

NAVIGATING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: RURAL PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RAISING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN REGULAR SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Despite Nigeria's commitment to inclusive education, enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools does not necessarily ensure meaningful participation or access to appropriate educational support, particularly in rural communities. This study explored how rural parents experience and navigate inclusive education for their children with disabilities in regular schools, with a focus on educational barriers and parental coping strategies. A phenomenological qualitative design was employed with 19 rural parents of children with disabilities, recruited through a snowball sampling approach. Data were collected through approximately 60-minute semi-structured interviews. Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed inductively using thematic content analysis. Six themes emerged: parents' lived experiences of inclusive schooling, educational barriers within regular schools, teacher-related experiences, financial burden of inclusion, social experiences of parents and children with disabilities, and parents' resilience.

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Findings showed that parents experienced considerable emotional strain while maintaining hope in their children's potential and progress. Major barriers included inadequate learning materials and assistive devices, transportation difficulties, limited school-based support services, inadequate teacher preparation, child neglect, weak teacher-parent communication, financial constraints, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, parents demonstrated resilience through home-based academic support, school-related advocacy and financial sacrifice. The study concludes that meaningful inclusion in rural Nigerian schools requires more than physical placement. Responsive teacher preparation, accessible learning resources, stronger school-family partnerships, financial and transportation support, and inclusive practices that foster participation and belonging are necessary to translate enrolment into substantive educational inclusion. These findings highlight parents as active agents whose experiences should inform inclusive-education policy, school practice, and support interventions.

Keywords: Disability, Inclusive education, Rural Parents, Regular schools, Phenomenology, Qualitative research

Introduction

Despite the global commitment to inclusive education, children with disabilities continue to experience considerable exclusion from meaningful participation in schooling, particularly in resource-constrained and rural settings. In Nigeria, this issue extends beyond access to school to the quality of educational experiences available after enrolment. Parents of children with disabilities have reported inadequate specialist services, shortages of qualified teachers, limited educational resources, financial pressures, and restricted participation in decisions concerning their children's education (Agbo & Boamah, 2026; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2020; Razaq-Shuaib, 2025). These difficulties are potentially more pronounced in rural communities, where limited professional services, geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure and socioeconomic disadvantage can constrain families' ability to secure appropriate educational support (Akande, 2024; Adeniyi & Olufemi-Adeniyi, 2024; Buren *et al.*, 2022; Lindsay *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, placement in a regular school does not necessarily translate into meaningful

inclusion, understood in terms of participation, acceptance, appropriate learning support and classroom belonging. Parents may encounter barriers within schools while simultaneously bearing financial, social and emotional responsibilities associated with securing their children's education. Thus, the central problem is not simply whether children with disabilities are admitted into regular schools, but whether rural parents experience those schools as environments in which their children can participate, belong, learn and receive appropriate learning support.

Although existing literature has attempted to address this problem, the evidence remains fragmented across parental attitudes, school-level barriers, policy implementation, parental involvement and access to educational services. Nigerian studies have documented parents' attitudes, knowledge and perceived social norms toward inclusive education (Torgbenu *et al.*, 2021), examined parents' and teachers' knowledge of disability and inclusion (Barrio *et al.*, 2019), and identified persistent policy and implementation challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, teacher preparation and institutional capacity (Angwaomaodoko, 2023; James *et al.*, 2025; Osagiobare & Ekwukoma, 2025). Other qualitative studies have moved closer to parents' experiences, showing that Nigerian parents encounter inadequate educational services, financial pressures, limited professional support and the need to navigate weak institutional systems (Agbo & Boamah, 2026; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2020; Razaq-Shuaib, 2025). International research similarly reports parental concerns about teacher competence, bullying, inadequate resources, weak communication and insufficient individualised learning support in regular schools (Carrera *et al.*, 2023; Jigyel *et al.*, 2020; Khanna & Kareem, 2025). Research focusing on rural areas further demonstrates that parents of children with disabilities experience unique constraints involving service accessibility, social isolation, stigma, transportation and limited professional networks (Buren *et al.*, 2022;

