

Review paper

UDC: 376.091.2-056.36-044.252

 [10.46763/JESPT2520287p](https://doi.org/10.46763/JESPT2520287p)

Received: 10.01.2026

Revised: 23.02.2026

Accepted: 28.02.2026

Special Needs Education: Implications for School Management and Teacher Leadership

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Abstract. The global shift toward inclusive education has fundamentally transformed school operations, requiring a critical re-examination of traditional management structures and leadership paradigms. This article examines the intersection of special needs education and school management, analyzing how leadership practices must evolve to address the complex demands of inclusive pedagogy and resource allocation. Utilizing a qualitative methodology and a synthesis of theoretical frameworks, the research explores how principals reflect on inclusive leadership behavior and how teachers can be developed to respond to the diverse needs of students with special educational needs.

Key findings highlight that effective inclusion is central to establishing supportive learning environments, yet it is often hindered by systemic barriers such as overwhelming paperwork and a lack of specialized preparation for school leaders. The study emphasizes the importance of transformational and distributed leadership models in fostering collaborative cultures where responsibility for diverse learners is shared across the faculty. Ultimately, the article concludes that for school reform to be successful, administrators must transition to instructional leadership roles that prioritize equity, culturally responsive pedagogy, and systemic change to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Key words: Inclusive education, special needs education, school management, transformational leadership, instructional leadership, teacher leadership, principal preparation

1. Introduction

The global shift toward inclusive education, catalyzed by frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement, has fundamentally transformed the operational landscape of schools, necessitating a re-examination of traditional management structures and leadership paradigms (Khasawneh, 2020). This transformation places significant responsibility on school administrators to not only uphold the legal entitlements of students with disabilities but also to actively bridge the disciplines of general and special education leadership (Pazey & Combes, 2020).

Effective school leadership is central to establishing inclusive learning environments that offer opportunities for students with disabilities to succeed, requiring administrators to execute leadership activities that foster a conducive atmosphere for learning (Demir, 2024). However, the implementation of these inclusive practices is often hindered by systemic barriers such as overwhelming paperwork, insufficient administrative support, and a lack of specific preparation for school leaders to meaningfully serve diverse student populations (Mbua, 2023).

Consequently, this article examines the critical intersection of special needs education and school management, specifically analyzing how leadership practices must evolve to address the complex demands of inclusive pedagogy and resource allocation

(Adams et al., 2024; Jouflin et al., 2022). By investigating the mechanisms through which school leaders navigate the tension between administrative efficiency and instructional support, this research aims to elucidate the management strategies that facilitate successful inclusion for students with special educational needs (Kristina et al., 2025; Sider et al., 2021).

Inclusive Educational and Leadership Management

The concept of inclusive education extends beyond mere physical placement, requiring a pedagogical approach that accounts for each student's unique needs while ensuring collective participation and learning (Li & Omar, 2024). This approach necessitates modifications in curriculum, teaching methods, and school facilities to meet the diverse needs of all students, thereby creating equal learning opportunities that respect individual differences (Abdussamad, 2022).

Central to this pedagogical evolution is the role of leadership management, which is crucial in determining the successful implementation of inclusive education by establishing supportive learning environments and guiding educators through the necessary structural and cultural changes (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2022; Mbua, 2023).

Specifically, school administrators must act as instructional leaders who collaborate with teachers and specialists to remove obstacles to learning while ensuring that legal mandates and best practices are upheld to support the academic success of all learners (Garrison, 2023; Murphy, 2018). Despite the recognized importance of these leadership functions, research indicates that principals frequently encounter a disconnect between the complex demands of special education and the training they receive, leaving them ill-equipped to navigate the multifaceted challenges of leading inclusive initiatives (Hughes, 2020; Mbua, 2023).

This gap in preparation is particularly concerning as educational leaders are expected to lead schools for increased outcomes for all students, yet many principals do not have a background in special education (Melloy et al., 2021). This deficiency in specialized training underscores the necessity for comprehensive professional development that equips school leaders with the knowledge to effectively manage resources, support staff, and foster an inclusive school culture (Kivirand et al., 2022; Ramango & Naicker, 2022).

Transformational Leadership

To address these challenges, the following research questions guide this investigation: How do principals reflect on inclusive leadership behavior, how can teachers be developed to be responsive to the diverse needs of students with special needs, and what strategies are required to cultivate an inclusive environment in schools (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024)?

