

Inclusive Leadership in Education: A Literature Review of Benefits and Implementation Challenges

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Abstract - Inclusive leadership has attracted growing attention in educational research in response to increasing student diversity and heightened demands for educational justice and equity. This article aims to review and synthesize the international literature on inclusive leadership in educational settings, with a particular focus on its benefits and the challenges associated with its implementation. The study employs a narrative literature review of scholarly publications from 2019 to 2025, encompassing empirical, conceptual, and policy-oriented works. The review indicates that inclusive leadership makes a substantial contribution to strengthening teacher agency, fostering an inclusive school climate, enhancing student engagement, and promoting more equitable socio-educational outcomes. Inclusive leaders are characterized by a commitment to justice, recognition of diversity, the active involvement of stakeholders in decision-making, and the cultivation of psychological safety within school environments. Nevertheless, the implementation of inclusive leadership faces multiple challenges, including limited leadership capacity, structural and policy constraints, gaps between policy and practice, and cultural resistance to inclusive values. This article underscores that inclusive leadership is a systemic process that requires policy support, ongoing professional development, and an inclusive organizational culture.

Keywords- *inclusive leadership, educational leadership, inclusive education, justice, diversity.*

INTRODUCTION

Diversity among learners represents an increasingly complex reality within modern educational systems. Schools no longer serve only students with homogeneous characteristics but also those with special needs, diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and varying socioeconomic conditions. This situation demands that educational systems adopt approaches ensuring justice and equity for all learners, as embodied in the concept of inclusive education[1] [2].

Although inclusive education has become a policy agenda in many countries, its implementation at the school level continues to encounter various challenges. Research indicates that inclusion policies

are often not fully implemented due to resource limitations, inadequate teacher competencies, and weak structural support and school leadership [3] [4]. In this context, school leadership plays a strategic role as a bridge between inclusive policies and on-the-ground teaching practices.

Reviews of educational leadership over recent decades reveal a shift from hierarchical models toward more participatory approaches oriented toward social justice values. One emerging approach is inclusive leadership, which emphasizes recognition of diversity, fostering a sense of belonging, and engaging all organizational members in decision-making processes [5][6]. In educational settings, inclusive leadership

extends beyond managerial effectiveness to drive cultural transformation in schools, rendering them more equitable and responsive to differences.

Empirical studies demonstrate that inclusive leadership positively contributes to strengthening teacher agency and developing inclusive teaching practices. Wood (2024)[7] found that inclusive school leaders create conditions supporting teacher collaboration and learning adaptations for students with disabilities. Furthermore, Feng et al. (2025) [8] showed that inclusive leadership indirectly impacts inclusive education literacy through reduced work stress and enhanced teacher agency.

On the other hand, implementing inclusive leadership faces several barriers, including limited leadership training, cultural resistance, and gaps between policy and school practices [8] [9]. Therefore, a comprehensive literature review is needed to understand the benefits and challenges of inclusive leadership in education. This article aims to review and synthesize research findings on inclusive leadership to provide theoretical and practical contributions to the development of educational leadership.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to systematically review and synthesize the international literature on inclusive leadership within educational contexts from 2019 to 2025. It specifically examines the benefits, such as enhanced teacher agency, inclusive school climates, and equitable socio-educational outcomes, alongside implementation challenges like resource constraints and cultural resistance. Through this analysis, the study seeks to offer theoretical insights and practical recommendations for advancing inclusive educational leadership practices.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This article employs a narrative literature review methodology to analyze and synthesize research findings on inclusive leadership within educational contexts. This approach was selected due to its capacity to facilitate a comprehensive conceptual exploration of the multidimensional, contextual, and dynamically evolving phenomenon of inclusive leadership. Unlike systematic reviews, which emphasize quantitative procedures and generalization of findings, narrative literature reviews are particularly suited to identifying thematic patterns, deepening theoretical understanding, and interpreting inter-variable relationships in educational leadership studies.

The literature analyzed encompasses reputable scholarly articles published between 2019 and 2025, a timeframe that captures recent advancements in inclusive leadership research. Sources were drawn from indexed international journals featuring studies on inclusive leadership, inclusive education, school leadership, and relevant educational policies. The reviewed studies include qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods research, conceptual analyses, and policy examinations, thereby enabling a holistic, multi-perspective understanding of the topic [9][5][6] [10].

Literature Selection Process

Literature selection proceeded through multiple stages. The initial phase involved identifying relevant articles based on alignment of titles and abstracts with the research focus—inclusive leadership in education—eliminating those that did not explicitly address leadership or lacked educational relevance. Subsequent in-depth reading of preliminarily selected articles ensured substantive fit, methodological rigor, and meaningful contributions to advancing knowledge on inclusive leadership.

