

Inclusive Early Childhood Education: Strategies for Supporting Diverse Learning Needs in Nigeria and Africa as a Whole

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Abstract

Original Research Article

Inclusive early childhood education has become an important policy and practice concern in Nigeria and across Africa because the early years provide the foundation for later learning, participation, and social development. However, many young children continue to experience exclusion from quality early childhood education due to disability, poverty, limited access to preschool services, inadequate teacher preparation, weak early identification systems, poor infrastructure, language barriers, stigma, and fragmented policy implementation. These challenges are particularly significant in contexts where diverse learning needs are not adequately recognized or supported at the earliest stages of education. This study examines inclusive early childhood education as a strategy for supporting diverse learning needs in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. The study adopts a narrative literature review design supported by document analysis, drawing on peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and institutional reports related to early childhood education, inclusive education, and learner diversity. The review explores the concept of inclusive early childhood education, the range of diverse learning needs present in the early years, major barriers to implementation, and practical strategies for improving participation and learning outcomes. Findings indicate that inclusive early childhood education should be understood not merely as the placement of children with disabilities in regular settings, but as the creation of accessible, flexible, developmentally appropriate, and culturally responsive learning environments for all children. Meaningful inclusion depends on several interrelated factors, including equitable access to preschool education, teacher capacity development, differentiated and play-based pedagogy, early identification and intervention, family and community engagement, multilingual and culturally responsive learning, improved infrastructure, intersectoral collaboration, and stronger financing and accountability systems. The study concludes that inclusive early childhood education is essential for reducing educational inequality and strengthening foundational learning in Nigeria and across Africa. A whole-system approach that combines policy commitment with practical implementation strategies is necessary to support children with diverse learning needs from the earliest years of education.

Keywords: inclusive early childhood education, diverse learning needs, early childhood care and education, Nigeria, Africa, inclusive pedagogy, early intervention.

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1. Introduction

Early childhood is a critical stage of human development in which cognitive, language, social, emotional, and physical capacities are formed. Experiences during this period strongly shape later learning, school participation, well-being, and life opportunities. For this reason, early childhood care and education (ECCE) is increasingly recognized not only as preparation for primary school, but also as a basic right and a strategic investment in equity and national development (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Evidence shows that inclusive, high-quality ECCE can reduce developmental disparities, improve school readiness, and strengthen children's long-term participation in education (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Inclusive early childhood education is particularly important in Nigeria and across Africa, where many children face barriers such as poverty, disability, weak access to preschool services, conflict, linguistic diversity, malnutrition, rural isolation, and limited learning support systems. These barriers often overlap, placing many children at risk of exclusion before formal schooling begins (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2023; UNICEF, n.d.). In this context, inclusive early childhood education should be understood as the provision of equitable, accessible, and responsive learning opportunities for all children, including those with disabilities and other diverse learning needs (FME, 2023; UNICEF, n.d.).

The urgency of this issue is clear in Nigeria, where only 35.6% of children aged 36 to 59 months participate in early childhood education (UNICEF, n.d.). This low participation rate means that many children enter primary school without structured early learning experiences that support language, social, and numeracy development. The consequences are especially severe for children with disabilities, children from poor households, rural learners, and those affected by insecurity or displacement (UNICEF, n.d.; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). At the continental level, the African Union's 2024 education theme also stresses the need for inclusive, resilient, and relevant education systems across Africa (African Union, 2024). Although

Nigeria has taken policy steps to support inclusion, including the Federal Ministry of Education's Inclusive Education Policy, implementation remains uneven. Many early childhood centres still face challenges such as inadequate teacher preparation, inaccessible infrastructure, weak early screening systems, limited learning materials, poor intersectoral coordination, and insufficient funding (FME, 2023; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). Against this background, this study examines inclusive early childhood education as a strategy for supporting diverse learning needs in Nigeria and Africa, with attention to its conceptual foundations, key barriers, and practical strategies for improvement.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Concept of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Inclusive early childhood education is increasingly understood as a principle of equity rather than a specialized intervention for a limited group of learners. It refers to the creation of learning environments in which all children can access, participate in, and benefit from early learning opportunities regardless of disability, developmental profile, language background, socioeconomic status, gender, or location (Ackah-Jnr & Udah, 2021; Dott & Licandro, 2025; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF, n.d.). This reflects a clear shift from earlier views that associated inclusion mainly with placing children with disabilities in regular classrooms. An important issue in this area is the distinction between access and participation. Children may be enrolled in early childhood centres yet still be excluded from meaningful engagement in learning activities, peer interaction, communication, and play. Dott and Licandro (2025) and Siller et al. (2021) therefore argue that inclusion should be assessed not only by admission into mainstream settings but also by the extent to which children experience belonging, engagement, and developmental support. Evidence from African contexts reinforces this position by showing that inclusive practice is shaped by teacher attitudes, professional knowledge, policy understanding, and contextual realities. Findings

from Ghana and South Africa indicate that meaningful inclusion depends not only on policy commitment but also on pedagogical capacity and institutional support (Ackah-Jnr & Uдах, 2021; Bipath et al., 2021; De Souza, 2025).

