

Knowledge, Perceptions and Attitudes of Pre-Service Teachers Toward Inclusive Education in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study evaluate the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of the pre-service teachers toward the inclusive education in Lagos State, Nigeria, at a time when the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018 and the revised National Policy on the Inclusive Education (2023) have created a very strong legislative mandate for the inclusion that classroom practice has yet to meet up with. Rooted in a post-positivist paradigm and employing a descriptive cross-sectional survey design, the study collected data from 34 final-year pre-service teachers across universities and the colleges of education in Lagos State using the adapted Pre-Service Teacher Inclusive Readiness Questionnaire (PTIRQ). Data were analyzed using the descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) and frequency distributions. The outcomes indicate that pre-service teachers hold a moderate-to-strong theoretical knowledge of inclusive principles, a generally optimistic, rights-based orientation toward inclusion, and positive attitudes toward teaching learners with disabilities, while expressing some apprehension about their practical readiness to manage changing classrooms. The findings suggest that an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Lagos State is succeeding in transmitting the conceptual and moral case for an inclusion but leaves the graduating teachers under-prepared in the applied competencies differentiation, behavioral management, and collaboration with specialists that translate their belief into classroom practice. The study recommends a curriculum reform in ITE programme, expanded practicum placements in an inclusive settings, and closer attention to the limitation that this early-career optimism may not survive using the first contact with an under-resourced schools.

Keywords: Inclusive Education; Pre-Service Teachers; Teacher Knowledge; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Readiness; Lagos State; Nigeria.

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I. INTRODUCTION

➤ Background

The Global education systems have changed quickly away from the segregating learners with disabilities toward the models of an inclusive education, rooted in the recognition that the access to quality education is a human right rather than a privilege reserved for the neurotypical or physically able learners (UNESCO, 1994; United Nations, 2015). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education established that inclusive mainstream schools are the most effective means of combating discrimination and achieving Education for All (UNESCO, 1994), a principle later reinforced by Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (United Nations, 2006, 2015).

Nigeria has changed or watered down these international commitments through the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018, which outlaws the discrimination and requires public schools

to be physically and pedagogically accessible, and through the National Policy on Inclusive Education, introduced in 2016 and revised in 2023 (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2018; Federal Ministry of Education, 2016, 2023). Yet the successful completion of these policies depends largely on teachers, who function as the front-line actors within schools; research continuously shows that the effectiveness of an inclusive education is shaped less by the policy intent than by the teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and confidence in managing the diverse classrooms (Ajuwon, 2012).

Because the pre-service teachers are still forming this knowledge and these attitudes during Initial Teacher Education, their profile at the point of graduation offers an early signal of whether the teaching pipeline entering the Lagos State schools is equipped for inclusive practice, or whether it is inheriting the same gaps and misconceptions that have historically limited inclusion in Nigerian classrooms.

➤ Statement of the Problem

Policy cannot work on itself: it depends on a competent, willing, and supported teaching workforce. The existing

literature indicates a troubling pattern in which the many Nigerian teachers continue to view disability through a medical or spiritual lens rather than an educational one, and report feeling ill-equipped to manage an inclusive classrooms (Fakolade et al., 2009). There remains, however, an insufficient data on pre-service teachers specifically the trainees who will shortly enter this workforce. Are teacher trainees graduating with modern, rights-based knowledge of inclusion (for example, Universal Design for Learning), or are they inheriting the same deficit-oriented assumptions as the practitioners who came before them? This study addresses that question by examining the knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes of final-year pre-service teachers in Lagos State.

➤ *Aim and Objectives*

This study aims to investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of pre-service teachers toward inclusive education in Lagos State, in order to inform evidence-based reform of Initial Teacher Education. The specific objectives are to:

- Assess pre-service teachers' knowledge of the principles and practices of inclusive education;
- Examine pre-service teachers' attitudes toward including students with diverse learning needs;
- Identify factors that shape pre-service teachers' perceptions of inclusive education; and
- Consider the implications of these findings for teacher-training curricula in Lagos State.

➤ *Research Questions*

- What is the current level of knowledge of the pre-service teachers in Lagos State regarding an inclusive education?
- What attitudes do pre-service teachers use toward including students with disabilities in the regular classrooms?
- What perceptions do the pre-service teachers hold about the feasibility of implementing an inclusive education in Lagos State schools?

