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PERCEPTION OF TEACHER EDUCATORS' ON INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM IN SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

This study examines the perception of teacher educators regarding the implementation of an inclusive early childhood education curriculum in Southeast Nigeria. Employing a descriptive survey design, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 327 teacher educators from two institutions, namely Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU), and Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri (AIFUE). Data were collected using a validated questionnaire titled "Teacher-Educators Questionnaire on Inclusive Early Childhood Education Curriculum," which achieved a reliability coefficient of 0.81. Findings reveal that teacher educators generally perceive existing training programs as effective in preparing educators for inclusive practices, but identified significant barriers, including resource shortages, societal attitudes toward disability, and insufficient training on special needs education. Cultural attitudes were also found to influence the perception and willingness of educators to embrace inclusion. The study concludes that while teacher educators hold positive attitudes and a strong commitment toward inclusive education, there is a critical need for better resources, more comprehensive training, and policy reforms to overcome existing barriers. It is recommended that government and non-governmental organizations collaborate to address these challenges by providing resources, conducting awareness campaigns, and ensuring effective policy implementation to promote inclusive education.

Keywords: Curriculum, Early Childhood, Inclusive Education, Teacher Education.

INTRODUCTION

Although different authors have given different interpretations of the concept, teacher education is generally understood to be an educational program that gives aspiring teachers the skills, behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge they need to carry out their duties in the classroom, school, and society at large. (Osuji, 2009) states that "teacher education is the professional education of teachers towards attainment of knowledge, skills and attitudes considered desirable so as to make them effective and efficient in their work in accordance with the needs of society at any point in time"(p.3). (Fafunwa, 2018) asserts that "teacher education is a set of educational activities and experiences designed to equip a prospective teacher with the skills, competence, knowledge and disposition which help to develop his personality as well as making him a competent teacher" (p.17). Thus, a teacher educator is any person who equips prospective teachers with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and skills they require to perform their tasks effectively in the classroom, school and wider society. Inclusive education on the other hand, has been one of the core ideas in international educational literature. The principles are the assurance of equal rights to quality education, provided within mainstream institutions, for all, including those with disabilities (Leijen et al., 2021). It highlights the changing nature of educational systems to meet diverse learning needs, which is key in ensuring equity and social justice (Gümüş et al., 2021). Globally, the shift towards inclusive education is supported by various

international frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which mandates that signatory countries ensure inclusive education systems at all levels (de Beco, 2022). In Nigeria, it is gradually considered indispensable to the creation of an equal educational setting where inclusive education is required. This was why the National Policy on Education (2013) emphasized that "provisions in education needed to be made in a manner that the needs of children with special needs should be met". Moreover, the National Special Education Policy identified ways in which children with disabilities should be included in regular schools, thus ensuring equal rights to education. These policy documents show how Nigeria has put its policies in line with global standards while addressing local challenges facing education. Despite these enabling legal frameworks, current state-inclusive practices in Nigerian early childhood settings indicate wide gaps. Implementation in practice has been ineffective and unsatisfactory due to a untrained teachers, lack of resources, and societal attitudes toward disability (Anokwuru, 2011). For instance, most ECE personnel do not possess skills and knowledge on how to provide maximum support to children with disability, ultimately hindering the realization of ideals of inclusive education.

Furthermore, children, particularly those from poor family backgrounds often do not get the opportunity to join preschool or go through the needed early learning experiences to make them well-equipped to join primary school. There is a shortage of qualified early childhood educators; this then affects instruction quality. Most teachers are lacking in competencies and knowledge on how to provide inclusive practices necessary to deal with children having special needs. In most cases, the idea of disability brings along with it cultural perceptions that lead to stigmatization and discrimination against children with special needs, (Ugochukwu, 2016). This largely cuts across to society's outlook on this matter, making families go reticent in seeking early education for their children with disabilities, further retreating into isolation, and preventing them from further development. Research studies indicate that, although rarely reported due to stigma and a general lack of comprehensive data collection, disabilities among children are common in Nigeria. This is evidenced by the estimated figure cited by WHO, 2011, of about 15 percent of the world's population having some form of disability- a statistic likely similar in the Nigerian context. These various studies identified physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, sensory impairments involving defective hearing and vision, and developmental disorders. Regrettably, all these disabilities have not been subjected to a certain statistical determination in the Nigerian context for proper assessment of the magnitude of the problem. Special needs education in Nigeria is informed by a raft of policies, which include both the National Policy on Education and the National Special Education Policy. These policies further require school systems to integrate children with disabilities into regular schools. Teacher educators have a very critical role to play in developing the cornerstone for early childhood inclusive education in Nigeria and indeed in societies where the imperatives of inclusiveness are increasingly being felt.

