

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE SUSTAINABILITY: RETHINKING VALUES IN NIGERIAN SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

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Abstract

Inclusive education has emerged as a crucial aspect of sustainable development, especially in developing countries like Nigeria, where social inequalities still hinder access to education for students with disabilities. The idea of inclusive sustainability highlights the importance of weaving ethical principles, social justice, and human dignity into educational policies and practices. This paper delves into philosophical viewpoints on inclusive sustainability and investigates how transforming values can enhance special needs education in Nigeria. By drawing on philosophical traditions such as humanism, the capability approach, social justice theory, and African communitarian ethics, the study examines how educational values influence inclusive teaching methods. Through qualitative philosophical analysis and a literature review, it argues that achieving sustainable inclusive education necessitates a move away from exclusionary efficiency models towards ethical frameworks that prioritize dignity, equity, and shared responsibility. The paper wraps up by suggesting that re-evaluating educational values through philosophical contemplation can help foster sustainable and inclusive educational systems that effectively meet the diverse needs of learners with disabilities in Nigeria.

Keywords: Inclusive education, sustainability, philosophy of education, social justice, and special needs education, Nigeria

Introduction

Education is a vivacious force in nurturing equality, social growth, and sustainable communities. Over the past few decades, the concept of inclusive education has gained worldwide attention as a means to ensure that every learner, including those with

disabilities, has fair access to education. International agreements, like the Salamanca Statement on Inclusive Education highlight, the importance of schools being welcoming to all children, no matter their physical, intellectual, or social circumstances (UNESCO, 1994). Inclusive education is closely tied to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to provide inclusive and equitable quality education for everyone (United Nations, 2015). Many scholars believe that inclusive education is a key player in promoting social justice by tackling educational disparities and making sure that marginalized groups have access to learning opportunities (Ainscow, 2020).

In Nigeria, there has been a surge in efforts to put inclusive education into practice through policies like the National Policy on Education and the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act of 2018. However, challenges such as a lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and negative societal attitudes towards disability still pose significant barriers to effective implementation (Lazarus & Ajibade, 2012). On top of these structural issues, the underlying beliefs about human capability, productivity, and what it means to succeed in education also shape inclusive practices. Educational systems that focus on competition, standardized testing, and efficiency often leave learners with disabilities on the sidelines. Therefore, to truly embrace inclusive education, we need not only policy changes but also a deep reflection on the values that drive our educational systems. This paper will delve into philosophical viewpoints on inclusive sustainability and explore how transforming values can enhance special needs education in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is that aspect of education which takes care of all persons in learning process, especially the impaired or disabling learners by providing basic learning facilities that will enhance or assist them in their learning process (Ofoegbu, Nwebo, Umeadi, 2022). Inclusive education also refers to an educational approach in which learners with disabilities are educated alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms while receiving the necessary support for effective learning (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006). Inclusive education is grounded in the principle that education is a fundamental human right. It promotes equal participation in learning and emphasizes the removal of barriers that prevent learners from accessing educational opportunities (Slee, 2011). Scholars emphasize that inclusive education not only benefits learners with disabilities but also enhances social cohesion and mutual understanding among students (Florian, 2014).

Sustainability in Education

Sustainability in education involves developing educational systems that promote long-term social equity, environmental responsibility, and human development. Education for sustainable development encourages learners to develop the knowledge, values, and skills necessary to build equitable societies (Sterling, 2010).

Inclusive education contributes to sustainability by ensuring that marginalized groups are not excluded from opportunities for personal and social development.

Literature Review

Research on inclusive education highlights the importance of addressing both structural and cultural barriers to inclusion. Ainscow (2020) argues that inclusive education requires systemic reforms that address inequality within educational institutions. Studies also emphasize the role of teacher preparation in promoting inclusive education. Florian (2014), notes that teachers must develop inclusive pedagogical practices that support diverse learning needs. In the Nigerian context, Lazarus and Ajibade (2012) observe that inclusive education is still developing and faces numerous challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited funding, and insufficient teacher training. Additionally, societal attitudes toward disability influence the effectiveness of inclusive education. Oliver (1996) argues that disability should be understood not merely as a medical condition but as a social construct shaped by societal barriers. Despite these contributions, scholars have emphasized the need for deeper philosophical engagement with the ethical foundations of inclusive education. Inclusive education is the continuous process of recognizing and valuing human diversity within educational systems by providing opportunities for children with diverse educational needs to access education and it is also the acceptance of diverse educational needs and the provision of opportunities for all to participate meaningfully in learning opportunities in ordinary classrooms (Engelbrecht Nel, & Tlale, 2015, Swart & Oswald, 2008, in Ofoegbu, Nwebo & Umeadi, 2022). Inclusive education is that aspect of education which takes care of all persons in learning process, especially the impaired or disabling learners by providing basic learning facilities that will enhance or assist them in their learning process (Ofoegbu, Nwebo & Umeadi, 2022)

Philosophical Foundations of Inclusive Sustainability

Humanistic Philosophy

Humanistic philosophy emphasizes the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being. In the philosophy of education, John Dewey argued that education should promote democratic participation and personal growth (Dewey, 1916). Human rights were thus initially believed to be natural rights of every individual and as such, those rights had a distinct anthropological quality (Ofoegbu, 2014). Humanistic educators believe that schools should nurture the individual potential of every learner rather than impose rigid standards of achievement. This perspective supports inclusive education because it recognizes the unique abilities and experiences of each learner.

