

**Inclusive Mentorship Support Provided by Primary School Teachers to Early Childhood and Primary Education
Student-Teachers during Teaching Practice**

Kingsley Chinaza Nwosu

kc.nwosu@unizik.edu.ng

Department of Educational Foundations, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Tonia Uchechi Chigbo-Obasi

Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Amaechi Charles Anidi

Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Obinna Nonso Anachuna

Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Chidinma C. Thompson

Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Emmanuel Chukwunweike Nwangwu

Department of Computer & Robotics Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Chinenye Blessing Amaonye

Department of Educational Management and Policy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Mirian Ngozi Alike

Department of Philosophy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

And

Chibuzo Valeria Ahaneku

Department of Geological Sciences, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

The challenges in the implementation of inclusive education in developing nations reflect teachers' insufficient skills in teaching children with special education in regular schools. Professional exposure and practical experience of teachers have been noted to be significant in inclusive education. To hone these skills, mentorship in inclusive education has become essential for developing inclusive teaching competence, particularly among student-teachers who are novice practitioners. There is dearth of studies that are devoted to understanding specific mentoring support for inclusive education given to student-teachers. Consequently, this qualitative research design was employed, involving 20 student-teachers to explore inclusive mentorship support provided by

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primary school teachers during the teaching practice exercise. Using thematic content analysis, themes that emerged include variability in the provisions of mentorship during teaching practice, structural concerns in the provisions of mentorship during teaching practice, true inclusive mentorship programmes, development of professional confidence and attitudinal change, practical pedagogical guidance, support for learners with special education needs (SENs) and use of inclusive teaching strategies. The findings indicate that mentorship provision varied significantly across student-teachers, underscoring the need for more structured, intentional, and policy-driven mentorship frameworks within teaching practice programmes. Implications were highlighted.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Mentorship, Special Education Needs, Student-teachers, Teacher Education

Introduction

Globally, evidence shows that many nations have failed in the implementation of inclusive education particularly in low-income countries (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024). Inclusive education as a priority of global policy implies that nations make urgent efforts to ensure that all children irrespective of their differences are not just included in regular classes but are supported to learn. In the implementation of inclusive education, teachers are seen as critical stakeholders as they work directly with students in schools implying that they are equipped with inclusive competences and dispositions. However, studies have shown that teachers lack the requisite knowledge, capacity and confidence to include all learners in regular classes (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2024; Pinnock, 2020; Umeora & Jacob, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Additionally, studies have shown that teachers particularly primary school teachers are ambivalent in their attitude towards inclusive education, and this may be influenced by the type of disabilities (Linder et al, 2023) hindering the implementation of inclusion particularly in low-income countries.

Though emphasis has been laid on the support that can be provided to students, not much has been done to support teachers who support these children in schools (Slowik et al, 2021). This support may be highly needed for a student in practicum given that it is usually the first formal experiences of student-teachers in teaching under a normal and conventional classroom setting. Within the Nigerian educational context, the teaching practice is the platform through which student teachers put theories into practice. At this point, they are still acquiring skills for teaching. Hence, meeting students with special education needs may pose a kind of challenge for them especially as researchers have noted that inclusive education principles and practices are not

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adequately infused in the teacher curriculum (Unachukwu & Nwosu, 2019). To help them navigate the challenges that may arise as they meet these students, they need support from more experienced teachers who also monitor their progress in classes.

