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Inclusive Classroom Practices and Student Belonging: Educational Leadership Strategies for Diverse Learning Communities

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Abstract

Background:

Participation, achievement, well-being, and persistence are all key issues related to inclusive classroom practice because belonging matters.

Methodology:

This applied secondary analysis involved an examination of the school-improvement reports and institutional evaluations, as well as practitioner evidence and qualitative studies focused on different forms of learning communities. The data was analyzed using structured extraction, comparative coding, pattern matching and cross-case synthesis.

Findings:

These six themes were identified as leadership: moral purpose and direction through equity focus; inclusive instructional design; relational trust and student voice; distributed professional capacity; abuse of evidence; and family community partnership. Analysis revealed that the sense of belonging increased if leaders linked policy, pedagogy, staffing, support systems and accountability to participation and to exclude only placement. De-segregation of accommodation settings was counterproductive if school practices and/or adult expectations were exclusionary. Good leaders safeguarded cooperative planning, introduced the disaggregated evidence with prudence, built up teachers' capacity, and put in place a quick response to marginalisation.

Conclusion:

The paper put forward the idea of a strategic coherence-classroom enactment–

relational conditions—continuous improvement applied inclusive-leadership framework, which could be applicable to different types of schools.

Keywords

Inclusive Education; Student Belonging; Educational Leadership; Inclusive Pedagogy; Distributed Leadership; School Improvement

1. Introduction

The concept of Inclusive Education has shifted focus from being about getting a child into a school to one that's about participation, Recognition, achievement and dignity. In today's diverse learning communities, students are predicting that persons with disabilities, multilingual learners, students of various cultures and backgrounds and of different race or economic status, and males, females, and students of mixed family, and with migration or prior attainment histories, and varying patterns of neurodevelopment and with various faiths and beliefs, constitute the new norm (Adams et al., 2023). Yet the central leadership challenge doesn't just pertain to the issue of finding space for difference in classrooms as they currently stand; rather, it is one of organizing schools and classrooms such that difference does not equate with erasure, low expectations, limited engagement, or disengagement from valued learning opportunities.

A lens to this challenge is a sense of belonging from a student perspective. Belonging is the feeling of being accepted, respected, known and included to contribute in a learning community (Adams et al., 2023). It doesn't mean nature or favorability. Belonging does not exclude relationships that are trustworthy, expectations that are fair, identities that are respected, and support that is readily available without stigma, as these factors can lead to intellectual challenge and constructive disagreement. On the other hand, students can physically be in school and in good attendance, and academically conform, but actually feel like they don't belong in class (Alier, 2025).

Belonging is important as this influences how educational experiences are understood. Students

are more likely to participate, seek help, persist when making errors and see feedback as developmental when they feel adults are familiar with them and have high expectations for their success. Those students who fear humiliation, stereotyping or rejection may withdraw, not take risks or find ways to protect themselves by remaining silent and resisting. Such behavior is frequently regarded as a lack of motivation when, in fact, it is sensible reactions to exclusionary situations (Assefa & Mujtaba, 2025).

The care of a teacher by incorporating differentiated instruction, accessible resources, cooperative learning, flexible grouping, and/or multimodal assessment is often referred to as teacher-level practices and is a prime example of inclusive classroom practices (Bhargava & Sneha, 2026). These practices are very valuable, but if they're not led, they're not sustainable. Timetables are the deciding factor in whether teachers are able to collaborate. All decisions on staffing have an impact on whether specialist expertise is delivered to classrooms. Whether adaptation is valued or seen as deviation depends on priorities in accountability (Carrington et al., 2024). The disciplinary regimes make the distinction between legitimate behaviors and legitimate identities. Leadership thus influences the culture and climate of inclusive pedagogy, either normalizing or promoting goodwill.

It is also important to consider how diversity is discursive as a result of leadership in education. Deficit-oriented leadership, the errors are in students, and the question that deficit-oriented leadership poses to itself is: What is the best way to repair or control these errors? In equity-focused leadership, the focus is on the relations between learner features, the curriculum, pedagogical practice, relations, regulations and the distribution of resources. This transition doesn't take into account someone's needs. It queries around the need for barriers and if the school has managed support arrangements in a dignifying, challenging and participatory manner.

This is a study using secondary analysis from a survey regarding the education leaders' support for inclusive classroom practices and student belonging. It was answered to four questions.

- **RQ1:** What were leadership practices that most consistently promoted inclusion/belonging?

- **RQ2:** In what ways did classroom enactment result from decisions made at the school?
- **RQ3:** What practices were unsuccessful or vice versa strong, but hindered by barriers to implementation?
- **RQ4:** Which improvement systems might be useful to support leaders in putting inclusive values into everyday leadership practices?

