

EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIAL EDUCATION: A BRIDGE IN THE GAP

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Abstract

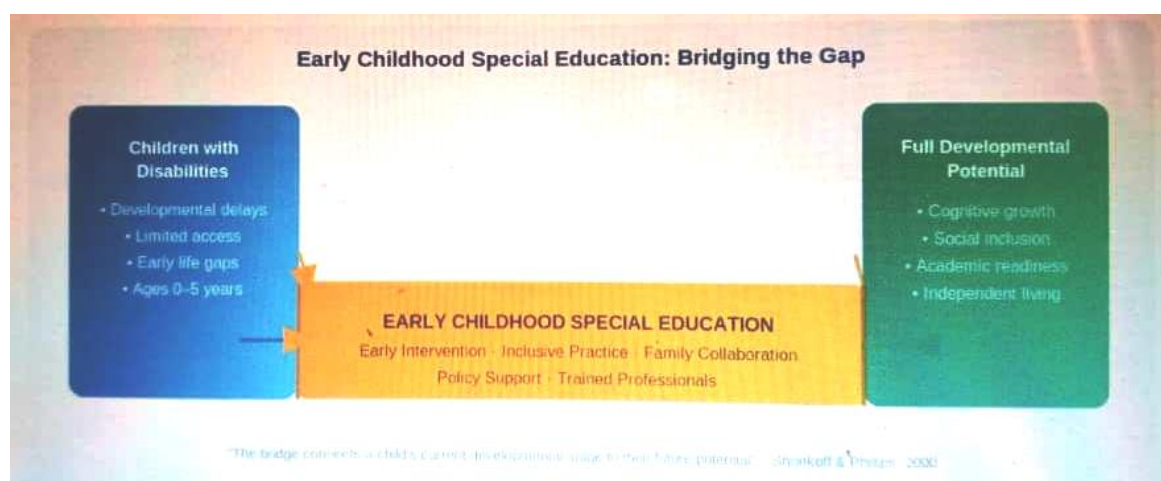
The paper x-rayed the inception of early childhood special education (ECSE) and its crucial roles in bridging developmental gaps for children with disabilities in Nigeria. This work explored the origin of early childhood special education, importance of ECSE in promoting inclusive education, highlighting challenges in implementation, and identifying strategies for improvement. Key aspects include the impact of early intervention, inclusive practices, collaboration between families and professionals, and addressing barriers to ECSE programs in Nigeria which were concisely demonstrated in diagrams. The paper concluded with recommendations focusing on strengthening policy implementation, investing in capacity building, promoting collaboration, increasing funding, and raising awareness to enhance outcomes for children with special needs.

Keywords: Early childhood, special education, Inclusive education, Children with disabilities

Introduction

Early childhood special education is a vital component in the educational landscape, serving as a critical bridge that connects young children with disabilities to opportunities and support that can significantly impact their lifelong development. The early years of a child's life are foundational, laying the groundwork for future learning, social interaction, and emotional growth. For children with special needs, these years are even more crucial as timely and appropriate intervention can dramatically alter their developmental trajectory (WHO and UNICEF, 2022; Guralnick, 2017). In Nigeria, like many other countries, there's a growing recognition of the importance of inclusive education. The federal Ministry of Education (2021) reaffirmed its commitment to inclusive education through the national policy on inclusive education, promoting equal educational opportunities for learners with disabilities. However, the gap between policy intentions and practical implementation remains significant. Many children with disabilities face barriers to accessing quality early childhood education tailored to their unique needs (UNESCO, 2020). Early childhood special education aims to address this disparity by providing targeted support and interventions designed to meet the individual needs of these children.

The concept of a "bridge" is particularly apt when discussing early childhood special education. It signifies a connection between the child's current developmental stage and their potential for future growth. This period is characterized by rapid brain development, making it an optimal time for intervention (WHO and UNICEF, 2022). Early childhood special education (ECSE), early help and early intervention are often interchangeably used in varied context. In this paper early childhood education or early intervention is used. Research has consistently shown that early intervention can lead to better outcomes in cognitive, social, and emotional development for children with special needs (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).