Mentorship in teacher education has been considered a significant approach towards developing full professionals (Mbhiza et al, 2024; Shumba et al, 2012) given that during teaching practice, student-teachers engage in planning, teaching and reflecting on their practices under the tutelage of a mentor teacher (Mbhiza et al, 2024). The role of the mentor teacher could enhance the professional development of the student-teacher particularly in the areas of tolerance, confidence, and flexibility in the actual teaching environment (Mlyakado & Mwandambo, 2023). However, literature is replete with evidence that some student-teachers may not receive the required support they need to succeed in teaching practice exercise (Maddamsetti, 2018; Mbhiza et al, 2024; Mlyakado & Mwandambo, 2023). This could stem from the fact that some teacher mentors may not be interested in helping or that they may erroneously think that the university has been able to equip these students with all the needed competences to thrive in the teaching profession (Mbhiza et al, 2024). Moreso, in a study that explored both the experiences of mentors and student-teachers revealed that systemic problems could put pressures in teaching practice exercise warranting that mentor teachers may not be able to discharge their duties while on the other hand, student-teachers perceived the mentor teachers as failing to direct them well but used them as reliefs (Zondo & Adu, 2024). Similarly, Ossai and Ramsaroop (2025) found that student-teachers in a Nigeria University lacked adequate mentoring and support, impacting on their ability to reflect critically on practice. This could be more damaging when it comes to support that could be specifically directed to inclusive teaching and learning especially as support for inclusive education for teachers is inadequate (Slowik et al, 2021). Inclusive education mentoring programmes for practicing teachers and notice teachers have been noted to be significant in enhancing inclusive education competence (Slowik et al, 2021).

Though some researchers have examined mentoring experiences during teaching practice exercise, what is still lacking are studies that are devoted to understanding specific mentoring support for inclusive education given to student-teachers. This is likely to impact on student teachers' professional preparation for inclusive education particularly in early childhood and primary education where it has been noted that inclusion is critical to early identification of special needs and remediation of such challenges (Ueda et al., 2021; World Bank Group, 2020). This gap in literature is what we closed by employing a qualitative research design to explore inclusive mentorship support provided by primary school teachers to early childhood and primary education student-teachers during teaching practice. Specifically, the following research questions were posed for the study:

1. What are student-teachers' experiences with inclusive mentorship during their teaching practice exercise?
2. What inclusive teaching support did student-teachers receive during their teaching practice exercise?

Methods

Research Design

Qualitative research design was employed in this study given the fact that we aimed at ascertaining the perception and experiences of our participants to solve real-life problems. Specifically, the phenomenological qualitative research approach was used to explore the lived experiences of student-teachers from the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education during their teaching practice exercise. Phenomenology has been described as a qualitative methodology that describes individuals' experiences and interprets these events in their everyday contexts, particularly focusing on the meaning they attach to these experiences (Bonyadi, 2023). It is an approach that focuses on collecting detailed, first-hand accounts from participants and systematically examining them to identify the core structure of their common experiences. This design was suitable for the present study because it facilitated a deep exploration of how student-teachers interpret and manage their inclusive education mentorship experiences during teaching practice. By giving participants, the opportunity to express their experiences in their own voices, the phenomenological approach generated the richness and depth necessary to fully capture the realities they encounter in classroom contexts.

Sampling Procedures and Data Collection

The population of the study comprised all the students of the Department of Early Childhood and Primary Education, Nnamdi Azikiwe University who underwent their teaching practice exercise in 2024/2025 academic session. Using simple random sampling, 20 students were randomly chosen from the population. All respondents were female students and are within the age range of 19 and 23 years. The sample size was considered suitable for a qualitative inquiry, as recent evidence suggests that thematic saturation can often be reached with 12–15 participants, particularly in relatively homogeneous groups where further interviews are unlikely to generate new insights (Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). To be eligible, participants had to have completed their teaching practice and resumed academic activities, ensuring they had sufficient field exposure to reflect meaningfully on their mentorship experiences during the exercise. Data collection involved obtaining informed consent and clearly communicating the purpose of the study to all respondents. Only student-teachers who agreed to participate were included. Each interview lasted about 35 minutes, was conducted in English, and was audio-recorded using a mobile device. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Instrument

