Chapter 6
Inclusive Leadership for Schools: Practices, Challenges, and Future Directions

Donnie Adams, Shaheera Hussain, and King Lok Tan

Introduction

Numerous scholars in the field of educational leadership and management have developed an earnest interest in understanding the influence of school leadership on student achievement (Özdemir et al. 2022). Researchers have reported both direct (Gümüş et al. 2021) and indirect (Leithwood et al. 2020) influences of these leadership practices on student achievement. A conclusion has been drawn that leadership matters in student achievement. However, based on a review of quantitative research articles, Leithwood et al. (2004) laid a strong claim that the principal's leadership is second only to teachers in influencing student achievement. More recently, a review of the research indicates that the school leadership's influence on student achievement, in fact, supersedes teachers' as it affects the school as a whole rather than just a single classroom (Grissom et al. 2021).

School leadership is critical for promoting equity and providing equal opportunities in learning for all students. In schools, principals not only drive the culture and focus, and are instrumental figures in promoting equality and equity (UNESCO 2017), but also guide and influence the school community towards a preferred direction in order to achieve a desired outcome (Diamond and Spillane 2016). However, a traditional leadership which emphasises single leadership is no longer compatible with the organisational structure of today (Adams 2018). Therefore, effective whole-school transformation towards inclusion must be led by school principals, and their senior leadership teams (Adams and Tan 2020). The principals share leadership responsibilities with the senior teachers, community members, and other school

D. Adams (✉) · S. Hussain · K. L. Tan
Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
e-mail: drdonnieadams@gmail.com

D. Adams
Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

administrators, and work collaboratively with them in creating a school structure which supports inclusion (Billingsley et al. 2018).

The principal's role also has a vast impact on how vulnerable student populations, such as those with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN), receive instruction (Adams et al. 2020; Spillane et al. 2019). By instilling an equitable environment, principals can greatly enhance these students' learning outcomes (UNESCO 2017). However, leading an inclusive school can be challenging with the changing dynamics, potentially exacerbating the issues faced by children with diverse needs. Nevertheless, as a result of the steadily increasing attention that educational systems all over the world are paying to inclusion, an inclusive school leadership has become one of the most hotly debated topics among researchers (Alzahrani 2020; Billingsley et al. 2018; DeMatthews et al. 2021) as it is seen as a vital element in its effective implementation, from which all children with differing abilities will benefit (Adams and Tan 2020; DeMatthews et al. 2021).

This chapter begins by providing a background of inclusive education by highlighting the establishment of global policies, guidelines, and rules and regulations in addressing equal educational opportunities and accessibility for all children. The chapter then discusses the concept of inclusive school leadership by providing an overview on several inclusive leadership practices identified in the literature. In the next section, the characteristics of inclusive school leaders are discussed, followed by their roles and responsibilities. Finally, the chapter provides insights on the challenges and enactment of inclusive school leadership in the twenty-first century.

Background of Inclusive Education

In the early days, the world witnessed children being discriminated in society, and dispelled from education systems for a wide range of reasons, including learning and physical abilities, gender, income level, race, and religion (Hayes and Bulat 2017). However, the establishment of certain global policies, guidelines, and rules and regulations have increased the rights of all children, irrespective of age, gender, and learning and physical ability, in education (UNICEF 2007). The United Nations' Salamanca Statement and Framework for Actions on Special Needs Education (UNESCO 1994) has been marked as one of the most significant treaties as more than 300 participants from 92 different countries and 25 organisations worldwide agreed on the importance of addressing equal educational opportunities and accessibility for all children. Notably, this treaty also allows mainstream schools to accommodate children with SEN (Hernández-Torrano et al. 2022).

As a result of the Salamanca Statement, nations throughout the world were urged to implement practical and strategic measures to foster inclusion in schools (Alzahrani 2020). The concept of inclusive education emerged and was supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006 (United Nations 2006). According to Article 24 (Education) of the UNCRPD, the state parties shall ensure an inclusive as well as lifelong-learning education system at

all levels by recognising the rights of persons with disabilities to education (United Nations 2006). Additionally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the United Nations in 2015 emphasised the prominence of inclusion and equity to combat all kinds of discriminations and disparities within education. In particular, SDG 4 (Quality Education) highlights inclusive and equitable quality education, and lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations 2015).

