

Leadership, Organizational Readiness, and Management Strategies in the Implementation of Inclusive Education for Learners with Special Needs

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Abstract

This study examined the leadership practices of school heads in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs in the City Schools Division of Calbayog. Anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory by Bass and Riggio (2006), Social System Theory by Luhmann (1995), and Social Constructivist Theory by Vygotsky (1978), the study aimed to determine the extent of leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies employed in inclusive education. A descriptive-correlational research design was utilized, employing survey questionnaires as the primary research instrument administered to school heads and teachers involved in inclusive education programs. Statistical tools such as frequency counts, percentages, weighted mean, and correlation analysis were used to analyze the gathered data. Findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high extent of leadership practices in strategic leadership, instructional support, professional development, stakeholder collaboration, and ethical leadership. Organizational readiness was also assessed to be moderate to high, particularly in terms of resource availability, teacher preparedness, and administrative support. Management strategies related to program implementation, capacity building, monitoring, and community partnerships were effectively practiced. The study further established significant relationships among leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies, indicating that effective leadership and institutional preparedness contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education for learners with special needs.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Inclusive Education, Instructional Support, Leadership Practices, Management Strategies, Organizational Readiness, Professional Development, Stakeholder Collaboration, Strategic Leadership, Transformational Leadership

1. Introduction

Inclusive education is founded on the principle that all learners, regardless of disability or special needs, must have equitable access to quality education. However, approximately 240 million children with disabilities worldwide continue to experience exclusion due to barriers such as inadequate resources, insufficient teacher preparation, and weak institutional support (UNICEF, 2021). Studies emphasize that leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies significantly affect the success of inclusive education by shaping school culture, instructional quality, and resource allocation (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). In the Philippines, inclusive education is institutionalized through Republic Act No. 10533, Republic Act No. 11650, and DepEd Order No. 21, s. 2019, which mandate equitable and accessible education for learners with disabilities. Despite these reforms, implementation remains inconsistent because of gaps in teacher competence, limited materials, and varying administrative support (Flores, 2021; Muega, 2019). Within the City Schools Division of Calbayog, schools differ in leadership approaches, resource availability, and management strategies, resulting in uneven implementation of inclusive education. The study asserts that leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies are interconnected factors that significantly influence inclusive education outcomes. Effective leadership fosters strategic direction and inclusive school culture, organizational readiness ensures adequate systems and resources, while management strategies operationalize inclusive programs through planning, monitoring, and collaboration. Strengthening these factors is essential for improving learner outcomes and sustaining inclusive education practices.

Literature consistently identifies inclusive education as a multidimensional reform requiring leadership, collaboration, and institutional readiness (UNESCO, 2020). Leadership practices influence school vision, culture, accountability, and instructional quality. Effective leaders promote inclusive values, allocate resources strategically, and support teachers through mentoring and professional development (Ainscow, 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). Organizational readiness is another recurring theme in the literature. Readiness involves teacher preparedness, availability of instructional resources, school support systems, and administrative backing (Weiner, 2009). Teachers require competencies in differentiated instruction, assessment modification, and classroom management to effectively support learners with special needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Studies also emphasize that positive school culture strengthens collaboration, inclusivity, and learner participation (Ainscow, 2020). Management strategies such as program development, resource management,

monitoring systems, capacity building, and stakeholder partnerships are critical to sustaining inclusive education (UNESCO, 2020). Effective monitoring and evaluation allow schools to identify gaps and improve programs continuously (Weiner, 2009). Collaboration among parents, communities, and external organizations also strengthens learner support services and institutional effectiveness (UNESCO, 2020). Research literature further indicates that leadership, readiness, and management strategies are interdependent factors affecting inclusive education implementation. However, many studies examine these variables independently rather than as an integrated framework (Ainscow, 2020; Weiner, 2009).