The paper has suggested that we cannot make a belonging if we only do pastoral activity in isolation. It was born out of a shared vision on strategic vision and direction, instructional design, adult learning, family partnership, student voice, support systems and evidence use. Leaders achieved better outcomes where they embedded the objective of providing for students with special educational needs and disabilities in a comprehensive approach that recognizes inclusion as a key quality of pedagogy and the school.

2. Conceptual and Applied Leadership Foundations

Both educational leadership and inclusive pedagogy and organizational improvement perspectives were integrated in the analysis. Leadership was taken to mean the influence-building process involved in direction, relations, resources, routines and accountability. It comprised formal leaders, teacher leaders, specialists, support staff, pupils and community partners (Carter & Abawi, 2018). This distributed view is one that does not assume that one principal could directly influence all classroom events.

There were five dimensions that were identified as inclusion through access, participation, achievement, recognition, and influence. Access to relevant or relevant entry-level curriculum, space, resources and supports. Participation was not simply being there, but was meaningful. Achievement encompassed academic progress as well as other aspects of development. Concerned with Recognition: whether identities & contribution were respected. Influence was whether students could have an influence on the choices related to their learning or not. A school may be good in some aspects, and bad in others.

The concept of belonging was understood as

relational and institutional outcomes. Relational, it was accompanied by trust, caring, justice, and mutual acknowledgment. It was supported at the instructional level by the challenging tasks, the legitimacy of participation routes and visible progress. It was impacted by the institutional level variables, including disciplinary policy, grouping, transition and representation as well as resource allocation. Being able to accept a student was more involved than a positive teacher personality (Galdames-Calderón, 2023).

All of the inclusive pedagogical practices were understood to include rich learning opportunities that are available to all and responsive support. It was not the same as strategies which reduced the challenge and student differentiation when difficulties were faced. Incorporating multiple representations, purposeful collaboration, scaffolded independence, formative assessment, and adapting based on evidence were core practices identified. It wasn't about the activity being the same, but about the valued learning being the same.

In the field of leadership, attention is given to knowledge that can be put to use, which is generated in a systematic process in relation to practice. Thus, this current review emphasized mechanisms and decision-making for implementation. It not only asked: was a strategy seemingly destitute of negative effects and seemingly successful, appearing to be an avenue worth exploring, but also: what was required in order for a strategy to be successfully implemented by leaders; where did it fall flat; and how could progress be measured? This orientation viewed schools as aggregations of relationships, norms, values, policy and instruction, all of which interplay (Hargreaves, 2025).

Interpretation was at the service of three teachings of leadership. First, moral purpose necessitated giving leaders the guidelines to see inclusion as an entitlement, not just one optional initiative that they should embark on. Second, there had to be policies, professional learning, staffing, evidence systems (and more) that aligned with the common goals. Thirdly, to achieve reciprocal accountability, the organisation was required to make changes to current conditions whilst having adult students make contributions towards inclusive practice. The blame for this should

not be single-handedly pinned on individual teachers, or on learners peripheral to the biting.

3. Methodology

The study was done as an applied qualitative secondary analysis. The choice of this design was because the research problem was related to the aspects of patterns that extended to educational leadership, classroom practice, institutional evaluation and student experience. This was done with the purpose of creating an actionable, as opposed to statistically pooled, explanation.

Research was reviewed and a purposive corpus of evidence compiled based on school-improvement reports, district and institutional evidence, practitioner questions, qualitative and mixed-method studies, implementation stories, and documented evidence of student, family, or educator perspectives. Materials were retained if they encapsulated leadership action relating to inclusive classroom practice, participation, belonging, engagement or equitable supports. Evidence that focused on diversity only at the policy level with no implications for the classroom, evidenced isolated activities but lacked any evidence of implementation, and used placement as evidence of inclusion was excluded.

The corpus comprised elementary, secondary, and a focus on patterns that could be used in varied kinds of learning communities. It was analyzed and presented in terms of context, level of leadership, school student population, instructional practice, condition of implementation, belonging indicator and stated outcome. No attempt was made to assume all school systems used the same word(s). The wording of related terms like inclusion, equity, participation, connectedness, climate and belonging was understood through the mechanisms described. The analysis was made in 4 stages. Firstly, relevant segments were taken out and created in matrix

format. Next, open codes were created that related to moral purpose, expectations, access to curriculum, universal design, differentiation, grouping, student voice, relational trust, professional learning, distributed leadership, family partnership, discipline, transition, data use, and resource allocation. Thirdly, pattern matching was done between cases to compare the code. Strategies were analyzed, providing for recurring outcomes, contextual variation, and contradictory evidence. Fourth, themes were connected in an applied leadership approach that related strategic conditions, enacting classroom, relational experience, and feedback for improvement.

The six consolidated themes that emerged were equity-focused direction, inclusive instructional design, a relational approach to trust and student voice, developing a distributed model of professional capacity, developing responsive evidence- and intervention-focused practices, and supporting family-community partnership. All negative cases were kept. For instance, while leaders made adjustments to use inclusive language, some continued to have strict groupings, a curriculum that was hard to access and disciplinary regimes that were strict. Sometimes, professional development resulted in gains in awareness but not routine, as planning time, coaching and follow-up were not available.

