

POLICY BORROWING, POLICY TRANSLATION, AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION REFORM: GLOBAL-TO-STATE DYNAMICS IN OSUN STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT:

Inclusive education has occupied a central place in global education policy since the 1994 Salamanca Statement, reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (2015). Nigeria ratified the CRPD in 2007 and enacted the National Policy on Inclusive Education (2017) and the Disability Act (2018). In 2024, Osun State passed its own Disabilities Protection and Prohibition Law. Despite this legislative momentum, inclusive education in Nigeria remains partial, uneven, and poorly implemented. Existing explanations emphasise state capacity deficits yet leave unexplained why children with learning difficulties continue to be excluded from schools that formally subscribe to inclusion, and why families navigate disability through biomedical clinics, prayer camps, and traditional healers that formal policy does not address.

This paper argues that a significant mechanism of implementation failure is not capacity deficit alone but interest-group fragmentation. Drawing on qualitative case study methodology, the study examines how international and federal inclusive education policies are translated into practice in Osun State, Nigeria, a context characterised by private school dominance (approximately 60–70 per cent of enrolment), active Yoruba cosmological frameworks, and weak enforcement capacity.

The study integrates two primary analytical frameworks. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) is extended to incorporate cosmological authority within the macrosystem, positioning traditional healers, religious leaders, and community elders as actors whose interpretive authority over disability causation shapes family decision-making across ecological levels. Stakeholder theory (Mitchell et al., 1997) provides the mechanism for explaining how configurations of power, legitimacy, and urgency among four key interest groups produce the observed pattern of uneven implementation.

Data were generated through directed qualitative content analysis of 37 policy documents, three global instruments, six federal Nigerian policies, four Osun State documents, and 24 school-level

documents, and 28 semi-structured interviews with eight mothers, four guardians, seven teachers, five school proprietors or principals, and four state-level policy officers. Analysis proceeded in three stages using NVivo 12: directed content analysis of policy documents, reflexive thematic analysis of interview transcripts, and matrix-based triangulation linking actor configurations to policy silences.

Document analysis identified four systematic silences across global, federal, and state policy texts: absent cultural engagement, minimal private sector regulation, weak enforcement mechanisms, and unrecognised gendered advocacy labour. Interview findings reveal that these four silences correspond precisely to the four domains in which informal actors exercise decisive influence over inclusion outcomes.

Four interest groups emerge as the primary agents of inclusion in practice. Cosmological authorities, babalawos, imams, and pastors, exercise high cultural legitimacy and interpretive power over disability causation, shaping whether families seek biomedical assessment, pursue spiritual intervention, or withdraw from formal education entirely. Yoruba ontological frameworks, including Orí (personal spiritual destiny) and ẹni-òòṣà (spiritual election), function as binding interpretive systems that formal policy neither engages nor reaches. Private school proprietors exercise high discretionary market power over admissions, employing covert screening mechanisms that exclude students with learning difficulties to protect institutional reputation, operating outside regulatory reach in a sector that accommodates most enrolled students. Mothers acting as advocates perform the primary labour of securing educational access for children with learning difficulties, navigating admissions, negotiating with teachers, managing disclosure across institutional and cosmological systems, and accumulating practical navigational knowledge that functions as epistemic brokerage. This gendered advocacy work is constitutive of whatever inclusion is achieved, yet it is entirely invisible in policy texts. Street-level teachers, tasked with implementing inclusive practices without training, materials, or systemic support, develop informal accommodations through classroom improvisation, constrained by institutional mandate without corresponding resources.

Triangulation demonstrates that borrowed policies fail in Osun not because of a single capacity deficit but because policy design assumes unified state authority, a regulated private sector, and accountable institutions that do not exist. The interaction of stakeholder attributes, high legitimacy

without formal accountability, high power without regulatory constraint, high urgency without institutional leverage, and moderate legitimacy without resources, produces inclusion that is contingent, uneven, and dependent on the sustained informal labour of actors' policy does not recognise.

The study introduces culturally negotiated inclusion as an empirical-analytical concept describing inclusion that emerges through locally authoritative systems of meaning and informal governance rather than through formal policy design or enforcement. This concept has comparative relevance for Global South contexts where epistemic pluralism, weak state capacity, and private sector dominance coexist, offering education policy researchers and reform practitioners a more analytically precise account of why globally borrowed frameworks requires multi-level stakeholder engagement to achieve meaningful implementation.

Keywords: policy borrowing; inclusive education; Global South; stakeholder theory; culturally negotiated inclusion