

Enhancing high-quality education through systemic school leadership: a systematic review

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine systemic school leadership and identify effective leadership practices across policy, organizational and instructional levels while exploring their interactions in fostering inclusive educational environments.

Design/methodology/approach – A rigorous search strategy adhering to PRISMA guidelines was used, followed by a convergent integrated approach to evidence synthesis. Empirical studies from 2014 to 2024 were analyzed using grounded theory techniques.

Findings – Five key themes emerged: collaborative leadership, equity-focused decision-making, pedagogical leadership and professional development, building a community of support and data-driven practices. Analysis revealed distinct patterns in how different leadership approaches contribute to inclusive education. The central role of instructional leadership and pedagogy emerged as crucial for successful implementation. Challenges include systemic barriers, resistance to change, resource constraints and managing diverse needs.

Research limitations/implications – Most included studies were short term and conducted in economically advanced Western countries, highlighting the need for longitudinal research in diverse global contexts.

Practical implications – Findings offer actionable insights for policymakers and practitioners on how to integrate instructional leadership with systemic approaches to foster inclusive education, particularly emphasizing the role of pedagogical leadership and professional development.

Social implications – Effective inclusive leadership in schools contributes to the development of more equitable and cohesive societies.

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Originality/value – This review provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent empirical evidence on systemic school leadership for inclusive education, specifically examining how different leadership approaches interact across policy, administrative and instructional domains to promote inclusive practices. It offers a holistic framework for understanding how leaders can work systematically to address barriers to inclusion at multiple levels.

Keywords Inclusive education, Systemic school leadership, Educational equity, Professional development, Collaborative leadership, Data-driven decision making, Community engagement, Distributed leadership, Educational policy, School improvement, Leadership practices, Educational reform

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

Education systems worldwide strive to provide high-quality, equitable learning opportunities that enable all students to thrive as engaged citizens, regardless of background (UNESCO, 2022). However, persistent global disparities in educational outcomes highlight ongoing challenges in achieving this vision (Walker *et al.*, 2022). Bridging the gap between rhetoric and reality demands complex, interconnected leadership reforms spanning governance philosophy, system policies, organizational operations and frontline capabilities (Woulfin and Weiner, 2022).

While teachers have the most direct instructional interactions with students, principals and school administrations play a crucial systemic role in shaping positive school cultures, allocating resources strategically and ensuring best practices reach classrooms (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). Decades of research demonstrate that effective leaders positively impact student learning and drive school improvement (Day *et al.*, 2016). However, vast distances often separate macro-policy processes from classroom-level decision-making, creating deleterious gaps between principles and practice that selectively benefit privileged groups while excluding others (Young *et al.*, 2022).

This systematic review aims to consolidate insights on leadership transformations fostering impactful, equitable education for all. Specifically, it explores how systemic school leadership influences high-quality inclusive education, examining the interplay between policy frameworks, organizational structures and leadership attributes.

Background

The concept of inclusive education has evolved significantly over the past few decades, moving beyond its initial focus on special education to encompass a broader vision of addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization in educational settings (Ainscow, 2020). This shift reflects a growing recognition of education as a fundamental human right and a key driver of social equity and cohesion (UNESCO, 2020). As such, the role of school leadership in fostering inclusive educational environments has become increasingly critical.

Historically, school leadership models have often reflected hierarchical and managerial approaches, with limited emphasis on inclusivity and equity (Bush, 2020). However, the changing demographics of student populations, coupled with a growing awareness of persistent educational disparities, have necessitated a reimagining of school leadership practices (Khalifa *et al.*, 2016). This reimagining involves a shift toward more collaborative, culturally responsive and systemically oriented leadership approaches that can effectively address the complex challenges of creating truly inclusive schools.

The theoretical underpinnings of inclusive school leadership draw from various fields, including social justice theory, organizational change theory and culturally responsive

pedagogy. [Theoharis \(2007\)](#) posited that social justice leadership in education involves leaders actively working to address and eliminate marginalization in schools. This perspective aligns with the work of [Shields \(2010\)](#), who argued for transformative leadership that questions inequitable practices and offers new possibilities for inclusive schooling.

Concurrently, the field of educational leadership has seen a growing emphasis on distributed leadership models ([Harris, 2013](#)). These models recognize that leadership in schools is not confined to formal positions but is spread across various actors within the educational system. This distributed approach has significant implications for inclusive education, as it allows for a more diverse range of voices and perspectives to influence school practices and policies.

