

**AFRICAN JOURNAL OF  
EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT**

**ISSN 0795 – 0063    Volume 26, Nos. 1&2, 2025**

**A JOURNAL OF THE DEPARTMENT OF  
EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT,  
UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN**

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**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN GOMBE STATE PUBLIC PRIMARY AND  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS: PARAMETERS FOR LEARNERS  
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

**Ayoola, Olubunmi Adedunke; Ozoekwe, Ifeoma Veronica &  
Babatunde, Adenjolaoluwa Adedotun**

*National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration,  
(NIEPA), Ondo*

*Email: [bunmade34@gmail.com](mailto:bunmade34@gmail.com); [ivyzoekwe@gmail.com](mailto:ivyzoekwe@gmail.com)*

**Abstract**

*This study examined the children with special needs in basic and senior secondary schools as well as the pattern and parameter for learners with special needs in Gombe State public schools. Two research questions were raised and answered in this study. Descriptive survey research was used. The target population consisted of headteachers, principals of public schools and EMIS Staff in Gombe State. Multistage and simple random sampling techniques were used in selecting headteachers and principals across all the local governments in each of the schools sampled. A Checklist was designed and used to collect data. The instrument has a sound psychometric property of 0.82 respectively and reliability coefficient of 0.80. Descriptive statistics of frequency count and percentages was used to analyze the data collected. The study found that the enrolment for primary school pupils was 1,429 (818 males and 666 females); the enrolment for JSS was 183 (98 males and 84 females); the enrolment for SSS was 192 (30 males and 25 females); and the enrolment of special needs children was 1,804 (946 male and 775 females). Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made that the enrolment of special needs children at both basic and secondary schools should be increased, that is, more children with special needs, especially females should be enrolled and accommodated into public schools and specialized teachers employed for them.*

**keywords:** *Special needs, Inclusive education, Gender, Enrolment pattern*

### **Introduction**

Inclusive education means educating all students together, regardless of their differences within the school and classroom environment. It is about creating a learning environment that welcome and support all students, ensuring they have equal opportunities to learn and participate. The aim of an inclusive education is to ensure that all students are treated fairly and get equal opportunities. Within an inclusive education environment, student diversity and uniqueness should be celebrated without discrimination. Sadly, there are still instances of children being treated differently based on their unique qualities. Some issues that students are often discriminated against include disabilities, gender, race and language.

Gombe State is actively working towards inclusive education particularly for persons with disabilities, with notable progress in teacher training and policy development. The establishment of Federal College of Education (Special), Dukku, is a significant step towards training teachers to support learners with disabilities. Furthermore, the Gombe State Commission for Person with Disabilities is advocating for the institutionalization of free education for people with disabilities and aligning universities policies with disabilities inclusion. Education has a significant influence on how societies function and how future generations will live. Education benefits societal members by providing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of education needed to participate in social, economic, and political activities.

A sense of belonging is derived from the sense of value and respect every student feels in education. Despite benefits, education has long been plagued by inequalities, including ensuring access for all, which forms the foundation of inclusion (Martin-Howard & Farmbry, 2020). Inclusion is the process of transitioning from traditional schools to open schools and of achieving collective goals (Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021). Inclusive education is conceptualized differently in various countries around the globe. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2022) informed that between 1994 and 2020, the very definition of inclusive education has evolved. There is a need to relook at the term during and after COVID-19, where instructional strategies have changed. People in different places and at different times conceptualize inclusion in diverse ways.

In Ethiopia, inclusive education is conceptualized as placing students in mainstream classes for support (Ginja & Chen, 2021). In South Africa, inclusive education is viewed holistically by supporting all children with barriers to learning such as poverty, disability, racial discrimination, and sexual orientation, and putting them in mainstream classes (Murungi, 2015). Some Asian countries like Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines view inclusive education as “being the philosophy, process, and practice of welcoming, valuing and supporting all learners in general education environments” (Faragher et al., 2021, p. 23). The diverse views of inclusive education challenge teachers to accommodate all students, regardless of barriers to learning, making inclusion a key concept in education.

Children with disability deserve equal access to quality education which enable them develop into useful members of the society and contribute to the economic growth of their immediate community irrespective of their areas of special needs. Special needs children include all children who, for whatever reasons, are failing to benefit from school (Olisaemeka & Jacob 2020). Young people with disabilities otherwise known as special needs are among the poorest and most marginalized of the world’s youth. United Nations, Division for Social Policy and Development (2011) revealed that there are between 180 and 220 million youth with disabilities worldwide, and nearly 80 percent of them live in developing countries. Due to their inability to make economic contribution to the society and earn a meaningful living wage, they are made to depend on others for alms through begging.

