



Inclusive Leadership and Equity Outcomes in Heterogeneous Primary Education

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Keywords:

Equity-oriented leadership; Inclusive leadership; Primary education; School management; Student diversity.

Abstract:

Today, primary education increasingly embraces inclusive leadership as schools face growing diversity in students' academic levels, learning characteristics, and social backgrounds. Although policy and instructional literature widely discuss inclusion, empirical research rarely examines how school leaders enact inclusive leadership in everyday management practices. This study explores how equity-oriented leadership practices enhance inclusion in managing heterogeneous primary education learners. Using an exploratory qualitative case study design, we investigated inclusive leadership practices at SDTQ Anak Sholih through semi-structured interviews with school leaders and teachers, classroom observations, and analysis of institutional documents. The researchers conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns and leadership practices related to equity and inclusion. The analysis revealed that school leaders operationalized inclusive leadership through four key approaches: equity-centered decision-making, differentiated classroom organization, restorative strategies for social dynamics, and distributed collaboration with teachers and parents. Notably, even in instances of limited parental engagement, equity-oriented leadership persisted, indicating that distributed leadership supports inclusive practices. The findings position inclusive leadership not merely as a normative ideal but as a dynamic systemic process with significant implications for both educational leadership theory and the inclusive management of diverse school classrooms.

Received: 2026-01-01

Revised: 2026-02-11

Accepted: 2026-02-21

Published: 2026-02-25

How to cite: Hatimah, N., Adiyono, A., Mansouri, M. C., & Daryanti, N. W. (2026). Inclusive Leadership and Equity Outcomes in Heterogeneous Primary Education. *Management of Education: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam*, 12(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.18592/moe.v12i1.19677>

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Introduction

Inclusive leadership is the new focus in modern educational management, recognizing that schools serve students with increasingly diverse academic, social, and learning needs (Albulescu et al., 2025). Leadership needs to move beyond equal-oriented treatment toward equity-oriented leadership. Many extensive quantitative and qualitative studies have examined inclusive policies related to teachers' attitudes and students' outcomes. However, empirical research still provides limited evidence on how school leaders enact inclusive leadership in everyday school management, particularly at the primary education level (DeMatthews, 2021; Maryani et al., 2025). Fragmented as it is, this points to a clear need for further inquiry and dissemination of findings in this field (Norese & Salassa, 2014). Many primary schools, particularly those in resource-poor settings, face significant barriers to inclusive education, including insufficient pre-service teacher preparation, non-nurturing environments, and a culture of resistance (Dyson et al., 2021; Nuansah et al., 2025).

Effective leadership is therefore required to implement and sustain these inclusive policies in everyday school operations through strategies such as greater participation in decision-making, more flexible interpretation of policies, and active community involvement to foster inclusive school cultures (Nuansah et al., 2025). School policies themselves are another significant barrier to implementing inclusive education policies alongside insufficient teacher competencies, rigid curricula, and inadequate infrastructure (Pranyoto & Berangka, 2025). These aspects place a premium on robust leadership to close the gap between policy formulation and implementation. Educational leadership, such as transformational, instructional, or distributed leadership, is fundamental not only in creating environments where all students can thrive but also in shaping institutional policies that promote equity (Nadeem, M., 2024).

While prior studies have explored inclusive education through policy analysis, instructional differentiation, and teacher preparedness, often treating leadership as a contextual variable, an empirical description of leadership decision-making in managing learner diversity is notably absent (Leithwood, 2021). The existing literature on inclusive leadership often emphasizes moral commitment, transformational leadership, or organizational culture (Saengchuk et al., 2024), but rarely examines how equity-oriented leadership translates into everyday practices. As Yusifli et al. (2025) argue, "Equity-driven curriculum design demands the integration of diverse cultural perspectives and the active dismantling of hidden power structures within instructional practices." This perspective places a clear obligation on school leaders to confront systemic inequities. This breach extends to tangible aspects such as student placements, assessment decisions, classroom organization, and the management of social relationships, particularly in heterogeneous primary school contexts (Gabaldón-Estevan, D., 2020).