An audit trail linked themes to the underlying mechanisms of the various coded accounts, and an element of comparison across evidence from different stakeholder perspectives helped to strengthen the credibility. Differentiated outcome reporting from sense-making inferences. No personal data were collected for the study, and it was carried out with non-identifiable secondary evidence, which was made public by the authors. This, therefore, did not require any ethical approvals.

Table 1. Applied secondary-analysis design, evidence boundaries, and interpretive safeguards

Element	Specification	Applied contribution
Applied research design	Qualitative secondary analysis with cross-case pattern matching	Generated actionable explanations linking leadership decisions, classroom practice, and belonging.

Evidence sources	School-improvement reports, district and institutional evaluations, practitioner inquiries, qualitative and mixed-method research, and stakeholder perspectives	Prioritized implementation detail and multiple viewpoints rather than policy claims alone.
Inclusion boundary	Leadership action connected to inclusive pedagogy, participation, equitable support, engagement, or belonging.	Excluded materials treating diversity symbolically or placement as sufficient inclusion.
Analytical units	Leadership strategy, organizational condition, classroom enactment, relational experience, implementation barrier, and reported outcome	Separated intended policy from experienced practice.
Analytical procedure	Structured extraction, open coding, comparative analysis, negative-case review, pattern matching, and framework integration	Preserved variation and identified recurring mechanisms.
Quality safeguards	Audit trail, triangulation of stakeholder perspectives, disconfirming evidence, and separation of reports from inference	Strengthened credibility without claiming universal causality.

4. Findings

4.1 Equity-centered direction and moral purpose

Leadership direction has been a determinant of the nature of inclusion, whether core work or simply a provision. Adapting the ethos to make known that challenging learning, recognition, and participation should be afforded for all students was an effective way of conveying the message. They related inclusion to teaching qualities, school improvement, safeguarding, and achievement and to the separation of responsibility for inclusion to a specialist department.

Leaders' moral purpose was realised through the value of decision-making. They looked at who was offered enhanced work, out-of-school activities, leadership opportunities and in-classroom discussion (Jay & Brown, 2026). They explored who is considered to be exhibiting disruptive behaviour, who are primarily approached by teachers for problematic behaviours, and which pupils are referred for more than one sitting outside of mainstream. This scrutiny brought in the races of things where there was ostensibly none.

Sometimes, the language that contained inclusive mission language was contrasted with low-expectation practices conveyed in school. Students observed discrepancies between the celebration activities and the way they were grouped, disciplined, represented, and/or talked to by adults. Leaders' trust and credibility grew as they recognised areas for development, as they communicated decisively about their actions and as they were prepared to challenge traditional processes.

4.2 Inclusive instructional design and classroom participation

The best cases viewed inclusive pedagogy as part of a common teaching framework. Leaders encouraged other elements that foster learning, such as clear learning goals, positive variation, scaffolded tasks, intentional learning groups, available technology, and differentiated means to demonstrate comprehension. These practices decreased the need to rely on reaction to the children's retrospective accommodation, with the understanding that variation may occur in planning.

Increased belonging is related to a continuity of access

to valued mental work. Situations in which students were often given the easier tasks, isolated from one another’s conversations, or complimented for finishing a task were perceived as being circumstances that made students feel out of place. Support was more inclusive when it afforded an opportunity for participation, independence, and contribution to be seen (Ketikidou & Saiti, 2025). Leaders’ impact upon enactment was through curriculum review, observation processes, coaching and planning time allocation. The pace and/or quiet compliance observation systems discouraged

experimentation. More useful review: who talked versus who listened, challenge quested, tokenism of resources to depict variously represented identities. There were mixed outcomes with flexible grouping. Targeted instruction to groups of students may be supported through short-term grouping analyses of the current learning needs. Permanent or publicly visible grouping could have an impact on status, limit curriculum choices, and diminish a sense of belonging. Groups need to be permeable, data-driven and anchored in vision and goals, and that is what we need to do to become an effective leader.