To address these inquiries, the subsequent sections review the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence regarding transformational leadership and inclusive school climate, followed by an outline of the qualitative methodology employed to gather data from educational leaders. The literature review synthesizes theoretical perspectives on transformational leadership and inclusive school climate, examining how these frameworks inform the management of special needs education within diverse educational settings.

Transformational leadership theory suggests that school leaders must articulate a compelling vision for inclusion to stimulate teachers' intentions to implement inclusive practices, as educators are viewed as fundamentally key change agents in driving inclusion success (Wang et al., 2025). This theoretical perspective emphasizes that leaders must inspire and empower teachers to adapt their pedagogical strategies, thereby fostering a collaborative culture where the responsibility for diverse learners is shared across the faculty (Garrison, 2023; Murphy, 2018).

However, realizing this collaborative vision requires addressing the persistent gap in teacher preparation, as many educators report feeling ill-equipped to implement inclusive practices due to training that treats inclusion as a specialized topic rather than a fundamental pedagogical approach (Carrington et al., 2024).

Consequently, professional development programs must be restructured to equip general education teachers with practical strategies for addressing a broad spectrum of learner needs, including those with severe disabilities, while emphasizing the creation and implementation of individualized educational interventions (Calumpang, 2025).

School climate

Beyond instructional strategies, the cultivation of an inclusive school climate is identified as a critical variable that enables schools to develop effective implementation strategies and foster a supportive learning environment for students with special needs (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024). Research indicates that a positive school climate is significantly correlated with student well-being and successful inclusion outcomes, yet achieving this atmosphere requires leaders to actively shape the cultural norms of the institution (Pandia & Purwanti, 2019). This involves establishing organizational conditions that elevate the efficacy beliefs of practitioners and reinforce their positive intentions to teach inclusively (Wang et al., 2025). Specifically, transformational principalship may act as a pivotal contributor to motivating teachers' behavioral intentions as it shapes organizational conditions, school culture, and teachers' psychological states (Wang et al., 2025).

By fostering a shared vision and providing individualized support, transformational leaders can significantly enhance teachers' self-efficacy and commitment to inclusive practices, thereby reducing resistance to change and promoting a culture of collective responsibility for student success (Murphy, 2018; Opiyo, 2019).

Effective Inclusion

Furthermore, empirical studies highlight that school leadership is central to the achievement of effective inclusion, with principals playing a significant role in fostering a culture of inclusion and promoting inclusive practices within schools (Newcastle et al., 2021). These decisions can also be represented in a principal's capacity to ensure that special and general education teachers work collaboratively and that general education teachers employ peer coaching and other effective strategies (Khaleel et al., 2021). To enhance the connection between program implementation and effective pedagogical practices, it is essential to provide specialized training on inclusive teaching strategies (Chan & Uhlmann, 2020).

Additionally, the development and implementation of a comprehensive action plan are strongly recommended to improve instructional practices and better address the diverse needs of students with special needs (Chan & Uhlmann, 2020). Effective school management requires leaders to establish a positive inclusive environment where individuality is respected and relationships are nurtured to prevent discrimination against special children (Li & Omar, 2024). This necessitates that principals remain responsive to the diversity of students with special needs, engaging in continuous reflection on their leadership practices while simultaneously developing the responsive abilities of their teaching staff (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024).

Principals who are knowledgeable and effectively execute inclusive education play key roles in the success of inclusive education, acting as important agents of change due to their broad authority within the school (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024). School leaders are responsible for mediating between highly complex demands of inclusive education and the structures at the specific school within their scope of action (Lambrecht et al., 2020). This mediation involves balancing external policy mandates with internal resource constraints to create sustainable support systems for students with disabilities (Khaleel et al., 2021; Mbua, 2023).

Specifically, this process necessitates that principals actively engage in redesigning school organization and teacher roles to accommodate the systemic changes required for effective inclusion (Li & Omar, 2024; Mbua, 2023). This redesigning process often involves addressing the beliefs of school staff regarding students with disabilities, modifying curriculum and instructional practices, and fundamentally shifting the school culture to support diversity (Mbua, 2023).

Effective coordination

Effective coordination among various stakeholders is essential for creating a seamless and supportive environment for inclusive education (Vo & Tran, 2023). Such coordination requires the cooperation of all layers of society, including school management, teachers, parents, and government representatives, as the success of the program primarily depends on the collaborative efforts of these groups (Бещараб et al., 2023).

