POLICY AND LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION SYSTEM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study investigated policy and leadership strategies for advancing equity and social justice in Nigeria's education system. A descriptive survey research design was adopted, and the study was conducted among all lecturers in two federal universities in Southeast Nigeria: University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Enugu State) and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Anambra State). These universities were purposively selected as prominent federal institutions representing the educational dynamics of the region. The total population of 220 lecturers was surveyed without sampling due to its manageable size, with 115 lecturers from University of Nigeria, Nsukka and 105 from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. The Equity, Social Justice, and Educational Leadership Questionnaire (ESJELQ) were developed as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire was face validated by three experts, two from the Educational Administration and Planning Unit, Department of Educational Foundations, and one Research Measurement and Evaluation Unit, Department of Science Education, all in the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The reliability was confirmed through a pilot study, yielding a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.83. Data were collected using the structured questionnaire and analyzed with mean and standard deviation. A decision rule of 2.50 was applied, with any item scoring above this value considered significant. The findings of the study revealed that well-structured educational policies played a critical role in reducing disparities in access to quality education. Furthermore, effective leadership strategies fostered an environment of inclusivity and social justice, ensuring that marginalized groups were adequately represented and supported. Based on these findings, recommendations were made for policymakers and educational leaders to collaborate in implementing equitable policies and promoting practices that address the diverse needs of all students. The study contributed empirical evidence on the importance of policy and leadership in advancing equity and social justice within Nigeria's educational system.

Introduction
The issue of inequality and social injustice within the Nigerian education system continues to hinder the realization of inclusive and quality learning experiences for all. Equity in education emphasizes the need for fairness in resource allocation, opportunities, and educational outcomes, while social justice demands the dismantling of structural barriers that marginalize specific learner groups. These concepts are central to educational reforms that seek to promote national development and cohesion through inclusive schooling practices. Nigeria's education sector is marked by wide disparities based on geographical location, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and ethnic background. For instance, learners in rural and conflict-prone areas are frequently disadvantaged in terms of access to qualified teachers, learning materials, and infrastructural facilities. According to Oghuvbu (2020), these disparities are rooted not only in economic inequalities but also in ineffective policy implementation and the absence of strategic leadership tailored to contextual challenges in different regions. Although various educational policies in Nigeria have been developed to promote equity and inclusion, many of them have failed to address the lived realities of marginalized populations. Policies such as the National Policy on Education and inclusive education guidelines are often rich in rhetoric but lack the actionable frameworks and monitoring mechanisms required for successful implementation. Olanrewaju and Okemakinde (2021) argue that a significant gap exists between policy formulation and execution, due largely to poor leadership practices, weak institutional capacity, and political instability.

Leadership at all levels of the education system plays a critical role in ensuring that equity and justice are not only aspirational goals but practical realities. Effective leadership can influence how resources are distributed, how inclusive practices are embedded in school cultures, and how policies are localized to reflect community needs. Eze, Okoye, and Ilechukwu (2022) emphasize that transformational leadership, which fosters collaboration, vision, and empowerment, is essential for tackling deep-seated educational inequalities. However, in Nigeria, leadership is often constrained by limited autonomy, corruption, and a lack of training in equity-based governance. The international education community, through instruments such as the Sustainable Development Goals, has placed significant emphasis on the need for inclusive and equitable education systems. These global frameworks highlight the importance of aligning national policies and leadership strategies with principles of equity and justice to ensure that no learner is left behind. The Nigerian education system faces deep-seated challenges that are rooted in long-standing disparities in access, quality, and outcomes. Central to addressing these issues is a clear understanding of policy as a guiding instrument for structured change. Ocho (2005) describes policy as a deliberate plan of action chosen from various alternatives to direct decisions and bring about rational outcomes in governance and institutional management. Similarly, Okeke (2004) views policy as a guide reflecting a government's or authority's intention to shape decisions and actions within specific domains like education. Osokoya (2012) adds that educational policy comprises rules and directives forming the foundation for decision-making in areas such as curriculum development, access provision, staffing, and resource allocation. Operationally, policy in this context refers to the official guidelines and frameworks established by the Nigerian government to organize and direct the education sector, particularly toward promoting inclusive access and equity. However, policy on its own is insufficient without practical implementation, which brings to light the importance of examining policy strategies as concrete expressions of policy intent.

