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‘School is no longer a lone wolf effort’: leadership strategies for inclusive, community-based school cultures

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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that the successful implementation of inclusion is largely dependent on the educators’ commitment to inclusive ideals, this study sought to examine the ways principals promote an inclusive vision and foster the development of associated practices in their school community. The study employed an exploratory qualitative research design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 12 principals of highly-ranked inclusive schools from four countries: Australia, Italy, Switzerland, and Spain. In so doing, the emphasis was placed on the principals’ perspectives and practices that contribute to the development of an inclusive school culture. The iterative process of thematic analysis revealed five broad key factors that affect and impact school inclusivity, namely: institutional commitment to a collective inclusive culture; family partnership and co-responsibility; collaboration among key stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, other staff); students’ voice and agency; and building and sustaining inter-institutional partnerships.. This paper concludes by advocating a community-based approach model to school inclusion by identifying key factors on which principals can rely to navigate material, social, and political challenges.

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School principals; inclusive education; community of practice; engagement; practice-based inclusion

1. Introduction

The relationship between effective school leadership and school improvement has long been emphasised in various studies around the globe (Pashiardis and

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Johansson 2020). While traditionally principals were mainly responsible for administrative tasks necessary for the day to day running of a school, in recent decades their role encompasses a multitude of diverse responsibilities (Sebastian, Camburn, and Spillane 2018). Overall, it is now generally agreed that a school's effectiveness, determined in terms of successful educational practices and improved academic outcomes, is largely dependent on the principal's values, knowledge, beliefs, and practices, which are collectively referred to as 'leadership style' (Seashore, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom 2010). By extension, the implementation of any complex reform such as inclusive education is also dependent on principals adopting an inclusive leadership style which promotes inclusive values and ensures that genuinely inclusive practices are consistently applied across their school (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Óskarsdóttir et al. 2020). Transformational leadership, for example, focuses on inspiring and motivating teachers to adopt inclusive practices through a shared vision and collaborative effort (Lambrecht et al. 2022). Indeed, as Tsirantonaki and Vlachou (2024) cogently argue, achieving a fair and inclusive school for all cannot possibly be accomplished without transformational school leaders who actively challenge traditional norms, embrace innovative approaches that foster the inclusion of all learners, and promote systemic transformation in their schools. It is towards discussing the complex concept of inclusion that we turn next.

The publication of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action for Special Educational Needs over thirty years ago (UNESCO 1994) was undoubtedly a critical step in moving nations toward greater inclusion. Following this statement, there has been strong drive internationally for implementing inclusive education in schools, deriving from the belief that inclusive practices are the most effective approaches for combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society, and enabling all students to learn (UNESCO 1994). Subsequent UNESCO documents have championed 'Inclusion' as a conceptual umbrella based on the notion of social justice and equal access to every educational opportunity for all students, regardless of the presence of various disabilities, different backgrounds, diversity of ethnicity, gender, religion, or social status (Graham 2020). For example, one of the more widely accepted definitions of inclusive education internationally comes from a UNESCO report (2015) which includes the following principles: (a) inclusion is a never-ending process of finding better ways of responding to diversity. (b) Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers and using evidence to stimulate creativity and problem-solving in addressing these challenges. (c) Inclusion is about the presence, participation, and achievement of all students. (d) Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on the groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalisation, exclusion, or underachievement. Nevertheless, despite the proliferation of such supportive international policy documents, inclusion is still a 'contested concept' (Woodcock and Hardy 2022): it can be understood both 'as a process which involves identifying and removing barriers to access,

learning, and achievement for all students ... and as an ideal result or outcome of such practice' (Woodcock et al. 2022). For this paper, we understand and define inclusion as the active embrace of all learners, acknowledging and responding to the full spectrum of diversity – whether related to poverty, class, race, gender, ethnicity, or ability. This definition reflects a commitment to a social justice-informed perspective that prioritises equity regardless of students' individual circumstances (DeMatthews et al. 2020; Graham 2020).

Several studies in the field argue that the transformation toward a more inclusive school system implies fundamental changes in school organisational systems and in cultural climate (DeMatthews 2015; McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd 2014; Toulia, Strogilos, and Avramidis 2023). Booth and Ainscow (2002), more than twenty years ago, recognised that improving inclusivity requires fundamental change not only in the teaching practices occurring inside and outside the classroom, but within the whole school organisation and in its relations with parents, associations, and community members. They argued that promoting inclusive educational environments starts with a change in perspectives of diversity and with a reduction of barriers to the full participation of students irrespective of their learning style or educational needs. Consequently, such transformation applies to all aspects of school life, including the formulation of equitable school policies and socially just practices (DeMatthews et al. 2020; Hintz et al. 2015).

The establishment of inclusive education as a globally recognised field of investigation was accompanied by a growing recognition of the importance of establishing collaborative fields of investigation that require cooperation among several organisational actors, such as teachers, students, parents, and school leaders (Embregts et al. 2018). Moreover, research in the field has shown that teachers who have positive attitudes towards inclusion and who have high levels of individual and collective efficacy tend to exhibit higher motivation and, ultimately, be more successful at including diverse learners than their counterparts (Avramidis et al. 2019; Sharma et al. 2024). However, while considerable work has been done on teachers' attitudes and beliefs, relatively less attention has been focused on principals (Hardy and Woodcock 2022), who undoubtedly play a pivotal role in creating a nurturing environment where inclusive practices are initiated and supported institution-wide (DeMatthews et al. 2020). Indeed, the limited research on principals' perspectives about school inclusion has emphasised the principals' role in enacting government policy initiatives in their school organisations (Billingsley et al. 2018). Furthermore, some international studies have also emphasised the principals' role as instructional leaders who enhance teacher capacity, set high expectations, and demonstrate teaching excellence (Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett 2014; DeMatthews et al. 2020). This conclusion was also reached in a recent study by Tsirantonaki and Vlachou (2025), who found a significant correlation between Greek principals' knowledge and their beliefs, attitudes, and

subsequent teaching practices related to the education of students with disabilities within their schools. In this respect, school principals' knowledge is vital for cultivating conducive educational environments that facilitate the professional growth of educators and for aiding them in developing appropriate attitudes and implementing effective practices concerning the education of students with disabilities.

