

LEADERSHIP IN PROMOTING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: STRATEGIES AND CHALLENGES IN ACCOMMODATING STUDENT DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education requires transformative leadership to secure equitable access and quality learning for all students. This qualitative case study examines the strategic role of leadership in implementing inclusive practices through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations with principals, teachers, staff, and parents. The findings show that leadership is central in addressing challenges such as student diversity, limited resources, resistance to change, and weak collaboration. Leaders who apply visionary, distributed, and adaptive strategies by fostering participatory decision-making, mobilizing resources through community partnerships, and promoting flexible pedagogies successfully embed inclusive principles into school culture and daily operations. Sustaining inclusive education further demands ongoing professional development, collaborative networks with stakeholders, and systematic evaluation mechanisms. The study provides practical guidance for educational leaders and policymakers in strengthening leadership capacity and institutionalizing inclusive practices, ensuring they remain responsive, equitable, and sustainable within dynamic educational contexts.

ABSTRAK

Kata Kunci:

Kepemimpinan Pendidikan
Pendidikan Inklusif
Strategi Kepemimpinan
Tantangan Pendidikan
Keberagaman Siswa
Kebijakan Inklusif

Pendidikan inklusif memerlukan kepemimpinan transformatif untuk menjamin akses yang adil serta pembelajaran berkualitas bagi semua peserta didik. Studi kualitatif ini menelaah peran strategis kepemimpinan dalam penerapan praktik inklusif melalui wawancara mendalam, diskusi kelompok terarah, dan observasi partisipatif dengan pemimpin sekolah, guru, tenaga kependidikan, dan orang tua. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan berperan sentral dalam menghadapi tantangan seperti keragaman peserta didik, keterbatasan sumber daya, resistensi terhadap perubahan, serta lemahnya kolaborasi. Pemimpin yang menerapkan strategi visioner, distributif, dan adaptif—melalui pengambilan keputusan partisipatif, mobilisasi sumber daya melalui kemitraan komunitas, serta penerapan pedagogi fleksibel—berhasil menanamkan prinsip inklusi ke dalam budaya sekolah dan praktik sehari-hari. Keberlanjutan pendidikan inklusif juga menuntut pengembangan profesional berkelanjutan bagi guru, penguatan jejaring kolaboratif dengan pemangku kepentingan, serta mekanisme evaluasi yang sistematis dan multidimensional. Studi ini memberikan panduan praktis bagi pemimpin pendidikan dan pembuat kebijakan dalam memperkuat kapasitas kepemimpinan dan melembagakan praktik inklusif agar tetap responsif, adil, dan berkelanjutan dalam konteks pendidikan yang dinamis.

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A. Introduction

Inclusive education has emerged as a transformative paradigm in the educational landscape, committed to providing equitable access and quality learning opportunities for all students without exception (Ibnu Muzakir, 2023; Zh et al., 2024). This principle does not merely integrate students with special needs into mainstream classrooms but also fosters an education system that is responsive, adaptive, and accommodative to individual needs while embracing the diversity inherent in every learner (Kurniasih et al., 2025; Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013). In this sense, inclusive education acknowledges that every student possesses unique potential that must be nurtured within a supportive and non-discriminatory environment (Crisol-Moya et al., 2022).

Within this context, educational leadership becomes a decisive factor in determining the success or failure of inclusive education. School leaders are not only responsible for managing administrative and managerial aspects but also for cultivating and sustaining an inclusive culture that permeates all dimensions of school life. This process requires the active involvement of the entire school community, including teachers, parents, students, and the broader society (Falkenström et al., 2017; Villavicencio, 2016). Effective leaders are expected to act as visionary agents of change who inspire, motivate, and engage all stakeholders in appreciating and embracing diversity (Özkan & Çakir, 2024).

Despite its potential, the implementation of inclusive education is confronted with complex challenges. The diversity of student characteristics and learning needs demands differentiated and personalized approaches. Many schools still struggle with limited resources, ranging from insufficient budgets and inadequate facilities to the lack of professional development for teachers. Resistance to change, particularly from groups holding on to traditional educational paradigms, also remains an obstacle (Barker & Hammer, 2024). These realities highlight the need for leadership strategies that are not only effective but also sustainable and adaptive to ongoing dynamics (Mendes-Sousa et al., 2025).

In response, this study is designed with three interrelated objectives. The first is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the strategic role of leadership in supporting inclusive education within schools. This analysis extends beyond the formal role of principals to include distributed forms of leadership among teachers, staff, and other stakeholders, examining how their interactions create an ecosystem conducive to effective and sustainable inclusion practices (Herrera-Seda & Pantić, 2025).

