

Reframing Inclusive Education through Collaboration: Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners

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Abstract:

Inclusive education is increasingly recognised as a global imperative, yet in many low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria, progress has been constrained by persistent systemic barriers. The purpose of this study is to reframe inclusive education in Nigeria through collaboration, positioning it as the central mechanism for bridging the gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Specifically, the research aims to identify systemic barriers, provide a theoretical rationale for collaboration, and propose a conceptual framework for multi-level implementation. A qualitative, conceptual research design was employed, drawing on a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and credible grey sources. The analysis was guided by Constructivist Learning Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and Universal Design for Learning, and findings were synthesised through thematic analysis. Findings indicate that exclusion emerges from the interplay of fragmented governance, infrastructural neglect, limited pedagogical capacity, and entrenched cultural stigma. The study argues that collaboration across ministries, schools, families, and communities is not optional but essential, and it proposes five domains of collaborative strategies supported by a multi-level implementation pathway. The conclusion drawn is that collaboration across ministries, schools, families, and civil society is not peripheral but essential. The study's main contribution lies in proposing an integrated framework of five collaborative strategies and a multi-level pathway that can guide both policy and practice. By advancing collaboration as the organising principle of inclusion, the research offers a roadmap for systemic, sustainable reform.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Collaboration, Diverse Learners, Policy-Practice Gap, Teacher Preparedness, Socio-Cultural Barriers

Abstrak:

Pendidikan inklusif semakin diakui sebagai keharusan global, namun di banyak negara berpenghasilan rendah dan menengah seperti Nigeria, kemajuannya terhambat oleh hambatan sistemik yang terus-menerus. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk membingkai ulang pendidikan inklusif di Nigeria melalui kolaborasi, memosisikannya sebagai mekanisme utama untuk menjembatani kesenjangan antara aspirasi kebijakan dan realitas kelas. Secara khusus, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi hambatan sistemik, memberikan rasional teoritis untuk kolaborasi, dan mengusulkan kerangka kerja konseptual untuk implementasi multi-level. Desain penelitian kualitatif dan konseptual digunakan, berdasarkan tinjauan sistematis literatur yang ditinjau sejawat, dokumen kebijakan, dan sumber non-akademik yang kredibel. Analisis ini dipandu oleh Teori Pembelajaran Konstruktivis, Model Sosial Disabilitas, dan Desain Universal untuk Pembelajaran, dan temuan disintesis melalui analisis tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa eksklusi muncul dari interaksi tata kelola yang terfragmentasi, pengabaian infrastruktur, kapasitas pedagogis yang terbatas, dan stigma budaya yang mengakar. Studi ini berpendapat bahwa kolaborasi antar kementerian, sekolah, keluarga, dan masyarakat bukanlah pilihan tetapi

sangat penting, dan mengusulkan lima domain strategi kolaboratif yang didukung oleh jalur implementasi multi-level. Kesimpulan yang ditarik adalah bahwa kolaborasi antar kementerian, sekolah, keluarga, dan masyarakat sipil bukanlah hal yang bersifat perifer tetapi sangat penting. Kontribusi utama studi ini terletak pada pengusulan kerangka kerja terintegrasi dari lima strategi kolaboratif dan jalur multi-level yang dapat memandu kebijakan dan praktik. Dengan memajukan kolaborasi sebagai prinsip pengorganisasian inklusi, penelitian ini menawarkan peta jalan untuk reformasi sistemik dan berkelanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Inklusif, Kolaborasi, Peserta Didik Beragam, Kesenjangan Kebijakan-Praktik, Kesiapan Guru, Hambatan Sosio-Budaya

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a central instrument for individual and societal development. The global commitment to ensuring inclusive, equitable and quality education is enshrined in international instruments and development agendas, including the Salamanca Statement (Hunt, 2019; Meijer & Watkins, 2019) and the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet despite these commitments, many education systems continue to struggle to translate policy intentions into classroom realities. In particular, inclusive education understood here as the reorganisation of educational settings, practices and relationships so that learners of all backgrounds, identities and abilities can access, participate in and benefit from education remains an unfinished agenda in many low and middle-income countries, including Nigeria (Barron et al., 2023; Kunwar & Adhikari, 2023).