For instance, school principals in Northern Thailand; have implemented continuous assessment comprising stakeholder evaluation 85%, culturally responsive indicators 80%, context-appropriate criteria 75% better to meet the requirements of their highly diverse student populations (Jatuporn, 2025). The literature thus fails to characterize how inclusive leadership operates within such diverse primary school contexts, a clear area for further research. It acknowledges, for example, that in Indonesian Madrasah Ibtidaiyah schools, principals are at the center in demonstrating inclusive values through everyday behavior, mentoring teachers, and encouraging collaboration with families and communities. However, significant challenges persist, including "inadequate resources, limited training access, and varying acceptance from parents" (Nuansah et al., 2025).

In this paper, we build on existing debates surrounding inclusive leadership as a significant paradigm in contemporary educational administration, one that fosters equity,

collaboration, and responsiveness to diversity (Albulescu et al., 2025). Myers, M., & Compton-Lilly, C., (2024) argue that effective inclusive leadership moves beyond value-based stances toward pragmatic, systematic action to reshape everyday school administration and foster equitable learning environments. While previous studies have often situated inclusive leadership within a broad conceptual umbrella encompassing various forms of leadership practice ranging from educational leadership to its role in envisioning education systems that uphold social justice and diversity (Gogoi & Vaiekauskait, 2025). There remains an acute need for empirical insights into how inclusive leadership operates in heterogeneous primary education contexts (White, R., & Fletcher, G., 2025). The present work investigates how school leadership is construed inclusively through equity-based practices in managing diverse learners, conceptualizing leadership not as a policy-driven framework or a teacher-level implementation strategy, but as a lived and institutionalized process, particularly in complex settings such as Islamic-based Early Childhood Education (Maryani et al., 2025).

This would in turn fill a gap in the literature as to how the interlinking mechanisms of equity-based decision-making, differentiated classroom organization, relational management of social dynamics, and distributed collaboration with teachers and parents operate toward systemic change and inclusive school cultures, thereby positing educational leadership styles as tools for building inclusive practices that ensure equitable access and maximal participation in learning for all students, irrespective of disability, language ability, cultural context, or family wealth (Adiyono et al., 2025; Dhakal, S., 2024). Proceeding on this qualitative argument, this research aims to demonstrate that inclusive leadership is no longer merely an ideal but instead becomes a concrete, systemic course of action toward achieving equitable outcomes in education, endorsing practices such as building productive partnerships with parents, schools, and the community at large, and engaging teachers in culturally responsive instruction (Leithwood, 2021). The following research questions guide the study:

1. How is inclusive school leadership enacted through equity-oriented decision-making in managing heterogeneous learners at the primary education level?
2. How do school leaders operationalize inclusive leadership practices through classroom organization, social relationship management, and collaboration with teachers and parents?
3. To what extent do these practices contribute to the creation of equitable and inclusive learning environments?

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore inclusive school leadership practices in managing heterogeneous learners. We selected a case study approach because it allowed us to examine leadership processes, decision-making patterns, and contextual dynamics holistically within a real-life school setting. Rather than measuring outcomes statistically, we focused on understanding how school leaders enact inclusive leadership in daily management practices, particularly in addressing learner diversity through an equity-oriented perspective.

We conducted the study at SDTQ Anak Sholih Islamic Primary School from January to March 2025. The school serves students with diverse academic abilities, learning styles, socio-cultural backgrounds, and developmental characteristics. We applied purposive sampling to select participants who played central roles in inclusive leadership practices. The participants included one school principal, five homeroom teachers, and two parents.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis. We conducted 8 interviews, each lasting 45-90 minutes. In addition,

we conducted 12 classroom and school-wide observations to examine leadership interactions, classroom management strategies, and inclusive school routines. We also analyzed twenty-seven institutional documents, including internal assessment guidelines, individualized learning records, school policies, communication logs, meeting records, and incident reports. By combining multiple data sources, we strengthened methodological triangulation and gained a comprehensive understanding of inclusive practices.