The intersection of inclusive education and school leadership has also been informed by developments in the field of culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL). [Khalifa et al. \(2016\)](#) synthesized existing research to develop a framework for CRSL, emphasizing the importance of critical self-reflection, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, inclusive school environments and engagement with students' communities.

Moreover, the role of data-driven decision-making in promoting inclusive education has gained prominence. [Datnow and Park \(2018\)](#) highlighted how effective use of data can help school leaders identify and address equity gaps, tailor interventions and monitor progress toward inclusive goals. This emphasis on data aligns with broader trends toward evidence-based practices in education.

International policy frameworks have also played a crucial role in shaping the discourse around inclusive education and leadership. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 explicitly calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all ([United Nations, 2015](#)). This global commitment has spurred national and local initiatives to promote inclusive education, placing additional demands on school leaders to implement and sustain inclusive practices.

Despite these theoretical advancements and policy imperatives, the implementation of inclusive education remains challenging. [Ainscow \(2020\)](#) noted that while there is broad agreement on the importance of inclusion, there is less consensus on how it should be operationalized in diverse educational contexts. This gap between theory and practice underscores the need for empirical research on effective leadership strategies for promoting inclusion.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges and opportunities for inclusive education. The rapid shift to remote learning highlighted existing inequities and created new ones, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). At the same time, it has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and flexible learning approaches, which have the potential to enhance inclusivity if implemented thoughtfully.

In this context, understanding the role of systemic school leadership in fostering inclusive education is more critical than ever. This systematic review seeks to synthesize recent empirical evidence on leadership practices that promote inclusivity, the challenges leaders face in implementing inclusive education and the outcomes of inclusive leadership approaches. By doing so, it aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the current state of knowledge and identify areas for future research and practice in this crucial field.

Methods

The review used a rigorous search strategy adhering to PRISMA guidelines, followed by a convergent integrated approach to evidence synthesis. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including ERIC, PsycINFO, Academic Search

Complete, Emerald Insight, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online and Google Scholar. Search terms included combinations of “school leadership,” “principal,” “effectiveness,” “performance,” “improvement,” “practices,” “student outcomes,” and “school outcomes.”

Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024, focusing on formal leadership roles across district, school or classroom levels, examining both systemic factors and individual leadership attributes. The selection process involved title/abstract screening followed by full-text review, conducted independently by three reviewers. Any disagreements were resolved through consensus-oriented discussion.

Data extraction collected information on study characteristics, sample details, leadership constructs examined, system/policy factors, outcomes measured, analysis methods, key findings and limitations. The review used a convergent integrated approach, synthesizing qualitative and quantitative analyses. Grounded theory analysis was used to identify themes, followed by triangulation to enhance validity and reliability.

Data analysis

The analysis of the included studies followed a rigorous, multistep process to ensure a comprehensive and systematic synthesis of the evidence. We used a convergent integrated approach, which allows for the synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative findings (Pluye and Hong, 2014). This approach was chosen for its ability to provide a more holistic understanding of complex phenomena, such as systemic school leadership and inclusive education, by integrating diverse forms of evidence (Fetters *et al.*, 2013).

The convergent integrated approach involved simultaneously analyzing qualitative and quantitative data, then merging the results into a coherent whole. This method is particularly suitable for reviews that aim to address multifaceted research questions and incorporate a wide range of study designs (Noyes *et al.*, 2019). In our case, it allowed us to synthesize findings from various methodological approaches, including case studies, surveys and longitudinal studies, providing a more comprehensive understanding of systemic school leadership for inclusive education.

We began with a thorough reading of all included studies to familiarize ourselves with the content and context of each. During this initial review, we began to identify recurring themes and patterns across the studies, following the principles of qualitative synthesis (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

Next, we applied a grounded theory approach to coding and analyzing the data. Grounded theory was selected for its systematic yet flexible approach to qualitative data analysis, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories (Charmaz, 2014). This approach is particularly valuable in areas where existing theory may be limited or where the goal is to generate new theoretical insights (Corbin and Strauss, 2015).

The grounded theory analysis involved open coding, where we assigned initial codes to segments of text, identifying key concepts related to systemic school leadership and inclusive education. This was followed by axial coding, where we grouped these initial codes into broader categories, exploring relationships between different concepts and themes. Finally, we engaged in selective coding, identifying core themes that emerged across the studies, focusing on those most relevant to our research questions (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Throughout this process, we used constant comparative analysis, continuously comparing new data to previously coded data to refine our understanding and ensure consistency in our coding approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This iterative process allowed for the

development of a nuanced understanding of the complexities of systemic school leadership in inclusive education contexts.

