Proceeding of ICSPHS 2026 Symposium: Critical Perspectives on Global Education and Psychological Development
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT28515

The Role of Educational Leadership in Shaping Inclusive Practices

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Abstract. Educational leadership styles are how administrators manage schools, for instance, transformational, instructional, or distributive leadership that assists in building inclusive practices. Such practices offer equitable access and maximum participation in learning for all students regardless of disability, language ability, cultural context, or family wealth. To achieve this, educational leaders must implement systematized solutions, for instance, evidence-based policies, i.e., embracing models such as the US Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or culturally responsive special education laws, and developing strong community support systems through long-term family engagement and local collaborations. All these strategies enable collaborative environments in which various groups of learners, like students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and immigrant students, can be well-nurtured. This article aims to investigate how specific leadership styles immediately impact implementing inclusive practice, hence addressing a critical knowledge lacuna regarding how leadership affects systemic inclusivity. Its unique contribution is exploring cross-cultural policy impacts and proposing an effective, sustainable, equity-focused school reform model.

Keywords: Educational leadership, Special Education, Leadership styles, Educational administrators, Inclusive Education

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is a natural commitment to deliver high-quality, fair learning to all students across backgrounds, abilities, language abilities, or migration statuses. Its importance lies in safeguarding education rights, social cohesion, and maximum realization of individual potential, particularly in the case of vulnerable groups such as students with disabilities, multilingual students, or newly arrived students in the country, which adds additional complexities [1]. Similar comparative research has established that inclusive education, in essence, supports individual rights, as well as community cohesion, especially for marginalized/disadvantaged groups, such as students with disabilities, multilingual students, and students who have immigrated to the country and face a myriad of challenges related to the country. In this regard, inclusive practices ensure that education systems respond to diversity, engage with diversity, and, more importantly, engage students through educational opportunities to ensure they will be engaged members of pluralistic and global communities. Educational leadership is critical in making this vision a reality. Leaders are uniquely

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT28515

positioned to create inclusive policies, invest in targeted resources, empower teachers through training and enabling models, and create school cultures that honour diversity [3]. This article aims to examine how effective leadership strategies facilitate or obstruct the use of inclusive practices and to determine successful methods to overcome systemic obstacles to inclusion. Structurally, the paper begins with an overview of leadership theories and frameworks for inclusive pedagogy, then discusses empirical evidence of leadership practice in various contexts, and finally provides policy and practice recommendations informed by evidence.

2. Literature review

2.1. Educational policies for inclusion

Educational leaders institute inclusive practices by developing and enforcing institutional policies. In the US, students with disabilities must receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), based on principles of individualized support and parental participation [3, 4]. This contrasts with systems like the United Kingdom's Children and Families Act 2014, which places EHCPs at the top but within a less adversarial, needs-driven system, emphasizing collaboration between schools, families, and local authorities. The implementation of policy in developing countries is highly diverse.

Some regions have progressed to an extent by adhering to international systems like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), whereas others still maintain serious systemic problems. For instance, Pakistan has developed inclusive national education policies. However, their implementation is uneven, especially in rural environments that do not have the infrastructure, well-trained teachers, and monitoring systems [2]. Similarly, there is a regional imbalance in Nigeria, where some states enthusiastically promote inclusive education but lack formal policy implementation or the appropriate provision of resources. In China, inclusive education is legitimized in the national education law, yet limited finances, inadequate training of teachers, and exclusion of disabled students hinder uniform implementation across provinces [2]. These points reveal that challenges surpass resource shortages and involve political will, training capacity, and provincial-level management. Therefore, educational leadership of a strong calibre is imperative to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Leaders are not only challenged to execute mandates but to place inclusive frameworks on the ground in ways that are responsive to local contexts, whether in the instance of negotiating IDEA's legal provisions in the US, enabling EHCP collaboration in the U.K., or dismantling systemic barriers in various regions of the Global South. As Mbua writes, educational leaders carry a twin mandate of operationalizing policy and advocating for systemic transformations that guarantee the rights of all learners [3]. In this way, leaders create schools that are responsive, equitable, and capable of meeting the varying needs of the student population, so that regardless of whether inclusion is a policy stance, it can be actualized and lived by all students.