We analyzed the data using an iterative thematic analysis procedure. First, we transcribed the interviews and organized observation notes and documents. Next, we conducted open coding to identify meaningful units of data. We then grouped similar codes into categories and refined them into overarching themes related to inclusive leadership, equity-based decision-making, and the management of heterogeneous learners. Although we primarily used an inductive approach to allow themes to emerge from the data, we interpreted the findings within the theoretical framework of inclusive leadership and educational management.

To ensure trustworthiness, we applied several strategies. We triangulated data across interviews, observations, and documents to enhance credibility. We conducted member checking by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants and incorporating their feedback. We also maintained an audit trail to document analytical decisions throughout the research process. These procedures enhanced the rigor of the study and ensured that our findings accurately represent inclusive leadership practices as enacted in the field.

Results and Discussion

1. Results

a. Equity-Oriented Leadership in Decision Making

The analysis of interview, observation, and document data revealed that equity-based decision-making is a key theme in school leadership practice at SDTQ Anak Sholih. Interview data from the school principal indicated that decisions about student placement, promotion, and academic evaluation were not based solely on standardized academic parameters. Instead, school leaders informed their decisions through careful consideration of students' developmental progress, learning characteristics, and social-emotional conditions.

The interview with the school principal presents the following view:

We cannot assess students using a short process or just academic scores. Each child develops differently; hence, our decisions must take into account their growth over time rather than relying on just their test scores."

Classroom teachers' interviews corroborated this perspective, indicating that they did not assess students with learning delays or developmental conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) using rigid or uniform academic standards. Although all students followed the duplicate curriculum content, teachers adapted instructional methods and assessments to meet each child's individual learning needs.

Classroom observations further verified this practice. The researchers documented differentiated instructional methods, including modifications to task structures, pacing variations, and alternative assessment formats, designed to accommodate students who require additional support. Rather than functioning as isolated teacher initiatives, these adaptations were consistently implemented across all observed classes, reflecting sustained institutional endorsement and leadership commitment at the whole-school level.

Document analysis further corroborated these findings. Internal assessment guidelines and individualized learning records explicitly identify long-term developmental progress as a key evaluation criterion. The documents did not portray any short-term

academic achievements as the sole indicators of student success but instead framed assessment as a continuous, developmental process.

Viewing these empirical findings in their totality, the conclusion is that the inclusive leadership practiced by SDTQ Anak Sholih is equity-based rather than equality-based, delivering justice to those who require it within a universal standard curriculum that honors and affirms each student's unique developmental and learning capabilities. Such practices reflect an understanding of inclusion as differentiated support within a common educational framework and clearly demonstrate how the principles of inclusive leadership inform daily school management decisions.

b. Managing Heterogeneous Learners through Differentiated Classroom Organization

An analysis of the data identified differentiated classroom organization as a primary leadership strategy for addressing diverse learners at SDTQ Anak Sholih. Interview data from homeroom teachers revealed that they deliberately organized students into different classes according to dominant learning characteristics, interaction patterns, and participation levels. Teachers clarified that the purpose of this strategy was to enhance engagement, not to categorize or stigmatize learners.

In the words of one homeroom teacher:

"We divide the classes based on how the students learn and interact. Some students are more active and verbal, while others are quieter and prefer listening or writing. This is not to label them, but to help each group learn more comfortably."

Classroom observations provided further empirical evidence for this practice. Observational field notes showed clear contrasts between classrooms characterized by high verbal interaction and those with more reflective learning environments. Classrooms with highly active learners employed instructional approaches that were frequently discussion-based, utilizing collaborative group work and audiovisual learning materials. In contrast, classrooms with comparatively reflective students relied heavily on structured explanations, listening tasks, and written reflection. These instructional variations consistently matched with observed patterns of student engagement.