The second objective is to identify and document leadership strategies that have proven effective in addressing challenges in inclusive education. This involves mapping strategies within specific contexts such as student diversity, resource limitations, resistance to change, and weak collaboration (Sajid et al., 2025). Through this mapping, adaptive and contextually relevant strategies can be drawn from real-world practices (Kaelin et al., 2019).

The third objective is to formulate practical and strategic recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers. These recommendations are directed toward building leadership capacities that are not only responsive to present challenges but also anticipatory of future demands, thereby strengthening the foundation for inclusive education that is equitable, sustainable, and of high quality (Poon-McBrayer & Deng, 2017).

The study draws upon several theoretical perspectives on leadership. Transformational Leadership Theory (Achmad & Muzakir, 2024) highlights the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and empower others toward a shared vision of inclusion. Inclusive Leadership Theory emphasizes creating organizational environments that actively value diversity and ensure the participation of all individuals. Social Justice Theory underscores the fair allocation of resources and opportunities to meet the needs of every student. Distributed Leadership Theory stresses the importance of shared leadership practices, recognizing that inclusive education requires collaboration across all stakeholders.

By engaging with these frameworks and insights from recent scholarship, the study seeks to contribute both conceptually and practically to the discourse on inclusive education. It aims to enrich the literature on educational leadership while offering actionable strategies to strengthen inclusive practices and ensure that education systems evolve to become more equitable, adaptive, and sustainable.

B. Methods

This study employed a qualitative intrinsic case study design to investigate the dynamics and complexities of implementing inclusive education in real-world school contexts (Sugiyono, 2016). The case study approach was considered appropriate as it enables a holistic and contextualized understanding of the phenomenon while capturing the multiple perspectives of stakeholders directly involved in the process. Participants were selected purposively to ensure relevance and depth of information, comprising school principals, teachers, support staff, and parents who had significant engagement with inclusive education practices.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participatory observation. Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were conducted with school leaders, teachers, staff, and parent representatives to explore their perceptions, experiences, and challenges. In addition, multiple FGDs were held with separate groups of teachers, parents, and students to capture collective perspectives and shared experiences regarding inclusion. Participatory observations were carried out in classrooms, special education units, staff rooms, and common areas to directly observe inclusive practices, social interactions, and the translation of school policies into daily routines.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved familiarization with the data, systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation. Through this process, recurring patterns and themes were identified to provide insights into the leadership roles and challenges associated with inclusive education. Triangulation across interviews, FGDs, and observations was applied to enhance the credibility of findings. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with participants, while an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to ensure transparency and reliability.

The analysis revealed four key challenges in the implementation of inclusive education: diversity of student abilities, limited resources, weak collaboration, and resistance in mindset and school culture. These challenges had direct implications for teaching and learning, ranging from

difficulties in designing differentiated strategies to inadequate resources and insufficiently supportive environments for students with special needs. Collectively, these findings underscore the critical need for adaptive, sustainable, and collaborative leadership strategies to foster inclusive practices within schools.

C. Result

The Strategic Role of Leadership in Inclusive Education

The findings of this study demonstrate that school leadership plays a decisive role in the School leadership in this research is revealed not as a mere administrative background but as the strategic engine of inclusion. Leaders articulate a values-driven vision and embed it into school improvement plans, staff appraisal systems, student support protocols, and resource allocation. Through measurable targets for access, participation, and outcomes, they provide a concrete direction for inclusion that can be monitored and evaluated over time.

Such leadership is also reflected in the consistent use of evidence to refine practice. Classroom observations, student data, and feedback mechanisms are used to adjust strategies, ensuring that policies are not static but responsive to changing needs. Leaders model inclusive values in language and actions, creating psychological safety for teachers to innovate and for students to express their identities without fear of marginalization.

The findings highlight that leadership goes beyond vision-setting. Abstract commitments are converted into tangible practices such as universal design for learning in lesson planning, accessible assessment methods, and transparent referral systems. These mechanisms institutionalize inclusion so that it does not rely solely on personal goodwill but becomes part of the school's operational structure.

Distributed leadership also emerges as a vital factor in strengthening inclusive education. Teachers, staff, and parents participate in structured forums such as professional learning communities and advisory groups, which provide multiple perspectives on student needs. This model creates a faster feedback loop from classroom experiences to policy adjustments, ensuring that decision making remains grounded in real challenges.

Role clarity is essential in distributed leadership. Teachers lead pedagogical and assessment innovations, coordinators align services across levels, and parents highlight cultural or logistical barriers often overlooked in formal data. Clear mandates and decision protocols help prevent confusion, ensuring that participation translates into meaningful influence rather than symbolic involvement.