2.2 Diverse Learning Needs in the Early Years

Diverse learning needs in early childhood are now understood more broadly than narrow “special needs” categories. In early childhood settings, these needs may include physical disabilities, sensory impairments, developmental delays, speech and language difficulties, autism, neurodiversity, trauma-related challenges, psychosocial vulnerability, and disadvantages linked to poverty, displacement, or multilingualism (Karisa et al., 2022; Mzimela, 2023; UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). This broader understanding is especially relevant in African contexts, where many children experience overlapping barriers without formal diagnosis or

specialized support. These early childhood challenges are often interconnected. A child may experience delayed language development linked to poverty, difficulty arising from an unfamiliar language of instruction, or unsupported sensory and developmental differences because screening systems are weak. In such situations, inclusive early childhood education requires flexible, child-centered, and context-sensitive support rather than narrow diagnostic labels. Nigerian studies reflect this position by showing that although teachers and parents may express support for inclusion, knowledge of disability and inclusive practice remains uneven, especially where teacher preparation, infrastructure, and classroom adaptation are limited (Barrio et al., 2018). This suggests that diverse learning needs in Nigeria should be understood broadly to include developmental, communication, social, linguistic, and environmental factors that affect children’s participation in early learning.

Table 1: Diverse Learning Needs and Corresponding Support Strategies

Category of learner	Typical needs in early childhood settings	Inclusive support strategies
Children with physical disabilities	Mobility, positioning, access to play and classroom routines	Ramps, adapted seating, accessible toilets, inclusive play spaces
Children with hearing impairments	Support for listening, language, and communication	Visual aids, gestures, sign support, preferential seating, picture cues
Children with visual impairments	Access to tactile, auditory, and spatial information	Tactile materials, enlarged print, oral explanation, guided movement
Children with developmental delays	Repetition, structure, scaffolded tasks, slower pacing	Small-step instruction, visual schedules, routine-based teaching, play therapy support
Children with speech and language difficulties	Rich communication opportunities and alternative expression	Songs, storytelling, picture exchange, modeling, peer-supported interaction

Neurodiverse learners	Predictable routines, sensory support, flexible interaction	Sensory-friendly spaces, visual routines, differentiated tasks, calm transitions
Linguistic minority children	Comprehensible input and familiar language support	Mother-tongue support, bilingual materials, songs and stories in home language
Children affected by trauma, poverty, or displacement	Emotional security, stable routines, psychosocial support	Safe spaces, trauma-sensitive teaching, caregiver engagement, feeding and referral support

2.3 Empirical Review of Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Inclusive early childhood education is strongly influenced by teacher preparedness. Ackah-Jnr (2020) explains that teachers need sustained professional development rather than occasional workshops if inclusion is to work in practice. In Ghana, Ackah-Jnr and Udah (2021) found that children’s participation in early childhood settings was shaped by teacher attitudes, teacher preparation, and the level of professional support available. Dionne et al. (2025) similarly show that educators and administrators see coaching, mentoring, and practical training as essential for improving inclusive childcare environments. These findings suggest that meaningful inclusion depends not only on policy commitment but also on whether teachers can adapt activities, manage diverse classrooms, and support different developmental needs. Another persistent issue is the gap between policy intention and classroom practice. Donohue and Bornman (2014) show that inclusive education often weakens at the implementation stage, where policy goals are not matched by resources, coordination, or practitioner understanding. Bipath et al. (2021) report a similar pattern in early childhood settings, where teachers and centre managers often have limited knowledge of inclusive policy and receive little practical support. Clark et al. (2024) add that delaying inclusion until ideal conditions exist is neither educationally nor ethically justified. This is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where national policy frameworks are in

place but implementation remains uneven across states and local settings.

Participation, belonging, and peer interaction also emerge as important measures of inclusion. Dott and Licandro (2025) show that children with disabilities often participate less fully than their peers in classroom activities and social interaction, even in settings described as inclusive. Siller et al. (2021) similarly note that late diagnosis, fragmented services, and weak family support can reduce opportunities for meaningful inclusion. These findings show that inclusion should be judged not simply by placement, but by the quality of children’s engagement and social participation. Evidence from African and other low-resource contexts further shows that inclusion must be grounded in practical realities. Harrison (2020) identifies uneven service provision, weak workforce development, and poor remuneration as structural barriers affecting early childhood education in South Africa. De Souza (2025) argues that inclusion in Southern Africa becomes more realistic when it is based on community participation, local materials, and flexible implementation models. Studies from Zimbabwe and other Southern African contexts similarly suggest that caregiver participation and locally available resources can make early learning more inclusive where formal services are limited. In addition, Mzimela (2023) found that South African educators working with young autistic children often lacked the knowledge and support needed for effective inclusion, while related studies emphasize

the value of structured routines, visual supports, differentiated instruction, and collaboration with caregivers.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework built around four interrelated perspectives: rights-based inclusion, ecological systems thinking, developmental appropriateness, and Universal Design for Learning. The rights-based perspective emphasizes that inclusive early childhood education is not optional. It reflects the view that all children, including those with disabilities and other forms of disadvantage, have a right to equitable participation in education from the earliest years. This perspective positions exclusion in early childhood as both an educational challenge and a social justice issue. The ecological perspective highlights that inclusion is shaped by multiple interacting systems. Children's participation in early learning is influenced not only by classroom practices, but also by family relationships, school leadership, policy environments, material resources, and community attitudes. This is particularly relevant in African contexts, where barriers to inclusion often extend beyond the school itself.

The developmental appropriateness perspective recognizes that young children learn in different ways and at different rates. It emphasizes play, repetition, routine, communication support, and responsiveness to developmental variability. This perspective supports flexible learning environments that adapt to children's needs rather than forcing all learners into rigid expectations. Finally, Universal Design for Learning provides a practical framework for inclusive pedagogy. Many of the strategies discussed in this study, such as multiple means of engagement, visual supports, varied participation pathways, differentiated tasks, and flexible communication support, align with UDL principles. Even where African studies do not always use the term directly, their recommendations reflect the same idea: early learning environments should be designed from the beginning to accommodate learner variability.

