

Inclusive Leadership in Education



Inclusive leadership is a crucial factor in efforts to improve education at local, regional, and national levels. Effective school and education system leaders take time to listen to and communicate with all stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, and community members. These leaders also build effective management teams that share a vision for change and the means to enact that vision. Finally, inclusive leaders are committed to equity and providing high-quality learning experiences for all children. In this brief, we explore what it means to be an inclusive education leader.





What is inclusive education?

Inclusive education has typically focused on special education to ensure that children with disabilities have the supports they need to learn and grow while including them in regular classroom settings. In recent years, however, the understanding of inclusive education has expanded to encompass a broader definition that commits to “addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities and inequalities in access, participation and learning outcomes.”¹ Forms of social exclusion and marginalization that directly affect participation and learning outcomes include restrictive responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, geographic location, residential status, religion, gender, and ability.

Inclusion is now understood as a social justice-oriented approach to education designed to ensure every child’s basic human right to an individually, culturally, and developmentally appropriate education. James Ryan discusses this shift:

“More recently, . . . scholars have expanded the notion of exclusion and inclusion beyond the differently-abled to encompass other axes of dis/advantage such as age, race, class, and gender. . . . Their basic premise is that students can be excluded from the school building and from learning processes and activities because of ability, age, race, class, gender, and sexuality. These studies are important because they draw attention to exclusion and inclusion in education and help us understand the ways in which students are excluded, the patterns that this process follows, and the benefits that accompany inclusion. The point that these scholars make is that social justice cannot be achieved when students (and their parents) are excluded from key educational processes.”²

When examining inclusive education, it is also essential to understand the importance of equity. “Equity” and “equality” are different and have drastically different results regarding access, participation, and learning outcomes. Equality refers to treating everyone in exactly the same way, while equity calls for ensuring every child has the proper support they need to grow and learn. Equity in education requires leaders to understand the unique challenges and barriers facing individuals and families and find solutions to overcoming those barriers.

How do we define inclusive leadership?

According to the *Inclusive Leadership Handbook*, an inclusive leadership approach “appreciates diversity, invites and welcomes everyone’s individual contribution, and encourages full engagement with the processes of decision-making and shaping reality. The aim of inclusive leadership is to create, change and innovate whilst balancing everybody’s needs.”³ Inclusive leaders value humans, recognize fundamental human rights, and are cognizant of others’ perspectives and complex systemic interconnections. They are also aware of the roles and responsibilities inherent in leadership structures and possess the courage to collaborate and be accountable for outcomes.

An inclusive leadership model is built on the premise that all people are entitled to basic human rights. Inclusive leadership fosters attitudes and actions that take conscious steps to break down barriers for people at risk of being discriminated against and excluded from society. Inclusive leaders also avoid a traditional hierarchical leadership approach and encourage full community participation in the life of a school or education system.

The hierarchical power structures traditionally prevalent in many societies do not promote inclusion. These structures tend to emphasize efficiency and a single leader rather than a team and community approach, and exclude

“those not privileged enough to occupy formal positions of authority and those who do not possess the personal characteristics needed to influence others. For leadership to be genuinely inclusive, it must foster equitable and horizontal relationships that also transcend wider gender, race and class divisions.”⁴

Change and innovation that leads to inclusive education require trustworthy leaders capable of listening, communicating a vision, and building consensus among diverse stakeholders. Communities need to be empowered through inclusive leaders to develop policies, curriculum, and interventions that benefit all children. Bringing together an adaptable and responsive team with a shared vision enables leaders to build the policies, processes, curriculum approaches, and interventions needed for their school community.

Inclusive leadership calls for the establishment of a collaborative, intentional process for school improvement that is mindful of all stakeholders, bringing together people with diverse skills and knowledge and accessing a variety of resources. Ryan explains that inclusive practices include “advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policymaking strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches.”⁵ The community education aspect is particularly essential to ensure that all stakeholders understand each other and recognize the truths and dangers of exclusive practices. Listening to the student and child voice is also necessary for inclusive leadership. Children’s backgrounds, opinions, and feelings must be taken into account in decision-making.