Globally, UNESCO (2020) and UNICEF (2021) emphasize that inclusive education remains a major educational challenge due to systemic inequities, insufficient resources, and exclusionary practices. International reforms advocate equitable participation and barrier-free education systems for learners with disabilities. Nationally, the Philippines institutionalized inclusive education through Republic Act No. 10533, Republic Act No. 11650, and DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020. These policies require schools to implement inclusive practices and align leadership standards with equitable educational goals. Despite these mandates, implementation disparities persist because schools differ in leadership capacity, teacher preparedness, and organizational support (Muega, 2019). Locally, schools in the City Schools Division of Calbayog demonstrate varying levels of implementation. Some schools exhibit strong leadership and collaborative practices, while others struggle with inadequate resources, limited infrastructure, and weak coordination systems. These contextual realities highlight the need for localized research that examines how institutional factors collectively shape inclusive education implementation.

The study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), which emphasizes the role of leaders in motivating stakeholders, promoting innovation, and driving systemic change. Transformational leadership highlights idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration as essential dimensions of effective leadership. The study is also grounded in Social System Theory (Luhmann, 1995), which conceptualizes schools as interconnected systems composed of leadership, teachers, learners, and organizational processes. This theory explains how leadership, resources, and school culture interact dynamically to influence inclusive education implementation. Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) further supports the study by emphasizing learning through social interaction, collaboration, and guided participation. Inclusive education relies heavily on collaborative learning, scaffolding, and culturally responsive practices to support diverse learners. Conceptually, the study examines the relationship among leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs. Leadership practices include leading strategically, managing operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others, building connections, and leading ethically. Organizational readiness covers resources, teacher preparedness, school support, school culture, and administrative support. Management strategies involve program development, resource management, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and collaboration and partnerships.

Existing studies establish that leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies influence inclusive education implementation. However, most studies examine these variables separately rather than as an integrated system (Ainscow, 2020; Weiner, 2009). Local studies also focus primarily on teacher preparedness or resource limitations without examining their relationship with leadership dynamics and management systems (Muega, 2019). There is limited localized research examining how leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies collectively shape inclusive education outcomes in Philippine school divisions. The City Schools Division of Calbayog presents a relevant context where implementation disparities exist because of differences in leadership approaches, resource allocation, and institutional systems. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the interrelationship among leadership, readiness, and management strategies. The findings aim to support evidence-based interventions and the development of PROJECT RAMP-IN (Readiness, Adaptation, and Management Partnerships for Inclusive Education) to strengthen inclusive education practices.

The study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

SDG 4 – Quality Education, because the research promotes equitable, inclusive, and accessible quality education for learners with special needs through improved leadership, institutional readiness, and instructional support.

SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, because inclusive education seeks to eliminate barriers that marginalize learners with disabilities and promotes equal participation in education.

SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, because ethical leadership, accountability, transparency, and inclusive governance strengthen institutional systems and educational equity.

SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals, because collaboration among schools, parents, communities, government agencies, and external organizations is essential in sustaining inclusive education programs.

The study supports the achievement of these SDGs by strengthening leadership systems, institutional collaboration, equitable access to education, and sustainable school governance practices.