Educational Leadership Pathway to Inclusive Participation and Belonging

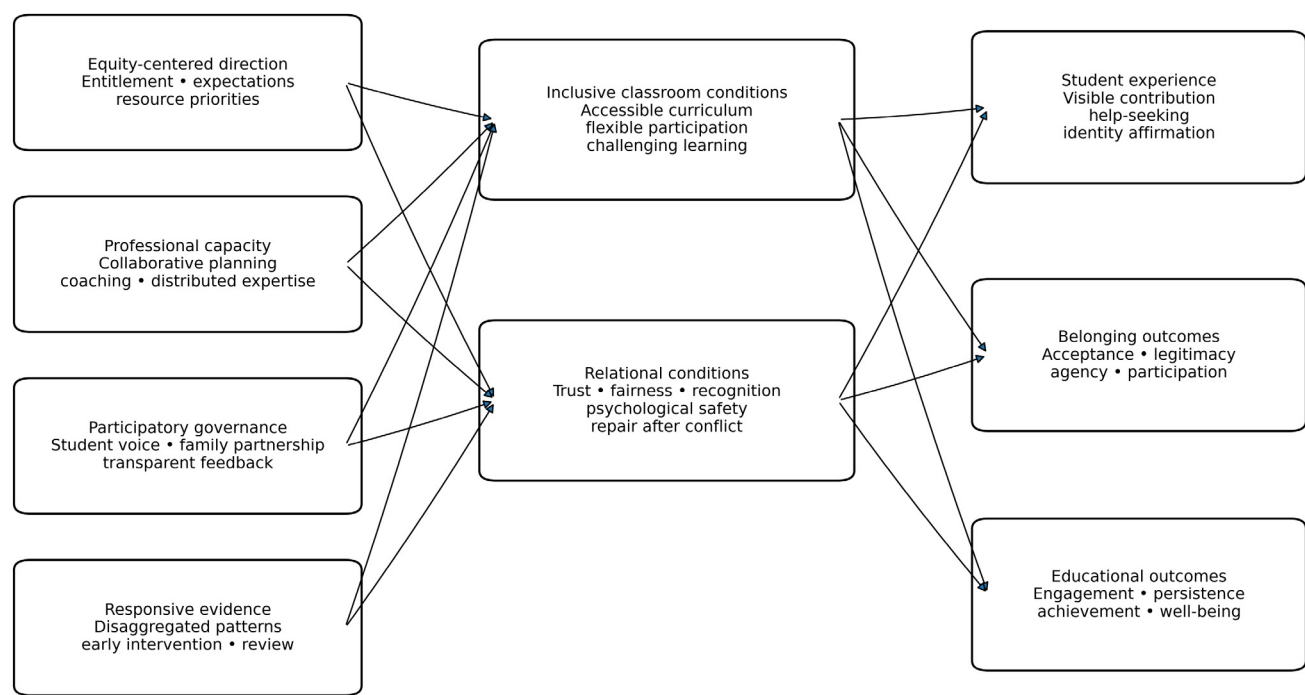


Figure 1. Leadership pathways connecting strategic direction and organizational capacity with inclusive classroom participation and student belonging.

4.3 Relational trust, Recognition, and student voice
There was a high relationship between the dimensions of belonging and relational trust. Students had to feel assured that adults would listen and that there would be fairness, respect for dignity and support afterwards when they got into difficulties. Trust was built on consistent follow-through, respectful communication, correct naming, being interested in what was going on in their lives, and separating out

behaviour and identity. Students’ input helped to make sure the leadership was more accurate. Patterns were created through surveys, but mechanisms of data were explored through dialogue, focus groups, in-class consultation, and student-led inquiry. Students could raise things that they felt were not accessible, about things that they felt were biased and were not safe to participate in, just because the adults had gotten used to them

(Koçak, 2021).

Voice was given a sense when it affected decision-making. Some symbolic consultation that resulted in leaders putting on a hearing and not doing anything about it undermined people's trust. There were feedback loops indicating how, what and why something changed/failed to change, with stronger practice. Students have also engaged in co-creating norms, co-curriculum, peer mentoring, and transitions assessments.

However, there were no boundaries in relational approaches, as though such an approach did not exist. Details of what was expected were predictably clear and fair to students. Belonging was more successfully fostered through restorative conversations, proportionate consequences and repair opportunities as compared to exclusionary discipline. The behaviour of adults was analysed, and leaders coached them to be consistent in disciplining behaviour without being humiliating.

4.4 Distributed professional capacity

The knowledge and confidence of many adults were the basis of inclusive leadership. Good schools shared leadership within a group of classroom teachers, special educators, the language specialist, counseling teachers, teaching assistants and community members. There was no hint of duplication of roles, and they were sufficiently flexible to allow for joint problem solving.

Professional learning that was sustained, enacted in practice and impacted by actual students was generally the most effective. One-off workshops resulted in increased terminology, but minimal changes to complex instruction. Application took place with the help of coaching, collaborative planning, lesson study, peer observation and case review. Teachers required time to analyse evidence, plan modifications and determine if supports helped in increased participation (Mbua, 2023).

The best content-specific expertise was found when it was integrated into the typical classroom. Selected purposes benefited from withdrawal, but there was overreliance, which resulted in fragmentation of learning and relationships. Expertise was integrated through co-planning and co-teaching, but this took time for coordination and required common

expectations as well.

The psychological safety of staff was impacted by the leader's behaviour. Teachers were more likely to show insecurity and try new strategies when observation was developmental instead of being a form of punishment. Leading inclusive improvement was about balance and the need to get past perfection. Staff had to be empowered to recognise a failure early and not be afraid of failure.