Document analysis also confirmed institutional support for leadership that promotes differentiated classroom organization. School policy documents and internal teaching guidelines explicitly granted teachers flexibility in instructional design and classroom management. These documents discouraged standardized or uniform teaching methods and instead promoted pedagogical adjustments based on students' learning needs and classroom dynamics.

The findings demonstrate that leadership at SDTQ Anak Sholih operationalizes inclusive leadership by institutionalizing strategic classroom differentiation as a central management practice. School leadership allows for flexible class organization and pedagogical adaptation, going beyond mere adherence to formal inclusion policies and thereby embeds inclusive principles into daily instructional management. Such a framework equips teachers to address learner diversity while maintaining inclusive classrooms that value engagement and equitable learning opportunities.

c. Inclusive Leadership in Addressing Social Dynamics and Student Relationships

Analysis of the interview data, observation notes, and documents identified inclusive leadership in the management of social dynamics and student relationships as a significant theme. Interview data from the principal and classroom teachers showed that they addressed

issues of perceived exclusion, peer conflict, or social isolation by conducting multi-perspective investigations rather than making immediate or unilateral decisions.

As the school principal states:

“When there is a report that a child is being excluded, we do not immediately conclude who is right or wrong. We listen to the teacher, the friends involved, and the parents before taking any action.”

Interview data from teachers further confirmed that school leadership required contextual information before determining any intervention. Teachers emphasized that they evaluated student behavior within broader social dynamics rather than as isolated incidents.

Observational data confirmed these practices, as the researchers recorded teachers and school leaders initiating mediation meetings to promote dialogue, clarify misunderstandings, and build mutual understanding, rather than resorting to punitive measures. Priority was given to restorative communication approaches, such as guided discussion and reflective questioning, to rebuild disrupted peer relationships.

Document analysis provided further empirical substantiation. An examination of school incident records and communication logs revealed no formal complaints or reports of systematic exclusion based on academic ability, learning differences, or developmental conditions. Governance documents emphasized values of social cohesion, peer support, and collective responsibility in student management policy.

The empirical findings indicate that leaders at SDTQ Anak Sholih enact inclusive leadership through restorative and relational approaches to students' social dynamics. These practices nurture a socially inclusive environment built on principles of justice, empathy, and shared responsibility. In so doing, the role of inclusive leadership is seen not only in academic equity but also in fostering increasingly positive peer relationships and a nurturing school climate.

d. Collaboration and Communication with Parents as an Inclusive Leadership Challenge

From the data to the analyzed information, collaboration and communication with parents emerged as key challenges to inclusive leadership at SDTQ Anak Sholih. Interviews with the school principal and classroom teachers revealed that, although most parents were supportive of school programs, their limited availability due to work commitments hampered consistent and timely communication.

In a teacher's teacher's teacher's words:

“Most parents are supportive, but some are difficult to reach because of their work schedules. This sometimes slows down coordination, especially when we need quick feedback about students.”

Interviews provided further evidence that teachers served as intermediaries in communication between parents and school leadership. Teachers kept the school principal informed about students' academic progress, behavioral development, and social interaction, and leadership made decisions based on this input. This approach positions teachers at the center of sustaining inclusive and equitable school management practices.

Document analysis further corroborated these findings. The researchers examined communication logs, parent–teacher meeting records, and internal reports, which showed that leaders often based intervention decisions on teachers' reports rather than on direct input from parents. The pattern of communications identified in these documents was indirect yet structured, and leadership sustained an inclusive approach through ongoing teacher mediation.

Empirical findings indicate that inclusive leadership at SDTQ Anak Sholih operates

more as a collective, distributed process than as the imposition of a single leader. While involving parents remains an inherent structural challenge, leadership in this context compensates by placing firm reliance on teacher mediation and internal communication mechanisms. Hence, inclusive leadership is sustained through coordination and trust between school leaders and teachers, thereby underscoring the importance of distributed leadership for equity-oriented practices in contexts where direct parental involvement is limited.