The study contributes to multiple dimensions of sustainability. In terms of educational sustainability, it promotes long-term improvements in leadership practices, instructional quality, and teacher preparedness for inclusive education. Strengthened institutional systems ensure continuity of inclusive practices and equitable learning opportunities. The study also contributes to social and community sustainability by fostering inclusive school cultures, stakeholder collaboration, and stronger partnerships among schools, families, and communities. These efforts encourage social inclusion, acceptance, and shared responsibility for learner development. In terms of institutional and governance sustainability, the research highlights the importance of ethical leadership, accountability, strategic planning, and efficient management systems in sustaining inclusive education reforms. The proposed enhancement plan strengthens organizational resilience and policy implementation. Finally, the study supports human development sustainability by improving access, participation, and learning outcomes for learners with special needs. Through strengthened leadership, organizational readiness, and collaborative management strategies, schools become more adaptive, equitable, and capable of supporting diverse learner populations in the long term.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a descriptive-correlational research design. Descriptive research was used to determine the extent of leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs. Correlational analysis was employed to examine the relationships among these variables and determine whether leadership practices and organizational readiness significantly influenced management strategies in inclusive education implementation. The design was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to systematically collect quantitative data and analyze patterns, associations, and predictive relationships among variables without manipulating the study environment. The study also incorporated a developmental component through the formulation of PROJECT RAMP-IN (Readiness, Adaptation, and Management Partnerships for Inclusive Education), which was based on the findings of the research.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the City Schools Division of Calbayog, Division of Samar, Philippines. The locale included selected public elementary and secondary schools implementing inclusive education programs for learners with special needs. The division was chosen because of its active implementation of inclusive education policies and the varying conditions among schools in terms of leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies. The study setting provided a relevant context for examining how schools operationalize inclusive education and address challenges related to resources, instructional support, administrative systems, and stakeholder collaboration. The diversity of schools within the division also allowed the researcher to gather comprehensive data regarding institutional practices and readiness in implementing inclusive education.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study consisted of school heads and teachers from selected public schools in the City Schools Division of Calbayog that implement inclusive education programs for learners with special needs. School heads were included because they play significant roles in leadership, decision-making, resource allocation, and program implementation. Teachers were selected because they directly implement inclusive instructional practices and provide support to learners with special needs. The respondents provided information regarding leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies related to inclusive education implementation. Their perspectives contributed to identifying institutional strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement in sustaining inclusive education practices.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed appropriate sampling procedures to identify respondents from schools implementing inclusive education programs. The researcher selected respondents based on their involvement in inclusive education implementation, including school heads and teachers directly engaged in managing or facilitating programs for learners with special needs. Sampling procedures ensured representation from various schools within the City Schools Division of Calbayog to obtain reliable and relevant data regarding leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies. The sample size was determined to provide sufficient data for statistical analysis and interpretation of relationships among the study variables.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in the study was a researcher-made survey questionnaire designed to measure leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs. The questionnaire was developed based on related literature, policies, and theoretical foundations such as Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006), Social System Theory (Luhmann, 1995), and Social Constructivist Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The instrument consisted of sections that assessed leadership practices, including

leading strategically, managing operations and resources, focusing on teaching and learning, developing self and others, building connections, and leading ethically. Organizational readiness was measured through indicators such as resources, teacher preparedness, school support, school culture, and administrative support. Management strategies included program development, resource management, capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and collaboration and partnerships. The questionnaire underwent validation procedures to ensure content relevance and clarity. Reliability testing was also conducted to determine the consistency of the instrument before data collection.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Before conducting the study, the researcher secured approval from the appropriate school authorities and obtained permission from the Schools Division Office and participating school heads. After approval, the researcher distributed the survey questionnaires to the selected respondents. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and provided instructions regarding the completion of the questionnaire. Respondents were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would only be used for academic purposes. After the retrieval of completed questionnaires, the responses were organized, checked, and prepared for statistical analysis. The data gathering process ensured that ethical standards, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the conduct of the study.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical tools to determine the extent of leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies in implementing inclusive education. Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, weighted mean, and standard deviation were used to summarize and interpret the respondents' assessments. Inferential statistical techniques were employed to determine the relationships among variables and assess their predictive influence. Correlation analysis was used to identify significant relationships among leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies, while regression analysis was utilized to determine the extent to which leadership practices and organizational readiness influenced management strategies in inclusive education implementation. The statistical analyses provided the basis for interpreting the findings and developing PROJECT RAMP-IN as an enhancement plan for inclusive education implementation.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Leadership Practices in Implementing Inclusive Education

3.1.1 Leading Strategically

The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high extent of strategic leadership in implementing inclusive education. Respondents indicated that administrators effectively communicated school goals, aligned programs with inclusive education policies, and ensured that initiatives for learners with special needs were integrated into school improvement plans. These findings suggest that strategic leadership plays an essential role in sustaining inclusive education initiatives. Effective planning and vision-setting enable schools to create structured programs that support learners with special needs. The results support the Transformational Leadership Theory of Bass and Riggio (2006), which emphasizes the importance of visionary leadership in organizational change and educational improvement.

