



Does Inclusive Education Actually Matter in Fostering Sustainability and Building Capacity among Diverse Learners?

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ABSTRACT: Inclusive education has been identified as a major pathway for breaking barriers to quality education for all, despite the challenges it faces in its implementation. One of the key drivers, if not the major driver, of sustainable development in every nation is human resources. To equip human resources to take up this responsibility, every individual should be given equal opportunity and access to quality education, irrespective of their learning needs. This paper discusses the role of inclusive education in advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, 10, and 8 to promote capacity building among diverse learners. Proponents of inclusive education argue that it promotes social relationships and community building, provides access and unconditional acceptance, creates goals based on individual ability and needs, fosters motivation through peer connections, supports parent involvement, and promotes an atmosphere of respect and belonging for every child. On the other hand, it was revealed that, as welcoming as it is, inclusive education is bedeviled by critical challenges such as a lack of teacher training in inclusive education, inadequate facilities and learning materials, limited support services, a rigid curriculum structure, inadequate infrastructure, and policy barriers. This paper argues that, despite these challenges, inclusive education implementation matters for achieving the SDGs 4, 5, 10, and 8, which, in turn, would promote capacity building among diverse learners towards a purposeful life in society.

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INTRODUCTION

Education, no doubt, is a fundamental human right. Every individual, regardless of ability or status, should have access to quality education without segregation or discrimination. One of the policies adopted in the Salamanca Declaration and Framework is the Zero Reject Policy, which states that no child should be denied enrolment in any regular school on account of disability. Nigeria adopted inclusive education because it was part of the Congress that gave birth to the Policy. To ensure that every child, irrespective of disability or status, has access to quality education, there is a need for effective inclusive education practices in Nigeria. Through inclusive education practices, every child would not only learn in the same environment as their peers but would also be exposed to experiences through a modified curriculum and the provision of special learning needs that will help them develop holistically in their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains for capacity building and effective functioning in society. The effective functioning of every child in society will support a collective effort to develop society. This aligns with the assertion that no nation can develop beyond the education of its citizens. This paper therefore examines the role of inclusive education in advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4, 5, 10, and 8 to promote capacity-building among diverse learners. The paper covered the following sections: Definition of Concepts; The Role of Inclusive Education in Capacity Building for Sustainable Development; Inclusive Education and the SDGs; Strategies for Promoting Inclusive Education for Capacity Building and Sustainable Development; Benefits of Inclusive Education; Challenges and Limitations of Inclusive Education; and Conclusion.

Definition of Concepts

1. Capacity Building

Capacity building, an investment in human capital, institutions, and practices, is a process that aims to improve a person, group, organization, or system's ability to meet objectives or perform better. The United Nations defined it as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world (Whitelock, 2024). This implies that building capacity requires ongoing training and retraining for individuals, organizations, systems, or institutions to improve their performance, support growth, enable adaptation, and remain relevant in a fast-changing, technology-driven world. The United Nations further asserts that capacity building enables individuals to develop, improve, and sharpen their skills to stay afloat amid advancing, evolving changes in the world. Whitelock (2024), quoting the United Nations (nd), stated that an essential ingredient in capacity building is transformation generated and sustained over time from within; this transformation goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes.

2. Sustainable Development

Sustainable development (SD) as a concept has been widely interpreted, critiqued, and updated to the present day to meet humanity's evolving demands in the evolving world. Its definition underscores it as an enduring improvement or development that continues to better any given society, institution, or organization. SD is construed as the development that meets the needs of the present generation without hindering succeeding generations' ability to meet theirs (Mensah, 2019). Sustainable development is concerned with improving the living and life conditions of humans in any given society without compromising the biosphere's ability to regulate, transform, and evolve (Makhrout and Ait Hbib, 2023). The key driver of sustainable development is people who make up a given society, whose responsibility is to ensure that transformation continues without compromise to future generations' ability to key in and make their impact to suit their needs. In other words, development requires continuity to become sustainable.