Table 2. Key Inclusive Leadership Practices Identified in the Field

Leadership Practice	Description of Field Evidence	Data Source
Equity-based decision making	Student promotion and assessment based on developmental progress rather than uniform academic standards	Interviews, documents
Differentiated classroom organization	Strategic class grouping based on learning characteristics to optimize engagement	Interviews, observations
Inclusive conflict resolution	Multi-perspective investigation and restorative communication in addressing social issues	Interviews, observations
Collaborative parent engagement	Teachers serving as mediators in communication between school leadership and parents	Interviews, documentation

Table 2 demonstrates that elementary schools operationalize inclusive leadership practices not merely as normative principles but as concrete policies and daily actions. Leaders reflect equity-based decision-making in student promotion and assessment systems by considering individual development rather than relying solely on uniform academic standards. Differentiated classrooms are strategically organized according to students' learning characteristics to increase engagement and participation. Furthermore, inclusive conflict resolution through restorative approaches and multi-perspective investigations strengthens a positive school social climate. Collaborative parent engagement is also a key practice, with teachers acting as communication mediators between school leaders and families, thus building partnerships that support the success of inclusive learning.

2. Discussion

The study aimed to examine how school leaders enact inclusive leadership in managing heterogeneous learners through an equity-oriented approach at the primary education level. The discussion explicitly addresses the research questions by synthesizing the main findings, interpreting them through established theoretical frameworks, and proposing contributions to the literature on inclusive and educational leadership. Inclusive leadership incorporates sufficiency in performance factors as part of equitable decision-making, as interpreted within the context of educational practices (Nishii, L. H., & Leroy, H., 2022). It thus moves beyond adherence to uniform academic standards by extending support to meet students' holistic needs (Kundu, 2025). These findings align with theoretical perspectives that distinguish equity from equality, emphasizing fairness through individualized support rather than uniform standards or performance-based criteria alone (Adiyono, 2019; da Silva et al., 2021). These scholars assert that equity-oriented leaders think structurally, recognizing that reducing systemic barriers affecting outcomes must be a priority (Kundu, 2025). This perspective acknowledges that many of the challenges schools face are sociological in nature, requiring a social science lens to facilitate meaningful change in response to students' diverse needs that extend well beyond purely academic experiences (Kundu, 2025).

School institutional leaders operationalize equity by adapting assessment and

instructional approaches to address students' developmental, social, and learning needs while keeping core curricular expectations intact (Yang et al., 2025). Developing culturally relevant curricula that incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and unmasking hidden power structures embedded in routine instructional practices are key dimensions of such leadership (Valiyev, I. et al., 2025). These practices challenge the norm that standardized achievement is the sole measure of success, promoting a more expansive and inclusive notion of student success (Savage, 2011) instead. For example, inclusive leadership fosters equity through an equity-centered vision that supports teacher professional growth and establishes systematic procedures for identifying, intervening in, and evaluating support, particularly for students with special educational needs (Yang et al., 2025). Scholars anticipate that transformational leadership will serve as a key driver of culturally responsive, collaborative decision-making and critical pedagogical reflection in multicultural school contexts (Suparmin & Adiyono, 2023; Valiyev et al., 2025).

Translating equity from a normative principle into daily managerial decisions lends empirical depth to the conceptual discussions of inclusive leadership (Yang et al., 2025). Empirical evidence indicates that leaders operationalize their commitment to equity-oriented leadership through systematic measurement and adaptive implementation strategies rather than through symbolic or superficial reforms (Aduwo et al., 2025). Such leaders will allocate resources to fund equity initiatives, thereby demonstrating how theory is put into practice to bring about meaningful inclusion (Virella & Woulfin, 2021). Furthermore, effective equity implementation depends on teacher empowerment, distributed leadership structures, and coherent policy frameworks that integrate curriculum, assessment, and institutional values (Valiyev et al., 2025). Equity-driven leaders also anticipate and prepare for resistance to their agendas, particularly when those agendas aim to disrupt the status quo (Kundu, 2025).

