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Social-Emotional Learning Across Adolescence: A Narrative Review of Cognitive and Human Development Outcomes

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Abstract

Background:

The leadership focus on inclusive classroom practice is linked to belonging, which impacts participation, achievement, well-being and persistence.

Aim:

This is a practical secondary analysis of studies on various kinds of learning communities in the form of school-improvement reports, institutional evaluations, practitioner evidence, and qualitative studies.

Methodology:

Structured extraction, comparison coding, pattern matching and cross-case synthesis were employed to analyze the evidence.

Results:

Six leadership themes were created: moral purpose and direction from equity; inclusive instructional design; family-community partnership; responsive use of evidence; and distributed professional capacity, relational trust and student voice. The analysis showed that as the leaders of these schools provided a focus on participation in addition to placement, belonging increased. Fragmented supports were less effective if classroom operations, discipline and/or adult expectations were exclusionary. Good leaders safeguarded co-planning, lived riskily with cautionary evidence, built teachers' skills and had quick rescue routes in addressing marginalization.

Conclusion:

The paper introduced a framework of applied inclusive leadership from strategic coherence to classroom enactment to relational conditions to continuous improvement as a way of thinking about relating the aspects of inclusive education across different schools.

Keywords

Social-Emotional Learning; Adolescence; Cognitive Development; Emotional Regulation; Student Well-Being; School Engagement

1. Introduction

The inclusive education shifts from being about where someone sits in school to a way of thinking about how someone takes part, is recognized, how they do well and about dignity. Learners who have disabilities, speak different languages, come from many cultures, races, socioeconomic backgrounds, are gendered, practice different religions, have different migration histories, have varying prior attainment levels, have differing family structures, and exhibit unique patterns of neurodevelopment are all expressive of diverse learning communities today (Archambault et al., 2009). The central challenge of leadership is thus not only about ‘how can difference be brought into the classroom and not how to put it out of sight and how not to have low expectations, but how to organize a school such that difference does not mean invisibility, weak participation, little engagement and exclusion from meaningful learning.

Belonging is the feeling someone feels when they belong and feel accepted, respected, known and able to contribute as a legitimate member of a learning community (Aviles et al., 2006). Does not equal comfort or popularity. Belonging can be experienced by students, even in the context of relationships that offer them intellectual challenge and constructive disagreement, when they are trustworthy, expectations are fair, their identities are valued, and support is available without stigma. On the other hand, a student may be “virtually” absent from the classroom environment and be in good attendance and compliance, although he or she feels that way (Barry et al., 2017).

The sense of belonging is an important aspect as it influences how the educational life is perceived. When adults know students and express their confidence that the students will succeed, they are more likely to listen, seek support, persevere despite failure and view feedback as developmental (Dowling & Barry, 2020). Learning contexts that are perceived as causing embarrassment, stereotyping, or rejection may have the effect of making pupils narrow their possibilities, taking no risks and/or silo mentality defenses, or simply plaintively resisting. The behaviors are often confused as Christians being unmotivated when they are, in truth, sensible responses to life circumstances of exclusion (Eriksen et al., 2025).

Commonly, inclusive classroom practices are called “teacher-level strategies,” which include a variety of differentiated instruction, accessible resources, cooperative learning, flexible grouping, or multimodal assessment. While these practices are important, they are dependent on leadership to be sustainable. The timing of the timetable is crucial to enabling teachers to work together (Eriksen & Bru, 2023). Specialist skills are linked to the rooms with staffing decisions. Valuing or not valuing of adaptation is dependent on the accountability priorities. The disciplinary apparatus expresses the legitimate behavior and identity. Thus, leadership has a significant influence on the context of inclusive pedagogy, in which it is either carried out in normal use or still relies on the goodwill of individuals.

Educational leadership also has an impact on how the frames of diversity are made. Deficit Leadership identifies a challenge in a student, and asks what could be done to repair or manage the student. Equity-centre leadership is about exploring the interplay between learner characteristics, the curriculum, pedagogy, relationships, institutional rules and resource distribution. This change does not “rule out individual needs.” It poses the questions of whether barriers are required and if there is organized support with dignity maintained, challenge and participation (Fuentealba-Urra et al., 2026).

This present study used applied secondary analysis to analyze the support of inclusive classrooms and inclusive student belonging provided by educational leaders. It dealt with four questions.

- **RQ1:** What leadership activities were most

consistently related to inclusion and belonging?

- **RQ2:** How was the enactment in the classrooms influenced by the school-level decisions?
- **RQ3:** Which barriers to implementation hindered other potentially strong practices?
- **RQ4:** What would be a framework for improvement that could lead leaders' inclusive values to become part of the accepted way of doing business within an organization?