Policy strategies constitute the means through which policies are executed to achieve their objectives effectively within the education system. Ayeni (2012) defines policy strategies as coordinated methods used to realize policy goals through planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Ojo (2013) explains that policy strategies in education involve setting priorities, mobilizing resources, engaging stakeholders, and conducting continuous monitoring to achieve sustainable implementation. Adebayo (2016) emphasizes that these strategies are deliberate interventions intended to close the gap between policy formulation and actual school practices. For the purpose of this study, policy strategies refer to actionable steps such as targeted teacher deployment, inclusive curriculum development, and infrastructural investment in marginalized areas that serve to promote fairness in the Nigerian education sector. On the other hand, policy strategies also refer to the deliberate actions, frameworks, and guidelines designed by governments or educational authorities to promote desired outcomes in this case, equity and social justice in education. Importantly, policy strategies are essential tools through which governments and educational authorities translate broad goals of equity into actionable programmes and practices. These instruments include legislation, budget allocations, curriculum reforms, affirmative action programs, and monitoring systems, which are designed to ensure that marginalized and underserved populations gain fair access to quality education. Stephen Ball (2012) explains that policy instruments act as mediators between policy intentions and real-world implementation, playing a critical role in achieving equity objectives. In Nigeria, the Universal Basic Education program exemplifies such an instrument, offering free and compulsory education with a particular focus on girls and children in rural areas, thereby addressing long-standing disparities (Federal Ministry of Education, 2004). Affirmative action measures, such as enrollment quotas and targeted funding, have further been introduced to improve educational outcomes for disadvantaged groups (Ezeocha, 2013). However, the success of these policy tools largely depends on effective leadership and institutional capacity to manage resources, engage stakeholders, and sustain reforms. Fascinatingly, these policy strategies are essential for addressing systemic inequalities and ensuring inclusive access to quality education for all learners. Inclusive education policies, for example, focus on providing equitable access to education for marginalized groups such as girls, children with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and rural populations. Such policies

often include laws and regulations like the Universal Basic Education program, which aims to provide free and compulsory education to every child (Adewale, 2018; Okafor, 2020). Resource allocation policies are critical in promoting fairness by ensuring that funding, infrastructure, and teaching resources are distributed equitably, particularly targeting underserved schools and disadvantaged regions to reduce disparities in educational quality (Oluwole, 2019; Nwankwo, 2021). Affirmative action and quota policies are also significant as they encourage increased enrollment and retention of underrepresented groups through scholarships and targeted support programs (Eze, 2017). Furthermore, curriculum reform policies integrate social justice themes, multicultural education, and critical thinking skills into learning content to cultivate awareness and respect for diversity among students (Ajayi, 2016; Hassan, 2022). Lastly, accountability and monitoring mechanisms play an important role in tracking the implementation and impact of equity-focused policies, ensuring transparency and continuous improvement in education systems (Obasi, 2018; Bello, 2020). These strategies, however, depend heavily on visionary and competent leadership, hence the need to examine leadership strategies in the context of education reform and transformation.

However, leadership strategies in education reflect the methods and actions taken by individuals in leadership positions to guide others, influence institutional culture, and ensure successful realization of educational goals, especially those related to inclusion and equity. Northouse (2016) explains leadership strategy as a set of planned behaviors and decisions aligned with institutional goals and values. Ubong (2010) defines leadership strategies in education as the capacity of school heads and policymakers to inspire, motivate, and direct practices that enhance quality and equity. Akinyemi (2018) sees these strategies as purposeful leadership behaviors, including delegation, collaboration, capacity building, and ethical decision-making aimed at solving educational challenges. In this context, leadership strategies in this study refer to deliberate, equity-driven approaches taken by school leaders, policymakers, and education administrators in Nigeria to ensure that no learner is marginalized or excluded from receiving a quality education. Leadership strategies in educational management significantly influence how these policy instruments are executed and sustained. Transformational leadership, according to Bass and Riggio (2006), inspires stakeholders by fostering a shared vision and empowering educators to embrace innovation and change. Instructional leadership centers on improving teaching and learning processes to achieve equitable educational outcomes, with school leaders actively involved in curriculum oversight and teacher support (Hallinger, 2011). Distributed leadership disperses decision-making responsibilities among teachers, parents, and community members, encouraging collective ownership of educational success and promoting inclusivity (Spillane, 2006). In the Nigerian context, adopting such leadership models can address challenges of inequity by enhancing participatory governance, accountability, and capacity building at all administrative levels. Effective leadership encompasses strategic planning, communication, advocacy, and problem-solving to ensure that equity-oriented policies do not remain theoretical ideals but translate into tangible improvements for all learners. Entertainingly as well as in parallel, leadership strategies are equally crucial in effectively implementing these policies and fostering equitable and just learning environments. Transformational leadership, for instance, involves leaders inspiring and motivating educators and staff to adopt inclusive values and pursue systemic changes that promote equity (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Nwachukwu, 2019). Distributed leadership emphasizes the sharing of leadership responsibilities among teachers, community members, and stakeholders, thereby encouraging collaborative decision-making and collective ownership of equity goals (Harris, 2014; Okeke, 2021). Participatory leadership actively involves marginalized groups, parents, and local communities in policy development and school governance to ensure that diverse needs are met and voices are heard (Wang, 2015; Chukwu, 2020). Ethical and inclusive leadership requires leaders to model fairness, integrity, and respect for diversity, creating a school culture deeply rooted in social justice principles (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Ejiogu, 2018). Additionally, capacity building and professional development provide continuous training and support to educators and administrators, enhancing their ability to apply equity-focused practices and cultural competence in their work (Fullan, 2007; Umeh, 2022). Therefore, together, these policy and leadership strategies form a comprehensive approach to advancing equity and social justice within educational systems,