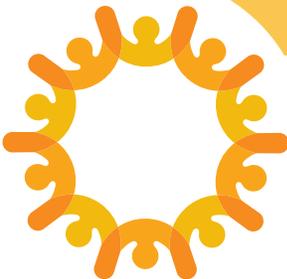


What are the traits of an inclusive leader?

Inclusive leaders in general recognize and embrace the need to make significant systemic changes. Such transformations require empathic and visionary leaders to navigate the collaborative planning required to address the interconnected needs of fiscal, human resource, technological, and pedagogical supports. Harvard University research identified the following leadership traits as key to building inclusive cultures:⁶

- **Visible commitment:** Leaders articulate a genuine commitment to diversity, challenge the status quo, hold others accountable, and make diversity and inclusion a personal priority.
- **Humility:** Leaders are modest about capabilities, admit mistakes, and create the space for others to contribute.
- **Awareness of bias:** Leaders show awareness of personal blind spots and flaws in the system and work hard to ensure meritocracy [value based on their own abilities].
- **Curiosity about others:** Leaders demonstrate an open mindset and deep curiosity about others, listen without judgment, and seek empathy to understand those around them.
- **Cultural intelligence:** Leaders are attentive to others' cultures and adapt as required.
- **Effective collaboration:** Leaders empower others, pay attention to the diversity of thinking and psychological safety, and focus on team cohesion.

Effective, inclusive leadership within the field of education also requires the knowledge and wisdom to examine the systems and attitudes within an education system and challenge the policies and practices to ensure they are not biased, exclusionary, or harmful to children. Such leadership can impact school culture, student outcomes, and teacher morale and effectiveness.



How can one apply inclusive leadership practices within an education organization?

For leaders, building an inclusive environment involves reflecting on and examining all aspects of the education system, from the policies to the curricula taught in the classrooms to the design of the learning environment. It is also essential for leaders to understand the interconnection between intent and actions while bringing the vision and the practice of inclusion together.

Inclusion is a process that continuously searches for the best ways to respond to the diversity of children and their learning needs. An inclusive leader needs to ensure that stakeholders or community members understand the importance of inclusion and how a school's leadership team plans to address the community's changing needs. Operating schools is always a complex business. It is important to remind staff that inclusion is an essential and constant objective that will feature prominently in every aspect of school. Professional development opportunities should be provided to support staff in dialogue and learning about how to create a more inclusive school environment.

The *Inclusive Leadership Handbook* identifies four key development areas for inclusive leadership:

- **Practicing self-awareness.** Self-aware leaders admit mistakes and show vulnerability, practice self-reflection and mindfulness, and challenge stereotypes.
- **Living a shared vision.** Inclusive leaders co-create and live a shared vision with other stakeholders.
- **Building relationships with colleagues and community members.** Relationship building entails creating a sense of belonging and purpose in a safe environment while avoiding deficit thinking.
- **Creating and managing change.** Leaders share responsibility, empower individuals, and develop strategies for handling the complexities of various projects.

The potential benefits of inclusive leadership can be found at personal, organizational, and societal levels. Leading with one's authentic self allows leaders to be more empathic and compassionate, creates conditions that bring higher levels of satisfaction to an organization's staff members, and has a greater overall impact within an organization's or educational institution's ecosystem.

It is important to remember that every school and system has unique challenges and community needs. There is no single model for the ideal inclusive school. Still, an inclusive leader understands the importance of remaining curious, flexible, and committed to improving all their students' learning outcomes and achievement. Employing a wide range of strategies and collaborating to address problems and challenges will lay the groundwork for continued success in building an inclusive school.