Strikingly, DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson (2021) formalised the distinction between two different approaches to principals' leadership as: 'leadership for effective inclusive schools' and 'leadership for socially just and inclusive schools'. According to the former approach, the pivotal role exercised by school principals is based on five tenets:

1. work collaboratively with external stakeholders to develop a mission and a shared understanding of inclusion;
2. communicate school expectations and work collaboratively so that all teachers are prepared to use evidence-based instruction, assessment, and schoolwide systems;
3. build and maintain a safe, welcoming, and responsive environment for students and families;
4. hire, retain, motivate, and provide professional development opportunities for teachers;
5. create partnerships with a range of school actors (e.g. families, teachers, students, other staff).

DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson (2021) argued that these contributions are important but do not examine or deal with how racism, ableism, classism, and other forms of discrimination are embedded within schools. In their empirical studies with school principals in Hispanic–Latino local communities, they collected data to shape a framework for 'leadership for socially just and inclusive schools'.

Accordingly, in their Australian study, Hardy and Woodcock (2022) highlights how school principals struggle to respond to the contradictory tensions between pressure for nationally standardised evaluation systems and performance and the intention to build a more socially just and inclusive approach for all students. In addition to empirical studies that investigate the factors that contribute to the development of inclusive practices. In a subsequent study, Woodcock and Hardy (2022) recommended further research on the forms of institutional partnerships that make for practices capable of promoting an inclusive institution-wide environment.

2. The current study

Most of the available studies in the field have addressed principals' beliefs and attitudes concerning school policies towards inclusion through the

administration of self-report instruments (e.g. Hadjidakou and Mnasonos 2012; Tsirantonaki and Vlachou 2025). Fewer studies have presented in-depth case studies of principals of highly inclusive schools who have managed to foster change in support of sustainable inclusive classrooms and increase student achievement (e.g. Billingsley et al. 2018; DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson 2021; McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd 2014). This offers a two-fold opening for further inquiry, given the pivotal role principals play in their schools: as ‘mediators’ (Shaked and Schechter 2017), that is, ‘implementors’ of national educational policies and prerogatives, and as ‘influencers’ (Tsirantonaki and Vlachou 2024) shaping their entire school community’s mission/s and vision/s. Consequently, gaining insight into principals’ perspectives and practices constitutes the primary focus of attention in this paper. Specifically, this study seeks to contribute to the research literature by addressing the following research question:

What are the key factors that principals employ that contribute to making their schools inclusive?

3. Methodology

This study incorporated an exploratory qualitative approach, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of the principals’ perspectives on inclusive education and the ways in which those perspectives influence systemic actions towards inclusive practices. Participants in this study came from four different countries (Australia, Italy, Switzerland, Spain; three principals from each country) operating different educational systems that can be regarded as representing various stages of inclusive development. In this respect, the selected countries offered an opportunity to elicit rich data from school leaders managing effective inclusive schools in diverse contexts and, therefore, allowed the research team to pinpoint effective common practices and wider similarities in the adopted leadership styles. It is worth noting here that there was no intention to draw any firm and generalisable conclusions about the respective countries from the limited research evidence collected in this investigation. Furthermore, such a research aspiration would be futile given the significant variations in educational policies and provision that exist within the participating countries (especially in Switzerland and Australia, which are federal states).

3.1. School contexts

As already mentioned, the four countries represent diverse educational systems at different phases of inclusive development. In every country, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted in order to locate principals who fulfilled the following criteria: (a) their school was officially recognised as an exemplary

institution for inclusiveness throughout the school community; (b) their school welcomes students with neurodiversity, disabilities, and special educational needs, with multiethnic backgrounds, and across the socio-economic status spectrum; (c) their school's policies and practices fully support inclusion of all students.

The selected schools represented a varied range of characteristics, including size (catering from approximately 100 to 2100 students), socio-economic class, and ethnicity. Although it is clearly not possible in the space of this article to present a comprehensive picture of the respective educational systems, some basic information about the state of inclusion in the four participating countries is provided next.

Australia: In Australia, there is no single agreed definition of inclusive education. Each state understands inclusive education differently and operates their practices accordingly. However, all states have committed to principles of inclusion in various ways, embracing a more holistic conception of inclusion in practice, with an emphasis on broader policy domains that encompass interventions not only regarding disability but also the intersectionalities of diversities (Woodcock and Hardy 2022). The selection of the Australian sample involved three secondary schools from two states (Victoria and Queensland). These schools were recognised by relevant education departments as being highly inclusive of all students. These schools varied in size (900–2100) and were identified as having a wide range of diverse students in the schools.