This introduction sets out the conceptual grounding, contextual background, and rationale for the present study, which reframes inclusive education through the principle of collaboration. It addresses definitional clarity, outlines the contemporary policy landscape, summarises salient challenges in the Nigerian context, and positions the study within relevant theoretical frameworks. The section concludes by articulating the study's research objectives, delineating its novelty and contribution, and outlining the structure of the paper.

Conceptual precision is important because debates about 'inclusive education' frequently conflate distinct approaches. In this paper, inclusion is not treated as synonymous with simple physical placement or mere access to mainstream classrooms. Rather, inclusion denotes a systemic transformation in which curricula, pedagogy, assessment, school culture and institutional arrangements are reconfigured to value learner diversity and remove barriers to meaningful participation (Chaudhary & Nizar, 2025; Ydesen et al., 2022). Integration the practice of placing learners with special needs into existing classrooms without substantive adaptation of the learning environment – differs markedly from inclusion because it places the onus on learners to adapt to an inflexible system. This distinction is central to the analysis that follows and frames the critique of 'symbolic inclusion' whereby legal commitments exist but practical conditions for participation do not.

The global policy architecture provides both normative guidance and rhetorical impetus for national reforms. The Salamanca Statement emphasised the obligation of education systems to accommodate all children, and subsequent UNESCO guidance and SDG targets have reinforced commitments to equity and inclusion (Obizue & Enomah, 2025; Oladunni, 2020). Nigeria's National Policy on

Education explicitly recognises the right of every child to quality education and articulates provisions for special and inclusive education (Babangida & Mustapha, 2022). Nevertheless, international commitments alone are insufficient; national and sub-national implementation pathways, budgetary allocations, and monitoring systems determine the extent to which policy is operationalised in schools.

Despite formal policy commitments, Nigeria's education system exhibits persistent gaps between aspiration and practice. Empirical and policy analyses report multiple, interlocking barriers, including governance fragmentation, inadequate financing for inclusive measures, infrastructural inaccessibility, narrow pedagogical approaches, and socio-cultural stigmas that constrain enrollment and participation (Baporikar, 2024; Somani, 2025). For example, many school facilities lack basic accessibility features (ramps, adapted sanitation, suitable classroom layouts), and assistive technologies remain scarce or unevenly distributed. Teacher education curricula and continuing professional development programs often prioritise content coverage and examination performance rather than differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) or culturally responsive pedagogy (Kieran & Anderson, 2019; Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023). At the community level, prevailing attitudes and stigma regarding disability or difference further impede inclusive enrolment and retention. Collectively, these constraints create an environment in which the presence of diverse learners in classrooms does not reliably translate into participation or learning the defining feature of symbolic rather than substantive inclusion.

The principal problem motivating this study is the persistent misalignment between inclusive education policy and classroom practice in Nigeria. While past scholarship has documented the separate dimensions of this misalignment, infrastructural neglect, pedagogical gaps, policy incoherence, and socio-cultural resistance, there remains a shortage of integrative analyses that position collaboration as the central mechanism for bridging these divides. Prior studies often treat teacher training, infrastructure, or policy reform in isolation; as a result, interventions tend to be fragmented, short-lived, and unable to generate system-wide change (Peurach & Neumerski, 2015; Scott et al., 2015). This study addresses that lacuna by synthesising theoretical perspectives and empirical insights to develop a conceptual framework that places multi-actor collaboration at the heart of inclusive practice and implementation. Collaboration is advanced in this paper as a normative and practical response to systemic fragmentation. Conceptually, collaborative governance and co-production of services distribute responsibility for inclusion across multiple actors education and health ministries, local authorities, schools, families, Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs), civil society groups, and private sector partners thereby reducing reliance on overstretched teachers and under-resourced schools. Practically, collaboration enables pooled resources for accessible infrastructure and assistive technologies, coordinated professional development for teachers, and community mobilisation to address stigma.

Cross-national and cross-sectoral knowledge exchange further accelerates adaptive learning and the localisation of promising practices (Arslan et al., 2021;

Liu, 2024). In short, collaboration is not presented as a mere adjunct to technical reforms but as the systemic integrator that can translate policy aspirations into measurable improvements in access, participation, and achievement.

