

Principalship Experiences on Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review

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How to cite this paper: Li, S., & Omar, M. K. (2024). Principalship Experiences on Inclusive Education: A Systematic Review. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 189-204.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.122012>

Received: January 8, 2024

Accepted: February 23, 2024

Published: February 26, 2024

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Abstract

Inclusive education has been attracting worldwide attention and governments as well as researchers around the world. The principals' role in embracing inclusive education spirit has become the forefront in education agenda. Therefore, this study explores and analyzes principals' experiences in building the capacity of inclusive education at myriad school settings using Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. This research reviewed 75 articles within the 2010 to 2023 publication years. The sources of database derived from WOS, SCOPUS, and ERIC. Selected articles were systematically reviewed and analyzed to understand the current trends on inclusive education at the school milieu. It will advance the growth of inclusive education and widen the research's vantage point on related topics.

Keywords

Inclusive Education, Principal, Students with Special Needs

1. Introduction

According to its definition, inclusive education takes into account each student's needs and ensures that everyone participates and learns together. It recognizes that all kids can learn and that they all have different traits, passions, skills, and educational demands. Learners who might be in danger of being marginalized, excluded, or performing below expectations are given particular attention. For example, where a child has a disability, they would not be separated from other learners in school and learning assessments and progress would take the disability into account (UNESCO, 2023).

Scholars have conducted in-depth exploration and research on inclusive education, understanding its core features from the understanding of inclusive education to successfully implementing it. Ainscow and Miles (2008) acknowledge

and value the diversity and individual differences of learners, including differences in abilities, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic capabilities. To meet the diverse needs of students, inclusive education strives for equitable access to quality education for all students, promoting social justice and addressing systemic barriers (Booth & Ainscow, 2002). In the implementation, scholars propose to adopt differentiated teaching methods to meet the needs of students with different needs in the core issue of teaching (Tomlinson, 2014). And it emphasizes that teachers can effectively support students through collaborative teaching and teamwork (Friend & Cook, 2013). Inclusive education also requires distinctive evaluation methods (Morton & Guerin, 2017). In addition, scholars believe that inclusive education should have Positive School Culture and Inclusive Values (Florian, 2014) and Parent and Community Involvement (Paseka & Schwab, 2020; Adams et al., 2018). It can be seen that inclusive education has its own characteristics in terms of objects, goals, content, and implementation strategies. It is a special problem faced by the academic and educational fields, with systematicity and complexity, and requires long-term research and practice.

1994 saw UNESCO host the World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality in Salamanca, Spain, where inclusive education was first formally advocated (UNESCO, 2023). Many countries have been actively echoed and promoted the practice of “inclusive education” in the past few decades. The Education of all Handicapped Children Act and No Child Left Behind in America confirmed the right of special children to enter regular classrooms for learning. The Denmark established European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in 1996, with an emphasis on ensuring that every student has access to inclusive and equitable educational opportunities, inclusive education systems are being developed. The disability Discrimination Act (1992) and The Disability Standards for Education (2005) in Australia clearly stated that the right of disabled students to fair access to education should be valued and guaranteed. The United Nations’ *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* stated that to ensure accessible, equitable, high-quality education and to encourage all people to pursue lifelong learning opportunities.

The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization’s data shows that some 244 million boys and girls are still out of school this year (3% in the world’s total population) (United Nations, 2023). According to a new UNESCO policy document, 58 million kids between the ages of 6 and 11 are still not attending school, showing little overall improvement since 2007 (UNESCO, 2023). The reason for this issue is comprehensive, including poverty, location, gender, language, disability, ethnicity, religion, and other related factors (UNESCO, 2023). In the implementation of inclusive education, scholars have faced some challenges in recent years through research and development, including negative attitudes and misconceptions toward inclusive education (Sari et al., 2022; Sijuola & Davidova, 2022), insufficient training, lack of knowledge and skills of educators (Mpu & Adu, 2021; Zabeli & Gjelaj, 2020), limited resources, including in-