3. Inclusive Education

Inclusive education (IE) could be defined as the educational practice that is open to all, considering their different learning abilities while addressing them accordingly. It removes all barriers to accessing quality education due to disabilities or individual differences in learning needs. Anierobi, Amaonye and Apiti (2024) construed that IE is based on the premise that every child, despite status or ability level, deserves equal opportunities to access quality education in mainstreamed schools. Deductively, IE makes room for every learner, enabling them to enjoy their fundamental human right. Nwogbo, Nwosu, and Anierobi (2023) emphasized that inclusive education not only removes barriers to accessing quality education but also makes every learner feel valued and accepted, regardless of their diverse learning needs. By implication, no child should be out of school on account of denial of admission into mainstream schools on account of disability. This, no doubt, is a sure way to promote quality education and capacity building toward sustainable development, because the collective efforts of every citizen count if the nation is to make lasting progress.

4. What SDG is with emphasis on Nos 4, 5, 8 and 10

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS) are a global agenda that replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000-2015, which aimed to eradicate poverty in all its ramifications, deal with climate change, and successfully combat inequalities by 2030 (Mahdi, Fernando & Abdalla, 2022). in other words, these goals call for zero hunger, no poverty, good health and wellbeing of people, quality education, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, affordable and clean energy, peace, justice and strong institutions, climate action, life on land, industry, innovation and infrastructure, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, life below water, responsible consumption and production. The emphasis of this paper is on SDG 4 (quality education), SDG5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reduced inequality) with a ripple effect on SDG8 (decent work and economic growth).

5. Diverse Learners

The learner is the person who receives curricular instruction and experiences from the teacher. Learners are the central focus and the reason for designing and organizing learning experiences. Apparently, without them, no learning would be initiated or achieved. Many factors affect how learners learn, such as their personality, age, level of development, and state of development. Ebenebe, Unachukwu and Nwosu (2021) noted that the learner's physical and mental health status are key determinants of their learning and learning outcomes. By implication, different learners learn differently on account of their physical and developmental status. These learners, therefore, have different learning needs which could be met through inclusive education and learning. In other words, inclusive education bridges the gap in learning needs by providing specialized learning supports that remove barriers to learning for students.

Importance of Inclusive Education in Achieving the SDGs

Inclusive education is critical to achieving the SDGs, especially SDGs 4, 5, 8, and 10, through capacity-building for sustainable development. These roles are discussed one after the other, as follows:

1. **Importance of Inclusive Education in Achieving SDG4:** One of the aims of inclusive education is to provide every child with access to quality education, irrespective of their background, ethnicity, race, colour, social or physical status, or learning needs. The right to quality education, as promoted by SDG 4, is a fundamental human right. Inclusive education removes every barrier to accessing quality education and provides for the acceptance of every child into any mainstream

school of choice. Inclusive education ensures access to quality education by not only permitting admission of every child but also ensuring that every child's learning needs are met. Before the adoption of inclusive education at the Salamanca Congress, well attended by international bodies, nations including Nigeria, in June 1994, most children were denied admission into mainstream schools on account of their status. More worrisome is the inhumane treatment, stigmatization and segregation received by some special learning needs children by family members, significant others, neighbours and society on account of their disabilities. Those with minor disabilities who could have coped in integrated / mainstreamed schools were dumped in special schools and subjected to emotional torture and neglect. The adoption of inclusive education through its Zero Reject Policy paved the way for granting these children access to quality education, enabling them to contribute to the progress of the society they live in through capacity-building received in schools. Emordi and Olufemi (2023) reported that achieving SDG4 is paramount for enhancing social and economic development through quality education, without neglecting any child. Sharing a similar perspective, a study by Kusimo and Chidozie (2019) asserted that for meaningful development to occur, every child (with or without a disability) should have access to quality education.