4.5 Responsive evidence and early intervention

Good leaders shared evidence to look for patterns and, therefore, trigger support rather than simplistically sorting out students and teachers. Achievement, attendance, participation, disciplinary referrals, belonging surveys, student work, observation, seeking, family feedback and enrichment were examples of useful evidence. No individual measure was identified as representing inclusion.

The disaggregation was needed, but both were carefully undertaken. Variations by disability, language, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic position or other categories may indicate inequity, but may not show variation and may serve to stereotype. Leaders used both the quantitative patterns and dialogue and contextual review (Mertens et al., 2024).

The early intervention that looked at barriers first before addressing the findings of deficits within the students was most effective. Teams focused on the understandability of instructions, safety of relationships, availability of materials and resources, attendance, and flexibility of assessment. Then, support plans were created addressing the learner's needs as well as the environment.

Data systems may have started to become exclusionary when focusing on gaps and limits. The students who had almost fallen/are at odds were taken care of, and yet there was no one for the rest of the students. Improved systems for monitoring growth, participation and response to support. The review meetings concluded with actions identified and the names of the adults responsible, time frames and follow-up evidence.

4.6 Family and community partnership

Families possessed information around Communication, Culture, Strengths, Stressors,

and Prior School experiences. Inclusive leaders encountered this knowledge, they approached it as a topic of inquiry, and not interference. Partnership grew stronger when communications were easy, bilingual when needed, time-proximate, and respectful.

In some instances, schools would not have undertaken a serious investigation into the factors related to barriers to the participation of ethnic minority or Traveller children in education, including transport, work, difficulty accessing online, disability and discrimination, but assumed that it was a matter of the Traveller family adapting to the School's routine. Alternative meeting formats and community events, interpretation, and proactive, positive contact expanded participation.

Mentoring, cultural knowledge, health supports, enrichment, and transition pathways were provided to students by community organizations. The higher-rated partnerships were those where objectives and accountability were clearly understood. There was a lack of long-term projects, leading to a loss of trust in any projects that did not stay around (Mertens et al., 2024).

Families were also shielded from deficit narratives and protected by leaders. Neither low aspiration was found in poverty, nor language difference, nor nontraditional participation. Strengths and mutual problem-solving kicked off the beginning of effective engagement.

4.7 Strategic coherence and belonging outcomes

Belonging went up when leadership behaviours complemented each other. Punitive discipline or lack of access to communication, segregated support or accountability systems based on narrow attainment undermined inclusive pedagogy. Explicit curriculum, professional development, assistance, student voice and family involvement, in turn, had a cumulative effect.

Normal moments: entering, feedback, group work, changes, celebration, evaluation and dealing with conflicts made students experience coherence. Therefore, it has been built multiple times but not through one programme, as it has been delivered through other programmes (Oduro & Kobeli, 2025).

Results of the cross-case synthesis showed that there were four pathways that affect belonging by the role of leadership. An entitlement and priorities were developed through strategic direction. Having organizational conditions led to time, expertise and accessibility. Levels of participation and challenge were driven by classroom practices. Relational feedback was used as an indicator of whether they were recognised and could make a difference in the community.

Sustainability was reliant on how these pathways were integrated into policy, induction, budgeting, evaluation, and succession. Enhancements were dependent on (aspiring) charismatic leadership and broke down during shifts of leadership. Continuity in documentation and distributed ownership.

Table 2. Leadership themes, classroom enactment, belonging signals, and implementation risks

Leadership theme	Core enactment	Belonging and inclusion signal	Failure mode
Equity-centered direction	Ambitious entitlement, resource alignment, and visible challenge to exclusionary routines	Students accessed valued learning and understood that differences did not lower status.	Inclusive language without changes to grouping, discipline, or opportunity
Inclusive instructional design	Accessible representation, flexible response modes, permeable grouping, scaffolded independence	Participation widened while intellectual challenge and contribution remained visible.	Simplified parallel work, permanent grouping, or accommodation after failure

Relational trust and voice	Reliable adults, fair boundaries, restorative repair, and formal response to student feedback	Students sought help, raised concerns, and influenced community decisions	Symbolic consultation, humiliating discipline, or inconsistent adult follow-through
Distributed professional capacity	Co-planning, coaching, specialist integration, role clarity, and psychological safety	Teachers adapted practice collaboratively and addressed difficulty earlier	One-off training, isolated specialists, unclear responsibility, or punitive observation
Responsive evidence	Multiple indicators, cautious disaggregation, barrier analysis, named actions, and follow-up	Support responded to participation patterns rather than labels alone	Deficit dashboards, threshold gaming, or ranking without contextual explanation
Family-community partnership	Accessible communication, positive contact, mutual knowledge, and sustained partnership	Families contributed evidence, trust, cultural knowledge, and support pathways	Crisis-only contact, inflexible access, deficit assumptions, or short-term projects
Strategic coherence	Alignment across curriculum, staffing, discipline, support, evaluation, and succession	Belonging became an everyday institutional condition rather than a program	Competing initiatives, contradictory incentives, and dependence on one leader

5. Discussion

The results revealed that an inclusive classroom is an organizational achievement. The impact of inclusion was driven by teachers implementing it, while leadership ensured that they had clear expectations, planning time, specialist access, and available evidence, and that they felt psychologically safe. This discovery counteracts views that proposed that the main cause of variation lies with the separate teacher attitude.