Despite the clear benefits, there are challenges. Limited resources, lack of trained professionals, and societal attitudes towards disability are just a few of the hurdles faced in implementing effective early childhood special education programs. In Nigeria, addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes policy support, community engagement, and investment in educator training (Soni, 2022; Odom et al., 2011). The goal of early childhood special education is not just to provide care but to empower these children with the skills and support needed to thrive in inclusive settings. By focusing on individualized support plans, fostering collaboration between educators and families, and promoting inclusive practices, early childhood special education can indeed serve as a bridge over the gap, leading to more equitable educational opportunities (Jimoh, Majebi & Sabia, 2025; Lawal, 2024). Bridging the gap will not be complete without looking at the origin of early childhood special education.

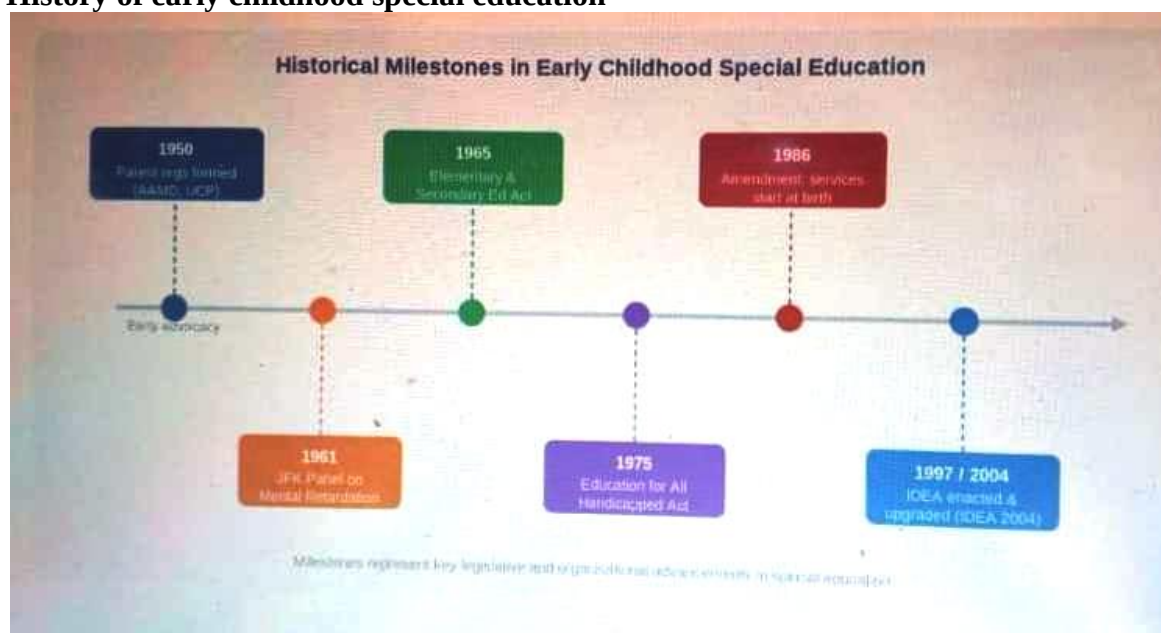
Inception of early childhood special education

Delays in growth of some children in family and society have become a great concern to parents, individuals, government and Society at large. It is because of these developmental delays that children tend to perform poorly in academic work. It is because of this concern that early dictation is inevitable, to identify and treat such children needing early intervention. Early Intervention reduces number of children needing special education as well as increase in the potentials for those severely involved children requiring longer programming. Teachers who are experienced with early education on special need children strongly believe that all special need children can function at a higher level, if appropriate identified and treatment is provided in early years (Razaq-Shuab, 2025). Some cases of special needs could be alleviated, some can be overcome to a large extent, so that the child can live a better life. This concern for early intervention for early years of birth from 0 to 5 years for special need child has given birth to a new field of learning referred to as early childhood special education.

This thoughtful and timely field of study seems to fill the gap created between early childhood education and special education. It integrates concepts from early childhood and special education. It acts as stabilizer. Early childhood special education stabilizes atypical child to near norm and prevents further damage from occurring, hence stabilizes the affected child through early teaching and learning. Early childhood is a field that studies the development and growth of growing children, along with the child rearing practices that can enhance that development. Since the inception of this program it has seen tremendous results and growth in the life of children and Society. With introduction of early childhood education in pre-primary schools' evidences have shown that early teaching and learning are possible and practicable (Lawal, 2024). Secondly, early

childhood education has grown and spread. From creche, daycare, nursery to kindergarten in most part of the world, Nigerian inclusive. The second field of study which early childhood special education has embed its concept is special education which deals with identification, diagnosis and treatment of children with special need. The categories of children with special need include hearing impairment, visual impairment, speech and language impairment, intellectual disabilities, health and physical impairment, emotional and behavioral disorders, learning disabilities and the gift, talented and creative children among others. The services and special education program for special children in primary and secondary schools have been of significant for past some years. It is so obvious that early childhood special education can not stand alone without integrating the knowledge, concept and practices of both fields of education to rescue the child with special need.