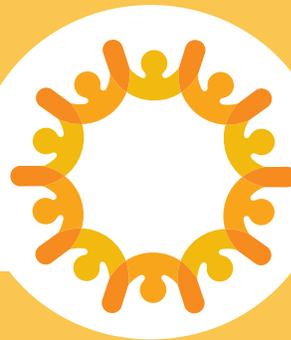


What are some of the challenges associated with inclusive education?

Leaders embarking on significant change initiatives in their schools need to clearly and consistently articulate their vision for an inclusive environment. Leaders also must provide the necessary support for others to understand this vision through dialogue, resource provision, and skill development. Without consistent support, individuals may find it challenging to embrace a philosophy of inclusion and change in current practices.

These supports include professional development to prepare teachers and staff to better understand themselves in their journey to be more inclusive. Professional development also can provide tools needed to develop more inclusive policies, practices, curriculum and overall learning environments to support all children in their learning needs. Both new and experienced teachers need training on how to increase inclusive practices in their curriculum and teaching practices. As education constantly changes and there is a greater need to adapt learning environments to best suit children, it is essential to provide teachers and staff with the support structures and training needed to meet these changes.

In addition to supporting staff, leaders may encounter additional challenges related to school finances, technical and building infrastructure, standardized testing, teacher quality, and related community needs such as healthcare. Children's health and well-being is a critical component affecting their ability to learn and grow. As leaders consider ways to address these challenges and redistribute current resources more inclusively, they will find collaborative and innovative thinking to be valuable tools. Community partnerships with other organizations may ease some of these burdens, for example.



To learn more about inclusive leadership, take a look at the following resources linked here:

[An Expert's Insight: Dr. Fawzia Reza on Diversity and Inclusion in Early Education](#)

[An Expert's Insight: Dr. Jill McFarren Aviles on Diversity and Inclusion in the Early Years](#)

[CCSSO's Inclusive Principals Guide](#)

[The Inclusive Leadership Handbook](#)

[The Principals' Guide to Building Inclusive Schools](#)

Why are inclusive practices so important for education today?

Education is a human right and the key to building more democratic, sustainable, and peaceful societies. To meet the goals of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to “ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”⁷ by 2030, we need inclusive education leaders who are ready to put in place the policies and practices that will make this goal a reality.

If countries are expected to meet the 2030 Agenda and build inclusive learning environments, society needs leaders who can work collaboratively with families and communities to examine current practices and find innovative solutions to solve the current challenges. Providing inclusive and equitable education for all cannot remain aspirational and requires collaboration and inclusive leadership from all education community members.

As our communities become diverse, our education systems must reflect this reality and embrace the needs of every child to ensure they have equitable access to quality education.

“Educators have had good reason to be concerned with social justice. As diversity has become more apparent in our schools and communities, the divisions that separate the advantaged from the disadvantaged have also widened. Not everyone does well in our educational institutions and not everyone is equally advantaged in our communities. This inequality does not happen randomly or by happenstance; rather, it displays distinct patterns. These patterns revolve around markers of distinction consistently associated with ethnicity, race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, mental and physical ability, language and so on.”⁸

Notes:

¹ UNESCO. (n.d.). *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*; 2016. p. 7. Retrieved from http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-2030-incheon-framework-for-action-implementation-of-sdg4-2016-en_2.pdf

² Ryan, J. (2006). Inclusive leadership and social justice for schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5(1), 3-17. pp. 5-6

³ The School for Leaders Foundation, EU-Fundraising Association. (n.d.). *The inclusive leadership handbook – theoretical framework. Inclusive leadership*. Retrieved from <https://inclusiveleadership.eu/>

⁴ Ryan, J. (2006). Inclusive leadership and social justice for schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5(1), 3-17. p. 8

⁵ Ibid. p. 10

⁶ Bourke, J., & Titus, A. (2019, March 29). Why inclusive leaders are good for organizations, and how to become one. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2019/03/why-inclusive-leaders-are-good-for-organizations-and-how-to-become-one>

⁷ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

⁸ Ryan, J. (2006). Inclusive leadership and social justice for schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 5(1), 3-17. p. 4

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