2.5 Synthesis of the Review

The literature reviewed in this section presents inclusive early childhood education as a whole-system approach to equity in the early years. The scholarship converges around several important conclusions. Inclusion must be participation-centered rather than placement-centered. Teacher preparation and implementation support are decisive for meaningful practice. Effective early childhood inclusion in Nigeria and Africa must be multilingual, developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and realistic within available resource conditions. These conclusions provide the conceptual and empirical foundation for the next sections of the paper, which examine the barriers to inclusive early childhood education and the strategies required to support diverse learning needs more effectively.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a narrative literature review design supported by document analysis to examine inclusive early childhood education and strategies for supporting diverse learning needs in Nigeria and Africa. A narrative review was considered appropriate because the paper seeks to synthesize conceptual, empirical, and policy-based literature drawn from different contexts rather than test a single intervention or calculate pooled statistical effects. Narrative reviews are particularly useful for integrating broad bodies of knowledge, identifying recurring themes, and generating policy-relevant interpretations in areas where evidence is diverse in type and scope (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). The choice of this design was also informed by the nature of the topic. Inclusive early childhood education is a multidisciplinary field that intersects with disability studies, teacher education, child development, language policy, educational planning, and social inclusion. Because of this complexity, a methodology was needed that could accommodate peer-reviewed studies, policy frameworks, institutional reports, and conceptual literature within a single interpretive structure. The narrative review approach therefore provided sufficient flexibility to

capture the breadth of the subject while maintaining analytical focus.

3.2 Sources of Data

The study relied entirely on secondary sources of data. These sources were drawn from three main categories. The first category consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles on inclusive early childhood education, disability inclusion, developmental support, teacher preparedness, participation, and early learning in Nigeria, Africa, and comparable low- and middle-income contexts. The second category included policy documents and official reports from national and international bodies such as the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the African Union. The third category consisted of conceptual and theoretical works relevant to early childhood inclusion, participation, ecological systems, and learner diversity. These categories of sources were used because the study aimed to provide not only an academic review of the literature but also a policy-relevant analysis of inclusive early childhood education in practice. The use of multiple source types helped to strengthen the study by allowing comparison between scholarly evidence, policy commitments, and implementation-oriented documents.

3.3 Search Procedure and Selection of Literature

The literature search was conducted through electronic databases, institutional repositories, and official organizational websites. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords: inclusive early childhood education, early childhood care and education, diverse learning needs, children with disabilities, inclusive education in Nigeria, early childhood education in Africa, teacher preparedness for inclusion, early intervention, multilingual early learning, and play-based inclusive pedagogy. Additional relevant sources were identified through reference lists and citation tracking from key articles and reports.

The selection of literature was guided by clear inclusion criteria. To be included in the review, a source had to:

- (a) address early childhood education, inclusion, disability, or diverse learning needs;
- (b) focus on Nigeria, Africa, or widely recognized international frameworks relevant to African contexts;
- (c) provide conceptual, empirical, or policy insight relevant to the objectives of the study; and
- (d) be sufficiently credible, accessible, and relevant to the topic under investigation. Preference was given to recent literature in order to reflect current thinking and policy developments, although some foundational texts were retained where they remained conceptually important to the field.

Sources were excluded where they focused exclusively on primary, secondary, or higher education without clear relevance to the early years, or where they did not engage meaningfully with inclusion, learner diversity, or early childhood support.

3.4 Method of Data Analysis

The selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis. After the relevant materials were reviewed, recurring issues, patterns, and concepts were identified and grouped into major thematic categories. These themes included:

- i. the concept of inclusive early childhood education;
- ii. the meaning of diverse learning needs in the early years;
- iii. empirical evidence on inclusive early childhood education in Nigeria and Africa;
- iv. barriers to implementation;
- v. strategies for supporting diverse learners; and
- vi. policy and practice implications.

Thematic analysis was appropriate because it allowed the study to move beyond simple description and develop a structured interpretation of the literature. By comparing patterns across journal articles, policy papers, and institutional reports, the

study was able to identify points of convergence in the literature. For example, teacher preparedness, access inequalities, weak infrastructure, inadequate financing, and poor implementation support emerged consistently as barriers, while differentiated pedagogy, early identification, family engagement, multilingual support, and policy coordination emerged as recurring strategies.

3.5 Justification for the Method

The chosen methodology was suitable for several reasons. First, the study addresses a broad educational and policy problem that cannot be adequately captured through a single empirical dataset. Second, the available literature on inclusive early childhood education in Nigeria and Africa is dispersed across scholarly, institutional, and policy sources, making an integrative narrative approach more appropriate than a narrowly statistical one. Third, the purpose of the paper is explanatory and analytical: it seeks to clarify concepts, synthesize existing knowledge, and propose context-relevant strategies rather than test causal hypotheses. This methodological approach is consistent with existing scholarship on review methods, which emphasizes that narrative and integrative reviews are valuable when the aim is to interpret, synthesize, and extend understanding across diverse forms of evidence (Grant & Booth, 2009; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

3.6 Reliability and Limitations of the Method

Although the methodology allowed for a broad and policy-relevant synthesis, some limitations should be noted. As a narrative review, the study does not claim exhaustive coverage of every publication on inclusive early childhood education in Africa. The interpretation of literature may also be affected by the availability of sources, the visibility of certain countries in published research, and the relative dominance of English-language materials. In addition, because the study depends on secondary data, its conclusions are shaped by the quality, scope, and limitations of the original sources reviewed. Nevertheless, the approach remains appropriate for the objectives of the study because it provides a

coherent and well-grounded synthesis of the most relevant conceptual, empirical, and policy literature on the topic.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study did not involve human participants, fieldwork, interviews, or the collection of personal data. It was based entirely on published and publicly accessible documents. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. However, ethical scholarly practice was maintained through careful citation of sources, accurate representation of authors' arguments, and adherence to academic standards of integrity.

