ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION FOR LIFE-LONG LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES IN UPPER BASIC SCHOOLS IN NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study assessed the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education in fostering lifelong learning opportunities among learners in public upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The population comprised teachers and school administrators in public upper basic schools, from which 298 respondents were selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Four research questions and two directional hypotheses, tested at the 0.05 level of significance, guided the study. Data were collected using validated instruments: the Implementation of Inclusive Education Practices in Upper Basic Schools Questionnaire (IIEPUBSQ), the Equity in Learners' Access, Participation, and Learning Opportunities Questionnaire (ELAPLOQ), and the Effectiveness of Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Promoting Students' Readiness for Lifelong Learning Questionnaire (EIPPPSRLLQ). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.782, 0.734, and 0.739, respectively, indicated acceptable internal consistency. Data were analysed using mean, standard deviation, Pearson product-moment correlation, and simple linear regression. Findings revealed that inclusive education practices were implemented to a moderate extent, while equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities was high. Systemic barriers, including inadequate resources, infrastructural constraints, and institutional limitations, challenged implementation. Inclusive pedagogical practices had a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship with learners' readiness for lifelong learning. Institutional factors significantly and positively predicted the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. The study concludes that strengthening inclusive pedagogical practices, addressing systemic barriers, and improving institutional support are essential for promoting lifelong learning opportunities. It recommends investment in teacher professional development, inclusive learning resources, school infrastructure, supportive leadership, and policies addressing systemic barriers.

Keywords: Equitable education, inclusive education, lifelong learning, upper basic schools.

1.0 Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a crucial factor in development. It equips individuals with the skills necessary to participate in society and achieve sustainable growth (UNESCO, 2021). By 2030, the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) set by the United Nations aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). This goal highlights the importance of providing fair and high-quality educational opportunities to everyone, regardless of gender, disability, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or geographical location (UNESCO, 2020).

Inclusive education promotes a welcoming environment in which all learners have equal opportunities, necessitating adaptations to curricula, teaching methods, and support services. Equity supports inclusion by providing the necessary resources for all learners to achieve similar educational outcomes, positioning these resources as foundational elements of quality education and lifelong learning (UNESCO).

Lifelong learning is increasingly recognized as a continuous process that extends beyond formal schooling (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2022). It fosters essential competencies such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, digital literacy, creativity, and adaptability, which are crucial in rapidly changing societies (OECD, 2021). As a result, schools are expected to offer learning experiences that prepare students not only for examinations but also for lifelong personal, social, and economic development (UNESCO, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2023). Although global access to basic education has improved, significant disparities in learning outcomes, participation, and completion rates persist among vulnerable groups, including girls, students from low-income households, displaced children, and those in rural areas (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2023). Additionally, many education systems face challenges, including shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate infrastructure, limited instructional materials, and insufficient support services for inclusive education, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2024).

Nigeria has shown its commitment to inclusive and equitable education through the National Policy on Education, based on the agenda of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient funding, limited teacher capacity, weak policy implementation, and persistent disparities between rural and urban areas continue to hinder the quality and equity of education (Federal Ministry of Education [FME], 2021; UNESCO, 2024). These issues are particularly prominent in North-Central Nigeria; Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and the Federal Capital Territory are among the affected states and territories. Here, socio-economic inequalities, teacher shortages, lack of instructional resources, poverty, migration, cultural diversity, and disability-related barriers significantly impact learners' access, participation, retention, and academic achievement (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

Upper basic education (JSS I-III) is a critical stage for developing the cognitive, technical, and life skills necessary for senior secondary school. The effectiveness of this education level relies on teacher competence, learner-centred teaching methods, sufficient learning resources, accessible infrastructure, supportive school leadership, parental involvement, continuous

assessment, and effective policy implementation. These factors promote learner participation, academic achievement, and essential lifelong learning competencies. Despite the increasing attention to inclusive education in Nigeria, there is less empirical evidence regarding its effectiveness at the upper basic school level, especially in North-Central Nigeria. Most existing studies have focused on access, enrollment, special education, or policy implementation, with less attention paid to how inclusive and equitable education promotes chances for lifelong learning. Therefore, this study aims to assess the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education in promoting lifelong learning by examining how inclusive practices, equitable resource provision, teacher preparedness, learning environments, and instructional processes contribute to meaningful participation, quality learning, and lifelong learning competencies. The findings are expected to provide valuable evidence to enhance inclusive education policies and practices and advance the achievement of SDG 4 in Nigeria.

