

Inclusive Leadership and Diversity-Friendly Schooling: A Case Study from an Elementary School in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Creating inclusive, diversity-friendly schools remains a major challenge in under-resourced educational settings. In Indonesia, particularly rural areas like East Lombok, limited infrastructure, absence of special education teachers, and rigid school culture hinder efforts toward educational equity. This study investigates how inclusive leadership practices can foster an inclusive school culture despite such systemic constraints. This research employed a qualitative single-site case study at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School, purposively selected for its strong commitment to inclusive practices despite lacking formal inclusive school designation. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis, involving a principal and two experienced classroom teachers. Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), with open thematic coding aligned with Carmeli et al.'s (2010) framework of inclusive leadership: openness, accessibility, and availability. Findings indicate that inclusive leadership was practiced through empathetic engagement with diversity, collaborative decision-making, flexible pedagogy, and strategic use of limited resources. The principal mobilized internal capacities, supported teacher autonomy, and facilitated external training partnerships. Despite systemic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers, adaptive strategies enabled meaningful inclusion for students with diverse needs. This study highlights how inclusive leadership in low-resource contexts can drive school-level transformation. By prioritizing trust, relational ethics, and collaborative culture, leaders can overcome structural limitations. The findings offer insights for policy development, school leadership training, and grassroots innovation in inclusive education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of students has become a serious problem facing schools around the world (L. Abawi et al., 2018). According to a UNESCO (2020), more than 258 million children worldwide have not received a proper education, largely due to limited resources, low teacher preparedness, and an inflexible school curriculum. A similar situation also occurs in Indonesia, where the education system is not fully

responsive to students' social, cultural, or learning abilities backgrounds (Wati et al., 2023). Even at the local level, such as in East Lombok Regency, based on Basic Education Data, 1,080 out of 23,000 regular elementary school students were identified as having special needs, or approximately 4.7% of the total population (Dapodikdasmen, 2025). Meanwhile, the availability of special assistant teachers (GPK) is only 82 and is not evenly distributed across all schools (Inovasi, 2024). This inequality demonstrates the education system's low capacity to respond to diversity. Despite this, Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School remains highly committed to implementing the principle of inclusivity to serve all students. This reality provides a crucial foundation for exploring how inclusive leadership can be applied as a solution to building diversity-friendly schools, where every student has the right to equal and meaningful learning.

In the context of primary education, particularly in areas facing limited resources, principals play a highly strategic role as educational leaders. Principals are responsible for creating an inclusive, adaptive, and responsive learning environment that addresses the diverse characteristics of students (Hurtado et al., 2021). Previous studies have also shown that a principal's ability to effectively manage diversity not only reduces social exclusion within the school environment (Hufon et al., 2022), but also contributes to increased student participation, academic achievement, and the quality of social interactions within the school environment (Rugambuka & Mazzuki, 2023). In elementary schools with limited infrastructure, professional support, and curriculum flexibility, these challenges become even more complex. Therefore, principals are required to implement a leadership approach that is not only adaptive to diversity but also able to demonstrate a constructive and transformative response, through strengthening a collaborative culture, empowering teachers, and creating learning spaces that ensure equal participation for all students.

To understand how principals can respond to diversity constructively and transformative, this study uses the conceptual framework from Carmeli et al. (2010), which defines inclusive leadership through three main dimensions: openness, accessibility, and availability. Openness reflects a leader's openness to diversity, listening to diverse perspectives, and valuing the contributions of all members. Accessibility refers to the ease of interaction between leaders and organizational members. Availability encompasses the leader's willingness to actively engage in supporting work processes and paying attention to members' needs. These three dimensions can create a sense of psychological safety for all organizational members. Therefore, in the context of elementary schools facing various resource limitations, this leadership approach is crucial for encouraging innovation in learning, empowering teachers, and creating an inclusive school culture that is welcoming to the diverse characteristics of students.