Schools that broaden participation tend to build a more inclusive climate. Teachers innovate with strategies such as co-teaching and differentiated tasks, while non-teaching staff contribute to transition planning, attendance monitoring, and the creation of accessible learning environments. Parents shift from passive recipients of policy to active partners who co-design individualized supports and share valuable contextual knowledge.

The benefits of such collaboration are visible in both short- and long-term outcomes. Increased student engagement, fewer behavioral issues, and improved attendance are among the immediate indicators, while narrowed achievement gaps reflect sustainable impact. However, the research emphasizes that participation must be paired with transparent feedback and decision-making processes to prevent tokenism and maintain trust.

Overall, the evidence suggests that visionary, participatory, and distributed leadership forms the foundation of sustainable inclusive education. By investing in leadership pipelines,

codifying effective practices, building partnerships, and leveraging digital tools, schools ensure that inclusion survives leadership turnover or policy shifts. In this model, all stakeholders work in synergy to translate inclusive principles into daily practice, creating an environment where every student can participate fully and achieve meaningful progress.

Leadership Strategies for Addressing Challenges

The research identifies a range of leadership strategies that are contextual and responsive to the challenges schools face in implementing inclusive education. One of the most pressing issues is the wide diversity of student abilities, encompassing learners with physical, intellectual, and emotional needs as well as those with advanced talents. To respond effectively, leaders encourage teachers to adopt flexible pedagogical approaches that move beyond uniform instruction. These include individualized learning plans, differentiated tasks, and the application of multiple instructional methods that allow students to engage with content according to their abilities. Such practices not only accommodate diversity but also foster a learning environment where students feel recognized and valued.

This emphasis on flexible pedagogy is closely tied to professional development. Leaders provide teachers with training, mentoring, and opportunities for collaborative lesson planning to build confidence in applying inclusive strategies. Regular monitoring and feedback mechanisms are established so that adjustments can be made in real time. In doing so, leadership ensures that inclusive pedagogy is not merely aspirational but systematically supported and embedded into classroom practice.

Another critical challenge identified is the limitation of resources. Schools often struggle with insufficient funding, inadequate facilities, or the absence of specialized services needed to support students with diverse needs. Leaders address this limitation with creativity and collaboration. They mobilize resources by partnering with parents, local community groups, non-governmental organizations, and governmental institutions to secure additional support. This can include the provision of learning aids, infrastructural improvements, or access to professional expertise. By broadening the resource base, schools become less dependent on limited internal budgets and gain greater resilience in sustaining inclusive practices.

The research further highlights the role of innovative resource management. Leaders maximize what is available by reallocating budgets, repurposing facilities, or encouraging staff to share expertise across disciplines. For example, a teacher with special education training may support colleagues in adapting instructional strategies, while community volunteers can assist with extracurricular inclusion programs. These strategies extend the school's capacity without overburdening existing structures.

Resistance to change emerges as another significant obstacle. Teachers and staff may initially express doubts about inclusive practices, often due to unfamiliarity or fear of added workload. Leadership addresses this challenge through deliberate efforts to build trust and collective ownership. Open dialogues, peer sharing sessions, and professional reflection forums are organized to provide a safe space for concerns and ideas. These initiatives foster a gradual shift in mindset, moving from skepticism to voluntary acceptance of inclusive approaches. Rather than enforcing change through top-down directives, leaders cultivate a culture where change is embraced as a shared responsibility.

This process of cultural transformation is reinforced through recognition and celebration of small successes. Leaders highlight innovative teaching practices, share positive student

outcomes, and acknowledge staff contributions in school meetings or public forums. Such recognition not only boosts morale but also normalizes inclusive practices as part of the school's identity. Over time, the collective narrative of success strengthens staff motivation and commitment to inclusion.

Weaknesses in coordination among stakeholders also present a barrier to effective implementation. Leaders respond by creating structured forums for inclusion at the school level. These forums bring together teachers, parents, administrative staff, and in some cases external experts, to jointly design, monitor, and evaluate inclusive programs. The forums provide a platform for dialogue, clarify roles and responsibilities, and ensure that actions are aligned with shared goals. In doing so, leaders transform fragmented efforts into coherent strategies with clear direction.

The research concludes that these leadership strategies flexible pedagogy, resource mobilization, cultural transformation, and collaborative coordination form a comprehensive response to the multifaceted challenges of inclusive education. By integrating these approaches, leaders strengthen the school's adaptability and resilience, ensuring that inclusive practices are not temporary interventions but long-term commitments. This holistic model enables schools to create an environment where all students, regardless of ability or background, are able to participate meaningfully and thrive academically and socially.