4. Barriers to Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Nigeria and Africa

Inclusive early childhood education in Nigeria and across Africa continues to face a range of interconnected barriers that limit children's access, participation, and learning outcomes. Although policy attention to inclusion has increased in recent years, the realities of implementation remain uneven. The literature suggests that the barriers affecting inclusive early childhood education are not isolated challenges but mutually reinforcing conditions that shape children's experiences from the earliest stages of education. These barriers include limited access to early childhood programmes, inadequate teacher preparation, weak early identification systems, inaccessible infrastructure, poverty, language mismatch, stigma, weak policy implementation, poor data systems, and the effects of conflict and displacement. Together, these constraints reduce the capacity of early childhood settings to respond effectively to diverse learning needs.

4.1 Limited Access to Early Childhood Education

One of the most fundamental barriers to inclusive early childhood education is low access to early childhood programmes. Inclusion cannot be achieved where many children are excluded from preschool provision altogether. In many parts of

Nigeria and across Africa, access to early childhood education remains uneven, especially for children in rural communities, low-income households, conflict-affected areas, and informal settlements. Children with disabilities and other vulnerable learners are often disproportionately affected because they face both general barriers to school access and additional obstacles related to disability, stigma, and weak support systems. Low participation in early childhood education has serious implications for school readiness and later academic progress. Children who do not benefit from structured early learning opportunities are less likely to develop the foundational language, social, and cognitive skills needed for successful transition into primary schooling. This makes early exclusion one of the most important barriers to lifelong educational inclusion.

4.2 Inadequate Teacher Preparation

The literature consistently identifies teacher preparedness as one of the strongest determinants of inclusive practice. Early childhood teachers are expected to respond to developmental variability, adapt activities, support communication, and create inclusive classroom environments. However, many teachers in Nigeria and other African countries have limited training in inclusive pedagogy, classroom adaptation, developmental observation, and differentiated instruction. In some settings, teachers may support the principle of inclusion but lack the practical knowledge required to implement it effectively. Where teacher preparation is weak, inclusive education often becomes symbolic rather than meaningful. Children may be admitted into classrooms but remain unsupported in their participation, communication, and engagement. Lack of ongoing professional development further worsens the problem, since teachers are left without mentoring, coaching, or opportunities to build confidence in working with diverse learners.

4.3 Weak Early Identification and Intervention Systems

Another major barrier is the absence of strong systems for early identification and intervention.

Inclusive early childhood education depends on the timely recognition of developmental delays, communication difficulties, sensory impairments, psychosocial needs, and other learning-related challenges. In many African contexts, these needs are identified late or not identified at all. As a result, children often enter formal schooling without receiving the early support that could improve participation and developmental outcomes. Weak screening and referral systems also make it difficult for teachers and caregivers to understand the nature of a child's challenges. In some cases, learning difficulties may be misinterpreted as indiscipline, laziness, or low intelligence. Without simple and accessible pathways for developmental observation, referral, and support, inclusive practice remains reactive rather than preventive.

4.4 Inaccessible Infrastructure and Learning Environments

Physical and material barriers remain a serious challenge to inclusion. Many early childhood centres across Nigeria and Africa operate with inadequate facilities, overcrowded classrooms, inaccessible sanitation, poor seating arrangements, and insufficient play and learning materials. Such environments can be especially exclusionary for children with physical disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, developmental delays, or sensory sensitivities.

Inclusion requires more than policy language; it also requires environments that children can actually use. A classroom without ramps, visual cues, safe play areas, or flexible seating reduces participation even where a child has been formally enrolled. In this way, infrastructure becomes both a practical and symbolic barrier, reflecting whether inclusion is being taken seriously in educational planning.

4.5 Poverty and Weak Financing

Poverty remains one of the most pervasive barriers to inclusive early childhood education in Africa. Children from poor households are less likely to attend preschool, more likely to experience

malnutrition and developmental risk, and less likely to access learning materials or supportive services. For many families, the costs associated with transport, materials, uniforms, or informal fees may be enough to prevent early enrolment. Weak financing at system level deepens these inequalities. When early childhood education is underfunded, centres are less able to recruit and train teachers, improve infrastructure, provide learning materials, or build support systems for children with diverse needs. Inclusion then becomes treated as an additional burden rather than a central principle of educational design. This is one of the reasons why inclusive early childhood education often remains more visible in policy than in practice.

4.6 Language Barriers and Cultural Mismatch

Language is another major barrier, especially in multilingual African societies. Many children begin early education in settings where the language of instruction differs from the language spoken at home. This can affect comprehension, confidence, classroom participation, and interaction with peers and teachers. In the early years, when language development is still emerging, such mismatch can be especially damaging. Cultural mismatch may also reduce inclusion where classroom practices, stories, routines, or expectations do not reflect children's lived realities. In such cases, children may experience learning as unfamiliar or alienating. Linguistic and cultural barriers are particularly important because they can be mistaken for low ability or developmental delay, leading to further exclusion.

4.7 Stigma and Discrimination

Stigma remains one of the less visible but highly influential barriers to inclusion. Children with disabilities, developmental differences, or behavioral challenges may encounter negative attitudes from teachers, peers, caregivers, and communities. Families may delay school enrolment due to fear of ridicule or rejection, while some schools may resist admitting children who are perceived as difficult to teach. The effects of stigma are especially harmful in

early childhood because belonging and social participation are central to young children's development. When children are isolated, underestimated, or excluded from activities, their opportunities for communication, play, and relationship-building are reduced. Stigma therefore functions not only as a social barrier but also as an educational barrier.