Several studies have shown that implementing inclusive leadership has a positive impact on creating a school culture and improving the quality of learning. (Murwanto, 2024), emphasized that inclusive leaders are able to create a broad space for expression for all school members, encouraging participation and mutual respect among all members of the school community. Furthermore, (Kusurkar, 2024), emphasized that an inclusive learning environment ecosystem is formed when the principal encourages the active involvement of all school members and maintains open communication between stakeholders. Furthermore, (Edy et al., 2024) found that implementing inclusive leadership in the school environment helps ensure equal access to learning for all students, including those with special needs.

Another study supporting the implementation of inclusive leadership was conducted by Surapto et al. (2024), who, using a quantitative approach in the context of distance education, found that inclusive leadership positively impacted student participation and retention. This finding reinforces the notion that leadership that recognizes individual diversity can sustainably enhance student engagement. Meanwhile, research Muchtar et al. (2024), in the context of elementary schools, found that inclusive leadership not only impacts students' socio-emotional aspects but also contributes to strengthening their literacy and academic capacity. These findings reinforce the relevance of implementing a behavior-based inclusive leadership model, as developed by Carmeli et al. (2010), particularly in promoting participation, equity, and empowerment in elementary education settings.

Although the implementation of inclusive leadership models has been widely studied in various educational contexts, most research focuses on secondary and tertiary education and uses quantitative

approaches that do not fully reflect the dynamics of leadership in the field. Furthermore, these studies are generally conducted in areas with relatively adequate access to resources. Meanwhile, research on the implementation of inclusive leadership by elementary school principals in areas with limited resources, such as East Lombok, remains very limited. This is despite the complex challenges faced by principals in this region, ranging from infrastructure disparities and a shortage of dedicated teachers to low curriculum flexibility. Therefore, this study is crucial to fill this research gap by providing a contextual and in-depth understanding of inclusive leadership practices in elementary schools serving students from diverse backgrounds.

Responding to this research gap, this study aims to explore in-depth inclusive leadership practices at the elementary school level, particularly in areas facing limited resources. The main focus of the study is directed at how principals carry out leadership behaviors in building an inclusive and diversity-friendly school culture amidst limited resource conditions. Based on this, the research questions posed are "What leadership strategies are employed by principals to foster inclusive school environments? and What challenges do principals face in implementing inclusive leadership practices in under-resourced elementary school settings?". Thus, the results of this study are expected to enrich the study of inclusive leadership, particularly in the context of elementary schools in areas with limited resources. In addition, the results of this study are also expected to be a reference for policymakers, school administrators, and educational program implementers in designing managerial strategies that are inclusive, participatory, and based on social justice.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a single-site case study method that is exploratory and descriptive in nature to enable an in-depth exploration process of the principal's inclusive leadership practices in building a school that is friendly to the diversity of student characteristics. The selection of State Elementary School 02 Aikmel was determined purposively as a critical case because this school is one of the regular elementary schools that is not formally designated as an inclusive school, but still serves students with special needs and shows a strong commitment to the implementation of the principle of inclusivity amidst limited resources. This study involved three informants, namely a male principal with a master's degree in education as the main informant who is directly involved in leadership practices and two female class teachers as key informants who were selected purposively, with the criteria of having relevant empirical knowledge and experience to answer the research questions.

Data were collected through triangulation techniques, namely in-depth interviews to explore the perspectives, experiences, and values held by the principal as the primary informant and teachers as key informants in implementing inclusive leadership. Meanwhile, observations were conducted to examine the dynamics of the principal's leadership, social interactions among school members, and the management of diversity in the classroom and school activities. Then, a documentation study included an analysis of school programs, documentation of school activities, and learning tools that support inclusivity. This study received informal ethical approval from the principal as the authority holder of the research location through the procedure of submitting a research permit to the principal. Before the data collection process, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, conveyed the confidentiality of informant and key informant data, and provided a consent form for participation before the interview process began.

Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which includes data collection, data condensation, data presentation, and drawing conclusions or data verification. The coding process was carried out manually using an open thematic system. Initial codes were developed emergently from the results of field data collection, which were then grouped into sub-themes and main themes based on the principles of inclusive leadership, namely "openness," "accessibility," and "availability." The research data analysis process is presented in the following chart.