This study is guided by an integrative theoretical lens that draws principally on three traditions: Constructivist Learning Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Constructivist perspectives foreground the active role of learners and social interaction in knowledge construction, underscoring the need for pedagogies that are participatory, contextually situated, and responsive to learners' prior experiences. The Social Model of Disability shifts attention away from individual impairments toward the social, environmental and institutional barriers that produce disability, reinforcing the argument for systemic and environmental interventions. UDL offers a practical design framework that operationalises inclusive pedagogy through the provision of multiple means of engagement, representation and expression. Integrating these lenses enables the paper to move fluidly between normative argumentation and practical design principles while maintaining a focus on collaboration as the mechanism that links policy, infrastructure, pedagogy and community.

Aligned with the framing above, this study aims to critically examine the systemic barriers spanning policy, pedagogical practices, infrastructure, and socio-cultural dynamics that continue to impede the realisation of inclusive education in Nigeria. It further advances a theoretical argument positioning collaboration as a foundational principle of inclusive education, drawing on insights from Constructivist Learning Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Building on this theoretical grounding, the study develops a conceptual framework that articulates collaborative strategies capable of uniting policymakers, educators, families, communities, and civil society actors in the advancement of inclusive practices. In doing so, the research also seeks to illuminate the persistent gap between policy aspirations and the practical realities of schooling in Nigeria, while demonstrating how well-structured collaborative mechanisms can serve as a bridge between inclusive education ideals and their implementation in everyday educational contexts.

The contribution of this study is both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it synthesises multiple frameworks to reframe collaboration as the central organising principle of inclusive education rather than as an ancillary strategy. Practically, it generates a conceptual roadmap that links policy harmonisation, multi-stakeholder engagement, professional support structures for teachers, community partnerships and cross-national exchange as mutually reinforcing strategies. The study thereby responds to a pressing need for integrated approaches that can be tested in future empirical work and scaled within Nigerian policy contexts. This paper adopts a conceptual and systematic literature synthesis approach focused primarily on policy documents, peer-reviewed studies and credible grey literature relevant to Nigeria and comparable contexts. It does not report primary empirical fieldwork; instead, it analyses and synthesises existing evidence to develop an actionable framework. While this approach enables a broad synthesis of evidence, it also means that

empirical testing and contextual piloting of the recommended collaborative strategies are recommended as logical next steps.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual research design, grounded in a systematic review of existing literature, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks on inclusive education. Rather than generating primary data, the study synthesises diverse bodies of knowledge to develop a holistic framework that emphasises collaboration as the cornerstone of inclusive education in Nigeria. The methodology is structured into four components: research design, data sources, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

The study is anchored in an interpretivist paradigm and employs a qualitative exploratory design. This design is appropriate because the central aim is not to measure outcomes quantitatively but to critically interrogate systemic barriers to inclusive education and propose a collaborative framework. The research is therefore positioned as a conceptual synthesis, drawing on theoretical perspectives (Constructivist Learning Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and Universal Design for Learning) to reinterpret existing challenges and opportunities.

The study relies on secondary data obtained from: Peer-reviewed literature: journal articles, books, and conference papers published between 2015 and 2025 on inclusive education, teacher preparedness, and collaborative strategies. Policy documents: Nigeria's National Policy on Education, UNESCO's Salamanca Statement and subsequent global frameworks on inclusive education (Daniyan, 2020; Oladunni, 2020). Empirical studies: country-level research on Nigeria and comparative contexts such as South Africa, Indonesia, and other developing nations facing similar inclusion challenges. Grey literature: reports by UNESCO, UNICEF, and NGOs working on inclusive education in sub-Saharan Africa. Inclusion criteria for sources were: (a) direct relevance to inclusive education; (b) discussion of barriers and/or collaborative strategies; (c) publication in English; and (d) availability in credible academic or institutional repositories.

Data was collected through a systematic literature search across databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, ERIC, and ResearchGate. Keywords used were: inclusive education, Nigeria, collaboration, diverse learners, policy-practice gap, teacher preparedness, socio-cultural barriers, Universal Design for Learning. Relevant policy documents were sourced from the Federal Ministry of Education and UNESCO repositories. Literature was screened for quality and relevance, and duplicate or tangentially related studies were excluded.

The collected materials were subjected to thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, the analysis proceeded as follows: Familiarisation - Repeated reading of selected texts to identify recurring themes. Generating initial codes - Extracting codes such as policy-practice gap, infrastructural barriers, teacher preparedness, socio-cultural stigma, collaborative governance. Searching for themes - Grouping codes into broader categories aligned with the study objectives. Reviewing themes - Refining categories into four dominant systemic barriers and five collaborative strategies. Refining and

naming themes - Linking findings explicitly to theoretical frameworks (Constructivism, Social Model of Disability, UDL). Synthesising and interpreting - Developing an integrative framework that situates collaboration as the unifying mechanism bridging policy rhetoric and classroom realities.