4.8 Weak Policy Implementation and Fragmented Governance

Although many African countries, including Nigeria, have adopted inclusive education policies, implementation remains inconsistent. Policy commitment does not automatically translate into teacher support, classroom adaptation, monitoring systems, or local accountability. In many cases, inclusive education frameworks exist at national level but are not effectively operationalized in state, district, or centre-level practice. Fragmented governance further weakens implementation. Inclusive early childhood education depends on coordination among education, health, nutrition, social welfare, and child protection systems. Where these sectors work in isolation, children's needs may go unrecognized or unsupported. Weak coordination also makes it difficult to create referral pathways, family support systems, and locally grounded strategies for inclusion.

4.9 Weak Data Systems

Reliable data are essential for inclusive planning, yet many systems lack accurate and disaggregated information on preschool participation, disability, developmental needs, and support provision. Without such data, governments and institutions cannot effectively identify who is excluded, where barriers are concentrated, or what forms of intervention are most needed. Weak data systems also reduce accountability. When exclusion remains statistically invisible, policy commitments are difficult to monitor and evaluate. This is particularly problematic in early childhood education, where many forms of exclusion are subtle and may not appear in general enrolment figures.

4.10 Conflict, Displacement, and Insecurity

In some parts of Nigeria and across Africa, conflict and displacement add another layer of difficulty to inclusive early childhood education. Insecurity disrupts schooling, weakens family stability, damages infrastructure, and creates psychosocial stress for children. Displaced children and those living in conflict-affected regions may have less

access to safe early learning environments and fewer opportunities for consistent developmental support. For young children, the consequences are especially serious because the early years are highly sensitive to disruption. In such contexts, inclusive early childhood education must address emotional wellbeing, continuity of care, and psychosocial support alongside academic participation.

Figure 1: Key Barriers to Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Nigeria and Africa

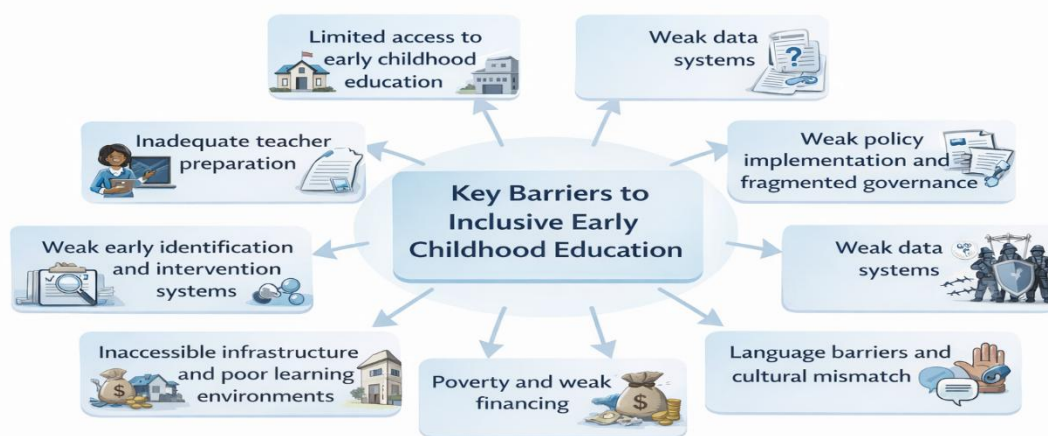


Figure 1 summarizes the major barriers discussed in this section and shows that inclusive early childhood education is constrained by both school-level and system-level challenges.

Table 2. Barriers to Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Nigeria and Africa

Barrier	Manifestation in practice	Implication for inclusion
Limited access to ECCE	Low enrolment, uneven rural-urban provision, exclusion of vulnerable groups	Many children are denied early learning opportunities from the outset
Inadequate teacher preparation	Limited knowledge of inclusive pedagogy and classroom adaptation	Children are present in class but not meaningfully supported
Weak early identification	Delays in recognizing developmental, sensory, or communication needs	Support begins late or not at all

Inaccessible infrastructure	Poor classroom layout, lack of ramps, inaccessible toilets, few learning materials	Learners with disabilities face direct participation barriers
Poverty and weak financing	Families cannot afford preschool; centres lack resources and support systems	Inclusion remains underfunded and uneven
Language and cultural mismatch	Unfamiliar language of instruction and non-localized classroom content	Reduced participation, misunderstanding, and low confidence
Stigma and discrimination	Negative attitudes from peers, teachers, families, or communities	Children face social exclusion and low expectations
Weak policy implementation	Policy exists without effective local action, monitoring, or support	Inclusion remains rhetorical rather than practical
Weak data systems	Limited disaggregated information on disability, access, and support needs	Planning and accountability are weakened
Conflict and displacement	Interrupted schooling, trauma, damaged infrastructure, forced migration	Inclusive learning becomes harder to sustain

Table 2 provides a summary of the barriers discussed in Section 4 and clarifies how each barrier affects inclusive practice.

4.11 Synthesis of the Barriers

The barriers discussed in this section are closely interconnected. Low access, weak teacher preparation, poor infrastructure, poverty, stigma, and fragmented governance reinforce one another and create layered forms of exclusion. A child living in a poor rural community, speaking a minority language, and experiencing an undiagnosed developmental delay may encounter several of these barriers simultaneously. This is why inclusive early childhood education cannot be addressed through isolated interventions alone. The evidence reviewed suggests that meaningful inclusion requires a whole-system response that recognizes the complexity of children's lived realities in Nigeria and across Africa.