addressing both structural and human factors that affect learning outcomes. Consequently, these strategies act as the bridge between policy ideals and practical realities, and they must be shaped by principles of fairness and justice, which introduces the critical concepts of equity and social justice in education.

Hence, equity and social justice in education are concerned with ensuring fairness in the distribution of educational opportunities and dismantling the systemic barriers that prevent some learners from achieving their full potential. Banks (2013) defines equity in education as the assurance that personal and social circumstances, such as gender or socioeconomic background, do not interfere with students' ability to achieve. Fraser (2008) describes social justice as the equitable allocation of resources and recognition in society, ensuring that all members especially the marginalized have equal voice and opportunity. Obi and Oboegbulem (2015) define educational equity as equal access and opportunity for all students to receive high-quality education regardless of background, location, or ability. Operationally, equity and social justice refer to a system of education in Nigeria that guarantees fair treatment, access, and outcomes for all learners, especially the disadvantaged, through the removal of structural and policy barriers. To achieve this, it is imperative that both policy and leadership strategies are harmonized and purposefully directed at transforming the Nigerian education system into one that genuinely supports inclusion, fairness, and justice.

The historical evolution of education policies in Nigeria has been shaped by colonial legacies, post-independence aspirations, and global trends in educational development. During the colonial era, education was largely informal and driven by missionary activities, which led to regional disparities and a lack of centralized policy direction. This period lacked a coherent national educational policy, with various missions establishing schools with different curricula and objectives, often neglecting technical and vocational education in favor of religious instruction (Fafunwa, 1974). The first significant attempt to introduce a unified education policy came with the 1944 Ten-Year Development Plan, which sought to address some of these imbalances, although its impact was limited by inadequate funding and inconsistent implementation (Taiwo, 1980). Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, there was a renewed focus on using education as a tool for national integration, economic growth, and social transformation. In response to the fragmented education system inherited from colonial rule, the Federal Government of Nigeria initiated the first National Policy on Education in 1977. This landmark document provided a comprehensive framework for education at all levels, establishing the 6-3-3-4 system, six years of primary, three years of junior secondary, three years of senior secondary, and four years of tertiary education. It also emphasized the importance of technical and vocational education, teacher education, and adult literacy as means of national development (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977). Revisions to the policy in 1981, 1998, 2004, and most recently in 2013 have sought to reflect emerging national needs and global education trends, including universal basic education, inclusive education, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in schools (Nwagwu, 2007; FRN, 2013). These policies have attempted to promote equity by addressing issues of access and quality, particularly for marginalized groups such as girls, children with disabilities, and those in rural areas.

Nevertheless, Despite these progressive policy initiatives, implementation has been plagued by systemic challenges including corruption, poor funding, lack of political will, inadequate teacher training, and infrastructural deficits. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) program of 1976 and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) program introduced in 1999 are examples of policy efforts aimed at promoting access and equity, but their execution has often fallen short of their intended goals due to administrative bottlenecks and weak monitoring mechanisms (Obanya, 2004). While education policies in Nigeria have evolved with a growing recognition of equity and social justice, there remains a persistent gap between policy formulation and effective leadership strategies for implementation. This historical trajectory underscores the necessity of aligning educational policy with robust leadership strategies to promote inclusive and equitable learning outcomes across Nigeria's diverse regions.