Italy: The Italian context is considered the most inclusive, with a long history of inclusive provision since a policy of radical integration was implemented in the 1970s, leading to the abolition of all special segregated provision. The pressure to ensure a fully inclusive educational system was initially enforced with the Law 118/1971, which abolished special classes and regulated the placement of all students with disabilities into regular school settings (Banks et al. 2023). In 1977, qualified support teachers were deployed in classrooms to support students with diverse needs, as well as to co-teach with the general teachers and facilitate the development of personalised teaching plans for students with special educational needs. The four decades that followed this reform included various governmental decrees and policy initiatives promoting inclusive practices in schools and ensuring effective provision for all students with disabilities. Three school principals from upper secondary schools were selected and invited to participate in the research. All three schools were technical and vocational. Their size varied from 600 to 900 students, and they were all recognised as excellent inclusive schools for their curricula projects to support all students.

Switzerland: The Swiss education system is highly selective and segregates students according to their academic performance after sixth grade (OECD 2017). In addition to mainstream schools, there are also special schools. Research shows that nationality and social background strongly influence

tracking in such schools (Neuenschwander 2014). Despite legal commitments to inclusion (UN General Assembly 2006), Switzerland maintains a highly specialised special school system (Hollenweger 2014), and individual schools retain the ultimate authority to decide whether children can attend mainstream schools or not. While some progress has been made in the last two decades, regional disparities persist because of the federal state structure. Educational segregation decreased from 5.3% to 3.2% between 2005 and 2020, but has stagnated in recent years (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020). In this respect, Switzerland represents a country where a traditional special education system is maintained despite efforts to promote inclusive education. For this study, three school principals from schools with visible commitment to inclusive school development were selected (participation in a cooperative inclusive education development project with one of the authors' universities, renunciation of tracked classes based on academic performance, absence of special classes, commitment to include all students in their school mission statement). Schools included both primary and lower secondary school levels and 260–500 students, including students with a wide range of disabilities.

Spain: In line with many other countries in Europe, from the 1970s, Spain's school system includes both specialised schools for students with special educational needs and learning support provision in mainstream schools. In 1990, an Education Act required that all students be taught in mainstream classes, unless they were not accessible, in which case they would attend special classes. Subsequent policy developments took place following the publication of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action for Special Educational Needs over thirty years ago (UNESCO 1994). Although the implementation of inclusive education was not as radical as in Italy, substantial progress has been achieved as manifested in the steady reduction of special school placements and the evolution of learning support structures in regular schools. Despite the co-existence of mainstream and special classes, the education system is developing towards a fully inclusive one, in line with the requirements of the United Nations' Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007), which established the rights for all children to be educated in mainstream schooling and to have access to a high-quality education. For the purpose of this study, three school principals from secondary schools based from the region of Catalunya were selected. These schools catered for students aged 12–16 and had been identified by the Department of Education of the Generalitat de Catalunya as providing excellent support for the diverse range of students in their register.

3.2. Researchers' positionality

As an international team of researchers, we recognise the significance of our race, experience with disabilities, and cultural positionality, especially given

the international nature of our study, which was carried out in four countries. These multiple dimensions of belonging require researchers to carefully consider their own cultural knowledge and background to be aware of contextualised systemic and structural images of social, political, economic, and educational factors that could affect the educational settings under investigation. To avoid 'researcher bias', we collaboratively engaged in processes that circumvent misinterpretations and misrepresentation of individuals, communities, institutions, and systems (DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson 2021). Our team's positionality was also informed by our previous experience as school professionals and as researchers interested in international projects on collective efficacy. These experiences were central to reviewing our methodological approach, which was inspired by the aim of giving voice to principals, learning from their communities, and generating models and practices that could be applied in different school contexts. This self-reflective and positional methodological perspective stimulated us to engage in critical discussions as we analysed our data (DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson 2021).

3.3. Data collection

Prior to commencing the study, approval for the project was granted by the ethics committees of all of the researchers' institutions and the local education authorities in the participating countries. Informed consent was also acquired from all participating principals who were additionally given written assurance that their responses would be kept in strict confidentiality. Data collection in each country followed a similar procedure. The researchers in the national units first carried out semi-structured interviews with each one of the selected principals with a view to eliciting their personal accounts on how 'collective inclusivity' was established in their schools. Based on a previously conducted literature review of the literature pertaining to the main research question of the study, a semi-structured interview protocol was designed by the research team. The main axes of this protocol addressed the following topics:

- why their schools are ranked as the top inclusive schools in their countries;
- the ways in which their school policies and practices favour inclusion of diverse students;
- involvement of families;
- students' engagement in the school inclusive practices;
- collaboration among key stakeholders and with other institutions;
- factors that promote a collective and institution-wide culture of inclusion.

In a subsequent wave of data collection, focus group interviews in every country were conducted with the participation of all selected principals and Local Authority administrators. In these interviews, the main issue around

which the discussion was launched concerned the ways recent policy developments at the regional, national, and international level had affected the inclusive development of their schools. Again, for the purpose of the present study, responses to the key research topics mentioned earlier oriented the discussion and subsequent analysis of the collected data.

The semi-structured interviews and focus groups lasted approximately 45–60 min. They were videotaped and/or audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed in original language. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, interview transcripts from all participating countries (with the exception of Australia) were translated into English using a standardised procedure and cross-verified by bilingual researchers prior to analysis. Across all four countries, the interviews and focus groups were guided by a protocol of questions that allowed freedom to digress while covering specific foci of interests such as relationships with families; students' engagement; effective leadership; and teachers' support. This methodological choice was adopted in order to allow participants to express beliefs about inclusive policies and practices at school from several viewpoints, while also exploring group dynamics and using dialogical prompts to stimulate the discussion.

