

A Principal's Role in Leading a Successful Inclusive School

Yazmin Pineda Zapata

Point Loma Nazarene University, United States of America

Abstract

Leading a full-scale school and cultural transformation can be a daunting task—especially when principals advocate for inclusive reform. Effective leaders must understand that inclusion is not about a specific place, but a mindset, rooted in acceptance and nurtured through meaningful and supportive learning opportunities for all students. Principals, in collaboration with their school communities, must champion the vision of inclusion, develop a strategic plan, and take deliberate action to bring it to life. A critical part of this work involves building staff buy-in using data that demonstrates the benefits of inclusive education for both students with disabilities and their typically developing peers [18] [16]. Villa and Thousand outline five essential organizational supports for inclusive reform: Vision, Skills, Incentives, Resources, and an Action Plan [34]. Semi-structured interviews with 14 principals from exemplary inclusive schools revealed how they applied these key components to sustain inclusive practices. Through systemic restructuring, they fostered teacher and student motivation, built capacity, and maintained strong support systems. Key strategies included high-quality professional development, coaching and co-teaching models, collaborative planning, distributed teacher leadership, and ongoing engagement of all stakeholders, including staff, students, and families [27].

Keywords: *Inclusion, special education, collaboration, professional development, coaching, co-teaching*

1. Introduction

Inclusion is not a static placement but a dynamic, visible practice that engages teachers, students, families, administrators, and the broader community [8]. Grounded in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its mandate for the least restrictive environment (LRE), inclusion positions general education as the *foundational setting* for all students with disabilities [17] [33]. This reflects the law's core principle: students should learn alongside their nondisabled peers with the necessary supports, services, and supplementary aids in place [33] [34]. When implemented effectively, inclusive education enhances academic and social development for all learners, particularly within co-taught classrooms that foster collaboration and individualized support [18] [16].

Sustaining effective inclusion requires strong transformational leadership [13] [32]. Principals, amidst juggling multiple responsibilities, must create a school culture that supports all learners [7] [16]. However, with gaps in their training being a significant concern, many principals lack the necessary knowledge and skills to develop and maintain successful inclusive environments [10] [11] [19]. To drive inclusive reform, principals must empower staff, promote collaboration, and ensure adherence to inclusive education standards. In doing so, they will foster evidence-based inclusive practices and ensure educators are equipped to deliver high-quality instruction for students with disabilities within the context of the general education classroom [2] [19].

2. Literature Review

As schools transition to inclusion, they can draw valuable insights from existing inclusive models. While some schools begin with logistical adjustments such as reconfiguring schedules and personnel, effective leaders must go beyond surface-level changes. A systematic approach focused on vision, skills, incentives, resources, and action planning fosters a collaborative culture, paving the way for sustainable change [34]. Central to sustaining inclusion is the belief that all students, including those with disabilities, deserve equitable education alongside their peers [35] [7]. Leaders must emphasize this belief, shifting staff mindsets to embrace inclusion as a core value. To turn belief into action, principals must demonstrate strong instructional leadership and foster collaboration among general and special education teachers [35] [38]. Reflective inquiry and feedback focused on diversity and inclusion is a powerful tool in this process [23].

Engaging teachers in shared decision-making and investing in their professional development are essential strategies for establishing sustainable inclusive practices [22] [26] [39]. This is achieved by fostering teacher leadership through job-embedded coaching, mentoring, and high-quality skill development [32]. This is especially crucial as both general and special educators face challenges such as limited planning time, inadequate training, and resource constraints [5] [9] [20] [36]. Special educators, in particular, are expected to lead the shift toward inclusive practices, underscoring the need for strong instructional leadership to support all staff during this transition [37] [15]. For administrative support to be truly impactful, it must go beyond encouragement by incorporating targeted, data-driven training that is collaborative and engaging, coupled with continuous feedback to help teachers effectively implement inclusive strategies such as co-teaching and co-planning [12] [21] [23] [25] [27] [29].

3. Research Problem and Purpose of Study

Principals have the responsibility and "power" to change school culture, starting with their beliefs, attitudes, and actions [4]. However, gaps in administrator and teacher preparation programs often leave both principals and teachers underprepared to effectively support students with disabilities in inclusive settings [6] [14] [22] [28]. This study aims to explore the leadership, management, knowledge, and skills principals need to develop, lead, and sustain inclusive education, ultimately providing recommendations to equip school leaders with the tools necessary to effectively support and implement inclusive practices [24] [25] [27].