Consequently, inclusive education has been widely practised in schools. In today's more multicultural and globalised society, schools must be designed in a way that fits all, considering the diversity among children. Francis et al. (2021a) defines inclusive education as providing students with special needs the physical access to learning environments, such as ramps, as well as access to education through specific plans and strategies to involve them in classroom activities along with their peers. Moreover, inclusion is all about providing equal opportunities for all students in mainstream classrooms in terms of participation, socialisation, and personal development (Adams et al. 2017). It is a process that includes the school community working together in order to deliver services to all learners, irrespective of the disparities that may exist between them in terms of their cultural origins, ethnic groupings, and learning abilities (Alzahrani 2020).

Inclusive School Leadership

Schools that seamlessly include all students are able to do so because of the efforts of their respective leaders. Effective school leaders carry out the duties of ensuring the smooth and proper functioning of school systems, accurately portraying the institution to the wider community, and carrying out educational policies in a methodical manner (Khaleel et al. 2021). Likewise, when it comes to developing and maintaining a culture inside the school that encourages inclusiveness, the attitude of the leaders plays a key role. It is obvious that the backing from the leaders has the potential to affect the attitudes of the educators towards inclusion. Khaleel et al. (2021) found that effective inclusive leaders cultivate teachers' attitudes towards inclusivity by frequently attending meetings with teachers to review challenges, student achievements, and requirements. Furthermore, the leaders making classroom visits, establishing personal connections with children, and maintaining open lines of communication with them may all have a significant influence on the process of implementing inclusive education in schools (Khaleel et al. 2021).

Inclusive school leadership is relatively contemporary in the field of educational leadership (Adams and Tan 2020). Esposito et al. (2019) described inclusive school leadership as a 'linchpin' in creating an inclusive education setting in schools for students with disabilities. However, the roles of inclusive school leaders are benchmarked differently in various contexts as the term 'inclusive' has no emphatic definition due to its ongoing research interest across the globe. A myriad of scholars deem that 'inclusive' refers to fair treatment to students of all identities (marginalised and excluded children) (Billingsley et al. 2018; Bordas 2017; DeMatthews et al. 2021).

Deppeler and Aikens (2020), in their systematic review, indicate that to develop an inclusive learning environment, school leaders could focus on responsible innovation elements in schools, such as 'Anticipation', 'Reflectivity', 'Inclusion', and 'Responsiveness'.

Each of the elements is vital for innovating the school environment, enhancing potential, and sterilising unforeseeable barriers to inclusion. It is an opportunity for school leaders to provide an inclusive schooling experience for students with disabilities. The focus and functions of the elements are illustrated in Table 6.1.

Turner-Cmuchal and Óskarsdóttir (2020) highlighted three core functions of inclusive school leadership through its Supporting Inclusive School Leadership (SISL) framework: setting direction, organisational development, and human development. *Setting direction* entails school principals providing strategic direction, with an emphasis on the inclusive practice-supporting ideals and discourse (Turner-Cmuchal and Óskarsdóttir 2020). Exploring and exchanging meanings about inclusion, with the objective of promoting the academic and social well-being of students via fairness, justice, and equality, are crucial components of this reflection on practice (Stone-Johnson 2014). Theoharis and Causton (2014), on the other hand, emphasised the importance of enacting a vision for inclusive schools, which requires school leaders to establish a cohesive philosophy or inclusive culture.

Organisational development emphasises the principals' responsibility in implementing inclusive policy and practice and, specifically, in fostering a school culture that values diversity (Cherkowski and Ragoonaden 2016). This implies that principals have an impact on organisational development, and therefore must systematically approach curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, and school structure (Óskarsdóttir et al. 2020). In addition to that, they are responsible for building relationships with the community, and parents (Fultz 2017).