2. **Importance of Inclusive Education in Achieving SDG5:** SDG5 advocates for gender equality, which inclusive education promotes. This advocacy calls for equal rights and opportunities for both men and women. In addition to equal rights and opportunities, women and girls in every society must live their lives free of violence, intimidation and discrimination. Gender equality strives for women's empowerment and requires action to eliminate the causes of discrimination against women in private and public spheres. Gender discrimination is one of the barriers to girls' education, which is a tool for empowerment and capacity building. Ezekwu (2025) posited that patriarchal societies often restrict the female child from accessing resources, formal education and freedom of mobility due to cultural biases. This has put the girl child at a disadvantage against her male counterpart. Such societies pride themselves on relegating the girl-child to the background, believing that women are seen, not heard. However, the adoption of inclusive education has been a game-changer for the girl-child, providing the opportunity to access quality education for capacity building and empowerment without any form of discrimination. Empowering women through capacity-building in inclusive education will give them equal and balanced opportunities to contribute to the sustainable development of society. Inclusive education breaks gender inequality barriers by embracing gender equality, disability and social inclusion in its practice (Ibda et al, 2024).
3. **Importance of Inclusive Education in Achieving SDG8:** The aim of every citizen is to settle for decent work, which will contribute to both personal, family and society's economic growth. Education is construed as the key to success and a tool for national development. No nation can rise or develop beyond the capacity building of its citizens. Education prepares and equips every child with the requisite competence and skills for decent work, whether white-collar, blue-collar or self-employment, all of which contribute to the economic growth of the individual, the family and the society at large.
4. **Importance of Inclusive Education in Achieving SDG10:** One of the aims of inclusive education is to reduce inequalities in all its ramifications, which aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 10. The practice of inclusive education ensures that every facet of the environment obtainable in the public space, such as at homes, the neighbourhood, recreation centres, worship centres and schools, is designed, structured and operated in such a way that would permit special needs individuals' opportunities to function maximally with or without pronounced assistance. This practice, no doubt, fights inequalities among children and breeds social cohesion among them, irrespective of their special needs condition. According to Nwogbo, Nwosu and Anierobi (2023), inclusivity creates an equal learning environment with equal opportunities to participate in school, class, and extracurricular activities without any form of segregation, by removing every barrier that could perpetuate inequality. Equal opportunities provided by inclusive education are an antidote to inequalities, which SDG10 fights.

The Role of Inclusive Education in Capacity Building for Sustainable Development

Inclusive education plays a vital role in promoting capacity-building among children with diverse learning needs toward achieving sustainable development in society. Education delivers knowledge that liberates from illiteracy and empowers for self-reliance and self-actualization, making one effective in the workforce. Inclusive education fosters a supportive learning environment that takes cognizance of diverse students' learning needs through equitable access to quality education. Inclusive education plays an important role in the capacity building of individual learners through achieving the following:

1. **Promoting Social Skills:** Social skills are essential for capacity-building among diverse learners. Inclusive education provides children with or without disabilities the opportunity to acquire social skills, such as communication, decision-making, and behaviour management, which enable them to integrate and interact freely with each other without any form of segregation and to develop intellectually (Sakellariou, Strati & Anagnostopoulou, 2019). Socialization with peers in school is an avenue for self-development through peer-tutoring and collaborative learning, which helps promote self-esteem and critical thinking necessary for lifelong success. Diverse learners also learn to develop empathy, a sense of belonging, mutual understanding and acceptance among themselves, thereby reducing inequality and promoting gender equity.