Lindsay *et al.*, 2025). However, these approaches have not adequately resolved the problem because much of the Nigerian evidence is urban, quantitative, perception-oriented, teacher-centred or focused on particular disabilities. At the same time, rural studies often examine disability or school provision without highlighting parents' everyday experiences. For example, Brydges and Mkandawire (2020) examined parents in Lagos, Akande (2024) focused primarily on parents of children with ASD in rural Nigerian communities, and Anazia *et al.* (2025) examined rural Nigerian home-school partnerships without specifically focusing on parents of children with disabilities. The literature therefore leaves a significant contextual, experiential and intersectional gap: limited empirical attention has been given to how rural Nigerian parents of children with disabilities experience and navigate regular schools, particularly how they negotiate relationships with teachers, advocate for their children's needs, mobilise formal and informal support, respond to stigma and resource constraints, and determine whether school placement translates into meaningful inclusion.

This study addresses this gap by exploring rural parents' experiences of raising children with disabilities in regular schools, with particular attention to the ways parents navigate the opportunities and constraints embedded within their children's educational environments. Rather than measuring parental attitudes or treating inclusion solely as an institutional outcome, this study explores parents' voices and everyday lived experiences to examine how inclusion is encountered, interpreted and negotiated, especially in resource-constrained settings or rural areas. A qualitative approach is appropriate because existing evidence indicates that parental experiences involve complex processes of advocacy, adaptation, communication, coping and support mobilisation that are difficult to capture through predetermined survey measures (Buren *et al.*, 2022; Razaq-Shuaib, 2025; Agbo & Boamah, 2026).

The study is therefore grounded in the proposition that meaningful inclusive education in rural communities cannot be adequately understood from policy provisions, school structures or parental attitudes alone; it must also be understood through the experiences of parents who negotiate those structures on behalf of their children. By examining these experiences, the study seeks to generate contextually grounded evidence to inform more responsive school-family partnerships, strengthen support for parents, and guide inclusive education practices that move beyond mere enrolment toward participation, belonging, and educational opportunity. The purpose of the study is therefore posed as a question:

RQ1: *How do rural parents experience and navigate inclusive education for their children with disabilities in regular schools?*

RQ2: *What educational barriers do rural parents encounter within regular schools when supporting their children with disabilities?*

RQ3: *What strategies do rural parents employ to cope with and overcome the challenges associated with educating their children with disabilities in regular schools?*

Methods

We employed a phenomenological qualitative research design in our study to explore the lived experiences and challenges encountered by rural parents of children with disability in training them in regular schools. There are a few special schools in Nigeria, and Anambra State in particular, which is the study area, since the implementation of inclusive schools has been hindered by many factors in the nation (Okonkwo *et al*, 2025). As a result of this, many parents are inclined to get their children with special education needs into regular schools in their neighbourhood (Agbo and Boamah, 2026). This could pose some challenges to both the child with disability and their rural parents in training them in regular schools, given that the schools might not be adequately ready to meet the educational needs of the child. Tavakol and Sandars (2025) posit that a phenomenological research

approach allows readers and researchers to understand the lived experiences of a particular phenomenon from the point of view of the participants in a particular study.

The study sites were in rural areas of Anambra State, which is a Southeast Nigerian state with its capital city located in Awka. The participants for our study were 19 (Male=3; Female=16) rural parents sampled through a snowball sampling technique. We achieved this through the assistance of the initial study participants (parents of children with disabilities) identified by schoolteachers in rural schools used for the study. Through their social networks, those parents helped to identify other rural parents of children with disabilities enrolled in regular schools. We visited the parents that served as our study participants in their various homes and workplaces, secured their consent and interviewed them in line with the purposes of the study. We considered this sample size of 19 adequate, given that sample sizes ranging from 15 – 20 participants have been adopted by researchers in qualitative studies, and they have hit data saturation points within this range (Hossain, Alam and Ali, 2024).

Interview sessions were used to collect qualitative data, which focused on exploring the challenges that rural parents of children with disability encounter while training their children in regular schools. The interview guide was validated by two experts in Educational Measurement and Evaluation. The question items included: What challenges do you face regarding school facilities, learning materials, or transportation? How do teachers relate to and support your child in school? Has your child experienced discrimination or exclusion in school or the community? Seeking the consent of the respondents and explaining the purpose of the study to the respondents were part of the processes in data collection. Only rural parents of children with disability who gave their consent were included in the study.

