



## **PATRISTIC EDUCATION AS A CATALYST FOR HARNESSING CATHOLIC PHILOSOPHY OF INCLUSIVE LEARNING IN NIGERIA**

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### **Keywords:**

Patristic education, Catholic culture, inclusive learning, religious education, Nigeria, Catholic identity.

**Abstract:** As Catholic schools struggle with the demands of inclusive education in a pluralistic society, there is a growing need to leverage theological heritage to reinforce identity and inclusivity. This study explores the influence of Patristic education, rooted in the teachings of the Early Church Fathers, on harnessing Catholic culture and practice to promote inclusive learning in Catholic secondary schools in Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was employed, targeting 625 teachers across 25 Catholic secondary schools in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. A sample of 112 teachers was selected using cluster sampling. Data were gathered using a structured 10-item questionnaire, with established validity (index = 0.74) and reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  = 0.77). Findings revealed that both traditional and modern forms of Patristic education significantly contribute to embedding Catholic values into inclusive educational practices. The study concludes that Patristic education remains a relevant tool for fostering inclusivity, unity in diversity, and holistic faith-based education. Recommendations include integrating Patristic education across curricula through both classical and digital platforms to promote inclusive learning aligned with Catholic identity.

### **Introduction**

In today's globalized and increasingly diverse educational landscape, Catholic schools face a

pressing imperative to balance fidelity to tradition with inclusive pedagogical practices.

The goal is to ensure that education not only

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transmits faith and doctrine but also accommodates the needs of all learners, regardless of socio-economic status, learning differences, gender, or religious background (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Inclusive education, as articulated in Sustainable Development Goal 4, promotes access to “equitable, quality education” and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2015; Bakwaph, 2020). Catholic schools are not exempt from this imperative and are uniquely positioned to integrate inclusive learning into a theological and cultural framework that upholds the dignity of all persons.

Patristic education – grounded in the teachings and writings of early Church Fathers such as Augustine, Ambrose, Basil, and Gregory the Great – offers an educational paradigm that is formative, holistic, and community-oriented (Wilken, 2005; Lebechi, 2023). Their theological insights emphasized the integration of reason and faith, the dignity of human beings, and the moral obligations of community living. In this light, Patristic education can be repositioned as a dynamic approach that not only conserves Catholic identity but also champions inclusive practices through pastoral sensibilities, ethical instruction, and communal responsibility (Lebechi, 2021). This study examines how Patristic education can serve as a veritable framework for harnessing Catholic culture and practice in promoting inclusive learning in

Catholic secondary schools in Nigeria (Mamma & Bakwaph, 2019).

## Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Inclusive Pedagogy Theory. CST provides a foundational ethical and theological lens for Catholic education, rooted in the principles of human dignity, solidarity, the common good, and the preferential option for the marginalized (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). It emphasizes that every human being, created in the image of God, possesses inherent worth and must be granted equal opportunities for personal and spiritual development. Within the educational context, CST challenges Catholic schools to become communities of inclusion, justice, and care, where diversity is not only acknowledged but also embraced. In fostering inclusive learning environments, CST supports the idea that Catholic education must reach beyond doctrinal instruction to nurture compassionate, socially responsible individuals. Complementing this moral foundation is Inclusive Pedagogy Theory, which focuses on practical strategies for teaching diverse student populations in ways that ensure participation, belonging, and achievement for all (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Rather than segregating students based on ability or background, inclusive pedagogy promotes a “one classroom for all” model that values difference as a resource

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for learning. When Patristic educational principles – grounded in early Christian teachings on community, spiritual formation, and moral responsibility – are applied within this inclusive framework, Catholic schools are uniquely equipped to deliver an education that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to contemporary needs. This synergy empowers educators to construct learning environments that are deeply rooted in Catholic values while actively countering marginalization, thus fulfilling the dual mission of faith formation and social transformation.

## Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's deep-rooted Catholic tradition and the widespread establishment of faith-based educational institutions, many Catholic secondary schools encounter significant challenges in effectively implementing inclusive learning practices that are deeply grounded in Catholic doctrine. While the mission of Catholic education emphasizes the holistic development of learners – spiritually, intellectually, and socially – the practical integration of this mission with inclusive pedagogical strategies often remains fragmented. One key reason for this disconnect is the limited use of Patristic education, which encompasses the theological, moral, and pastoral teachings of the early Church Fathers. These teachings offer profound insights into human dignity, communal responsibility, and moral formation. These are concepts that are

inherently aligned with contemporary principles of inclusive education.