The paper proclaimed that isolation in pastoral activity was not a replicative catalyst for bringing about belonging. It was developed from the strategic alignment of the following: strategy, instructional design, adult learning, student voice, support systems, family partnership, and evidence use. Leaders' efforts towards inclusion were successful when they viewed this as an essential element rather than a specialist service for particular pupils.

2. Developmental and Conceptual Foundations

Analysis included educational leadership, inclusive pedagogy and organizational improvement perspectives. Leadership was defined as the influence process that led to the organization of direction relationships, Resources, Routines and Accountability (Grové & Laletas, 2020). It encompassed both formal and teacher leadership, specialists, support personnel, students and community partners. This view was distributed one that did not enable a single principal to be accountable for all classroom activities. The definition of inclusion was gained through the parameters; access, participation, achievement, recognition, and influence. Engage with relevant entries to curriculum, areas, resources and assistance. Participation was meaningful and not only 'showing up' (Grové & Laletas, 2020). The areas of achievement were academic progress and broader achievement. Recognition related to treating identities and contributions with respect. Influence stemmed from the question of whether or not students could have an impact on decisions which impacted their learning. A school might be doing a good job on one aspect but not on another.

Belonging was viewed from a relationship and an institutional perspective. Relational level: backed with trust, care, fairness and reciprocity. At a teacher

level, it was supported by challenging work, clear and equitable ways to participate and clear progress (Hachem, 2025). At the level of the institutions, the influence was from the disciplinary policy, grouping, the transitions, representation and resource allocation. Being part of a group to which one belonged was bound to involve more than a positive teacher personality.

Inclusive pedagogy referred to a continuous approach of extending rich learning opportunities for all and ensuring a responsive support. This was different from the strategies that reduced challenge or separated students for lower levels of difficulty when they were struggling (Jansen & Kiefer, 2020). The core practices were: good explanations; multiple representations; multiple modes of response; purposeful collaboration; scaffolder independence; ongoing assessment and formative feedback; and using evidence to modify instruction. It was not about the same activity; it was about equal access to valued learning.

Applied leadership research focuses upon 'useful knowledge' that is gained in relation to engaging systemically with practice. Thus, the present review was directed towards the mechanism and the decision-making of its implementation. It questioned not just the apparent usefulness of a strategy, but how leaders dealt with implementing a strategy, what conditions were necessary, where they broke down, and how you could keep track of whether it was making progress (Lazarus et al., 2021). This orientation characterized schools as complex adaptive systems where the interplay between policy, culture, instruction and relationships shaped this process.

Three principles of interpretation regarding leadership were used: Firstly, moral purpose forced leaders to make inclusion a Right and not an 'initiative'. Second, strategic coherence demanded policy, professional learning, staffing, and evidence for the same goals for coherence. Thirdly, the organization was to become more inclusive and adults and learners were expected to play their part. It was impossible to point to individual teachers/individual marginalized learners as a cause of responsibility.

3. Methodology

The study was carried out in a qualitative, secondary

analysis manner with an applied approach. This design was chosen since the research problem was related to patterns of educational leadership, classroom practice, institutional evaluation and student experiences. The aim was to develop action-oriented, as opposed to a statistically summarized, explanation.

A purposive evidence corpus comprised of school-improvement reports, district and institutional evaluation materials, practitioner inquiries, qualitative and mixed-method studies, implementation accounts, and documented teacher-, student-, and/or family-statements was collected. Materials were kept if they provided information on leadership action related to inclusive classroom, participation, belonging, engagement or equitable support. Evidence was drawn out when it either talked about diversity at the policy level only and did not have implications in the classroom, or spoke of individual activities and didn't provide evidence of implementation in the classroom, or viewed placement as evidence of inclusion.

The corpus comprised elementary and secondary schools and focused on patterns that can be applied across a variety of learning opportunities. Evidence was coded according to context, level of leadership, type of student, type of instruction, state of implementation, belonging measure, and outcome reported. It was not assumed that a consistent terminology was used by all school systems. The terms 'inclusion', 'equity', 'participation', 'connectedness', 'climate' and 'belonging' were translated based on the mechanisms conveyed.

Analysis was done in four steps. Firstly, relevant segments were drawn off into a structured matrix. Secondly, open codes were produced for the themes

of moral purpose, expectations, access to curriculum, universal design, differentiation, grouping, student voice, relational trust, professional learning, distributed leadership, family partnership, discipline, transitions, the use of data and resource allocation. Thirdly, the pattern matching of the code was carried out between the cases. For recurring outcomes, contextual variations and contradictory evidence, strategies were examined. Fourth, themes were incorporated into a leadership application and a tie from strategic condition, to classroom enactment, to experiences related to the other experiences, to feedback on improvement.