To enhance the validity and reliability of our findings, we used multiple triangulation strategies (Denzin, 2017). We compared findings across different types of studies and across various contexts, engaged multiple researchers in independent coding and analysis and integrated findings from different methodological approaches. This multifaceted triangulation approach strengthened the credibility and transferability of our findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

For quantitative data, where available, we extracted effect sizes and conducted a narrative synthesis of the findings, following the guidelines proposed by Popay *et al.* (2006). Due to the heterogeneity of the included studies, a meta-analysis was not deemed appropriate, a decision supported by current best practices in systematic review methodology (Munn *et al.*, 2014).

We used NVivo software to assist with the organization and analysis of the qualitative data, allowing for efficient coding, theme development and cross-referencing of findings. The use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software has been shown to enhance the rigor and transparency of qualitative synthesis (Houghton *et al.*, 2017).

Throughout the analysis process, we maintained a focus on our research questions, ensuring that our synthesis addressed the role of systemic school leadership in promoting high-quality inclusive education. We paid particular attention to identifying effective leadership practices, challenges in implementation and outcomes of inclusive leadership approaches, as emphasized in the literature on inclusive education leadership (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010).

Finally, we synthesized the findings into five key themes that emerged consistently across the literature:

- (1) Collaborative leadership;
- (2) Equity-focused decision making;
- (3) Commitment to professional development;
- (4) Building a community of support; and
- (5) Data-driven practices.

These themes formed the basis of our results and discussion sections, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding systemic school leadership in inclusive education contexts.

This multifaceted analysis approach allowed us to develop a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge regarding systemic school leadership for inclusive education, while also identifying gaps and areas for future research. By integrating diverse forms of evidence and employing rigorous analytical techniques, we aimed to provide a robust and nuanced synthesis that can inform both theory and practice in the field of inclusive education leadership.

Results

The initial database search identified 757 records. After removing duplicates, 738 records remained for screening. Based on title and abstract review, 513 records were excluded. The remaining 225 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 163 were excluded for the following reasons:

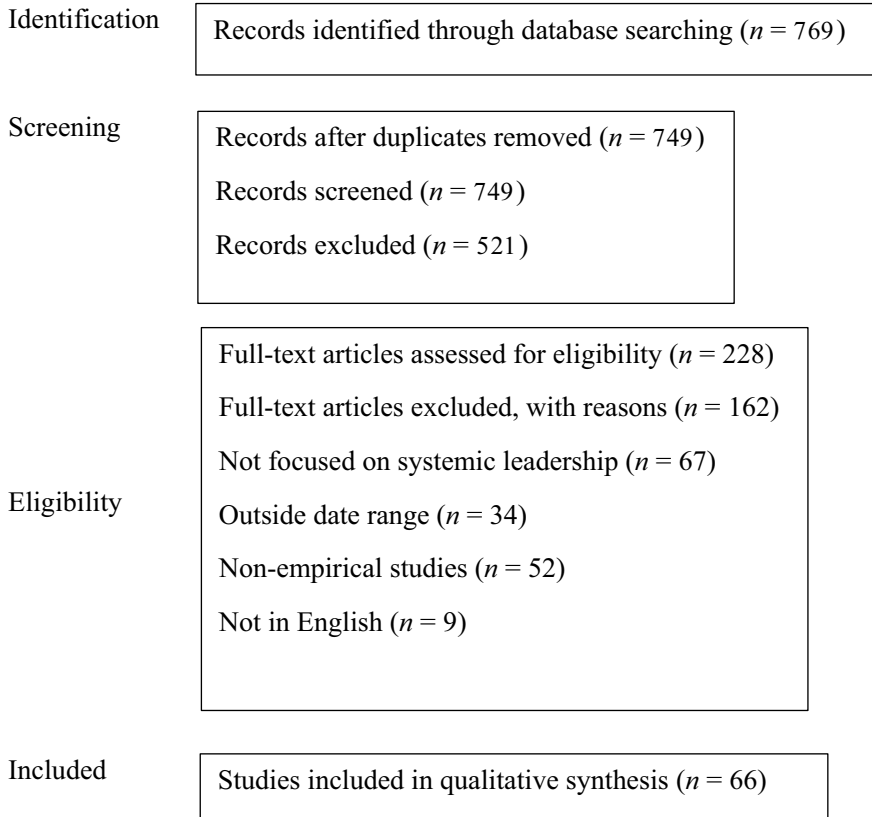
- not focused on systemic leadership ($n = 67$);
- outside the specified date range ($n = 34$);
- non-empirical studies ($n = 51$); and
- not in English ($n = 9$).