History of early childhood special education



Latest successes have been discovered to emanate from early training of a child. Research has verified that the early formative years are the most important stage of development in a child's life (Soni, 2022). Researchers in Child Development such as Freud 1938; Piaget 1952; Bloom 1964 ; white 1975 among others emphasize that these first five or 6 years are period of the highest potential growth in physical ,perceptual, linguistic, Cognitive and affective areas. It has also been discovered that environmental experiences during these crucial years affect intelligence and mental growth. The early stage of rapid growth is more crucial to a special need child. The earlier the special need child is identified the greater are the chances that academic failure can be lessened and the chances of reducing further disabilities. Early treatment of the child with potential disabilities is seen as one of the most promising methods of dealing with special learning needs.

Specially, since all areas of special education namely intellectual disability, emotional and behavioral disturbance learning disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairment, health and physical impairments, speech impairment as well as gifted talented and creative, specialist appreciate the fact that early identification and treatment reduce further disabilities (Meda et al, 2026). In underdeveloped countries like Nigeria, early childhood program for disabilities has received support from local, state and federal level through establishment of schools for children with hearing impairment and rehabilitative

services in various centers. In developed countries they have placed early childhood special education activities as a top priority Programme.

In 1950 parents were forming organizations that will support the condition of people with special needs and the first organization formed was American Association of Mental Deficiency. The second organization was United Cerebral Palsy Association and the Muscular Dystrophy Association. In 1961 President John F. Kennedy created the first president's Panel of Mental retardation. It was a 27 member panel which comprised of doctors and scientists and other like-minded people. They spent one year gathering information about people and services that were associated with disabilities. The panel brought to president a plan that consisted of more than 100 recommendations. According to John F Kennedy library website, President Kennedy used the panel's report as the Blueprint to address those living with disabilities. This step helped for the fight for equality for persons living with disabilities . The panel meeting also brought about changes in legislation including funding for facilities related to prevention, care and treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. The panel outcome continued to empower changes today.

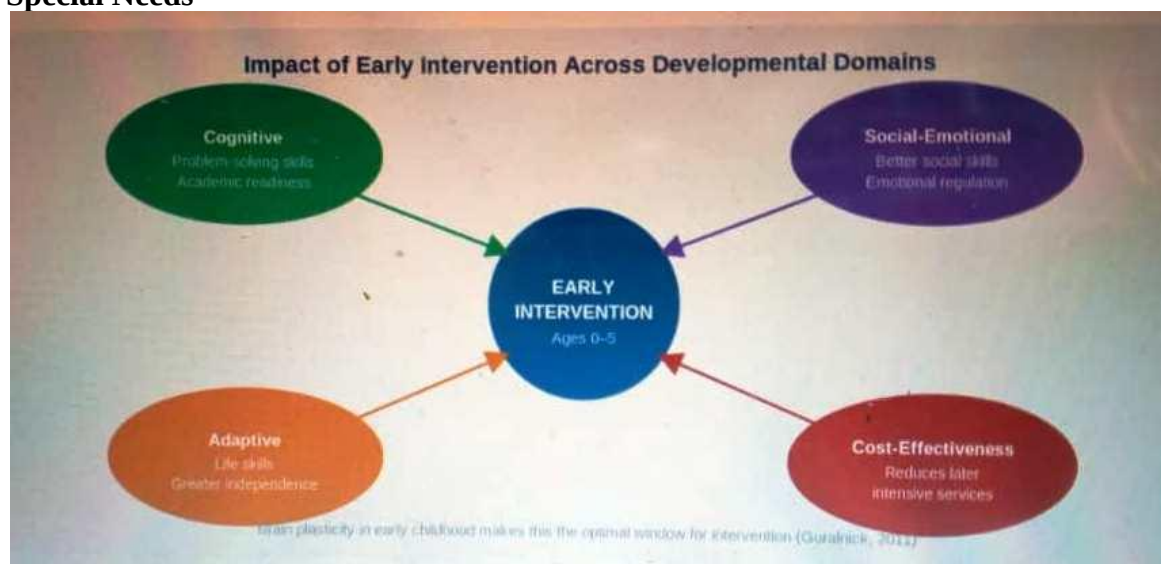
In 1965 president Lyndon B Johnson signed the elementary and Secondary Education Act. As the fight for equality moved forward there was another victory in the 1960s. In his tenure the president instituted full education opportunity as the first national goal. The department of Education website also revealed that the law which was a civil right law supported programs like federal grants for textbooks and library books and low-income scholarships and grants to improve the quality of elementary and Secondary Education. In 1968 Eunice Kennedy Shriver find the Special Olympics. Her dream became a reality in 1968. The Special Olympics game is still in existence where persons with disabilities can exhibit their physical talents. It was a place where they can be cheered and appreciated for their triumphs. In 1975 the education for all handicap children act was created. With the aim of increasing the inclusion of children with special needs in public schools, that they receive one meal a day and to establish greater quality of education between those with and without special needs. Also, official division should be put in place where parents will administer their complaints and where they will resolve their complaints. It was discovered that before the election of the law there were 1 million children without access to education claimed special Education website. In 1986 amendment to the education for all handicap children act was enacted. The amendment mandated that programs and services start at birth. It was discovered that services were not reaching infants and toddlers. It took up to 8 years, in 1994 for this amendment to be enforced. This brought about the preschool programs departments of education. It created preschool grants for children with disabilities. This took the place of previous incentive grant program. It was estimated that nearly 600, 000 3 to 5-year-old children with disabilities are in this program today. In 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) took the place of the Education for all Handicaps Children Act. The purpose of the IDEA was to protect the rights of those with disabilities and their families. Specially, part b covers from 3 years old through the age 21-part B deals with services and rights of those from births on the age of 2 years old.