2.2. Leadership styles in shaping inclusive practices

Different leadership styles have varying effects on the application of inclusive education. Transformational leadership inspires a culture of innovation, personalized learning, and collaboration, providing conditions for inclusive practices to thrive [5, 6]. Transformational leaders motivate teachers to venture beyond traditional teaching practices and adopt innovative teaching

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approaches targeted at the needs of diverse learners [6]. For example, in the New Jersey Ramapo Indian Hills School District, Dr. Rui Dionisio, the superintendent, led a district-wide strategic planning process involving over 400 staff and faculty members, 2,000 students, and nearly 40,000 community stakeholders. Instead of calling on the top-down approach, Dionisio employed an inclusive process to verify a shared vision, strengthening inclusive practices at all levels in the district. This is an example to demonstrate that transformational leadership can engage school populations to take ownership of inclusive policies and objectives. As strengths as these may be, the issue of consistency and implementation can fall in transformational leadership, especially when the interested stakeholders are not equal and as resourceful as one another [6].

Transactional leadership, by contrast, prioritizes structure, routine, and performance standards [5]. It can work well in delivering short-term academic targets and maintaining organizational order. Nevertheless, it might not meet different students' emotional, social, or linguistic needs, which are essential for successful inclusion. Instructional leadership, which focuses on developing teaching quality and student outcomes, is also essential in establishing learning outcomes. Nevertheless, it might not tackle the broader social-emotional development necessary for inclusive education [5]. Distributed leadership ultimately builds collective responsibility through shared decision-making by teachers, administrators, and parents [5, 6]. Through decentralized leadership activities, schools can create inclusive environments where multiple voices contribute to planning, problem-solving, and resource allocation. This method is best used in implementing school-wide inclusion that requires extensive stakeholder engagement.

2.3. Training and support for teachers

Inclusive education depends significantly on the presence of trained and supported teachers to serve diverse learners [7]. Educational leaders play a pivotal role in making it easy for teachers to access quality professional development, instructional resources, and research-based teaching materials that can help teachers build inclusive classrooms. Kilag et al. believe that effective leaders offer training but also build long-lasting systems of support that allow teachers to implement inclusive strategies consistently [7]. For example, some Ontario, Canada, school boards offer tiered professional development modules in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and differentiated instruction [7]. They include hands-on workshops and in-classroom mentoring by inclusion specialists to guide teachers in incorporating accessibility and differentiation strategies into daily lessons. In the New York City Department of Education, the Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) model includes training general and special education teachers to co-plan and teach in inclusion classrooms [7]. Teachers receive coaching, participate in professional learning communities, and receive workshops on students with IEPs and English Language Learners' needs. Practical training encompasses heterogeneous classroom management practices, accommodations for disability, and culturally responsive instruction. Leaders develop teachers' capacity and confidence to make inclusive practices integral to daily instruction by providing ongoing support, not a one-time set of workshops.

2.4. Connecting with families and communities

Inclusive education occurs in the classroom with the active involvement of the families and the community [8]. Kelty and Wakabayashi confirm that engaging families strengthens classroom relationships, expectations, student-teacher relationships, and cultural competency of students of all ages [8]. Educational leaders need to develop positive relations with family members to discover

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT28515

whether a student's needs are being fulfilled in the home and school setting. Community partnerships can also provide students with further support, resources, and possibilities for creating an inclusive setting. It is important to collaborate with communities and families to become part of an inclusive learning community that promotes inclusive education [8]. An empowering example is Hand in Hand, a network of integrated Jewish–Arab bilingual schools in Israel.

The schools offer joint celebrations during holidays, mixed-language family workshops, and community dialogue sessions for Jewish and Arab parents. The program is also co-led by educators and families at each school, establishing mutual understanding and trust across diverse cultures. Such collaborative community effort fosters inclusive pedagogy by affirming multiple cultural identities and promoting co-responsibility between schools and families. Communities In Schools of Chicago (CIS–Chicago) in the United States positions community partner coordinators within 175 public schools, linking students and families to health, social, and mental health services. CIS staff engage families through home visits, community resource fairs, and parent advisory councils [8]. In one study, 99 % of intensive program students graduated or were advanced, and no students were dropped, capturing increased family engagement and student success. Leaders also enable family engagement through targeted, culturally sensitive communication strategies. At London's Surrey Square school, a virtual Family Zone offers multilingual ESOL workshops and parenting classes in partnership with community organizations. Parents receive frequent two-way communication, building an inclusive online network of support. The following examples demonstrate that engaging families and communities successfully requires relational leadership—building trust, valuing multiple cultural identities, and creating joint ownership of school goals [3, 8]. When leaders adopt distributed leadership practices, families become living agents in policy-making, school reform, and inclusive culture.

