UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION AS A NEXUS FOR ACTUALISING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines Universal Basic Education (UBE) as a framework for actualising the right to education for learners with disabilities in Nigeria within the context of sustainable development. The study adopts a historical method of inquiry, drawing evidence from relevant policy documents, international conventions, and educational reports, including UNESCO frameworks. The analysis is anchored on the Social Model of Disability and Inclusive Education Theory, which provide a conceptual basis for understanding the relationship between UBE implementation, special education provision, and sustainable development goals. The study traces the historical evolution of special education in Nigeria, examines provisions of the National Policy on Education and the National Policy on Special Needs Education, and reviews the objectives of the UBE programme. Findings reveal that special education in Nigeria has progressed from missionary driven charitable interventions to more structured policy driven frameworks; however, implementation gaps, inadequate funding, and limited infrastructure continue to hinder effective inclusion. The study concludes that while UBE provides a strong policy foundation for inclusive education, its effectiveness in promoting equitable access for learners with disabilities remains constrained. It recommends strengthened policy implementation, increased funding, and improved teacher preparation for inclusive education delivery.

Keywords: special education, universal basic education, nexus, rights and sustainable development

Introduction

Education is the right of every child in any society and a society that denies this right is only abdicating its responsibility, for a society can only continue to survive when it brings up the young ones properly to take over from the adult members when they pass away. (Adeyinka, 2006, p. 186). Article 26: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 United Nations (2015) confirmed that everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the

elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (p. 54).

According to Ogunwale & Ajayi (2006), no child would want to cause trouble in their immediate environment, regardless of whether society accepts and permits problem children to live happy lives of their own and within the acceptable range of their disabilities on challenges that they must face and live by with pride and a sense of belonging.

Special education in Nigeria has undergone significant transformation over the years, evolving from informal and charitable efforts to a more structured and policy-driven system. Initially, the education of learners with disabilities was largely neglected or handled by religious organisations and non-governmental bodies. Over time, increased awareness, advocacy, and global influence such as the principles of inclusive education have shaped Nigeria's approach to special education.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the various educational reforms and policy initiatives, special education in Nigeria continues to face significant challenges. Many learners with disabilities remain out of school due to inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained personnel, insufficient funding, and persistent social stigma. In some contexts, disability is still associated with negative social perceptions, which affects inclusive educational access. Such societal attitudes have placed learners living with disabilities at a disadvantage in accessing quality basic education. Against this background, this study examines Universal Basic Education (UBE) as a framework for actualising the right to education for persons living with disabilities in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine Universal Basic Education (UBE) as a means to actualise in Nigeria the right of persons living with disabilities to education, within the framework of sustainable development. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. trace the historical development of special education in Nigeria.
2. examine the origin of Universal Basic Education programmes in Nigeria.
3. highlight the situational and policy analysis of rights to education for people living with disabilities in Nigeria.
4. identify the current challenges facing persons living with disabilities and discuss strategies for improving their condition.

Methodology

This study adopted a historical and descriptive research design to examine the development of special education in Nigeria over time. The design is considered appropriate because it allows for the systematic examination of past events, policies, and developments that have shaped special education practice. The study relied primarily on secondary data sources. Relevant information was gathered from academic journals, government publications, policy documents, textbooks, and reports from international organisations. The collected data were analysed using documentary content

analysis to identify key themes and trends in the evolution of special education policy and practice in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

Special Education

The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004, 2014) defines special education as a formal special educational training given to people (children and adults with special needs. It classified this group of people into three categories, namely: the disabled (i.e. people with physical or sensory impairments), the disadvantaged, and the gifted and talented. These categories of persons may have some special needs or experience learning problems/ difficulties due to their special nature, peculiar circumstances, and unique abilities. Special education refers to a carefully designed form of education that addresses the unique learning needs of individuals with disabilities. These disabilities may include physical impairments (such as mobility challenges), intellectual disabilities (affecting reasoning and learning), emotional or behavioural disorders, and sensory impairments such as hearing or visual loss.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is an educational approach where all learners, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, or linguistic differences, learn together in the same classroom environment. It promotes equality by ensuring that students with disabilities are not separated or excluded but are supported within mainstream schools. UNESCO (2017) defines inclusive education as a process that responds to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, while reducing exclusion within education. This approach requires schools to adapt teaching methods, learning materials, and environments to accommodate all learners through support systems such as differentiated instruction and accessible infrastructure.