The IDEA is the governing agent to how agencies provide interventions, special education and related services to both state and public agencies. The IDEA has been upgraded in 2004, has also included some services to the children with disabilities such as assistive technologies and transitions to new environment. In 2002 no child left behind was enacted. This law made it possible for any child to go to school outside of their immediate living areas, it also made available grants to entice teachers to teach in

underscoring schools and districts. The goal was for every student in public school to be proficient in Reading and mathematics by 2014. Even though many parents have not deemed it necessary for their children with disabilities to attend school but, many have benefited from this laudable stride of the government. In 2010, President Barack Obama signed a legislation changing the term mental retardation to intellectual disability. He made a clear public gesture that mental retardation was offensive and not acceptable in the modern language. It was a federal law that will not be implemented at once but it is seen as win for all persons with and without disability. Though seen as a mirage but many writers have started using the new concept in textbooks, lesson planning and advertisements and news castings.

There remains serious concern for early intervention at early age ranging from 0 to 5 years, this concern has given rise to early childhood special education hence, bridging the gap between early childhood and special education ranging from 3 to 21 years. This paper tends to also x- ray vital gaps early childhood special education has occupied which include developmental gaps, inclusive practices in early childhood education, collaboration with families and other professionals among others.

Bridging Developmental Gaps: The Impact of Early Intervention on Children with Special Needs