4. Research Questions

This study is grounded in Villa and Thousand's five organizational components for fostering inclusive environments: Vision, Skills, Incentives, Resources, and an Action Plan [34]. It examines whether these components are essential for the success of inclusive education. The following overarching research questions guided this study:

1. How do leaders develop and sustain inclusive education?
2. Are the five organizational components identified in the literature truly necessary for sustaining inclusive education?

5. Methodology

A phenomenological approach was used to explore principals' actions and behaviors supporting inclusive education for students with disabilities, focusing on their motivations, knowledge, and experiences. Fourteen K-12 principals were selected based on the following criteria: at least three years of experience and leadership at a school recognized for inclusive practices by external organizations like SWIFT, MCIE, PEAK, CAL-TASH and TASH. The final sample included seven female and seven male principals from nine elementary, four middle, and one high school. Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed using A priori coding to identify patterns aligned with Villa and Thousand's components for sustaining inclusive organizational change [34].

6. Findings and Discussion

The study identified key actions principals take to develop and sustain inclusive settings. Qualitative data revealed that vision, skills, incentives, resources, and action planning are critical for building support, fostering buy-in, and ensuring commitment to inclusion. Semi-structured interviews highlighted how these components contributed to an inclusive culture. The findings, organized around Villa and Thousand's framework, demonstrate how principals' actions align with essential supports for inclusive education. Pseudonyms are used throughout the following discussion of findings to protect confidentiality [34].

6.1. Vision

Effective school leadership requires a visionary principal who views inclusion as a fundamental right for all students, particularly those with disabilities. In this study, principals regarded inclusion as a

social justice issue, addressing the needs of diverse learners. Their leadership, grounded in trust, a clear vision, and shared values, emphasized support over imposition, fostering collaboration and meaningful relationships. For instance, Principal Fairfield supported a teacher facing behavioral challenges by reinforcing the inclusive vision, coordinating support, and providing training. Principals like Brentwood echoed the belief that "all means all," underscoring their commitment to meeting every learner's needs. As Villa and Thousand note, a compelling vision rooted in social justice is essential for sustaining inclusion [34].

6.2. Skills

Among the principals interviewed, 42% had formal special education backgrounds, but all emphasized that a commitment to supporting all students in inclusive settings was more important than specialized training. They led inclusive change with support from districts, consultants, and various stakeholders, actively seeking knowledge through courses, professional development, co-teaching videos, and coaching. Principals like Smith, McMahon, and Brice engaged in professional development alongside their staff, believing in leading by example and prioritizing hands-on learning. Director Stanford pointed out the gap in inclusive training within administrative credential programs, highlighting the need for ongoing, learner-centered professional development to sustain inclusive practices, particularly in behavior management, co-planning, assistive technology, and understanding disabilities [24] [26].

6.3. Incentives

Structured support systems were essential for fostering collaboration and effective instruction in inclusive schools. Principals emphasized the value of dedicated planning time for co-teachers, with collaboration ranging from forty-two minutes daily to several hours weekly. Release time for co-planning, highlighted by Principal Smith, was crucial for sustaining teacher commitment, while Principal Brentwood noted its importance in long-term success. Additionally, many schools utilized summer months for preparation, including organizing support, coordinating caseloads, and holding IEP meetings to ensure a smooth start to the school year.

Principals prioritized teachers' emotional well-being by pairing new educators with mentors and fostering ongoing collaboration to prevent isolation during reforms [14] [31] [36]. The BELL Institute's two-year program provided both curricular and emotional support while promoting a sense of belonging [18] [22] [35]. Four principals emphasized the value of daily debriefing sessions with staff, which were central to fostering continuous improvement in inclusive practices. These sessions provided a space for instructional assessment, problem-solving, and celebrating successes, all of which helped refine strategies and strengthen collaboration toward more effective inclusion.

Collaboration was central to the success of inclusive education at these schools. Involving administrators, teachers, students, service providers, parents, and the community was crucial. Principals like Montana and Fairfield emphasized shared leadership through committees and workshops, highlighting that collaboration was essential for maintaining high-quality inclusive classrooms. Student input in setting learning goals, peer mentoring, and role-playing were key strategies used by principals like Brice, Emerson, and Oakland to foster empathy, diversity, and character development.

Collaboration also extended to service providers, with principals like Brentwood bringing together educators and service providers in pre-IEP meetings and using tools like Google Docs to ensure consistency for parents. Additionally, strong partnerships with parents were prioritized, with Principal Montana emphasizing the importance of understanding parental aspirations for students. Across all schools, transparent communication and trust-building were integral in creating a supportive, inclusive environment.