Thereafter, the interview sessions started by creating a good rapport by initiating conversations that aimed at making the respondents feel relaxed and ready for discussion. The conversations were used to familiarise the participants with the aim of the discussion. The discussions took place at the participants' home or workplace environments and lasted for about 60 minutes. The discussions with each participant were digitally recorded.

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis. In doing this, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. We employed inductive analysis in our study, which is geared towards deriving concepts, themes, or a model through raw data interpretations made by a researcher (Thomas, 2006, in Okonkwo *et al*, 2025). We read the manuscripts many times and coded the data to identify emerging concepts that addressed the research questions. No restriction was placed on the number of emerging themes and sub-themes as we coded the data until they were exhausted. Before coding the data, we immersed ourselves in the data to get familiar with it, understand the data, and pre-code the data by underlining a participant's significant quotes that strike their attention. Specifics were grouped into sub-themes after identifying major emerging concepts, and these were drawn together to form themes. From the manuscripts, verbatim expressions such as "It has not been easy attending to a child with special needs...I commit a large portion of daily time towards him" and "I am getting tired of taking care of here" were coded "emotional burden of parenting"; and "'I still that my child can learn, very intelligent" and "I still believe in my child" were coded "hope despite difficulties". Other verbatim expression coded as "satisfaction with children's progress" emerged from such response as "the child has been faring well"; and "balancing expectations and reality" coded from such response as "she cannot read and write as fast as other children". Another theme emerged from the verbatim expressions of the rural parents

and was coded into further sub-themes. For instance, verbatim expressions such as “there are no learning materials for the disabled like my child” and “there are no special support services in my child’s school” were coded as “Educational barriers within regular schools”. Verbatim expressions such as “there are teachers who genuinely want him to improve”, “the teachers do not understand how to teach children like mine” and “teachers should be more educated and equipped” were coded as “teacher-related experiences”. The financial burden of inclusion sub-theme was coded from such verbatim expressions as “everything concerning the child requires money” and “I commit a large portion of my daily time and resources towards him”. Another theme that emerged was coded “Social experiences of parents and children with disabilities” and emerged from such verbatim expressions as “any time he comes to school...he is isolated” and “the people in the community are so caring to the child”. These were later classified under the theme of “Parents' Lived Experiences of Inclusive Schooling”. Codes and themes were reflected upon by the researchers for depth and appropriateness. Where there was no disagreement, the codes and themes were adopted, whereas changes were made where the researchers agreed that there was a need for adjustment in the codes and themes.

Results

Thematic Analysis

This study explored how rural parents experience and navigate inclusive education for their children with disabilities in regular schools. Emerging from the interview transcripts were the lived personal experiences of parents, involving their emotions, expectations, and perceptions regarding raising children with disabilities in regular schools. Based on the thematic analysis, six overarching themes emerged from the data, as presented:

Theme 1: Parents' Lived Experiences of Inclusive Schooling

Under this theme, four subthemes emerged substantially from the evidence in the verbatim quotes. These subthemes include emotional burden of parenting; hope despite difficulties; satisfaction with children's progress; and balancing expectations and reality.

Rural parents reported that they are burdened emotionally in training their children in regular schools. Verbatim expression revealed that a good number of parents are emotionally exhausted stemming from the demands of taking care of children with disabilities. For example, P7 reported that taking care of the child demands enormous time: *"It has not been easy attending to a child with special needs... I commit a large portion of daily time towards him."* Daily, parents feel exhausted because of the enormity of the demands in taking care of these children, as most of them struggle with engaging in adaptive skills. Similarly, P11 reported the emotional exhaustion resulting from the burden of training children with disabilities in an almost despairing mode: *"I am getting tired of taking care of her."* P1 summed her experience as a very difficult one: My experience can be summed as *'a difficult one'*. These expressions reflect the parental-associated burden in training children with disabilities.