However, this study is grounded in Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978) and is supported by Rawls' Theory of Justice (1971) and Jarvis' Lifelong Learning Theory (2007). Together, these theories explain how inclusive and equitable educational practices foster lifelong learning in upper basic schools. According to Vygotsky's theory, learning is socially mediated, and knowledge is constructed through interactions with peers and teachers. Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) are key concepts that highlight the value of instructional support in helping students achieve higher levels of comprehension. Inclusive classrooms that honor diversity enhance participation and improve educational quality, aligning with UNESCO's view that every learner should have opportunities to reach their full potential. Rawls' Theory of Justice complements this by advocating for fair distribution of educational resources based on individual needs, ensuring equity rather than identical treatment for all learners. This aligns with the perspective that diversity should be a strength in education. Jarvis' Lifelong Learning Theory asserts that education is an ongoing process beyond formal schooling, advocating for the development of skills essential for lifelong participation in society. This aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4, emphasising both access and the acquisition of necessary competencies. This integrated framework suggests that effective inclusive education in upper basic schools depends on inclusive teaching practices (Vygotsky), equitable resource distribution (Rawls), and fostering lifelong learning skills (Jarvis). By providing supportive environments and equitable policies, schools can better prepare learners with the knowledge and skills for lifelong learning, thus supporting Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is to ensure that everyone has access to high-quality, egalitarian education for lifelong learning (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). All students in Nigeria, regardless of gender, location, socioeconomic background, or handicap, are to have equitable access to high-quality education as stated in the National Policy on Education and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014). However, there are several issues that public upper basic schools must address, including poor facilities, overcrowded classrooms, and underprepared teachers, all of which impede student engagement and academic success (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2022). There is still little empirical evidence on how well inclusive education fosters opportunities for these students to pursue lifelong learning. Meanwhile, instead of examining how inclusive education enhance lifelong learning, the majority of research has concentrated on academic success and educational

access. To close this gap and support SDG 4 in Nigeria, this study assesses the efficacy of inclusive education in upper basic schools.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education for lifelong learning opportunities in Upper Basic Schools. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the extent to which inclusive education practices are implemented.
2. Assess the level of equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities.
3. Examine the relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning.
4. Determine the extent to which institutional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors predict the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education for lifelong learning opportunities.

Research Questions

The study was directed by the following research questions.

1. To what extent are inclusive education practices implemented in upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria?
2. What is the level of equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities?
3. How effective are inclusive pedagogical practices in promoting students' readiness for lifelong learning?
4. What institutional, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors influence the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education for lifelong learning?

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant positive relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning.

Hypothesis 2: Institutional factors significantly and positively predict the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education.

2.0 Methodology

This study evaluated the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education in fostering lifelong learning among learners in public upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted, with teachers and school administrators serving as the respondents. Four research questions and two directional hypotheses, tested at the 0.05 significance level, guided the study. A multistage sampling procedure was employed. First, three states were selected from the seven states in the North-Central geopolitical zone using stratified random sampling to ensure adequate geographical representation. Public upper basic schools in the selected states were subsequently selected through simple random sampling. In contrast, teachers and school administrators were selected in proportion to the number of eligible respondents in each school. The resulting sample comprised 298 respondents, with the sample size determined using an appropriate statistical estimation procedure. Learners were not included as respondents because the study was designed to assess the implementation and effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education from the perspectives of key educational personnel directly involved in its

planning, implementation, and monitoring. The selection of three states provided reasonable geographical coverage of the North-Central region while ensuring the efficient use of available resources.

Data were collected using three validated instruments: the Implementation of Inclusive Education Practices in Upper Basic Schools Questionnaire *(IIEPUBSQ),* which assessed the extent to which inclusive education practices were implemented; the Equity in Learners' Access, Participation, and Learning Opportunities Questionnaire *(ELAPLOQ),* which assessed equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities; and the Effectiveness of Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Promoting Students' Readiness for Lifelong Learning Questionnaire *(EIPPPSRLLQ),* which assessed the effectiveness of inclusive pedagogical practices in promoting students' readiness for lifelong learning. The instruments demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.782, 0.734, and 0.739, respectively. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1), while responses to open-ended items were analysed thematically. Trained research assistants administered the instruments after obtaining approval from the relevant educational authorities. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), Pearson product-moment correlation, and simple linear regression. The directional hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 alpha level, with statistical significance established when $p < .05$.