Principal Fairfield emphasized providing teachers with the necessary tools to teach diverse students, noting that resources like planning time, paid training, technology, extra duty pay, and furniture were key supports. Principals Brice and Edmonds highlighted consultant-led training as a major incentive for teachers to embrace inclusion, with schools like BELL Elementary, Bright High, and Blue Middle benefiting from hands-on learning with experts. With 19 years of experience in full inclusion, Principal

Edmonds continues to prioritize teacher support, ensuring educators receive the resources they need to succeed.

Principals recognized staff through various methods, such as kudos, gift cards, certificates, newsletters, and special privileges, with the most meaningful recognition often tied to the school's growing reputation. For instance, Principal Jackson's SWIFT designation and Principal Emerson's daily celebrations motivated staff, while others like Smith and Brentwood used "I noticed..." cards and annual recognition. Fairfield emphasized weekly grade-level recognition and teacher-led professional development, and Kline valued teacher involvement in leadership roles. Recognition boosted morale and student outcomes, with principals stressing the importance of continued resources like co-planning time and professional development to sustain progress.

6.4. Resources

Principals emphasized the importance of key resources for sustaining inclusive environments, such as professional development, co-planning time, support systems, assistive technology, and manageable caseloads. While some had full district funding, others strategically allocated limited resources, with all prioritizing inclusion in their budgets. For example, Principal Smith saved \$40,000 by centralizing requests. Principals stressed that inclusive education and equitable access must remain top priorities, with leaders responsible for securing the necessary resources.

6.5. Action Plan

Effective leaders recognize that driving change is inherently challenging. Transforming a school system requires building consensus, developing staff capacity, and ensuring access to necessary resources—all essential components of a strategic plan for shifting school culture and practice [34]. Data highlighting the underperformance of students with disabilities was the driving force that led principals to commit to this work. Influenced by personal experiences, Principal Fairfield championed inclusion, while Principal Rose sought training to address the limitations of pullout models, leading to a turnaround at Newton Elementary. Principal Jackson shifted to general education classrooms due to high special education placement rates, emphasizing integrated learning. Principals like Oakland highlighted the broader benefits of inclusion, such as empathy and diversity, while Edmonds felt a moral duty to provide local services for students with disabilities.

A purposeful action plan involving all stakeholders is essential for driving change [30]. Principals were diligent in identifying key personnel for their leadership teams, including general and special education teachers, administrators, specialists, and community members. Principal Montana emphasized the importance of starting with a committed group of believers and even skeptics, while Principal Fairfield stressed involving teachers, parents, and the community in developing a shared vision.

To sustain inclusive settings, principals highlighted several key components, including a clear inclusion philosophy, ongoing professional development, dedicated reflection time, progress monitoring, strong parent partnerships, and robust teacher support. Successful strategies involved practices such as common planning time (Jackson), making inclusion an organizational expectation (Edmonds), and ensuring staff fully understands the underlying rationale for inclusion (Smith).

While strong district or central office support is ideal, principals without it remained committed to advancing inclusive practices. For instance, Principals Edmonds and Kline thrived with full district backing, while Principal Montana valued guidance from experienced central administrators. Over time, Principal Rose's efforts gained district support, bringing resources, training, and encouragement for other schools to replicate her success. However, Principal Jackson pointed out the challenges of maintaining inclusive practices without district commitment, emphasizing that sustained engagement from key leaders, such as the superintendent and special education director, is critical.

7. Implications for Practice

For the principals in this study, inclusive education was a daily commitment, not just a final goal. It was about an intentional focus on strengthening teacher capacity and ensuring support for all learners at different stages of the journey. Findings show that inclusive schools can be developed and sustained

with consistent, well-structured support. All principals agreed that prioritizing the needs of all students led to improved outcomes for both students with disabilities and their peers. Success depended on the principal's ability to build trust and maintain supportive relationships with teachers, parents, students, and community members. Trust was fostered through shared decision-making among key stakeholders, concern for teachers, and consistent support for both staff and the school's core values [1] [3].

8. Limitations

This study's limitations include a small sample size, reliance on principals' perspectives, and data collected only through interviews. Including input from teachers, students, staff, and parents, as well as incorporating classroom observations and focus groups, would have provided a more comprehensive understanding. A larger sample size would offer more diverse examples and increase the potential for replicating inclusive practices in other schools.