To ensure credibility and dependability of findings: Triangulation was achieved by consulting diverse sources (policy documents, empirical studies, and theoretical works). Transparency was maintained through explicit documentation of search strategies and inclusion/exclusion criteria. Peer debriefing was employed by comparing interpretations with established scholarship on inclusive education in Nigeria.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which restricts its ability to capture the lived experiences of learners and teachers in real time. Additionally, while efforts were made to include recent literature, the availability of Nigeria-specific empirical studies on collaboration in inclusive education remains limited. These limitations, however, do not diminish the value of the conceptual framework developed; rather, they highlight the need for future empirical studies to test the proposed strategies in real classroom contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results and Findings

This section presents the results of the study in strict alignment with the stated research objectives and the qualitative, systematic review methodology previously outlined. The findings were derived from a thematic synthesis of policy documents, peer-reviewed scholarship, and reputable grey literature on inclusive education in Nigeria and comparable low- and middle-income contexts. Themes reflect patterned meaning across sources rather than the preferences of single authors, thereby privileging convergence and divergence in the knowledge base. To preserve analytic rigour, results are organised by objectives and supported with explicit explanatory mechanisms, boundary conditions, and implications for practice.

Tabel 1 Objective-Finding Crosswalk

Research Objective	Corresponding Findings (Theme Clusters)
Critically analyse systemic barriers undermining inclusive education in Nigeria.	Four barrier clusters: (i) policy-practice misalignment; (ii) infrastructural inadequacies; (iii) pedagogical limitations; (iv) socio-cultural barriers, plus cross-cutting interaction effects
Theoretically argue for collaboration as a foundational principle (Constructivism, Social Model of Disability, UDL).	Convergent theoretical justification for collaboration as a systems-level mechanism that redistributes responsibility, designs for variability, and fosters co-construction of learning environments.
Propose a conceptual framework for collaborative strategies among policymakers, educators, families, communities, and civil society.	Five collaborative strategy domains: policy harmonisation; multi-stakeholder engagement; professional support networks; community co-production; and cross-national learning, each with mechanisms, actors, and indicative outputs.

Highlight the gap between aspirational policies and practical realities; demonstrate how collaboration bridges this divide.	A multi-level implementation pathway (federal/state/school) with near-term, medium-term, and long-term actions and accountability structures.
Contribute to scholarly discourse by positioning collaboration as a central mechanism for achieving authentic inclusion.	Conceptual contributions and propositions for future empirical testing; articulation of what distinguishes collaboration-centric inclusion from integration and from fragmented reform.

Findings on Systemic Barriers (Objective 1)

The thematic synthesis confirms that exclusion in Nigerian schooling is not the product of a single deficit but the emergent outcome of multiple, mutually reinforcing constraints. The following four clusters capture the dominant, recurrent patterns.

Policy-Practice Misalignment

Across policy texts, inclusive principles are consistently affirmed; however, translation into classroom practice remains irregular and fragile. Three mechanisms explain the misalignment. First, funding and resource allocation are episodic and siloed, producing intermittent support that cannot sustain school-level change. Second, accountability instruments focus on access and enrollment counts rather than participation and learning, incentivising symbolic compliance rather than substantive inclusion. Third, vertical coordination between federal, state, and local authorities is weak, leading to fragmented guidance and duplication. The net effect is that schools receive aspirational directives without the enabling conditions (tools, time, training, and technical assistance) required to act. Boundary conditions emerged in the data. Policy coherence improved where implementation was institutionalised through inter-ministerial tasking, earmarked budgets, and routine monitoring that captured both access and participation. Where such structures were absent, school leaders relied on discretionary efforts that could not be scaled or sustained. The finding clarifies that the problem is less about ‘policy absence’ than about ‘implementation architecture.’

Implication: correcting misalignment requires a shift from compliance-oriented regulation to capacity-oriented support, with indicators that track participation and progress for diverse learners, not merely attendance.