Belonging was identified as a result and a process. Participation was enhanced by feeling recognized, and participation itself contributed to belonging as they saw that they were contributing. Strategies for leadership thus included a pattern of opportunities for agency, for success, and for repair of relationships. A sense of belonging was not achieved through messaging, whilst a lack of challenging work or decision-making was happening with students (Sider et al., 2021).

The analysis also helped to articulate the connection

between the universal and targeted support. However, many students' participation increased and predicted barriers were lowered due to universal design. There was a continued need for targeted support where needs were very specific or intensive. The key leadership challenge was to ensure there was a seamless link from targeted support to mainstream class membership and that there was no separation. A distinct interpretable discipline was needed to support the equity-based application of data. Patterns were broken up, revealing exclusion, but these did not state causes. There needed to be a mix of judgment and evidence from leaders in the form of numbers, and from students, parents, and teachers. This way, data was not treated as "the gospel truth," nor as data information that was overlooked due to its imperfection (Suhaimi et al., 2025).

The distribution of leadership, which increased the likelihood of inclusion crossing over the boundaries of professions, drew in strengthened implementation. But without any coordination, fragmentation has resulted from distribution. Leaders had to agree

with each other on shared principles and on how things are to be done; they had to establish a way of making joint decisions. Formal “leaders” still held final responsibility for and accountability over the resources, even in the context of broad-based and distributed expert leadership.

Giving each other credit and blame was another key aspect of the study. The requirements for inclusive learning design options were placed on the discretion of teachers, while the accountability for time, staffing, coaching systems, accessible systems and policy alignment was placed on the leaders. It was expected of students to contribute positively, and particularly of the responsible adults, for dignity, fair play and meaningful opportunities. Families were encouraged to partner, but schools were responsible for minimizing access barriers (Tejeiro, 2024).

Applied research via evidence to improve decision-making. Thus, the effectiveness of a leadership approach was not just related to whether it looked promising or not, it also influenced whether the leadership approach would be implementable, measurable, flexible and viable. Informative scale testing of change, swift feedback, and cross-role questioning and inquiry supported contextual learning without losing strategic direction (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

An underlying point was that inclusion is not an issue that should be judged solely by placement, but experience, too. Enrollment data would capture physical access, and evidence of a sense of belonging would capture how students felt about physically belonging to the community. Importance was still the achievement data, and interpretation was required to involve participation, relational and access indicators. This broader evidence profile resulted in a more defensible portrayal of the quality of schools.

Lastly, power was addressed when dealing with inclusive leadership. Judgements of what it was normal to do, what was worth knowing, what could be achieved and how the family should or should not be involved in decisions about normal behaviour were not value-free. Leaders reinforced belonging by providing organized ways to challenge these assumptions and redistribute the influence to those who are most impacted by these assumptions (Valdés et al., 2026).

Beyond the adoption of a checklist of inclusive practices, the implications were applied. Leaders were expected to have a defined theory of action which demonstrated how organizational choices would be expected to impact the participation and experience of students in the classroom. For instance, protected co-planning time was beneficial when teams utilized the time to discuss challenges/issues, then to plan for collective responses and to reflect on evidence of engagement. Student voice functions well only when information is conveyed to decision makers, and action is taken that is evident. Professional development was useful only when there was follow-up coaching, a chance to put the learning into practice and feedback that was related to actual classrooms. This logic prompted leaders to “look out at implementation mechanisms, not wait around for the outcome data every year (Wang & Tian, 2023).

Leaders also needed to make a distinction between technical and adaptive challenges when using an applied approach. While a gap in infrastructure or materials provision might be addressed in procurement, gaps in perceptions of ability/behaviour or commitment of families need discussions, reflections, and changes in power. Solutions that were tackling the “how” of the problems led to cursory acceptance. On the other hand, each issue was considered as a cultural discussion, and this slowed down action. There was effective leadership – they immediately cleared up obstacles, but they also continually looked at assumptions and relationships. Work had scope and complexity that were manageable for improvement. Inconsistent language and fatigue developed amongst schools when many disconnected initiatives were started. A few more credible implementations focused on low-hanging fruit routines like inclusive questioning, flexible response modes, “relational check-in”, and “rapid review of participation concerns”. Leaders then analysed variation between classrooms, their enabling conditions, and they modified their support. Scaling – was done based on demonstrated learning, not enthusiasm only (Wang & Tian, 2023).