Practical Recommendations for Strengthening Inclusion

The research also yields several practical recommendations aimed at strengthening the implementation of inclusive education. A central priority is continuous professional development for teachers, particularly in the areas of differentiated instruction and inclusive classroom management. Teachers who are systematically trained in these competencies display greater confidence in addressing varied learning needs and are able to design lessons that balance academic rigor with flexibility. This investment ensures that inclusion is not left to individual improvisation but supported by a coherent framework of professional expertise.

Professional development is most effective when it is ongoing, practice-oriented, and collaborative. Leaders are encouraged to establish mentoring systems, peer observation opportunities, and regular workshops where teachers can share challenges and strategies. In this way, training is not treated as a one-time intervention but as a continuous cycle of reflection and refinement. Teachers are thus empowered not only to manage diversity within their own classrooms but also to contribute to a collective repository of inclusive practices across the school.

A second recommendation emphasizes the cultivation of collaborative networks. Inclusive education cannot be achieved by schools acting in isolation; it requires the active involvement of parents, community organizations, and professional institutions. By forging partnerships with these stakeholders, schools gain access to resources, expertise, and cultural insights that extend beyond the classroom. For instance, collaboration with health professionals can support early identification of learning difficulties, while cooperation with community organizations can enrich extracurricular programs and social integration initiatives.

These networks also foster continuity between school and home. Parents who are actively engaged in decision making and support strategies are better positioned to reinforce inclusive practices at home, creating consistency in expectations and interventions. This reciprocity between school and family ensures that inclusion is not confined to formal instruction but becomes part of students' broader lived experience. Such partnerships also strengthen trust, reduce miscommunication, and enhance the sustainability of inclusive efforts.

The third recommendation concerns the establishment of systematic and ongoing evaluation mechanisms. Schools that monitor inclusion only through academic performance risk overlooking the broader dimensions of student development. Evaluations must also consider student well-being, social participation, and the sense of belonging within the school community. By adopting multi-dimensional indicators, schools obtain a more accurate picture of whether inclusive practices are meeting their intended goals.

Importantly, evaluation processes should integrate the perspectives of students and parents. Students provide unique insights into the accessibility of learning environments, while parents contribute contextual knowledge about progress and challenges outside school. Structured feedback systems, surveys, and participatory review meetings can formalize this input, ensuring that evaluations are inclusive in both content and process. This approach not only improves the quality of data but also reinforces stakeholder ownership of inclusive initiatives.

The research also highlights the necessity of anticipatory leadership. Schools that prepare for emerging challenges whether demographic changes, evolving student needs, or shifts in educational policy are better able to sustain inclusion over time. Anticipatory leadership involves scanning the environment for potential risks, investing in capacity building before problems escalate, and developing flexible policies that can adapt to new circumstances. Leaders who adopt this stance ensure that inclusive practices are not reactive stopgap measures but proactive strategies that remain relevant and resilient.

Taken together, these recommendations professional development, collaborative networking, comprehensive evaluation, and anticipatory leadership form an integrated roadmap for enhancing inclusive education. They underscore that inclusion is not a static achievement but a dynamic process requiring constant adaptation, reflection, and cooperation. By embedding these practices, schools can build inclusive systems that are robust, responsive, and capable of ensuring meaningful participation and success for all learners.

D. Discussion

Inclusive education requires leadership that can integrate vision, strategy, and practice to ensure that all students fully participate in the learning process. Leadership should not be understood merely as an administrative function but as a driving force of change that determines the extent to which inclusive principles are embedded within school culture. The role of the leader is crucial in building synergy among teachers, staff, parents, and the wider community, while at the same time ensuring that inclusive policies are translated into tangible practices in the classroom. To better understand this dynamic, it is essential to examine it through the lens of leadership theories that provide a solid conceptual foundation for strengthening inclusive education in a sustainable way.

Within this framework, transformational leadership offers a particularly relevant perspective. School leaders are not confined to administrative management but act as change agents who embed inclusive visions within the cultural fabric of schools. This finding resonates with the work of Burns (1978) and later Bass and Avolio (1993), who argue that transformational leadership involves articulating a shared vision, fostering motivation, and encouraging pedagogical innovation tailored to the diverse needs of students (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By inspiring teachers, staff, and parents to engage actively, leaders are more capable of cultivating an inclusive school culture that is genuinely practiced in everyday learning.