Disability

Disability refers to any condition that may limit a person's physical, sensory, cognitive, or emotional functioning in a way that affects their daily activities or participation in society. Disabilities may be temporary or permanent, visible or invisible, and can vary in severity. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2021) explains disability as an umbrella term covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a concept that focuses on meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In education, it emphasises equity, access, environmental responsibility, and long-term social well-being. The United Nation (UN, 2015) highlights sustainable development through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. In relation to education and disability, sustainable development promotes equal opportunities, accessible learning environments, and lifelong learning for all individuals, regardless of their abilities.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two major theories: the Social Model of Disability and the Inclusive Education Theory.

Social Model of Disability

The Social Model of Disability, developed by disability scholars such as Oliver (1990), argues that disability is not primarily caused by an

individual's impairment but by barriers within society. These barriers may be physical (inaccessible buildings), institutional (lack of inclusive policies), or attitudinal (stigma and discrimination). In relation to special education in Nigeria, this theory is highly relevant because it explains why many learners with disabilities are excluded—not because of their conditions, but because schools and society fail to accommodate diversity. For example, lack of ramps, trained teachers, and assistive technologies reflects societal barriers rather than learner limitations. This theory supports the shift from segregated education to inclusive education, emphasising that removing barriers leads to equal participation in education (UNESCO, 2017).

Inclusive Education theory

Inclusive Education Theory is based on the principle that all learners, regardless of differences, should learn together in the same environment with appropriate support. It promotes equity, participation, and access for all learners. UNESCO (2017) explains inclusive education as a continuous process of improving school systems to respond to learner diversity. This theory underpins global and national reforms in Nigeria, including the National Policy on Education and the Disability Rights Act (2018). It also supports instructional approaches such as differentiated instruction and universal design for learning, which ensure that teaching methods accommodate diverse learning needs.

Historical Development of Special Education in Nigeria

Ademuyiwa & Oseni (2006) and Oyundoyin & Eni-Olorunda (2008) traced the history of special education in Nigeria when they averred that the development of special education in Nigeria could be traced to Christian Missionaries with an effort to provide basic training for leprosy and ex-patient children and adults. Before the missionaries came, the attitude of the Nigerian society towards the disabled was not favourable. The disabled were totally relegated and denied their fundamental human rights. Ademuyiwa & Oseni (2006) further averred that during this era, the disabled were either killed outrightly, thrown into evil forests, hidden away from public view or marked in different parts of the body, depending on the prevailing cultural practice. Special education started to gain recognition during General Gowon's regime in 1974. Following this development, the Federal Government made provision for Special Education in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1998, 2004 & 2014).

Specifically, the conception and establishment of a leper's colony by the Roman Catholic Mission at Sacred Heart Hospital in Abeokuta, Ogun State, in 1914 started the formal history of special education for the people living with disabilities in Nigeria. According to the 1989 NERDC record, other Christian Missions like the Sudan Interior Mission, the Baptist, the Methodist Church, the Church Missionary Society in Collaboration with Local government also established schools to train the people with special needs between 1930 and 1950.