The six resulting themes are a direction for equity, inclusive instructional design, relational trust and student voice, extended professional capacity, evidence-driven and responsive intervention and family/community partnership. Figure out what negative numbers are. For instance, leaders on occasion used inclusive language but had very strict grouping, an inaccessible curriculum, or a disciplinarian approach. Awareness was occasionally raised, but action was not taken due to the lack or absence of planning time, coaching and follow-up.

The themes were supported by an audit trail linking them to coded mechanisms, a comparison of data from the various stakeholder perspectives and a consideration of disconfirming or disconfirmable data. The results between the reported and interpreted were separated from each other. As the evidence was taken from public secondary data and not identifiable to the participants, there was no need for any participants to be recruited or for any personal data to be gathered. It was therefore not necessary to obtain ethical approval.

Table 1. Narrative-review design, evidence boundaries, and interpretive safeguards

Element	Specification	Analytical contribution
Review design	Narrative review and qualitative secondary analysis	Supported interpretation across developmental psychology, education, youth studies, and school improvement.
Evidence boundary	Reviews, empirical studies, programme evaluations, institutional reports, and documented adolescent or educator perspectives	Included evidence concerning learners approximately eleven to nineteen years old.

Outcome domains	Executive functioning, emotional regulation, identity, agency, empathy, relationships, motivation, engagement, and well-being	Connected cognitive and human development rather than treating them as separate systems.
Analytical process	Structured extraction, open coding, comparative analysis, thematic grouping, and framework development	Preserved positive, mixed, null, and adverse findings.
Implementation factors	Duration, facilitator preparation, leadership, student voice, cultural adaptation, dosage, and whole-school coherence	Explained contextual variation beyond programme labels.
Interpretive safeguards	Reflexive separation of programme claims, observed evidence, measurement limits, and institutional conditions	Reduced overgeneralization and avoided equating compliance with development.

4. Findings

4.1 Executive functioning and self-regulation

Inclusion was either a central part of the teaching or 'extra' help based on direction given by leadership. Strong leadership messaging recognized that challenging learning for all pupils, their recognition and participation would be allowed. They linked inclusion to quality of teaching instead of a specialist department, school improvement, and safeguarding, and to achievement.

Moral purpose was put into action when values were translated into decisions by leaders. They looked at the learners who had access to advanced work, extra-curricular activities, leadership and class discussions. They reviewed those who were considered to be a nuisance, who had received most of their families' attention because of disturbances and who were frequently being removed from regular classes. This investigation put exclusion in the spotlight, where it was once not visible in seemingly neutral routines (Liew et al., 2019).

It's not enough to make symbolic statements. Inclusive

mission language was sometimes used by schools with practices that demonstrated low expectations. Students detected occurrences of celebration events and daily grouping, discipline, representation or adult language contrary to each other. Leaders were also increasing their credibility, acknowledging gap areas, making their decisions openly and being prepared to change the established practice.

4.2 Emotional awareness, coping, and well-being

The best cases used inclusive pedagogy as a unified pedagogy. Leaders reinforced clear learning goals, multiple representations, scaffolding, grouping of students, availability of technology and multiple means. These practices made it less necessary to rely on retrospective accommodation as there was an expectation that there would be variation in planning. The strengthening of belonging in situations of adaptation was the creation of the same absent valued intellectual products. Students' experiences of reduced access to challenging work, isolation from talking with their peers, and criticisms primarily related to their behavior, signaled that they were

marginalized. More open and enabling supports allowed for more participation, independence and insightful contribution (Martinez & Gomez, 2024).

Leaders supported enactment in the following ways: curriculum review, observation protocols, coaching, and allocating planning time for enactment. Systems of observation and also those that emphasized only 'pacency' or 'compliance of silence' did not foster a spirit of experimentation. More useful review thought about who spoke, who waited, who had challenging questions, how they were fed back and if the materials included varying identities but with no tokenism.

The results of flexible grouping were varied. Short-term grouping to address immediate (current) learning needs may be effective in providing targeted instruction. Permanent or visible (tentative) grouping can serve to reinforce status, limit curriculum and undermine a sense of belonging. When leading, effective leaders need a group to be open, evidence-based and aligned with ambitious visions or goals.

4.3 Identity, agency, and purpose

Relational trust was found to be strongly related to belonging. Students had to have proof that when things were tough, the adults listened, treated them fairly, respected their dignity, and were available. Consistent follow-through, respectful communication, correct use of the student's name, showing interest in the student's life and responding to behavior without focus on identity facilitated development of trust (Morrish et al., 2018).