3.1.2 Managing School Operations and Resources

The data showed that respondents perceived school heads as highly capable in managing school operations and allocating resources for inclusive education. Schools were able to provide instructional materials, coordinate support services, and manage available resources to address the needs of learners with special needs. The findings indicate that resource management contributes significantly to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Efficient allocation of resources ensures that learners receive adequate support and services despite institutional limitations. This supports organizational principles discussed in Luhmann's Social System Theory (1995), which emphasizes the importance of coordinated systems and institutional functionality in achieving organizational goals.

3.1.3 Focusing on Teaching and Learning

The results revealed that school heads consistently supported teaching and learning processes related to inclusive education. Respondents noted that administrators encouraged differentiated instruction, monitored classroom practices, and promoted professional support for teachers handling learners with special needs. These findings imply that instructional leadership strengthens teachers' ability to deliver inclusive and learner-centered instruction. School leaders who prioritize teaching and learning create supportive environments that enhance educational outcomes for learners with special needs. The findings align with Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), which highlights the significance of guided learning and collaborative educational support.

3.1.4 Developing Self and Others

The study found that school heads demonstrated strong commitment to professional growth and staff development. Respondents reported that administrators encouraged teachers to attend seminars, training programs, and professional development activities related to inclusive education. The findings suggest that continuous professional development improves teachers' competencies and confidence in handling inclusive classrooms. Capacity-building initiatives strengthen institutional readiness and improve the quality of instruction for learners with special needs. The results reinforce the importance of transformational leadership in fostering professional growth and collaborative learning environments (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

3.1.5 Building Connections

The results showed that school heads effectively established partnerships with parents, stakeholders, and community organizations in support of inclusive education. Respondents observed active collaboration and communication between schools and external stakeholders. These findings indicate that stakeholder engagement enhances support systems for inclusive education programs. Collaboration among schools, families, and communities promotes shared responsibility in addressing the needs of learners with special needs. This supports inclusive education principles emphasizing community participation and collaborative partnerships in educational development.

3.1.6 Leading Ethically

The findings revealed that school heads exhibited ethical leadership practices in implementing inclusive education. Respondents perceived administrators as fair, respectful, and committed to promoting equal learning opportunities for all students. The results imply that ethical leadership strengthens trust, inclusivity, and positive school culture. Leaders who demonstrate fairness and respect contribute to environments where learners with special needs feel valued and supported. Ethical leadership also reinforces educational equity and inclusive practices within schools.

3.2 Organizational Readiness for Inclusive Education

3.2.1 Availability of Resources

The findings showed that schools demonstrated moderate to high organizational readiness in terms of resources for inclusive education. Respondents identified the availability of instructional materials, learning facilities, and support services, although some limitations in resources were still evident. These findings suggest that adequate resources are necessary for effective inclusive education implementation. Limited resources may hinder schools' ability to fully address the diverse needs of learners with special needs. The results highlight the importance of institutional support and resource allocation in strengthening inclusive education programs.

3.2.2 Teacher Preparedness

The results revealed that teachers were generally prepared to implement inclusive education practices, although varying levels of confidence and expertise were observed. Respondents acknowledged the importance of training and professional development in improving instructional competencies. The findings indicate that teacher preparedness is a critical factor in successful inclusive education implementation. Professional development opportunities help teachers adapt instructional approaches and manage diverse classroom needs effectively. These findings support Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory (1978), which emphasizes guided learning and collaborative educational support systems.