➤ *Significance of the Study*

For the teacher-education institutions, the findings explain the specific gaps in trainees' knowledge that can change the restructuring of Teacher initial Education curricula to prioritize high-leverage practices such as the differentiation and behavioral management. For policymakers, the findings offer an empirical evidence on whether the barrier to inclusion among incoming teachers is mainly just a training deficit or a resource deficit. Theoretically, the study continue the Knowledge, Attitudes, and Perceptions (KAP) framework (adapted from Jacob & Pillay, 2022) to the Nigerian urban context, with a specific attention to the pre-service population.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Theoretical Framework: The Social Model of Disability and the Theory of Planned Behaviour*

This study pick on the Social Model of Disability and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) as complementary

lenses for understanding the teacher readiness for an inclusion. The Social Model, advanced by Oliver (1990, 2013), rejects the Medical Model's framing of disability as a deficit located within an individual. It instead locates the disability in environmental, attitudinal, and institutional barriers in the Nigerian context, overcrowded classrooms, inaccessible buildings, inflexible curricula, and scarce teaching tools (Ajuwon, 2012). Under this model, the goal change from "fixing" the learner to removing the barriers that exclude them.

The Theory of The Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) complements this by explaining how these attitudes change into behaviour through the three components: the attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. For the pre-service teachers, the attitudes formed during a coursework reflect an exposure to the rights-based, social-justice framing of an inclusion; subjective norms reflect the expectations delivered by lecturers, supervising teachers, and institutional culture; and the perceived behavioral control reflects the trainees' confidence in their own capacity to deliver an inclusive instruction, a confidence shaped by the balance of theoretical and practical training they receive (Fakolade et al., 2009).

➤ *Pre-Service Readiness and the Risk of "Reality Shock"*

A continuous theme in the literature is a divergence in the perception between those entering the teaching profession and those who have spent their years within it. Jacob and Pillay (2022) found that pre-service teachers generally hold a positive, optimistic attitudes toward an inclusion, shaped by theoretical, rights-based coursework that frames inclusion as a moral imperative. This optimism, however, has been shown to wane sharply once trainees enter the under-resourced school systems a phenomenon described as a "reality shock" (Ajuwon, 2012). Understanding the starting point of this process the knowledge and attitudes trainees hold before they encounter the classroom is therefore important to designing interventions that sustain the early-career enthusiasm rather than allow it to collapse on a contact with practice.

➤ *Training and the Competence–Confidence Link*

The literature continuously points to a gap between the theoretical and the practical in the Nigerian teacher education. Ajuwon (2012) argues that while the teacher-education programme cover the process of special education, they rarely teach the pragmatics process of managing a mixed-ability classroom, adapting a lesson plan in the real time, or handling the behavioral disruption without resorting to an exclusion. The Empirical evidence links this technical gap to attitude: trainees who feel competent, because they have received a relevant training, report more positive attitudes toward inclusion, while those lacking the training report greater anxiety (Fakolade et al., 2009). This suggests that a strong theoretical foundation, without matching practical exposure, may leave the graduating teachers with positive intentions but limited perceived behavioral control.

➤ *Gap in the Literature*

Most of the existing Nigerian literature treats the teachers as a single, undifferentiated group or examines only

one career stage (Fakolade et al., 2009). Comparatively the little research isolates the pre-service population specifically to establish what the trainees know, believe, and feel before entering the classroom, within the specific, high-pressure urban system of Lagos State. This study addresses that gap.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ Research Philosophy and Design

The study adopts a post-positivist paradigm, which holds that an objective reality in this case, teacher readiness actually exists and can be measured, while acknowledging that the measurement of the human attributes such as the knowledge and attitude is prone to error (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A descriptive cross-sectional survey design was employed, appropriate for creating a baseline profile of the pre-service teacher readiness in a system where empirical data is really little, and for generalizing the findings from the sample to the broader population of trainee teachers in Lagos State (Cohen et al., 2018).

➤ Population and Sampling

The target population consist of final-year education students in universities and colleges of education in Lagos State, representing the "ideal" theoretical state of the readiness before the full-time practice. A total of 34 pre-service teachers completed the questionnaire, drawn from the universities, a polytechnic, and colleges of education. The study used an online survey sampling technique (Taherdoost, 2016): a Google Forms questionnaire was distributed through the professional and institutional networks commonly used by the trainee teachers, a mode well suited to a digitally native and campus-based population.