3. Methodology

The chapter presents research design, data collection, analytic framework, and ethics in analyzing the effect of leadership styles on inclusive practice. The research analyzes transformational, instructional, and distributed forms of leadership practice in the day-to-day life of schools and their effects on inclusive outcomes in various pupil groups [1, 3]. Confronted with growing interest in educational equity in educational reform worldwide, the study provides an empirical basis to broaden the applicability of leadership in inclusive education to various socio-political environments [1, 3].

3.1. Research design

The research was a qualitative multiple-case study based on a constructivist epistemology [1, 9]. Qualitative research enables thicker descriptions of participants' everyday lives and the worth of educational leadership subjectivity and richness [9]. A multi-case study enabled comparison between contexts and further exploration of leadership style differences and implications between contexts [10]. The constructivist paradigm was most suited to this research since it is less concerned with the researcher and participant co-construction of meaning [9]. By investigating the stakeholders' sense-making of their experience within their school context, the study formulated context-specific conclusions about the tensions and promise of inclusive education leadership. This agrees with Alnuaimi et al., where stakeholders' perceptions matter most in developing quality leadership [11]. Three schools were purposively selected to be represented in media in policy spaces at the national and cultural levels, and resources were used in capability terms [1, 3]. The Canadian school is in an

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urban district and has experience in multilingual education and inclusive policy experiments. The UAE school is a federally owned semi-private school experimenting with inclusive education but skirting local constraints [12]. The Ghanaian school is a rural government-sponsored secondary school with minimal government sponsorship but a strong local commitment to experiment with inclusive leadership practice [3]. The cross-case design allowed findings to be reported and triangulated, and school-specific leadership patterns were built [1].

3.2. Participants and setting

Twelve participants participated: 3 school principals, six special and general teachers, and three inclusion coordinators. Four members from every school [10]. Purposive sampling facilitated the involvement of participants with three or more years of teaching experience within inclusive learning environments. It involved planning or implementing inclusion activities at the school level [10]. The Canadian campus is a public K–12 school with more than 800 socioeconomically and linguistically diverse students [1]. Its provincial government is highly reputed for inclusive innovations such as special education and language support. The UAE campus is semi-private, with Emirati and expatriate student admissions [12]. Although inclusive education is supported by national policy, its practice is variable, and schools vary in the degree of autonomy achieved [13]. The Ghanaian schools are rural, overcrowded, have few teaching resources, and lack the best brains. There has however, under the leadership of principals, been an increase in collective responsibility for inclusion among parents and staff [3]. English and/or local language interviews were conducted per respondents' preference, and the services of local interpreters were solicited where required. All participants were given pseudonyms, and schools were de-identified for anonymity.

3.3. Data collection

Data collection took ten weeks and comprised three primary sources: semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and fieldwork observations. All twelve participants underwent a one-on-one semi-structured interview for 45 to 60 minutes. Interview protocols were developed through previous research by Kilag et al. and Le Fevre, and they revolved around the most crucial themes, such as leadership style, teacher development, community relationships, understanding of inclusive policies, and implementation challenges [5, 7]. To ease the discussion, a few example questions were: "What is your leadership style in encouraging inclusiveness?", "What are the mechanisms of support for teachers teaching students with special educational needs?" and "How does your school engage with families and local communities?" In addition to interviews, document analysis was conducted to enrich the data further and triangulate participants' responses. Relevant documents included institutional inclusion strategies, school development plans, teacher training packages, and school monitoring reports. Documents were obtained directly from the school authorities or through publicly available educational databases. Field observations complemented interviews and document reviews with contextual and behavioural data. In-person field notes were taken in the Ghanaian and Canadian schools, where the researcher walked through classrooms and monitored classroom interactions, leadership behaviours, and school-level practices like inclusive assemblies, staff meetings, and student support sessions. Due to access restrictions, school leaders convened remote video walkthroughs and virtual school meetings to gather observations at the UAE location. Observational data were used to support participant accounts and offered immediate validation of implementing inclusive practices and leadership styles in school life.