2. **Empowering Students with Disabilities:** Capacity building among learners is possible through education-based empowerment. Inclusive education empowers students with the necessary knowledge and technical know-how to secure decent work and contribute to the economic growth of society. Inclusive education includes sheltered workshops where students with disabilities can acquire trade and vocational skills for self-employment (Varkas, 2022). IE also prepares and equips many of the learners in different fields for other workforces, such as government or non-governmental agencies, towards the economic growth of the individual and that of the society. Without adaptive, innovative teaching methods, students with disabilities might not be adequately empowered to secure decent work in society. Consequently, teaching methods and curricula should be adapted and improved to meet the educational needs of diverse learners for adequate empowerment and effective functioning in their workplaces and society.
3. **Developing Competencies:** Inclusive education provides diverse learners with opportunities to develop competencies for effective functioning in society. Education builds and shapes learners. Through quality education, learners develop appropriate competencies, preparing them to fit into the workforce and contribute positively to the economic growth of society.

Benefits of Inclusion Education

Inclusive education benefits all students by fostering a more supportive and equitable learning environment that promotes diversity and acceptance. Jardinez and Natividad (2024) construe that inclusive education fosters social relationships, provides access and acceptance, and creates goals based on individual abilities and needs. It also fosters motivation through peer connection and parent involvement and promotes an atmosphere of respect and belonging for every child. On the other hand, the United Nations Toolkit of Disability (n.d.) (Module 14) asserts that the educational inclusion of students with diverse needs is the gateway to full participation in society and promotes inclusive and tolerant societies. Thus, Alberta Education (2021) emphasizes that inclusive education is paramount for promoting equal opportunities for all learners and for fostering the acceptance of responsibility by all children and students. Similarly, Jeri and Mauka (2025) reported that inclusive settings foster a sense of belonging and resilience among students with disabilities while on the other hand, bolster empathy and social cohesion among students without disabilities. Holzer and Mozer Opitz (2025) showed that inclusive education provides students with special education needs the opportunity to achieve greater academic progress. Sharing similar perspective, Sikhangezile Makwelo et al (2025) reported that students with disabilities enjoy improved academic performance in inclusive setting.

Challenges of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is an education that emphasizes the importance of embracing diversity and promoting equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of their disabilities. Morina (2017) sees it as an educational strategy that supports settings where each student may study and feel appreciated as a member of the wider society. Even though inclusive education is aimed at ensuring equal opportunities, involvement, engagement, and achievement for all students to access education, several challenges militate against it. These challenges include the following: lack of teacher training in inclusive education, inadequate facilities and learning materials, limited support services, rigid curriculum structure, inadequate infrastructure, social integration and peer relationships, parental involvement and support, legal policies and policy barriers, and others.

The lack of teacher training in inclusive education is a challenge to its implementation. This is obvious because teachers are the key players of the teaching and learning process, and therefore, in dealing with students with disabilities, the inability to provide trained teachers will probably bring a serious obstacle to the success in education of the students with special needs (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018; Materechera, 2020). Given that teachers lack the fundamental understanding and capacity required to accommodate the different requirements of students with disabilities, they will surely encounter difficulties in establishing an inclusive learning environment and delivering support for such students. In so doing, the phenomenon may lead to the students' inability to fully realize their potential both academically and otherwise. Therefore, Zagona, Kurth, and MacFarland (2017) opined that numerous educators are unfamiliar with the teaching approach of inclusive education, and for this reason, professional training should be a must to choose the best pedagogies rather than depending on just personal experiences. Again, Materechera (2020) maintained that a lack of time and large class sizes prevent many educators from properly implementing educational ideas.

Another challenge is the lack of adequate facilities and learning materials. In modern school days, there is evidence of a lack of facilities and learning resources that could respond to the conditions of students with disabilities. In fact, many schools are yet to set up to serve students with disabilities. However, physical challenges can have an impact on these students, for instance, a non-inclusive sports program, inadequately constructed classrooms, inaccessible facilities such as stairs without ramps, and a lack of adaptive equipment such as braille for reading and translators for sign language and screen readers. This underscores the need for educational institutions to adopt a comprehensive strategy to eliminate the physical barriers and to ensure a welcoming educational setting that will enable every student to have an equitable chance to succeed.