As for *Human development,* it focuses on leadership as one of the primary determinants of teaching quality, and the most influential school-level factor on student accomplishment where the strategic function is centred on facilitating, monitoring, and evaluating teaching practice (Turner-Cmuchal and Óskarsdóttir 2020). The purpose of this strategic role is to gather information to guarantee that professional development supports and inspires each teacher to serve all students

Table 6.1 Elements of responsible innovations for schools

Elements of responsible innovations	Focus and functions
Anticipation	Understanding potential impacts of school design for diverse stakeholders and conditions
Reflectivity	Mechanisms for aligning design intentions and educational aims with social and educational practices
Inclusion	Incorporating participatory processes in the design, build, and occupation of schools
Responsiveness	Adjusting practice and adapting flexible designs for change

(Black and Simon 2014). In this approach, leaders develop the teachers' potential by enhancing their knowledge and skills and fostering a school-wide professional community that promotes conversation and cooperation on inclusive teaching techniques (Humada-Ludeke 2013).

DeMatthews (2021) explored inclusive school leadership practices, and the effectiveness of inclusive education in elementary schools. He identified four leadership practices (see Fig. 6.1), namely: 'Creating a culture of change-oriented collaboration', 'Planning and evaluating', 'Building capacity', and 'Developing or revising plan'. In *Creating a culture of change-oriented collaboration,* principals need to create cultural conditions to support the change processes. Thus, this involves developing a routine where teachers collaborate regularly. In *Planning and evaluating*, principals need to establish a team, and they are required to have regular meetings to develop plans for implementation, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Certain priorities need to be given in areas such as identifying Individualised Education Programmes (IEPs) that require immediate revision as well as topics for teachers' professional development and making revisions to teachers' schedules. As for *Building capacity,* principals need a strong foundation of teaching and planning in their schools. They need to recruit qualified teachers while supporting novice and veteran teachers. *Developing or revising plan* refers to principals establishing school improvement plans (SIP) each school term to assess how far the school has come in order to make decisions about future directions.

Fig. 6.1 Inclusive school leadership practices

Osiname (2018) revealed several inclusive practices that are performed by school leaders in order to promote inclusion in their schools. These involve principals working collaboratively with groups and embracing shared decision making to determine and execute their school's vision. Moreover, they are visible and approachable in the school environment so that support can be offered to students and staff when needed. Similarly, encouraging openness, sincerity, and impartiality within the school community, utilising formal meetings and informal conversations to enable the stakeholders to contribute to school development, providing adequate support for teachers, and providing assistance in designing behaviour plans to overcome student behavioural problems are some of the significant leadership practices to foster inclusion in schools (Osiname 2018).

Characteristics of Inclusive School Leaders

The leadership of school principals is one of the most significant factors that contributes to the development of a positive and inclusive culture in schools. Principals who aim to create inclusive schools tend to utilise a variety of leadership strategies and approaches in order to cater to the requirements of all students (Osiname 2018). They develop a strategic plan that articulates the school community's commitment to the success of all students. Similarly, principals who are passionate about inclusion manage to encourage and model positive behaviours as well as reinforce values and traditions to build and shape a strong, positive inclusive culture (Gómez-Hurtado et al. 2021). Aside from the school culture, they are also cooperative, collaborative, and collegial in creating an inclusive working climate for the teachers as well (Gómez-Hurtado et al. 2021; Voinea and Turculet 2019).

Ackaradejruangsri et al. (2022) mentions that principals who foster an environment where all members of the school are actively involved, and whose efforts are recognised, are said to be 'inclusive'. Pedaste et al. (2021) found that school leaders generally have an optimistic view on inclusive education vision, beliefs, and practices. They are willing to promote inclusion in their schools and embrace inclusive ideas and practices in order to establish a more inclusive environment within the school. Khaleel et al. (2021) revealed that these school principals' attitudes and behaviours play a vital role in fostering inclusivity in their schools. As described in the study, the teachers' attitudes can be affected by the principals' attitudes and perceptions towards inclusion as well as the direction and support provided in implementing these practices. Hence, principals influence the practices of creating and maintaining a well-structured inclusive school that supports all students.