3.0 Presentation of Results and Discussion

Bio Data

Table 1:

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 298)

Variable	Category	Frequency(n=298)	Percentage
Gender	Male	157	52.7
	Female	141	47.3
Age	Below 20Years	2	.7
	21-30Years	67	22.5
	31-40Years	153	51.3
	41-50Years	38	12.8
	50Years and above	38	12.8
Qualification	Diploma/ND	6	2.0
	HND/bachelor's degree	219	73.5
	PGD/master's degree	40	13.4
	PhD	33	11.1
Geopolitical Zone	North-Central	298	100.0
LGA/State of Origin	Kwara State/Ilorin East, Offa, Moro	46	15.4
	Nasarawa State/Lafia Toto, Keffi	85	28.5
	Benue State/Markurdi, Gboko, Otukpo	167	56.0
Religion	Christianity	175	58.7
	Islam	116	38.9
	African Traditional Religion (ATR)	7	2.3
Occupation	Unemployed	6	2.0
	Civil Servant	292	98.0

Variable	Category	Frequency(n=298)	Percentage
Teaching Level	Primary School Teacher	5	1.7
	Secondary School Teacher	293	98.3

Source: Authors Compilation.

Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the 298 respondents in the study. Of these, 157 (52.7%) were male, and 141 (47.3%) were female, indicating a balanced gender distribution. The majority (153; 51.3%) were aged 31–40 years, followed by 67 (22.5%) aged 21–30 years. Respondents aged 41–50 and above 50 years each made up 12.8% (38 respondents), while only 2 (0.7%) were under 20. Most respondents had substantial teaching experience, making them well-suited to evaluating inclusive education practices. In terms of education, 219 (73.5%) held HND/Bachelor's degrees, 40 (13.4%) had postgraduate qualifications, 33 (11.1%) held PhDs, and 6 (2.0%) had diplomas. All respondents were from Nigeria's North-Central geopolitical zone, with 167 (56.0%) from Benue State, 85 (28.5%) from Nasarawa State, and 46 (15.4%) from Kwara State, ensuring adequate representation. Religiously, 175 (58.7%) identified as Christian, 116 (38.9%) as Muslim, and 7 (2.3%) as adhering to African Traditional Religion. Occupation-wise, 292 (98.0%) were civil servants, primarily secondary school teachers (293, or 98.3%), aligning with the study's focus on inclusive education in upper basic schools. Generally, the demographics indicate a qualified, experienced, and diverse group of teachers from the selected states, providing a solid basis for evaluating the effectiveness of inclusive education.

Research Question 1: To what extent are inclusive education practices implemented in upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria?

Table2:

Mean and Standard Deviation of Implementation of Inclusive Education Practices in Upper Basic Schools (N = 298)

S/no	ITEM STATEMENT	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	Teachers regularly use inclusive teaching methods to meet the needs of all learners.	6 (2)	45 (15)	146 (49)	85 (29)	16 (5)	3.20	.83	Agreed
2	Students with diverse learning needs are actively included in classroom and school activities.	12 (4)	55 (19)	104 (35)	104 (35)	23 (8)	3.23	.97	Agreed
3	Learning resources and assistive materials are available and accessible to all students.	13 (4)	44 (15)	136 (46)	102 (34)	3 (1)	3.13	.83	Agreed
4	School management monitors and supports the implementation of inclusive education practices.	17(8)	65 (22)	103 (35)	67 (23)	46 (15)	3.20	1.12	Agreed
5	Teachers receive adequate training and support to implement inclusive education effectively.	21 (7)	45 (15)	120 (40)	104 (35)	8 (3)	3.11	.94	Agreed
	Aggregate						**3.17**	**0.94**	

Source: Authors Compilation. *Note: SD = Standard Deviation*

Table 2 presents respondents' views regarding the application of inclusive teaching methods. Overall, the results indicate a moderate level of implementation, as reflected in an aggregate mean of 3.17 (SD = 0.94), exceeding the criterion mean of 3.00. Item 2 recorded the highest mean (3.23; SD = 0.97), suggesting that students with diverse learning needs are reasonably included in classroom and school activities. Items 1 and 4, each with a mean of 3.20, show agreement that teachers employ inclusive instructional strategies and that school management monitors and supports inclusive practices. Item 3 (mean = 3.13; SD = 0.83) indicates general availability of learning resources and assistive materials, though access appears uneven across schools. Item 5 had the lowest mean (3.11; SD = 0.94), suggesting that teacher training and support for inclusive education remain the least developed component, underscoring the need for enhanced professional development and sustained capacity- building initiatives.