3.3 Data analysis

The interview data were analysed according to the thematic analysis approach advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), a reflexive and theoretically flexible approach to analysing and interpreting patterns (themes) in qualitative data. First, the transcribed interviews were read several times by all members of the research team to gain deep immersion in the data. Next, an iterative process of coding was carried out manually by a group of four independent researchers (Saldana 2013). This team of co-researchers agreed to work separately in a first cycle of analysis, following a highly inductive and 'in-vivo' coding approach. The initial coding phase generated several inductive codes derived from the transcripts. Then, in a subsequent phase, researchers debriefed on the initial analysis, confronted the axial categories of the thematic analysis, and then carried out a second cycle of data analysis and review. This process resulted in the refinement of the initial categories produced and the generation of additional inductive codes to further compare principals' perspectives and inclusive practices. Finally, the team of co-researchers agreed on the specifics of each identified theme, generating clear definitions and names for each.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several steps were undertaken in the process of data collection and analysis. One involved '*data triangulation*', achieved by drawing on multiple data sources, including semi-structured interviews and focus groups. A second was '*investigator triangulation*' which involves the employment of several researchers, evaluators, peer debriefers in the coding/analysis procedure and not just the main researchers. Along with the

four main researchers, two additional researchers reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups, and confronted and validated the categories reported in the findings.

From the thematic content analysis, a network of concepts emerged. The findings revealed five broad key factors that affect and impact on school inclusivity: institutional commitment to a collective inclusive culture; family partnership and co-responsibility; collaboration among key stakeholders (e.g. students, teachers, other staff); students' voice and agency; and building and sustaining inter-institutional partnership. The emergent thematic categories presented in the findings' section are the outcome of that process and represent commonalities of similar responses among the groups of participants. The direct quotations of participants' words selected are those that best illustrate these themes.

Following the emergence of these key factors, we adopted the framework offered by Communities of Practice (CoP; Wenger 1998; Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002) to depict a community-based approach to collective school inclusion that could encompass these key factors (see Figure 1). In practice-based studies, communities of practice are informal groups of peers that share a common identity concerning a practice, mutual engagement, and sense of belonging to a specific domain or organisation. This practice-oriented

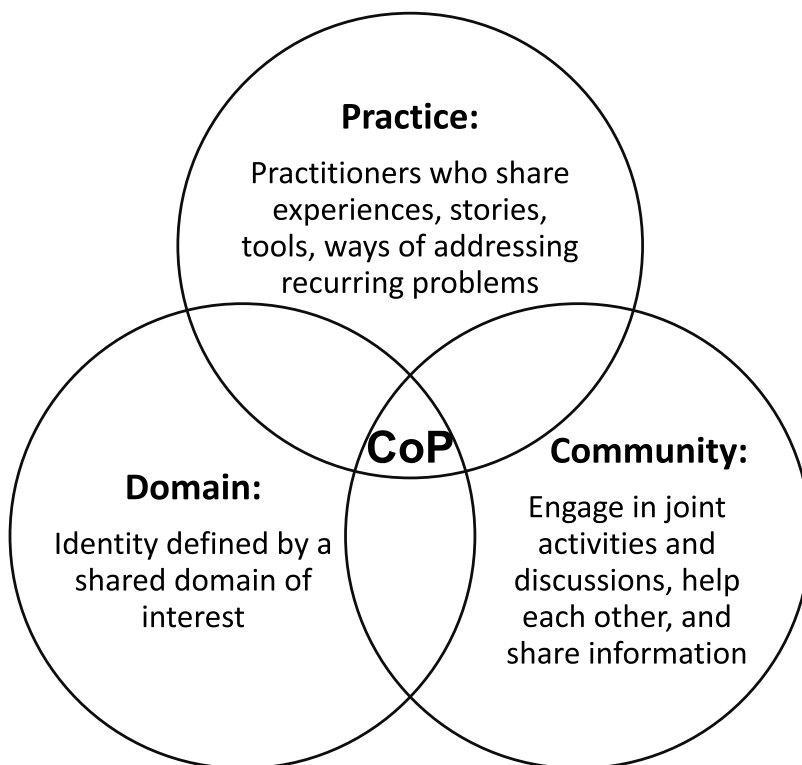


Figure 1. The model of the communities of practice.

framework guided our research efforts towards identifying key factors in the schools that contribute to the formalisation of a practice-based approach to collective inclusion.

4. Results and discussion

Inclusion is a huge umbrella term. It can have different meanings across cultures and across different local areas in the same country. In this study, we endeavoured to reach a bottom-up definition of school inclusivity through the identification of commonalities among the cross-cultural definitions of inclusivity elicited. Considering these foci, the analyses of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups allowed us to perceive an emerging framework for the interpretation of inclusivity. This framework is unique in the sense that: (a) it is practice-oriented, in terms of eliciting the principals’ ‘actual’ as