Another subtheme that emerged from the analysis of the responses of rural parents is the *hope despite difficulties* subtheme. Reports indicate that parents exhibit a great deal of hope despite the systemic challenges children with disabilities face in regular schools. This subtheme demonstrates parental resilience in managing children with disabilities. For example, a parent reported that she still has hope in her child and perceived the child as very intelligent: *"I still feel that my child can learn; very intelligent."* (P10). This made some parents still believe in their children: *"I still believe in my child."* (P9). This is translated into the reported future hopes for these children despite the challenges they face.

Another subtheme that emerged from the analysis of the responses is *satisfaction with children's progress*. This is similar to the subtheme that reflected hope despite difficulties. Even though children with disabilities were making the same progress as their peers without disabilities, rural parents were satisfied with the efforts they made. They understood that if the learning environment was made conducive for these students, they would thrive in their environment. This was expressed thus: *"The child has been faring well."* (P3). Parents also recognised that the progress made by the children could stem from the ecological support they may come from the community, peers, and teachers. One parent reported that her child was not discriminated against in the community and that the teachers were caring: *"The people in the community are so caring to the child...." "The teachers are so caring."* (P3). Another affirmed the positive relationship existing among the peers: *"They like to discuss and associate with him."* (P19).

More importantly, parents' lived experiences included their ability to balance expectations and reality. This reflects the ability of parents to understand that disabilities, even when all necessary interventions are provided, could slow the pace at which an individual could progress in certain areas of life. These children may also attend the same milestones in different ways and at different times when compared with their peers who are without disabilities. For example, a parent emphasised the abilities of the child: *"She cannot read and write as fast as other children"* (P2). Whereas another parent took into consideration the uniqueness of the child: *"Manage my child's potential and uniqueness."* (P3).

Generally, the parents' experiences were characterised by a continual tension between emotional strain, struggle and enduring hope. Raising a child with disabilities in regular schools was reported as demanding, emotionally exhausting, and in a way frustrating. However, these experiences were frequently accompanied

by optimism, a strong belief in their children's potential, reflecting the need to provide learning environments that are suitable for these children. Parents constantly negotiated the gap between the ideal and reality about their children's learning outcomes given the realities imposed by disability, inadequate school support, and societal barriers. Rather than giving up, many demonstrated remarkable perseverance, adjusting expectations while continuing to advocate for meaningful educational opportunities for their children.

Theme 2: Educational Barriers within Regular Schools

The second theme that emerged from the analysis of the responses of rural parents focused on their experiences with structural, infrastructural and institutional barriers. These barriers were categorised into subthemes such as inadequate learning materials and the absence of assistive devices, and transportation difficulties.

The issue of *inadequate learning materials and the absence of assistive devices* emerged as significant problems that were reflected in almost all the responses of the parents interviewed. It focused on the lack of instructional materials, the need for free textbooks, the lack of specialised learning materials, and the absence of visual aids and assistive devices. These barriers could undermine teachers' capacity to provide inclusive learning experiences for children with disabilities. A parent reported this thus: "*The challenges include learning materials such as textbooks and other items for training these children.*" (P1), whereas another noted that "*There are no learning materials for the disabled like my child.*" (P4). Rural regular schools were reported to lack these resources that could facilitate the learning outcomes of children with special educational needs. Besides the reported deficiencies of these resources in most schools, parents expressed that they could not afford the provision of these resources for the children. This was reflected in the response of a parent thus: "*There are materials recommended... Unfortunately, I*

cannot afford them." (P10). These have dire consequences for these children by limiting the avenues through which they can learn: *"They lack solid instructional materials, reducing the children to verbal learners."* (P13). *"There are no visual aids or talking books since he has a speech problem."* (P18).

Another barrier that emerged is the *difficulty in transportation*. This could have resulted in the fact that some children with mobility problems are finding it difficult to walk to school like their peers without disabilities. Also, there could be spatial orientation problems that may make it difficult for some of these children to walk to school independently. These could be compounded by structural problems that are associated with rural areas, including poor road conditions: *"The road is bad when it rains."*(P5). Consequently, parents are, by necessity, made to take them to school by hired buses. Some parents noted that transporting their children with special educational needs is quite expensive: *"Transporting her daily to school is quite expensive."* (P2); *"School transportation is difficult for my child."* (P6); *"Transportation is a big issue."* (P14). Another parent mentioned that it was difficult for them to enter public transport: *"We can't even enter a public vehicle."* (P18). This could reflect instances of exclusion because of the nature of the vehicle, which is usually public, commercial and not designed to accommodate children with disabilities or a kind of social discrimination.