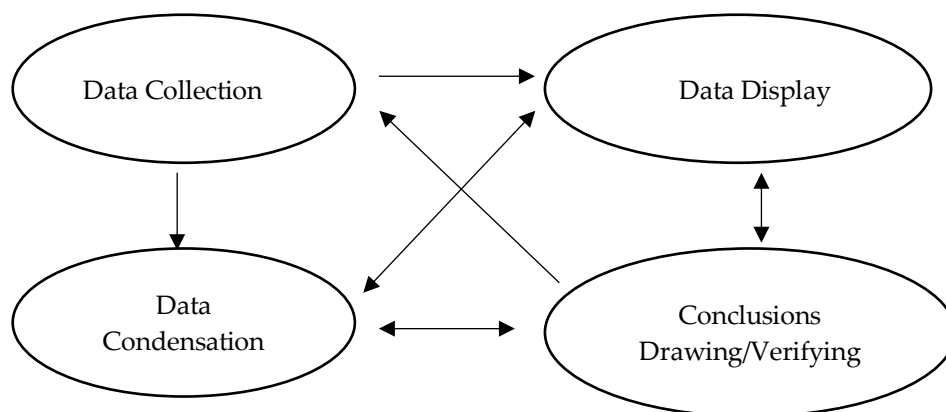


Figure 1. Miles, Huberman, & Saldana's (2014) Interactive Analysis Model

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Implementation of Inclusive Leadership by School Principals in Building Diversity-Friendly Schools

The following are the research findings related to the principal's application of inclusive leadership in creating a diversity-friendly school at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School.

Table 1. Research Results Matrix: The Principal's Application of Inclusive Leadership in Building a Diversity-Friendly School at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School

No	Aspect	Sub-Aspect	Research Results
1	Openness	Empathy Towards Diversity	"...I don't want any child to feel like an outsider here ...we must be sensitive to that as educators ..." (KS, 01/25/2025).
		Response to School Community Input	"...I am very open suggestions, input and even criticism... it's important to evaluate and improve..." (KS, 01/25/2025).
		School Community Involvement	"...we are often asked for our opinions before deciding something, and we feel appreciated..." (GS, 01/25/2025).
2	Accessibility	School Policy	"...we implement policies that can meet the needs of all our students..." (KS, 01/25/2025)
		Learning flexibility	"...freedom to choose teaching methods... adjusted to the character of the child" (GS, 01/25/2025)
		Supporting resources	"...school budget used for teaching materials and training for teachers..." (KS, 01/25/2025).
3	Availability	Physical Facilities	"...LCDs and Chrome books help students learn effectively" (GS, 01/25/2025)
		Non-physical Facilities	"...training from external parties helped us develop strategies and media for diverse students" (GS, 01/25/2025)

3.1.1. Implementation of the Principle of Transparency

3.1.1.1. Empathy Towards Diversity

The principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School demonstrated a strong sense of empathy toward the diverse characteristics of students. The principal not only recognized diversity as a reality within the school environment, but the principal recognized them as a core aspect of inclusive learning that must be understood and embraced. As stated during the interview "Differences in student backgrounds are a common problem in schools, however, I don't want any child to feel like an outsider here, so I encourage all teachers to understand the character of each child and we must be sensitive to that as educators so

that we can serve their needs..." (KS, 25/01/2025). This statement shows that empathy was not expressed as a personal sentiment alone, but as a strategic leadership behavior that shaped how teachers were guided to respond to student diversity.

The principal's orientation reflects a leadership mindset grounded in relational ethics and inclusive responsiveness, wherein equity and social belonging are treated as non-negotiable values in school governance. The results of this study align with the statement by DeMatthews & Mawhinney (2014), who stated that empathy is an essential component of inclusive leadership, enabling school leaders to respond to student needs contextually and fairly. This statement is reinforced Coppess (2022), who stated that principals with a high level of empathy for student differences are better able to create emotionally safe and inclusive learning environments.

Notably, the principal's empathetic leadership was developed not in ideal conditions, but within a setting marked by systemic limitations lack of inclusive policy frameworks, shortage of special education staff, and minimal infrastructure. This resonates with Meanwhile Abawi et al. (2018), who describe empathy as a form of social capital that can bridge structural gaps by building trust among school stakeholders. Moreover, similar to findings by Kudrnáč et al. (2024), the principal's empathy extended institutionally motivating teachers to adapt learning to the diverse needs of their students. In contrast to studies in well-resourced urban schools, this case highlights how empathy in under-resourced settings is not an added value, but a survival-based leadership logic.