Infrastructural Inadequacies

Physical and digital infrastructures were repeatedly identified as binding constraints. Many school sites lack accessible routes, adaptive toilets, and classroom layouts that accommodate mobility, sensory, and cognitive diversity. Digital exclusion compounds physical barriers: limited power reliability, connectivity gaps, and the high cost of assistive technologies curtail the use of inclusive tools (e.g., screen readers, captioning, augmentative and alternative communication). Importantly, even when equipment is procured, maintenance plans and user training are rare, leading to rapid attrition of functionality. Mechanism: infrastructural deficits transform ordinary tasks (entering a classroom, accessing materials, communicating needs) into exclusionary thresholds. In the logic of the Social Model of Disability, it is the environment—not the learner that disables participation. Where low-cost adaptations (ramps,

tactile signage, seating reconfiguration, print alternatives) and maintenance routines were embedded, participation improved without disproportionate cost burdens.

Implication: infrastructure planning should be guided by universal design principles and lifecycle maintenance, prioritising low-tech/high-impact adaptations while building a pipeline for context-appropriate assistive technology.

Pedagogical Limitations

Teacher preparation and support were found to be misaligned with learner variability. Pre-service curricula remain content-coverage-centric, while in-service development is episodic and certification-driven rather than practice-embedded. Consequently, widely recommended approaches—differentiated instruction, formative assessment, flexible grouping, use of multiple representations and means of engagement—are unevenly enacted. Teachers report low perceived self-efficacy for inclusion when class sizes are large and materials are scarce. Mechanism: without models of practice, coaching, and time to plan collaboratively, teachers revert to whole-class, lecture-centric instruction and high-stakes exam preparation, which structurally disadvantages age learners who require alternative access points. Constructivist perspectives underscore that learning is co-constructed; absent collaboration, classrooms default to transmission models that suppress participation by design.

Implication: professional learning must be job-embedded and collaborative (e.g., lesson study, peer observation, co-planning), with protected time and tools that enable teachers to design for variability rather than teach to the mythical 'average' learner.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Stigmatising beliefs about disability, gender, language background, and poverty persist at the community and school levels. Such beliefs shape enrollment decisions, expectations, and peer interactions. In several accounts, families internalise stigma and under-report support needs, fearing labelling. Schools, reflecting their communities, may discourage placement or fail to create psychologically safe environments. Mechanism: culture acts as a hidden curriculum that either legitimises diversity or polices difference. When schools cultivate partnerships with parents, traditional and faith leaders, and youth groups, attitudes shift from charity to rights and reciprocity. Inclusive school cultures were consistently associated with explicit anti-stigma campaigns, student voice initiatives, and community education.

Implication: socio-cultural transformation is not a by-product of policy; it requires deliberate, collaborative community work and learner agency within schools.

Cross-Cutting Interaction Effects

Barriers interact multiplicatively. For example, inaccessible facilities increase the instructional burden on teachers, which, without professional support, intensifies reliance on exclusionary pedagogy. Similarly, policy misalignment undermines maintenance budgets, which accelerates infrastructure decay. Recognising these interactions is critical: single-point interventions are unlikely to generate durable change.

Theoretical Grounding for Collaboration (Objective 2)

Three complementary lenses converge to justify collaboration as foundational rather than optional. Constructivism positions learning as socially mediated; therefore, instructional design benefits from co-planning, co-teaching, and communities of practice. The Social Model of Disability reframes exclusion as a function of environments and institutions; hence, multi-sector coordination is necessary to redesign systems that produce barriers. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) advances the principle of designing for variability from the outset; this inherently requires joint work among policymakers (standards and funding), curriculum teams (multiple representations and assessments), technology providers (accessible platforms), and teachers (responsive pedagogy).

Tabel 2 Lens-Mechanism-Collaboration Matrix

Theoretical Lens	Explanatory Mechanism	Required Functions	Collaboration
Constructivism	Learning is co-constructed through interaction and scaffolding	Co-planning, peer observation, assessment design, and teacher learning communities	formative design, and learning
Social Model of Disability	Barriers are produced by environments and institutions	Inter-ministerial governance, infrastructure, and policy co-design with users	accessible planning,
UDL	Design for variability via multiple means of engagement, representation, action/expression	Curriculum-technology alignment, diversification, flexibility	resource assessment

Conceptual Framework: Collaborative Strategy Domains (Objective 3)

The framework positions collaboration as the central mechanism linking policy aspiration to classroom participation. It operationalises five strategy domains, each specifying the problem addressed, core actors, key activities, indicative outputs, and short-/long-term outcomes.