DeMatthews and Knight (2019) expounded that school leaders should have strong inclusive beliefs and values, knowledge and expertise in inclusive education, and instructional leadership practices. These leaders should lead by example by upholding strong inclusive values themselves when leading (DeMatthews et al. 2021), and demoting stereotypes such as discriminating against the race, learning and physical ability, family background, language, and immigration status of

students (DeMatthews 2015; DeMatthews et al. 2021). Brimhall and Palinkas (2020) uncovered several inclusive leader characteristics, such as equitable consideration, shared power, collective motivation, universal belonging, and authentic transparency. Leaders who support inclusion appreciate others' personal characteristics and inspire them through their optimism. Hence, being an inclusive leader means being upbeat, supportive, and motivating to the team as a whole.

Brimhall and Palinkas (2020) added that leaders who foster inclusion acknowledge employees' thoughts and feelings by communicating the purpose of the collective mission. Moreover, they seek feedback from others before making significant choices, and encourage others to be involved in the decision-making process through which the sense of belonging and inclusion is augmented. In addition to this, these inclusive school leaders are confident and competent in being authentic, transparent, and humble. Correspondingly, they are determined, ambitious, and involved in school life, which develops the fortitude to implement school-wide reforms (Shore et al. 2011). They foster an inclusive environment, ensuring that all members of the team have the impression that they are respected and treated equally, are appreciated, and have a feeling of belonging, and that they are enthused and competent (Ackaradejruangsri et al. 2022). They advocate the values of group members and strive to make sure that all members are fully engaged in the activities of the group in order to foster an inclusive atmosphere (Shore et al. 2011).

Roles and Responsibilities of Inclusive School Leaders

Principals are considered to be essential characters in schools since they are accountable for the accurate planning and supervision of all administrative responsibilities, ensuring the smooth internal operations of the school, and carrying out policy objectives in an accurate manner (Khaleel et al. 2021). It is extremely important for them to develop school philosophies and cultures that support the inclusion of all students and maintain high expectations for them. Essentially, constructing a school culture which embraces and sustains the dignity of children tends to be the initial approach for the establishment of inclusive education (Francis et al. 2021a). Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020) also highlights the significance of developing a vision for schools that involves aspects of an inclusive culture, which is achieved through the implementation of certain policies and practices along with the development of professional competence in teachers working with a diverse group of students.

In addition, management support from the school leaders for educators and other staff members, including executing positive behaviour support, making decisions based on data, utilising a multidisciplinary approach to problem-solving educational needs, and partnering with parents as well as other support personnel in the belief of a child progressing forward, can enhance the process of inclusion (Francis et al. 2021b). Furthermore, principals who encourage professional development, and provide paraprofessional support, and also monitor and evaluate students, and personalise their

curriculum can augment the level of inclusive practices in schools (Francis et al. 2021b).

Leaders who are enthusiastic about maintaining inclusion in their schools perform a variety of responsibilities, including sustaining teachers' motivation, encouraging their professional development, and utilising various strategies and instruments to implement inclusive education. One such example of this is the Individualised Education Programme (IEP), defined by Lambrecht et al. (2022) as an essential tool used to enhance personalised education for children with SEN by providing suitable learning opportunities in a normal class. These leaders of schools are held to a high level of accountability for ensuring that all children get the finest possible education, despite the fact that each child has unique requirements. Moreover, they need to cultivate the skills, passion, and motivation of their teachers to cater to the diverse needs of the students in the classroom (Lambrecht et al. 2022).