Understanding the cornerstone for early childhood inclusive education from the perspective of a teacher educator will be highly important to inform policy and practice to improve outcomes for children with special needs. Their influence is even felt beyond the classroom, that is, in both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. In the context of pre-service education, influence at this level would be garnered when they prepare aspiring teachers with the knowledge and competencies that will enable them to apply inclusive practices effectively. This means infusing the concepts of inclusive education in the curriculum to make graduates from the teacher education institution cognitively aware of diverse learners and the increasing need for adapting teaching strategies to suit varied needs. On this basis, if teacher educators value inclusive methodologies, pre-service teachers will likely become positively disposed toward inclusion and thus create an inclusive classroom for all when they go out into the field (Tufue, 2023).

Moreover, the practice of inclusive education is modeled by teacher educators in their teaching. Modeling teaching techniques such as meeting the needs of a variety of learning styles and abilities is a means by which teacher educators give concrete examples to their students (Papadatou-Pastou et al., 2021). Such experiential learning is vital to help pre-service teachers appreciate how inclusive approaches can be applied in practice. The major challenge inhibiting inclusive practices is negative attitudes toward children with disabilities in some educational settings. Such are the attitudes that teacher educators will find important to challenge through education and advocacy. Educating teachers on disability issues and the rights of children with special needs thus helps to reshape perceptions and foster a more inclusive approach to welcoming diversity. In the words of Adeleke, 2021, "Teacher educators are very instrumental in ensuring inclusive practices within early childhood education settings in Nigeria.". It is due to this influence on pre-service and in-service training that they provide both prospective and current educators with the relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for setting up inclusive classrooms. Teacher educators can play a critical role in making the dream of an inclusive educational landscape a reality for all children, including those with special needs, by soliciting against pedagogical and attitudinal barriers (Craig, 2024). It will also help appreciate the perspectives of teacher educators in developing better and more inclusive practices within early childhood education for improved educational and social gains in the area of special needs in Nigeria. While studies have shed light on the experiences of teachers and students in inclusive settings, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the perceptions and attitudes of teacher educators, who play a crucial role in shaping the beliefs and practices of pre-service and in-service teachers (Dignath et al., 2022). (Viskovic, 2021) have emphasized, teacher educators are instrumental in ensuring inclusive practices within early childhood education settings, as they have the power to influence the development of relevant skills, knowledge, and attitudes among both prospective and current educators. The absence of research on the perspectives of teacher educators makes it challenging to formulate targeted interventions aimed at better-equipping teachers with the

necessary skills for inclusive classrooms (Massey, 2025). Additionally, the specific barriers inhibiting the establishment of inclusionary practices in Nigerian early childhood settings have not been fully explored from the viewpoint of teacher educators, who have a deep understanding of the contextual factors shaping inclusive education (Wakil et al., 2024). This study addressed this gap by exploring the perceptions of teacher educators concerning inclusive practices for children with special needs in Nigerian early childhood settings. By understanding the attitudes, beliefs, and perceived barriers from the perspective of these key stakeholders, the study can provided valuable insights to inform policy, practice, and teacher education programmes, ultimately contributing to the realization of inclusive education ideals in the Nigerian context.

