

Inclusive Education: Breaking Barriers for Learners with Disabilities

Waheed, Adekunle Olaiya

[0009-0002-6370-6353](tel:0009-0002-6370-6353)

Special Educator and Sign language Interpreter, Federal College of Education (Special), Oyo State,
Nigeria

Abstract

This paper explores the global landscape of inclusive education, focusing on the systemic barriers that hinder equitable participation for learners with disabilities. Grounded in international frameworks such as the 1994 Salamanca Statement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, the study emphasizes that inclusive education is a fundamental human right and a driver of sustainable development. Through a comparative analysis of three distinct national contexts—Nigeria, India, and the United States—the article illustrates the varied implementation of inclusive practices. Nigeria and India represent developing and middle-income contexts where robust policy frameworks, such as Nigeria’s Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and India’s Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), exist but face significant challenges. These include infrastructural deficiencies, deep-seated socio-cultural stigma, and a lack of trained educators. In contrast, the United States offers lessons in institutionalizing inclusion through established legal mandates like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), though it continues to navigate internal inequities related to socioeconomic status.

The paper identifies key structural, pedagogical, and economic barriers while proposing multi-dimensional strategies for reform. Recommendations include aligning national policies with global mandates, investing in assistive technologies and accessible infrastructure, and providing comprehensive teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. Ultimately, the study argues that breaking these barriers is essential for fostering social justice and ensuring that learners with disabilities can contribute fully to national and global development.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Learners with Disabilities, Human Rights, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), UNCRPD, Salamanca Statement, Assistive Technology, Comparative Education, Nigeria, India, USA.

Introduction

Education has long been recognized as both a fundamental human right and a key driver of social and economic development. For centuries, however, education systems across the world largely marginalized or excluded children with disabilities, often relegating them to segregated institutions or denying them formal education altogether. The modern movement toward inclusive education emerged in response to these inequities, with increasing recognition that quality education should be accessible to all learners, regardless of disability status. Inclusive education is defined as the practice of educating learners with and without disabilities in the same classrooms, where diversity is valued and appropriate supports are provided to ensure equitable participation (Ainscow, 2020). This vision represents a significant paradigm shift from exclusion and segregation to participation and equality.

The global momentum for inclusive education gained prominence in the late 20th century. One of the most influential milestones was the 1994 Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, adopted by representatives of 92 governments and 25 international organizations. The statement declared that “regular schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society, and achieving education for all” (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix). The Salamanca principles highlighted not only the rights of learners with disabilities but also the societal benefits of inclusion.

Since Salamanca, inclusive education has been reinforced through a number of international frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), adopted in 2006, made a legally binding commitment to inclusive education, declaring in Article 24 that states parties must ensure “an inclusive education system at all levels” (United Nations, 2006). Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, further emphasized inclusive and equitable quality education. Specifically, **SDG 4** commits countries to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

These frameworks illustrate that inclusive education is not merely an educational issue, but a human rights and development imperative. However, despite international consensus, the

practical implementation of inclusive education varies widely across countries and regions. Developed countries such as the United States have established robust legal frameworks such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), while many developing nations, including Nigeria and India, continue to face significant structural, cultural, and resource-related challenges (Obiakor & Ofor, 2020). Thus, inclusive education remains a work in progress, with uneven achievements globally.

Why Breaking Barriers for Learners with Disabilities Matters

While policy frameworks provide an important foundation, the reality is that learners with disabilities still encounter multiple barriers to education. These barriers are structural, cultural, and attitudinal. Structurally, many schools, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, lack the physical infrastructure, assistive technologies, or trained personnel required to support inclusive classrooms. Culturally, stigmatization of disability often leads to exclusion, bullying, or lowered expectations for students with disabilities (Sharma & Salend, 2016). Attitudinally, teachers, parents, and policymakers may hold misconceptions about the capabilities of learners with disabilities, thereby perpetuating exclusion.

The consequences of these barriers are profound. According to the World Bank (2020), children with disabilities are twice as likely to be out of school compared to children without disabilities. UNESCO (2020) further estimates that 50% of children with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries are excluded from education altogether. Exclusion not only violates the right to education but also reinforces cycles of poverty and social marginalization. Without education, learners with disabilities face limited employment opportunities, reduced social mobility, and diminished participation in civic life.