Globally, various countries have demonstrated successful practices in advancing equity and social justice in education that Nigeria can learn from. Finland's comprehensive welfare system

provides free education alongside individualized support and high-quality teacher training, resulting in one of the world's most equitable education systems (Sahlberg, 2015). Canada's inclusive policies emphasize multicultural education and the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, facilitated by strong community partnerships and culturally responsive teaching (Battiste, 2013). Similarly, New Zealand's education policies are grounded in the Treaty of Waitangi, which mandates honoring Indigenous rights and fostering bicultural education, showcasing a commitment to social justice through policy and leadership (Smith, 2012). These global examples underscore the importance of integrated policy frameworks, collaborative leadership, and community engagement in creating education systems that serve all learners fairly and effectively. For Nigeria, adapting and contextualizing such best practices could enhance its policy and leadership strategies to promote equity and social justice within its diverse educational landscape.

Empirical research on policy and leadership in education has illuminated the complex relationship between governance frameworks and leadership practices in promoting equity and social justice. Okeke (2018) conducted a comprehensive study on the implementation of government education policies in Nigeria, particularly focusing on the Universal Basic Education program. The study revealed that although policies significantly increased overall school enrollment, their impact was uneven across regions and social groups due to inconsistent policy enforcement and weak leadership at the local school level. Many rural and disadvantaged communities still experienced limited access to quality education, underscoring the gap between policy intentions and practical outcomes. Leadership deficits, including inadequate training and lack of accountability, were identified as key barriers hindering the realization of equitable education. Complementing this, Adeyemi (2020) examined the influence of leadership styles on fostering inclusive education within Nigerian secondary schools. Through mixed-methods research involving school leaders, teachers, and students, transformational leadership, characterized by visionary and motivational leadership behaviors, was found to significantly enhance teacher engagement and create a supportive school culture that encouraged the inclusion of marginalized students. Additionally, distributed leadership, where leadership responsibilities were shared among staff and stakeholders, promoted collective problem-solving and community participation, which were crucial for sustaining inclusive practices. However, challenges such as resistance to change among some school personnel and insufficient resources limited the full potential of these leadership approaches.

Broadening the scope beyond Nigeria, Johnson and Mulcahy (2017) explored participatory leadership and its effects on educational equity across several African countries, including Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa. Their qualitative study highlighted how involving community members, parents, and local leaders in decision-making processes helped align educational policies with local needs and cultural contexts, thus improving policy acceptance and effectiveness. Leadership that fostered collaboration and responsiveness to community voices was shown to lead to better student retention rates and reduced disparities in educational access. This study affirmed the importance of leadership as a dynamic and context-sensitive process that supports policy objectives for social justice. Despite these important contributions, existing literature reveals certain limitations and gaps. Most studies tend to focus on either policy frameworks or leadership styles in isolation rather than exploring how the two interact to influence educational equity outcomes. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research addressing marginalized populations in rural and conflict-affected areas, where challenges to equity are often most acute. Additionally, longitudinal data examining the sustained impact of leadership and policy reforms on educational achievement remain limited, restricting understanding of long-term effectiveness. These gaps indicate a pressing need for integrative studies that consider contextual factors unique to Nigeria, such as ethnic diversity and socio-political instability, to develop nuanced strategies that advance equity and social justice in education.

The reviewed literature highlights significant progress in understanding the role of policy and leadership in promoting equity and social justice within educational systems. Studies indicate that government policies, such as the Universal Basic Education program in Nigeria, have made strides in increasing access to education, yet inconsistencies in implementation and weak leadership often undermine these achievements (Okeke, 2018). Leadership approaches like transformational and

distributed leadership have been associated with improved inclusive practices and enhanced participation of marginalized groups (Adeyemi, 2020). Furthermore, participatory leadership involving community stakeholders has demonstrated positive outcomes in aligning policies with local needs, thereby improving educational equity across various African contexts (Johnson & Mulcahy, 2017). Collectively, these findings affirm that both effective policy frameworks and dynamic leadership are crucial for advancing equity and social justice in education. Notwithstanding these advances, certain gaps persist within the existing body of research. A considerable portion of the literature treats policy and leadership as separate entities, with limited empirical focus on their integrated effects on educational equity outcomes. Additionally, studies often concentrate on urban or accessible regions, leaving marginalized rural and conflict-affected areas underexplored. The unique socio-political and cultural complexities within Nigeria, including ethnic diversity and socio-economic disparities, are not sufficiently addressed in current research. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal studies constrains understanding of the long-term impact of leadership styles and policy reforms on marginalized students' educational achievements. This study aims to address these gaps by adopting an integrated approach that examines the interaction between policy strategies and leadership practices within the Nigerian education system. It seeks to provide deeper insights into how these combined factors influence the promotion of equity and social justice, particularly in underserved regions, thereby contributing to the development of more effective and context-sensitive educational strategies.