Inclusive leadership enables and legitimizes differentiation in the classroom based on diversities in learning characteristics and interaction styles; it challenges the framing of differentiation as merely a teacher-level pedagogical choice (Lddeckens, 2025). This perspective serves as one means of bridging the gap between policy and practice to ensure learning equity (Lddeckens, 2025; Prasetyo et al., 2025). Moreover, leadership policies that reject "one-size-fits-all" teaching create systemic conditions in which responsive differentiation occurs consistently rather than sporadically, thereby reshaping prevailing assumptions in inclusive education theory.

The role of the effective school leader includes acting as a facilitator, innovator, and motivator supporting teacher training, providing resources, and fostering collaborative cultures that enable successful differentiated instruction (Prasetyo et al., 2025). The principles of inclusive leadership thus guide differentiation as a process aimed at optimizing student engagement, rather than conceptualizing it in deficit-based terms that risk isolating students from one another (Wang & Tian, 2023). For instance, studies have shown that distributed leadership is directly associated with teachers' orientation toward differentiated instruction, while teacher leadership and competencies mediate these two aspects (Wang & Tian, 2023). School leaders address challenges such as limited teacher time, insufficient facilities, and resistance to change by fostering collaboration, flexibility, and active engagement with parents and the community (Hajis & Othman, 2024; Saraya et al., 2023). In addition, stakeholders should provide sustained professional development and streamline administrative demands to unlock the transformative potential of differentiated instruction, especially in rural contexts where structural limitations frequently impede its implementation (Beladinna et al., 2025).

Within the social and relational contexts of the school setting, inclusive leadership

serves as a practical approach for maintaining social inclusion through multi-perspective inquiry and restorative dialogue to resolve conflicts. School leaders use this approach to build a favorable school climate by sustaining inclusion through proactive efforts rather than reactive measures, particularly in the aftermath of social trauma such as global pandemics. As Brown (2021) argues, "schools need to be attending to how to provide safe, trauma-sensitive restorative learning environments," underscoring the necessity of this kind of leadership. Such leadership also draws on relational leadership theory and restorative justice approaches, which foster dialogue, communication, and mutual accountability. Restorative justice methods such as community circles, conferences, and peer mediation can improve school climate, discipline practices, and conflict resolution (Lodi et al., 2021), thereby reducing the likelihood of exclusion and bullying. Evidence shows that inclusive leadership functions as a preventive mechanism for social inclusion, reinforcing the understanding that inclusion is an ongoing relational process embedded in everyday leadership practices. Figure 1 illustrates the strategic role of school leaders as facilitators, innovators, and motivators in implementing equity-based differentiated learning. School leaders mediate inclusive leadership through distributed leadership practices, teacher competency development, and ongoing professional support to foster optimal student engagement and an inclusive school climate. This diagram also emphasizes the importance of relational approaches and restorative justice in building a safe, collaborative, and sustainable learning environment.