Inclusive education, therefore, matters not just for the academic growth of learners with disabilities but also for their broader social and economic empowerment. It provides opportunities for learners to acquire skills, gain confidence, and become active members of society. Furthermore, inclusion benefits all learners, not just those with disabilities. Research demonstrates that inclusive classrooms foster empathy, social cohesion, and respect for diversity among all students (Ainscow, 2020; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In this way, inclusive education contributes to building more equitable and just societies.

Another critical reason for breaking barriers is the potential contribution of learners with disabilities to national development. Excluding millions of learners from education systems worldwide represents not only a human rights violation but also an economic cost. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019) reports that excluding persons with disabilities

from the labor market and education reduces global GDP by up to 7%. By contrast, inclusive education enhances human capital, promotes productivity, and strengthens national economies. Thus, ensuring the inclusion of learners with disabilities is essential not only for equity but also for sustainable development.

Finally, inclusive education is a moral obligation. It reflects the values of dignity, equality, and justice enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). By breaking barriers, societies affirm the inherent worth of all individuals and recognize diversity as a strength rather than a deficit.

Purpose and Scope of the Article

This article seeks to explore inclusive education through both global and national perspectives, focusing on how barriers can be broken to ensure equitable participation of learners with disabilities. Using Nigeria, India, and the United States as case studies, the article examines diverse contexts to illustrate the opportunities and challenges of inclusive education. These three countries were chosen for their distinct contexts:

- **Nigeria** represents a developing African country where policy frameworks for inclusive education exist but are often undermined by limited resources, cultural stigmatization, and implementation challenges (Adebisi et al., 2020).
- **India**, as a middle-income country with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, has made strides in legislating inclusive education through the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), yet still struggles with large-scale implementation and disparities between urban and rural areas (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2021).
- **The United States**, a high-income country, has a longer history of inclusive practices through federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). While it faces challenges such as funding inequities and disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, the U.S. offers lessons in institutionalizing inclusion (Turnbull et al., 2019).

By analyzing these three contexts, the article situates national experiences within the broader international frameworks of UNESCO, UNCRPD, and the SDGs. The comparative analysis highlights not only the barriers but also innovative strategies and best practices that can inform global efforts toward inclusion.

The article also adopts a multidimensional approach, examining inclusion through the lenses of policy, practice, and culture. It identifies barriers such as inadequate teacher training, policy gaps, lack of assistive technologies, and societal attitudes, while also proposing strategies to

overcome them. Particular attention is given to how inclusive education contributes to broader social goals, such as reducing inequalities, promoting human rights, and fostering sustainable development.

Ultimately, the purpose of this article is threefold:

1. To provide a global and comparative understanding of inclusive education, using Nigeria, India, and the U.S. as illustrative cases.
2. To highlight barriers that continue to impede the realization of inclusive education for learners with disabilities.
3. To suggest practical strategies and recommendations that can inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in advancing inclusive education worldwide.

Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education refers to the practice of ensuring that all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions, are provided equitable opportunities to learn in the same classroom settings. UNESCO (2020) defines inclusive education as a transformative process that “addresses and responds to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.” At its core, inclusive education is grounded in the principle that diversity is a normal and valuable aspect of human life, and schools should adapt to learners’ needs rather than expecting learners to conform to rigid systems.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), particularly Article 24, makes clear that inclusive education is not optional but a right, requiring states to establish inclusive systems at all levels (United Nations, 2006). The Salamanca Statement (1994) also emphasized that ordinary schools with inclusive orientations are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, fostering solidarity, and building inclusive societies.

Key principles of inclusive education include:

1. **Accessibility:** All learners should be able to physically and academically access educational environments.
2. **Equity:** Learners should receive fair treatment and the necessary support to succeed, recognizing that equality of opportunity may require differentiated strategies.
3. **Participation:** Inclusion involves not only physical presence in the classroom but also active engagement in learning and social interactions.
4. **Supportive Environment:** Schools must provide resources, trained personnel, and policies that accommodate diverse learners.