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3.4. Data analysis

Data were coded by thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six steps: familiarization, coding, generation of themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and final reporting [9]. NVivo software codes and organizes data to enable cross- and within-case comparison. Early codes were inductively generated and included concepts such as collaborative planning, differentiated instruction, policy gaps, and family engagement [1]. Axial coding subsequently categorized early codes into broader themes. For instance, professional development codes and collaborative work with peers were placed under capacity-building for teachers. Similarly, leadership activities promoting collaborative responsibility and teamwork arrangements were placed under "distributed leadership practices." This thematic classification followed the leadership capabilities conceived by Richardson and Khawaja to provide theoretical consistency and empirical significance [14, 15]. Member checking enhanced validity through the provision of coded transcripts for participant feedback. Discrepant findings were pinpointed and addressed to avoid confirmation bias. Data saturation was achieved, with no new themes surfacing in the final round of interviews.

3.5. Ethical considerations

This research conformed to the best ethics of research. Approval from the primary researcher's university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained. Informed consent was gained from participants in all groups, who were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and how their data would be protected. Cultural sensitivity was accommodated, particularly in the Ghanaian and UAE contexts, where school leaders are de facto community gatekeepers. Local approval procedures were observed, and culturally compliant language was used for all interactions. Translated consent forms were utilized when necessary [16]. Anonymization of all transcripts and data storage on encrypted drives ensured confidentiality. Audio recordings were deleted upon transcription and member checking. Data were only used for research and never shared with any third parties.

4. Results

Qualitative case study results in three inclusive school settings: Canada (urban elementary), the United Arab Emirates (UAE; public primary), and Ghana (rural secondary) are presented here. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants in each environment, i.e., class teachers, special education coordinators, and principals. The themes that emerged through thematic coding with the assistance of NVivo software are elaborated below.

4.1. Leadership style and teacher empowerment

A dominant theme across all cases was the impact of distributed and transformational leadership on teacher motivation and inclusion efficacy. Leaders from Ghana and Canada described how they fostered a culture of openness, trust, and the development of professionals. For example, a Ghanaian head teacher emphasized, “We meet weekly as a team and no voice is more important than the other —we solve classroom challenges together.” Educators in Canada named principals who actively participated in lessons and practiced inclusively, noting that direct engagement from school leaders increased teachers’ capacity to implement differentiated instruction and coteaching.

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4.2. Policy-practice gaps and cultural context

In contrast, the UAE case supported policy-practice gaps. While national guidelines promote inclusion, teachers reported a lack of training and unclear roles.“We are told inclusion is the law, but we are not trained on how to teach students with autism or learning difficulties,” said a teacher. In Ghana, teachers also reported insufficient material resources and large class sizes as additional deterrents. However, high leadership commitment levels are mitigated partially against these constraints, demonstrating that strong principal intentions can drive inclusive growth even in contexts of low resources.

4.3. Family and community engagement

All three schools indicated that family involvement influenced inclusive success. In Canada, inclusive planning included family advisory committees. In Ghana, home visits and community-based meetings were crucial for trust-building. These findings reinforce fostered collaborative relationships between schools and families and contributed to the development of inclusive learning environments.

5. Discussion

Section 5 interprets Section 4 findings, examining what they signify for how different leadership styles affect inclusive practice in diverse educational settings. This discussion synthesis observed practices, theoretical perspectives, and broader literature, as well as how it is observed in practice, and it discusses broader implications and limitations.

