

Press Release: IFIP Inducts Nigerian Neurodiversity Advocate Ayanwole Boluwatife Joshua as Fellow at National Inclusion Conference in Lagos

The International Fellowship of Inclusion Practitioners [IFIP] has inducted renowned Neurodiversity Advocate and Special Educational Needs specialist Ayanwole Boluwatife Joshua as a Fellow of the International Fellowship of Inclusion Practitioners. The announcement was made by IFIP Director Dr. Heidi Cavanagh during the closing session of the National Inclusion Conference held on May 29–30, 2026, at Rugby School, Eko Atlantic City, Victoria Island, Lagos. The induction took place alongside several other specialists recognized for their contributions to inclusive practice.

IFIP is recognized globally for advancing inclusion across multiple countries. Founded by Daniel Sobel, an internationally respected leader in inclusive education who has advised the UK Department for Education, the European Union, and other governments worldwide, IFIP is steered by a team of world experts in the field.

Boluwatife was also invited as one of the speakers and delivered a workshop to school leaders, school owners, parents, therapists, government representatives, and other stakeholders on the title “Autism: Overcoming Challenges, Seizing Opportunities & Implementing Strategies”

In his session, Boluwatife reframed autism as “a dynamic and unique way of being human” that requires understanding, respect, and the right support to thrive. He emphasized that autism is not a problem to be solved, but a neurodevelopmental difference affecting social interaction, communication, and behavior.

Using the analogy of a radio receiving multiple stations at once, he explained that individuals on the autism spectrum process the world differently—not less, not broken, just differently. He stressed that the primary barrier is often a mismatch between the environment and the learner, not the individual.

Addressing cultural attitudes in Nigeria and across Africa, he challenged the normalization of mocking neurodevelopmental conditions in media and called for an end to stigma, stereotypes, and harmful perceptions. He noted that when proper advocacy and inclusion strategies are absent, misinformation fills the gap.

Key Points from the Workshop

1. Understanding Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social communication, sensory processing, and patterns of behavior and interests. It exists on a spectrum, meaning no two individuals are alike. Boluwatife emphasized that true understanding requires appreciating the interplay of neurological, psychological, and environmental factors, and recognizing each individual’s strengths, challenges, and needs.

Early signs often appear by 12–24 months and can include limited eye contact, delayed speech, lack of response to name, and lack of joint attention. While diagnosis can be reliable from age 2, many in Nigeria are diagnosed later due to awareness and access gaps. Early identification and intervention significantly improve outcomes in communication, learning, and independence.

2. Shifting from Pathology to Neurodiversity

Boluwatife urged a shift from viewing autism as a disease to be cured to seeing it through a neurodiversity lens—as a natural variation in human brain function. He contrasted the pathology view, which focuses on deficits, with the neurodiversity view, which focuses on understanding, accommodation, and leveraging strengths.

He addressed common misconceptions prevalent in some African contexts, including the beliefs that autism is a curse, caused by poor parenting, only affects boys, can be cured, or precludes independent living. He clarified that autism is not a mental illness, not caused by vaccines, not a choice, and not limited to any one culture or country.

3. Signs, Causes, and Barriers

He outlined common signs such as pragmatic language impairment, resistance to change, sensory sensitivities, stimming, delayed language development, difficulty with eye contact, and challenges in social reciprocity.

Causes of autism involve a combination of genetic and environmental factors occurring prenatally, perinatally, and postnatally, including genetic mutations, maternal infections, birth complications, and severe untreated neonatal conditions.

He highlighted persistent barriers in Nigeria and similar contexts: stigma, lack of diagnosis and qualified professionals, limited access to therapy, educational exclusion, employment **discrimination, and sensory overload in public spaces.**

4. Practical Support Strategies

Boluwatife outlined actionable strategies for supporting autistic individuals:

- Early diagnosis and intervention to leverage brain plasticity
- Sensory-friendly environments that reduce noise and harsh lighting
- Visual supports and structured routines to reduce anxiety
- Multidisciplinary therapy including special education and behavioral interventions
- Social skills training and parent/caregiver training
- Inclusive education policies and workplace accommodations
- Community awareness campaigns to reduce stigma

He also shared practical, low-cost activities for skill development, including animal walks and ball play for gross motor skills, playdough activities for fine motor and sensory regulation, and sorting/matching games for visual perception and fine motor coordination.

Call to Action

Boluwatife concluded by urging stakeholders to move beyond sympathy to empathy, and from seeing limitations to recognizing strengths. He called for culturally sensitive awareness campaigns, stronger support services, and inclusive policies that enable individuals on the

autism spectrum to live empowered, meaningful, and independent lives. He also urges the government to provide and build an autism public centre in Nigeria.

His induction as an IFIP Fellow recognizes his ongoing commitment to advancing inclusion and neurodiversity advocacy across Africa and he's committed to increase awareness about Neurodiversity across Africa and the world at large