5. **Collaboration:** Inclusive education requires partnerships between teachers, parents, policymakers, and communities (Sharma & Loreman, 2019).

Benefits for Learners with Disabilities

Inclusive education benefits learners with disabilities in numerous ways. Academically, it ensures access to the same curriculum as peers, with appropriate modifications and support systems. Research shows that learners with disabilities placed in inclusive classrooms perform better academically and socially compared to those in segregated settings (Hehir et al., 2016). Exposure to general education curricula helps students develop higher-order skills, communication abilities, and adaptive strategies.

Socially, inclusion fosters a sense of belonging, reduces stigma, and enhances self-esteem. When learners with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms, they are less likely to internalize feelings of inferiority and more likely to form meaningful relationships. Inclusive environments also create opportunities for peer support, where classmates collaborate and learn from one another (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

From a developmental perspective, inclusion promotes independence and prepares learners for participation in wider society. It aligns with the idea that education should not only transmit knowledge but also cultivate skills for living in diverse communities.

Inclusive Pedagogy

A critical component of inclusive education is the pedagogy that drives classroom practice. Inclusive pedagogy shifts the focus from reactive responses to diversity toward proactive lesson design that anticipates differences among learners. This involves differentiated instruction, flexible teaching strategies, and the integration of assistive technologies to ensure meaningful participation for all students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Teachers are central to this process, as their attitudes, skills, and preparedness directly shape the success of inclusive classrooms. Consequently, sustained professional development and ongoing support remain vital for embedding inclusive practices effectively.

Globally, three major frameworks have shaped the inclusive education movement: UNESCO's Salamanca Statement, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The Salamanca Statement (1994) remains a landmark in advocating for education that accommodates all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds. Building on the earlier Education for All (EFA) agenda, it moved the global discourse from segregated special education to integration within mainstream schools (UNESCO, 1994). Salamanca underlined education as

a human right and stressed flexibility in teaching, curriculum adaptation, and teacher preparation. Recent studies affirm its ongoing influence, particularly in low- and middle-income countries still developing inclusive education systems (Pather & Nxumalo, 2022; Miles & Singal, 2019). UNESCO's advocacy has also broadened the notion of inclusion to encompass all learners, not only those with disabilities.

The UNCRPD (2006) advanced these ideas further by embedding inclusive education within a legally binding international treaty. Article 24 requires states to ensure inclusive education at all levels and to provide reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities (United Nations, 2006). Unlike Salamanca's aspirational tone, the UNCRPD enforces accountability under international law. It reframed disability from a medical or charity concern to a rights-based issue (Degener, 2019). This framework has significantly influenced national policies, such as Nigeria's Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). However, despite widespread ratification, challenges remain in translating these commitments into practice, particularly in resource-limited contexts where infrastructure, funding, and societal attitudes hinder progress (Moriña, 2020; Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2022). Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, consolidated earlier efforts by explicitly committing countries to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015, p. 17). SDG 4's scope extends beyond disability to address inclusion based on gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Specific targets, such as 4.5 and 4.a, emphasize eliminating disparities and ensuring accessible facilities. Nonetheless, monitoring reports reveal uneven progress. High-income countries have largely integrated inclusive education into policy and practice, while low- and middle-income countries continue to struggle with funding gaps, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate infrastructure (UNESCO, 2021). For example, Nigeria and India have both aligned their policies with SDG 4 yet still face high numbers of out-of-school children with disabilities (World Bank, 2020). By contrast, the United States has leveraged existing legislation, particularly IDEA, to align with SDG 4, though issues of equity among minority groups persist (Kurth & Morningstar, 2020).

Inclusive Education in Practice

Inclusive education has gained momentum worldwide as countries seek to provide equal access to quality education for all learners, particularly those with disabilities. The experiences of Nigeria, India, and the United States illustrate the diversity of approaches, achievements, and challenges in implementing inclusive education policies and practices.

In Nigeria, there has been notable progress at the policy level. The National Policy on Education (2013) and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) legally recognize the right of learners with disabilities to access education. These frameworks reflect global commitments under the UNCRPD and SDG 4. Moreover, pilot inclusive schools and teacher training programs initiated by both government and non-governmental organizations demonstrate efforts to put policy into practice (Adebisi et al., 2020). However, implementation remains uneven. Public schools often lack accessible infrastructure, assistive technology, and adequately trained teachers, while cultural stigma and poverty further hinder participation (Omede & Bakare, 2021; Eleweke & Ebenso, 2016). Consequently, the gap between Nigeria's inclusive education aspirations and actual classroom realities remains wide.