9. Implications for Future Research

Future research should involve a wider range of perspectives—teachers, students, support staff, and parents—to better understand the school-wide shift to inclusive practices. Through the lens of these stakeholders, identifying specific topics for effective training, preferred resources and incentives would be valuable. Conducting case studies across multiple schools through observations and focus groups would provide the field with more substantive evidence of success. Examining the academic and social outcomes of students with disabilities, compared to their peers, would further support inclusive education. Expanding the sample size of model inclusive schools in other countries and exploring principals' perspectives internationally regarding preparedness and motivations can also offer insights to improve administrator training for inclusive settings.

10. Conclusion

Principals play a crucial role in transforming schools into inclusive environments. The success of the schools in this study was driven by strong leadership and active principal support. The experiences of these fourteen principals highlight the practical application of Villa and Thousand's five organizational components for change—vision, skills, resources, incentives, and an action plan—which emphasize that inclusion should be integrated into general education, not treated as an add-on [34]. Their framework offers a pathway for bridging the gap to a fully inclusive general education system.

REFERENCES

- [1] Arias, M., & Morillo, M. (2022). Building trust in inclusive education: The role of school leadership. *Journal of Educational Leadership*, 12(3), 120-134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1570001>
- [2] Boardman, A. G., & Schwarz, V. S. (2024). Integrating disability into equity-focused general education teacher preparation. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, Article 1372380.
- [3] Bowers, A. J., Gilpin, R. M., & Schmitt, J. C. (2023). Building trust to support inclusive education: Insights from school leadership. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 36(2), 98-112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105678132310379>
- [4] Brady, L. M., Wang, C., Griffiths, C., Yang, J., Markus, H. R., & Fryberg, S. A. (2024). A leadership-level culture cycle intervention changes teachers' culturally inclusive beliefs and practices. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121(25), e2322872121. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2322872121>
- [5] Bryant, D. A., & Walker, A. (2024). Principal-designed structures that enhance middle leaders' professional learning. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 62(3), 345-367. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-05-2023-0123>



- [6] Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2022). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/effective-teacher-professional-development-report>
- [7] DeMatthews, D. E., & Mueller, C. (2021). Principal Leadership for Inclusion: Supporting Positive Student Identity Development for Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 17(4), 315-332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751211015420>
- [8] Elder, B. (2023). "Inclusion is definitely a possibility for all": Promoting inclusive education through a critical professional development schools' model. *Emerald Insight*. Retrieved from <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/sup-06-2023-0021/full/html>
- [9] Gilmour, A. F., Nguyen, T. D., Redding, C., & Bettini, E. (2023). The shifting context of special education teachers' work. *Remedial and Special Education*, 44(3), 156–167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325221113016>
- [10] Gilson, T., & Etscheidt, S. (2022). Preparing administrative leaders to support special education programs in schools: A comprehensive multi-dimensional model. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 17(1), 41–55. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543221115357>
- [11] Harkins-Brown, A. R., Gillon, N., & Schanbacher, A. (2024). Results of a competency-based approach to prepare general educators to effectively include students with disabilities. *Education Sciences*, 14(5), 475. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14050475>
- [12] Härkki, T., Kallio, K., & Lerkkanen, M.-K. (2023). Co-teaching implementation: How do school leaders support teachers? *Education Sciences*, 13(12), 1197. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13121197>
- [13] Heenan, I. W., De Paor, D., Lafferty, N., & Mannix McNamara, P. (2023). The impact of transformational school leadership on school staff and school culture in primary schools—a systematic review of international literature. *Societies*, 13(6), 133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13060133>
- [14] Herzig Johnson, S. (2023). The role of teacher self-efficacy in the implementation of inclusive practices. *Journal of Special Education*, 59(2), 175–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10526846231174147>
- [15] Hughes, M. T., Maggin, D. M., & Barcus, C. L. (2021). Special education teacher leadership: A vital component in enhancing inclusionary practices in schools. In *Empowering formal and informal leadership while maintaining teacher identity* (pp. 30–50). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6500-1.ch007>
- [16] Jackson, M. (2022). *Promoting inclusive education for students with disabilities*. *Frontiers of Educational Review*, 4(2), 32. <https://doi.org/10.69610/j.fer.20220930>
- [17] Kauffman, J. M., Burke, M. D., & Anastasiou, D. (2022). Hard LRE choices in the era of inclusion: Rights and their implications. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 34(2), 104–112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073221113074>
- [18] Kausik, N. H., & Hussain, D. (2023). *The impact of inclusive education on academic motivation, academic self-efficacy, and well-being of students with learning disabilities*. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 115(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00220574211031957>
- [19] Khaleel, N., Alhosani, M., & Duyar, I. (2021). The role of school principals in promoting inclusive schools: A teachers' perspective. *Frontiers in Education*, 6, 603241. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.603241>
- [20] Lloyd, J. W., Smith, S. W., & Johnson, A. L. (2024). Fostering positive learning environments: Are general and special education teachers from one school district using research-informed and evidence-based practices? *Education and Treatment of Children*, 47(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43494-024-00141-0>