adequate infrastructure, poor funding, personnel, and materials (Sijuola & Davidova, 2022), large class sizes (Mpu & Adu, 2021), limited parental engagement (Shurr et al., 2023), lack of inclusive and accessible assessment tools (Tay & Kee, 2020). In addition, the global pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges such as disruptions to regular school routines, increased educational inequalities, and the need for innovative approaches to inclusive education (Page et al., 2021). Soldevila-Pérez et al. (2022) comprehensively put forward the challenges faced by inclusive education. It is pointed out that inclusive education and social justice must be a shared commitment, requiring the joint construction of various forms of precise solutions; teacher training needs to be rooted in inclusive education; There is an urgent need to rethink the issues of school innovation, leadership, and educational improvement from the perspectives of inclusivity, fairness, and social justice, supplemented by new and effective evaluation models. And a collaborative approach of classroom, school, family, and community education needed to be adopted.

We must look for proactive ways to advance inclusive education in our own fields in order to address this challenge. Inequitable treatment of various groups of children in school has long been a source of worry, according to Leithwood (2021), which highlights how difficult it has been to find a solution. Regardless of the strategy chosen to increase equity, school administrators and staff have virtually always been at the cutting edge of implementing that strategy. Finding out what school leaders do to improve equity in their schools has been a major area of research for many leadership academics (Leithwood, 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020). In the future, 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. 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 (Billingsley et al., 2018).

One of the effective practices is the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center have been dedicated in developing principal role in inclusive education for about 10 years. In 2017, the CCSSO and CEEDAR announced the *PSEL 2015 and Promoting Principal Leadership for the Success of Students with Disabilities* which proposed Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. This file refers to 10 Standards, including 1) Core values, mission, and vision, 2) Integrity and Professional Standards, 3) Fairness and cultural sensitivity, 4) Instruction, Curriculum, and Evaluation, 5) Student Care and Support Community, 6) Professional Competence of School Staff, 7) Professional Network for Staff and Teachers, 8) Meaningful Community and Family Engagement, 9) Management and Operations, 10) School Improvement (CEEDAR Center, 2017). And other research and practice were conducted by some scholars and organizations (Leithwood & Riehl, 2004; Billingsley, 2005; Billingsley et al., 2018).

However, in fact, insufficiency still exists. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2018) did the policies review through 20 countries around the world and found that less than half have specific policy relating to inclusive school leaders which indicates that some countries still do not attach enough importance to principals' responsibilities in inclusive education. Some scholars conducted qualitative research and found that there are several obstacles to this effort, making it harder than most educators and administrators anticipated to educate students with disabilities in effective inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2018). Such as lack of consensus and consideration of inclusion throughout the school, administrators' decisions without consulting the teachers and without taking into account or being aware of the requirements of the children, negative teacher attitudes influencing, pedagogy and curriculum that are teacher-driven rather than student-driven, and the Insufficient professional support (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Dentith et al., 2013).

There are many valuable achievements on principalship inclusive education experiences around the world through previous research and practice. To continue the theoretical or practical research are very meaningful. Yet, facing the crisis of out of school issue, it is essential to systematically review the previous research and summarize the experiences of principals on inclusive education implementation. This can provide comprehensive references for countries to raise the standard of inclusive education in order to benefit children, adolescents, and youth who fail to set foot in schools or those are at risk of underachievement, marginalization, or exclusion.

Research Objective and Questions

This study's goal is to investigate the principalship experiences and determine required leadership qualities for the principals on embarking inclusive education. The research questions that guide the study are as follows:

- 1) What are the trends and issues of the principalship on inclusive education?
- 2) What are the required leadership qualities on inclusive education implementation?