In-person interviews were conducted with the selected participants, and a uniform set of guiding questions was used to ensure consistency across interviews. The following questions informed the study: Did you receive mentorship support from the teachers

in your cooperating school? What kind of support or guidance did your mentor teacher(s) provide during your teaching practice exercise? How frequently did you interact with your mentor teacher(s) during your teaching practice exercise? In what ways did your mentor teacher support you in addressing the needs of learners with diverse abilities or backgrounds? Were you encouraged or guided to use inclusive teaching strategies? Can you give examples? Did your mentor model inclusive teaching practices for you? If yes, what did you learn from observing them.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic content analysis following verbatim transcription. Each participant's transcript was first reviewed individually to preserve the uniqueness of their perspectives. Emerging ideas were identified and grouped into sub-themes, which were subsequently integrated into broader themes representing shared participant experiences. The themes were developed inductively, allowing them to emerge from the data rather than imposing a priori. For instance, statements such as "She was able to guide me... she showed me what I was doing wrong and how to correct it" and "The second teacher was very nice and she helped me understand how things are done in the class" were coded as evidence of mentorship presence. In contrast, responses like "There was no kind of mentorship support for me; it was more like self-learning" were coded as mentorship absence. These codes were later consolidated under the theme Variability of Mentorship Experiences in Teaching Practice Schools. No predetermined limits were placed on the number of themes or sub-themes; analysis continued until no new categories emerged.

Results

During the process of data analysis, a number of themes emerged addressing the main questions of the study. Regarding research question one, the themes that emerged included variability in the provisions of mentorship during teaching practice, structural concerns in the provisions of mentorship during teaching practice, true inclusive mentorship programmes, and development of professional confidence and attitudinal change. For research question two, practical pedagogical guidance, support for learners with SENs/modelling and use of inclusive teaching strategies. These themes are discussed below.

Variability of Mentorship Experiences in Teaching Practice Schools

Participants' experiences revealed that there are differences in the availability and quality of mentorship support provided by the school teachers for the student-teachers during their teaching practice exercise. Some student-teachers reported receiving meaningful mentorship from classroom teachers: "*She showed me what I was doing wrong and how to correct it.*" . The teacher was reported to be so supportive that she directed the student teacher on the right thing to do. Another respondent also noted that

one of the teachers was good and supportive indicating that the other teacher may not have been that helpful: *"The second teacher was very nice and she helped me understand how things are done in the class."* Another student noted that the mentorship support came through the supervisor from the university, and not the mentor teacher. The respondent noted that she made some mistakes in writing the lesson plan that were corrected by the supervisors: *"I made some mistakes in my lesson plan at the moment. So, she was able to guide me, the first supervisor that came was able to guide me..."*.

On the other hand, some reported limited or complete absence of mentorship. In some cases, initial mentor teachers were described as unapproachable or unsupportive, prompting student-teachers to seek assistance from alternative teachers within the school. For example, a student teacher reported: *"To be honest, my teacher wasn't of help... she didn't tell me anything."* There appears to be a lack of professional relationships and guidance from the teacher to the student teacher. Similarly, another student reported that her teaching practice exercise experience was just like a period of self-help. She never received any form of mentoring from the cooperating teachers in their school of practice: *"There was no kind of mentorship support for me; it was more like self-learning."* This variability could suggest that mentorship during teaching practice could largely be dependent on individual teachers rather than being structured school-wide practice. Instead of the support the student teachers needed to succeed, some of them noted that the teachers were stressing them which made some of them to switch to another mentor teacher: *"To be honest, my teacher wasn't of help. She was stressing me.... I had, I let her switch to a second teacher"*.

Student teachers who experienced supportive mentorship highlighted the importance of mentor teachers who were patient, approachable, and willing to offer guidance beyond routine supervision. Conversely, the absence of mentorship led some participants to rely on self-learning and trial-and-error approaches, which limited opportunities for professional growth in inclusive teaching.

Structural Concerns in The Provisions of Mentorships during Teaching Practice

Despite positive experiences reported by some participants, there were some concerns raised on the way the mentoring was provided. Several student-teachers indicated that mentorship was informal, inconsistent, and largely dependent on individual goodwill. Verbatim expressions from our respondents reflected these. For example, a respondent noted that particular teacher you encountered in school could influence the kind of mentorship you receive: *"It depends on the teacher you meet; there was no arrangement for mentoring."* Another student-teacher reported that "mentorship was not organised; it was just based on who was willing." This could imply that there are no existing formal plan on how to mentor student-teachers to handle students with special education needs in primary schools. This could limit the capacity of teachers to support student-teachers and may point to the need for administrative oversight on how they are mentored by the full-time teachers in schools.