Students' contributions positively influenced the leadership precision. Dialogue and focus groups, classroom consultation, and student-led inquiry proved helpful to the survey in uncovering mechanisms behind the data. Students were able to recognize "routines that weren't openly available or accessible," "assumptions that may or may not have been unbiased," "spaces that may or may not have been safe", and finally "routines in which they might not have actively participated.

Voice was meaningful when it had an impact on decisions. When the leaders conducted symbolic consultation, that is, they took the views without any explanation or response, then trust was also weakened. The practice was stronger in the feedback

loops with consideration of what changed, what could not be changed and why. Besides this, students engaged in co-creating guidelines, reviewing curriculum documents, peer mentoring and assessing transitions (Nelson et al., 2020).

There were no boundaries in the relational approaches, nor was there an ending. Pupils appreciated the clear and consistent expectations. Inclusionary discipline practices (restorative conversations and proportionate consequences, and/or opportunities for repair) were more effective at supporting belonging, as compared to exclusionary discipline practices. Leaders reinforced consistency through analyzing patterns of discipline and developed strategies to support adults to respond in a nonhumiliating manner.

4.4 Empathy, relationships, and school belonging

Many adults were required to have knowledge and confidence in inclusive leadership. Good schools shared leadership - of each classroom teacher, special educators, language specialists, counselling staff, teaching assistants and community staff. There was a clear passing of roles, so no two-thumb typing and effective collaboration in problem-solving was possible.

Highly effective professional learning was continued, hands-on and related to actual students. There was an increase in terminology as a result of one-off workshops, but a change in complex instruction was seldom achieved. Application was supported by coaching and collaborative planning, lesson study, peer observation and case review. Staff had to review evidence, come up with adaptations and consider if support resulted in greater participation (Nelson et al., 2020).

It was found that specialist skills were best when they were integrated into normal classrooms. Having to withdraw was still helpful for specific use, but too much resulted in broken learning and a broken relationship. Co-planning and co-teaching allowed for the incorporation of expertise, but without shared expectations or protected co-planning time, this would not have been possible.

Staff's level of psychological safety was impacted by leader behavior. Observation was developmental and not punitive; that made teachers more willing

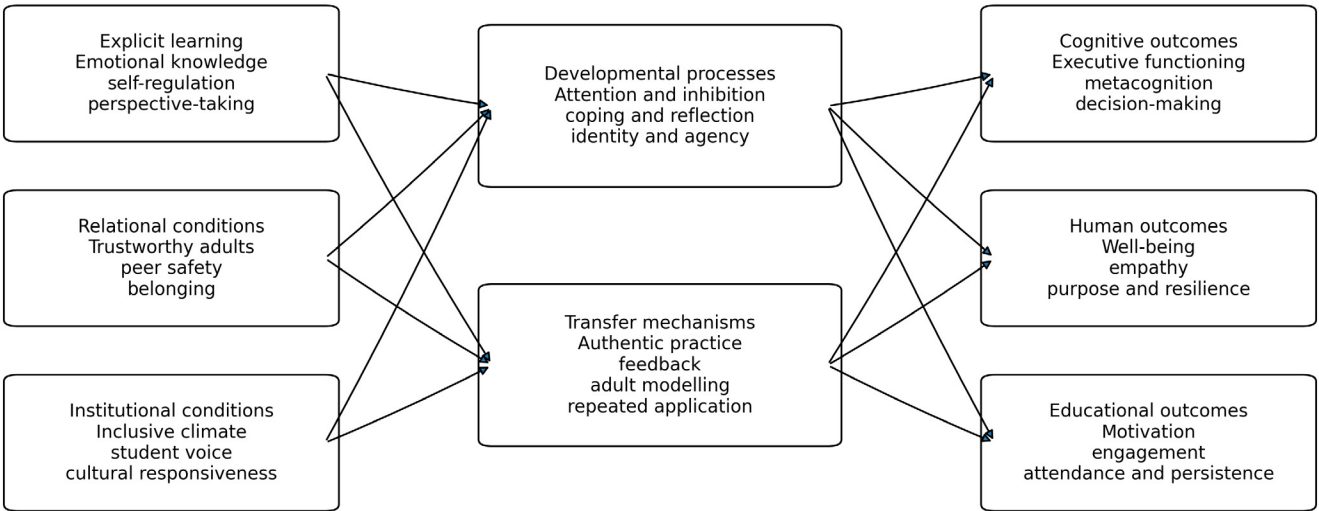
to share their uncertainty and try new things. The leaders needed to learn how to differentiate accountable practice from perfection in order to carry out inclusive improvement. Staff had no alternative but to fail early students and be entrusted with the authority to do so.