2. Method

This study used systematic review to answer the research questions and achieve research objectives. Systematic review that gathers and synthesizes data from research that answer a clearly stated question using defined, systematic techniques (Higgins et al., 2023). PRISMA is an evidence-based item to make systematic review report transparent, complete, accurate and valuable. The PRISMA Flow Diagram was applied in this systematic review to clearly depict the phases of data collection and analysis (PRISMA, 2023).

Searching/Identification Procedures

To comprehensively understand the trends and issues of the principalship on Inclusive Education and required leadership qualities on inclusive education implementation, three reputable databases were searched for literature, which are

Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection, Institution of Education Sciences (ERIC), and Scopus.

The main basis for selecting these three databases is because the high quality, broad coverage and profession of literature. The Web of Science (WOS) Core Collect allows users to search the whole citation network and encompasses the top scholarly journals in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences from 1900 to the present. Scopus's content is produced by more than 7000 publications. With 240 fields covered, Scopus offers the largest coverage of any interdisciplinary abstract and citation database. ERIC is professional for education research and information and covers two million education resources most of which are peer reviewed. Thus, to collect the literature from these three databases could ensure the quality and coverage.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Clearly specifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria is critical. Because through the clear criteria, a certain of high-quality literature could be obtained which is the foundation of the credible SLR findings (Pati & Lorusso, 2018). The Inclusive Criteria are as follows:

IC1: All the research articles are published in 2010 to 2023.

IC2: Peer-reviewed cover all the selected articles.

IC3: The language of all articles should be English.

IC4: All the research articles are included in the Journals.

The Exclusive Criteria are also defined:

EC1: The searching results were not including gray literature (non-peer reviewed publications, dissertations, thesis, conference proceedings, etc.).

EC2: The books, book chapters, letters, comments, review, erratum, conference paper, note were excluded.

EC3: Any literature review was excluded from the articles have been found.

EC4: The duplicated records were removed.

EC5: Any unrelated articles were excluded manually.

According to the searching rules of each database and the IC and EC, query strings consisted of keywords were used to do the searching of literature. Searching phases and findings are presented in **Table 1 & Figure 1**.

3. Results

This research adopted PRISMA Flow Diagram to do systematic review analysis. This literature analysis method is more accurate, because the process of literature review can be replicable and verifiable. Through the system literature review, 75 articles are compliant with the Inclusive Criteria and have the strongest relevance to the topic. These articles have been analyzed mainly from some aspects as title, research methods and findings.

4. Discussion

The principals play a major role in inclusive education (Graham & Spandagou,

Table 1. Search strings from Web of Science, Scopus and Eric.

Databases	Keywords used	
Scopus	(TITLE (principal*) AND TITLE (inclusive*)) AND (EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2009) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2008) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2007) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2006) OR EXCLUDE(PUBYEAR, 2001) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 2000) OR EXCLUDE(PUBYEAR, 1998) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 1997) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 1996) OR EXCLUDE (PUBYEAR, 1962)) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE, "ar"))	38 results
WOS core collection	Principal*(Title) and inclusive*(Title)	33 results
ERIC	title: inclusive AND principal pubyear min: 2010	373 results
	Remove duplicate by Endnote and manually.	361 results
	Unrelated records and literature reviews excluded by screening the title and abstract	75 results
Time point	December 31 st , 2023	
Reviewers collected data	Authors	