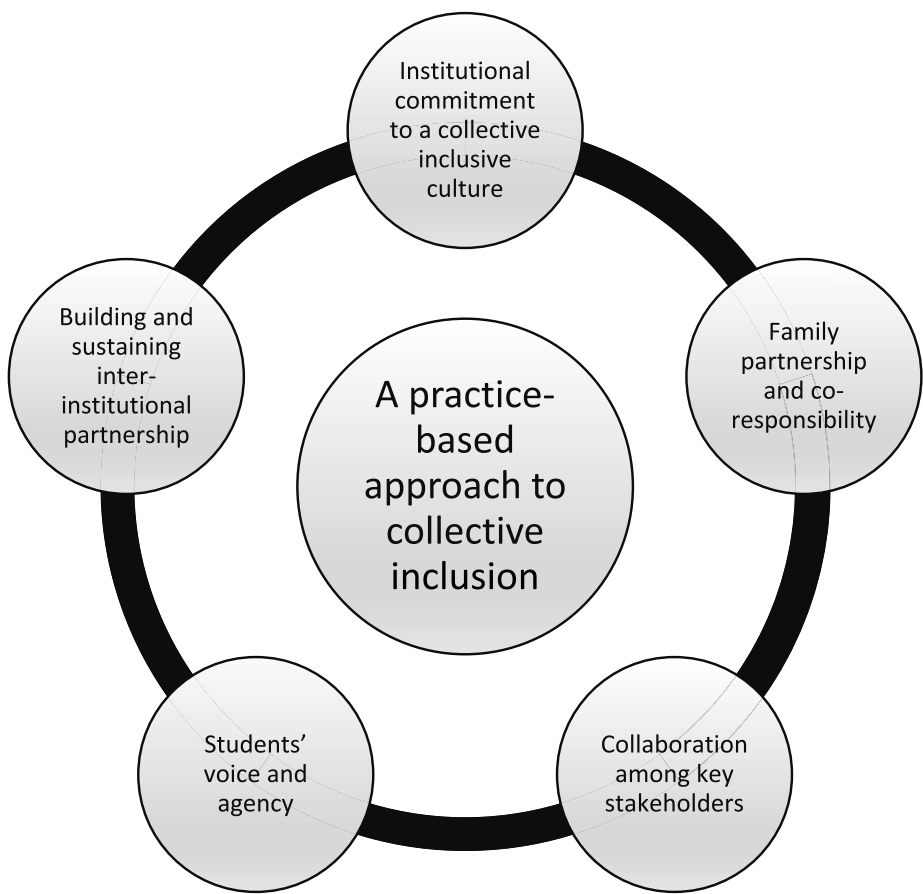


Figure 2. A practice-based approach to collective inclusion.

opposed to 'idealised' practices; (b) it is community-based; and (c) it is oriented towards a collective, collaborative framework.

It is towards presenting in detail the five key factors (see [Figure 2](#)) that emerged from the iterative analyses of the data to which we turn next.

4.1 *Institutional commitment to a collective inclusive culture*

Principals across the four countries highlighted the importance of how their leadership has shaped the culture and direction of their school. Each principal reported the need to understand school and local community histories and to assess teacher capacity, student needs and expectations, and their school's readiness to adopt or implement a collective culture of inclusion. They used words like '*community*', '*inclusive responsiveness*', and '*collaboration*' when discussing efforts to support inclusion from an institution-wide perspective. They described the need to critique routines within schools and challenge 'taken-for-granted' practices that might expose students to the risk of micro-exclusion or segregation.

One of the Italian school principals indicated the importance of understanding the local community challenges:

Our context is complex and includes many students with vulnerabilities, especially socio-economic. This requires awareness and constant adaptation. (Marco, Italian Principal)

Furthermore, the importance of staff understanding and willingness to engage in inclusive education was stated by several principals from Switzerland and Italy:

It's not just about implementation but about where the team stands, and whether they can see the point of inclusive education. (Olivia, Swiss Principal)

I strongly believe in inclusion, but I must have the support of the teaching staff. We all need to believe in it. (Lucio, Italian Principal)

Most of the principals highlighted the need to break down stereotypes as a form of '*affirmative action*' to demonstrate their commitment to raising awareness (DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson 2021). As highlighted by Australian and Spanish principals, this is also reflected in their values and attitudes toward inclusive education:

The realities of how inclusion should be achieved in practice are often not woven into the fabric of school management systems, because to do so it would require more staff, resources, and funding ... but a change in the organizational culture is a key aspect of ensuring that quality inclusive practices is maintained throughout any class. Continuing professional development ensures that at least all teachers have a thorough understanding of the value of inclusion. (Ben, Australian Principal)

We talk about every teacher being an inclusive teacher, but this won't happen until every school leader is devoted to inclusive policies. (Matthew, Australian Principal)

[We] try to open the eyes, listen a lot and try to deal with everyone equally, always with clear lines of what path we want to follow. (Maria, Spanish Principal)

The above quotes are indicative of a 'transformational' leadership style, which is typically associated with the leader's capacity to facilitate changes and innovations in schools through changing people's attitudes, beliefs, and by extension pedagogical practices, resulting in the establishment of a transformative culture within an organisation (Lambrecht et al. 2022; Óskarsdóttir et al. 2020). Notably, a transformational leader is not only committed to instilling an inclusionary vision to their staff, but also to ensuring that genuine inclusive practices are maintained throughout the organisation, which are fundamental to the success of educational inclusion.

4.2 Family partnership and co-responsibility

Participants argued that establishing collaborative relationships between families and school actors is a strategic leverage for cultivating genuine inclusive practices. They mentioned concrete actions and competencies they considered vital for enhancing cooperation: building mutual understanding; clarifying communications; achieving authentic collaboration on common efforts to which everyone can contribute; sharing awareness of students' developmental needs; and creating consensus on school activities that foster an inclusive culture.