Social Justice Theory

The concept of social justice provides an important philosophical foundation for inclusive education. John Rawls (1971) argued that social institutions should be organized in ways that benefit the least advantaged members of society. Applying Rawls's theory to education suggests that educational policies should prioritize learners who face systemic disadvantages, including learners with disabilities. Brian (1989) argues that justice requires impartiality and equal treatment. The same vain, Nagel (1991) supports the idea that justice must be justifiable to all rational persons. He emphasizes fairness as moral

requirements. This philosophic foundation makes it imperative for education stakeholders to take inclusive education seriously.

The Capability Approach

The capability approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes individuals' real opportunities to achieve well-being and participate in society. From this perspective, education should expand learners' capabilities rather than merely measure their academic performance. Inclusive education therefore requires removing barriers that limit the participation of learners with disabilities.

Ethics of Care

The ethics of care framework developed by Nel Noddings (2005) emphasizes the importance of empathy, relationships, and moral responsibility in education. According to Noddings, education should foster caring relationships between teachers and students. Inclusive education aligns with this perspective because it emphasizes supporting learners with diverse needs.

African Communitarian Philosophy

African philosophical traditions emphasize community, solidarity, and mutual responsibility. The concept of Ubuntu, widely discussed by scholars such as Mogobe Ramose (2002), expresses the idea that individuals exist through their relationships with others. This worldview emphasizes that communities have a moral responsibility to support vulnerable members. Inclusive education therefore reflects the communal values embedded in African societies.

Rethinking Educational Values in Nigerian Special Needs Education

From Competition to Equity

Educational systems often prioritize competition and standardized performance. However, such systems may disadvantage learners with disabilities. Inclusive sustainability requires educational frameworks that promote equity and recognize diverse forms of learning (Slee, 2011). For Ofoegbu (2025), inclusive education has become a global priority, aimed at ensuring that all students, regardless of their physical, intellectual, emotional, or social abilities, have access to equitable learning opportunities.

From Charity to Rights-Based Education

Historically, disability support was framed as charitable assistance. Contemporary inclusive education emphasizes that access to education is a fundamental human right (Oliver, 1996). Inclusive education is no longer a favour that is dished out to people with special needs. It is their rights to have equal access to education like any other abled body person in school environment. Ofoegbu (2026), in his lecture notes, says that inclusive education is one of the irremovable and unavoidable rights that people of special needs should enjoy, without restriction. The accessibility to school infrastructures in respect to special needs must be factored in erecting such.

From Segregation to Participation

Inclusive education promotes active participation of learners with disabilities in mainstream educational environments rather than segregated institutions (Ainscow et al., 2006). The success of inclusive education largely depends on teachers' abilities to create supportive, adaptive, and accessible learning environments (Ofoegbu, 2025). Ofoegbu (2022) delineates that the principle of prioritizing functional learning for all learners within the context of inclusive education practice, therefore it implies that all educational methodologies and deliveries (teaching and learning) must be such that they ensure effective learning and skill acquisition to the extent that learners (irrespective of intellectual and ability dispositions) are able to demonstrate expected learning outcomes effectively.

From Individual Responsibility to Collective Responsibility

African communitarian philosophy emphasizes collective responsibility in addressing social challenges. Inclusive education therefore requires collaboration among families, educators, policymakers, and communities (Ramose, 2002). Inclusive education is a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupils/students with diversity and seeing individual differences not as a problem but as an opportunity for enriching learning. Inclusive education involves the processes of increasing the participation of pupils in and reducing their exclusion from cultures, curricula and communities of the school. Its aim is to eliminate exclusion that is a consequence of negative attitude (Ofoegbu, Nwebo & Umeadi, 2022)

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical research design based on conceptual analysis and literature review.

The research involved:

Analysis of philosophical theories related to inclusion and sustainability

Review of scholarly literature on inclusive education

Synthesis of philosophical perspectives to develop a framework for inclusive sustainability

This approach enables critical examination of the ethical assumptions underlying educational policies and practices.

Discussion

The analysis suggests that inclusive sustainability requires both philosophical reflection and structural reform. Humanistic philosophy emphasizes the dignity of every learner, while social justice theory highlights the need to address inequalities within educational systems. The capability approach further emphasizes the importance of expanding opportunities for learners with disabilities. African communitarian philosophy reinforces the ethical obligation of communities to support vulnerable members. Together, these philosophical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding inclusive sustainability in Nigerian special needs education.

Conclusion

Inclusive sustainability in Nigerian special needs education requires a fundamental transformation in the philosophical values guiding educational systems. Policies alone cannot achieve meaningful inclusion without ethical commitments to dignity, equality, and justice. Philosophical frameworks such as humanism, social justice theory, the capability approach, ethics of care, and African communitarian philosophy provide valuable foundations for inclusive education. By integrating these perspectives into educational policy and practice, Nigeria can develop more inclusive and sustainable educational systems capable of addressing the diverse needs of all learners.

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