Theme 1: Inclusive Education Practices in Upper Basic Schools Implementation

The findings indicate that inclusive education practices are moderately implemented in upper basic schools, aligning with the quantitative data (Aggregate Mean = 3.17, SD = 0.94). Teachers use strategies such as differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and individualised support to help students with diverse needs participate actively in lessons and activities. While schools utilise resources such as textbooks and visual aids, there is a shortage of specialised assistive devices, such as Braille materials and hearing aids. Support for inclusive education from school management is noted, though limited funding and weak policy implementation pose challenges. Participants reported attending workshops on inclusive education, but emphasised the need for more hands-on training, particularly in disability-specific strategies and assistive technologies. One participant remarked on the importance of continuous practical training to enhance their teaching for learners with special needs.

Research Question 2: What is the level of equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities?

Table 3:

Mean and Standard Deviation on equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities in upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria (N = 298)

S/no	ITEM STATEMENT	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD	Remarks
6.	All students, regardless of background, have equal access to learning resources and materials.	12 (4)	55 (19	104 (35)	104 (35)	23 (8)	3.24	.97	Agreed
7.	Classroom activities allow full participation of students with diverse abilities and needs.	13 (4)	44 (15)	136 (46)	102 (34)	3 (1)	3.13	.83	Agreed
8.	School policies ensure fairness in access to co-curricular and extracurricular programs.	17 (6)	65 (22)	103(35)	67(23)	46(15)	3.20	1.1 2	Agreed
9.	Teachers distribute attention and support equally among all students in the classroom.	20(7)	45(15)	120(40)	104(35)	8(3)	3.11	.94	Agreed
10.	Students perceive that learning opportunities and resources are	29(10)	76(26)	83(28)	95(32)	15(5)	2.97	1.0 8	Agreed

S/no	ITEM STATEMENT	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD	Remarks
	fairly provided across the school.								
	Aggregate						**3.13**	**0.99**	**Agreed**

Source: Authors Compilation. *Note: SD = Standard Deviation*

Table 3 demonstrates that the overall level of equity in access, participation, and learning opportunities for learners is favourable. The aggregate mean score is 3.13 (SD = 0.99), which is above the criterion mean, indicating that respondents generally agree that equitable practices exist in their schools. Specifically, respondents indicated that all students have equal access to learning resources and materials (M = 3.24, SD = 0.97). That school policies promote fairness in access to co-curricular and extracurricular programmes (M = 3.20, SD = 1.12), that classroom activities support the participation of learners with diverse abilities and needs (M = 3.13, SD = 0.83), and that teachers provide equitable attention and support to all learners (M = 3.11, SD = 0.94). However, while respondents also agreed that students perceive learning opportunities and resources as fairly distributed across the school, this item received the lowest mean score (M = 2.97, SD = 1.08). This suggests that perceptions of fairness in distribution are weaker and may need further improvement. Thus, the findings show significant progress in promoting equity in access, participation, and learning opportunities. Nonetheless, there is room to enhance learners' perceptions of fairness in the distribution of educational opportunities and resources.

Theme 2: Equity in Learners' Access, Participation, and Learning Opportunities

Participants noted that upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria generally provide equitable access to educational resources and learning opportunities for students, regardless of gender, socio-economic background, or ability. While teachers use inclusive strategies like group work and differentiated instruction, some learners with disabilities face challenges due to a lack of assistive devices. School policies promote equal participation in activities, and teachers are seen as supportive and fair. However, barriers such as inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient support for learners with special educational needs were identified. These qualitative findings support the quantitative results (Aggregate Mean = 3.13), indicating that equity in learners' access, participation, and learning opportunities is generally evident in upper basic schools. However, further improvements are needed to strengthen inclusive practices and ensure equitable learning outcomes for all learners.

Research Question 3: How effective are inclusive pedagogical practices in promoting students' readiness for lifelong learning in upper basic schools?