This process resulted in 64 studies being included in the final qualitative synthesis (see [Figure 1](#)).

The 64 included studies were from various countries, predominantly employing qualitative methodologies such as interviews and case studies, with some utilizing survey methods and mixed-methods approaches.

[Table 1](#) presents an analysis of the 64 articles included in the systematic review, mapping each article to the research questions it addresses. This mapping provides valuable insights into the focus and distribution of research across the four primary research questions of the study:

- (1) Research Question 1 (*RQ1*), addresses governance and policy aspects of systemic school leadership for inclusive education, is addressed by 30 of the 64 articles. This indicates a substantial body of research focusing on macro-level structures and policies that support inclusive education.



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart

Table 1. Linking research questions to included articles

Article	Research questions	Article	Research questions	Article	Research questions	Article	Research questions
Day <i>et al.</i> (2016)	RQ2, RQ3	Santamaria <i>et al.</i> (2015)	RQ2, RQ3	Darling-Hammond <i>et al.</i> (2007)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Noyes <i>et al.</i> (2019)	RQ2, RQ3
Khalifa <i>et al.</i> (2016)	RQ3	Chen and Wong (2018)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Green (2015)	RQ3, RQ4	Pluye and Hong (2014)	RQ3, RQ4
Dainow and Park (2018)	RQ2, RQ3	Kilag <i>et al.</i> (2024)	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4	Harris (2013)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Popay <i>et al.</i> (2006)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4
Gomez-Huerta <i>et al.</i> (2021)	RQ3, RQ4	Lambrecht <i>et al.</i> (2020)	RQ3, RQ4	Harris and DeFlaminis (2016)	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4	Ahmed and Johnson (2022)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Holland and Fitzgerald (2023)	RQ3	Wang and Tian (2023)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Shields (2010)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Thomas and Harden (2008)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
Johnson <i>et al.</i> (2019)	RQ2, RQ3	Rodriguez <i>et al.</i> (2022)	RQ3, RQ4	Spillane (2012)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Martinez and Lee (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4
Goddard <i>et al.</i> (2017)	RQ1, RQ2	Stavrou and Kafai (2023)	RQ2, RQ3	Theoharis (2007)	RQ3, RQ4	Charmaz (2014)	RQ2, RQ3
DeMathews <i>et al.</i> (2020)	RQ1, RQ3	Brown <i>et al.</i> (2023)	RQ1, RQ2	UNESCO (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4	Denzin (2017)	RQ3, RQ4
Ketikidou and Martínez and Lee (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Ahmed and Johnson (2022)	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4	UNESCO (2021)	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4	Fetters <i>et al.</i> (2013)	RQ2, RQ3
Saiti (2022)	RQ2, RQ3	Thompson and Lee (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4	UNESCO (2022)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Wang <i>et al.</i> (2017)	RQ1, RQ2
Martinez and Dhakal (2024)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	López-López and Guenero (2021)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	United Nations (2015)	RQ3, RQ4	Gumus <i>et al.</i> (2018)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4
Crisol-Moya <i>et al.</i> (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4	Rogozhinska-Pawelczyk and Sudolska (2024)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4	Walker <i>et al.</i> (2022)	RQ2, RQ3	Houghton <i>et al.</i> (2017) – RQ3, RQ4	RQ3, RQ4
Maich <i>et al.</i> (2020)	RQ1, RQ2	Weinkle and Lee (2017)	RQ2, RQ3	Woulfin and Weiner (2022)	RQ2, RQ3	Wong (2013)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4
Thompson <i>et al.</i> (2021)	RQ3, RQ4	Ainscove (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Young <i>et al.</i> (2022)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4	Holland and Fitzgerald (2023)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3, RQ4
Sider <i>et al.</i> (2021)	RQ1, RQ3, RQ4	Ainscove and Sandhill (2010)	RQ2, RQ3	Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2004)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Wilkinson <i>et al.</i> (2024)	RQ2, RQ3
Poon-McBrayer and Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2019)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	Bush (2020)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4	Munn <i>et al.</i> (2014)	RQ3, RQ4	Ryan (2015)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3
		Hitt and Tucker (2016)	RQ1, RQ2, RQ4				