Yet, in most Catholic school curricula, the contributions of Patristic thinkers such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Basil the Great are either marginally referenced or omitted entirely. This underutilization has led to a gap between the Church's historical, theological foundations and the lived educational experiences of students (Lebechi, 2024; Shabayang, 2025). Without a consistent and meaningful integration of Patristic insights, the Catholic identity risks becoming a nominal label rather than a lived reality within classrooms. As a result, students from diverse backgrounds may feel spiritually or culturally alienated, thereby undermining efforts toward inclusivity and weakening the transformative power of Catholic education. This study seeks to explore how a revitalized approach to Patristic education can serve as a bridge, reconnecting doctrinal heritage with inclusive educational practices and revitalizing Catholic schools as communities of both faith and equity.

## Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to:

1. Assess the influence of traditional forms of Patristic education on promoting inclusive learning rooted in Catholic culture and practice.
2. Evaluate the influence of modern forms of Patristic education, including digital and



multimedia tools, on inclusive learning in Catholic schools.

## Research Questions

1. How do traditional forms of Patristic education influence inclusive learning practices in Catholic schools in Nigeria?
2. What is the influence of modern forms of Patristic education on the promotion of inclusive Catholic education?

## Hypotheses

1. Traditional forms of Patristic education do not significantly influence inclusive learning in Catholic schools in Nigeria.
2. Modern forms of Patristic education do not significantly influence inclusive learning in Catholic schools in Nigeria.

## Literature Review

Patristic education reflects the intellectual, spiritual, and moral legacies of the early Church Fathers who shaped the doctrine and educational mission of the Church. Their writings emphasized a holistic view of education, shaping not only intellect but also character and community responsibility (Benedict XVI, 2008). In this sense, Patristic education aligns with the mission of Catholic schools to form individuals spiritually, morally, and socially (Miller, 2006; Bakwaph & Anyanwu, 2020). Inclusive education refers to the right of all learners to access and participate in quality education regardless of ability, background, or belief (UNESCO, 2017). Catholic schools, rooted in the *imago Dei* principle, are called to create

educational environments that reflect universal human dignity. Studies by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) suggest that inclusive pedagogy not only benefits marginalized groups but also improves the learning climate for all students. Modern approaches have begun to digitize Patristic content through mobile apps, digital archives, and online theology platforms. Agu (2020) found that such modern formats enable educators to contextualize early Church teachings in ways accessible to contemporary learners. Similarly, Ekezie (2022) observed that integrating Patristic texts through audio-visual materials enriches the inclusivity and cultural fidelity of religious instruction.

Further, the connection between faith-based instruction and inclusive pedagogy has been reinforced by empirical studies emphasizing the moral and ethical potential of religious education in pluralistic classrooms. Grace (2016) argues that Catholic education offers a values-based framework that enables schools to respond constructively to diversity and difference, particularly when grounded in theological traditions such as those offered by the Church Fathers. This framework not only affirms the dignity of every learner but also encourages a communal ethos that supports both academic achievement and spiritual formation. In addition, digital theology – an emerging field within religious education – has created new pathways for engaging with Patristic content in ways that align with inclusive education goals.

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According to Campbell and Garner (2016), digital tools facilitate participatory and dialogical learning environments, especially in contexts where students bring diverse religious experiences and cognitive styles. Through incorporating Patristic texts into these platforms, Catholic educators can enhance doctrinal understanding while promoting interactive, learner-centered pedagogy. This convergence of tradition and innovation holds significant promise for reimagining Catholic schools as inclusive, faith-anchored communities of learning.

## Methodology

A descriptive survey research design was employed in this study to investigate the influence of Patristic education on promoting inclusive learning through Catholic culture and practice in Catholic secondary schools. The target population consisted of 625 teachers across 25 Catholic secondary schools located within the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. To ensure manageability and representativeness, cluster sampling was used to select a sample of 112 teachers from five randomly chosen schools. This sampling approach allowed for the efficient gathering of

data across diverse educational settings while maintaining the integrity of the population structure. Data collection was facilitated through a structured 10-item instrument titled the *Questionnaire on the Influence of Patristic Education in Harnessing Catholic Culture and Practice for Inclusive Education (QIPEIHCCPIE)*. The instrument was subjected to expert validation in the fields of educational research, theology, and measurement and evaluation, resulting in a content validity index of 0.74. A pilot study involving 20 teachers, excluded from the final sample, was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the questionnaire, yielding a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's Alpha) of 0.77, which indicates acceptable reliability. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) to address the research questions and independent sample t-tests to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level, providing both statistical rigor and interpretive clarity.