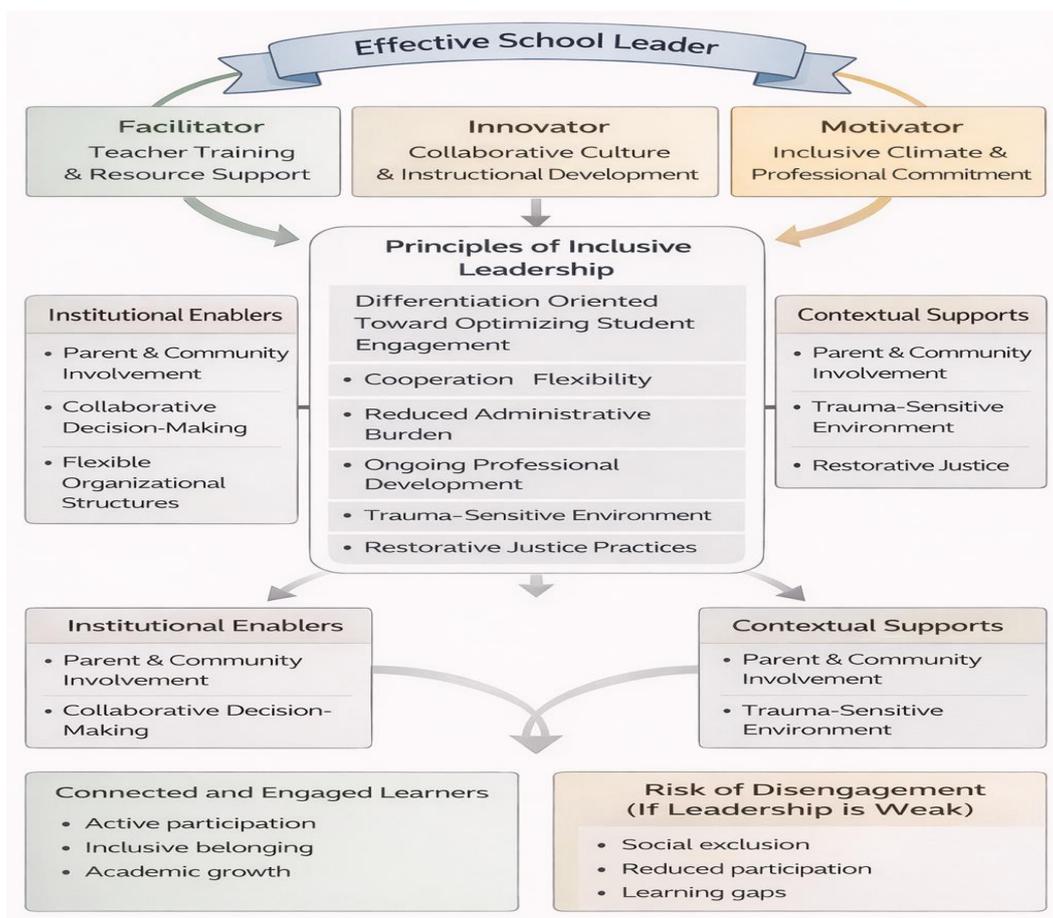


Figure 1. Inclusive School Leadership Architecture in Encouraging Justice-Based Differentiation

Rooted in community-building and shared power, this approach offers an alternative to punitive disciplinary strategies, enhancing student well-being (Sandwick et al., 2019). Studies indicate that restorative approaches lead to "lower rates of self-reported perpetration and improved student bio- psychosocial outcomes" (Bonell et al., 2019). Schools must systematically implement restorative justice by integrating its principles with trauma-informed care and multicultural teaching perspectives in ways that are aligned and complementary, ensuring its effectiveness.(Parameswaran et al., 2023). Centering values such as relationships, safety, belonging, and agency on an ecological framework opens a pathway towards "systemic school reform" that will take these punitive environments into "healing spaces" (Parameswaran et al., 2023).

The findings regarding the challenges to parent communication carry significant weight in the dimension of inclusivity: leadership must design adaptations on the one hand, while navigating the constraints of engagement on the other, such as work commitments and resource limitations. School leaders can effectively adapt leadership practices by leveraging teacher mediation and strengthening internal communication systems. Stakeholder collaboration and community engagement are essential to the successful adaptation and implementation of curricula, particularly in diverse educational contexts. Meaningful involvement of stakeholders fosters shared ownership and mutual accountability, thereby aligning educational goals with the needs of the learners and the community" (Adila, A. et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the core premise of distributed leadership theory by demonstrating that leadership functions as a collective practice rather than the responsibility of a single individual. It thus follows that inclusive leadership can thrive even in the absence of direct parental involvement, provided that there is strong internal collaboration and teacher-mediated communication (Osei et al., 2025).

Indeed, under such distributed leadership practices," collaboration, inclusivity, shared responsibility, mutual trust among school stakeholders" constitutes an effective strategy to improve school performance (Osei et al., 2025). Research confirms that inclusive leadership operates through multiple pathways. For instance, "head teachers' collaborative approaches very much increase parental involvement in learning," with a moderate-positive correlation ($r \approx 0.66$) established between collaborative leadership practices and levels of parental engagement (Zhang, S., & Wu, 2025). Even in schools where parental availability is limited, teacher collaboration emerges as a powerful alternative mechanism within these collaborative frameworks. Empirical studies further demonstrate that head teachers strengthen the accessibility, quality, and sustainability of inclusive education by integrating strategic resource management, continuous professional development, and active stakeholder engagement (White & Johnson, 2025).