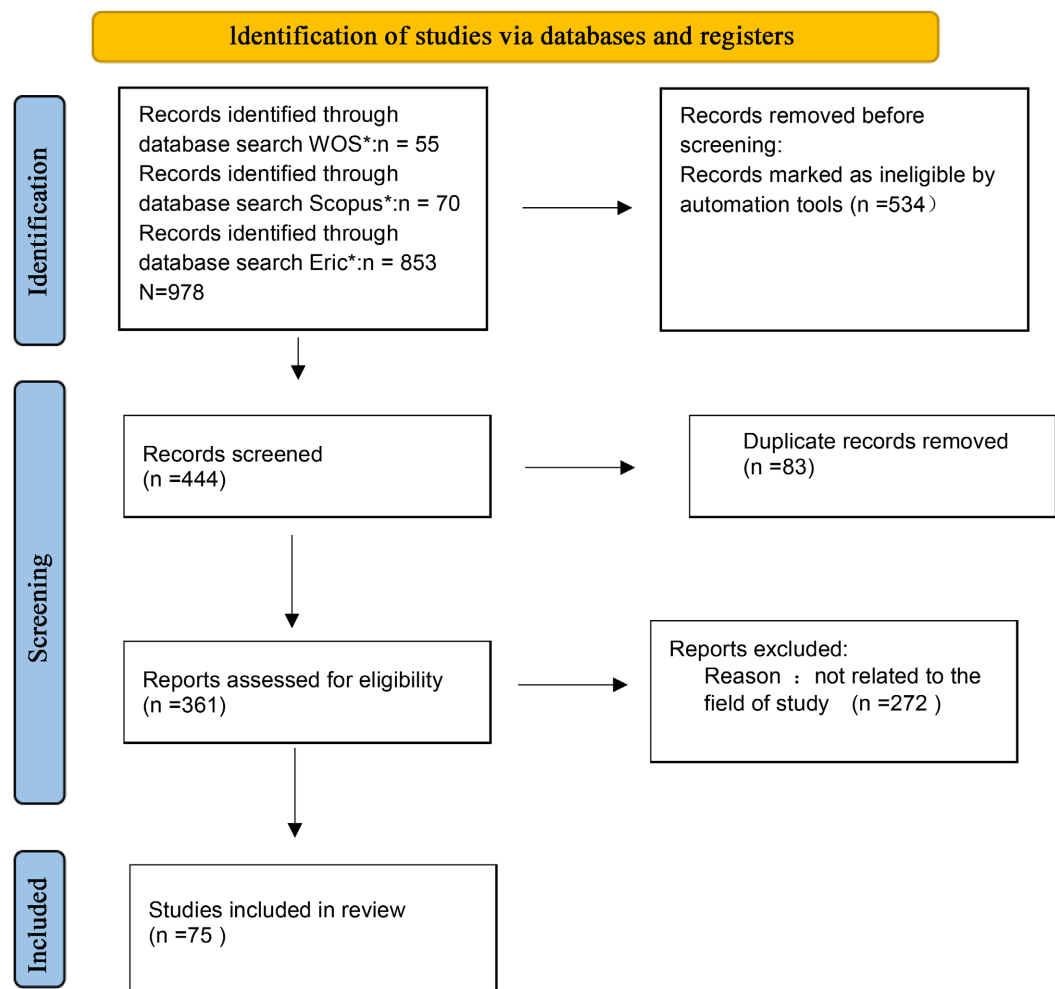


Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram.

2011; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Khaleel et al., 2021; Sider et al., 2017). Principal can promote the implementation of inclusive education from multiple perspectives. Scholars have found that the leadership style of principals has a significant impact on inclusive education, such as transformative and inclusive styles of principals having a positive impact on the implementation of inclusive education (Ainscow, 2015; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Principal can create a supportive environment in schools by advocating inclusive policies and creating an inclusive school culture, making schools value diversity, promote acceptance, and make students feel a sense of belonging (Slee, 2011). The strategic decision-making of the principal, including resource allocation, curriculum adjustment, and support services, is also very important (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Principal can also promote inclusive education by providing teachers with continuous professional development opportunities to strengthen their inclusive teaching practices (Slee, 2011). Inclusive education implementation can also be promoted by cultivating a collaborative culture among faculty, parents, and students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