4.5 Motivation, academic engagement, and learning

Good leaders use evidence to detect patterns that are a basis for support, not to provide a simplistic ranking of students and/or teachers. Examples of evidence cited were: achievement, attendance, participation, motivating not to fail, disciplinary referrals, belonging surveys, student work, observation, help-seeking, family feedback, and access to enrichment. There was no one measure that was representative of inclusion. While appropriate, disaggregation needed to be taken care of. This variation and categorization by disability, language, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic position or other characteristics may show inequity or may

mask variation and perpetuate stereotypes. Leaders used a mix of quantitative patterns and verified them through conversation and context (Oberle, 2018). The earlier intervention, which focused on barriers prior to identifying deficits within students, was most effective. Teams explored the questions of how understandable instructions were, how secure relationships were, how accessible materials were, how attendance was supported and whether the assessment was flexible. Then a plan was developed to support the learner’s needs along with the environmental considerations.

Data systems can be exclusionary when they focus on deficits and thresholds. The needs of students at risk of falling below the benchmarks were met, but other students were invisible. Enhanced systems observed growth, participation and reaction to supporting systems. Named actions, responsible adults, timelines and follow-up evidence were produced at the end of review meetings.



Skills, relationships, authentic practice, and equitable conditions jointly shaped adolescent development.

Figure 1. Integrated pathway linking social-emotional learning conditions with adolescent cognitive, human, and educational outcomes.

4.6 Developmental equity and contextual variation

Families possessed knowledge about communication, culture, strengths, stress factors, and their experience with school. Inclusive leaders had approaches where they saw this knowledge as evidence, not as interference. Communication was readily available, multilingual as needed, respectful of other people’s

time, and was not solely related to crises, which had a positive impact on partnership. If a parent was concerned about their child’s transition, they may have encountered no response from a school, or the response may have been: “There is no issue, it is just the way that works. Some schools might not have investigated issues regarding travel, work,

online access, disability or past discrimination from a parent when they raised concerns about how well their child was transitioning to the school. Flexible meeting formats, meeting in communities, meeting interpretation and positive proactive contact increased participation (Pedrini et al., 2022).

Mentoring, cultural knowledge, health support, enrichment and transition pathways were provided by community organizations. Goals and responsibilities were very clearly stated in the partnerships that are strongest. There was erosion in trust because of the lack of long-term projects.

Leaders also safeguarded families against deficit narratives. Low aspiration was in no way associated with poverty, being a difference in language or with participation in nontraditional ways. Things started with good engagement based on strengths and problem-solving.

4.7 Implementation conditions and sustainability

These positive leadership behaviors were mutually strengthening in improving belonging. Appropriate discipline, communication, or access to segregated support and/or accountability which focused on narrow achievement undermined inclusive pedagogy.

Aligned curriculum, professional learning/supports, student voice and family partnership, however, had cumulative effects.

Students had moments of coherence such as entry routine, feedback, group work, transitions, celebrations, assessment and addressing conflict. Therefore, the sense of belonging was created repeatedly and not as part of one program.

These findings from the cross-case synthesis showed that leadership had four pathways that influenced belonging. Entitlement and priorities are taken from the strategic direction. There was time, expertise, and access due to organizational conditions. Participation and challenge were influenced by classroom activities. The relational feedback indicated students' awareness of being recognized and having an impact on the community.

The pathways needed to be integrated into policy, induction, budgeting, evaluation, and succession in order to be sustainable. Changes related to one strong individual leader faltered when being passed on. The continuity was safeguarded by distributed ownership and in a documented routine.

Table 2. Developmental outcomes, enabling mechanisms, and implementation risks

Domain	Developmental outcomes	Enabling mechanisms	Principal risks
Executive functioning	Planning, inhibition, attention, metacognition, reflective choice	Authentic practice, clear routines, feedback, gradual complexity	Overresponsibilizing students for institutional stress
Emotional development	Emotional differentiation, coping flexibility, help-seeking, recovery	Psychological safety, optional disclosure, strategy choice	Compulsory sharing, suppression, culturally detached calming routines
Identity and agency	Values, self-concept, purpose, leadership, future orientation	Student voice, consequential participation, diverse pathways	Imposed identities, symbolic consultation, rigid scripts
Empathy and relationships	Perspective-taking, listening, conflict resolution, and belonging	Adult modelling, peer safety, repeated collaboration	Status hierarchies, superficial perspective-taking, punitive discipline

Academic engagement	Goal setting, persistence, attendance, task initiation, help-seeking	Curriculum integration, mastery feedback, transfer prompts	Competing instructional time and accountability-driven delivery
Developmental equity	Inclusive participation, dignity, cultural recognition, accessible expression	Co-design, multiple participation modes, contextual interpretation	Dominant emotional norms, masking, and under-resourced implementation
Sustainability	Long-term coherence and transfer across school settings	Leadership, staff development, alignment with safeguarding and curriculum	Initiative overload, staff turnover, and fragmented measurement