5. Strategies for Supporting Diverse Learning Needs

Addressing diverse learning needs in early childhood requires a coordinated response that moves beyond access alone and focuses on the quality of children's participation, development, and learning. The literature reviewed in this paper shows that effective inclusion is rarely the product of a single intervention. Rather, it emerges when policy, pedagogy, family support, infrastructure, and child development services work together to reduce barriers and strengthen participation. In Nigeria and across Africa, this means that strategies for inclusion must be realistic, context-sensitive, and adaptable to settings where resources may be limited but the need for early support is high. The emphasis, therefore,

should be on building early childhood systems that are responsive to learner variability from the outset rather than attempting to retrofit inclusion after exclusion has already taken root.

5.1 Expanding Equitable Access to Inclusive Early Childhood Education

The first strategy is to expand access to early childhood education, particularly for children who are least likely to enroll. Inclusion cannot be achieved where large numbers of children remain outside early learning settings altogether. In Nigeria and across many African countries, children in rural communities, low-income households, conflict-affected areas, and informal settlements continue to have less access to quality early childhood services. Children with disabilities and other vulnerable learners are especially likely to be excluded because they face both general barriers to enrolment and specific barriers linked to disability, social attitudes, and the absence of support services. Expanding equitable access requires more than increasing the number of centres. It also involves addressing cost, distance, safety, stigma, and institutional barriers that prevent children from entering and remaining in early childhood programmes. Community-based models, flexible delivery options, and outreach to underserved households are especially important in contexts where formal provision is limited. An inclusive approach to expansion should therefore prioritize not only quantity but also accessibility and readiness to support diverse learners.

5.2 Strengthening Teacher Preparation and Continuous Professional Development

Teacher preparedness remains one of the most important determinants of inclusive early childhood education. Teachers need practical knowledge of child development, developmental variability, communication support, classroom adaptation, play-based learning, and differentiated instruction if they are to support children effectively. In many settings, however, teachers are expected to implement

inclusion without sufficient pre-service preparation or ongoing professional support. This often leads to a situation in which children are admitted into classrooms but do not receive the instructional and social support necessary for meaningful participation. Continuous professional development is therefore essential. Rather than relying only on one-time workshops, teacher development should involve mentoring, peer learning, coaching, reflective practice, and classroom-based demonstration. Such approaches are more likely to help teachers translate inclusive principles into everyday pedagogy. They also help reduce teacher anxiety and improve confidence in working with children who have different developmental, behavioral, or communication profiles.

5.3 Using Universal Design for Learning and Differentiated Pedagogy

A key strategy for inclusive early childhood education is to design learning environments around learner variability rather than assuming that all children will learn in the same way or at the same pace. Universal Design for Learning provides a helpful framework for this because it encourages the use of multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression. In early childhood contexts, this means presenting ideas in different ways, providing flexible routes for participation, and allowing children varied ways to communicate understanding. Differentiated pedagogy works alongside this approach by enabling teachers to adapt content, processes, materials, and activities according to children's developmental levels, interests, and support needs. In practice, this may involve using visual supports, tactile materials, songs, movement, repetition, flexible grouping, and scaffolded tasks. These strategies are valuable not only for children with identified disabilities, but for all learners, especially in classrooms where developmental and linguistic diversity is high. Designing classrooms for variability from the beginning reduces the need for exclusionary practices and makes participation more equitable.

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Inclusive Early Childhood Education

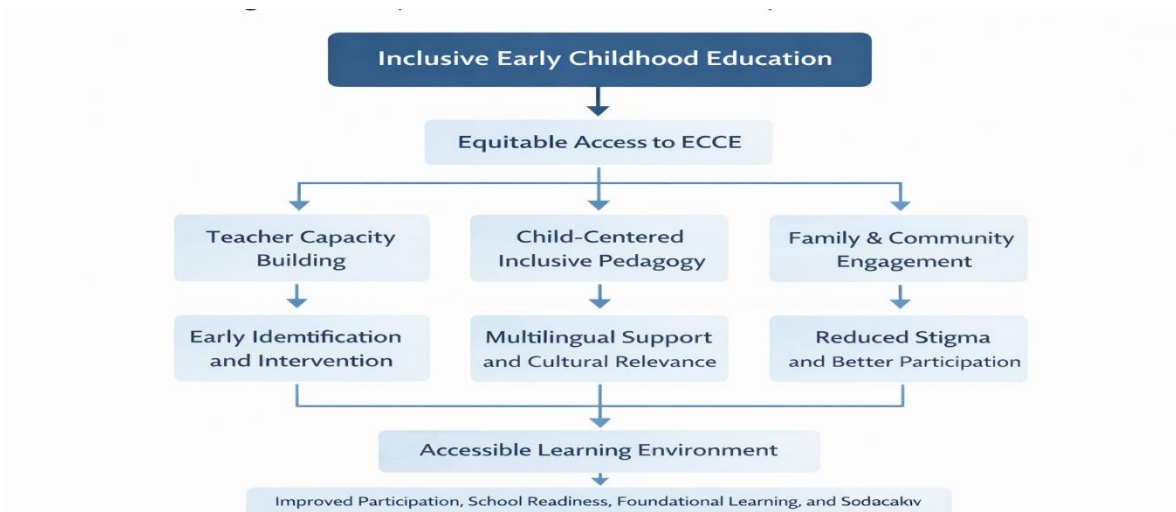


Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework guiding the strategic responses discussed in this section. It shows that inclusion in early childhood education depends on the interaction between access, teacher development, pedagogy, family engagement, early intervention, multilingual support, and accessible learning environments.

5.4 Promoting Play-Based and Developmentally Appropriate Learning

The literature strongly supports play-based and developmentally appropriate learning as a core strategy for supporting diverse learning needs in early childhood. Play allows children to explore, communicate, socialize, and learn in ways that are flexible and responsive to developmental variability. It creates natural opportunities for interaction and reduces pressure on children to conform to rigid academic routines before they are ready. In inclusive settings, play-based learning is particularly valuable because it provides multiple entry points for children with different abilities, communication styles, and social needs.