3.1.1.2. Response to School Community Input

The principal at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School demonstrated a consistent openness to input from the school community, especially teachers and parents, and responded to such input in a reflective and constructive manner. As stated by the principal *"I always believe that nothing is perfect, especially when it comes to policies, so I am very open to suggestions, input, and even criticism, whether from teachers or parents, and it is important for us to evaluate, improve, and even create new policies so that educational services in schools become better"* (KS, 25/01/2025). This response reflects a leadership orientation based on humility and collaborative learning, where input is not perceived as a threat but as a source of institutional growth.

The principal's receptiveness to criticism and policy evaluation suggests an inclusive mindset that values the horizontal flow of ideas, and sees policy as an evolving construct rather than a top-down directive. The results of this study align with the findings of Hurtado et al. (2021), this finding underscores the idea that inclusive school environments are nurtured when school leaders demonstrate responsiveness to stakeholder aspirations. Therefore Carter & Abawi (2018), highlight that openness is most effective when coupled with reflective communication, which is clearly evident in how the principal frames criticism as a learning opportunity. In line with Carmeli et al. (2010), such openness contributes to psychological safety, where school members feel secure in expressing concerns without fear of retribution. Çevik et al. (2023), further argue that a leader's openness to teacher feedback can enhance both trust and emotional investment within the school community.

This case particularly highlights how openness is enabled not by structure, but by leadership disposition. Unlike schools where formal feedback systems are institutionalized, the principal in this under-resourced setting compensates by building informal channels of trust—through informal teacher room conversations, parent discussions, and consistent follow-up. As Randel et al. (2018) suggested, inclusive leaders create not only a voice space, but also a safe space, where ideas are heard, valued, and acted upon.

3.1.1.3. School Community Involvement

The principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School actively involves all members of the school community in the decision-making process as part of a collaborative and inclusive leadership approach. This involvement extends beyond formal mechanisms, such as school meetings, to informal spaces like teacher room conversations and casual parent interactions. A teacher interviewed *"We are often included, even the existing policies come from what we convey during meetings or casual chats in the teacher's room. We*

are asked for our opinions before decisions are made, and we feel appreciated as subordinates in this school" (GS, 25/01/2025). This testimony illustrates how the principal has institutionalized openness and participation, not through policy mandates but through everyday leadership behaviors that build psychological safety and professional trust. Rather than positioning decision-making as an administrative function, the principal reframes it as a collective responsibility, which reflects a leadership mindset rooted in empowerment, humility, and shared ownership.

The results consistent with DeMatthews & Mawhinney (2014), these findings reaffirm that active school community involvement is a central pillar of inclusive leadership. In line with Harris & Jones (2015), the data also support the idea that participatory policy development enhances implementation fidelity and strengthens professional collaboration. Moreover Stovin (2023), underscores that when school staff are included in decision-making, they develop a sense of ownership and mutual accountability, which aligns with the culture nurtured by the principal in this study. Extending the insights of Wahlstrom & Louis (2008), this case suggests that in resource-limited schools, legitimacy of school policy does not come from top-down directives, but from bottom-up, dialogic processes led by trust-based leadership.

3.1.2. Implementation of Accessibility Principles

3.1.2.1. School Policy Inclusive

The principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School demonstrated a strong commitment to designing and implementing school policies that were accessible and inclusive for all students, including those with special needs. As noted during the interview *"We here really pay attention to the differences of each student, so we implement policies that can meet the needs of all our students, so that they will develop according to their abilities both in their academics and outside of academics"* (KS, 25/01/2025). This statement reflects a policy orientation rooted in fairness, flexibility, and recognition of diversity. Rather than implementing rigid, top-down mandates, the principal emphasized the creation of policies that were contextually responsive and adaptable to student realities. This indicates a leadership mindset that sees policy not as a fixed instrument of control, but as a tool for enabling equity and transformation.