Data Analysis Approach

Literature analysis utilized thematic analysis, grouping research findings into recurrent major themes: (1) dimensions and characteristics of inclusive leadership, (2) mechanisms and benefits of inclusive leadership, (3) challenges and barriers to its implementation at school and system levels, and (4) impacts on teachers, students, and school organizations. This method allowed identification of interconnections among findings and interpretation of consistencies or variations across contexts.

To enhance analytical rigor, synthesis results are presented via synthesis tables and a conceptual framework. Synthesis tables compare focus, methods, and key findings across studies, while the conceptual model illustrates relationships among inclusive leadership, organizational mediating mechanisms, and educational outcomes. Thus, this narrative review not only maps prior research but also establishes an analytical framework for future empirical investigations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Literature Synthesis Table

No	Author (Year)	Research Method	Main Focus	Contribution to the Field
1	Ashikali (2019) [11]	Instrument development	Measuring inclusive leadership	Conceptual and operational foundation for the construct
2	Ashikali et al. (2021) [5]	Quantitative	Inclusive leadership & organizational climate	Explains mechanisms of inclusive climate
3	Korkmaz et al. (2022) [6]	Systematic review	Conceptualization of inclusive leadership	Primary theoretical framework

4	Connally (2020) [1]	Conceptual / policy brief	Role of inclusive principals	Emphasizes school leaders' role
5	Stathakopoulou (2022) [12]	Conceptual analysis	Support for inclusive leadership	Identifies competency gaps
6	Wood (2024) [7]	Qualitative	Leadership & teacher agency	Empirical evidence of teacher empowerment
7	Verheijen-Tiemstra et al. (2024) [13]	Mixed methods	Leadership development programs	Importance of professional development
8	Carrington et al. (2024) [14]	Qualitative	Transformational leadership	Transformational dimensions of leadership
9	Villaver et al. (2024) [2]	Narrative review	Special education leadership	Relevance for students with special needs
10	Feng et al. (2025) [8]	Quantitative (SEM)	Leadership, stress, teacher agency	Empirical mediation pathways
11	Albulescu et al. (2025) [15]	Quantitative	Perceptions of inclusive leadership	Links to student outcomes
12	López-López et al. (2021) [16]	Quantitative (instrument validation)	Family perspectives	Stakeholder viewpoint
13	Massouti et al. (2023) [3]	Case study	Inclusive education policy	Policy-practice gaps
14	Belaid (2023) [4]	Conceptual & empirical	Affiliative leadership styles	Structural barriers

15	Baig & Afqaq (2023) [17]	Quantitative	Adaptive performance	Psychological impacts of leadership
16	Pangestu et al. (2025) [9]	Qualitative	Inclusion strategies & challenges	Local contextual challenges
17	Villarante & Durante (2025) [18]	Conceptual	Inclusion policy framework	Policy relevance
18	Fuaddah et al. (2025) [19]	Qualitative	School harmony	Social dimensions of leadership
19	Jannah et al. (2025) [20]	Qualitative	Student character	Impact on character formation
20	Garg & Chhikara (2025) [10]	Integrative review	Leadership & sustainability	Global theoretical strengthening
21	Dezenberg (2017) [21]	Conceptual study	Organizational climate & culture	Organizational culture foundation

Key Findings Overview

Analysis of the literature reveals consistent patterns in inclusive leadership within education across contexts, methods, and educational levels. These findings cluster into four primary themes: (1) characteristics and dimensions of inclusive leadership, (2) mechanisms of its influence, (3) impacts on teachers and students, and (4) implementation challenges at school and system levels.

Characteristics and Dimensions of Inclusive Leadership

The literature demonstrates consensus that inclusive leadership constitutes a distinct approach, explicitly oriented toward justice, diversity, and

belonging, rather than merely a variant of transformational or distributed leadership. Ashikali (2019) [11] identifies inclusive leadership as emphasizing three primary dimensions: justice and equity, active organizational participation, and strengthened sense of belonging in the work environment. These findings are expanded by Korkmaz et al. (2022) [6], whose systematic review affirms that the core of inclusive leadership lies in balancing leading uniqueness and fostering belongingness. In educational contexts, this balance manifests in school leaders' ability to accommodate individual needs of students and teachers without compromising social cohesion and collective school goals.

Several empirical studies confirm that inclusive leadership manifests through concrete practices, such as openness to teachers' and parents' voices (López-López et al., 2021) [16], participatory decision-making (Connally, 2020)[1], and creation of psychologically safe school environments (Ashikali et al., 2021) [5]. Thus, inclusive leadership is relational and contextual, extending beyond administrative functions.