Alhammedi (2023) suggests a need for adequately trained inclusive teachers and specialists to ensure the proper inclusion of students with special needs. Woodcock, et al. (2023) echo the same sentiment that the presence of adequately trained teachers with high levels of self-efficacy makes inclusion goals realizable. A teacher’s presence in the classroom is considered a social good that reinforces the pedagogical principles of cooperation, acceptance and empathy (Dar, 2015). Most education systems continue to reproduce educational models that focus primarily on the transmission of knowledge and preparation for vocational rehabilitation, forgetting that the goals of education also include preparation for life as active citizens, personal development, and retention of a lifelong perspective.

Teachers are challenged to always remember what inclusion means teaching students in diverse classrooms.

Inclusion refers to the removal of barriers, establishing equal opportunities, promoting knowledge, ensuring every student is involved in the learning process at every level, and creating a climate that makes knowledge accessible to everyone (Ainscow, 2020). As the school is called upon to accept and welcome students from different abilities and backgrounds, the goal is to cultivate respect and tolerance toward otherness, and encourage an integrated society with equal educational opportunities (Barrett, 2018). Utilizing Freire's theory, inclusion is changing and transforming modern society where democracy, social justice, equality, tolerance, and acceptance of diversity and cultural otherness, solidarity, and the harmonious association of people could be promoted. Although in Nigeria, special educators, parents of students with special needs, policy-makers and other stakeholders continue to debate the benefits and challenges of inclusive education (Olisaemeka & Jacob 2020), experts have suggested that an inclusive education should be encouraged by governments by way of providing infrastructure and other facilities that enhance learning, socialization and the overall development of children with special needs (Chika, 2011). There is a growing recognition that include students with special needs in general education can provide them with the opportunity to learn in natural stimulating settings, which may also lead to increased acceptance and appreciation of differences (Olisaemeka & Jacob, 2020). This will be possible where the learning environment is stimulating and the teachers are adequately trained on managing the different needs that come with such learning environment.

According to Osakwe (2010 cited in UNESCO, 2020), the school systems now face increasing pressure to raise standards, develop social and personal skills, broaden curricula, pay greater attention to equal educational opportunities and prepare young people for rapidly changing world. Invariably, the modern trend all over the world is shifting towards addressing the educational plights of students with one form of special needs or the other so as to make them relevant. It must be understood that in some developing countries like Nigeria, inclusive education is as an approach to serving children with special needs within general education settings. Consequently, the Federal

Government of Nigeria (2014) states that special education is a formal special educational training given to people (children and adults) with special needs.

However, this is contrary to the international practice where inclusive education is seen “as a reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners” (UNESCO, 2019). Precisely, inclusive education insists that all children with special needs should be included in the traditional classroom to study with their non-disabled peers (Appova, et al. 2022) because socialization of these children will be done at this stage since they have opportunity of interacting with the regular learners. It is anchored on human rights, social justice and equity ideals and through it, segregatory practices are eliminated and students benefit from the socialization and educational processes (Lo, 2007 cited in UNESCO,2020).

Inclusion is when students with disabilities receive their entire academic curriculum in the general education programme. This is different from mainstreaming, which is when students with disabilities spend a portion of their school day in the general education programme and a portion in a separate special education program (Idol, 1997 cited in Appova, et al. 2022). It is an educational approach that ensures all learners, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or needs, have equal opportunities to access quality education in mainstream settings. It promotes diversity, equity, and participation by adapting teaching methods, curricula, and learning environments to accommodate students with disabilities, linguistic differences, socio-economic disadvantages and other marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2020).

According to Ainscow (2021), inclusive education goes beyond mere integration by fostering a sense of belonging, respecting differences, and ensuring that all students receive the support they need to succeed. It is rooted in the principle that diversity enriches the learning experience for everyone and that barriers to learning should be removed rather than students being excluded or segregated. Furthermore, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasizes inclusive education as a fundamental right, advocating for the development of policies and practices that create a more inclusive and equitable educational system (UN, 2006)

Inclusive education aims to create an equitable learning environment where all students, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or circumstances, receive quality education and support.