More importantly, irrespective of the fact that these children face such problems as lack of learning resources and transportation issues, there were little or no school-level support services. Some parents reported this thus: *"There are no special support services in my child's school."* (P6); *"The school could not offer enough needed support."* (P10). This could worsen the learning experiences of the children, given that support services are needed in school to optimise the learning outcomes of children with special educational needs.

Theme 3: Teacher-Related Experiences

This theme captures parents' experiences and perceptions of teachers' roles in facilitating or hindering inclusive education. The data reveals a continuum of experiences, ranging from supportive and caring teachers to inadequate inclusive competence, neglect of learners with disabilities, and weak communication between teachers and parents.

Emerging from the responses of the parents is the fact that some teachers are caring, patient and encourage the children to learn in class. For example, these statements emerged from parents: *"The teachers are so caring...., ...The teachers encourage him to participate in class."* (P3); *"The teachers exercise patience with my child."* (P5); *"Some teachers really care about these children."* (P10); *"There are teachers who genuinely want him to improve."*(P13). Although many parents described significant barriers within regular schools, several acknowledged that teachers displayed empathy, patience, and commitment towards children with disabilities. Such teachers were perceived as creating a more welcoming classroom environment and encouraging children's participation despite institutional limitations.

On the contrary, parents also noted that some teachers may be lacking in inclusive competence. This focused on teachers' pedagogical competences in including children with disabilities in regular classes. A number of the teachers were reported to apply instructional strategies that do not support children with special educational needs. For example, their verbatim expressions reflected this thus: *"Their style of instructional delivery also does not support them."* (P13); *"Individualised learning is not considered."* (P17); *"The teachers do not understand how to teach children like mine."* (P19). This could limit the possibility of children with special educational needs benefiting maximally in regular classes, warranting

parents to point out that teachers lack special needs/inclusive education training: *"Teachers should be trained and retrained on special needs skills."* (P5); *"Teachers should be more educated and equipped."* (P13). Parents therefore perceived inadequate teacher preparation as a major obstacle to effective inclusion. They believed that many teachers lacked pedagogical knowledge, instructional flexibility, and specialised skills needed to address diverse learning needs. Rather than adapting instruction, teachers were often described as relying on whole-class approaches that disadvantaged learners with disabilities.

Similar to the issue of inadequate inclusive competence, parents reported the neglect of learners with special educational needs. This ranged from children receiving little attention or being ignored/excluded in class: *"Those who seem to be disabled are not being given adequate attention."* (P10); *"They neglect and push him aside while focusing on others."* (P13); *"They focus more on the children who learn quickly."* (P14); *"The child is simply left to struggle."* (P18). Overall, some parents believed that their children were marginalised within classroom instruction. Rather than intentionally including learners with disabilities, some teachers were perceived as concentrating on academically stronger pupils while overlooking those who required additional support. Parents interpreted this as neglect rather than mere lack of resources.

Another teacher-related experience reported by parents is *inconsistent teacher-parent communication*. This focuses on the communication flow between teachers and rural parents with regard to the learning of their children with special educational needs. Parents reported that their relationship with teachers was weak, and that they rarely receive feedback from teachers. These were reflected in the verbatim quotes thus: *"The relationship between the teachers and parents is quite poor.....They hardly tell us how the child is progressing."* (P14); *"There is little*

communication between us and the teachers." (P15); and *"Teachers should communicate with parents regularly."* (P17); *"Nobody discusses my child's educational needs with me."* (P19). Parents emphasised that effective inclusion requires continuous collaboration between families and teachers. However, many reported infrequent communication, limited feedback on children's progress, and minimal parental involvement in educational planning. This weakened opportunities for coordinated support between home and school.