## Results and Discussion

Research Questions 1: How do traditional forms of Patristic education influence inclusive learning practices in Catholic schools in Nigeria?





**Table 1: Mean and Standard Showing Influence of Traditional Forms of Patristic Education in harnessing Catholic Culture and Practice for Inclusive Learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria**

|  | SA | A  | D  | SD | Mean        | Std Dev     | Remarks |
|--|----|----|----|----|-------------|-------------|---------|
| Traditional forms patristic education are incorporated into school teaching culture and practices in schools                 | 46 | 33 | 23 | 10 | 3.03        | 0.78        | Agreed  |
| Traditional forms of patristic education helps students develop a deeper understanding of Catholic tradition and identity    | 52 | 24 | 20 | 16 | 3.04        | 0.78        | Agreed  |
| Traditional forms of patristic education help students to develop a deeper understanding of Catholic tradition and identity. | 48 | 36 | 15 | 13 | 3.06        | 0.79        | Agreed  |
| Traditional forms of patristic education are adapted by the teachers to meet students' diverse needs and abilities           | 56 | 24 | 18 | 14 | 3.08        | 0.79        | Agreed  |
| Patristic education is effective in promoting inclusive learning in Catholic Schools.  | 35 | 31 | 36 | 10 | 2.81        | 0.80        | Agreed  |
| <b>Average mean</b>  |    |    |    |    | <b>3.00</b> | <b>0.79</b> |         |

Table 1 shows the influence of traditional forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria. Results indicate that scale mean value is 2.96. This value is above the benchmark mean value of 2.50. Hence there is high influence of traditional forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria.

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Research Questions 2: What is the influence of modern forms of Patristic education on the promotion of inclusive Catholic education?

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Showing influence of Modern Forms of Patristic Education in harnessing Catholic Culture and Practice for Inclusive Learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria.**

| Items   | SA | A  | D  | SD | Mean        | Std Dev     | Remarks |
|---|----|----|----|----|-------------|-------------|---------|
| Modern forms of patristic education are important in shaping Catholic culture and practice for inclusive education  | 46 | 33 | 23 | 10 | 3.03        | 0.78        | Agreed  |
| Modern forms of patristic education influence the way Catholic values are taught.   | 31 | 35 | 36 | 10 | 2.81        | 0.80        | Agreed  |
| Modern forms of patristic education help to incorporate   | 56 | 24 | 18 | 14 | 3.08        | 0.96        | Agreed  |
| Modern forms of patristic education incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences  | 56 | 24 | 18 | 14 | 3.08        | 0.79        | Agreed  |
| Moderns forms of patristic education enhances the use of technology which promotes Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria. | 35 | 31 | 36 | 10 | 2.81        | 0.80        | Agreed  |
| <b>Average mean</b>   |    |    |    |    | <b>2.96</b> | <b>0.83</b> |         |

Table 2 shows the influence of modern forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria. Results indicate that scale mean value is 2.96. This value is above the benchmark mean value of 2.50. Hence there is high influence of modern forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria.

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Hypothesis 1: Traditional forms of Patristic education do not significantly influence inclusive learning in Catholic schools in Nigeria.

**Table 3: t-test Statistics showing the Influence of traditional forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria**

| S/N variables N Df                      | Mean Std Dev | t     | Sig   | Remarks     |
|---|--------------|-------|-------|-------------|
| Traditional 112 222                     | 3.00 0.79    | 23.00 | 0.012 | Significant |
| Forms of<br>Patristic<br>Education      |              |       |       |             |
| Catholic<br>Culture and<br>Practice 112 | 2.98 0.77    |       |       |             |

Table 3 above shows the t-test analysis of the influence of traditional forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria. The results showed that at the t-calculated value of 23.00, the p-value of 0.012 was found to be less than 0.05. Hence, the result reveals that there is a significant influence of traditional forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2: Modern forms of Patristic education do not significantly influence inclusive learning in Catholic schools in Nigeria.