School administrators occupy a unique position as educational leaders and foster collaboration among teachers, requiring them to possess robust knowledge and skills in forming professional learning communities (Demir, 2024). These communities serve as essential mechanisms for continuous improvement, allowing educators to collectively analyze student data, share instructional expertise, and refine their approaches to meeting diverse learning needs within a collaborative framework (Li & Omar, 2024; Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024). This collaborative approach is further reinforced by the necessity for principals to coordinate the efforts of teachers, students, and the wider community to ensure the success of inclusive education (Li & Omar, 2024).

Therefore, school leaders must actively engage parents and community members to foster a shared understanding and commitment to inclusive practices, thereby extending the support network beyond the classroom walls (Hayes & Bulat, 2017; Mbua, 2023). This engagement necessitates that leaders establish meaningful partnerships with families and external organizations to access a variety of resources that benefit all children (Irvine et al., 2010; Mbua, 2023). A crucial step in creating successful inclusive schools is continuing to enhance principal preparation so that they are aware and equipped to fulfill the requirements of each student (Li & Omar, 2024). This preparation must be deeply rooted in the principles of inclusive education and social justice, requiring a fundamental rethinking of school innovation, leadership, and educational improvement to address the inequitable treatment of various groups of children (Li & Omar, 2024).

Shared responsibility

Distributed leadership models emphasize the importance of shared responsibility among principals, teachers, and parents in developing and sustaining inclusive schools (Li & Omar, 2024; Mbua, 2023). This shift is necessitated by the finding that transformative and inclusive leadership styles have a significant positive impact on the implementation of inclusive education (Li & Omar, 2024). Research indicates that distributed leadership, promoted by the principal, is significantly related to the achievement of an inclusive school, as elements such as cooperative teamwork and shared decision-making foster student-centred educational approaches and encourage the participation of both students and their families (Tejeiro, 2022).

Furthermore, inclusive leadership models explicitly value diversity and invite contributions from all stakeholders, thereby breaking down barriers for those at risk of discrimination and avoiding traditional hierarchical management approaches (Mbua, 2023). This paradigm shift towards collaborative governance is essential for fostering a school culture where all members feel valued and empowered to contribute to the educational process (Mbua, 2023; Tejeiro, 2022). Within this collaborative framework, teacher leadership emerges as a critical component for sustaining inclusive practices, as educators with practical experience in including students with disabilities are uniquely positioned to support their colleagues in navigating the complexities of diverse classrooms (Carrington et al., 2024).

Teacher Leaders

To help address the need for learning at all levels in schools, teacher leaders can play an important mentoring role and share their skills, capabilities and knowledge of inclusive approaches (Carrington et al., 2024). This mentoring function is particularly vital given the urgent need for practitioners who can translate policy into practice through the sharing of best practices and collaborative professional development (Carrington et al.,

2024). Acknowledging the pivotal role played by teacher leaders and building their capacity can effectively influence others and facilitate inclusive education (Carrington et al., 2024). Inclusive leadership stands out for prioritizing teacher agency and participation, combining elements of transformational and instructional leadership with an emphasis on equity, collaboration, and shared responsibility (Gürbüz & Saklan, 2025). Such leaders do not act in isolation but rather distribute leadership responsibilities among colleagues to drive inclusive change, utilizing a transformational model that delegates authority to team leaders and builds capacity from the bottom up (Opiyo, 2019).

This distributed approach is further evidenced by research showing that shared decision-making and collaborative professional cultures directly enhance staff development and student outcomes by fostering a common vision among educators (Opiyo, 2019; Tejeiro, 2022). Effective inclusive schools are characterized by coherent school cultures in which teachers and school leaders demonstrate high levels of personal responsibility and collective commitments that place students at the center of educational decision making (Opiyo, 2019). This student-centered focus is operationalized through distributed leadership practices that facilitate shared instructional research and promote visual engagement from all stakeholders during professional development cycles (Farley, 2024).

Transformational Leaders

To sustain these collaborative efforts, transformational leaders must provide the necessary time and resources for staff to engage in cooperative teamwork, ensuring that schedules are structured to support co-teaching and joint planning opportunities (Murphy, 2018). By fostering these collaborative structures, leaders enable teachers to expand their knowledge and skills while working critically and collectively to implement inclusive practices (Carrington et al., 2024).

In addition to structural support, leaders must establish the conditions for challenging non-inclusive, discriminatory educational practices and build consensus towards putting the universal value of inclusion into practice (Handbuch Inklusion International / International Handbook of Inclusive Education, 2021). Transformative school leaders are particularly instrumental in this process, as they seek to influence organizational change by building from the bottom up rather than relying solely on top-down directives (Opiyo, 2019). This approach necessitates that leaders actively reconstruct school systems and commit to inclusive processes by empowering staff through cooperative teamwork and challenging traditional norms of teaching (Opiyo, 2019).