Theme 4: Financial Burden of Inclusion

Another significant theme that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data is the *financial burden of inclusive education*. This explores the financial implications of raising and educating children with disabilities in regular schools. Parents described the substantial economic demands associated with ensuring their children's school attendance, acquiring specialised educational resources, and coping with the broader financial strain imposed by disability. These costs often exceeded what rural households could comfortably afford, thereby limiting children's educational opportunities. For example, parents noted that the cost of caring for children with disabilities affects their schooling: *"Everything concerning the child requires money."* (P14). This is actually exacerbated by low-income earnings of parents living in rural communities: *"The cost of things is not quite easy."* (P. 14). Another parent noted the continuous commitment of financial resources to the education of children with disabilities: *"I commit a large portion of my daily time and resources towards him."* (P7). Beyond specific educational expenses, parents portrayed disability as creating an ongoing financial burden that affected many aspects of family life. They described balancing household responsibilities with the continuous costs of supporting their children's education, often making difficult financial decisions regarding transportation, learning materials, and daily

care. Their accounts suggest that poverty and disability interacted to create additional barriers to educational inclusion.

Theme 5: Social Experiences of Parents and Children with Disabilities

This theme captures the social experiences of children with disabilities and their parents within the school and community contexts. Parents described a mixture of acceptance and support, alongside experiences of exclusion and unequal treatment. These social interactions shaped children's sense of belonging and influenced parents' perceptions of inclusive education. One of the subthemes that emerged was social exclusion and limited participation in social activities in school and among peers. There were reported instances of social isolation and withdrawal: *"Anytime he comes to school... he is isolated."* (P7); *"She will try to withdraw."* (P15). A parent noted that the child is limited to the kind of activities she will participate in: *"She may never be part of any school competitive exercise."* (P8). This indicates that these children may have limited opportunities for social participation. The experiences that are linked to difficulty forming friendships, or withdrawal from social interactions, could reduce their sense of belonging within the school environment. On the contrary, fewer parents noted that there were positive social relationships between their child and members of the school and community. This was reflected thus: *"He communicates very well They like to discuss and associate with him."* (P19). *"The people in the community are so caring to the child."* (P3). Although parents described challenges, few reported positive social experiences in which they noted that some children were accepted by peers and community members, while others maintained meaningful social relationships that promoted their confidence and participation. These accounts demonstrate that inclusive environments can foster positive social development when acceptance is present.

Theme 6: Parents' Resilience

This theme captures the strategies and actions adopted by parents to support the education and well-being of their children with disabilities despite the numerous educational, financial, and social challenges they encountered. Rather than remaining passive recipients of these challenges, parents demonstrated resilience through active involvement, persistent advocacy, reliance on personal beliefs, and continuous efforts to improve their children's educational opportunities. Parents assisted their children in doing homework and encouraged them to learn: *"The child struggles to do his homework... I therefore assist him."* (P4); *"I want her to learn by any means."* (P12). To ensure that children with special educational needs learn, parents make significant sacrifices. They choose schools based on their children's needs: *"We enrolled the younger sister in the same school to keep him company."* (P18). These efforts are made to ensure that these children learn.

Discussion

The findings of this study provided insights into the experiences of rural parents in educating their children with disabilities in regular schools. The findings reflect the complex interplay of systemic barriers that limit the quality of inclusive education in rural areas, as experienced by parents of children with disabilities in these areas. The emerging themes, capturing these experiences, are interpreted below in line with existing literature.

Parents' Lived Experiences in Inclusive Schooling

The lived experiences of parents with inclusive schooling buttress the research position that the enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools does not translate to meaningful inclusion (Buren *et al.*, 2022; Lindsay *et al.*, 2025). This reality is more pronounced in rural contexts where infrastructural deficits, such as the lack of adaptive learning materials, accessible transportation, and specialized

teachers, undermine the capacity of the tight-knit community structure to support children with disabilities (McCabe & Ruppar, 2023). Consequently, the gap between inclusive policy and practice transfers the burden of supporting children with disabilities to families, placing a significant emotional strain on parents (Agbo & Boamah, 2026; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2020; Razaq-Shuaib, 2025). However, the findings of this study extend the literature by revealing that, beyond this emotional strain, rural parents remain hopeful in their children's capacity to learn in regular schools. This hopefulness is supported by parents' satisfaction with their children's social learning gains and unique potential (Francis *et al.*, 2016).