In addition to transformational leadership, the notion of distributed leadership emerges as equally important in strengthening inclusive practices. The distribution of leadership roles across teachers, staff, and parents generates a participatory and collaborative learning ecosystem. This perspective aligns with Spillane's (2006) view that leadership is not an individual act but a collective practice shaped by the interactions of multiple actors within an organization. Such collaboration expands the school's capacity to respond to the complexity of students' needs while reducing dependency on a single leadership figure.

Furthermore, participatory leadership contributes to building a sense of ownership and shared responsibility among all members of the school community in ensuring the success of inclusion programs. Teachers who are empowered become more confident in innovating pedagogical practices, staff develop a stronger sense of contribution, and parents are encouraged to engage as active partners in the educational process. These findings are consistent with Likert's (1961) organizational participation theory, which emphasizes that involvement in decision-making enhances motivation, loyalty, and commitment toward collective goals. Thus, participatory leadership becomes an effective strategy not only for strengthening support for inclusive programs but also for reducing resistance to change.

The adaptive and situational dimension of leadership is also evident in the strategies implemented by schools. Leaders encourage teachers to adopt flexible pedagogical approaches, such as individualized learning plans and diversified teaching methods, to accommodate students' varied abilities. Resource limitations are addressed through collaboration with parents, communities, and external organizations, while internal resistance is managed through open dialogue, peer-sharing sessions, and collective awareness building. These strategies reflect the principles of situational leadership as proposed by Hersey and Blanchard (1969), which highlight the importance of adjusting leadership styles according to the readiness and needs of followers within specific contexts.

Practical recommendations arising from this study also underscore the relevance of learning-centered leadership. Investments in continuous professional development, the cultivation of collaborative networks, and the implementation of systematic evaluation mechanisms demonstrate a strong commitment to capacity building and school sustainability. As Leithwood and Riehl (2003) argue, learning-centered leadership focuses on creating the conditions that enable all members of the school community to learn through innovation, reflection, and collaboration. Moreover, anticipatory leadership that prepares schools for future changes in student needs and educational policy illustrates an institutional readiness for continuous adaptation.

Taken together, the discussion highlights that the success of inclusive education is not determined solely by the presence of formal policies but more importantly by the quality of leadership that is visionary, participatory, distributed, situational, and learning-oriented. The integration of these leadership models provides a strong foundation for schools to build resilient, responsive, and sustainable systems capable of navigating the dynamic challenges of contemporary education.

In addition to theoretical insights, this study also offers practical recommendations that can be implemented by educational leaders to strengthen inclusive education. These recommendations are presented in Table 3, which highlights concrete steps in the areas of policy development, teacher capacity building, strategic partnerships, and cultural transformation. Each of these recommendations is linked to specific achievement targets, thereby providing a structured framework that schools can adopt and adapt according to their respective contexts.

Table 3. Recommendations for Educational Leaders

Recommendation	Description	Achievement Target
Policy Development	Formulating policies responsive to the needs of all students	Establishment of comprehensive inclusion guidelines
Teacher Capacity Building	Providing specialized training and mentoring for teachers	Teachers able to implement differentiated instruction according to needs
Strategic Partnerships	Establishing cooperation with training institutions, government, and NGOs	Availability of financial and technical support from external parties
Cultural Transformation	Building an inclusive mindset through socialization and behavioral modeling	Creation of an environment that values diversity

E. Conclusion

The study concludes that leadership is not simply a supporting factor but the strategic core that determines the long-term success of inclusive education. Success is reflected not only in formal policies but in the degree to which inclusive principles are embedded in school culture and daily practices. Leadership thus becomes the driving force that turns abstract values into lived realities within the school environment.

The research highlights that effective leadership for inclusion must be both hybrid and contextual. It involves a combination of complementary leadership models that respond to the complex demands of inclusive practice. Visionary and transformational leadership provides direction and inspiration for change. Distributive and participatory leadership fosters shared responsibility and collective ownership among stakeholders, while situational and adaptive leadership allows schools to address challenges such as limited resources or resistance with contextually appropriate strategies.

Anticipatory leadership also plays a critical role in ensuring that inclusion continues to develop rather than remain static. By integrating these approaches, leadership bridges the gap between principles and practice. As a result, inclusive values are institutionalized within school structures, from lesson planning and resource management to staff evaluation and feedback systems, reducing dependence on the initiatives of individual leaders that may change over time.

The most important investment for the future of inclusive education is therefore the cultivation of leadership pipelines and the strengthening of collective capacity. Schools must be able to nurture leaders at every level teachers, staff, and parents who understand the principles of inclusion and are capable of translating them into meaningful action. This shared capacity ensures that inclusion becomes a sustainable and integral part of the educational ecosystem.

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