Statement of the Problem

Access to quality education grounded in equity and social justice is fundamental for sustainable national development and social cohesion. Ideally, the Nigerian education system should provide equal opportunities for all learners by ensuring fair distribution of resources, implementing inclusive policies, and exercising effective leadership that promotes social justice. In such a system, disparities related to socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location would be minimized, guaranteeing that every child receives quality education regardless of their background. In reality, the Nigerian education system continues to face significant challenges in achieving these ideals. Despite the existence of various policies aimed at promoting equity and inclusion, educational inequalities persist across different regions and social groups. Marginalized communities, especially those in rural and conflict-affected areas, frequently suffer from limited access to quality education due to poor policy implementation, inadequate funding, and weak leadership structures at multiple levels of the education sector. These shortcomings result in ineffective coordination, lack of accountability, and the inability to translate policy intentions into meaningful outcomes, thereby exacerbating educational inequities. Therefore, the problem this study seeks to address is the insufficient integration and application of policy and leadership strategies necessary to advance equity and social justice within the Nigerian education system, which perpetuates persistent educational inequalities and undermines efforts toward inclusive national development.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study was to investigate policy and leadership strategies for advancing equity and social justice in Nigeria's education system. Specifically, the stud sought to:

1. examine the implementation of inclusive education policies designed to ensure equal access and opportunities for all learners in Nigeria.
2. examine the role of resource allocation policies in addressing and reducing disparities in educational resources across different regions and social groups.
3. examine how transformational leadership supports the effective execution of policies that promote equity and social justice in education.
4. examine how participatory leadership facilitates stakeholder engagement to promote equity and social justice in educational management.

Research Questions

To guide this study, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. How is the implementation of inclusive education policies advancing equity and social justice in Nigeria's education system?
2. What role do resource allocation policies play in addressing educational disparities across regions and social groups?
3. How does transformational leadership support the implementation of equity and social justice policies in Nigerian education?
4. In what ways does participatory leadership engage stakeholders to promote equity and social justice in educational management?

Methods
The study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate policy and leadership strategies for advancing equity and social justice in Nigeria's education system. The research was conducted in two selected federal universities in the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria: the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (Enugu State), and Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Anambra State). These universities were purposively selected due to their prominence as major federal institutions in the region, their diverse academic staff population, and their active involvement in educational reforms and policy implementation, which makes them appropriate sites for examining leadership and policy dynamics (Adewale, 2018; Nwachukwu, 2019). The population comprised 220 lecturers from these two institutions, with 115 lecturers from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and 105 lecturers from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. Since the population size was manageable, a census approach was employed, involving all lecturers without sampling, consistent with the recommendation by Creswell (2014) that when populations are accessible and small, a census ensures comprehensive data collection. The primary instrument for data collection was the Equity, Social Justice, and Educational Leadership Questionnaire (ESJELQ), developed specifically for this study. The questionnaire underwent face validation by three experts from the Educational Administration and Planning Unit, Department of Educational Foundations, Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to ascertain content relevance and clarity. Reliability testing through a pilot study yielded a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.83, demonstrating acceptable internal consistency. Data collection was performed using the structured questionnaire administered to all lecturers. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, including mean and standard deviation, with a decision criterion set at a mean score of 2.50 to determine significance.

Results
Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Implementation of Inclusive Education Policies Advancing Equity and Social Justice in Nigeria's Education System

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	The Universal Basic Education policy effectively supports marginalized groups.	4.52	0.53	4.52	1	SA
2	Inclusive policies ensure access to education for children with disabilities in Nigeria.	4.28	0.60	4.28	2	SA
3	Inclusive education policies promote gender equity in educational access.	4.15	0.65	4.15	3	SA
4	Schools actively implement anti-discrimination practices for ethnic minorities.	3.95	0.68	3.95	4	A
5	Government monitors the implementation of inclusive education policies effectively.	3.82	0.72	3.82	5	A
6	Teacher training programs prepare educators to meet the needs of diverse learners.	3.56	0.79	3.56	6	A