This consistent with DeMatthews & Mawhinney (2014), this approach illustrates that inclusive leaders must actively design policies that guarantee equal access to all educational aspects. The principal's commitment also aligns with Dematthews et al. (2023), who argue that local responsiveness in policymaking is essential to stimulate systemic change through equity-oriented leadership. In line with Massiah et al. (2024), the principal's strategy shows that inclusion is not only about student placement, but also about systemic design that accommodates differences in ability, background, and learning needs. Brokamp (2017), suggests, such inclusive policies are characterized by their focus on justice and respect for difference.

Moreover, extending the insights of Carrington & Andrews (2022), this case demonstrates how transformational leadership grounded in vision and advocacy can guide the creation of inclusive policy even in resource-constrained settings. In the absence of formal inclusive infrastructure, the principal compensates by crafting policies that are empathetic, flexible, and co-created with teachers, thereby fostering accessibility through leadership, not bureaucracy.

3.1.2.2. Learning flexibility

The principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School provides teachers with the autonomy and flexibility to design learning methods that are tailored to the diverse characteristics of their students. As stated by one of the teachers *"We are always given the freedom to choose and use teaching methods in class, so that all students feel comfortable following the lessons, and the principal always emphasizes to us that teaching doesn't have to be the same old thing; it has to be adjusted to the character of the child"* (GS, 25/01/2025). This practice indicates a leadership mindset that prioritizes teacher agency and student-centered adaptation. Instead of standardizing instructional approaches, the principal promotes pedagogical creativity, recognizing that rigid methods often marginalize learners with different needs. This approach shows

that inclusive leadership is not only about vision or policy, but about structural flexibility that enables inclusive teaching practices to thrive in the classroom.

The results consistent with Ruijs & Peetsma (2009), the accessibility of meaningful education is shaped by a school's ability to adapt the learning process to all students. In line with Florian & Spratt (2013), this case illustrates how flexible pedagogy becomes essential in meeting the learning needs of students from diverse academic and social backgrounds. Moreover Tomlinson (2014), emphasizes that differentiation is a critical practice for inclusive classrooms, and this was observed in how teachers at Aikmel 02 adapted lessons without fear of administrative reprimand. Extending the work of Loreman (2017), this case shows that principal-led structural support through professional trust and encouragement forms the foundation for instructional innovation in under-resourced schools. The flexibility granted in this school is not derived from external policy or official inclusive mandates, but from the principal's deliberate choice to lead with empathy, trust, and adaptability. In doing so, the principal creates an environment where inclusive learning is practiced as culture, not just compliance.

3.1.2.3. Supporting resources

The principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School demonstrates a strategic and inclusive approach to resource allocation by channeling limited school funds toward initiatives that support diverse learners. As explained in the interviews *"We use our school budget to meet the school's needs, such as providing teaching materials like LCDs, chrome books, and even providing training for teachers here so that they are better prepared to provide classroom learning for students from various backgrounds"* (KS, 25/01/2025). This statement illustrates that the principal reframes budgeting not as routine financial administration, but as a tool for equity-building. Rather than distributing resources equally, the principal allocates them based on students' differential needs a key marker of inclusive and transformative leadership.

The above research is consistent with Liasidou (2015) the principal's strategy, which reflects inclusive resource management practices that enhance educational equity. The principal's investment in technology and professional development, particularly in the absence of designated special education funding, aligns with Makoelle (2020), assertion that inclusive budget management signifies transformative and justice-driven leadership. Additionally, the decision to fund external extracurricular coaches illustrates a broader commitment to holistic inclusion not only in academics, but also in social and emotional development. This mirrors Raihani (2018), view that strategic leadership must be adaptive to the dynamics of school diversity, and responsive to both pedagogical and non-pedagogical needs. Extending the work of (Tandon & Sharma, 2024), this case highlights how investment in teacher training becomes a cornerstone of inclusive school reform. The principal's actions reveal a leadership model grounded in equity-oriented prioritization where available resources are mobilized to create the greatest inclusive impact, even in a setting with modest financial capacity.