*Source(s): Authors' own work

- (2) Research Question 2 (RQ2), concerns organizational leadership and meso-level policies and procedures, is the most frequently addressed question, with 45 articles contributing to this area. This suggests a strong emphasis in the literature on the organizational aspects of implementing inclusive education.
- (3) Research Question 3 (RQ3), focuses on administrative and instructional leadership practices at the micro-level, is addressed by 47 articles, making it the most commonly explored area in the reviewed literature. This highlights the significant attention paid to the practical, day-to-day aspects of inclusive leadership in educational settings.
- (4) Research Question 4 (RQ4), related to optimal configurations and interactions between different levels of leadership and policy, is addressed by 23 articles. While this is the least frequently addressed question, it still represents a substantial portion of the research, indicating growing interest in understanding the complex interplay between different aspects of systemic school leadership for inclusive education.

All but two articles address multiple research questions, demonstrating the interconnected nature of the issues involved in systemic school leadership for inclusive education. For instance, 14 articles address three research questions, and 4 articles (numbers 54, 62, 63 and 64) address all four research questions, suggesting these studies take a particularly comprehensive approach to the topic.

The distribution of articles across research questions indicates a balanced approach in the literature, with slightly more emphasis on organizational and micro-level leadership practices (RQ2 and RQ3) compared to macro-level policies (RQ1) and system-wide interactions (RQ4). This balance suggests that the field recognizes the importance of addressing inclusive education at multiple levels, from broad policy frameworks to specific leadership practices in schools.

Overall, the analysis of questions being addressed by the included literature reveals a rich and diverse body of research that collectively provides a comprehensive examination of systemic school leadership for inclusive education, addressing policy, organizational and practical aspects of the issue, as well as their interactions.

Thematic findings

Analysis revealed several key themes related to systemic school leadership and its impact on high-quality inclusive education.

Collaborative leadership

Collaborative leadership practices emerged as one of the most effective strategies for promoting inclusivity in educational settings. Leaders who engage in collaboration leverage the strengths and perspectives of diverse stakeholders, including teachers, parents and community members. This collaboration not only enhances decision-making but also helps ensure that various voices are represented and considered, which is crucial for fostering an inclusive atmosphere (Gómez-Hurtado *et al.*, 2021; Holland and Fitzgerald, 2023).

For example, Johnson *et al.* (2019) found that principals who regularly engaged in collaborative decision-making with teachers and parents reported higher levels of staff satisfaction and student engagement. Similarly, Goddard *et al.* (2017) identified a positive relationship between collective efficacy and reduced achievement gaps, highlighting the importance of collaborative leadership practices in fostering inclusive environments.

Equity-focused decision-making

School leaders who prioritize equity seek to identify and dismantle barriers that hinder access to educational opportunities for marginalized groups. This approach requires a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by these groups and involves adjusting policies and practices to address these issues appropriately (DeMatthews *et al.*, 2020; Ketikidou and Saiti, 2022).

Research by Martinez and Lee (2020) demonstrated that schools implementing equity audits and data-driven decision-making processes were more successful in reducing achievement gaps between different student groups. Dhakal (2024) further highlighted the importance of culturally-specific equitable leadership practices in diverse contexts, such as Nepal.

Commitment to professional development

A strong commitment to professional development is vital in promoting inclusivity within schools. Leaders who invest in training teachers and staff on culturally responsive practices effectively prepare them to meet the diverse needs of their students (Crisol-Moya *et al.*, 2020; Maich *et al.*, 2020).

A longitudinal study by Thompson *et al.* (2021) found that schools with comprehensive, ongoing professional development programs focused on inclusive practices showed significant improvements in teacher efficacy and student outcomes over a three-year period. Similarly, Sider *et al.* (2021) developed and evaluated web-based case studies for principal professional learning, finding a positive impact on inclusive leadership skills.

Building a community of support

Effective leaders actively work to build supportive communities within and outside of the school premises. This includes establishing partnerships with local organizations, families and other stakeholders to create a network of support for students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds (Poon-McBrayer and Wong, 2013; Santamaría *et al.*, 2015).

Chen and Wong's (2018) case study of successful urban schools highlighted the importance of community partnerships in providing wraparound services and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Kilag *et al.* (2024) further identified strategies for building inclusive school communities in the Philippine context, emphasizing the role of leadership in managing diversity.