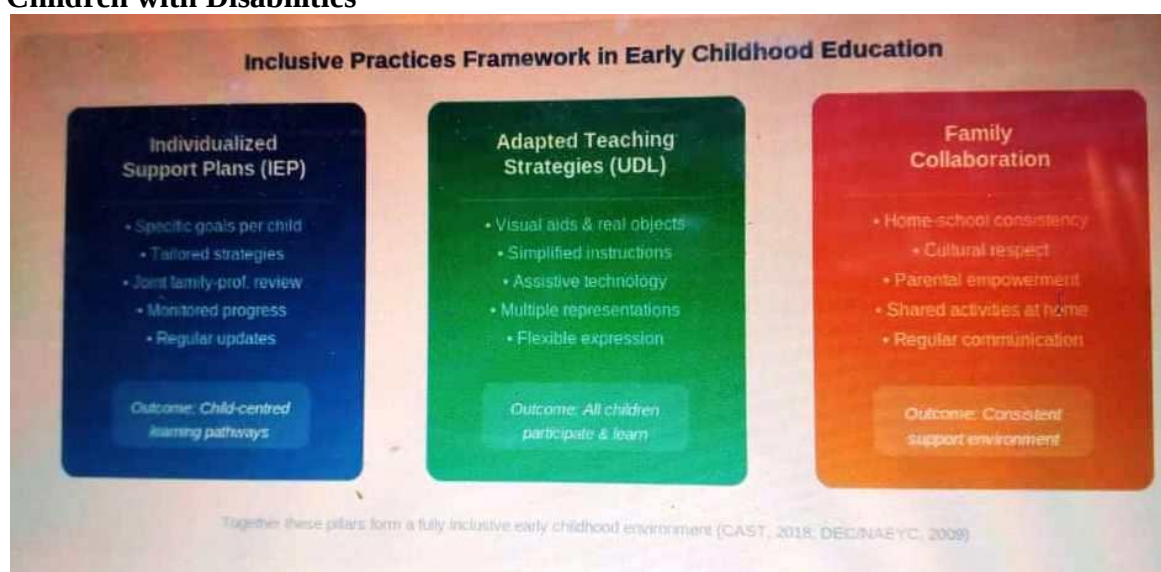


Early intervention in special education refers to the services and support provided to young children with developmental delays or disabilities from birth to age 5. Research has consistently shown that early intervention can significantly impact the developmental trajectory of children with special needs, bridging gaps in cognitive, social, and emotional development (Guralnick, 2017). The brain's plasticity during early childhood makes it an optimal period for intervention, allowing for greater responsiveness to therapeutic and educational inputs (UNICEF, 2021). In Nigeria, many children with special needs face delayed identification and intervention, exacerbating developmental gaps. Early childhood special education programs aim to address this issue by providing targeted support tailored to each child's needs. These programs often include speech therapy, occupational therapy, and specialized educational strategies designed to enhance developmental outcomes (Tollan and Jezrawi, 2023). The impact of early intervention is evident across various domains:

- Cognitive Development: Early intervention has been linked to improved cognitive outcomes, with children showing better problem-solving skills and academic readiness.
- Social-Emotional Development: Children receiving early intervention often exhibit better social skills and emotional regulation.
- Adaptive Behavior: Early support helps children develop essential life skills, promoting greater independence. Despite these benefits, challenges such as limited access to services, lack of trained professionals, and cultural barriers hinder the effectiveness of early intervention programs in Nigeria. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maximizing the impact of early childhood special education.

Studies have shown that early intervention can lead to reduced need for more intensive services later in life, making it a cost-effective approach (Meda, et al, 2026). By investing in early childhood special education, Nigeria can potentially improve long-term outcomes for children with special needs, enhancing their quality of life and contributions to society. The key to bridging developmental gaps lies in timely, targeted, and family-centered interventions. By focusing on these elements, early childhood special education can serve as a powerful bridge, connecting children with special needs to opportunities for growth and development.

Inclusive Practices in Early Childhood Special Education: Strategies for Supporting Children with Disabilities



Inclusive education is an approach that values diversity and promotes the participation of all children, including those with disabilities, in early childhood settings. In Nigeria, promoting inclusive practices in early childhood education is crucial for ensuring that children with disabilities have equal opportunities for learning and development. Inclusive practices involve adapting teaching strategies, curricula, and environments to meet the diverse needs of all children (Okonjo, et al, 2026). Effective inclusion requires educators to be proactive in creating learning environments that are physically, socially, and instructionally supportive of children with disabilities. This includes using universal design for learning (UDL) principles to provide multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression.

Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners, including children with disabilities (United Nations, 2023; UNESCO, 2020). This could be made possible through implementation of planned

strategies to support all learner, disability notwithstanding. Such strategies for supporting children with disabilities in inclusive settings include:

- Individualized Support Plans: Developing and implementing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that outline specific goals and strategies tailored to each child's needs.
- Adapted Teaching Strategies: Using visual aids, simplified instructions, and assistive technology to enhance learning and participation.
- Collaboration with Families: Working closely with families to understand children's needs and preferences, ensuring consistency between home and school environments.

In addition, Adigun (2021) also perceived that teachers also should benefit from ongoing training and support to develop the skills needed to effectively include children with disabilities in their classrooms. This might involve workshops, coaching, or peer mentoring focused on inclusive education strategies.

Implementing inclusive practices can have positive outcomes for all children, including enhanced social skills, empathy, and preparation for a diverse society. For children with disabilities, inclusion can lead to improved academic and social outcomes, greater sense of belonging, and increased opportunities for friendships. In addition, Nigeria's early childhood education system can prioritize building inclusive environments by providing resources, training, and support for educators, and fostering collaboration between schools, families, and communities.