- [21] Magiera, K. (2020). Effective co-teaching practices within the inclusive classroom. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-1018>
- [22] Mahinda John, R., & Hardiman, M. M. (2023). Exploring changes in teacher self-efficacy through neuroeducation professional development. *The Teacher Educator*, 59(2), 175–195.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730.2023.2214555>
- [23] Massar, M. M., Horner, R. H., Kittelman, A., & Conley, K. M. (2023). Mechanisms of effective coaching: Using prompting and performance feedback to improve teacher and student outcomes. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 25(3), 145–158.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10983007221133524>
- [24] Miller, E. K., Franco-Jenkins, X., Duncan, J. T., Reddi, A. R., & Ward, C. (2025). Strengthening education through equitable and inclusive evidence-based teaching practices: A scoping review. *Education Sciences*, 15(3), 266. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15030266>
- [25] Moore, S. A., Sridhar, A., Taormina, I., Rajadhyaksha, M., & Azad, G. (2024). The perspective of school leaders on the implementation of evidence-based practices: A mixed methods study. *Implementation Research and Practice*, 5, 26334895231220279.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/26334895231220279>
- [26] Murray, E., Leonard, H., & Bonaccorso, V. (2024). Teacher growth through professional development centered on the teaching for robust understanding framework. *Education Sciences*, 15(1), 18. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15010018>
- [27] Preis, D., & Jara, D. (2023). Leveraging Co-Teaching as a Social Justice Pedagogy: What School Leaders Need to Know. *NASSP Bulletin*, 107(4), 364–390.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01926365231211912>
- [28] Rosenberg, R., De Bruin, K., & Ludecke, M. (2024). Beginning teacher preparation and readiness for the profession as inclusive educators. *Australian Journal of Education*, 68(1), 65–83.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00049441231218724>
- [29] Ruhter, L., & Karvonen, M. (2024). The impact of professional development on data-based decision-making for students with extensive support needs. *Remedial and Special Education*, 45(1), 3–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325231164636>
- [30] Sider, S., Maich, K., Morvan, J., Villella, M., Ling, P., & Repp, C. (2021). Inclusive school leadership: Examining the experiences of Canadian school principals in supporting students with special education needs. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 21(3), 233–241.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12515>
- [31] State, T. M., Ouellette, R., Zaheer, I., & Zahn, M. (2023). Healthy educators need healthy schools: Supporting educator work-related well-being through multitiered systems of support. *School Psychology*, 38(6), 390–402. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000556>
- [32] Toson, A. L.-M., & Weisling, N. (2023). Preparing educational leaders for special education: A call to the field. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 36(1), 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512231161657>
- [33] U.S. Department of Education. (2004). Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 612: Least Restrictive Environment. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/part-b/idea-2004.html>
- [34] Villa, R.A., & Thousand, J.S. (2005). *Creating an inclusive school* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.



[35] Voelkel, R. H., Prusak, K. J., & Van Tassell, F. (2024). Effective principal leadership behaviors that enhance teacher collective efficacy. *Education Sciences*, 14(4), 431. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14040431>

[36] Woodcock, S., Sharma, U., Subban, P., & Hitches, E. (2022). Teacher self-efficacy and inclusive education practices: Rethinking teachers' engagement with inclusive practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 117, 103802. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103802>

[37] Zaratea, K., Hughes, M. T., & Maggin, D. M. (2022). Special education teacher leadership: Toward a teacher leadership framework for professional development. *Exceptionality*, 31(2), 149–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2022.2100393>

[38] Zhang, L., Wang, H., & Zhang, X. (2023). Does inclusive leadership foster employee psychological resilience? The role of perceived insider status and supportive organizational climate. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1127780. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1127780>

[39] Zhang, Y., Wang, L., & Li, Y. (2024). More leadership, more efficacy for inclusive practices? Exploring the relationships between distributed leadership, teacher leadership, and self-efficacy among inclusive education teachers in China. *Sustainability*, 14(23), 16168. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142316168>