Table 4:

Mean and Standard Deviation of inclusive pedagogical practices in promoting students' readiness for lifelong learning in North-Central Nigeria

S/no	ITEM STATEMENT	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD	Remarks
11.	Inclusive teaching methods in my school enhance students' engagement and interest in learning.	14(5)	45(15)	126(42)	84(28)	29(10)	3.23	.98	Agreed
12.	Classroom activities help students	12(4)	48(16	106 (36)	127(43	5(2)	3.22	.88	Agreed

S/no	ITEM STATEMENT	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	SD	Remarks
	develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills.		)		)				
13.	Inclusive pedagogical practices prepare students to continue learning beyond the classroom.	21(7)	45(15)	120(40)	104(35)	8(3)	3.11	.94	Agreed
14.	Teachers provide adequate support to help students become independent and self-directed learners.	29(10)	76(26)	83(28)	95(32)	15(5)	2.97	1.08	Agreed
15.	Students feel confident in applying skills learned in school to real-life situations and future learning opportunities.	37(13)	41(14)	98(33)	96(32)	26(9)	3.11	1.12	Agreed
	Aggregate						**3.13**	**1.00**	**Agreed**

Source: Authors Compilation. *Note: SD = Standard Deviation*

Table 4 shows that respondents generally agreed that inclusive pedagogical practices effectively promote students' readiness for lifelong learning, as indicated by the positive mean ratings for all items. Respondents agreed in particular that inclusive teaching methods enhance students' engagement and interest in learning (M = 3.23, SD = 0.98), making this the highest-rated item. They also noted that classroom activities help students develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills (M = 3.22, SD = 0.88), suggesting that inclusive instructional practices foster essential competencies for lifelong learning. Furthermore, respondents agreed that inclusive pedagogical practices prepare students to continue learning beyond the classroom (M = 3.11, SD = 0.94) and that students feel confident in applying the skills they have acquired to real-life situations and future learning opportunities (M = 3.11, SD = 1.12). Although the support teachers provide in helping students become independent and self-directed learners received the lowest mean score (M = 2.97, SD = 1.08), it was still rated positively, indicating that this area requires further attention. Overall, the findings suggest that inclusive pedagogical practices positively contribute to student engagement, critical thinking, independence, and preparedness for lifelong learning. However, there is a need for greater emphasis on supporting students in becoming more self-directed learners.

Theme 3: Effectiveness of Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Promoting Students' Readiness for Lifelong Learning

Analysis of participants' responses indicates that inclusive pedagogical practices are effective in preparing students for lifelong learning. Teachers utilise approaches such as differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, peer tutoring, and ICT integration to accommodate diverse learners. These practices enhance student engagement and motivation and create supportive classroom environments. Participants noted that inclusive practices encourage self-directed learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving through group discussions and project-based tasks. Such experiences promote independent thinking and responsibility for learning. Students appreciate these practices for building confidence and improving academic performance, while teachers assess their progress through varied methods and provide individualised support. Adaptations in instructional methods enable students to apply their knowledge in practical

contexts, enhancing their preparedness for future education and employment. Generally, the findings show that inclusive pedagogical practices significantly contribute to students' readiness for lifelong learning by fostering engagement, critical thinking, and the practical application of skills. Thus, the qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative evidence that inclusive pedagogical practices are effective in promoting students' readiness for lifelong learning.

Hypothesis 1: There is a significant positive relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning.

Table 5a.
Pearson Correlation between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning (N = 298)

		Inclusive Pedagogical Practices	Learners' Readiness for Lifelong Learning
Inclusive Pedagogical Practices	Pearson Correlation	1	.737**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	298	298
Learners' Readiness for Lifelong Learning	Pearson Correlation	.737**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	298	298

Source: Authors Compilation.

Table 5b:
Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Analysis of the Relationship between Inclusive Pedagogical Practices and Learners' Readiness for Lifelong Learning (N = 298)

Variables	N	Mean	SD	r	p-value	Decision
Inclusive Pedagogical Practices	298	12.62	2.62	.737**	0.000	Significant
Learners' Readiness for Lifelong Learning	298	9.46	2.42			

Source: Authors Compilation.

Tables 5a and 5b present the Pearson product-moment correlation between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning among 298 respondents. The result indicates a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning, $r(296) = .737$, $p < .005$. This implies that higher levels of inclusive pedagogical practices are associated with higher levels of learners' readiness for lifelong learning. Since the p-value (.000) is less than the .05 significance level, the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is supported. The finding suggests that strengthening inclusive pedagogical practices is associated with greater readiness among learners to engage in lifelong learning.

Hypothesis 2: Institutional factors significantly and positively predict the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education.