Challenges in Inclusive School Leadership

In the 1990s, school leaders faced a multitude of challenges in establishing inclusive schools (Sebba and Ainscow 1996). Nevertheless, the Salamanca Statement garnered government agreements across the world to enact policies and practices that promote inclusive education (UNESCO 1994). Consequently, scholars have highlighted the critical roles that school leaders need to undertake in order to develop effective inclusive schools (DeMatthews et al. 2020, 2021). However, promoting school inclusion remains a daunting task for these leaders (Crisol Moya et al. 2020; Eleweke and Rodda 2002). While juggling plans to manage the school's teaching and learning, school leaders are also struggling to allocate sufficient resources to provide trainings to teachers (DeMatthews et al. 2021; Óskarsdóttir et al. 2020), and to reform the culture in schools (DeMatthews and Edwards 2018).

Salisbury (2006) noted, "Schools that function inclusively do so for a reason… [and] the principals in these schools were the reason" (p. 79). Principals are responsible for the school budget, distributing resources, providing professional development for staff, hiring, and appraising teachers, and setting the school goals (Leithwood et al. 2008). However, they can feel burdened by having to create and maintain inclusive schools while dealing with Ministry and district directives, resource deficits, teacher struggles and confrontations, and discontented parents (Adams et al. 2016; Frick et al. 2013). These challenges, alongside a lack of expertise and proper guidelines on inclusive education, can cause principals to neglect their duties (O'Laughlin and Lindle 2015).

Pregot (2021) deplores the fact that school leaders had to acquire knowledge and experience of "inclusive practices" based on their generic school leadership experiences, which concurrently exposed the lack of professional development and training programmes for school leaders. Pedaste et al. (2021) revealed that, although inclusive school leaders have a positive attitude towards the inclusive vision and practice, they are typically dissatisfied with the educational and community resources

offered to them. School leaders have been left jettisoned with complex challenges such as revising school programmes, and upgrading facilities (Billingsley et al. 2018), on top of which is also identifying appropriate teaching methods to cater to the many types of student disabilities (DeMatthews et al. 2021; Mahoney 2020).

In the USA, DeMatthews et al. (2021) identified that the district's long-term history of student segregation and labelling (by learning and physical ability, race, and language) created numerous challenges to inclusion. Specifically, principals shared that the teachers were inadequately trained, and schools lacked a culture conducive to collaboration, inquiry, and high student expectations. In addition, principals had to be content with district-developed self-contained programmes. These programmes enable students with certain disabilities from other schools to be assigned into programmes housed within the principals' schools. These students were then placed in full-time segregated classrooms. Principals now needed to develop ways to maximise the inclusive opportunities available to these students. This resulted in principals recognising the hypocrisy between advocating for inclusion while maintaining separate spaces for certain students (DeMatthews et al. 2021).

Additionally, the pandemic has disconnected students with disabilities from schools, and school leaders are unable to ensure that students are learning in an inclusive setting. While, for certain, school principals needed to ensure that learning continued during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris 2020), it remains relatively unexplored how they are able to sustain learning when face-to-face classes are suspended, especially for children with SEN (Bates et al. 2021). This question is clearly related to the larger issue of developing inclusive education leadership (Bush 2020; Vassallo 2021). The prolonged class suspension has, to some extent, exposed the inequality in education, and threatened to widen the digital divide among students and schools (Lee 2022).

Inclusive School Leadership in the Twenty-First Century

The need for inclusive education in the twenty-first century is propelled by a shift towards embracing diversity and equality in schools (Cherkowski and Ragoonaden 2016; Stone-Johnson 2014). Inclusive education ensures that all students, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning styles, have equitable access to quality education (UNESCO 2017; United Nations 2015). This is not only a matter of social justice and human rights but also a recognition that diverse classrooms enhance the educational experience for all students (Lambrecht et al. 2022). In an era marked by globalization and technological advancements, fostering inclusivity equips students with essential skills like empathy, collaboration, and adaptability, which are vital for success in a diverse and interconnected world (DeMatthews et al. 2021).