The framework also suggested that, to the extent that leaders can be evaluated, evidence of conditions created for others would be included. Plans, compliance or total outcomes were often stressed in

traditional evaluation. Focusing on 'safe conditions among staff' to support inclusive leadership, the need to involve students in decision making, the access of families to communication and whether the resources ended up in classrooms that faced the greatest difficulties were important. This evidence of such weakness rendered responsibility as a leader real (Wang & Tian, 2023).

Lastly, the sense of belonging must be taken into account for all transitions, ranging from entry into school, grade transitions, when coming back after absences, after placement changes, if the student

is disciplined in some way and returns to the same setting, or any other transition to prepare for further education. Student relationships were broken, and students faced new expectations due to the presence of transitions. Subsequently, those leaders who worked on continuity of information, continuity of adult contact, continuity of peer contact, and accessibility of the curriculum minimized the chances of students slipping through the cracks at the most important times (Woodcock et al., 2026). These transition practices also safeguarded confidence, continuity, safety and momentum in learning.

Applied Inclusive Leadership Improvement Cycle

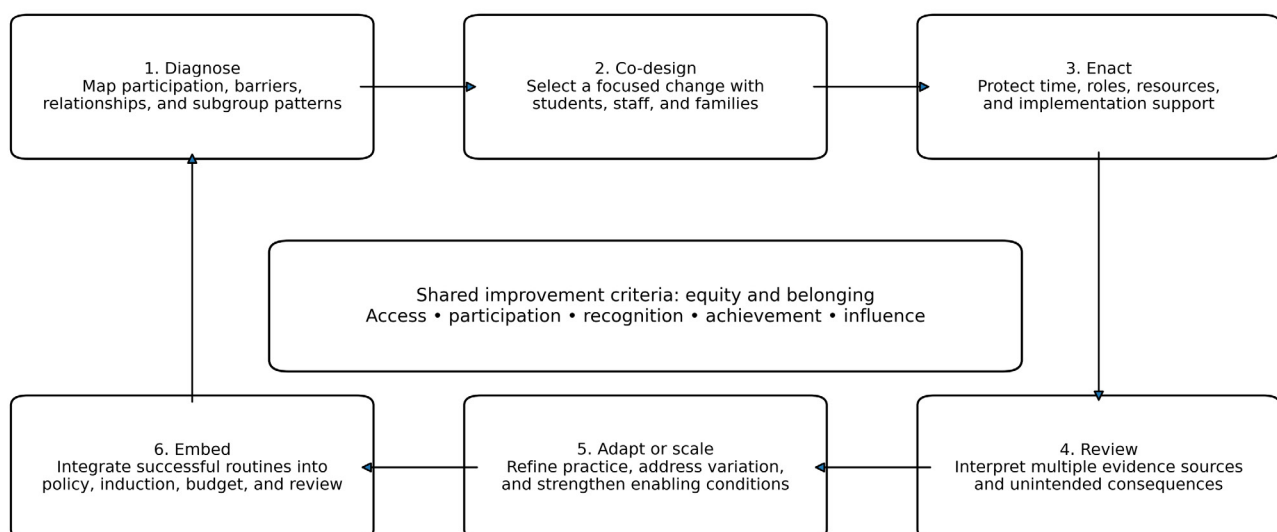


Figure 2. Applied inclusive leadership improvement cycle linking diagnosis, co-design, enactment, review, adaptation, and institutional embedding

6. Applied Inclusive Leadership Framework

Through the synthesis, a five-domain system of educational leadership and applied improvement was created. Key aspects of the first domain being directed by equity were to ascertain what it means to be included and to feel like they belong, to establish what cannot be negotiated (or which rights they are entitled to), and to link goals to decisions about resources.

The second domain, inclusive instructional infrastructure, involved "curriculum access, flexible

pedagogy, collaborative planning, specialist integration and observation that was based on participation and intellectual challenge. Leaders need to consider if adaptations had the effect of extending learning beyond the classroom or simply bringing the pupils out of lessons to engage in learning.

The third domain, relational and participatory culture, needed trusted adults, fair discipline, sound from the students, realising their identity, and clear feedback. A reliable access mechanism for every pupil to voice concerns and bring about improvements should be put in place.

Continuous adult learning, sharing knowledge, working with the family, and working together in the community were needed for the fourth domain, professional and community capacity. Capacity to be safeguarded - through time, role clarity, coaching and induction.

The fifth domain was evidence-informed adaptations, which included a number of indicators, disaggregated review, early intervention and iterative testing. Evidence should be used to establish barriers, track the response, and aid in learning and not as blame. Implementations should be based on the applied cycle. Leaders underwent the initial diagnosis of participation and belonging patterns. They then collaboratively created a small-scale change with students, staff and families. Teams implemented the shift, gathered data, and made decisions about whether or not to adjust, increase, or stop the shift.