3.1.3. Application of the Availability Principle

3.1.3.1. Availability Physical Facilities

The availability of physical facilities at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School has been intentionally directed to support a learning environment that is accessible and responsive to all students. Teachers noted that technological tools such as LCD projectors and chrome books were not only used to enhance academic delivery, but also to accommodate diverse student needs in both pace and mode of learning. One teacher stated *"The facilities provided by the school are sufficient to support learning for all students. For example, the presence of LCDs and chrome books helps students learn effectively"* (GS, 25/01/2025). This reflects a leadership approach that recognizes infrastructure as an equity tool not merely a support structure, but an enabler of participation and differentiated instruction.

In a setting where specialized learning materials are limited, the allocation of accessible physical resources becomes a strategic compensatory act that transforms generic infrastructure into inclusive tools. This finding is consistent with Florian & Black-Hawkins (2011), the availability of adaptable physical facilities is a crucial component of inclusive education system. In line with Mitchell &

Sutherland (2020), this study reinforces that inclusive leadership is demonstrated through the deliberate provision of resources that serve diverse learners, thereby signaling a shift from symbolic to structural inclusion. Similar to Alquraini (2012), who emphasized the role of educational technology in supporting full participation, the principal's strategy at Aikmel 02 illustrates how inclusive learning is enabled when physical access is paired with pedagogical intent. What distinguishes this case, however, is that such infrastructure was not externally provided nor embedded in policy; instead, it was locally prioritized a clear sign of the principal's belief that technology can bridge pedagogical gaps when systemic support is lacking.

3.1.3.2. Availability Non-physical Facilities

The principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School not only ensures the availability of physical infrastructure but also proactively facilitates non-physical support systems to sustain inclusive learning. One of the key initiatives is the collaboration with external organizations to deliver teacher training that strengthens pedagogical competence in managing student diversity. As noted by a teacher *"The principal collaborated with external parties to provide training for us and that helped us a lot in developing learning strategies and media for diverse students"* (GS, 25/01/2025). This illustrates a leadership mindset that goes beyond material provision toward capacity building and professional empowerment. By prioritizing continuous teacher learning, the principal reinforces the idea that inclusive education is not only a matter of access, but also of adaptive competence.

The results are consistent with this case, confirming that ongoing professional development is central to the success of inclusive education. Moreover Leithwood et al. (2020), emphasize that non-physical support mechanisms, particularly sustained pedagogical training, are critical strategies in cultivating inclusive teaching quality. Importantly, these efforts were undertaken not as part of a mandated national program, but as local leadership initiatives. Extending the insights of Ainscow (2020), who frames inclusive leadership as a cultural shift, this case shows how teacher training becomes a vehicle for shifting attitudes and increasing professional agency. It reveals that inclusive leadership functions not only structurally but culturally and relationally by shaping the ways teachers think, plan, and collaborate in diverse classrooms.

3.2. Obstacles for School Principals in Building Diversity-Friendly Schools

Based on the research findings regarding the obstacles faced by the principal of Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School in realizing a diversity-friendly school.

Table 2. Obstacles Faced by the Principal in Building a Diversity-Friendly School at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School

No	Obstacle	Research Results
1	Systemic Barriers	"So far, we have not had a dedicated teacher, but we strive to provide the best..." (KS, 01/25/2025)
2	School Culture Barriers	"Not all children can be taught in the same way" (GS, 01/25/2025).
3	Pedagogical Technical Barriers	"The principal collaborated with external parties to provide training for us..." (GS, 01/25/2025)

3.2.1. Systemic Barriers

The principal acknowledged the absence of professionally trained Special Assistant Teachers (GPK) at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School, which has presented significant challenges in supporting students with special needs. This reflects a systemic barrier that lies beyond the control of the school, particularly related to the uneven distribution of teaching staff and the lack of inclusive education policy infrastructure at the district level. As the principal stated *"So far, we have not had a dedicated teacher, but we strive to provide the best possible service, especially for children with special learning needs"* (KS, 25/01/2025). This quote highlights a leadership response that is both realistic and resilient. Instead of

viewing the systemic limitation as an immovable obstacle, the principal mobilizes classroom teachers and initiates internal strategies to bridge the gap.