➤ Instrumentation

The Pre-Service Teacher Inclusive Readiness Questionnaire (PTIRQ) was gotten from an instrument originally developed by Jacob and Pillay (2022) in the South African system. The Contextual adaptation replaced the terms not applicable in Nigeria (for example, "IEPs," which are

legally established in the Western contexts but unique in Nigeria) and the substituted references to South African policy with the Nigerian National Policy on Education. The Face and content validity were reviewed by the two special-education specialists and one measurement-and-evaluation expert.

The knowledge sub-scale used a True/False/Uncertain format, with "Uncertain" included to understand a genuine ignorance from misconception a process of particular value to policymakers. The attitudes sub-scale used a forced-choice five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), deliberately removing a "Neutral" midpoint to discourage non-committal responses on a sensitive topic (Bandura, 2006).

➤ Data Analysis

The Data were coded, cleaned, and analyzed in the IBM SPSS Version 29. The Descriptive statistics means and standard deviations were computed for each subscale (Knowledge, Perceptions, Attitudes), with the mean used as the primary indicator of the average readiness and the standard deviation used to the degree of consensus or divergence among the respondents (Pallant, 2020).

➤ Ethical Considerations

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). An Informed consent was gotten from all the participants, participation was entirely voluntary, and no identifying information was collected, ensuring a full anonymity. The Ethical approval was obtained from Lincoln University.

IV. RESULTS

➤ Response Rate

Thirty-four questionnaires were given to the pre-service teachers, all of which were completed and returned, resulting to a 100% response rate.

➤ Demographic Profile

Table 1 Demographic Information of Pre-Service Respondents (N = 34)

Variable	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	12	35.3
	Female	22	64.7
Age Group	15–20	6	17.6
	21–25	18	52.9
	26–30	7	20.6
	31–35	3	8.8
	36–40	0	0.0
	40 and above	0	0.0
Institution	University	26	76.5
	Polytechnic	1	2.9
	College of Education	7	20.6
Programme of Study	NCE	7	20.6
	Bachelor's degree	21	61.8
	PGDE	4	11.8
	Master's degree	1	2.9
	Non-education degree	1	2.9
Level of Study	100/Year 1	3	8.8

	200/Year 2	4	11.8
	300/Year 3	3	8.8
	400/Final year	19	55.9
	PGD/MEd and above	5	14.7
Completed course(s) on inclusive/special needs education	Yes	26	76.5
	No	7	20.6
	Maybe	1	2.9
Completed teaching practice	Yes	24	70.6
	No	10	29.4
Currently a student under teacher training	Yes	34	100.0

The sample skewed female (64.7%) and was concentrated in the 21–25 age bracket (52.9%), consistent with typical undergraduate teacher-training cohorts in Nigeria. Most respondents (76.5%) had completed a course on inclusive or special-needs education, and 70.6% had completed their teaching practice, though this exposure was predominantly theoretical rather than grounded in sustained

practical experience in inclusive classrooms consistent with earlier observations that Nigerian teacher-education programme emphasize theory over applied pedagogical training (Ajuwon, 2012; Eleweke & Rodda, 2021).

➤ Level of Knowledge of Inclusive Education

Table 2 Knowledge of Inclusive Education Among Pre-Service Teachers (N = 34)

Item	True	False	Uncertain	Mean	SD
Inclusive education refers to putting students with disabilities in different classrooms for special attention	19 (55.9%)	15 (44.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2.56	0.504
The Nigerian National Policy on Education (2013) aligns with the combination of special needs children into conventional schools	23 (67.6%)	3 (8.8%)	8 (23.5%)	2.44	0.860
"Differentiated instruction" means providing some students with less work than others	21 (61.8%)	10 (29.4%)	3 (8.8%)	2.53	0.662
Inclusive classrooms are intended to benefit only students with disabilities	11 (32.4%)	20 (58.8%)	3 (8.8%)	2.24	0.606
An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a legal plan structured to align with the unique needs of a student with a disability	31 (91.2%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (8.8%)	2.82	0.576
"Mainstreaming" and "Inclusion" are similar concepts	15 (44.1%)	11 (32.4%)	8 (23.5%)	2.21	0.808
Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a curriculum structure aiming to make learning open to all students from inception	29 (85.3%)	1 (2.9%)	4 (11.8%)	2.74	0.666
Students with intense or deep disabilities are not appropriate for inclusion in a mainstream classroom	19 (55.9%)	8 (23.5%)	7 (20.6%)	2.35	0.812
Assistive technology means only high-tech electronic devices like computers or tablets	18 (52.9%)	14 (41.2%)	2 (5.9%)	2.47	0.615
Inclusive education is a basic right for every child, as supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	31 (91.2%)	1 (2.9%)	2 (5.9%)	2.85	0.500
Dyslexia is a kind of intellectual disability	28 (82.4%)	3 (8.8%)	3 (8.8%)	2.74	0.618
A student with a visible disability (e.g., using a wheelchair) will also possess an intellectual disability	8 (23.5%)	26 (76.5%)	0 (0.0%)	2.24	0.431
The objective of inclusion is to make students with disabilities "normal"	16 (47.1%)	13 (38.2%)	5 (14.7%)	2.32	0.727
Collaboration between general teachers and special education teachers is important for successful inclusion	30 (88.2%)	3 (8.8%)	1 (2.9%)	2.85	0.436
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is mainly a behavioral and communication disorder, not an intellectual one	25 (73.5%)	5 (14.7%)	4 (11.8%)	2.62	0.697