Further, social integration and peer relationships are also identified as one of the challenges of inclusive education. The fact is that it is very important to acknowledge that, within inclusive education, some students with special needs may encounter peer rejection,

which will inevitably affect their social conduct and self-perception. As Chen, Huang, Liu, and Wang (2022) rightly put, the act of this rejection may have negative consequences on the students' self-esteem and may result in a decrease in their self-confidence, and may also interfere with their social growth, therefore, making it hard for them to build connections with their peers and grades. Consequently, most of these students with special needs may face bullying because of their condition, which most of the time induces feelings of loneliness and isolation and often leads to increased stress and anxiety among the group. However, Coelho (2019) in a study revealed that the idea of inclusive education may not always be suited for some students, especially those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Another challenge of inclusive education is parental involvement and support. Most often, parents of children with disabilities have a negative perception of the idea of joining students with disabilities with those without disabilities because of the concern they have about the potential discrimination based on their child's conditions. Meanwhile, such negative parent perceptions can hinder their willingness to embrace inclusive education initiatives and, at the same time, prioritize their child's emotional well-being and social acceptance (Domenech & Moliner, 2014). In this case, engaging parents and caregivers of students with special needs as partners in the inclusive education process is essential to success. Jardinez and Natividad (2024) found that aligning curriculum with inclusive education requires diverse communities, including parents, families, and educators, to understand the unique needs of students with special needs.

A rigid curriculum structure is another challenge to inclusive education. Challenges posed by an inflexible or static curriculum that does not allow for testing, or the use of different teaching methods can be a huge barrier to inclusion. Therefore, a study plan that does not use different learning styles hampers the school experience for all students, even those who are not conventionally perceived as having special needs. Schieffter, Vasquez, Chini, and James (2019) affirmed that implementing universal design for learning (UDL) in higher education institutions can effectively reduce the challenges faced by students with disabilities in STEM training. Again, Schieffter et al. (2019) opined that constructing classrooms that are readily accessible to all students should be a major focus of educational programs.

Environmental barriers can include doors, passageways, stairs, ramps, and spare-time areas. These can create an obstacle for some students to simply enter the school building or classroom; however, UNICEF (2017) maintains that for inclusive education to be fully developed, there must be an inclusive education environment in which the whole education system is transformed.

Funding is the biggest challenge; adequate funding is a requirement for inclusion, yet it is exceptional. Schools frequently lack adequate amenities, qualified and properly trained teachers and other staff members, educational equipment, and all-purpose support. Due to a lack of funds, modern schools are experiencing poor infrastructure, which is one of the most important aspects of institutions. However, inadequate infrastructure is an obvious challenging obstacle to inclusive education; students with physical disabilities are ordinary to attend schools that are not accessible to them (Brown, 2018). In poor school systems, particularly those in rural areas, rundown, poorly cared-for buildings, classrooms, and so on can limit ease of access. Some of these amenities are unsafe or unhealthy for both students with special needs and their peers. Many schools lack the facilities to provide adequate housing for students with special needs, and local governments lack either the funds or the resolve to provide financial assistance.

CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that inclusive education matters in fostering sustainability and building capacity among diverse learners by achieving access to quality education (SDG4), promoting gender equality (SDG5), and reducing inequality (SDG10) for decent work and economic growth (SDG8). By this, every individual, irrespective of their learning styles and needs, is empowered through quality education to achieve self-reliance and effective functioning in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the importance of inclusive education in achieving SDGs 4, 5, 8 & 10, and the glaring challenges of the implementation of IE to the fullest in Nigeria, stakeholders of education such as the government, policy makers, teachers and the community leaders are called to join hands together to ensure that inclusive education is fully funded and adopted to fight illiteracy, inequality, discrimination. It is given that if every child receives quality education, they will be empowered and prepared for a functional and effective life in society. They will no doubt contribute their quota to the development of society.

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