Specifically, transformative leaders must develop a leadership style that meets the demands of educational change by providing moral direction, raising awareness, and offering the support necessary for the group to carry out full inclusion projects (Opiyo, 2019). Globally, school leaders express a need for ongoing professional learning to support teacher's knowledge and skills in inclusive education (Carrington et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Ensuring appropriate educational opportunities for students with disabilities is one of the greatest challenges that public schools face, yet research suggests that few school leaders are prepared to provide effective special education leadership (DiPaola et al., 2017). If school reform goals are to be realized, effective leaders must be prepared to address diverse learning needs (DiPaola et al., 2017). This preparation requires a shift from traditional management roles to instructional leadership that emphasizes the creation of inclusive cultures and the capacity to support teachers in adapting to complex student profiles (Li & Omar, 2024; Mbua, 2023).

Principals must therefore possess a deep understanding of special education law and instructional strategies to effectively advocate for resources and facilitate the implementation of evidence-based practices that improve outcomes for diverse learners (DiPaola et al., 2017; Obiakor, 2006).

Without capable instructional leaders acting as dedicated advocates for students and skillful community builders, current reform efforts will fail to achieve the ambitious goals of equity and access (DiPaola et al., 2017). To bridge this gap, principal preparation programs must collaborate with practitioners to identify relevant content and incorporate necessary coursework that addresses the specific knowledge and skills required for leading inclusive schools (Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Scheef & Mahfouz, 2020).

Furthermore, school leaders must actively dismantle systemic barriers by adopting culturally responsive pedagogy and fostering collaborative partnerships among educators, families, and community stakeholders to ensure that educational environments are equitable and responsive to the diverse needs of all student populations (Li & Omar, 2024; Ross & Berger, 2009).

To achieve this, school leaders and administrators must develop ongoing, contextualized professional development that reflects an equity logic and promotes inclusive, anti-racist approaches to special education (Woulfin & Jones, 2023). Such professional development should move beyond mere compliance to address the systemic inequities that contribute to disparate outcomes, requiring leaders to frame messages that highlight disparities in diagnosis and long-term life outcomes by race (Woulfin & Jones, 2023).

The absence of mandated specialized training often compels school leaders to rely heavily on external personnel or delegate complex compliance tasks, rather than assuming direct leadership over instructional programs for students with disabilities (Garrison, 2023; Roberts & Guerra, 2015). This reliance on external support highlights a critical need for leadership preparation programs to integrate comprehensive training on inclusive practices, as researchers have increasingly emphasized the principal's role in creating systems and interventions that support students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020; DeMatthews & Mueller, 2021).

Teachers with specific training on teaching students with disabilities and those with higher levels of education are more supportive of inclusive education, suggesting that resistance to the practice is often linked to inadequate teacher preparedness (Mngo & Mngo, 2018). Significant gaps in the academic training of prospective teachers have been identified, necessitating systemic approaches to curricula reform and the integration of research-based inclusive practices to foster a more equitable system for all students (Lucena-Rodríguez et al., 2025).

In addition to teacher preparation, there is an urgent need for teacher leaders who have practical experience in including students with disabilities to support their teaching colleagues in implementing inclusive education practice with diverse groups of students (Carrington et al., 2024).

Fostering shared leadership through collaboration, community involvement, and developing others is relevant in the context of inclusive education (Mbua, 2023). This distributed approach to leadership acknowledges that school leadership is broad and incorporates leadership at multiple layers across a school, including teacher leadership, which does not necessarily include formal administrative roles but often focuses on sharing best practices (Carrington et al., 2024).

Consequently, successful inclusive schools embrace comprehensive school-wide approaches, including a clear vision of high expectations and universally designed instructional practices that address both academic and behavioral components of schooling (Opiyo, 2019). Principals play pivotal roles in high-risk learning environments that address complex student achievement issues, and as skillful instructional leaders, they ensure that their schools focus on powerful academic outcomes for all learners (DiPaola et al., 2017).

Specifically, principals must develop, enhance, and monitor the professional skills and knowledge of their faculty to ensure the effective implementation of research-based instructional strategies (DiPaola et al., 2017). This focus on instructional quality is most effective when leaders establish an academic press characterized by high expectations for all students, including those with disabilities, and provide a comprehensive range of strategies to support achievement (Mbua, 2023).

Leaders with vision, combining humanity together with the will of assisting, is definitely the necessary ingredient to make the changes become a reality not only in special needs education but also in every section in life.

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