Developmentally appropriate practice further supports inclusion by recognizing that children differ in readiness, pace of development, and modes of engagement. Rather than imposing standardized expectations, this approach encourages educators to match activities to children’s developmental profiles and cultural contexts. In Nigeria and across Africa, this also means using locally meaningful materials,

familiar stories, songs, and routines that connect school learning to children’s everyday experiences.

5.5 Establishing Early Identification, Screening, and Referral Pathways

Effective inclusion depends on timely recognition of developmental and learning-related challenges. Early identification makes it possible to respond before difficulties become more severe or are misunderstood as misbehavior or inability. In many African contexts, however, screening and referral systems remain weak, which means that children with hearing, vision, communication, developmental, or psychosocial needs may receive support too late or not at all. An important strategy, therefore, is to strengthen simple and practical pathways for developmental observation, screening, and referral. This does not necessarily require highly specialized systems at the initial stage. Teachers, caregivers, community health workers, and local education officers can all play a role in noticing developmental concerns and linking children to further support. The goal should be to ensure that children’s needs are

recognized early and addressed in ways that support participation rather than lead to exclusion.

5.6 Strengthening Family and Community Engagement

Family and community participation is central to meaningful inclusion in the early years. Families are often the first to observe children's strengths, needs, communication patterns, and routines. When schools work in partnership with caregivers, they are better able to design responsive support for children and sustain learning across home and school contexts. Family engagement is also important for reducing stigma and building trust, especially in communities where disability or developmental difference may be misunderstood. Community involvement strengthens inclusion further by drawing on local support systems. Religious bodies, women's groups, community leaders, disability organizations, and local volunteers can help encourage enrolment, reduce discrimination, and support children's participation. In low-resource contexts, such community structures may be essential for reaching children who are excluded from formal services and for sustaining inclusive practices over time.

5.7 Supporting Multilingual and Culturally Responsive Learning

Language-sensitive and culturally responsive teaching is another essential strategy for supporting diverse learners. In multilingual African societies, many children enter early childhood centres where the language of interaction differs from the language they speak at home. This can limit comprehension, confidence, and participation, especially in the early years when children are still developing expressive and receptive language skills. When teachers respond only in one formal language, children who are otherwise capable may be misjudged as weak learners or developmentally delayed. Inclusive early childhood education should therefore promote home-language support, bilingual materials where possible, familiar songs and stories, and pedagogies that recognize children's cultural backgrounds as assets. Culturally responsive teaching also improves

belonging by making learning more meaningful and relatable. In this sense, multilingual and culturally grounded pedagogy is not separate from inclusion; it is a major pathway through which inclusion is realized.

5.8 Improving Infrastructure, Learning Materials, and Accessibility

Inclusive early childhood education requires environments that are physically and materially supportive of participation. Where classrooms are overcrowded, inaccessible, poorly equipped, or unsafe, inclusion becomes much harder to achieve. For this reason, improving infrastructure remains a key strategy. This includes providing ramps, accessible sanitation, flexible seating, visual supports, safe outdoor play spaces, and child-friendly classroom layouts. Learning materials also matter. Inclusive settings benefit from tactile objects, visual schedules, picture cards, sensory materials, and low-cost locally produced resources that can be adapted for different learners. Importantly, accessibility does not always depend on expensive imported equipment. Many meaningful improvements can be made through simple, low-cost adaptations and the creative use of local materials. The crucial issue is whether the learning environment has been deliberately designed to support participation for all children.

5.9 Promoting Intersectoral Collaboration

Children's learning and development in the early years are shaped not only by schools but also by health, nutrition, child protection, and family wellbeing. This means that inclusive early childhood education requires intersectoral collaboration rather than isolated educational responses. A child who experiences malnutrition, untreated hearing loss, trauma, or unstable caregiving may not benefit fully from classroom strategies alone. Early learning systems must therefore be linked to health screening, nutrition support, disability services, social protection, and psychosocial care.

Intersectoral collaboration is especially important in African contexts where developmental risks are often shaped by wider social and economic conditions. Better coordination among ministries, local government authorities, schools, health providers, and community organizations can improve early identification, referral, and continuity of support. It also increases the likelihood that inclusive education will be treated as part of holistic child development rather than as a narrow educational reform.

5.10 Strengthening Financing, Data, and Accountability

No strategy for inclusive early childhood education can be sustained without adequate financing, reliable

data, and strong accountability mechanisms. Underfunded systems struggle to recruit and train teachers, provide materials, improve infrastructure, and reach underserved communities. Where inclusive education is not reflected in budgeting, it often remains rhetorical rather than practical. Reliable disaggregated data are equally important. Governments and institutions need to know who is excluded, where children are located, what barriers they face, and what support is available. Without this information, planning remains weak and inequities remain hidden. Accountability mechanisms should therefore ensure that inclusion is monitored in terms of access, participation, support provision, and learning outcomes rather than general enrolment alone.