A major milestone in the development of special education occurred in the 1950s and 1960s with the establishment of more formal schools for the blind and deaf. One notable example is the Pacelli School for the Blind in Lagos. These institutions represented the first organised attempt to provide structured education for learners with disabilities in Nigeria. They introduced more systematic teaching methods, basic learning materials such as braille, and specialised instruction for learners with hearing and visual impairments (Federal Ministry of Education, 2008). After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, the government began to gradually recognise the importance of education as a tool for national development. A

significant turning point was the introduction of the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977. This policy was the first major national document to formally recognise special education as an integral part of the Nigerian educational system. It emphasised that education should be available to all citizens regardless of physical, mental, or emotional challenges, thereby introducing the principle of equal educational opportunity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, international organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF played a significant role in reshaping Nigeria's approach to special education. These organisations promoted the global concept of inclusive education, which emphasises that learners living with disabilities should be educated alongside their peers in regular schools whenever possible. They also provided technical assistance, policy guidance, and funding support to help Nigeria improve access and equity in education (UNESCO, 2009).

Another important milestone was the introduction of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in 1999. The UBE programme was designed to provide free, compulsory, and universal basic education for all children in Nigeria, including those with disabilities. It aimed at reducing educational inequality and increasing access to schooling for marginalised groups. The programme represented a major step toward educational inclusion and equity at the national level (UBEC, 2012).

Provisions of the National Policy on Special Needs Education in Nigeria

According to the Federal Ministry of Education (2015, pp.9-10). The purpose ad objectives of Special Needs Education in Nigeria are as follows:

- To take care of total service delivery of the physical, mental and emotional disabilities of the Nigerian child, irrespective of setting (school, home and hospital).
- To provide adequate and qualitative education for all Persons with Special Needs in all aspects of national developmental endeavours.
- To ensure that all Persons with Special Needs develop at a pace commensurate with their abilities and to contribute to the nation's socioeconomic and technological development.

Sustainable Development Institutions as Channels for Actualising in Nigeria the Rights to Education of People with Special Needs

In Nigeria, the foremost legal recognition of the rights of a child is that which is provided for in Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (CFRN). The Child's Rights Act 2003 is the most recent and most comprehensive legislative attempt at the protection of child rights in Nigeria. Akinbola (2007) and Olayanju (2011) recalled that several rights of the Nigerian child are listed under the Child's Right Act, 2003 but those that bear direct relevance to this paper under discussion are examined below.

Sections 3 to 10 of the Act incorporate the fundamental rights provisions of the CFRN or any subsequent constitution and provide for sundry rights like right to survival and development, right to name, among others, while sections 11-18 likewise endow specific rights on children, which include:

- Right to the dignity of the child
- Right to parental care, protection and maintenance
- Right to free, compulsory, and universal basic education at least up to junior secondary education.

Every child (male or female) is entitled to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity for higher education depending on individual ability (Life Planning Education, LPE, 1999). In the same vein, the following basic principles were established in November 20, 1989 by the General Assembly of the United Nations:

- Every child has the right to life and be allowed to survive.
- Every child is entitled to protection from any act that interferes with his or her privacy, honour and reputation.
- Every child (male or female) is entitled to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity for higher education depending on individual ability.
- No child should suffer any discrimination irrespective of origin, birth, colour, sex, language, religion, political and social beliefs, status or ability.

Sustainable development institutions, especially those operating under the United Nations system, have significantly influenced the advancement of inclusive education globally and in Nigeria. Their interventions are grounded in the belief that education is a fundamental human right and a key driver of sustainable development. Among these frameworks, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 serve as a central global agenda for addressing inequality and improving access to quality education. A major pillar of this agenda is SDG 4 which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). This goal explicitly emphasises the need to eliminate disparities in education based on disability, gender, socio-economic status, or geographic location. In the Nigerian context, SDG 4 has provided a policy direction that encourages government reforms aimed at expanding access to education for learners with disabilities. It also strengthens advocacy for inclusive education by framing it as a global obligation rather than just a national concern.

Key international agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organisation (WHO) have played complementary roles in supporting Nigeria's inclusive education agenda. UNESCO, for instance, provides technical expertise in curriculum development, teacher training, and policy formulation to ensure that education systems are inclusive and equitable. Its *Global Education Monitoring Reports* consistently highlight the importance of removing barriers that prevent learners with disabilities from accessing quality education (UNESCO, 2020).