This reflects a leadership mindset oriented toward adaptive resilience where systemic exclusion triggers internal innovation. The results consistent with Beamish & Yuen (2022), this case reflects how the lack of GPK teachers is a widespread challenge in inclusive implementation, particularly in underserved areas. In line with Artiles (2020), such inequality often prompts school leaders to create alternative models of support through internal resource mobilization. Moreover, extending the insights of Alquraini et al. (2019), this finding affirms that strong internal collaboration and leadership-based support are key for the successful realization of inclusive education in structurally limited settings.

3.2.2. School Culture Barriers

Although the principal has made continuous efforts to build inclusive awareness among teachers, a paradigm shift and collective reorientation remain ongoing challenges. Teachers are encouraged to be more reflective and sensitive to student diversity, but the shift from uniform teaching models to differentiated, student-responsive practices is still evolving. One teacher explained *"We often discuss with the principal to share experiences in the classroom, because not all children can be taught in the same way"* (GS, 25/01/2025). This statement reflects early signs of cultural movement, where professional dialogue is being used as a vehicle for reflection and rethinking practices.

However, the process of building an inclusive school culture requires more than just procedural implementation it depends on deep shifts in mindset, beliefs, and values across the teaching staff. The results consistent with Collet (2017), this case illustrates how cultural resistance often implicit and rooted in habit presents one of the greatest barriers to achieving genuine inclusion. In line with Ruijs et al. (2010), the findings show that teacher attitudes and readiness are pivotal in shaping inclusive practice, often more so than structural support. Moreover, extending Ekins & Grimes (2009), the study shows that collective reflection and dialogic leadership, initiated by the principal, play a key role in reshaping professional culture. In a resource-limited setting like Aikmel 02, such cultural transformation is not enforced from above but nurtured through relationships, mentoring, and trust, hallmarks of inclusive leadership operating as long-term cultural change.

3.2.3. Pedagogical Technical Barriers

The principal recognizes that one of the major challenges in building a diversity-friendly school is the lack of adequate training and inclusive learning media for teachers. While the principal strives to meet this need through budget allocation and external collaboration for teacher training, resource limitations and the inconsistency of training delivery remain ongoing obstacles. As one teacher stated *"The principal collaborated with external parties to provide training for us, and that helped us a lot in developing learning strategies and media for diverse students"* (GS, 25/01/2025). This response shows that the leadership approach is not passive in the face of structural deficits. Rather, the principal is proactively building technical capacity from the ground up, leveraging partnerships and internal planning to gradually equip teachers. It illustrates a leadership style based on adaptive innovation turning constraints into opportunities for sustainable support.

This study Consistent with Forlin & Sin (2017), the success of inclusive education depends not only on policy or attitude, but also on continuous professional development and technical reinforcement. In this case, training is treated not as a one-off event, but as a long-term process aimed at transforming instructional practice. In line with Murwanto (2024), the principal reflects the characteristics of an inclusive leader mapping local resource needs, building capacity through partnerships, and cultivating internal support systems tailored to students' diverse realities. This case reveals that in under-resourced schools, pedagogical barriers are not merely logistical, but reflect systemic inequality, which must be

addressed through leadership that is strategic, relational, and resource-aware.

Discussion

Systemic Challenges

The absence of formally assigned Special Assistant Teachers (GPK) at Aikmel 02 reflects a broader structural inequality in teacher distribution and the lack of formal inclusive policy support at the regional level. As the principal stated *“So far, we have not had a dedicated teacher, but we strive to provide the best possible service, especially for children with special learning needs”* (KS,25/01/2025). This limitation exemplifies a systemic constraint often beyond the school’s immediate control. However, the principal’s adaptive response mobilizing classroom teachers and internal collaboration demonstrates resource-leveraging leadership that turns limitations into opportunities.

Consistent with Beamish & Yuen (2022), the lack of GPK is a common issue in under-resourced regions. Artiles (2020), argues that such systemic gaps often force schools to improvise alternative supports. In this case, the principal aligns with Fullan’s Change Theory (2016), which emphasizes initiating change from within when external systems are unresponsive. The school develops internal coherence through staff empowerment and role adaptation, advocating from the bottom up. Practical pathways forward may include forming peer-based inclusion teams within the school, using informal reporting to local education offices to advocate needs, and building NGO or community partnerships for additional support.