Globally, the shift toward inclusive education is supported by various international frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which mandates that signatory countries to ensure inclusive education systems at all levels (de Beco, 2016). In Nigeria, this gradual shift towards inclusive education is considered indispensable to the creation of an equal educational setting where inclusive education is required. This was why the National Policy on Education showed its commitment by stating that "provisions in education needed to be made in a manner that the needs of children with special needs should be met" (Byrne, 2022). These policy documents show how Nigeria has put its policies in line with global standards while addressing local challenges facing education. Despite these enabling legal frameworks, current state-inclusive practices in Nigerian early childhood settings indicate wide gaps. Implementation in practice is marred with significant challenges due to a lack of preparation by teachers, lack of resources, and societal attitudes toward disability. Furthermore, infrastructural weaknesses and lack of specialized supporting services further aggravate the challenge of implementation of inclusive practices. Thus, this study seeks to investigate the perceptions of teacher educators concerning inclusive practices for children with special needs in Nigerian early childhood education. This will be important in understanding perceived barriers to the implementation of inclusive practice and devising strategies that might help ensure that effective inclusive education occurs.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study was limited to teacher educators at Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU) and Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri (AIFUE). The study incorporated the Faculty of Education at MOUAU, which consists of 136 academic staff, and the Faculty of Education at AIFUE, which consists of 709 academic staff. Due to the relatively small population size at MOUAU, all academic staff in the Faculty of Education were included in the sample. For AIFUE, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select 191 academic staff. The inclusion criteria for purposive sampling required that participants (1) were actively involved in teaching education-related courses, (2) had at least two years of teaching experience, and (3) demonstrated knowledge or interest in inclusive education based on their research or teaching portfolio.

These criteria ensured that participants possessed relevant expertise to contribute meaningfully to the study objectives.

Data collection was conducted using a validated questionnaire titled "Teacher-Educators Questionnaire on Inclusive Early Childhood Education Curriculum." The instrument was administered in person with the assistance of two trained research assistants who coordinated visits to each institution. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. The research assistants distributed the questionnaires during faculty meetings and departmental gatherings to maximize participation. Follow-up visits were conducted to ensure a 100% response rate. This hands-on approach facilitated clarity in answering the questions and minimized non-response bias.

The questionnaire was designed by the researchers and validated by three experts from the Departments of Early Childhood Education and Department of Special Needs Education at AIFUE. The instrument consists of five parts: 1. demographic information of respondents, 2. effectiveness of current training programmes in preparing future educators for inclusive practices, 3. Barriers in the implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs in Nigeria, 4. cultural attitudes toward disability and practices regarding inclusive education. The questionnaire items used a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD), scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The instrument's face validity was confirmed by four experts from the relevant department at AIFUE, and it underwent trial testing with 36 lecturers outside the study population, achieving a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.81. The questionnaire was administered with the assistance of two trained research assistants, ensuring a 100% response rate. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions, with a decision rule that any mean score of 2.50 or above was accepted, while scores below 2.50 were rejected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Average perception scores and standard deviation of teacher educators

S/N	ITEMS	MOUAU			AIFUE		
		$\bar{x}$	SD	REM	$\bar{x}$	SD	REM
1	The current training programs adequately prepare future educators for inclusive practices.	3.47	0.71	Accept	3.0	0.78	Accept
2	I feel confident in my ability to teach students with special needs due to my training.	3.14	0.50	Accept	3.49	0.64	Accept
3	The curriculum at my institution includes sufficient content on inclusive education	3.61	0.71	Accept	3.59	0.70	Accept
4	I believe that practical experiences in inclusive settings are emphasized in training programs	3.35	0.62	Accept	3.66	0.75	Accept

	Total mean average	**3.39**	**0.63**	**Accept**	**3.43**	**0.74**	Accept

Table 1 shows that both MOUAU and AIFUE teacher educators demonstrate relatively high agreement that training programs adequately prepare educators for inclusive practices, with AIFUE showing slightly higher average scores. The table also indicates that both MOUAU and AIFUE teacher educators feel confident in the adequacy of current training programs for inclusive practices, aligning with (Ogbu & Ph, 2024), who noted the importance of effective training in fostering positive attitudes toward inclusion. Item 2 shows a slightly lower score in both institutions, suggesting a potential area for improvement in inclusive education training programmes. This finding supports the findings of (Balık & Ozgun, 2024) where the teachers identified a number of difficulties in putting inclusive education into practice such as a lack of resources, big class sizes, parents' lack of knowledge and support, and their own lack of experience and professional competence. Therefore, there is a need for hands-on training in creating and executing inclusive activities, modifying them to fit different child features, and actively including kids with special needs in the educational process.

