chances for distance-based professional development, especially for instructors in remote and marginalised locations. Pilot projects such as the EdTech Hub's digital training programs in Nigeria also show the potential for technology-mediated SNE teacher development to be scalable when designed with local connection challenges in mind (EdTech Hub, 2022).

Attitudinal and Cultural Transformation

Teacher attitudes toward learners with disabilities are among the most potent determinants of inclusive classroom practice (Avoke, 2021; Obiakor et al., 2010). Thus, pre-service and in-service training must provide structured opportunities for critical reflection on ableist assumptions, encounter experiences with disabled adults as role models and educators, and exposure to the social model of disability which locates the barriers to inclusion in societal structures rather than individual impairments. Partnerships between teacher training institutions and disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) can play a transforming role here. Learning with and from persons with disabilities by trainee teachers transforms their professional identities in ways that are not achieved by textbooks alone. Several Nigerian DPOs notably the Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD) have indicated their willingness to work with teacher training schools in this regard (Onuoha, 2021).

Community Partnerships: Grounding Inclusion in Social Context

The third pillar of the reform framework presented in this study is the purposeful building of community relationships as engines of inclusive education. The argument here is based on the understanding that educational inclusion is not a purely technological or even predominantly technical issue. It is a social and cultural phenomenon which happens in communities built on certain values, histories, religious traditions and economic forces. SNE reform in Nigeria that ignores and fails to build on these community-based realities is unlikely to be sustainable (Ajuwon, 2008; Nwoye, 2016).

Parents and Families as Advocates

Parents and family members of children with disabilities are among the most potent and underutilised advocates for educational inclusion in Nigeria. The research repeatedly reveals that family participation is positively connected with school enrolment, attendance and academic success for children with disabilities (UNICEF, 2021). However, SNE planning processes in Nigeria seldom provide established channels for parental participation in individual educational planning or systemic policy advocacy. The formation of Parent-Teacher Associations with explicit SNE mandates at the school level, along with state-level Parents of Children with Disabilities Networks, would provide for a formalised mechanism for the community voice to impact educational decision-making. These networks need to be resourced thru government and civil society financing to provide information, legal literacy and peer support for families navigating the educational system on behalf of children with various needs

Religious and Traditional Institutions

Given the profound social significance of religious and traditional organisations in the life of Nigerians, any approach to community participation on SNE cannot afford to ignore these structures. Religious leaders, whether they are Christian pastors, Muslim imams or traditional chiefs, often change community views on disability more effectively than government efforts or school pronouncements. Interfaith coalitions for disability inclusion, already emerging in states like Kaduna and Anambra, have shown that religious leaders can become powerful champions for the educational rights of children with disabilities when they are engaged as partners, rather than bypassed as obstacles (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The Federal Government, thru the National Orientation Agency (NOA) in partnership with the NCPWD and civil society organisations, should establish and implement a systematic religious and traditional

leader's engagement program on disability rights and inclusive education. The programs have been successful in the East African setting and are replicable in Nigeria (Avoke, 2021).

Civil Society and Disabled Persons' Organizations

In Nigeria, civil society organisations (CSOs) and disabled persons' organisations (DPOs) represent a complex and strategically positioned advocacy ecosystem that is growing in sophistication and positioning. Organisations like JONAPWD, Inclusive Friends Association, and the Center for Citizens with Disability have developed a lot of expertise in monitoring disability rights, legal advocacy, community sensitisation and developing assistive technologies adapted to the Nigerian context (Onuoha, 2021). However, the connection between these organisations and the formal SNE system is usually ad hoc, project based and donor reliant. Formalising a structural integration of CSO and DPO knowledge into national and state SNE planning, monitoring and evaluation procedures thru Memoranda of Understanding with education ministries will build a more sustainable foundation for community-anchored inclusive education. This concept, which is sometimes referred to as 'co-production' in the public administration literature, has been found to enhance the responsiveness and accountability of social service systems to the communities they serve (Opertti et al., 2014).