Perceived Characteristics of Truly Inclusive Mentorship

Participants conceptualized inclusive mentorship as a supportive, dialogic, and developmental process. Key features identified included regular interaction, constructive feedback, emotional support, and intentional guidance. Inclusive mentorship was seen as one that recognises the learning needs of student-teachers, just as inclusive teaching recognises the needs of pupils. For example, the student-teachers highlighted this when they reported that: *“She showed me the ways to handle those children because it’s not the same way you handle others.” “By watching her teach, I learned how to focus more on children that need extra help.”* There was intentional interaction existing between the mentor teachers and the student-teacher. The teacher demonstrated how students with SENs are included in classes whereas the student teacher pays attention to the approaches the mentor teacher. Others reported openness and encouragement as critical ingredients in inclusive mentorship: *“She would correct me and also encourage me whenever I tried.” “There should be dialogue... at least once or twice a week to correct and guide the student teacher.”*

Development of Professional Confidence and Attitudinal Change.

Mentorship experiences contributed to student-teachers’ professional confidence and attitudes towards inclusive education. Participants reported increased tolerance, patience, and emotional resilience because of their teaching practice experiences. Situations that initially evoked discomfort or uncertainty, such as managing children’s hygiene or emotional needs were tolerated by students through mentorship and repeated practice. Our respondents prior to their teaching practice experiences could not endure some of these classroom occurrences but when they were mentored, they became clearly aware that those were parts of their classroom responsibilities. For example, a respondent noted: *“So she, like, she showed me the ways to handle those children specifically because it’s not the same way you handle others. For example, the food aspects you get to, like, open food for the children in the class. But that particular one, we don’t open the food and just leave them.....So you have to, like, fill them yourself”*. Another reported her attitudinal change thus: *“When I was ...year one, I didn’t know how to do most things. But then, for example, if a child messes with me or herself or I’ll be disgusted and all that. But after that, my teaching practice and everything, my mentorship and everything. Now, if a child is to mess with me or herself or in front of me, it’s nothing to me”*. This shift reflects the role of inclusive mentorship in fostering not only pedagogical competence but also positive professional dispositions necessary for working with diverse learners.

Mentorship as a Source of Practical Pedagogical Guidance

Where mentorship was present, it was largely characterised by practical, classroom-based guidance. Mentor teachers supported student-teachers in lesson preparation, classroom management, and responding to mistakes made during instruction. This hands-

on guidance was especially valuable for student-teachers transitioning from theoretical coursework to real classroom practice. For example respondents noted how inclusive mentorship support were of help to them with regard to pedagogical strategies they adopted to help students with special educational needs: *“She showed me the ways to handle those children because it’s not the same way you handle others”* and *“By watching her teach, I learned how to focus more on children that need extra help.”* Respondents noted clearly how mentorship support resulted in their developing the capacity to tailored instruction to the individual differences among diverse pupils in the class during teaching and learning process.

Support for Learners with SENs/Modelling and Use of Inclusive Teaching Strategies

A central theme across interviews was the role of mentor teachers in supporting inclusive practices. Student-teachers who received mentorship described being guided on how to recognise and respond to learners with diverse abilities, particularly children who exhibited delayed learning, social withdrawal, or limited participation. A respondent noted this thus: *“There were two children that had issues... they don’t interact with others, and she taught me how to handle them”* then mentor teacher directed: *“You have to observe them very well; through observation you will know when a child has something.”*

Furthermore, the mentor teachers demonstrated that inclusive teaching requires differentiated approaches rather than uniform treatment of learners. For example, student-teachers were guided to provide closer attention, individualised instruction, and emotional reassurance to learners with additional needs. For example, participants reported this thus: *“You have to bring the child close and teach her personally. That particular one, you don’t just leave them; you have to assist them yourself.”* In differentiating instruction, our participants recognized the need to tailor instruction to individual needs: *“Not all children have the same abilities... some are fast learners, some are slow learners.If you teach on the board, some won’t follow, but when you bring her close and teach her personally, she understands.”* These experiences enabled student-teachers to understand inclusion as a practical, relational process rather than an abstract concept.