Educational Barriers within Regular Schools

Rural parents attributed the poor quality of educational experiences for their children with disabilities in regular schools to infrastructural deficiencies, including learning materials and assistive devices (McCabe & Ruppar, 2023). Because of these deficiencies, responsibility for providing these materials is shifted to families, placing a significant financial burden on parents. However, the high cost of these materials makes them unaffordable for rural parents within low- and middle-income brackets (Ataguba *et al.*, 2025). Consequently, this infrastructural deficit dictates classroom pedagogy, as P13 noted that it makes teachers resort to verbal-only teaching modes, thereby reducing "...*the children to verbal learners.*" The reliance on this teaching mode reduces the quality of educational experiences for children with disabilities in rural regular schools. Further to this barrier is the broken transportation chain between the home and the school in rural communities. The parents noted severe environmental and logistical barriers in transporting their children to school, with P5 noting, "*The road is bad when it rains.*" The condition of the roads makes daily transportation to school difficult and "*quite expensive*" (P2) for these children, limiting their access to inclusive schooling. The situation is

further worsened, as P18 alleged that they “*can't even enter a public vehicle*” due to physical design barriers in public transport systems. This structural barrier underscores the exclusion of persons with disabilities (Akande, 2024; Adeniyi & Olufemi-Adeniyi, 2024; Buren *et al.*, 2022; Duri & Luke, 2022) from universally accessible transport infrastructure in rural contexts, and undermines their access to quality educational experiences in regular schools.

Teacher-Related Experiences

The findings on teacher-related experiences are nuanced, highlighting supportive and caring teachers’ behaviours alongside neglect of children with disabilities in regular schools. Some rural parents reported that some teachers show care for their children and genuinely want them to improve. This public display of affection reflects the teachers’ empathy, positive attitude and even willingness to include children with disabilities in regular schools, and fosters a sense of belonging among them (Nwune *et al.*, 2025). Nevertheless, the positive dispositions of teachers in rural regular schools may not be sufficiently supported by the competence needed to effectively implement inclusive practices (Agbo & Boamah, 2026; Jigyel *et al.*, 2020; Khanna & Kareem, 2025; Nwune *et al.*, 2026). One critical area of teacher competence for implementing inclusive education is instructional delivery. According to P17, “*Individualised learning is not considered*” by teachers in regular schools in rural areas to support the educational needs of children with disabilities. The non-consideration and utilization of effective instructional styles like individualized instruction often result in the neglect and marginalization of children with disabilities in regular schools, undermining their access to equitable educational experiences like their peers without disabilities (Nketsia *et al.*, 2025). Compounding

this challenge is the breakdown in home-school collaboration. The study revealed a weak flow of communication between teachers and rural parents of children with disabilities (Anazia *et al.*, 2025). This barrier hinders rural parents' monitoring of their children's learning progress and classroom decision-making. These incompetencies collectively reflect the need for teachers to "... *be trained and retrained on special needs skills*" (P5), to transform their positive dispositions into meaningful inclusive practices, thereby enriching the educational experiences of children with disabilities in rural regular schools.

Financial Burden of Inclusion

The findings of the study revealed that rural parents bear the financial burden of educating their children with disabilities in regular schools, and often, this burden exceeds their household income. Thus, parents in rural areas are forced to make difficult financial trade-offs between basic family needs, learning materials, and transportation of their children with disabilities. These trade-offs reflect how severe financial scarcity can compel parents to weigh immediate family survival against educational access for children with disabilities (Simeu & Mitra, 2017). This financial burden of rural parents was succinctly captured by P14, who alleged that "*Everything concerning the child requires money,*" and P7, who claimed that they "...*commit a large portion of ... daily time and resources towards him.*" The accounts of these parents suggest that the extra cost incurred by disability for mobility, care, and basic learning aids of children with disabilities creates compounding economic consequences for low-income households that are already strained financially (Maddocks *et al.*, 2020; Duri & Luke, 2022). This finding validates the research position (Brydges & Mkandawire, 2020; Razaq-Shuaib, 2025) that rural parents' low income impacts the quality of educational experiences they can afford to provide for their children with disabilities in regular schools.