This cycle was about strategic thinking and strong local learning.

Priority actions were to perform a participation audit, prioritize mapping of students' access to trusted adults, enrichment, examine disciplinary disproportionality, prevent collaborative planning from being undermined, and create a student advisory system with a formal response. Professional evaluation with reward for experimentation, incorporating inclusion, should also be considered. Progress indicators should incorporate achievement, attendance, behaviour, engagement in classrooms, students' sense of belonging and family trust, exposure to higher-level learning and a response to support. Judging of improvement should be based on trends or subgroup experience and not on a composite score.

Table 3. Twelve-month applied leadership roadmap for strengthening inclusion and student belonging

Implementation phase	Leadership action	Evidence of progress
First 30 days: establish direction	Define inclusion and belonging outcomes; communicate non-negotiable entitlements; identify a representative improvement team.	Approved purpose statement, role map, stakeholder representation
Days 31-60: diagnose experience	Audit participation, trusted-adult access, grouping, discipline, support withdrawal, enrichment, and family access	Baseline dashboard; student and family narratives; barrier map
Days 61-90: select focused changes	Co-design two or three high-leverage routines and specify the theory of action	Change specification; implementation measures; risk register
Months 4-6: build capacity	Protect co-planning, coaching, specialist access, accessible resources, and relational practice development.	Participation in professional learning, coaching records, and resource readiness
Months 4-6: enact and learn	Test changes in selected contexts, collect evidence frequently, and review variation without blame.	Short-cycle evidence; student feedback; fidelity and adaptation notes
Months 7-9: adapt and extend	Refine supports, address subgroup differences, and extend practices supported by evidence.	Improved participation and belonging trends; documented adaptations
Months 10-12: embed systems	Integrate successful routines into policy, induction, observation, budgeting, and support review.	Revised procedures, budget allocation, induction and evaluation tools

Annual review: sustain account-ability	Publish progress, limitations, unintended effects, and next improvement priorities.	Transparent report; family and student response; succession and continuity plan
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7. Limitations and Future Re-
search

Heterogeneous secondary evidence was used, and no pooled effects were estimated in this study. Various contexts, leadership structures, definitions and measures were present. The synthesis focused on a mechanism and utilized a principle instead of universal causes.

Successful initiatives might have been overrepresented in publicly reported cases, and students and families least connected to schools might have been underrepresented. There was also variation in the level of methodological transparency of institutional reports. It was therefore based on the idea of convergence and contradiction instead of taking claims on their own.

The longitudinal relationship between aspects of leadership practice and participation in the classroom, belonging, and achievement should be investigated in future studies. More consideration should be paid to intersectional experience, rural and under-resourced situations, succession of leadership and the impact of digital learning environments.

Applied studies: make comparisons in the sequences of possible implementations, record costs, workload and unforeseen consequences.

Questioning of students, families, and support staff may help to improve the validity of belonging measures and also shed light on aspects of belonging that may not be apparent to formal leaders. These are design considerations that research should investigate also: do targeted provision, support or lead to inclusion or to separation?.

8. Conclusion

Educational leadership influenced inclusive classroom practice and student belonging in four categories: strategy, organization, pedagogy, and relationships, and through the use of evidence. A secondary analysis indicated that isolated accommodations resulting in little or limited change are occurring when wider

systems are exclusionary.

High-performing leaders provided equity-focused leadership, created an inclusive learning system, set up a culture of trustful relationships, deployed professional capacity, responded effectively to evidence, and engaged with families and communities. Belonging intensified where students who faced difficult learning were treated fairly, recognized for who they are, trusted adults in their lives, and had real influence.

The implemented framework saw inclusion as an ongoing learning process within the organisation. Leaders identified barriers, co-codified changes, piloted implementation, looked at evidence and incorporated successful routines. This model was one which blended moral obedience with deliberate improvement.

There was no need for children to be “more alike” in order to be part of a diverse learning community. They experienced a need for the school to be better able to deny or reduce variation and ensure ongoing engagement. A central pillar to making belonging an everyday rather than a statement of educational leadership was therefore brought into the scene.

Declarations

Author Contributions

David Escobar conceived the study, developed the research design and conceptual framework, established the methodological approach, supervised the analytical process, interpreted the findings, and critically reviewed and finalized the manuscript for publication.

Olivia Laursen conducted the evidence collection and organization, performed data extraction, coding and comparative analysis, prepared the initial manuscript draft, developed the tables and figures, managed the references, and contributed to manuscript revision and formatting. Both authors discussed the findings, approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Competing interests:

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

Ethics approval:

Not applicable because this study analyzed publicly available, non-identifiable secondary evidence.

Data availability:

No primary dataset was generated; the analytical approach and applied framework are fully reported herein.

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