**Table 4: t-test Statistics showing the Influence of modern forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria**

| S/N variables N Df           | Mean Std Dev | t     | Sig   | Remarks     |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------|-------|-------------|
| 1 Modern 112 222 Forms<br>Of | 2.96 0.79    | 25.00 | 0.000 | Significant |
| Patristic<br>Education       |              |       |       |             |

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## 2. Catholic Culture and Practice 112

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Table 4 above shows the t-test analysis of the influence of modern forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria. The results showed that at the t-calculated value of 25.00, the p-value of 0.000 was found to be less than 0.05. Hence, the result reveals that there is a significant influence of modern forms of patristic education in harnessing Catholic culture and practice for inclusive learning in Catholic Schools in Nigeria.

### Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that both traditional and modern expressions of Patristic education significantly contribute to advancing inclusive learning in Catholic educational settings. Traditional forms – such as the study of early Church Fathers' writings, theological reflection, and scriptural exegesis – provide students with a rooted understanding of Catholic identity and moral formation. These foundational teachings resonate deeply with the values of human dignity, community, and spiritual development, which are essential in fostering inclusive educational spaces. This supports previous research by Ekezie (2022), who demonstrated that traditional Patristic education reinforces Catholic culture and strengthens students' sense of belonging and

shared values within faith-based learning environments.

Simultaneously, modern adaptations of Patristic content – such as mobile applications, digital archives, and multimedia platforms – have proven effective in extending the accessibility and relevance of these teachings to a broader and more diverse student population. Agu (2020) emphasized that these innovations allow for more personalized and interactive learning experiences, catering to varied learning styles and fostering deeper engagement. By combining theological depth with technological tools, Catholic schools are better equipped to respond to the inclusive mandate of contemporary education while remaining faithful to their ecclesial identity. These insights underscore the imperative for Catholic schools to integrate both forms of Patristic education as a means of enriching pedagogy, strengthening cultural heritage, and ensuring that no learner is left behind in the formation process.

### Conclusion

In light of the findings and theoretical perspectives explored in this study, it is evident that Patristic education offers a dynamic and multifaceted foundation for fostering inclusive learning in Catholic secondary schools in Nigeria. Rooted in the rich theological and moral

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heritage of the early Church Fathers, Patristic education cultivates a sense of spiritual identity, communal responsibility, and human dignity, principles that are vital to inclusive pedagogy. The integration of traditional approaches, such as theological reflection and moral instruction, with contemporary inclusive education strategies demonstrates that Catholic schools can remain anchored in their doctrinal heritage while responding to the educational needs of diverse learners. The alignment between Patristic teachings and inclusive education goals underscores the relevance of theological resources in shaping faith-based, equitable learning environments. Moreover, the adaptation of Patristic content through digital and multimedia platforms represents a significant advancement in making these ancient teachings accessible, relatable, and engaging to a modern student body. This convergence of tradition and technology not only supports differentiated instruction but also affirms Catholic education's mission to nurture the whole person, spiritually, intellectually, and socially. As the study has shown, both classical and innovative expressions of Patristic education contribute meaningfully to inclusive practices, reinforcing the Catholic identity of schools while promoting equity and participation for all learners. Therefore, the revitalization and systematic integration of Patristic education is not merely a nostalgic return to early Church teachings but a strategic, pedagogically sound

approach to meeting the complex demands of contemporary Catholic education.

## Recommendations

- i. *Integrate Patristic Education into Core Curriculum:* Catholic secondary schools should formally embed Patristic teachings within religious and moral education curricula to deepen students' understanding of Catholic identity and inclusive values.
- ii. *Leverage Digital Platforms for Theological Engagement:* Schools should invest in user-friendly digital tools—such as mobile apps, e-libraries, and multimedia resources—to make Patristic content more accessible, interactive, and appealing to diverse learners.
- iii. *Enhance Teacher Capacity through Targeted Training:* Ongoing professional development programs should be established to equip teachers with pedagogical strategies for integrating Patristic insights within inclusive, learner-centered classroom environments.
- iv. *Develop Context-Sensitive Educational Materials:* Contextualize Patristic themes by linking them with contemporary issues such as social justice, gender equity, and interreligious understanding to enhance relevance and engagement.
- v. *Foster Faith-Inclusive Learning Communities:* School leadership should cultivate a culture of inclusive faith-based

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learning where the moral teachings of the Church Fathers support diversity, collaboration, and holistic development.

- vi. *Institutionalize Research on Faith and Inclusion Synergy*: Educational policymakers and Catholic institutions should support longitudinal research exploring the long-term impact of Patristic education on inclusivity and student outcomes in pluralistic contexts.

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