The Private Sector as a Community Partner

SNE has an under-leveraged community collaboration opportunity in Nigeria's booming private education sector, which includes private schools, vocational training institutes, and EdTech platforms. While private schools in Nigeria are not subject to the same inclusive education obligations as public institutions, there is a growing moral and reputational case for disability inclusion in private education as corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks increasingly push for disability inclusion (FME, 2022).

Government should examine methods of financial incentives to encourage private schools to invest in SNE provisioning including accessible infrastructure, skilled specialist staff and development of low-cost assistive technologies. governmental-private partnerships (PPPs) are particularly promising in the manufacture and distribution of Braille textbooks, hearing devices, and sign language curriculum, considering that governmental procurement mechanisms have clearly failed to provide for these material demands at scale.

Synthesis: Toward a Coherent Reform Agenda

The three pillars outlined in this study systems strengthening, teacher capacity development, and community collaborations are not autonomous levers, but mutually reinforcing facets of a coherent and integrated reform program. Systems that are better controlled and better supported are better equipped to invest in teacher development. Better qualified teachers who are more positively disposed toward disability inclusion are better partners for communities. Communities that are better informed, better organised and more successfully involved produce the social demand that supports systemic reform over time. The logic underlying this virtuous circle is the tripartite structure given here. Turning this concept into real policy requires political will, ongoing investment, and long-term institutional commitment. The following particular recommendations are derived from the study offered in this paper:

1. **Federal Government of Nigeria:** Establish and sufficiently resource a dedicated National SNE Coordination Agency with statutory power and cross-ministerial mandate. Carry out a comprehensive National School Disability Census to create an evidence base for planning and resource allocation. Issue and implement the rules of the SNE provisions of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act, 2019. Raise the share of the federal education budget spent on SNE from less than 1% to at least 5% in five years, with annual increments linked to disability enrolment targets;
2. **State Governments and Education Ministries:** Establish minimum infrastructure and staffing standards for SNE in all public schools within their jurisdiction. Create state-level SNE Monitoring and Evaluation Units with dedicated budgetary allocations. Formalize partnership agreements with CSOs, DPOs, and parent networks for community participation in SNE planning. Integrate SNE performance indicators into state-level School Report Cards and public education accountability frameworks.
3. **Teacher Training Institutions:** Mandate a minimum of two core courses in inclusive and special needs education for all teacher education students. Develop and implement a Special Education Competency

Framework in collaboration with the NCCE and NTI. Establish formal partnership agreements with DPOs and disability advocacy organizations for teacher preparation programs. Expand access to in-service professional development in SNE through digital platforms and school-based learning communities.

4. **International Development Partners and Donors:** Align disability inclusion benchmarks with funding conditionalities for education sector support programs in Nigeria. Support the development and scaling of low-cost, culturally adapted assistive technologies for use in Nigerian schools. Fund longitudinal research on the outcomes of SNE reforms in Nigeria to build the local evidence base. Invest in the institutional strengthening of DPOs and CSOs as long-term advocacy and co-production partners.

Conclusion

The repositioning of special needs education in Nigeria is both an urgent moral imperative and a strategic national development priority. In a country where over one in five children of school age are estimated to have some form of disability or special learning need, the persistent educational exclusion of this population represents not only a human rights failure but a profound economic and social loss. The talents, perspectives, and contributions of millions of Nigerians with disabilities are being forfeited not because these individuals lack capacity, but because the systems that should serve them are inadequately designed, insufficiently resourced, and culturally unprepared to receive them. This paper has argued that meaningful repositioning of SNE requires a simultaneous and sustained commitment across three fronts: the structural reform of educational systems to create coherent governance, accountability, and resource mechanisms; the transformation of teacher preparation and professional development to produce disability-responsive educators; and the strategic cultivation of community partnerships that harness the social, cultural, and institutional assets of Nigerian communities in service of educational inclusion. None of these reforms is technically complex. All of them are politically feasible. What they require above all is a decision by Nigeria's political leadership, educational administrators, civil society actors, and communities to recognize the education of children with disabilities not as a peripheral concern but as a central test of the country's commitment to leaving no one behind. The frameworks, precedents, and examples exist. The moment to act is now.

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