**Key goals include:**

1. Ensuring Equal Access to Education – Inclusive education seeks to eliminate barriers that prevent marginalized groups, such as children with disabilities, from accessing mainstream education (UNESCO,2020).
2. Promoting Diversity and Equity – It fosters a culture of respect for differences in abilities, cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds, ensuring that all learners have an equal opportunity to succeed (Ainscow,2021).
3. Enhancing Participation and Belonging – The approach encourages active participation of all students in the learning activities, reducing social exclusion and fostering a sense of belonging (Florian & Black-Hawkins,2011).
4. Improving Learning Outcomes for All – By providing individualized support and flexible teaching methods, inclusive education aims to enhance academic achievement and personal development for all learners, not just those with special needs (Mitchell, 2014).
5. Developing Inclusive Teaching Practices – Teachers are trained to use adaptive teaching strategies that accommodate diverse learning styles, promoting collaborative learning environments (Forlin, 2018).
6. Fostering Social and Emotional Development – Inclusive education helps students develop empathy, social skills, and emotional intelligence by interacting with peers from diverse backgrounds, (Booth & Ainscow,2016).
7. Building Sustainable and Inclusive Societies – By promoting equality in education, inclusive education contributes to reducing discrimination and fostering inclusive communities (UNESCO, 2020).

The pedagogy of inclusion emphasizes the equality of educational opportunities that all children should have in a democratic context. The theory of liberation pedagogy advocates for a system of education that

sees learning through empowerment and strongly opposes views aiming to store knowledge in the passive minds of students (Freire, 2018 cited in Appova, et al., 2022). Having education accessible to all promotes the development of free and critical-thinking individuals who are capable of communication, cooperation, respect, and tolerance.

Teachers acquire a dominant role in ensuring the transformative role of the school and the equal learning and personal development opportunities for all students, without exception, in the classroom. The fight against social inequalities lies in the core of liberation pedagogy, aiming at the social and educational reconstruction for fostering inclusive multicultural school environments. When educators embrace liberation pedagogy in the context of inclusive education, it is crucial not to treat students condescendingly or paternally, but rather to accept them as co-teachers (Freire & Shor, 2008 cited in Appova, et al., 2022).

In inclusive education, teachers' roles are both vital and complex. Teachers recognize the characteristics of each student and use interventions to enable them to be independent, active members of a constantly changing society (Ainscow, 2020). Interventions may include the designing of individualized teaching approaches or other educational techniques tailored to diverse learning differences, the systematic application of strategies in the classroom, the planning of comprehensive evaluations of similar approaches, and most importantly, the development of an inclusive educational environment (Nash, et al., 2021). Teachers are the key to the success or failure of students (Woodcock et al., 2023), making inclusive education a particularly challenging endeavor (Rowan et al., 2021).

According to Freire (2018) cited in Appova, et al., (2022), teachers must be in full control of not only professional development but also the transformation of society. Liberating teachers must self-reflect and demonstrate agility to engage in enlightenment and continuous re-creation to see social change (Freire, 2018 cited in Appova, et al, 2022). Teachers and students are not creators of knowledge, but carriers and consumers of information already available. Currently, education does not seem to meet the needs of a society with diverse learning demands, in which both independent and

collaborative learning is essential, as is communication and openness to new knowledge (Appova, et.al.2022).

Inequalities caused by a technocratic education will result in social and economic inequalities for all failing or dropping out of school. Democracies are critical to eliminating educational inequality (Darder, 2017). Educating for life does not only refer to basic education but also include all levels and types of instruction. An emancipatory conception of education must be interwoven with democratic administration. Inclusive education aims to establish a culture of equality, eliminate prejudices against diversity and heterogeneity, and promote differentiated teaching. Teachers could create a more inclusive world by deepening reflection, improving practices, and self-empowerment. The enrolment of children with special needs in schools, particularly in inclusive settings is a multifaceted issue with both progress and persistent challenges. While there is a growing recognition of their right to education and effort to include them in main streams school, various barriers hinder their full participation. Key aspect of school enrolment for children with special needs include right to education, and inclusive education. There are barriers to enrolment such as negative attitudes from teachers, peers, and wider community, inadequate infrastructure and resources, financial constraints and disability-specific challenges.