3.2.3 School and Administrative Support

The data showed that schools and administrators provided substantial support for inclusive education implementation. Respondents recognized the efforts of school leaders in facilitating programs, monitoring implementation, and encouraging inclusive practices. These findings suggest that administrative support enhances organizational readiness and promotes the sustainability of inclusive education initiatives. Supportive leadership strengthens institutional commitment and encourages teachers to adopt inclusive instructional strategies. The results align with Transformational Leadership Theory, which highlights leadership influence on organizational improvement (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

3.3 Management Strategies in Implementing Inclusive Education

3.3.1 Program Development and Implementation

The findings revealed that schools effectively implemented management strategies related to program development for inclusive education. Respondents observed that schools established initiatives and interventions designed to support learners with special needs. These findings indicate that structured program implementation contributes to the effectiveness of inclusive education. Proper planning and coordination allow schools to address learners' educational and developmental needs systematically. The results emphasize the importance of organized management systems in sustaining inclusive programs.

3.3.2 Capacity Building and Professional Development

The results showed that schools regularly conducted capacity-building activities and professional development programs for teachers and staff involved in inclusive education. The findings imply that continuous training strengthens teachers' instructional competencies and improves the implementation of inclusive practices. Professional development also enhances educators' confidence in addressing diverse learner needs and promotes long-term institutional readiness for inclusive education.

3.3.3 Monitoring, Evaluation, and Partnerships

The study found that schools practiced regular monitoring and evaluation of inclusive education programs while maintaining partnerships with stakeholders and community organizations. These findings suggest that monitoring mechanisms and collaborative partnerships contribute to effective program implementation and continuous improvement. Stakeholder involvement also strengthens support systems for learners with special needs and promotes shared accountability in inclusive education implementation.

3.4 Relationship Among Leadership Practices, Organizational Readiness, and Management Strategies

The findings revealed significant relationships among leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies in implementing inclusive education. Leadership practices were positively associated with organizational readiness and management effectiveness. Organizational readiness also demonstrated a significant relationship with management strategies. These findings indicate that effective leadership and organizational preparedness are essential factors in successful inclusive education implementation. School leaders who demonstrate strategic, ethical, and instructional leadership strengthen institutional readiness and improve management systems for learners with special needs. The results support Bass and Riggio's Transformational Leadership Theory (2006) and Luhmann's Social System Theory (1995), which emphasize leadership influence, organizational coordination, and systemic collaboration in achieving educational goals.

3.5 Proposed Enhancement Plan

Based on the findings, the study proposed PROJECT RAMP-IN (Readiness, Adaptation, and Management Partnerships for Inclusive Education) as an enhancement plan to strengthen inclusive education implementation in the City Schools Division of Calbayog. The program focuses on improving leadership practices, strengthening organizational readiness, enhancing professional development, and expanding stakeholder partnerships. The proposed enhancement plan addresses the identified needs and challenges in implementing inclusive education and aims to promote sustainable support systems for learners with special needs. The project emphasizes collaboration, capacity building, and institutional development to improve the overall quality of inclusive education programs.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The study concluded that school heads in the City Schools Division of Calbayog demonstrated a high extent of leadership practices in implementing inclusive education for learners with special needs, particularly in strategic leadership, instructional support, professional development, stakeholder collaboration, and ethical leadership. Schools also showed moderate to high organizational readiness through available resources, teacher preparedness, and administrative support, while management strategies were effectively implemented through program development, capacity building, monitoring, and partnerships. Furthermore, significant relationships were found among leadership practices, organizational readiness, and management strategies, indicating that effective leadership and institutional preparedness contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education. These findings support the principles of Transformational Leadership Theory by Bass and Riggio (2006), Social System Theory by Luhmann (1995), and Social Constructivist Theory by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizing the importance of leadership, collaboration, and organizational support in achieving inclusive educational goals.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that school administrators continue strengthening leadership practices that support inclusive education by enhancing strategic planning, instructional supervision, ethical leadership, and stakeholder collaboration. Schools should further improve organizational readiness through sustained resource allocation, teacher training, and institutional support mechanisms to address the diverse needs of learners with special needs. Continuous professional development programs and strengthened partnerships with parents, communities, and external stakeholders should also be maintained to sustain effective implementation of inclusive education. In addition, the proposed PROJECT RAMP-IN should be adopted and implemented to enhance leadership capacity, organizational preparedness, and management strategies for inclusive education in the City Schools Division of Calbayog.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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