5.1. Interpretation of findings

Evidence exists that distributed and transformational leadership are key to establishing inclusive learning environments. Distributed leadership practices in shared decision-making, motivational support, and teacher empowerment in Ghanaian and Canadian schools were associated with teacher collaboration and responsive teaching practices [17]. Trigueros et al. and Wang et al. also concurred that inclusive school climates thrive where leaders trust teachers and develop collective efficacy [14, 15]. Specifically, inclusive leadership members form a culturally embedded distributed leadership model to facilitate local response in the Ghanaian culture. All these findings are consistent with Szeto's dissertation that leadership, to be effective, needs to be contextually responsive [10]. In all of these cases, instructional leadership was employed to a certain extent but was most effective when paired with transformational or distributed models, but not solely relying on instructional leadership [7, 18]

5.2. Policy-practice gaps and systemic influences

Leadership commitment in the UAE school was firm; however, effectively turning policy into classroom practice was impossible because of inadequate teacher training and limited resources for instruction. Alnuaimi et al. and Meda et al. confirm that these findings are consistent with a gap between inclusive policy frameworks and the readiness of schools to implement them meaningfully [11, 13]. This contrasts with the Canadian case, where leadership was supported by uniform district-wide policies and continuous professional development, illustrating that inclusion cannot be driven by leadership without the support of systems [1, 14]. Such evidence corroborates Mbua's argument

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT28515

that systems' barriers must be addressed alongside leadership practices to facilitate uniform, inclusive change [3].

5.3. Implications for practice and research

School leaders must embody inclusive values and lead in terms of resource redistribution, professional development, and partnerships with the community. The combination of democratic, servant, and transformational leadership styles appears well-adapted to achieving inclusive means [8, 17]. Future professional development programs for school leaders should include modules on collaborative leadership, equity literacy, and culturally responsive practices. For researchers, this study offers windows into exploring how regional and cultural differences influence the application of global models of leadership to inclusion. Longitudinal studies into the long-term impact of specific leadership interventions would also be beneficial [19, 20].

5.4. Limitations

While this research offered many insights, it has some limitations. First, the small sample limits generalizability, and the findings are specific to context, so they should not be taken for granted as applying across all educational contexts. Secondly, as with all studies relying on self-reported data, there is the potential for a social desirability bias, as students may have presented their schools in a more positive light, given that the researcher was focused on inclusion. Though this was partly controlled due to establishing triangulation and member checking, some skewed responses may still exist. Thirdly, gaining access to locations in the UAE impacted inserting a face-to-face observation component of the data collection, and a 10-week time limit on data collection inhibited not only some longitudinal follow-up purposes but may have restricted the depth of the data on context and tracking the effects of leadership over time. Nonetheless, findings contribute to the validity and usefulness of the study for its cross-cultural design, methodological triangulation, and thematic intensity in the contribution to the scholarship of inclusive educational leadership. This is a major contribution to the field of inclusive educational leadership scholarship, as well as for longitudinal research, policy work, and leadership preparation, to improve equity opportunities across concerningly diverse educational contexts.

6. Conclusion

The project examined how school leadership in three contrasting school contexts, Canada, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Ghana, contributes to the evolution of inclusive practices. Drawing on a qualitative multiple-case study design, the study explored how transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership influenced the evolution and implementation of inclusive education policy and practice. The study emphasizes that leadership is both an enabler and a barrier in inclusive change, depending on how it interacts with systemic supports and cultural contexts. The findings showed that transformational and distributed forms of leadership are particularly effective in shaping inclusive school cultures. In Canada and Ghana, leaders mobilized teachers, developed shared decision-making, and encouraged innovation in teaching methods—outcomes that align with the inclusive leadership competencies described by Richardson and Khawaja [18]. Nonetheless, leadership efforts alone will not suffice. In the UAE, strong policy discourse did not consistently translate into practice due to inadequate teacher training and limited provision of materials, consistent with the concerns raised by Meda et al. and Alnuaimi et al. [11,13]. These findings have

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.HT28515

several implications. Firstly, educational leadership development programs must explicitly address inclusion through a multi-theoretical approach that engages democratic, servant, and transformational leadership. Secondly, the policy must extend beyond the mandate to include pragmatic supports such as professional development, monitoring, and community engagement initiatives. Thirdly, this study contributes to the developing area of inclusive education by providing a comparative, international perspective on leadership practice. It shows that although leadership is contextual, certain universalities, such as shared vision, empowerment, and relational trust, are at the core of inclusive change. Future research must address how these principles evolve in post-pandemic schools and amid increasing student diversity.

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