India offers another case of progress mixed with persistent obstacles. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) expanded recognized disability categories and required both public and private schools to provide inclusive education and reasonable accommodations. Major programs such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the Samagra Shiksha Scheme have improved enrollment rates, especially in urban centers, by providing resources for assistive devices, teacher training, and specialized support services (Government of India, 2016; Singal et al., 2019). Yet challenges are evident in rural areas, where infrastructure is weak and teacher preparedness is inadequate. Social stigma also continues to affect acceptance of inclusive education, with many families preferring special schools for their children (Sharma & Das, 2021). Although India has advanced considerably in expanding access, disparities in quality and social attitudes remain barriers to full inclusion.

By contrast, the United States represents one of the most developed examples of inclusive education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), first passed in 1975 and reauthorized in 2004, guarantees free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment for children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This legal framework mandates individualized education plans (IEPs) and ensures the provision of assistive technologies, specialized services, and classroom accommodations. Inclusive practices are reinforced by teacher preparation programs, advocacy networks, and continuous monitoring. Best practices such as co-teaching models, universal design for learning (UDL), and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) further strengthen inclusion (Kurth & Morningstar, 2020). Despite this progress, inequities persist, particularly for learners from minority or low-income backgrounds. Nonetheless, the U.S. provides valuable lessons on the role of strong

legislation, funding, professional development, and parental involvement in sustaining inclusive education.

Barriers to Inclusive Education

Infrastructural Barriers: Many schools, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, lack the physical facilities required for inclusion. Inaccessible classrooms, absence of ramps, poor lighting, and lack of Braille signage restrict learners with physical or sensory impairments. While policies often mandate accessibility, limited resources mean such standards are rarely met.

Pedagogical Barriers: Inclusive pedagogy requires teachers to anticipate learner diversity by using flexible strategies such as differentiated instruction and assistive technologies (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). However, most teachers are inadequately trained in inclusive methods. Teacher preparation programs often allocate little time to special needs education, leaving teachers ill-equipped to address diverse classrooms.

Socio-Cultural Barriers: Cultural stigma around disability remains a strong obstacle in many societies. In contexts like Nigeria and India, disability may still be seen as a curse or misfortune, discouraging families from sending children with disabilities to school (Omede & Bakare, 2021). Gender norms exacerbate exclusion, with girls with disabilities often doubly disadvantaged.

Economic Barriers: Inclusive education requires investments in infrastructure, assistive devices, and specialized support. In low-resource settings, governments struggle to meet these costs, while families face expenses related to transportation, medical care, or learning aids. Poverty often forces families to prioritize immediate survival over schooling. Even in wealthier countries like the U.S., unequal funding models limit access in disadvantaged communities (Kurth & Morningstar, 2020).

Policy and Implementation Barriers: Although many countries have strong legal frameworks, such as Nigeria's Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities Act (2018) and India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), policies often remain aspirational. Weak enforcement, poor coordination between ministries, and lack of monitoring mechanisms hinder effective implementation.

Breaking Barriers: Strategies and Interventions

1. Policy Strengthening and Enforcement

Strong policies are the foundation of inclusive education. Governments need to not only adopt but also enforce laws that guarantee the rights of learners with disabilities. This includes aligning national legislation with global frameworks such as the UNCRPD and SDG 4. Effective

enforcement ensures that schools are held accountable for providing accessible facilities, appropriate curricula, and equal opportunities.

2. Teacher Training and Professional Development

Teachers are at the heart of inclusion. Comprehensive pre-service and in-service training programs should equip educators with skills to handle diverse learning needs, apply differentiated instruction, and use assistive technologies. Continuous professional development, supported by peer learning networks, ensures that teachers remain competent in inclusive practices.