Discussion

Findings from our study revealed variability in the provision of inclusive mentorship for student-teachers in primary schools. Further findings revealed that those who were provided with inclusive education mentorship reported enhanced confidence, inclusive competence, and professional identity. The variability in the provision of inclusive education mentorship for the student-teachers during their teaching practice revealed that its provision is inconsistent, informal, and heavily dependent on individual mentor teachers rather than structured institutional support. This aligns with available literature that demonstrates that some student-teachers may not receive the required support they need to succeed in teaching practice exercise (Maddamsetti, 2018; Mbhiza et al, 2024; Mlyakado & Mwandambo, 2023). Mbhiza et al, (2024) has suggested that inadequate provisions of

mentorship support could result from some teachers' not being interested in helping student teachers or the erroneous belief that these students might have been provided with sufficient training in the university to survive during the teaching practice exercise. One of the respondents noted that the mentor teachers were not interested in what they were doing, leading to the student-teachers engaging in self-learning endeavor. On the other hand, those who received mentorship reported its critical significance in their professional experience which have been attested by previous researchers such as Mbhiza et al (2024) and Shumba et al (2012). Some of the mentorship experiences reflected in student-teachers' capacity in planning, teaching and reflecting on their practices (Mbhiza et al, 2024).

Our respondents reported how the mentorship they received from the teachers provided them with practical guidance in inclusive education pedagogical strategies and practices. They were able to identify students with needs and reflected on how to handle these students in their classes. Mentor teachers were instrumental in their differentiating instructions and tailoring their practices to attend to the individual differences of pupils with special educational needs. This aligns with the findings of Mlyakado and Mwandambo (2023) who noted that the role of the mentor teacher could enhance the professional development of the student-teacher particularly in the areas of tolerance, confidence, and flexibility in the actual teaching environment.

Moreso, student-teachers reporting that the provision of mentorship is inconsistent, informal, and heavily dependent on individual mentor teachers rather than structured institutional support reflects the findings of Zondo and Adu, (2024) that revealed that systemic problems could put pressures in teaching practice exercise warranting that mentor teachers may not be able to discharge their duties while on the other hand, student-teachers perceived the mentor teachers as failing to direct them well but used them as reliefs. Similarly, Ossai and Ramsaroop (2025) have found that student-teachers in a Nigeria University lacked adequate mentoring and support, impacting on their ability to reflect critically on practice. Student-teachers' responses demonstrated that mentor support is critical to inclusive education practice (Slowik et al, 2021).

These findings have significant and practical implication to teacher education in Nigeria. First, the variability and informality of mentorship reported by participants suggest an urgent need for structured, institutionally supported mentorship frameworks during teaching practice. Teacher education programmes should move beyond ad hoc mentoring arrangements by developing formal mentorship guidelines that clearly define roles, expectations, and inclusive support responsibilities for mentor teachers.

Second, the findings highlight the need to intentionally integrate inclusive mentorship into pre-service teacher preparation programmes. Since participants who received mentorship demonstrated improved confidence, tolerance, and

inclusive competence, universities should incorporate mentorship training modules that prepare both student-teachers and mentor teachers for inclusive collaboration. This may include pre-practicum orientation, and joint mentor–mentee workshops.

Finally, the study underscores the need for professional development for in-service primary school teachers who serve as mentors. Given that mentorship quality was largely dependent on individual goodwill and competence, continuous professional development programmes should equip practicing teachers with skills in mentoring, inclusive pedagogy, and reflective supervision.

Conclusion

The study revealed that there is variability in the provision of inclusive mentorship for student-teachers in primary schools reflecting inconsistent and informal approach to the provision of support for student-teachers during their teaching practice exercise, and that those who were provided with inclusive education mentorship reported enhanced confidence, inclusive competence, and professional identity. Therefore, it could be concluded from our findings that there is no consistent approach to the provision of inclusive education mentorship support for student-teachers during teaching practice exercise, underscoring the need for more structured, intentional, and policy-driven mentorship frameworks within teaching practice programmes.

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