Social Experiences of Parents and Children with Disabilities

The social experiences of children with disabilities and their parents revealed instances of social isolation (P7), withdrawal (P15), and exclusion (P8), revealing the dichotomy between systemic exclusion of children with disabilities and community acceptance. These accounts of parents illustrate that mere physical placement, without intentional social facilitation, results in the marginalization of people with disabilities, often resulting in their withdrawal (Maddocks *et al.*, 2020). These findings validate the research position that the mere placement of children with disabilities in regular schools does not guarantee their social belonging and active participation in school activities (Buren *et al.*, 2022; Lindsay *et al.*, 2025). However, the notable proportion of rural parents (P3, P19) who reported positive social experiences contradicts the prevalent assumption that the social isolation and exclusion of children with disabilities in rural regular schools are uniform and inevitable (Schwab *et al.*, 2019). These positive experiences demonstrate that inclusive practices operate on a relational spectrum. Thus, when teachers, peers, and other community members support children with disabilities in rural communities, they enhance their confidence and educational experiences (Nwune *et al.*, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2026).

Parents' Resilience

The findings revealed that rural parents do not remain passive in the face of the systemic challenges affecting the education of their children with disabilities in regular schools. Thus, in the face of resource constraints, financial burdens, and social exclusion, rural parents exhibit significant agency in ensuring their children with disabilities get quality education in regular schools. Parents demonstrate this agency by engaging their children in home-based learning, as captured by P4, who noted that "*The child struggles to do his homework... I therefore assist him.*" Driven

by a conviction to see their children learn "*by any means*" (P12), parents engage in home-based tutoring to compensate for instructional gaps at the school level (Nwosu *et al.*, 2024). Another demonstration of agency by rural parents is the restructuring of family dynamics to provide children with disabilities with the supportive social and emotional environments needed to learn effectively (Anazia *et al.*, 2025; Yang *et al.*, 2026). This agency was captured by P18, who posited that they "*... enrolled the younger sister in the same school to keep him company.*" These qualitative findings extend prior literature (Agbo & Boamah, 2026; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2020) by reframing rural parents of children with disabilities from burdened and overwhelmed victims of the systemic gap between inclusive policy and practice to active educational stakeholders who compensate for the systemic barriers in the implementation of inclusive educational policies in rural regular schools.

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is a significant gap between inclusive education policies and implementation in rural areas, as the enrollment of children with disabilities in regular schools does not guarantee their social inclusion and participation in school activities. This conclusion stems from the systemic barriers identified in this study, including infrastructural deficits, instructional gaps, and financial constraints, which affect the quality of educational experiences that children with disabilities get from regular schools in rural areas. The study further concluded that, irrespective of these barriers, the parents of these children demonstrate remarkable agency, resilience, and hope in taking active steps to support their education. Thus, to bridge the gap between policy and practice, targeted interventions, such as training and retraining teachers in inclusive pedagogy, improving rural transport infrastructure, and providing financial relief for low-income families, are required to make inclusive education a reality in rural areas.

Implication of Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for practice, policy, partnership, and community engagement. First, the training of pre-service teachers and continuous professional development for in-service teachers are critical for equipping them with the essential skills needed for the effective implementation of inclusive education policies in regular classrooms. Second, the government must fund infrastructure, specialized learning resources, and financial relief to make inclusive education a reality in rural areas. Third, school authorities must leverage parental resilience and agency to establish active parent-school partnerships in the education of children with disabilities. Finally, community leaders and non-governmental organizations must champion community awareness initiatives to combat the stigmatization and foster a supportive environment for children with disabilities.

Limitations of the Study

The study offers rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of rural parents in educating their children with disabilities in regular schools within a developing context like Nigeria. However, because the findings reflect a specific rural setting, they may not be generalized to urban settings and other regions with different dynamics. Additionally, relying on data from parents alone may have limited the study's scope. To address these limitations, future studies should adopt a mixed-method approach to determine the widespread prevalence of these systemic barriers and the effectiveness of parental support strategies. Moreover, future studies should incorporate the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as classroom teachers, school authorities, and the children themselves, to enrich the understanding of inclusive education.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is declared.

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