Pre-service teachers demonstrated a moderate level of conceptual awareness of inclusive education. Respondents most strongly recognized inclusive education as a basic right (91.2% correct, $M = 2.85$), correctly identified the function of an Individualized Education Plan (91.2% correct, $M = 2.82$), and understood Universal Design for Learning (85.3% correct, $M = 2.74$). Respondents also strongly endorsed the value of collaboration between general and special-education

teachers (88.2%, $M = 2.85$). The weaker areas included distinguishing the "mainstreaming" from "inclusion" (44.1% correct) and identifying an assistive technology as going beyond the high-tech devices (52.9% correct).

This pattern suggests that the pre-service teachers possess a solid foundational and rights-based knowledge of an inclusion but the weaker command of the applied

instructional distinctions differentiated instruction, mainstreaming versus inclusion that determine how an inclusion is actually delivered in a classroom. These findings are relating with the earlier work showing that the pre-service teachers typically hold a positive conceptual understanding of an inclusion alongside the constrained practical readiness (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Sharma et al., 2018).

➤ *Perceptions of Inclusive Education*

The Perceptions function as a systemic filter between the theoretical knowledge and classroom practice. Pre-service teachers expressed moderate concern about systemic constraints: while 32.4% strongly agreed that inclusion is

unrealistic in overcrowded classrooms, the mean response to this item ($M = 2.76$) was comparatively restrained. Trainees generally believed that regular teachers lack the skills to manage serious behavioral disorders (47.1% agreed) and that Lagos schools lack necessary materials (44.1% agreed). Notably, respondents did not, on the whole, see students with special needs as disruptive to other learners ($M = 2.00$) an optimism consistent with Jacob and Pillay's (2022) description of a pre-service "moral imperative" orientation that has not yet been tested by daily classroom practice.

➤ *Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education*

Table 3 Attitudes Toward Inclusive Education Among Pre-Service Teachers (N = 34)

Item	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
I am willing to teach students with disabilities in my classroom	14 (41.2%)	16 (47.1%)	2 (5.9%)	2 (5.9%)	3.24	0.819
All students, despite ability or disability, have a right to be educated in mainstream classrooms	10 (29.4%)	20 (58.8%)	3 (8.8%)	1 (2.9%)	3.15	0.702
I feel anxious about managing a student with a severe behavioural disorder	7 (20.6%)	13 (38.2%)	13 (38.2%)	1 (2.9%)	2.76	0.819
I am confident in my ability to meet the needs of students with special needs	10 (29.4%)	17 (50.0%)	5 (14.7%)	2 (5.9%)	3.03	0.834
Inclusive education is the best way to advance social acceptance and reduce stigma	13 (38.2%)	15 (44.1%)	5 (14.7%)	1 (2.9%)	3.18	0.797
I feel positive about collaborating with special education teachers and therapists	13 (38.2%)	17 (50.0%)	3 (8.8%)	1 (2.9%)	3.24	0.741
I am comfortable teaching a student with a significant physical disability (e.g., cerebral palsy)	5 (14.7%)	21 (61.8%)	6 (17.6%)	2 (5.9%)	2.85	0.744
Students with special needs learn better in separate, special schools	8 (23.5%)	16 (47.1%)	10 (29.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2.94	0.736
I am afraid I might not fairly evaluate the academic progress of a student with a disability	2 (5.9%)	14 (41.2%)	17 (50.0%)	1 (2.9%)	2.50	0.663
Having students with disabilities in the classroom will enrich the learning experience for all students	7 (20.6%)	13 (38.2%)	13 (38.2%)	1 (2.9%)	2.76	0.819
I am sympathetic but do not feel responsible for students with special needs	3 (8.8%)	12 (35.3%)	17 (50.0%)	2 (5.9%)	2.47	0.748
I am eager to learn new teaching strategies to support diverse learners	13 (38.2%)	14 (41.2%)	5 (14.7%)	2 (5.9%)	3.12	0.880
I am comfortable teaching a student with an intellectual disability (e.g., Down syndrome)	5 (14.7%)	19 (55.9%)	8 (23.5%)	2 (5.9%)	2.79	0.770
Inclusive education is more a social philosophy than a practical educational approach	8 (23.5%)	18 (52.9%)	7 (20.6%)	1 (2.9%)	2.97	0.758
I am optimistic about the future of inclusive education in Nigeria	9 (26.5%)	20 (58.8%)	5 (14.7%)	0 (0.0%)	3.12	0.640