Mechanisms of Inclusive Leadership Influence

Literature analysis reveals that inclusive leadership's influence on educational practices operates indirectly, mediated by organizational and psychological factors. Teacher agency emerges as one of the most prominent mechanisms. Wood (2024)[22] demonstrates that inclusive leadership encourages teachers to take initiative in adapting instruction for students with disabilities through enhanced professional confidence and leadership support. This is corroborated by Feng et al. (2025)[8], who empirically prove that inclusive leadership boosts inclusive education literacy via sequential mediation of reduced work stress and increased teacher agency. Beyond teacher agency, inclusive school climate constitutes another key mechanism. Ashikali et al.

(2021) [5] found that inclusive leadership significantly contributes to creating an inclusive and psychologically safe organizational climate. In school settings, Carrington et al. (2024) [14] show that such climates enable pedagogical transformation and adoption of learning practices more responsive to student diversity.

Impacts of Inclusive Leadership on Teachers and Students

Literature analysis indicates that inclusive leadership yields positive impacts across educational levels. At the teacher level, it correlates with enhanced professional commitment, collaboration, and pedagogical readiness. Baig and Afaq (2023) [17] found that inclusive leadership improves educators' adaptive performance through strengthened psychological capital. Verheijen-Tiemstra et al. (2024) [13] further report that professional development programs grounded in inclusive leadership enhance school leaders' capacity to empower teachers and foster collaborative cultures.

At the student level, inclusive leadership affects learning engagement, well-being, and socio-educational outcomes. Albulescu et al. (2025) [15] demonstrate that positive perceptions of inclusive leadership correlate with improved socio-educational performance, including participation and equitable access. In special education contexts, Villaver et al. (2024) [18] affirm inclusive leadership's critical role in ensuring learning accommodations and equal opportunities for students with special needs. Additionally, Jannah et al. (2025) and Fuaddah et al. (2025) highlight its contributions to student character development and school community harmony, extending beyond academic domains.

Implementation Challenges of Inclusive Leadership

Despite consistent benefits, the literature identifies multiple implementation challenges. A

primary barrier is school leaders' limited capacity and readiness. Stathakopoulou (2022) emphasizes that inclusive leadership demands specific competencies not yet fully integrated into school leadership training programs.

Structural and policy constraints pose significant hurdles. Massouti et al. (2023) show that inclusive education policy implementation is often impeded by rigid bureaucracies and narrow accountability orientations. Belaid (2023) adds that without systemic support, inclusive leadership practices prove unsustainable over time.

Cultural and social resistance represents another prominent challenge. Pangestu et al. (2025) identify negative perceptions of diversity and resource limitations as major obstacles, particularly in developing country contexts.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Overall, literature analysis reveals that inclusive leadership encompasses interrelated value, relational, and structural dimensions. Its impacts are mediated by teacher agency and inclusive school climates. Inclusive leadership contributes to more equitable and sustainable educational quality. Its implementation is heavily influenced by policy contexts, cultures, and organizational capacities. These results affirm inclusive leadership as a strategic factor in inclusive education success, necessitating systemic approaches for effective realization.



Discussion

This discussion interprets the literature analysis results by positioning inclusive leadership as a strategic leadership approach that bridges inclusive education policies with school practices. Cross-study findings confirm inclusive leadership's significant contributions to strengthening teacher capacity, fostering inclusive school climates, and enhancing students' socio-educational outcomes. However, its effectiveness is profoundly shaped by policy contexts, organizational cultures, and system readiness.

Inclusive Leadership as Value- and Relation-Based

Analysis results consistently portray inclusive leadership as grounded in justice values, appreciation of diversity, and equitable social relations. These align with conceptualizations by Ashikali (2019) and reinforced by Korkmaz et al. (2022), emphasizing balance between recognizing individual uniqueness and building organizational belongingness. In education, the relational dimension proves crucial, as schools rely on intensive interpersonal interactions. Leadership treating teachers, students, and families as strategic partners—rather than policy objects—creates fairer, more responsive learning environments (López-López et al., 2021; Connally, 2020). Thus, inclusive leadership transcends managerial techniques, embodying an ethical and cultural organizational orientation.