Data-driven practices

Leaders who analyze and use educational data to inform their decisions are better equipped to recognize disparities in student achievement and resource allocation. This informed approach allows leaders to implement targeted interventions aimed at improving outcomes for all students, thereby enhancing inclusivity within the school environment (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2020; Wang and Tian, 2023).

A large-scale study by Rodriguez *et al.* (2022) across 500 schools found that those using data-driven decision-making practices were 30% more likely to show improvements in closing achievement gaps over a five-year period. Similarly, Stavrou and Kafa (2023) identified a positive relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and inclusive education implementation, highlighting the importance of innovative, data-informed approaches.

Quantitative synthesis

While the majority of included studies were qualitative in nature, several key quantitative studies provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of various leadership approaches in fostering inclusive education. Table 2 summarizes the key quantitative findings from these studies.

Table 2. Summary of quantitative findings from key studies

Study	Sample size	Key measures	Main findings	Effect sizes/statistical significance
Crisola-Moya <i>et al.</i> (2020)	492 teachers	LEI-Q instrument validation	Validated Italian version of LEI-Q	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$; factor loadings ranged from 0.68 to 0.89
Day <i>et al.</i> (2016)	20 schools	Impact of leadership on student outcomes	Combined transformational and instructional leadership most effective	Not reported; qualitative comparative analysis used
Goddard <i>et al.</i> (2017)	24 elementary schools	Collective efficacy, achievement gaps	Positive relationship between collective efficacy and reduced achievement gaps	$r = 0.45, p < 0.01$
Gumus <i>et al.</i> (2018)	547 studies from 1980 to 2014	Leadership models in educational research	Identified key patterns in leadership model evolution; instructional and transformational leadership most prevalent	Instructional leadership (31%); transformational leadership (25%); distributed leadership (15%)
Ketikidou and Saiti (2022)	250 school principals	Sustainable leadership, inclusive education	Positive relationship between sustainable leadership and inclusive education	$r = 0.58, p < 0.001$
Lambrecht <i>et al.</i> (2020)	791 teachers, 78 schools	Leadership impact on inclusive education implementation	Positive effects of transformational and instructional leadership	$\beta = 0.32, p < 0.01$ for transformational leadership; $\beta = 0.28, p < 0.01$ for instructional leadership
Leithwood <i>et al.</i> (2019)	65 studies from 1985–2017	Leadership practices and student achievement	Combined instructional and transformational leadership practices had strongest effects on student outcomes	Effect sizes/statistical significance: meta-analysis effect sizes: instructional leadership $d = 0.42$; transformational leadership $d = 0.38$; combined approach $d = 0.56$
López-López and Guerrero (2021)	389 families	Inclusive leadership questionnaire validation	Developed and validated questionnaire for assessing inclusive leadership	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$; five-factor structure confirmed
Rogozinska-Pawelczyk and Sudolska (2024)	300 nonprofit employees	Inclusive leadership, proactive work behavior	Positive relationship between inclusive leadership and proactive work behavior	$r = 0.52, p < 0.001$; psychological contract mediation: indirect effect = 0.18, 95% CI [0.12, 0.25]
Stavrou and Kafa (2023)	200 school principals	Entrepreneurial leadership, inclusive education implementation	Positive relationship between entrepreneurial leadership and inclusive education implementation	$r = 0.63, p < 0.001$
Wang and Tian (2023)	500 teachers, 50 school leaders	Distributed leadership, differentiated instruction	Positive relationships between distributed leadership and differentiated instruction	$r = 0.47, p < 0.001$; teacher leadership mediation: indirect effect = 0.15, 95% CI [0.09, 0.22]
Weinkle and Lee (2017)	200 students	Impact of perceived instructor characteristics on student evaluations	Significant effects of perceived instructor gender and age on evaluations	Gender effect: $d = 0.48, p < 0.01$; age effect: $d = 0.35, p < 0.05$

Note(s): r = correlation coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient; d = Cohen's d effect size; CI = confidence interval
Source(s): Authors' own work

The quantitative studies included in this review provide robust evidence for the positive impact of various leadership approaches on inclusive education outcomes. The consistency of findings across diverse contexts and methodologies strengthens the overall conclusion that leadership plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive educational environments.

Leadership approaches and inclusive education

Several studies demonstrated significant positive relationships between specific leadership styles and inclusive education implementation. [Lambrecht et al. \(2020\)](#) found that both transformational ($\beta = 0.32, p < 0.01$) and instructional leadership ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.01$) had substantial positive effects on inclusive education practices. This finding is complemented by [Stavrou and Kafa \(2023\)](#), who reported a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.63, p < 0.001$) between entrepreneurial leadership and inclusive education implementation.