All school principals highlighted the importance of parental involvement for the development and the feasibility of their inclusive initiatives. For example, an Italian principal, underlined the importance of actively involving parents in decision-making processes as an integral component in the process of successfully achieving an inclusive school:

I think the key word is awareness, because there are families – it is no mystery – that when faced with a disability, in the situation of a child undertaking a school journey, move with maturity, with responsibility and the awareness that lets them say: 'well, my child has this situation, these are the tools, school is an element of a broader context I need to confront and to share in order to construct a common path'. If the families of students with special needs have this mindset, then we can talk to each other, we construct solutions step by step and work together, every day. (Lucio, Italian Principal)

One Swiss principal also referred to the importance of parents in making the best decisions for their child:

Parents suddenly come into a different role, and they are suddenly no longer the advocates [only], they have to think about what is actually right for their child. (Lina, Swiss Principal)

In support, other school principals also stressed the importance of addressing issues of labelling and stigmatisation inside and outside of their schools through collaborating with parents:

When a parent fears that a label limits what his/her child can do, we have to support them in revising their beliefs and in understanding what the student is really capable of when given appropriate support. (Sofia, Italian Principal).

Schools can address issues of ableism and stigmatization in the home. We are aware that for parents, accepting that their child has a disability can be difficult ... often parents are frustrated, they search for help, and nobody responds to their requests. But opening a dialogue with parents and families, coaching them to meaningfully participate in developing their child's individualized educational plan, means adding value to schools. (Ben, Australian Principal)

The above quotes are all indicative of a distributed leadership style (Nadeem 2024) in which parents are valued and regarded as equal partners. This democratic culture is most vividly illustrated in the perspectives of the Italian and Spanish principals who adopted the terms '*conversations*', '*dialogue*', '*collective responsibility*', '*collegiality*', '*discussions*' to describe the social interactions occurring between parents and teachers. Such dialogic practices reflect participation and membership in shared practices of an educational Community of Practice, where '*practices*' constitute socially agreed ways of doing things in a specific (school) domain (Eleftheriadou and Vlachou 2020). Parents contribute towards inclusive policies and practice in schools by campaigning for the rights of their children to have equal access and opportunities for participation. In so doing, parents share knowledge and information about their children with teachers and other school staff so that all the necessary adjustments are implemented in order to meet their children's needs. As an Australian school principal pointed out, '*there are twin benefits*' (Matthew) for parents who contribute to a practice-oriented culture of inclusion. Parents' involvement solidifies a '*village*' mindset which positions them as equal partners in the education of their children. Furthermore, involving parents renders inclusion a socially equitable process, since students with disabilities are viewed as a part of a wider milieu, with unique family needs and social obligations.

The concept of the village mindset (Subban et al. 2023) fosters a deeper vision of a '*community-oriented*' mindset aimed at collective inclusivity, according to which authentic inclusion is a process of collective responsibility towards all students. '*Identity*' was defined as the set of parent/teacher roles in social interaction between parents and teachers, as participation and membership in shared practices of an educational CoP that concerned the education of children with disability, where '*practices*' constitute socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain.

4.3 Collaboration among key stakeholders

All participating principals focused on the importance of collaborative practices that enact the inclusion vision on the ground. School principals are viewed as *'mentors'*. Such work entails supporting decision-making processes with teachers; cultivating informal communities of practice to build trust among teachers, students, and parents; advocating and guaranteeing personalised teaching for all students; and ensuring opportunities for professional learning for teachers and other staff.

One of the Spanish principals said her role was *'to foster continuous improvement and reflection'* (Carmen). She started her school year by evaluating teaching teams, welcoming students with disabilities in person, identifying weaknesses, and visiting classrooms during daily activities. She describes her role as being *'an instructional leader'* (Lambrecht et al. 2022), whose responsibility is coordinating and helping teachers improve their instructional abilities and classroom management:

If we want students to be successful, we need good teachers working together ... they need to plan organic activities to present to students. They need to cooperate in advance to design fruitful learning activities, also through co-teaching and team-teaching practices. If they don't speak to each other, students with disabilities would be just pulled out of the regular classroom to stay in segregated spaces. (Carmen, Spanish principal)

Other school principals identified the need to support teachers in developing further knowledge and practice:

We organize further training on this and as a school team we are becoming more and more fit in dealing with diversity ... I really think that I support every teacher in difficulties as a school director. I make sure that the continuing education for teachers and the IF-teachers [Integrative Förderung – integration support] ... that I organize and that I am simply there in difficulties and always stay on top of it. (Lina, Swiss Principal)

We've actually started creating a data dashboard and we're teaching our staff how to collect and use data in a more targeted way so when they're differentiating what they're doing in the classroom with their students they'll have the data there to support whatever strategies it is that they're taking. (Fiona, Australian Principal)

These statements seem to be consistent with previous studies in the field (Carter and Abawi 2018; Poon-McBrayer 2017; Valdivieso 2020), which emphasised the importance of team-teaching in collective inclusion practices in order to prevent teachers from struggling alone and to advocate a proactive and *'can-do'* attitude towards changing segregating practices (DeMatthews, Serafini, and Watson 2021). School principals can cultivate professional learning communities (PLCs; Cox 2005), where teachers can work together, exchange experiences of critical incidents, build relational knowledge of their daily work practices, discuss differentiated instructional approaches, and identify effective teaching methods and management strategies to support all students

(Lambrecht et al. 2022). This is a bottom-up collaborative community-based model that supports teachers' professional learning through the lens of the Community of Practices (CoP) model (Wenger 1998).