Similarly, UNICEF has been instrumental in supporting child-centred education reforms in Nigeria. Its interventions include funding inclusive education projects, supporting the development of inclusive learning materials, and implementing school-based programs that improve access for vulnerable children, including those with disabilities. UNICEF also collaborates with governments to strengthen early childhood education systems, ensuring that inclusion begins from the foundational level of learning (UNICEF, 2021). WHO, on the other hand, contributes by addressing the health-related dimensions of disability, such as early detection, rehabilitation, and assistive device provision, which are critical for effective educational participation.

Sustainable development institutions play a critical role in shaping inclusive education in Nigeria by providing policy guidance, financial support, technical expertise, and advocacy. Their alignment with SDG 4 has strengthened national

efforts to improve educational access for learners with disabilities. However, the full realisation of inclusive education still depends on sustained political will, adequate funding, and effective implementation at all levels of government. A major landmark in this policy evolution is the Disability Rights Act (2018), which represents one of the most significant legal instruments for protecting persons with disabilities in Nigeria. The Act explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in education, employment, transportation, and access to public services. It also establishes legal consequences for individuals and institutions that violate these rights.

Origin of the Universal Basic Education Programmes

The first initiative to universalise education in Nigeria was taken by the Western Region Government led by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo on 17th January, 1955. Awolowo had been appalled by the inequalities embedded in the previous system which gave elitist education to a select few while denying access to the teeming population of poor children. His indignation was further accentuated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which asserted that "everyone has a right to education".

Table 1: Past Attempts at Universalising Basic Education in Nigeria

Years	Scheme Introduced	Initiator Period
1955	Free education programme in the Western Region of Nigeria	Chief Obafemi Awolowo as the Premier of Western Region
1957	Short-lived free education programme in the Eastern Region of Nigeria	Dr. Nnamidi Azikiwe as the Premier of the Eastern Region.
1960	Limited Free Education in the Northern Region of Nigeria	Sir Ahmadu Bello, the Sadauna of Sokoto Premier of Northern Region
1976	Introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) by the Federal Government of Nigeria Launched by Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo at Okesuna Municipal Primary School, Lagos.	Brigadier Olusegun Obasanjo As The Military Head of State of Nigeria between 1976-1979.
1979	The Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) Free Education at all Levels	THE FREE Education Scheme of Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) between 1979 and 1983
1999	Universal Basic Education launched by President Olusegun Obasanjo on Sept., 30, 1999 at Shehu Kangiwa Square, Sokoto	President Olusegun Obasanjo as the Nigerian President in 1999
2004	Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC)	President Olusegun Obasanjo as the Nigerian President in 2004

Source: Olayanju, 2011

UBE (in principle) is not new in Nigeria. Long before the present effort in this direction by the Obasanjo government, there had been similar programmes in the country. The different

programmes met with different successes and shortcomings. In spite of the remarkable attempts made by these bodies to enable the citizens receive basic education, raise pupils enrolment, provide additional classrooms, the problems of access, equity, quality and quantity of education and disparity continue, especially among the regions which later became States. For example, pupil enrolment figures in primary schools all over Nigeria declined to 11.27 million in 1987 while in 1996, the functional literacy level for males was 62.5% and 39.5% for females. Among the reasons adduced for these disparities are social, cultural, lack of access to education, inadequate infrastructural facilities, gender imbalance, or lack of qualified teachers and adequate funds.

Objectives of Universal Basic Education (UBE)

The present UBE according to Obanya (2000:35) is more broad and more ambitious than any previous Universal Primary Education scheme in the country. The objectives of the UBE are:

- Developing in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong commitment to its vigorous promotion.
- The provision of free universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school age.
- Reducing drastically the incidence of drop-out from the formal school system (through improved relevance, quality, and efficiency).
- Catering for the learning needs of young persons who for one reason or another have had to interrupt their schooling, through appropriate forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education, and
- Ensuring the acquisition of appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, manipulative, and communicative life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme is founded, first and foremost, on Nigeria's adherence to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948), which takes universal access to basic education as given. This point is reinforced by section 18 of the 1999 Nigeria Constitution which deals with the fundamental principles of state policy and which provides that government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy, and to this end the government shall, as and when practicable, provide:

- Free compulsory and universal primary education and Universal basic education, in a variety of forms, depending on needs and possibilities, shall be provided for all citizens.