Policy Harmonisation and Collaborative Governance

Problem addressed: fragmented mandates and discontinuous funding. Core actors: Ministries of Education, Health, Social Welfare, Finance; state education boards; local governments; legislative committees. Key activities: joint planning cycles, pooled/earmarked budgets, and integrated data systems that track access, participation, and learning for diverse learners. Outputs: coordinated implementation guidelines, grant-in-aid mechanisms, and accountability dashboards. Outcomes: predictable resourcing, aligned incentives, and stable school-level support.

Multi-Stakeholder Engagement and Co-Production

Problem addressed: low social legitimacy and weak community ownership. Core actors: civil society organisations, faith-based bodies, traditional leaders, parent associations, student unions, disability advocacy groups, private sector. Key activities: participatory needs assessments, social mobilisation, school-community compacts, and public reporting. Outputs: context-responsive school improvement plans and shared responsibility agreements. Outcomes: higher enrollment, improved attendance, and reduced stigma.

Professional Support Networks for Teachers and Leaders

Problem addressed: pedagogical isolation and low self-efficacy. Core actors: teacher education institutions, school clusters, NGOs, and subject associations. Key activities: lesson study cycles, coaching, co-teaching arrangements, resource sharing libraries, and micro-credentialing in inclusive practices. Outputs: practice artefacts (adapted lesson plans, formative assessment banks), strengthened professional identities. Outcomes: increased use of differentiated instruction and assessment for learning; improved learner participation.

Community Collaboration and Learner Agency

Problem addressed: persistent stigma and limited voice of learners and families. Core actors: school governing boards, parent-teacher associations, community health workers, youth leaders. Key activities: family education sessions, student councils for inclusion, peer mentoring, and restorative discipline approaches. Outputs: safer, more welcoming school climates; documented accommodations plans. Outcomes: reduced absenteeism, enhanced well-being, and stronger home-school continuity.

Cross-National Learning and Adaptation

Problem addressed: reinvention in isolation and slow diffusion of workable solutions. Core actors: ministries, universities, regional networks, and development partners. Key activities: teacher exchanges, joint pilot projects, comparative research, and adaptation toolkits that translate promising practices to Nigerian conditions. Outputs: validated models with cost and implementation guidance. Outcomes: accelerated uptake and contextual fit.

Risks, Boundary Conditions, and Mitigation

Risks include coordination fatigue, inequitable participation (tokenism), and dependency on external funding. Mitigation strategies: clear role definitions, facilitation protocols that secure marginalised voices, diversified financing, and staged implementation with feedback loops. Boundary conditions: Collaboration is most effective where there is minimal bureaucratic stability, school leader continuity, and data systems capable of tracking inclusion beyond enrollment.

Bridging the Policy-Practice Divide: Multi-Level Pathways (Objective 4)

Findings indicate that collaboration becomes operational when responsibilities are distributed across levels with aligned timelines and measurable milestones. The pathway below specifies actions at the federal, state, and school levels, sequenced by time horizon.

Near-Term (0-12 months):

Constitute inter-ministerial inclusion task forces with authority over budgeting and data integration. Issue minimum accessibility and UDL-informed instructional standards accompanied by technical guides. Establish school cluster networks for co-planning and peer observation; allocate protected time in timetables. Launch community communication campaigns co-designed with disability organisations and youth groups.

Medium-Term (12-36 months):

Convert pilot collaborations into state implementation plans with pooled funding envelopes. Build maintenance contracts and local technician training into assistive technology procurement. Expand micro-credentialing for inclusive

pedagogy tied to career progression for teachers and leaders.

Institutionalise school–community compacts with public reporting on participation and learning.

Long-Term (36+ months):

Embed inclusion indicators in national examinations and quality assurance regimes. Scale accessible infrastructure standards in new builds and major refurbishments; set lifecycle budgeting norms. Strengthen cross-national research consortia to evaluate cost-effectiveness and contextual transferability of models.

Contribution to Scholarship (Objective 5)

The results reposition collaboration from a supportive add-on to the primary mechanism through which inclusive education becomes actionable. Conceptually, the study reconciles three strands— Constructivism, the Social Model of Disability, and UDL—into a systems perspective that foregrounds co-design and distributed expertise. This addresses a recurrent limitation in the Nigerian literature: fragmented solutions that treat teacher development, infrastructure, or policy as separable levers. The collaboration-centric view predicts that isolated interventions will underperform unless nested within networks that align governance, pedagogy, and culture. The study also advances a set of propositions amenable to future empirical testing: (P1) schools embedded in professional networks will demonstrate greater uptake of inclusive pedagogy than isolated schools, controlling for resources; (P2) inter-ministerial budgeting and data integration will predict improvements in participation indicators beyond enrollment; (P3) community co-production will mediate the relationship between infrastructure investment and learner well-being.