Table: 2: Teacher educators responses on the barriers to implementation of inclusive early childhood education curriculum

S/N	STATEMENT	MOUAU			AI FUE LECT.		
		$\bar{x}$	SD	REM	$\bar{x}$	SD	REM
5	There are significant resource shortages that hinder implementation of inclusive education.	3.47	0.65	Accept	3.10	0.68	Accept
6	Lack of administrative support is a barrier to effective inclusive practices	3.40	0.66	Accept	3.42	0.64	Accept
7	Insufficient training on special needs education is a major challenge for educators	3.51	0.61	Accept	3.45	0.60	Accept
8	Societal attitudes towards disability negatively impact the implementation of inclusive education	3.73	0.64	Accept	3.79	0.62	Accept
	Total mean average	**3.53**	**0.64**	**Accept**	**3.45**	**0.63**	**Accept**

Table 2. indicate that teacher educators at both institutions strongly agree that resource shortages and societal attitudes toward disability significantly hinder inclusive education. This finding affirms the view of (Ogbu & Ph, 2024) who argue that most teachers are lacking in competencies and knowledge on how to provide inclusive practices necessary to deal with children having special needs, and in most cases, the idea of disability brings along with it cultural perceptions that lead to stigmatization and discrimination against children with special needs. This largely cuts across to society's outlook on this matter, making families go

reticent in seeking early education for their children with disabilities, further retreating into isolation, and preventing them from further development. The agreement on lack of administrative support is also substantial. This highlights the need for increased resources, policy changes, and societal shifts in attitudes. This finding supports the idea of (Ali et al., 2006) who asserted the need for a clear guideline on the implementation of inclusive education. The finding also corroborates the finding of (Odebiyi et al., 2016) which showed that despite legal frameworks of inclusive education, current state-inclusive practices in Nigerian early childhood settings indicate wide gaps. Implementation in practice has quite a few challenges due to a lack of preparation by teachers, lack of resources, and societal attitudes toward disability.

Table 3: Average perception scores and standard deviations of cultural attitudes toward disability and inclusive education

S/N	STATEMENT	MOUAU			AI FUE LECT.		
		$\bar{x}$	SD	REM	$\bar{x}$	SD	REM
9	Cultural beliefs in my community support the inclusion of children with disabilities	2.58	0.49	Accept	2.62	0.58	Accept
10	Negative cultural perceptions of disability affect the willingness to seek early education for children with special needs.	3.70	0.76	Accept	3.80	0.74	Accept
11	Teacher educators actively challenge cultural stigmas associated with disabilities	3.64	0.61	Accept	3.67	0.50	Accept
12	Awareness campaigns about disabilities would improve attitudes towards inclusive education	3.81	0.64	Accept	3.83	0.72	Accept
	Total mean average	**3.43**	**0.57**	**Accept**	**3.48**	**0.63**	**Accept**

Table 3 shows that while there's strong agreement that negative cultural perceptions impact families' decisions regarding early childhood education for children with special needs, agreement is lower on the extent to which cultural beliefs support inclusion. This suggests a need for interventions addressing cultural attitudes and promoting inclusive values. This finding affirms the finding of (Salami, 2016) which showed that Nigeria's educational policies towards inclusive education were not defined, which resulted in a severe lack of resources and a lack of government support for inclusion. As a result, the Nigerian educational system didn't seem ready for IECE. As a temporary step toward inclusion, it was recommended that the government take into account implementing integration. Table 3 also reflects the influence of cultural attitudes on the beliefs and practices of teacher educators, resonating with Ainscow, who emphasized the role of societal perceptions in shaping inclusive practices and who found that there is a shortage of

qualified early childhood educators which then affects instructional quality. Most teachers are lacking in competencies and knowledge on how to provide inclusive practices necessary to deal with children having special needs and the idea of disability brings along with it cultural perceptions that lead to stigmatization and discrimination against children with special needs.

Table 4. Teacher Educators' Attitude Towards Physical Challenged Students

S/N	STATEMENT	MOUAU			AI FUE LECT.		
		$\bar{x}$	SD	REM	$\bar{x}$	SD	REM
13	All children, regardless of their abilities, have the right to quality education.	3.67	0.69	Accept	3.62	0.68	Accept
14	Inclusive education benefits not only children with special needs	3.80	0.76	Accept	3.82	0.74	Accept
15	My institution values inclusive education as a priority in teacher training	3.64	0.61	Accept	3.67	0.50	Accept
16	Commitment to advocating for inclusive practices in teacher education	3.51	0.64	Accept	3.53	0.62	Accept
	Total mean average	**3.65**	**0.67**	**Accept**	**3.66**	**0.64**	**Accept**