4.4 Students' voice and agency

The majority of the participating principals (9 out of 12) fully embraced an 'Education for All' vision, which requires that not only are all students placed in the same mainstream education, but also that they are fully engaged strategically in the learning design and governance. For example, one Italian principal indicated the importance of student agency through choosing and engaging with the community through work on community-based projects:

We have students who, for example, are working in the province ... acting as guides at the wildlife exhibition. (Lucio, Italian Principal)

A Swiss principal highlighted the importance of students being strategically engaged in the learning process at the school:

So student council and class council ... I think that is important ... The self-organized learning, the further development, project work, I also find that very important. That should become even more important at our school. (Olivia, Swiss Principal)

Italian principals acknowledged that their schools are treating students as co-experts, creating spaces where their voices are heard and influence decisions. For example, one principal stated:

We are beginning to establish committees of teachers and students to listen more to student voices. (Marco, Italian Principal)

In a similar way, Spanish and Australian school principals highlighted the importance of giving students a voice in decision making:

This year we are creating student committees to give students voice and decision-making power ... which enable students to participate in municipal decision-making. (Miguel, Spanish Principal)

We spend a lot of time and energy on making sure that our students are happy and engaged because you have to be happy and engaged in order to learn ... It's about listening to the children. (Ben, Australian Principal)

The above quotes indicate a democratic style of leadership in which students are not only valued and respected, but more importantly, are offered the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes. Strikingly, such practices contribute to the creation of a responsive learning environment which supports the students' academic development and psychological well-being, especially those deemed to experience special educational needs and disabilities (Hunt et al. 2024).

4.5 Building and sustaining inter-institutional partnership

Several principals reported relying on other professionals such as social workers, educational psychologists, and therapists to build relationships with out-of-school services that impact student learning and growth. Several school principals' comments toward inter-institutional collaboration included:

... we are well networked with social services, with educational counselling, with other schools. I think that's also very important, that you have a network where you can turn to in case of difficulties ... for me school is no longer a lone wolf effort (..) but that it is always a team effort. (Roger, Swiss Principal)

... community and culture which is such an important part of all this ... the staff, the students, the parents, [and community groups] are so keen on maintaining ... the culture comes from the community, and they want to maintain it. (Fiona, Australian Principal)

The broad, inclusive inter-institutional work that school principals depict includes paths of intervention that address all students, using a strength-based approach as well as utilising community resources. Their vision represents a collective and collaborative village mindset, where they make an effort to learn how to ensure that all students have access to equal opportunities for learning and growth as well as address the personalised needs of students with disabilities.

The second notable finding, and one that requires further investigation, is that the Italian principals exhibited in-depth knowledge of the country's legal framework. This finding is interesting yet troublesome, as it supports claims that the national context (and legal regulation) affects the development of a community-based approach to inclusion. The Italian school principals portray themselves as 'receivers' and 'implementers' of inclusive policies.

I make a small remark that the PEIs [Piano Educativo Individualizzato [Individual Education Plans]] are mandatory, as to say, in their composition that they are attended by all the teachers ... there is a collegiality that is mandatory, the TAR [Tribunale Amministrativo Regionale [Regional Administrative Court]] with a recent ruling, this is important to make people understand there is the utmost attention. (Sofia, Italian Principal)

However, sometimes these policies are perceived more as a 'melange' of reforms in constant evolution, year by year. Furthermore, the management of some schools is particularly complicated, due to their difficult socio-economic local environments, in which several insecurities and weaknesses have to be addressed by community resources.

The social class of our students is predominantly medium-low and many families require and receive financial aid for canteen, school supplies, and excursions. (Miguel, Spanish Principal)

... [it is important] involving all the political stakeholders, associations, and health services that can provide support in the effort of building bridges towards life-long autonomy projects. (Sofia, Italian Principal)

4.6 The way forward: building a collective mindset for a practice-based and community-based approach to school inclusion

The five factors presented in detail are determinants of inclusive policies and practices and lead to the articulation of a community-based approach to collective inclusivity that can be applied across various countries' educational systems. These findings reaffirm the important role principals play in the creation of a collective organisational climate and culture (Billingsley et al. 2018; DeMatthews et al. 2020).

The results of this qualitative analysis reflect the participating principals' commitment to promoting an inclusive vision and highlight the ways they have supported the development of associated practices in their school community. The data suggest that these principals have adopted a 'distributed leadership' style (Rönn-Liljenfeldt, Sundqvist, and Ström 2024; Wang, Deng, and Tian 2022), which refers to the involvement of additional stakeholders as informal leaders in developing and improving processes, searching for the causes of problems, and designing solutions and implementation. This is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the evidence relating to promoting collaboration among key stakeholders and the heavy emphasis placed on establishing partnerships with families. In our study, 'distributed leadership' was achieved through sharing responsibility and delegating roles among all stakeholders involved within the school community, and resulted in genuine collaboration and knowledge sharing, thus strengthening the schools' capacity to respond to the challenge of inclusion (Óskarsdóttir et al. 2020).

It is worth noting here that the participating principals mentioned several microlevel leverage points of action such as offering professional development opportunities to their staff, addressing pressing needs that limited their teachers' effectiveness in inclusive classrooms, and securing additional resources. Interestingly, some of the activities and practices mentioned are associated with an 'instructional leadership' style (Howley et al. 2019; Lambrecht et al. 2022). As Ainscow and Sandill (2010) have cogently argued, at system and school level it is critical for leaders to foster inclusive practices, and these leaders have to take charge of such efforts. In the present study, the participating principals actively sought to improve pedagogical practices in the school through concrete practices that affect lesson development and individualised education planning, coordinating learning support provision in the school, providing advice to teachers with respect to their instructional practices, and ensuring systematic monitoring of the implementation of their school's goals.