However, the principals face some challenges and difficulties when carry on inclusive education. Due to lack of sufficient information about inclusion and support, the principals do not have enough preparations for inclusion (Ira, 2015). These directly led to problems with the system of inclusive education schools, such as traditional educational concepts, lack of authority, the insufficient educational culture and setting, students' lack of emotional acceptance, academic and health support, crowded class size, limited professional development, insufficient abilities of school staff and teacher, poor parent/school communication and support and inadequate resources and facilities (Subba et al., 2019). Thus, some students with special needs fill disappointed and leave mainstream schools (Jahnukainen, 2015; Yazicioglu, 2020; Ryan, 2010; Stephenson et al., 2020; Mullick et al., 2012; Poon-McBrayer, 2017; Ira, 2015; Kelly et al., 2014). In addition, sometimes the principals feel lonely from the superiors and decision-makers (Luddeckens et al., 2022). These issues are interconnected and have an impact on each other. As Ryan mentioned that the rapid expanding of students makes it not easy to form inclusive culture. The teachers' misunderstanding of diversity-related issues make they fill difficult to put the concept of inclusive education into practice and involve the community in school activities (Ryan, 2010).

From the personal development perspective, some factors affecting the leadership ability of principals in inclusive education. Some scholars find that there are reasons for the problems that arise when principals implement inclusive education. It is critical that how principals understand inclusive education, which is related to principals' knowledge and beliefs, principals' experience of socialization, special experiences, promotion situation, identity protection, personal technology and community environment (Muresherwa & Jita, 2021; Vlachou & Tsirantonaki, 2023). And the main influence factors include the principals' attitudes, intention and perceived behaviour control, school types, social en-

vironment, educational experience, school culture, caring members, effective guidance, personality and the personal understanding of inclusive education (Khaleel et al., 2021; Schmidt & Venet, 2021; Boyland et al., 2020; Yan & Sin, 2015; DeMatthews, 2015).

From the perspective of external influencing factors, the research found that government and education sector's policies and formal education system have impact on inclusive education. Aligning district goals and procedures with those of school leaders is a significant problem (Shields & Hesbol, 2020; Emam & Alkharusi, 2018). In fact, the principals have ability to influence and improve policy environment and to establish relevant laws and regulations to accommodate unique needs of students (Boyland et al., 2020). They need to make the inclusive education planing, develop and revising the plan according to the condition (DeMatthews, 2021) and redesign the organization for inclusive education (Waldron et al., 2011). For instance, the objective and impartial school self-evaluation is a kind of effective system in inclusive education (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2022; DeMatthews, 2021; Yazicioglu, 2021). And using data as the basis for all decision making (Waldron et al., 2011).

There are some effective strategies of principal in implementing inclusive education. For a fair and just inclusive school, principals basically need to create a common inclusive vision, shared ownership, and decision-making (Jones et al., 2013; Carter & Abawi, 2018; Hands & Freckelton, 2019). And then to create inclusive school setting and culture to prevent discrimination and attacks against special children (Forde et al., 2021; Theoharis, 2010; Okilwa, 2018; Gallagher & Bennett, 2013). So, it is crucial to foster a culture of change-focused cooperation (DeMatthews, 2021). Osiname suggested that principals could establish a positive inclusive environment which make relative individuality feel being respected and inclusive through establishing good relationships and care for others (Osiname, 2016). DeMatthews and Mueller proposed if the knowledgeable leaders will participate in dialogue and build a shared responsibility culture, the students with special needs can obtain better professional skills and gain meaningful life (DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022).

The professional aptitude of a principal in an inclusive school comprises assuming personal responsibility, taking calculated risks, exercising autonomy, and sharing complementing expertise (Larochelle-Audet et al., 2019). And this ability is related to the context and purpose. Loiacono and Palumbo's survey demonstrates that the principals with ABA professional background are more capable of teaching children with autism in inclusive classrooms (Loiacono & Palumbo, 2011). In order to enhance professional abilities, principals need professional training to develop their understanding of inclusive education development (Mohanty & Nanda, 2017; Fitzgerald & Radford, 2022). DeMatthews found that learning leadership knowledge is effective for principals to enhance inclusive education leadership skills (DeMatthews, 2021).