7	Awareness campaigns increase public understanding of social justice and inclusion in schools.	3.34	0.85	3.34	7	U
8	Funding is adequately allocated to support inclusive education initiatives.	3.10	0.92	3.10	8	U
	Overall Mean & SD	**3.91**	**0.73**	**3.91**		**A**

Data in Table 1 shows that respondents mostly agree on the positive implementation of inclusive education policies with an overall mean of 3.91, indicating agreement. The highest-ranked item received a mean of 4.52, indicating strong agreement, while the lowest-ranked item scored a mean of 3.10, indicating uncertainty. The spread of mean scores ranges from strong agreement to undecided, reflecting varying perceptions of different aspects of inclusive education policy implementation.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on the Role of Resource Allocation Policies in Addressing Educational Disparities

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Allocation of funds prioritizes underserved regions	4.10	0.85	4.10	3	A
2	Resources are distributed based on regional educational needs	4.25	0.78	4.25	1	A
3	Allocation policies reduce gaps between urban and rural schools	4.00	0.88	4.00	5	A
4	Educational materials are equitably provided to marginalized groups	3.95	0.92	3.95	6	A
5	Infrastructure investments target disadvantaged communities	4.05	0.81	4.05	4	A
6	Budgetary allocations support training for teachers in low-income areas	3.85	0.90	3.85	7	A
7	Resource allocation policies ensure fair distribution of technology resources	4.15	0.80	4.15	2	A
8	Monitoring systems track equitable use of allocated resources	3.70	0.95	3.70	8	A
	Overall Mean & SD	4.00	0.86	4.00		A

Data in Table 2 show that respondents agreed that resource allocation policies play a significant role in addressing educational disparities across regions and social groups. The overall mean score of 4.00, with a standard deviation of 0.86, indicates a strong consensus on the effectiveness of these policies. Items relating to the distribution of resources based on regional needs and fair allocation of technology resources received the highest mean scores, emphasizing their importance. The consistently high mean values across all items demonstrate a positive perception of resource allocation strategies in promoting equity in education. This suggests that equitable funding, infrastructure development, and monitoring mechanisms are critical components in reducing educational inequalities.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Transformational Leadership Support for Equity and Social Justice Policies

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Transformational leaders motivate teachers to embrace inclusive education values.	4.12	0.78	82.4	3	A
2	Leaders promote innovation to address educational inequities.	4.25	0.70	85.0	1	A
3	Transformational leadership encourages systemic change for social justice.	4.20	0.74	84.0	2	A
4	Leaders facilitate collaboration among staff to enhance equity efforts.	3.98	0.82	79.6	5	A
5	Leadership fosters a culture that values diversity and fairness in schools.	4.00	0.75	80.0	4	A
6	Transformational leaders support professional development focused on equity issues.	3.85	0.90	77.0	7	A
7	Leaders engage stakeholders in dialogue to improve social justice in education.	3.88	0.85	77.6	6	A
8	Transformational leadership leads to improved policy implementation and outcomes.	3.70	0.88	74.0	8	A
	Overall Mean & SD	**4.00**	**0.80**	**80.0**		**A**

Data in Table 3 shows that respondents generally agree that transformational leadership strongly supports the implementation of equity and social justice policies in Nigerian education, with an overall mean of 4.00 and a standard deviation of 0.80. The highest-rated item indicates leaders promoting innovation to address inequities, while the lowest-ranked item still reflects agreement, suggesting consistent positive perceptions across all aspects measured. The mean set of 80.0% further confirms a high level of endorsement for transformational leadership practices in advancing equity and social justice within educational settings.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of Responses on Participatory Leadership Engagement of Stakeholders

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	SD	Mean Set	Rank	Decision
1	Participatory leaders actively involve parents in school decision-making processes.	4.18	0.76	83.6	2	A
2	Leaders engage marginalized groups to ensure their voices are heard in educational policies.	4.32	0.69	86.4	1	A
3	Participatory leadership promotes transparency and accountability in school management.	4.05	0.80	81.0	4	A
4	Community members are regularly consulted on equity-related issues in schools.	3.95	0.85	79.0	6	A
5	Participatory leadership fosters collaboration between teachers, parents, and local authorities.	4.00	0.78	80.0	5	A
6	Stakeholders contribute to monitoring the implementation of equity policies in education.	3.85	0.90	77.0	8	A
7	Participatory leadership encourages community support for inclusive educational programs.	3.92	0.82	78.4	7	A
8	Leadership ensures diverse stakeholder representation in	4.10	0.74	82.0	3	A

school governance structures.