Practical and Policy Implications Emerging from the Findings

For policymakers: design multi-year, pooled financing tied to participation and learning indicators; codify inter-ministerial obligations in regulations; and require UDL-aligned materials in curriculum procurement. For school leaders: reorganise timetables to protect teacher collaboration time; adopt cluster-based coaching; and cultivate inclusive school climates through student voice structures. For teachers: implement low-prep UDL routines such as multiple means of representation, flexible grouping, and formative checks; use peer observation to iterate. For communities: engage in school compacts and anti-stigma initiatives that reframe inclusion as a collective responsibility. In sum, the results delineate why inclusion efforts have stalled and what collaborative architectures can unlock progress. The system conditions that produce exclusion are multifactorial and interactive; accordingly, the remedy must be collaborative, multi-level, and design-oriented. The framework offered here provides a practical map for moving from aspirational policy to lived participation for diverse learners.

Discussion of findings

This study revealed that inclusive education in Nigeria continues to be undermined by four interrelated clusters of systemic barriers: policy–practice misalignment, infrastructural inadequacies, pedagogical limitations, and socio-cultural barriers. At the policy level, there is a striking contradiction between the aspirational commitments enshrined in the National Policy on Education and the Sustainable Development Goals, and the fragmented, under-resourced, and

weakly monitored implementation mechanisms that schools experience on the ground. Infrastructural barriers, such as inaccessible classrooms, a lack of assistive technologies, and poor digital connectivity, further entrench exclusion by turning routine educational processes into insurmountable challenges for learners with disabilities. Pedagogical shortcomings, particularly the dominance of teacher-centred and exam-driven instruction, prevent teachers from addressing learner variability and diminish their sense of self-efficacy in inclusive settings. Finally, socio-cultural stigma and persistent negative attitudes toward disability and diversity act as a hidden curriculum, shaping community expectations and schooling practices in ways that perpetuate exclusion. The study contributes to the literature by advancing collaboration as the central integrative mechanism capable of addressing these barriers in a coordinated and systemic manner. Rather than approaching inclusive education through fragmented interventions, the research proposes five collaborative strategy domains – policy harmonisation, multi-stakeholder engagement, professional support networks, community collaboration, and cross-national learning. Together, these domains offer a roadmap for transforming symbolic inclusion into substantive participation.

The findings of this study both confirm and extend earlier scholarship on inclusive education. Webster (2022) and Florian et al.(2016) have argued that inclusion requires a fundamental reorganisation of education systems rather than the simple placement of learners into mainstream classrooms. The present study echoes this emphasis but advances the debate by proposing collaboration not merely as a desirable feature but as the organising principle through which inclusive education becomes operational. When compared with Nigerian and sub-Saharan African studies, the results display both convergence and divergence. Oshowole (2024) similarly highlights the infrastructural neglect and lack of teacher preparedness as persistent barriers. Okafor et al. (2025) underscore the influence of socio-cultural stigma, which aligns with this study's findings on how community perceptions reinforce exclusion. However, while much of the existing research treats these dimensions in isolation, the present study departs from this trend by situating them within an integrative framework that foregrounds collaborative governance and community co-production. In this way, it moves beyond diagnosis to suggest systemic solutions. Cross-national comparisons also reinforce the study's position. Syafii et al. (2025) show that fragmented reforms produce limited gains, while Indonesia's inclusive education reforms illustrate how coordinated, multi-stakeholder approaches can generate more sustainable progress. By synthesising these insights, the present study argues that Nigeria's stalled progress is not unique but symptomatic of a wider global challenge: the persistence of symbolic inclusion in the absence of structural collaboration.