Culture Challenges

While policy may promote inclusivity, actual classroom culture often resists change. Teachers at Aikmel 02 are still in the process of internalizing inclusive mindsets. One teacher reflected *“We often discuss with the principal to share experiences in the classroom, because not all children can be taught in the same way”* (GS, 25/01/2025). This shows that collaborative reflection is taking place, but a deeper paradigm shift is still needed. Building an inclusive culture is not a technical task, it’s a value-based transformation, as noted by Collet (2017) those who argue that cultural resistance remains a key barrier.

Ruijs et al. (2010), also emphasized that teacher attitudes and openness are decisive factors in successful inclusive implementation. Applying Fullan’s moral purpose model, school leaders must foster belief-driven change by creating safe, supportive dialogue spaces. Suggested strategies designating *“change agents”* among teachers, embedding inclusive reflection in staff development plans, and recognizing inclusive practices to model behavior

Pedagogical Challenges

Teachers acknowledge that they need more technical capacity and inclusive instructional materials. The principal has initiated partnerships to provide training and teaching tools, yet budget constraints and inconsistent training frequency limit progress. *“The principal collaborated with external parties to provide training for us, and that helped us a lot in developing learning strategies and media for diverse students”* (GS, 25/01/2025). This reflects an understanding of pedagogical inclusion as an evolving process. As noted by Forlin & Sin (2017), continuous teacher development is essential for inclusive transformation. Murwanto (2024), further highlights that inclusive leaders must map needs, build capacity, and innovate under constraints.

This aligns with implementation science, which emphasizes local adaptation over idealized replication. Aikmel 02’s principal uses adaptive leadership by optimizing local resources and promoting hands-on training. Pathways forward initiate low-cost, high-frequency training cycles using local expertise, create internal mentorship networks for differentiated instruction, and use digital microlearning platforms for pedagogical enrichment.

These challenges illustrate that inclusive leadership in under-resourced schools requires more than

policy compliance it demands transformative thinking, strategic adaptation, and relational trust-building. By applying Fullan's theory of change, this study shows how even in constrained systems, meaningful inclusion can be pursued through internal innovation and collective action.

4. CONCLUSION

This study explored the inclusive leadership practices of the principal at Aikmel 02 Public Elementary School, focusing on how the principles of openness, accessibility, and availability (Carmeli et al., 2010) were manifested in a resource-limited setting. The findings show that inclusive leadership can be cultivated not only through formal policy or infrastructure, but through adaptive strategies, relational trust, and professional empowerment. The principal's ability to involve the school community, adjust pedagogical policies, and mobilize limited resources reflects a transformative approach to inclusion in a structurally constrained environment.

Based on these findings, the following practical recommendations are proposed for policymakers strengthen policies on inclusive teacher deployment (especially GPK) and fund targeted capacity-building programs. Promote flexible, context-responsive policy frameworks that empower school-level innovation. For school leaders develop internal inclusion teams, initiate peer mentoring systems, and foster a school culture of reflection and openness. Inclusive leadership must extend beyond administrative duties toward cultural change facilitation. For teacher training institutions integrate inclusive leadership into principal preparation programs. Offer continuous, practice-based professional development on differentiated instruction, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and adaptive teaching methods.

This study, however, is not without limitations. As a single-site qualitative case study, the findings are not intended to be generalized across all schools in Indonesia. The specificity of context geographical, sociocultural, and institutional limits its representativeness. Additionally, data were based on a small number of informants, which may not capture all perspectives within the school ecosystem. To address these limitations, future research should pursue broader and more comparative approaches, such as cross-regional studies involving both urban and rural inclusive schools, longitudinal research tracking leadership impact over time, and participatory action research (PAR) that actively involves teachers, students, and community members in co-constructing inclusive leadership models. Such approaches would not only enrich the theoretical understanding of inclusive leadership, but also provide context-sensitive, scalable strategies for improving equity in education across diverse school environments.

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