Principals are crucial agents of transformation due to their extensive influence within schools. Their expertise in special education, disabilities, and inclusion may make a significant impact on establishing and maintaining inclusive schools (Billingsley et al. 2018; DeMatthews 2015). DeMatthews and Mueller (2022) stated

that principals could contribute to the development of inclusive schools by increasing the knowledge about disability identity development, and being willing to commit their resources, and take action. More specifically, principals may expand their inclusive leadership by emphasising connections, enhancing disability visibility in the curriculum, and fostering an understanding of disability identity (DeMatthews and Mueller 2022).

Education systems throughout the world are attempting to develop inclusive schools that are welcoming and approachable for all types of students, and which recognise the diversity that exists among them. According to UNESCO's (2005) assessment, one of the most complicated challenges facing educational institutions in the twenty-first century is the thorough redesigning of educational environments to accommodate human diversity for all students within a contemporary paradigm (Voinea and Turculet 2019). A well-planned organisational structure and school leadership that supports inclusion is crucial to establish and maintain inclusivity in a school. This may require alterations to the school's organisational structure and leadership practices throughout the implementation process (Van Mieghem et al. 2022).

Principals could significantly influence student achievement by designing intellectually rigorous, and socially and emotionally supportive schools. They could place importance on developing healthy interpersonal relationships among the school community that promote the social inclusion of every student with a disability (Billingsley et al. 2018). Moreover, principals could ensure that teachers and other staff receive opportunities to learn and develop professionally by enhancing their knowledge and understanding of concepts related to inclusion, such as the effects of inclusion, and inclusive teaching strategies like differentiated instruction, collaboration, and co-teaching techniques for educating children with SEN (DeMatthews and Mawhinney 2014).

Furthermore, cultivating and sustaining genuine connections with families, communities, and district officials, as well as increasing the capacity of teachers and staff via continual professional development and inquiry, are essential for the growth of a successful inclusive school (Billingsley et al. 2018). DeMatthews et al. (2020) characterise leadership for successful inclusive schools as a strategy that emphasises the growth of schools, the integration of general and special education programmes, and the constant monitoring of interventions and the results they create for children. Ramango and Naicker (2022) suggest that school leaders who are committed to and driven by inclusive principles, such as addressing diversity, embracing multiculturalism, and promoting inclusion, are more likely to foster inclusive school environments.

Conclusion

This chapter began with the background of inclusive education by highlighting the establishment of global policies, guidelines, and rules and regulations in addressing equal educational opportunities and accessibility for all children. It then discussed the concept of inclusive school leadership by providing an overview on several inclusive leadership practices identified in the literature. In addition, the chapter also highlighted the characteristics of inclusive school leaders, and their roles and responsibilities. Finally, the chapter provided insights on the challenges and enactment of inclusive school leadership in the twenty-first century.

Despite the growing research interest in this field, there is a relatively limited knowledge base on inclusive school leadership compared to other leadership paradigms. This leads to a further need for empirical research on the indicators and outcomes of inclusive school leadership in different contexts. In conclusion, in designing professional development programmes for principals, attention could be given to enhancing principals' breadth of knowledge and expertise in inclusive education so that they could ensure that every child receives the best possible education in an inclusive learning environment which supports equality and equity.

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Donnie Adams is a lecturer in Educational Leadership at the Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne. He obtained his Ph.D. in Educational Leadership from Universiti Malaya under the Bright Sparks scholarship and was awarded the Universiti Malaya's Excellence Award 2016: Ph.D. Completion in Less than 3 years. He was recently awarded the Emerald Young Researcher Award 2021 by Emerald Publishing and Universiti Malaya's Excellence Award for Community Engagement in 2019. He is Editor-in-Chief for the International Online Journal of Educational Leadership (IOJEL) and Editor for Cogent Education. He is actively involved in research and development work towards the area of inclusive school leadership and school-wide reformation of inclusive education agenda in Malaysia. He has led research projects with The British Council, ETH Zürich, The HEAD Foundation, UNICEF, Asian Universities Alliance, and Teach for Malaysia. Recently, he is listed by Britishpedia as one of the 'Successful People in Malaysia' in the field of Education.