5. Discussion

The results indicated that inclusive classroom practice was related to an organizational achievement. Inclusion was put in place by teachers (however, leadership affected teachers' coherent expectations, planning time, specialist access, evidence that was used/understood and psychological safety). This finding questioned the views that primarily impute the differences to the attitude of individual teachers. Belonging came home as a result and as a way. When belonging was made apparent through participation, it increased and when students felt recognized they participated more. Leadership solutions required for this reason were to establish multiple opportunities for agency, success and repair of the relationship. However, with pupils isolating from challenging tasks and decision making, it was not possible to secure their sense of belonging (Pranowo et al., 2026).

The analysis also streamlined the understanding of and connection between universal and targeted support. The Universal Design decreased the foreseeable limitations and enhanced the involvement of many students. Targeted support was still needed if there were specific and/or intensive needs. One of the most important leadership challenges was to link specific actions, such as targeted support, with the status quo of mainstream classroom membership and to avoid a connection between straining for skills and separating people.

Interpretive discipline was necessary in the process of data use when it came to equity. Patterns of

disaggregation might show some exclusions, but they weren't able to explain causes. Leaders had to factor in data alongside their pupils', parents', and staff understanding. This gave an opportunity to create a data source without being considered infallible or a flawed data source that was discarded (Qi et al., 2025).

Inclusion transcended professional boundaries; as a result, there was distributed leadership that helped with the implementation. But there were a number of issues with distribution that lacked coordination, which led to fragmentation. Leaders required common principles, clearly defined responsibilities and processes for their decision-making. Where there was widespread sharing of expertise, formal leaders continued to be accountable for resource allocation and leadership.

The other big finding of the study was that of joint accountability. Leaders would be held accountable for time, staffing, coaching, accessible systems and policy alignment of inclusive learning, while teachers would be expected to design inclusive learning. The adults were responsible for dignity, fairness, and opportunities for meaning and the students for constructive participation. As was previously noted, although families were encouraged to participate, certain barriers to participation must be removed, and the responsibility of the schools falls on this matter (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010).

Applied research-partnered with connecting the

evidence to decisions for improvement. Leadership strategies would only be important if not only did they seem viable and promising, but if they also could be implemented, monitored, modified, and continued. It was the contextual learning where small tests and feedback were seen as promoting change without any forfeiture of strategic direction, and also cross-role questioning was considered important.

One of the key findings was that policy should go beyond placement to an experience of inclusion. The data of enrollment might reveal physical inclusion, and the data of belonging might indicate student's sense of belonging in the community. Achievement data was important, but interpretation required participation, relational, and an access indicator. This broader picture of evidence resulted in a more defensible telling of school quality (Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013).

Lastly, inclusive leadership needs to take care of power. There was nothing neutral about decisions about what was normal behavior and, valuable knowledge and ability and how families were going to be engaged. Leaders' actions of injecting belonging were further enhanced by establishing and providing structured opportunities to challenge these assumptions and redistribute power to those most impacted by these assumptions.

There were implications beyond the implementation of a checklist of inclusive practices. Leaders required an explicit theory of action that demonstrated the ways in which they expected decisions made at the organizational level to change how students were engaged in classroom learning and their classroom experience (Van Pham, 2024). For instance, protected co-planning time was only enlightened with teams when they used it to consider barriers, structure a collective reaction, and analyze demonstration of involvement. Student voice structures could be of value only if information was provided to decision makers, and there was associated evidence of action. Coaching, practice and feedback in relation to actual classrooms were especially helpful forms of PD. This logic led leaders to look at the management mechanisms and not await the results of outcomes every year (Yang et al., 2018).

A second aspect of the applied approach was to distinguish technical problems from adaptive

challenges, a process that leaders first fulfil a leadership role as needed and then gain consensus on the technical components. While the shortage of accessible resources might be addressed in the procurements, barriers regarding beliefs and understandings of ability, behavior, or family commitment need dialogue, reflection, and power change. There was superficial compliance with the challenges encountered in the schools as "technical" problems. In contrast, action-oriented culturally competent decision-making was deferred by universalistic discussion of all problems. Successful leaders were able to remove obstacles and perpetually interrogate the assumptions and relationships (Yin et al., 2023).

Work was undertaken for improvement, with the scope being very manageable. When schools initiated numerous uncoordinated activities, fatigue and varying terminology were generated. More credible implementation featured a few high-leverage routines, including asking inclusive questions, different ways of responding, relational check-ins, and ways of quickly checking in on concerns about participation. Leaders then used what they had learned to analyze which aspects differed from classroom to classroom, what conditions enabled which aspects to be successful and how they could adjust support. Scaling was only based upon demonstration of learning and not for enthusiasm (Zhang, 2026).