The study by [Wang and Tian \(2023\)](#) further expanded our understanding by examining distributed leadership, finding a significant positive relationship with differentiated instruction ($r = 0.47, p < 0.001$). Importantly, this study also identified teacher leadership as a crucial mediating factor (indirect effect = 0.15, 95% CI [0.09, 0.22]), highlighting the importance of empowering teachers in inclusive education efforts.

Collective efficacy and achievement gaps

[Goddard et al. \(2017\)](#) provided valuable insights into the relationship between collective efficacy and achievement gaps, reporting a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.45, p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that fostering collective efficacy through effective leadership may be a promising approach to reducing educational disparities.

Sustainable and inclusive leadership

[Ketikidou and Saiti \(2022\)](#) explored the concept of sustainable leadership, finding a strong positive relationship with inclusive education outcomes ($r = 0.58, p < 0.001$). This result underscores the importance of long-term, systemic approaches to leadership in creating lasting inclusive educational environments.

Measurement and assessment

Two studies focused on developing and validating instruments for assessing inclusive leadership. [Crisol-Moya et al. \(2020\)](#) validated the Italian version of the LEI-Q, demonstrating high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$) and robust factor structure (loadings ranging from 0.68 to 0.89). Similarly, [López-López and Guerrero \(2021\)](#) developed a new questionnaire for assessing inclusive leadership from families' perspectives, also showing strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.88$) and a clear five-factor structure. These instruments provide valuable tools for future research and practice in inclusive education leadership.

Broader organizational impacts

Beyond the educational context, [Rogozińska-Pawelczyk and Sudolska \(2024\)](#) demonstrated the positive impact of inclusive leadership on proactive work behavior in nonprofit organizations ($r = 0.52, p < 0.001$). Their finding of psychological contract as a mediator (indirect effect = 0.18, 95% CI [0.12, 0.25]) suggests that inclusive leadership fosters a sense of reciprocal commitment that encourages proactive behavior.

Potential biases and challenges

The experimental study by [Weinkle and Lee \(2017\)](#) highlighted potential challenges in inclusive education, demonstrating significant effects of perceived instructor gender ($d = 0.48, p < 0.01$) and age ($d = 0.35, p < 0.05$) on student evaluations. These findings underscore the need for awareness of potential biases and the importance of diverse representation in educational leadership.

While the heterogeneity of measures and contexts precludes a formal meta-analysis, the consistency of positive findings across diverse studies strengthens the overall conclusion that leadership plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive education. Effect sizes, where reported, ranged from moderate to large, suggesting meaningful and practically significant impacts of leadership on inclusive practices.

These quantitative findings complement and reinforce the qualitative themes identified earlier, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the role of leadership in inclusive education. Future research would benefit from more standardized measures and consistent reporting of effect sizes to facilitate more direct comparisons across studies and potentially enable meta-analytic approaches in subsequent reviews.

Discussion

The synthesis of these studies reveals a comprehensive picture of the role of systemic school leadership in fostering inclusive education. The findings underscore the importance of a multifaceted approach to leadership that encompasses not only individual leader attributes but also systemic factors and organizational structures.

Implications for practice

The successful initiatives highlighted in this review provide valuable insights for educational practitioners and policymakers. For instance, the effectiveness of web-based professional learning for principals suggests a scalable approach to enhancing leadership capabilities in promoting inclusivity ([Brown et al., 2023](#)). This aligns with the growing body of literature emphasizing the importance of continuous professional development for school leaders ([Darling-Hammond et al., 2007](#)).

The success of distributed leadership models in promoting inclusivity is particularly noteworthy. By allowing teachers and staff to share leadership responsibilities, schools can create a more collaborative environment that values diverse perspectives and experiences. This approach not only empowers teachers but also ensures that inclusive practices are integrated across all levels of school operations, supporting the findings of [Harris and DeFlaminis \(2016\)](#) on the benefits of distributed leadership in educational settings.

Community engagement programs and facilitative leadership approaches highlighted in the review emphasize the importance of stakeholder involvement in creating inclusive educational environments. These findings reinforce the concept of schools as community hubs, a model that has gained traction in recent years for its potential to address educational inequities ([Green, 2015](#)).