Note. SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree.

Pre-service teachers expressed generally positive attitudes toward inclusion. A majority supported the principle that all students have a right to be educated in mainstream classrooms ($M = 3.15$) and expressed willingness to teach students with disabilities ($M = 3.24$). Respondents were also notably positive about collaborating with special-education teachers and therapists ($M = 3.24$) and eager to learn new instructional strategies for diverse learners ($M = 3.12$). At the same time, a meaningful share of respondents expressed anxiety about managing severe behavioral disorders ($M = 2.76$) and uncertainty about their own competence to meet the needs of students with special needs ($M = 3.03$). These

findings explains the prior work showing that the positive attitudes toward the inclusion do not automatically translate into a confidence or instructional readiness (Forlin, 2010; Opoku et al., 2021).

V. DISCUSSION

➤ *A Theoretically Grounded but Practically Untested Readiness*

The results suggest that the Initial Teacher Education in Lagos State is mainly thesucceeding in transmitting the conceptual and the rights-based case for inclusion. The Pre-

service teachers scored very strongly on the items reflecting a legal and philosophical understanding of an inclusion (the right to education, the function of an IEP, Universal Design for Learning) and expressed the attitudes consistent with a moral-imperative framing of an inclusive practice. This supports Jacob and Pillay's (2022) finding that the university curricula are very effective at teaching the principles of inclusion.

However, the comparatively weaker performance on the applied distinctions differentiated instruction, mainstreaming versus inclusion combined with the expressed anxiety about the behavioral management and a self-assessed competence, points to a readiness that is conceptually strong but is practically untested. This is consistent with the Self-Efficacy Theory: attitudes and beliefs alone do not guarantee a confident action in the classroom, particularly where trainees have had reduced sustained practical exposure to an inclusive settings.

➤ *The Risk of Reality Shock*

The optimism evident in this cohort the belief that inclusion is a moral imperative, and the reluctance to see disability as inherently disruptive mirrors the starting point described in prior comparative work before it erodes under the pressure of under-resourced school environments (Ajuwon, 2012; Jacob & Pillay, 2022). Because this study captures pre-service teachers at the point closest to graduation, the findings represent a baseline against which the durability of this optimism, once trainees enter practice, can be assessed. The gap between trainees' strong rights-based knowledge and their comparatively modest confidence in applied skills suggests that this optimism may be fragile once tested by classroom realities such as large class sizes and limited assistive resources.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Pre-service teachers in Lagos State enter the final stage of their training with meaningful theoretical knowledge of inclusive education and a positive, rights-based orientation toward inclusion. This readiness, however, is concentrated in conceptual and legal understanding rather than in the applied instructional competencies that translate belief into effective classroom practice. Left unaddressed, this imbalance leaves a promising cohort of the new teachers that are vulnerable to the erosion of their idealism once they encounter the resource constraints of practice.

➤ *Recommendations for Teacher Training Institutions*

- Restructure Teaching Practice (TP) requirements so that trainees spend a meaningful proportion of their placement time in inclusive or special-needs settings, to build applied experience alongside theory.
- Extend Faculty of Education curricula beyond the history and legal framing of special education to explicit, practical instruction in Universal Design for Learning and differentiated instruction.

- Introduce structured opportunities for trainees to collaborate directly with special-education professionals during training, building the confidence that questionnaire responses suggest is currently uneven.

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