The model also suggested that evidence of conditions created for others should be part of the evaluation of the leader and others. Traditional assessment did tend to focus on plans, compliance and/or overall outcomes. Inclusive leadership involved a focus on safe collaborative staffing, student voice in decision-making, family access to communication, and access to resources in classrooms where there were likely the highest barriers. This kind of evidence brought leadership accountability to reality.

Lastly, belonging needs to be taken into account at all transitions: entrance, inter-grades, after absence, placement change, disciplinary re-entry, and transition to next steps into college and career. Relationships were broken down, and pupils were faced with new expectations thanks to the transition. Leaders who had made arrangements to keep pupils informed, who had made themselves available as

adults who could keep them informed, peer informed, and offer access to the curriculum, reduced the risk of pupils becoming invisible, just when they need to

be visible. These transitions ensured maintenance of confidence, continuity, safety and momentum in learning.

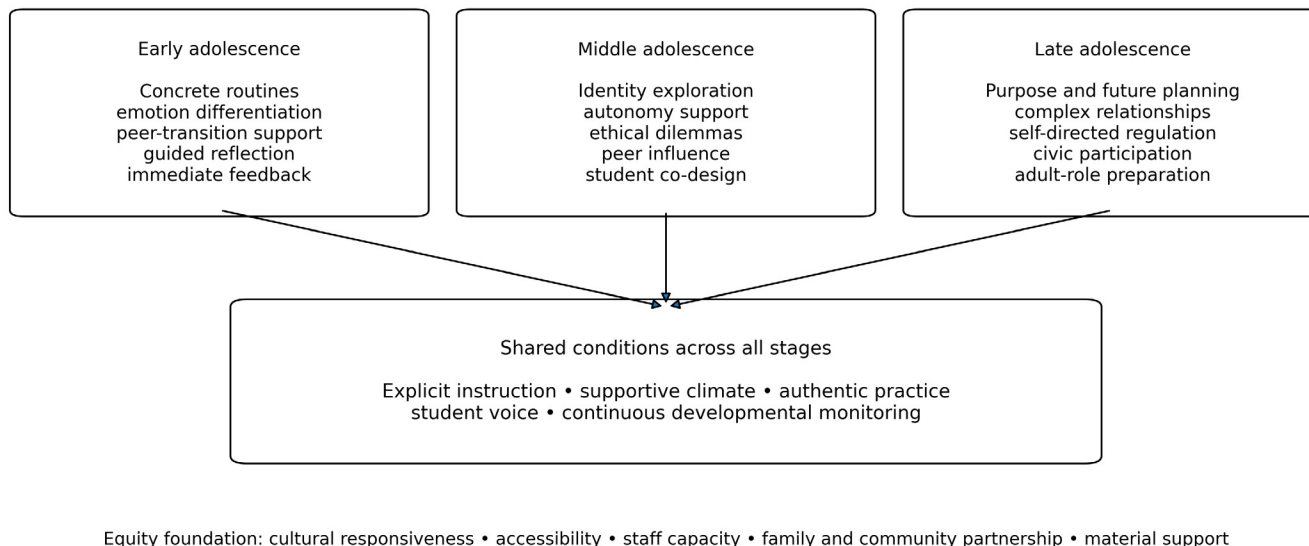


Figure 2. Stage-responsive social-emotional learning framework for early, middle, and late adolescence

6. Stage-Responsive Practice and Policy Framework

The synthesis and yields revealed a five-domain framework for educational leadership and applied improvement. Equity-focused direction was the first domain, where equity is key, and leaders need to make inclusion and belonging central outcomes, make some rights non-negotiable, and tie goals to resource levels.

Inclusive instructional infrastructure included curriculum access, flexible pedagogy, observations of participation and challenge to thinking, collaborative planning, and specialist integration. Leaders should consider if adaptations are allowed to extend learning or if that was moved as a result of the adaptation.

The third domain, relational and participatory culture, entailed having trusted adults, fair discipline, and voice from students, along with recognition of identity and transparent feedback. All pupils need to be assured a streamlined system to voice their concerns and help drive improvements.

Professional and community capacity was required for the 4th domain and was achieved by ensuring that adult learning was sustained, expertise was

distributed, families participated, and communities expanded. Time, role clarity, coaching and induction are all ways to take care of capacity.

It took multiple indicators, disaggregated review, early intervention, and multiple tests on an iterative basis for the fifth domain of evidence-informed adaptation. Evidence should be used as a barrier identifier, for response monitoring and learning, and not focused on blame.