3. Investment in Infrastructure and Assistive Technology

Physical accessibility remains a major barrier. Governments and schools must invest in ramps, accessible classrooms, learning aids, and digital assistive technologies such as screen readers or speech-to-text software. Affordable and context-specific technology solutions can help bridge learning gaps, especially in low-resource countries.

4. Community Engagement and Awareness

Cultural and societal attitudes often reinforce exclusion. Community sensitization campaigns, parent-teacher partnerships, and the involvement of civil society organizations can help shift mindsets. Promoting stories of success and role models with disabilities also encourages acceptance and challenges stereotypes.

5. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Data-Driven Decision Making

Effective implementation requires evidence. Governments and institutions should collect disaggregated data on enrollment, performance, and retention of learners with disabilities. Regular monitoring and evaluation provide insights into what strategies are working and where gaps remain, ensuring resources are targeted effectively.

Conclusion

Inclusive education is no longer a choice but a global commitment rooted in human rights and sustainable development. From the Salamanca Statement to the UNCRPD and SDG 4, the international community has emphasized the importance of education that welcomes all learners, regardless of ability. The case studies of Nigeria, India, and the USA highlight both progress and persistent challenges. While policies exist in all three countries, gaps remain in implementation, teacher preparedness, infrastructure, and societal attitudes. The USA demonstrates stronger systems of enforcement and teacher support, India shows promising legislative frameworks, and Nigeria reflects the struggles of low-resource contexts where cultural and infrastructural barriers are significant. A comparative view makes it clear that

breaking barriers requires a multi-dimensional approach that integrates policy, practice, and community engagement.

Recommendations

For Policymakers:

- Align national policies with global frameworks (UNCRPD, SDG 4) and ensure strict enforcement.
- Allocate sufficient budgets for inclusive education infrastructure and teacher training.
- Develop monitoring systems to track progress and evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive education programs.

For Educators:

- Pursue continuous professional development in inclusive teaching methods and assistive technology use.
- Foster classroom cultures that value diversity and encourage peer support among students.
- Collaborate with parents and communities to reinforce inclusive values beyond the school setting.

For International Agencies:

- Provide technical assistance and funding support to low- and middle-income countries.
- Facilitate cross-country knowledge exchange on best practices in inclusive education.
- Strengthen global accountability mechanisms to ensure commitments translate into meaningful outcomes for learners with disabilities.

References

1. Adebisi, R. O., Jerry, J. E., Rasaki, S. A., & Igwe, G. C. (2020). Disability management and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018 in Nigeria. *African Journal of Disability*, 9(1), Article 691. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v9i0.691>
2. Okoye, C. C. (2024). Assistive technology and inclusion of children with disabilities in Nigeria. *African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research*, 7(3), 218–228. <https://doi.org/10.52589/AJSSHR-JPKFGOEW>
3. Degener, T. (2019). A human rights model of disability. In V. Della Fina, R. Cera, & G. Palmisano (Eds.), *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (pp. 41–59). Springer.

4. Kurth, J., & Morningstar, M. E. (2020). Inclusive education: Legal and policy frameworks. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 31(3), 133–141. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1044207320919461>
5. Long, T., & Guo, J. (2023). Moving beyond inclusion to belonging: Development for children with disabilities. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(20), 6907. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20206907>
6. Rather, M. A., et al. (2025). Role of assistive and adaptive technologies in promoting inclusive education. *Journal of Educational Technology & Digital Education*, Article 1458. Available at <https://aquila.usm.edu>
7. Samaniego López, M. V., Orrego Riofrío, M. C., Barriga-Fray, S. F., & Paz Viteri, B. S. (2025). Technologies in inclusive education: Solution or challenge? A systematic review. *Education Sciences*, 15(6), Article 715. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15060715>
8. Sharma, U., & Das, A. (2021). Inclusive education in India: Status and challenges. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 25(8), 920–935. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1624847>
9. Singal, N., Nanda, U., & Jeffery, R. (2019). Inclusive education in India: Policy perspectives and implementation challenges. *Oxford Review of Education*, 45(4), 475–493. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2019.1596076>
10. U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *A guide to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
11. UNESCO. (1994). *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. UNESCO.
12. United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. United Nations.
13. United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations.
14. World Bank. (2020). *World report on disability and education*. World Bank Publications.