Through the UBE initiative, efforts were made to improve school infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and enrollment of children with special needs.

Challenges Facing Learners with Disabilities and Strategies for Improvement

Despite notable progress in policy development and international support, inclusive education in Nigeria continues to face several systemic and socio-cultural challenges that hinder its full implementation. One of the most significant constraints is inadequate funding. Education budgets in many developing countries, including Nigeria, often fall short of international recommendations. This funding gap directly affects the quality and reach of inclusive education programs (Okoli & Onah, 2020). Another major challenge is the shortage of trained special education teachers. Effective inclusive education requires educators who are skilled in

differentiated instruction, classroom adaptation, and the use of assistive technologies.

In addition, poor infrastructure and inaccessible learning environments remain a critical barrier. Many schools lack basic facilities such as ramps, accessible toilets, adaptive furniture, and appropriate classroom layouts that can accommodate learners with physical disabilities. The absence of these facilities not only restricts mobility but also discourages school attendance among learners with disabilities (UNESCO, 2017).

Furthermore, persistent social stigma and negative cultural attitudes toward persons with disabilities continue to undermine inclusive education efforts. In many communities, disability is still misunderstood and associated with superstition, charity dependence, or social exclusion.

To address these challenges, a multi-dimensional response is required. The government must significantly increase investment in inclusive education, and also increased funding is needed to improve infrastructures, and recruitment of qualified personnel.

Finally, community awareness campaigns should be intensified through media platforms, religious institutions, and community-based organisations to address the disability stigma and promote positive attitudes toward disability.

Recommendations

Based on the problems encountered by physically challenged children in Nigeria, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. The Nigerian Government should strengthen the implementation of free and compulsory basic education to ensure equitable access for all learners, including persons with disabilities.
2. No child should experience discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin, birth, colour, sex, language, religion, political or social beliefs, status, or disability.
3. Learners with disabilities and their families should be empowered through advocacy and legal awareness programmes to promote the realisation of their educational rights.
4. The Nigerian Government should provide an inclusive and accessible learning environment that is conducive to the educational needs of learners with disabilities.
5. Children should be encouraged to take advantage of educational opportunities provided through the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme to enhance access to quality basic education.
6. The Nigerian Government should increase the funding of the education sector, particularly basic and special education programmes.
7. The Federal Government of Nigeria should strengthen the enforcement of the compulsory education provisions of the UBE Act (2004) to ensure compliance by parents and guardians.
8. Teacher education institutions should integrate compulsory inclusive education training into all teacher preparation programmes.
9. Schools should be equipped with assistive technologies and learning materials to support learners with disabilities.
10. The Nigerian Government should ensure that school facilities comply with accessibility standards, including ramps, accessible toilets, and adaptive classrooms.
11. Public enlightenment campaigns should be intensified to reduce stigma and

discrimination against persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

The evolution of special education in Nigeria reflects a gradual but significant transition from exclusion to inclusion. From the colonial period, when learners with disabilities were largely neglected, to the contemporary era of inclusive education influenced by global frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Nigeria has made notable progress in educational policy and institutional development. The study, however, concludes that a significant gap still exists between policy formulation and effective implementation. Although legal frameworks, international support systems, and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme have created opportunities for inclusive education, challenges such as inadequate funding, shortage of trained personnel, inaccessible infrastructure, and persistent societal stigma continue to hinder effective educational inclusion. The study further emphasises that achieving sustainable and inclusive education in Nigeria requires strong political commitment, effective policy implementation, adequate funding, continuous public sensitisation, and improved teacher preparation. Ultimately, inclusive education remains essential for promoting educational equity, social justice, and sustainable national development.

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