Table 6:
Shows the summary of the findings about hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis	Regression Weights	Beta Coefficient	R^2	F	p-value	Hypothesis Supported
H_2	IF -- IE	0.615	0.466	258.027	.000	Yes

Source: Authors Compilation. *Note: *p > 0.05. IF= Institutional Factors, IE= Inclusive Effectiveness*

Table 6 presents the regression analysis examining whether institutional factors significantly and positively predict the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. The result indicates that institutional factors made a significant positive contribution to the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education, with a standardised regression coefficient (β) of .615, $R^2 = .466$, $F(1, 296) = 258.03$, $p < .001$. The R^2 value of .466 indicates that institutional factors explained 46.6% of the variance in the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. The significant F statistic further indicates that the regression model provides a statistically significant prediction of the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. The positive beta coefficient ($\beta = .615$) indicates that higher levels of favourable institutional factors were associated with higher effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. Therefore, since $p < .005$, the result is statistically significant at the .05 level, and Hypothesis 2 is supported. This finding suggests that institutional factors are significant positive predictors of the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education.

Discussion of Findings

This section presents the study's findings on the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education in promoting lifelong learning opportunities. The results of the first research question indicate that inclusive education practices are implemented to a moderate extent in these schools. These findings are in line with the work of Angwaomaodoko (2023), who reported that although Nigeria has adopted inclusive education policies, their implementation remains moderate due to inadequate resources, limited teacher preparedness, and infrastructural challenges. The author observed that while progress has been made in mainstreaming learners with diverse needs, the effective implementation of inclusive practices remains constrained by institutional and systemic barriers.

The second research question revealed significant progress in promoting equity in access, participation, and learning opportunities. The results of this study align with Ayoko (2025), who found that basic schools are increasingly adopting inclusive instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, active learner participation, and equal learning opportunities. These efforts ensure that learners from diverse backgrounds can meaningfully engage in the teaching and learning process. This indicates a growing commitment to equitable and inclusive education in Nigerian basic schools.

The third research question indicates that inclusive pedagogical practices positively enhance students' engagement, critical thinking, independence, and readiness for lifelong learning, a finding supported by corresponding hypothesis one, which posits a strong positive relationship between inclusive pedagogical practices and learners' readiness for lifelong learning. This finding aligns with Florian and Beaton (2018), who argued that inclusive pedagogy promotes active participation, learner autonomy, and meaningful learning experiences for all students, thereby fostering the competencies necessary for lifelong learning. Also agrees with UNESCO (2020), which emphasised that learner-centred and inclusive teaching approaches strengthen learners' competencies, participation, and motivation for lifelong learning.

Additionally, hypothesis two finds that institutional factors significantly and positively predict the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. This is supported by Ainscow (2020), who emphasised that effective school leadership, supportive policies, adequate resources, and professional teacher development are critical institutional conditions for successful inclusive education.

4.0 Conclusion

The study concludes that inclusive and equitable education has positive contributions to lifelong learning opportunities in upper basic schools in North-Central Nigeria. Schools have made significant progress in providing equitable access, participation, and learning opportunities for diverse learners, although inclusive education practices are only moderately implemented.

The findings further indicate that inclusive pedagogical practices significantly enhance learners' readiness for lifelong learning and are strongly associated with students' engagement, critical thinking, and independent learning. Additionally, institutional factors play a crucial role in predicting the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education. This highlights the importance of supportive policies, adequate resources, effective school leadership, and teacher capacity development. Therefore, strengthening both inclusive pedagogical practices and institutional support is essential to improving the effectiveness of inclusive and equitable education and enhancing lifelong learning opportunities for all learners.

Recommendations

The study's findings and the previously mentioned data led to the following recommendations being suggested as necessary:

1. Educational authorities should enhance the implementation of inclusive education to improve the way inclusive education is implemented by providing adequate resources, assistive learning materials, and ongoing monitoring to improve inclusive practices in upper basic schools.
2. School administrators should promote equitable access and participation by ensuring that all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equal opportunities for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equal opportunities to engage in learning and participate in school activities.
3. Teachers should receive encouragement and support through regular professional development programmes to adopt inclusive teaching practices that foster learner engagement, critical thinking, independent learning, and lifelong learning skills.

4. Governments and school management should strengthen institutional support through effective leadership, sufficient funding, provision of inclusive learning facilities, and continuous teacher preparation to improve the efficacy of inclusive and equitable education.

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