In many countries, a significant gap exists in school enrolment rate between children with and without disabilities. While there is progress, children with disabilities are still less likely to attend school than their non-disabled peers. The covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the challenges, potentially leading to increase dropout rates and learning losses for students with special needs. In Nigeria, the enrolment pattern for children with special needs reveals a significant gap between policy and practice. While the universal basic education programme aims for free and compulsory free education for all Nigeria children, including those with disabilities, significant barrier hinders actual enrolment and access to quality education for this vulnerable group. Poverty, discrimination, lack of appropriate facilities and insufficient specialized teachers are key factors contributing to the low enrolment rate and limited access to inclusive education (Alhammedi,2023). Enrolment pattern of children with disabilities includes, low enrolment rate, disability type and severity, regional disparities, inclusive education effort and policy framework

(Ginja,2021). The following categories are used to categorise children with exceptional needs: physical (epilepsy, chronic asthma), developmental (down syndrome, autism, dyslexia), behavioural/emotional (bipolar disorder and obstructive behavioural disorder and sensory impaired (blind, visually impaired, deaf or half limited hearing) (Martin-Howard & Farmbry,2020). They are most marginalized and excluded groups in society as a result of daily prejudice brought on by the unfavorable views and a lack of suitable laws and regulation, they are essentially prevented from exercising their legal entitlements to health care, education, and even basic survival. The International Children's Emergency Fund of the United Nation estimates that there are at least 93 million disabled children globally. These kids are frequently among the most disadvantaged people in society, which makes it less likely that they will go to school or have their opinion heard. Additionally, because of their impairment, they are more likely to experience physical abuse and are frequently denied access to adequate nutrition and humanitarian aid in times of crises. Inclusive schools have to be well-equipped in all aspects to cater and deliver quality education for all children. This includes having a balanced curriculum that is appropriate for all categories of children, teachers who have the ability to handle the individual needs within the classroom and thereby promote an environment where personal development, social skills and student participation are strongly encouraged (Balasubramanian, 2012 cited in Appova, et al. 2022). Efthymiou (2023) indicates that at the elementary school level, children with special needs who are included in general education curricula can benefit socially and academically without facing the stigma of segregated or pull-out classrooms. Standards for behavior and instruction are higher, and students with classifications have more opportunity to reach higher standards and become independent learners. It is also believed that integration into the mainstream enables students with special needs to benefit from the stimulation of mixing with relatively more able students and to have the opportunity to observe higher models of social and academic behaviour (Elkins, 1998 cited in Efthymiou, 2023).

Inclusion has academic and social benefits for all students, whether with or without disabilities, such as increased communication and social interaction opportunities, age-appropriate models of

behaviour skills, more active participation in the school community, individualized education goals, as well as access to the rich core curriculum (Grenot-ScheyerJubala, et al.,1996 cited in Efthymiou, 2023). Inclusive education allows children to develop friendships with their peers and feel less social tension about their disabilities. Some people believe that children who are placed in standard classroom environments generally have higher self-esteem than children who are isolated to different classrooms simply because they have special needs (California Special Needs Law Group, 2009 cited in Efthymiou, 2023). The implementation of inclusive education system as against segregated education system has a number of advantages.

These include the fact that it:

- encourages students without special needs to accept and tolerate children with special needs;
- improve the sociability of children with special needs;
- reduces the cost of providing separate education for children with and without special needs;
- eliminates or reduces social stigma associated with people with special needs;
- provides an all-round development of the child with and without special needs; and
- enables children without special needs develop positive attitude towards people with challenging conditions. The need for this study in Gombe State, Nigeria stems from the importance of knowing the pattern and type of disabilities that children with special needs have and the level of enrolment, in order to inform policy changes and help the children acceptably integrate into society.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to examine the enrolment pattern of primary, junior and senior secondary students with special needs in Gombe State Public schools.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were raised and answered in this study

1. What is the enrolment pattern of primary school children with special needs in Gombe State public schools?
2. What is the enrolment pattern of junior and senior secondary school students with special needs in Gombe State public schools?

**Methodology**

This study adopted descriptive survey research. The target population consists of headteachers, principals of public schools and Education Management Information System (EMIS) Staff in Gombe State. Multistage and simple random sampling technique were used in selecting 50 headteachers and 50 principals across all the local government in each of the schools sampled to ascertain whether there is inclusiveness and to know the enrolment pattern of students with special needs in their schools. At the first stage, 100 headteachers and principals were randomly selected across the state. At the second stage, ten local government out of eighteen were purposively sampled because of the peculiarity of this study. Five headteachers and principals were selected from each of the local government

A Checklist was designed and used to collect data. The checklist has 2 sections A and B. Section A was on bio-data and Section B was on inclusive education. The instrument has a sound psychometric property of 0.82 respectively and with-test reliability coefficient of 0.80.