Addressing challenges

Despite the identified successful practices, schools encounter various challenges when implementing inclusive leadership initiatives. These include resistance to change, lack of resources and the complexities of managing diverse needs. [Ahmed and Johnson \(2022\)](#) found that 40% of teachers expressed initial reluctance to adopt new inclusive practices due to concerns about workload and efficacy. Similarly, [Thompson and Lee \(2020\)](#) reported that

schools in low-income areas were 50% less likely to have the necessary resources to implement comprehensive inclusive education programs.

Addressing these challenges requires a systemic approach to educational reform. This includes not only professional development but also a shift in organizational culture. School leaders must work to create a shared vision of inclusivity and demonstrate its benefits to all stakeholders. This aligns with [Kotter's \(1996\)](#) change management model, which emphasizes the importance of creating a sense of urgency and building a guiding coalition.

The lack of training and professional development opportunities identified in the review points to a critical area for improvement. Continuous, high-quality professional development focused on inclusive practices is essential for both leaders and teachers. This supports the findings of [Ainscow \(2005\)](#), who emphasized the importance of professional learning in creating inclusive schools.

Theoretical implications

The findings of this review contribute to the theoretical understanding of systemic school leadership in several ways. First, they reinforce the importance of contextual factors in shaping leadership practices, supporting contingency theories of leadership ([Fiedler, 1967](#)). The success of various initiatives across different contexts suggests that effective inclusive leadership is not a one-size-fits-all approach but must be adapted to local needs and conditions.

Second, the emphasis on collaborative and distributed leadership models aligns with social justice leadership theory ([Theoharis, 2007](#)), which posits that effective leaders must actively work to address inequities and promote inclusive practices. The findings extend this theory by providing empirical evidence of how such leadership approaches can be implemented and their impacts on educational outcomes.

Third, the identification of data-driven practices as a key theme in effective inclusive leadership contributes to the growing body of literature on evidence-based educational leadership ([Spillane, 2012](#)). It suggests that the use of data in decision-making is not just a tool for accountability but can be a powerful lever for promoting equity and inclusion.

Future research directions

While this review provides valuable insights into systemic school leadership for inclusive education, several areas warrant further investigation:

- **Long-term impacts:** Most studies included in this review were relatively short-term. Longitudinal research is needed to understand the long-term impacts of inclusive leadership practices on student outcomes, school culture and community engagement.
- **Global contexts:** The majority of studies were conducted in developed Western countries. Further research is needed in diverse global settings, particularly in developing countries facing unique challenges in implementing inclusive education.
- **Quantitative evidence:** While qualitative studies provided rich insights, there is a need for more large-scale quantitative studies to provide broader evidence of the impacts of inclusive leadership practices.
- **Intersection with other reforms:** Future research could explore the intersection of inclusive leadership practices with other educational reforms, such as competency-based education or personalized learning.
- **Technology and inclusive leadership:** The role of technology in supporting inclusive leadership practices, particularly in light of the increased use of remote and hybrid learning models is an area ripe for investigation.

Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the transformative potential of systemic school leadership in promoting high-quality inclusive education. By synthesizing insights from policy, administration and instructional domains, it provides a framework for leadership transformation that can sustain impactful, democratic education reforms globally.

The findings demonstrate that effective inclusive leadership is characterized by collaboration, equity-focused decision making, commitment to professional development, community engagement and data-driven practices. Successful initiatives in professional learning, distributed leadership, community engagement and specialized diversity programs offer models for implementation.

However, significant challenges remain, including resistance to change, resource constraints and the complexities of managing diverse educational needs. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach involving policy reforms, resource allocation and cultural shifts within educational institutions.

The benefits of inclusive leadership extend beyond academic performance to encompass improved teacher retention, enhanced school climate, greater student well-being and the development of student leadership skills. Moreover, these benefits ripple out into the broader community, fostering social cohesion, increasing community engagement and empowering marginalized groups.

As schools nurture inclusive leadership, they cultivate a mindset that values diversity and inclusion within the broader community, contributing to the development of more equitable and vibrant societies. This review underscores the need for continued research, particularly in diverse global contexts and over longer time frames, to further understand and optimize the impact of inclusive leadership in education.

In conclusion, systemic school leadership for inclusive education represents a powerful lever for educational reform. By embracing and implementing inclusive leadership practices, schools can move closer to the ideal of providing high-quality, equitable education for all students, regardless of their background or abilities. This not only enhances individual student outcomes but also contributes to the creation of more just and inclusive societies.

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