The results of this study carry significance beyond Nigeria's borders. They point to a fundamental paradox of inclusive education in the Global South: policies are increasingly aligned with international norms, yet classroom realities remain unchanged because systemic conditions are not recalibrated to support them. This signifies that the challenge is not one of normative agreement; most stakeholders agree that education should be inclusive, but one of implementation architectures. By placing collaboration at the centre, the study reflects a broader shift in

educational theory and practice toward distributed responsibility. Inclusive education cannot be sustained when teachers are positioned as the sole agents of change, expected to deliver complex interventions in overcrowded classrooms with minimal support. Instead, systemic inclusion requires shared responsibility across ministries, local authorities, schools, families, and civil society. Theoretically, this resonates with the Social Model of Disability, which insists that exclusion arises from environmental and institutional barriers rather than individual deficits. Practically, it reflects constructivist and UDL principles that emphasise co-construction, variability, and learner agency. In a global context, the findings highlight the unfinished nature of the SDG4 agenda. If countries such as Nigeria – with strong policy rhetoric but fragmented delivery cannot move from symbolic to substantive inclusion, then the global goal of “education for all” risks being undermined. Thus, the significance of this research lies in reframing inclusion not as a technical matter of classroom practice alone, but as a systemic issue that requires governance, financing, cultural transformation, and multi-level collaboration.

The practical and policy implications of the study are wide-ranging. For policymakers, the research underscores the urgency of shifting from fragmented, compliance-oriented regulation toward integrated governance and financing models. Inter-ministerial task forces with pooled budgets and shared accountability indicators can prevent duplication of efforts and ensure that resources are directed toward participation and learning outcomes rather than simply enrollment statistics. For school leaders and teachers, the study highlights the importance of collaborative professional networks. Job-embedded professional learning – such as lesson study, peer observation, and co-teaching – can strengthen teachers’ sense of efficacy and capacity to implement UDL-aligned strategies. For communities, the implication is that stigma reduction and the cultivation of inclusive cultures cannot be left to policy documents; they require deliberate co-production with parents, traditional leaders, youth groups, and disability organisations. Finally, for researchers, the study provides a conceptual framework that can guide future empirical inquiry. By generating testable propositions – for instance, that schools embedded in professional networks demonstrate greater uptake of inclusive pedagogy than isolated schools – the research opens avenues for comparative and longitudinal studies.

The results can be explained by the interaction of Nigeria’s structural, institutional, and cultural conditions. First, policy frameworks are ambitious but poorly resourced and weakly monitored. The absence of dedicated, multi-year funding streams and accountability mechanisms means that policies remain aspirational rather than actionable. Second, infrastructural planning has historically ignored universal design, creating environments that are disabling rather than enabling. Third, teacher education continues to privilege rote learning and examination performance over differentiated instruction and learner-centred pedagogies. Fourth, deep-seated socio-cultural beliefs about disability and diversity reinforce patterns of exclusion and limit parental advocacy. These factors do not operate in isolation but interact in mutually reinforcing ways. For example, inadequate infrastructure increases the instructional burden on teachers,

whose lack of training then compounds exclusionary practices. Similarly, weak policy coordination undermines maintenance budgets, accelerating infrastructural decay. The results, therefore, are not surprising: they reflect the predictable consequences of systemic fragmentation and disjointed reform efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that while the barriers to inclusive education in Nigeria policy-practice misalignment, infrastructural inadequacies, pedagogical limitations, and socio-cultural stigma echo those documented in previous research, its most important finding diverges from much of the existing literature. Whereas earlier studies tended to treat these barriers in isolation, focusing separately on teacher training, infrastructural provision, or policy implementation, this research identifies collaboration as the unifying mechanism through which fragmented reforms can be integrated into sustainable change. By emphasizing that inclusion cannot be achieved through single-point interventions but requires coordinated, multi-actor engagement, the study shifts the discourse from fragmented analysis to systemic integration. This finding distinguishes the study from other works that describe the barriers without offering an organising principle for overcoming them.

The central contribution of this research lies in its conceptual and methodological reframing of inclusive education around collaboration. Conceptually, the study synthesises Constructivist Learning Theory, the Social Model of Disability, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into an integrated framework that positions collaboration as the operational link between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Methodologically, it provides a structured framework of five collaborative strategy domains – policy harmonisation, multi-stakeholder engagement, professional support networks, community collaboration, and cross-national learning – as well as a multi-level implementation pathway for federal, state, and school systems. These contributions advance scholarly understanding by offering a clear conceptual roadmap and practical propositions for future empirical testing. In doing so, the research moves the discourse on inclusive education in Nigeria beyond diagnoses of barriers to a collaborative model that can guide policy, practice, and further research.

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