Research had proofed that the principals had a significant impact on teachers' development (Wang & Zhang, 2021). The principals need to support inclusive

teacher development. From a psychological perspective, principal has the responsibility to care about teachers, building trust with teachers and relieve their work pressure. From the personal development perspective, the teachers could get professional development guidance and growth opportunity from principals (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Wanjiru, 2020). And teachers could obtain professional knowledge and skills (Yazicioglu, 2021). DeMatthews stated that distributed leadership could motivate teachers by employing carefully screened candidates, exemplifying an open-door policy and democratic decision-making, modeling these behaviors, participating in democratic decision-making, being highly visible, creating leadership opportunities, engaging in activities with teachers as coworkers, and offering coaching and feedback to teacher leaders (DeMatthews, 2015). As the Waldron et al. mentioned that one of the inclusive school's successes factors comes from the collaborating of principals and teachers (Waldron et al., 2011).

Provide more strong support for special students. The principals have responsibility to foster new meanings about diversity (Okilwa, 2018), protect students from discrimination, infringement and should achieve students' correct understanding of themselves, actively develop (DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022; Boyland et al., 2016). To achieve this goal, the principal firstly can accept the difference of the students (Faas et al., 2018). To find the differences between students with special needs and others and know how to address these complexities (Pollock & Briscoe, 2020). Then rich in love, building trust with each other and attach importance to the students' perspective (Luddeckens et al., 2022). Furthermore, the principal should focus on the performance of disabled students, promote instructional programs (Okilwa, 2018) and provide high-quality instruction (Waldron et al., 2011), provide foundational skills, develop students' social relationship with fellows (Gallagher & Bennett, 2013), give increasing visibility of disabled students in classes and establishing student identity are all essential for principals with students (Sider et al., 2021; DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022; Boyland et al., 2016).

As the scholar said, "key factors include collaboration among key players in the students' education and opportunities for professional development" (Irvine et al., 2010). The principal and teacher are a team and the principal needs to coordinate efforts of teachers, students, and the community for inclusive education (Duncan & Punch, 2021; Andriana & Evans, 2020). Continuously improving communication, coordination skills and promote collaborative practice to demonstrate the importance attached to everyone in inclusive education (Sider et al., 2021; Okilwa, 2018). In order to develop inclusive schools, principals must take into account a variety of elements and make use of a wide array of strategies in the face of resistance and obstacles to significant change (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

Limitation

Some limitations were present in this systematic literature review. The system

literature review is an effective and exact approach which was used by many scholars. However, the articles selected in this research are all English and just from three databases. And all the research articles were published in 2010 to 2023. This makes the selected literature limited and loses some articles in non-English or other databases and time slot. Therefore, future research could analyze more databases and broaden data time to obtain richer research results.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, scholars have mainly studied the difficulties and issues principals' encounter of inclusive education schools and how to enable principals to do a good job in inclusive education. This research mainly adopted qualitative research method as case study, interview et al. and less research using quantitative research methods. Scholars believe that inclusive education principals face difficulties in developing their personal professional abilities and need to be improved through training, learning, and practice. Principals also face external environmental influences, such as government policies, teachers, students, and communication. The principals of inclusive education schools urgently need to have the ability to respect and care for special students. They need to take effective measures to deal with various problems, build a good school environment, leverage teachers' abilities, enable students to learn professional knowledge, feel respected and cared for, and communicate well with the community. Principals of inclusive education schools need to have higher inclusiveness, stronger professionalism, and more effective practical abilities than ordinary school principals.

Overall, scholars have found in their research that principals of inclusive education schools will still face challenges from both personal and external perspectives in the future. The principals are also actively exploring effective methods to build inclusive education schools. Due to the fact that principals' actions differ based on the school setting, future study can undertake empirical research in specific contexts (Szeto & Cheng, 2018) to provide effective experience that other principals can learn from.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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