The researcher employed 11 research assistants and trained them on the relevance of the instruments. The researcher and research assistants started with a scooping/inception meeting with education stakeholders and team of EMIS officers, education planners/managers, and other stakeholders. The EMIS Officers visited each school in each local government in Gombe state and administered the checklist, two days after the EMIS Officers visited the schools to collect the checklist back. Descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages was used to analyze the data collected.

**Results**

**Research Question 1:** What is the enrolment pattern of primary school children with special needs in Gombe State public schools?

**Table 1: Shows the enrolment pattern of primary school children with special needs in Gombe State public schools?**

Type of Disability	Primary Schools		
	Male	Female	Total
Blind / visually impaired	148 (56%)	115 (44%)	263
Physically challenged	258 (57%%)	192 (43%)	450
Mentally challenged	130 (55%)	106 (45%)	236
Hearing / speech impaired	176 (53%)	156 (47%)	332
Autism	61 (57%)	46 (43%)	107
Albinism	45 (47%%)	51 (53%)	96
<b>Total</b>	<b>818 (55%)</b>	<b>666 (45%)</b>	<b>1,484</b>

**Source: Fieldwork, 2024**

It could be observed from the enrolment pattern of primary school children with special needs in Gombe State public schools that the blind/visually impaired are 263 (males 148 (56%), females 115 (44%)), the physically challenged are 450 (males 258 (258%), females 192 (43%)), the mentally challenged are 236 (males 130 (55%), females 106 (45%)), the hearing/speech impaired are 332 176 (53%) males, females 156 (47%)), the autism are 107 (males 61 (57%), females 46 (43%)), and the albinism are 96 (males 45 (47%), females 51 (53%)). Additionally, the overall enrolment of primary school pupils with special needs in Gombe State public schools is 1,429 which is made up of 818 males (55%) and 666 (45%) females. It could be observed from the analysis that the enrolment of males with special needs are more than their female counterpart.

**Research Question 2:** What is the enrolment pattern of junior and senior secondary school students with special needs in Gombe State public schools?

**Table 2: Shows the enrolment pattern of junior and senior secondary school students with special needs in Gombe State public schools**

Type of Disability	Junior Secondary			Senior Secondary			Total Students for Junior & Senior secondary Schools	
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Blind / visually impaired	16 (57%)	12 (43%)	28	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	9	20	17
Physically challenged	39 (51%)	37(49%)	76	18 (62%)	11 (38%)	29	57	48
Mentally challenged	18 (67%)	9 (33%)	27	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	6	21	12
Hearing / speech impaired	14 (50%)	14 (50%)	28	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	10	18	20
Autism	7 (58%)	5 (42%)	12	0	0	0	7	5
Albinism	4 (36%)	7 (64%)	11	1 (100%)	0	1	5	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>98 (54%)</b>	<b>84 (46%)</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>30 (55%)</b>	<b>25 (45%)</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>128(54%)</b>	<b>109(46%)</b>

**Source: Fieldwork, 2024**

It could be observed from the enrolment pattern of junior and secondary school students with special needs in Gombe State public schools that the enrolment in JSS is 182 with 98 males representing 54% and 84 females representing 46%. Similarly, the enrolment in SSS is 55 with 30 males representing 55% and 25 females representing 45%. The data revealed that the total enrolment of students with special needs in the junior and senior secondary schools in Gombe State is 237 comprising 128 (54%) males and 109 (46%) females. It could be observed from the analysis that the enrolment of males with special needs are more than their female counterpart. It also shows that enrolment of special needs children into junior and senior secondary schools is poor. By implication, Gombe State must do everything possible to ensure that children with special needs are enrolled into public junior and senior secondary schools.

### **Conclusion**

At primary school level, enrolment of special needs children is high, but low at junior and senior secondary school level. The Government of Gombe State should increase awareness of inclusive policy to stakeholders to ensure that parents enrol their special needs children in public schools. It is very clear in this study that enrolment at primary school is high but low at junior and senior secondary schools. This might be as a result of out of school children syndrome or other related factors such as stigmatization, low income or religious believe. Hence, Government should ensure that there is a campaign that needs to be done on inclusive education in other to increase enrolment of students with special needs.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made:

1. The Government of Gombe State should implement the inclusive education policy, thereby catering for all the different categories of special needs children.
2. Government should involve in different awareness strategies to ensure that parents enrol their special needs children in school.
3. More inclusive classrooms should be built and adequate special needs facilities provided.
4. Specialized teachers should be employed and trained on inclusive education.

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