Notwithstanding the importance of such practices, we would contend that our focus should not be only on microlevel leverage points of action of the types mentioned here but also on developing a whole 'village' mindset (Subban et al. 2023), where collective engagement in key issues like competing demands, school culture, organisational climate, physical barriers, and

collaboration among families and staff can be fostered. Educators and school leaders, who accept this collective responsibility through an embracing of their role within the village, are likely to transform educational provision for all students (Carter and Abawi 2018). In this respect, the metaphor elicited by the 'village' mentality prevents the risk of establishing new neo-institutionalising practices, according to which the responsibility for the growth and well-being of students with disabilities is delegated only to technical support staff (Banks et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the findings reveal a need for much closer scrutiny of how principals envision and enact inclusion in relation to their school community, and how they 'translate' their adopted management style into actual practices. These findings also align with previous research that suggests that inclusive principals rely on a basic repertoire of actions (e.g. building an institution-wide inclusive culture, redesigning organisational structures and spaces, cultivating teachers' professional development), responsive to the unique circumstances and design of each school community (Lambrecht et al. 2022; Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins 2008; Woodcock and Woolfson 2019).

The findings of this study have significant implications and lead to recommendations that need to become part of the conversation and research into inclusive education. This community and practice-based approach provides a framework for collective inclusive actions at school that does not depend on situated local conditions, but rather can be pertinent to many different national and international contexts. It is worth noting here that the cross-national convergence of these findings carries a particularly significant implication: the disposition toward collective responsibility for all learners, as evidenced in the accounts of principals across four markedly different educational systems, does not appear to be contingent upon any particular national policy architecture. This is perhaps most strikingly illustrated in the contrast between the Italian context, where full inclusion has been legally mandated since the 1970s, and the Swiss context, where selective and segregated provision remains largely intact, yet where principals in this study demonstrated a comparable commitment to cultivating the relational and cultural conditions of genuine inclusion. We would contend that this convergence lends further support to the argument that community-oriented, practice-led approaches to inclusion can take root even where structural barriers persist, provided that school leaders actively nurture shared ownership of inclusion across the whole school community (Óskarsdóttir et al. 2020).

Notwithstanding this, the evidence also points to the need for much closer scrutiny of the tension between legislative compliance and the cultivation of authentic inclusive cultures. The Italian principals, in particular, portrayed themselves at times as 'receivers' and 'implementers' of inclusion policy, suggesting that legal obligation alone does not guarantee the depth of collective engagement that characterises the schools in this study. In this respect, the findings

align with Ainscow and Sandill's (2010) argument that fostering inclusive practices requires not only structural and regulatory conditions but also the deliberate cultivation of the relational and cultural dimensions of school life that legislation cannot readily prescribe – and it is precisely these dimensions that the community-based framework advanced in this paper is designed to address.

Furthermore, the evidence relating to students' voice and agency warrants particular attention in terms of its implications for how school improvement and leadership preparation frameworks conceptualise inclusion. The participating principals did not treat student participation as a pedagogical consideration alone, but as a structural feature of their schools' inclusive culture – establishing student committees, embedding student voices in governance processes, and actively involving students in community-based projects beyond the school (Hunt et al. 2024). This points to the need for leadership frameworks and professional development programmes to position student agency not merely as a desirable outcome of inclusion but as one of its constitutive conditions.

Interestingly, the prominent role that inter-institutional partnerships played in the accounts of principals – particularly, though not exclusively, in contexts marked by significant socio-economic complexity, as highlighted by the Spanish and Australian participants – underscores the limitations of school-centric approaches to inclusion. When schools are deliberately embedded within broader networks of social services, health providers, community organisations, and local authorities, as the principals in this study described, the responsibility for inclusion is more equitably distributed and its reach necessarily extends beyond the school gate. We would argue, in line with previous research (e.g. Banks et al. 2023), that future inquiry into community-based models of inclusion would benefit from examining how such networks can be intentionally built and sustained over time, and what forms of leadership are most effective in brokering and maintaining them across diverse and shifting community contexts.

As researchers, we recognise that, despite the fact that the interviews and focus groups provided a rich and dense quantity of data, this study has some limitations. The sample of participants is not representative of the national populations of school principals. We cannot exclude the possibility that a broader sample of participants would yield other or additional factors relevant to school inclusion. Moreover, social desirability may have influenced school principals' responses. Nevertheless, the study was not aimed at providing any 'tokenism' or 'magic formula' to promote and realise an inclusive culture in public schools; rather, its objective was to contribute to the ongoing international scientific debate around how to foster a community-based and practice-led approach to inclusion in schools.

To sum up, the present study has highlighted some key factors that are conducive to the development of a practice-based approach to collective inclusion. Strikingly, despite differences between the four educational systems discussed

in this investigation, these key factors that have emerged undoubtedly affect and impact school inclusivity. The research evidence suggests that by adopting a community-based model to school inclusion principals can navigate material, social, and political challenges in order to strengthen their school's inclusion culture. Ultimately, fostering inclusive schools is less about isolated actions and more about cultivating a collective, community-driven mindset that empowers all stakeholders to lead, collaborate, and transform together.

Ethical approval

Approval for the project was granted by the ethics committees of all of the researchers' institutions and the local education authorities in the participating countries. Informed consent was also acquired from all participating principals who were additionally given written assurance that their responses would be kept in strict confidentiality. Data collection in each country followed a similar procedure.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Stuart Woodcock:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Elias Avramidis:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Umesh Sharma:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing; **Pearl Subban:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Caroline Sahli Lozano:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Harry Kullmann:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Tim Loreman:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Sergej Wüthrich:** Writing – review & editing; **Margarita Knickenberg:** Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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