Both MOUAU and AIFUE teacher educators express strong positive attitudes towards inclusive education, believing in the rights of all children and the benefits of inclusive practices. They also show a high level of commitment to advocating for inclusive practices. This finding corroborates the finding of (Padillo & P., 2024) It demonstrated that respondents had a highly positive opinion of inclusive education and were very hopeful about managing inclusive classrooms. This finding further agrees with the finding of (Ali et al., 2006) which confirmed that Teachers have favorable opinions of inclusive education because they concur that it promotes social contact and student inclusion, which reduces unfavorable preconceptions about children with special needs. On the contrary, this finding disagrees with the finding of Olusodo and Farrow (n.d.) which indicated stated the majority of Nigerian primary school teachers in Lagos State have a bad attitude about including kids with SEN/D. The degree of knowledge that individual instructors had about inclusive educational techniques was one of the main elements that was discovered to have an impact on their unfavorable views about inclusive education, resonating with the finding of Eze (n.d.) which also indicated that 74% of teachers in the lower and upper basic education levels in Ohaukwu Local Government Area of Ebonyi State, South-East Nigeria are negatively disposed to inclusive education. Table 4 also demonstrates a strong commitment among teacher educators to advocate for inclusive education, supporting the findings that underscore the crucial role of educator attitudes in promoting inclusiveness.

To complement the quantitative findings, anecdotal insights from teacher educators revealed significant challenges and opportunities in implementing inclusive early childhood education. During informal discussions conducted alongside questionnaire distribution, several educators expressed concerns about the lack of practical exposure to inclusive settings during their training. For instance, one respondent from AIFUE noted, *"While the theoretical aspects of inclusive education are covered in our curriculum, we rarely have the chance to apply these concepts in real-life classroom settings. This makes it difficult for educators to feel fully prepared to handle diverse learning needs."* Similarly, educators highlighted the cultural stigma associated with disabilities as a persistent barrier. A respondent from MOUAU remarked, *"Many parents in our community are reluctant to send their children with disabilities to school because they fear judgment from others. This mindset limits the reach of inclusive education."* However, some educators shared positive experiences of advocacy efforts within their communities. For example, one lecturer described how a local awareness campaign successfully encouraged families to enroll children with special needs in early education programs, noting that *"Change begins when people start to see these children as capable learners."* These qualitative insights reinforce the need for more practical training opportunities, stronger advocacy, and community engagement to address the barriers identified in the quantitative analysis.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to strengthen inclusive education policies in Nigeria, particularly in early childhood education. Although policies such as the *National Special Education Policy* and the *National Policy on Education* have been designed to promote inclusivity, implementation on the ground continues to face significant challenges, including resource shortages, inadequate teacher training, and limited administrative support. These barriers align with (Ogunyemi et al., 2022) findings, which emphasized that despite the presence of legal frameworks supporting inclusive education, implementation is often hindered by negative societal perceptions of disabilities. This study also identified cultural attitudes toward children with special needs as a factor influencing parents' willingness to access inclusive education, a result consistent with (Salami, 2016), who noted similar challenges in Nigeria.

Internationally, countries like Malaysia and Turkey have demonstrated concrete measures to address similar challenges through enhanced teacher training and policy advocacy. For instance, (Ali et al., 2006) in Malaysia found that intensive training on inclusive approaches significantly improved teachers' understanding of inclusive education and reduced negative stereotypes about children with special needs. Similarly, Turkey has tackled resource constraints by focusing government policies on active parental involvement and better provision of teaching aids, which have contributed to the successful implementation of inclusive education. By adopting best practices from these countries, Nigeria can strengthen its

inclusive education system through a more integrated approach that emphasizes continuous teacher training, community support, and data-driven policy planning.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the foregoing findings, the following conclusions were drawn. It is concluded in this study that teacher educators find the training programs for inclusive education effective and adequate in preparing educators for inclusive practices. Teacher educators identified resource shortages and societal attitudes toward disability as the barriers to effective implementation of inclusive education for children with special needs. Cultural attitudes toward disability influences teacher educators' perception of inclusive education in early childhood education. Teacher educators have positive attitudes towards inclusive education and a significant level of commitment to advocating for inclusive practices.

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