Table 3: Priority Strategies for Strengthening Inclusive Early Childhood Education

Strategic area	Recommended action	Expected outcome
Access and equity	Expand early childhood services in underserved communities and reduce enrolment barriers	Increased participation of marginalized children
Teacher development	Strengthen pre-service and in-service training in inclusive pedagogy	Improved teacher confidence and classroom responsiveness
Inclusive pedagogy	Use differentiated instruction and Universal Design for Learning principles	Better participation and engagement for diverse learners
Early intervention	Establish early screening, referral, and support pathways	Timely recognition and response to developmental needs
Family partnership	Involve caregivers in planning, communication, and support	Stronger home-school collaboration and reduced stigma
Language and culture	Promote multilingual and culturally relevant early learning	Greater comprehension, identity support, and participation
Infrastructure and materials	Improve accessibility and provide adaptive learning resources	More inclusive learning environments
Intersectoral coordination	Link education with health, nutrition, and child protection services	Holistic support for children’s development

Financing and monitoring	Increase funding and collect disaggregated data	More sustainable and accountable inclusion
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Table 3 summarizes the major strategic responses discussed in this section and shows how each one contributes to strengthening inclusive early childhood education.

5.11 Synthesis of the Strategic Response

The strategies outlined in this section are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Expanding enrolment without improving pedagogy will not produce meaningful inclusion. Training teachers without strengthening infrastructure and support systems will have limited effect. Early identification without referral or follow-up will not improve outcomes. The literature therefore suggests that inclusive early childhood education works best when it is planned as a whole-system approach in which access, pedagogy, family partnership, early support, multilingual responsiveness, infrastructure, coordination, and financing are addressed together. This integrated perspective is particularly important in Nigeria and across Africa, where diverse learning needs are shaped by overlapping educational, developmental, and social realities.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Inclusive early childhood education is a critical foundation for equitable learning, social participation, and long-term human development in Nigeria and across Africa. The literature reviewed in this paper shows that the early years provide the most strategic opportunity for addressing exclusion because developmental differences, communication difficulties, disability-related barriers, and other forms of disadvantage often become visible during this period. When such barriers are not addressed early, they tend to widen over time and contribute to weak school readiness, poor foundational learning, low participation, and long-term educational inequality.

This paper has shown that inclusive early childhood education in Nigeria and Africa is shaped by both

policy opportunity and implementation difficulty. On the one hand, policy attention to inclusion has increased, and there is broader recognition that education systems should respond to learner diversity from the earliest years. On the other hand, the evidence reviewed indicates that implementation remains constrained by low access to preschool education, inadequate teacher preparation, weak early identification systems, inaccessible infrastructure, poverty, language barriers, stigma, weak policy translation, fragmented governance, and insufficient data and financing. These conditions make it difficult for many early childhood settings to provide meaningful support for children with diverse learning needs.

A major conclusion emerging from the study is that inclusive early childhood education should not be understood narrowly as the placement of children with disabilities in regular classrooms. Rather, it should be viewed as a whole-system commitment to creating early learning environments that are accessible, flexible, developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and capable of supporting all learners. This broader understanding is especially important in Nigeria and across Africa, where exclusion in the early years is often shaped by multiple overlapping disadvantages such as poverty, rural isolation, multilingualism, developmental risk, conflict, and weak institutional support. In such settings, inclusion requires not only classroom adaptation, but also stronger coordination across education, health, nutrition, child protection, and community systems.

The study also demonstrates that meaningful inclusion depends on the interaction of several strategic areas. Expanding equitable access to early childhood education is essential, but access alone is not enough. Teacher preparation must be

strengthened so that educators can respond confidently to learner variability. Early identification and referral systems must be improved so that developmental needs are recognized and addressed before they become more severe. Family and community engagement must be deepened to reduce

stigma and strengthen home-school collaboration. Learning environments must be more accessible and culturally responsive, particularly in multilingual African contexts. Finally, financing, monitoring, and accountability must be improved so that inclusion becomes operational rather than symbolic.

Table 4: Policy Priorities for Scaling Inclusive Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

Policy priority	Practical implication
Expand access to ECCE	Increase early childhood centres and outreach in rural, low-income, and conflict-affected communities
Strengthen teacher preparation	Embed inclusive pedagogy, developmental support, and classroom adaptation into pre-service and in-service training
Improve early identification systems	Develop community-linked screening, referral, and follow-up pathways for developmental and learning needs
Support multilingual learning	Promote local language materials, bilingual support, and culturally relevant early learning resources
Improve infrastructure and accessibility	Ensure child-friendly, safe, and accessible classrooms, play spaces, and sanitation facilities
Strengthen family and community engagement	Involve caregivers, community leaders, and local organizations in awareness, support, and participation
Promote intersectoral collaboration	Link education with health, nutrition, disability, and child protection services
Increase financing and accountability	Allocate targeted funding for inclusive ECCE and strengthen disaggregated data systems for monitoring

Table 4 provides a summary of the major policy priorities emerging from this study and highlights the practical steps required to scale inclusive early childhood education in Nigeria.

For Nigeria, the policy implications are clear. First, early childhood education should be treated as a national equity priority rather than as an optional preparatory stage. Second, inclusive education policy should be translated into practical state- and

local-level action plans supported by funding, training, and implementation guidance. Third, teacher education institutions should incorporate stronger preparation in inclusive pedagogy, developmental observation, multilingual teaching,

and classroom adaptation. Fourth, early childhood centres should be more effectively linked to health, nutrition, disability, and child protection services so that support for children is timely and coordinated. Fifth, stronger data systems are needed to identify excluded children and monitor whether policy commitments are producing real improvements in participation and learning.

At the broader African level, the findings of this paper suggest that inclusive early childhood education should be recognized as a key strategy for improving foundational learning and reducing long-term educational inequality. African education systems are unlikely to achieve equitable learning outcomes if large numbers of children continue to enter primary school without access to quality early learning opportunities. This means that governments and stakeholders across the continent should give greater attention to inclusive early childhood provision within education planning, budgeting, workforce development, and community-level implementation. Approaches that are affordable, multilingual, community-based, and adaptable to local realities are likely to be more sustainable than highly specialized models that depend on resources unavailable in many settings.

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