Applications of it must be done by an applied cycle. Leaders made a first-round diagnosis of participation and belonging patterns. Then they co-designed the same change with students, staff and families for an appropriate scope of change. Teams implemented the change, gathered evidence, determined evidence of variation, and made the decision to increase, stretch or abandon the change. This cycle linked strategic aspirations to disciplined, locally delivered learning.

Key to prioritize were the participation audit, the map with students' access to trusted adults or enrichment, the analysis of disciplinary disproportionality, the protection of collaborative planning, and a student advisory mechanism with formal answers. Professional evaluation should also be looked at to see if the reward was given for inclusive experimentation.

Progress indicators should include achievement, attendance, discipline, engagement in the classroom, as well as belonging, family trust and access to challenge and support. Improvement should be measured by trends and getting experience in subgroups, instead of one overall score.

Table 3. Implementation roadmap for equitable and sustainable adolescent social-emotional learning

Stage	Required action	Monitoring evidence
Diagnose	Map developmental needs, school climate, student concerns, inequalities, and existing provision	Needs profile, climate evidence; accessibility review.
Co-design	Involve adolescents, educators, families, specialists, and community partners in adaptation.	Participation diversity; documented design changes
Prepare	Develop facilitator competence, relational practice, cultural responsiveness, and referral pathways.	Training completion; staff confidence; support protocols
Deliver	Use sequenced instruction, authentic practice, multiple participation modes, and developmental differentiation.	Dosage, participation quality, implementation fidelity and adaptation
Integrate	Connect SEL with curriculum, mentoring, behaviour, safeguarding, inclusion, and staff well-being.	Cross-policy alignment; reduced initiative duplication
Monitor	Combine student reflection, observation, climate indicators, participation patterns, and developmental evidence.	Multiple-source evidence; no personality ranking
Review	Use findings to improve context, resources, practice, and programme fit	Responsive adjustments; subgroup outcome review
Sustain	Protect staffing, leadership attention, student voice, and community partnership over time.	Continuity, staff retention, student trust, and long-term transfer

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study was a heterogeneous secondary study that did not pool effects. There were a variety of contexts, leadership, definitions and measures. In the SYNTHESIS, mechanisms and application of principles, but no universal causal claims were identified.

Those students and families who were most tightly-knit with schools may have been underrepresented, and initiatives that had a positive result were more likely to be publicly reported. There was also variation in the way that institutional reporting was conducted in terms of methodological transparency. The analysis, therefore, focused on notions of convergence and contradiction and not what is said at face value.

Future research is needed to explore longitudinal connections between leadership practice, belonging, and participation in the classroom and student achievement. More focus is needed on intersectional experience, greater under-resourced and rural contexts, in addition to the succession of leadership and the impact of digital learning environments. Applied studies are to examine the comparative sequences of implementation as well as record the cost, workload and unintended consequences of implementing them.

Engagement of students, families and support staff in creating belonging measures could validate the measures and identify barriers that key stakeholders may not be aware of. Research should also focus on the timing of such provision as might facilitate

inclusion or create separation.

8. Conclusion

Educational leadership in terms of strategy, organization, pedagogy, relationships, and use of evidence influenced inclusive classroom practice and student belonging. The secondary analysis revealed that while there were some impacts of isolated accommodation within exclusionary wider systems, there was limited change.

Good leaders created a vision focused on equity, an inclusive professional learning system, relational trust and a shared professional learning space, applied data with mindfulness, and involved families and community. Belonging increased when students faced challenging learning, fair treatment, identity recognition, trusted adults and had genuine influence. Therefore, inclusion was deployed as an ongoing process of organizational learning, based on a framework applied. Leaders identified challenges and co-designed changes, tested changes, and integrated effective changes into practice. In doing so, it linked moral intent and purpose to the practice of discipline-driven enhancement.

Students didn't have to be more alike in diverse learning communities. They called for schools to be more prepared on how to deal with variation, break down unnecessary barriers and maintain participation meaningfully. Hence, educational leadership became focused on making a sense of belonging an actual reality in the institution and not a statement of intent.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions

Alison Sanchez

Alison Sanchez conceptualized the study, formulated the review objectives and research questions, designed the methodological framework, supervised the qualitative secondary analysis, interpreted the findings, developed the conceptual framework, and prepared the initial manuscript draft.

Lisa Moshontz

Lisa Moshontz conducted the literature screening and evidence extraction, organized and coded the reviewed studies, contributed to data synthesis and

thematic refinement, critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content, verified references and formatting, and approved the final version for publication.

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The author declares no competing interests influencing the review design, analysis, interpretation, or reported conclusions.

Data availability:

No primary dataset was generated; the analytical framework and narrative synthesis are reported herein.

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