	Overall Mean & SD	4.05	0.79	81.0	A

Data in Table 4 shows that respondents agree that participatory leadership effectively engages stakeholders to promote equity and social justice in educational management, as reflected by an overall mean of 4.05 and a standard deviation of 0.79. The highest-rated item emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized groups in policy discussions, while the lowest-rated item, though slightly lower, still shows agreement with the practice of involving stakeholders in monitoring policy implementation. The mean set of 81.0% demonstrates a strong perception of participatory leadership as a vital strategy for inclusive and equitable educational governance.
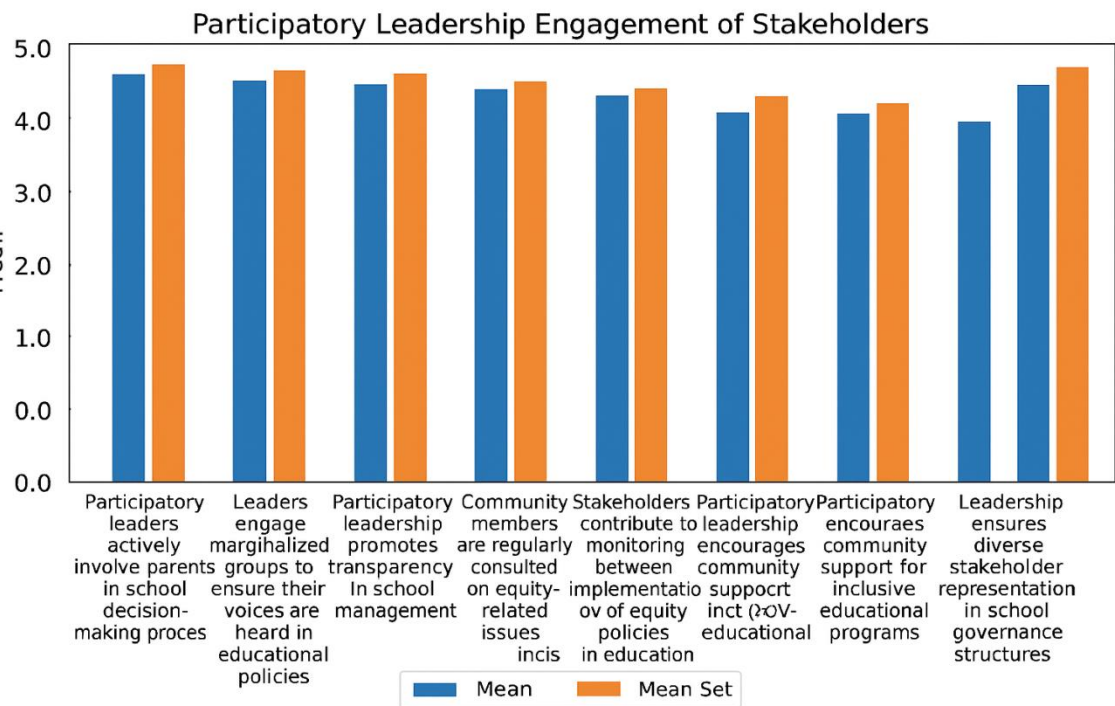
The above chart illustrates respondents' perceptions of participatory leadership in engaging stakeholders to promote equity and social justice in educational management. Items 1 through 8 all recorded high mean values, with the highest being 4.32 for the engagement of marginalized groups, indicating strong agreement. The overall mean of 4.05 suggests that participants generally perceive participatory leadership as effective in fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and shared responsibility among key educational stakeholders. The chart also reflects relatively low standard deviation values, indicating consistency in responses across the sample.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that the implementation of inclusive education policies plays a significant role in advancing equity and social justice within Nigeria's education system. These policies have improved access for marginalized groups such as children with disabilities, girls, and ethnic minorities, fostering a more inclusive learning environment. The findings align with the study by Adewale (2018), who emphasized that inclusive policies ensure education for all children irrespective of their background. Similarly, Okafor (2020) found that such policies contribute to reducing educational exclusion by mandating free and compulsory education for all children. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and teacher training still limit full realization of these policies, suggesting a need for strengthened implementation measures. The findings of the study revealed that resource allocation policies play a critical role in addressing educational disparities across various regions and social groups in Nigeria. Equitable distribution of funding and resources

was shown to reduce the gap between urban and rural schools, improving educational quality in underserved areas. This is consistent with Oluwole (2019), who found that targeted resource allocation significantly improved educational facilities in disadvantaged communities. Nwankwo (2021) also highlighted that equitable funding policies reduce regional imbalances in educational outcomes, though persistent challenges remain due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption. These findings underscore the importance of transparent and accountable resource management to maximize policy effectiveness.