Building Bridges to Success: Collaboration Between Families and Professionals in Early Childhood Special Education.



Collaboration between families and professionals is a cornerstone of effective early childhood special education. In Nigeria, fostering strong partnerships between educators, therapists, and families can significantly enhance outcomes for children with special needs. Families bring unique insights into their child's strengths, needs, and preferences, while professionals offer expertise in child development and intervention strategies. When families and professionals work together, they create a cohesive support system that bridges gaps between home and school environments (Razaq-Shuaib, 2025). This collaboration ensures that interventions are consistent, reinforcing, and tailored to the child's individual needs.

Effective collaboration involves:

- Shared Decision-Making: Families and professionals jointly develop and review Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), ensuring goals reflect the child's needs and family priorities.

- **Regular Communication:** Ongoing communication keeps families informed about their child's progress and involves them in decision-making processes.
- **Respect for Family Culture:** Professionals respect and incorporate cultural values and practices into intervention strategies, enhancing engagement and effectiveness.
- **Collaboration** also extends to involving families in therapeutic activities at home, empowering them to support their child's development beyond the classroom.

Research shows that family-professional partnerships lead to better outcomes for children with disabilities, including improved academic performance, social skills, and emotional well-being (Turner & Knight, 2011). By building bridges between home and school, early childhood special education can become more responsive and effective.

To strengthen collaboration, professionals can prioritize building trusting relationships with families, being culturally sensitive, and providing support that is accessible and relevant to family needs.

Navigating the Gap: Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Early Childhood Special Education Programs in Nigeria.



Implementing early childhood special education (ECSE) programs in Nigeria faces several challenges that impact the quality and accessibility of services for children with disabilities. Despite policy frameworks supporting inclusive education, gaps in implementation persist. Key challenges include limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of trained professionals in special education. Many early childhood settings lack adaptive equipment, therapeutic resources, and accessible facilities needed to support children with disabilities effectively (Soni, 2022). Additionally, societal attitudes and stigma surrounding disability can hinder efforts to include children with special needs in mainstream settings. The shortage of trained educators and therapists is a significant barrier. Many teachers lack specialized training in special education, making it challenging to meet the diverse needs of children with disabilities. Addressing this requires investment in professional development and capacity-building initiatives for educators and support staff.

Funding constraints also limit the scope and sustainability of ECSE programs. Adequate financing is crucial for providing necessary resources, training, and support services. Partnerships with NGOs, international organizations, and community groups can help bridge funding gaps and enhance program effectiveness. Cultural beliefs and practices in Nigeria can influence how disability is perceived and addressed. Some communities may have limited awareness about the potential of children with disabilities,

impacting enrollment and participation in ECSE programs. Community engagement and advocacy are essential for promoting inclusive attitudes and mobilizing support for children with special needs.

Opportunities exist to leverage technology and innovative approaches to overcome some challenges. For example, teletherapy and digital learning tools can extend the reach of specialized services, especially in underserved areas.

Conclusion

Early childhood special education serves as a vital bridge, connecting children with disabilities to opportunities for growth, learning, and inclusion. By addressing gaps in access, quality, and support, Nigeria can enhance developmental outcomes for these children. Collaboration among families, educators, policymakers, and communities is key to building an inclusive education system that empowers every child to reach their potential. Investing in early childhood special education is an investment in a more inclusive, equitable future for all.

Suggestions

Based on the discussions on early childhood special education in Nigeria, key recommendations include:

- Strengthen Policy Implementation: Enhance implementation of inclusive education policies to ensure access to quality ECSE services.
- Invest in Capacity Building: Provide training and support for educators and therapists in special education strategies.
- Promote Collaboration: Foster partnerships between schools, families, communities, and NGOs to support children with disabilities.
- Increase Funding: Allocate adequate resources to ECSE programs to improve accessibility and quality.
- Raise Awareness: Conduct community outreach to promote inclusive attitudes towards children with disabilities. Implementing these recommendations can help bridge gaps in early childhood special education, enhancing outcomes for children with special needs in Nigeria.
- Capacity Building: Training educators and therapists in special education strategies.
- Resource Allocation: Ensuring ECSE programs receive adequate funding and resources.
- Community Engagement: Promoting awareness and inclusion of children with disabilities.
- Partnerships: Collaborating with stakeholders to enhance program effectiveness.
- By addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities, Nigeria can improve outcomes for children with special needs, ensuring they have access to quality early childhood education.

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