Mediating Role of Teacher Agency in Inclusive Education Implementation

A strongest finding is teacher agency as the primary mediating mechanism between inclusive leadership and inclusive practices. Wood (2024) and Feng et al. (2025) indicate that inclusive leadership transforms teaching indirectly by boosting professional confidence, autonomy, and innovation readiness. This underscores inclusive education's dependence on teachers as frontline implementers. Leadership providing participation space, emotional support, and professional recognition reduces work

stress and enhances readiness for student diversity (Feng et al., 2025). These insights expand understanding of teacher agency as a leadership and organizational issue, beyond pedagogy.

Inclusive School Climate as Foundation for Sustainable Inclusion Practices

Analysis further reveals inclusive school climate as essential for sustaining inclusive practices. Inclusive leadership fosters psychologically safe, collaborative climates valuing differences (Ashikali et al., 2021; Carrington et al., 2024). This climate emerges cumulatively from consistent inclusion-oriented leadership. When teachers and students feel valued and safe to express differences, schools become adaptive, innovative learning spaces. Carrington et al. (2024) demonstrate inclusive leadership drives pedagogical transformation, beyond mere administrative policy adaptation.

Impacts of Inclusive Leadership on Student and School Outcomes

Discussion of impacts shows benefits extending from teachers to students and entire school organizations. Albulescu et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence linking positive inclusive leadership perceptions to improved socio-educational performance, including engagement and equitable access. In special education, Villaver et al. (2024) affirm its role as structural justice mechanism ensuring accommodations and equal opportunities. Jannah et al. (2025) [20] and Fuaddah et al. (2025) [19] extend impacts to character formation and school community harmony, supporting holistic educational goals beyond academics.

Systemic and Contextual Challenges in Inclusive Leadership Implementation

Despite consistent benefits, serious systemic challenges persist. Leadership capacity limitations dominate, as Stathakopoulou (2022) [12] highlights inadequate integration of inclusive competencies in

training programs. Structural and policy constraints undermine effectiveness; Massouti et al. (2023) [3] note rigid bureaucracies and narrow accountability clash with inclusion's flexibility needs. Belaid (2023) [4] adds that without adequate policy and resource support, practices remain sporadic and unsustainable. Cultural resistance proves significant, especially where diversity is viewed as burdensome; Pangestu et al. (2025) [9] identify teacher and parent resistance hindering implementation despite formal policies.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this strengthens inclusive leadership's position as multidimensional and contextual, with cross-study findings supporting a framework positioning it as a strategic variable mediated by organizational mechanisms. Practically, strengthening requires:

- Ongoing professional development for school leaders,
- Policy-practice alignment in education,
- Organizational cultural transformation valuing diversity.

Without systemic support, inclusive leadership's potential for equitable, sustainable education remains underrealized.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This article concludes that inclusive leadership represents a strategic and relevant leadership approach addressing the complexities of modern education, characterized by student diversity, social justice demands, and needs for school cultural transformation. Based on a narrative literature review of reputable studies published between 2019 and 2025, inclusive leadership demonstrates significant contributions to creating equitable, participatory, and sustainable educational environments.

Key findings indicate that inclusive leadership functions not only as policy guidance but also as a

driver of school social relations and organizational culture. Its impacts on educational practices operate through organizational mediating mechanisms, particularly strengthening teacher agency, fostering inclusive school climates, and enhancing educators' psychological capital. Through these mechanisms, inclusive leadership contributes to improved teacher pedagogical readiness, student engagement and well-being, and development of diversity-valuing school cultures.

Nevertheless, the article emphasizes that inclusive leadership implementation faces persistent challenges, particularly leadership capacity limitations, structural and policy barriers, and cultural resistance within schools. Without systemic support and policy alignment, inclusive leadership practices tend to remain partial and difficult to sustain long-term. Thus, inclusive leadership must be understood as a systemic transformation effort involving individual actors, school organizations, and broader educational systems.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed.

Practical Recommendations

First, policymakers and educational administrators should explicitly integrate inclusive leadership competencies into training and professional development programs for school principals and aspiring educational leaders. Such training should extend beyond managerial aspects to strengthen values, relational competencies, and skills for building inclusive school climates.

Second, schools must develop participatory mechanisms enabling active involvement of teachers, students, and parents in decision-making. This approach can enhance sense of belonging, build trust, and promote more contextual and sustainable inclusive education practices.

Third, more flexible and adaptive policy support is needed to ensure effective inclusive leadership implementation across diverse school contexts, particularly in resource-constrained areas.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should empirically test the proposed conceptual model of inclusive leadership using quantitative or mixed-methods approaches. Longitudinal studies are also essential to understand long-term impacts on school culture and student outcomes.

Additionally, comparative studies across cultural contexts and educational systems can provide deeper insights into contextual factors moderating inclusive leadership effectiveness. Such research would enable more responsive development tailored to local needs and characteristics.

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