At the same time, this refines existing theories by positioning parent participation not as an abstract condition for inclusion, but as a contingent variable that necessitates adaptive leadership strategies. It also leads educational research to affirm that "educational leaders need to institutionalize systematic solutions like evidence-based policy, develop strong community support systems through long-term family engagement and local collaborations" to align with diverse stakeholder capabilities (Edlmann, F. R. P., & Grobbelaar, S., 2021; Rosmini et al., 2025). These dynamics illustrate the flexible nature of distributed leadership. Studies on home-school partnerships demonstrate that active parental engagement fosters inclusion, enhances learning outcomes, strengthens teacher-parent collaboration, and increases students' confidence. (Robianti et al., 2025).

Further studies suggest that "parental involvement in inclusive schools for students with special needs is multidimensional, ranging from parenting support and communication to volunteering, learning at home, participation in decision-making, and community

collaboration"" (Andrada, & Barrot, 2025; Jigyel, K, et al., 2019) These forms are adaptable to family circumstances and systemic constraints (Andrada, & Barrot, 2025; Sari et al., 2025). These findings reinforce a flexible conception of stakeholder engagement in inclusive school leadership, highlighting that leadership is a relational, context-sensitive process and that transformational and nurturing practices cultivate trust, collaboration, and professional satisfaction, especially in challenging school settings (Nasrullah, 2025). Hence, inclusive leadership models must balance structured engagement approaches with flexibility so that even when external factors constrain direct parental involvement, schools can sustain inclusion by empowering teacher leadership, establishing robust internal collaboration structures, and utilizing alternative communication pathways. In doing so, parental involvement is reconceptualized not as a prerequisite for effective inclusion, but also as a scalable and adaptable component of distributed leadership.

Conclusion

This study found that inclusive school leadership for heterogeneous learners is not merely a normative commitment to inclusion; rather, it constitutes an equity-oriented system embedded in everyday managerial practices actively shaping decision-making, classroom organization, social relationships, and collaborative processes. The study's rigorous qualitative inquiry reveals the depth of this operationalization. Among the most striking and somewhat unexpected results was that equity-oriented leadership persisted even in the context of minimal parental involvement, sustained instead by distributed leadership practices that relied heavily on teacher mediation and relational governance.

While these insights offer meaningful contributions, our study carries several specific limitations that warrant reflection. First, the research was conducted at a single Islamic primary school in Indonesia (SDTQ Anak Sholih), limiting the transferability of the findings to other institutional, cultural, or religious contexts. Thus, while the mechanisms of teacher-mediated inclusion may resonate elsewhere, we cannot assume their applicability without contextual validation. Second, our sample included only one principal, a small group of homeroom teachers, and a few parents. This limited participant diversity means that perspectives from other key stakeholders (students, special education coordinators, or district-level leaders) were not taken into consideration, potentially narrowing the understanding of leadership dynamics. Third, the focus on the primary education level excludes insights from early childhood and secondary settings, where learner diversity and leadership demands may differ significantly. Consequently, the equity-oriented leadership model we examined in this paper may not fully capture developmental or systemic variations across educational stages. Finally, the exclusive use of qualitative methods, while rich in depth, does not allow us to generalize or make causal claims; therefore, the observed relationships, such as between teacher mediation and sustained inclusion, should be understood as contextually grounded patterns rather than general principles.

For this reason, future research should examine inclusive leadership across multiple school settings, diverse educational levels, and varied demographic contexts, using larger and more representative samples and employing mixed-methods or comparative approaches. Such expanded studies would yield a deeper, more nuanced understanding of equity-oriented, inclusive leadership, thereby better informing contextually sensitive and effective educational leadership policies.

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