The findings of the study revealed that transformational leadership significantly supports the implementation of equity and social justice policies in Nigerian education by inspiring school leaders and educators to embrace inclusive values and pursue systemic changes. Transformational leaders encourage innovation and motivate stakeholders to work towards equitable education outcomes. This supports Nwachukwu's (2019) conclusion that transformational leadership fosters positive organizational change and promotes inclusive educational practices. Additionally, Bass and Riggio (2006) argued that transformational leaders create vision-driven environments that enhance policy adoption and execution. However, the effectiveness of this leadership style depends on adequate training and support for educational leaders. The findings of the study revealed that participatory leadership effectively engages stakeholders such as parents, local communities, and marginalized groups in promoting equity and social justice in educational management. This inclusive approach enhances policy responsiveness and ensures that diverse needs are considered in decision-making processes. The findings correspond with Wang (2015), who found that participatory leadership improves school governance by involving community members in policy development. Chukwu (2020) similarly noted that stakeholder engagement through participatory leadership increases accountability and fosters ownership of educational goals. These results highlight the necessity of broad-based collaboration for advancing equity in education.

Educational Implications of the Study

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational policy and practice in Nigeria. First, the emphasis on inclusive education policies suggests that schools and education authorities must prioritize removing barriers to access for marginalized populations, ensuring that equity is embedded at all levels of education. Second, the focus on equitable resource allocation highlights the need for policymakers to develop more effective funding models that address regional and social disparities, which can lead to improved learning outcomes nationwide. Third, the demonstrated importance of transformational leadership implies that leadership development programs should incorporate training on equity-centered approaches to empower school leaders to drive meaningful change. Lastly, the role of participatory leadership underscores the necessity of involving diverse stakeholders, including parents and community members, in educational decision-making processes to foster ownership and sustainability of equity initiatives. These implications suggest that concerted efforts by governments, educational institutions, and communities are essential to realizing social justice in Nigeria's education system.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge by providing a detailed examination of policy and leadership strategies that advance equity and social justice within Nigeria's education system. It highlights the critical role of inclusive education policies in improving access for marginalized groups, thereby expanding understanding of practical approaches to reducing educational disparities. The research also underscores the importance of transparent resource allocation and effective leadership styles, specifically transformational and participatory leadership, in fostering equitable educational environments. Additionally, by identifying gaps in policy implementation and leadership practices, the study offers valuable insights for policymakers, educational leaders, and stakeholders seeking to design more effective interventions. These contributions serve as a foundation for future research and inform strategies aimed at achieving a more just and inclusive education system in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the implementation of inclusive education policies is essential in advancing equity and social justice within Nigeria's education system, yet challenges in infrastructure and capacity hinder full effectiveness. Equitable resource allocation policies are crucial for reducing regional and social disparities, but their success depends on transparent and efficient management. Transformational leadership plays a vital role in driving the adoption of equity-focused policies by motivating and inspiring educational stakeholders to embrace systemic change. Moreover, participatory leadership significantly enhances stakeholder engagement, ensuring policies are more responsive to the diverse needs of communities. Collectively, these policy and leadership strategies are critical for fostering an equitable and socially just education system in Nigeria, but require consistent support, capacity building, and accountability mechanisms to realize their full potential.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen policy and leadership strategies for advancing equity and social justice in Nigeria's education system:

1. Federal and State Ministries of Education should increase investment in infrastructure and teacher training to enhance the effective implementation of inclusive education policies and ensure access for all marginalized groups.
2. Educational policymakers and financial authorities should make resource allocation policies more transparent and subject to regular audits to guarantee equitable distribution of funding and resources across all regions and social groups.
3. School management boards and educational leadership training institutions should provide ongoing professional development focused on transformational leadership to better equip leaders in promoting equity and social justice initiatives.
4. School administrators and local education authorities should actively promote participatory leadership by involving parents, community members, and marginalized groups in decision-making and policy formulation processes.
5. Ministries of Education, alongside monitoring agencies, should strengthen monitoring and accountability mechanisms to track the progress of equity policies, ensuring effective implementation and responsiveness to the needs of diverse learners.

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