

School Principals' Role as Inclusive Leaders to Foster Academic Engagement

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Abstract: Inclusive leaders play a critical role in fostering an engaged culture by upholding justice and fairness, which are important factors that motivate and bind employees. The study was qualitative in nature. Secondary school Principals were selected as participants in the study. There were 15 secondary school principals who participated in the study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The responses to questions were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study emphasizes important tactics used by principals to encourage inclusion through interviews with school administrators. The interviews were transcribed using thematic analysis. According to the research, inclusive principals increase student involvement and help diverse student groups achieve better academic results. The study emphasizes how crucial leadership is in establishing inclusive teaching methods and the beneficial effects this has on student participation.

Key Words: School Principals, Inclusive Leader, Academic Engagement, Education, School Administrators

Introduction

The dynamic and ongoing process of inclusive education aims to encourage all students, especially those who are marginalised, to participate in the educational system. It is based on the ideas of fairness, involvement, and the genuine inclusion of every kid in the school's social and academic life (Graham, 2020; Vlachou, 2023). In order to eliminate obstacles to participation, inclusive education necessitates systemic transformation, which includes adjustments to curriculum, instructional strategies, school administration, and educational methodologies. It is a dynamic process that involves teachers, students, and school administrators working together to create an inclusive and equitable environment (Graham, 2020; Vlachou, 2023).

The inclusion of handicapped students is the main focus of this study since, as previously noted, methods and policies that support inclusiveness for impaired students also benefit all students (Graham, 2020). In order for every student to fully engage, feel welcomed, and feel valued, the administrator of an inclusive school must be ready to establish a school atmosphere with student diversity in an aggressive and positive way (DeMatthews et al., 2020). However, in practice, prior research indicates that principals are not the best at overseeing inclusive education. Principals' comprehension of what inclusive education means is still limited, according to the findings of a study by Andini et al. (2018). Furthermore, according to another study by DeMatthews et al. (2020), principals play a crucial role in establishing inclusive schools, but they have difficulties when it comes to putting significant change into practice.

This is supported by a study by Frick et al. (2013), which shows that when faced with resource shortages, teacher expectations, restrictive municipal legislation, and parental discontent, principals find it difficult to create inclusive schools. Given that knowledge of inclusive education is still lacking and the intricate adjustments needed to accomplish this, it is evident that administrators confront significant obstacles when establishing a school atmosphere that supports it.

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Applying Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) is crucial to creating an inclusive and stimulating learning environment for kids with special needs, as previously noted, given the problems in the previous study. In order to create a leadership that acknowledges that student diversity adds complexity to extra teaching duties, CRSL was conceived as culturally responsive leadership (Vlachou, [2023](#)). As a leader, CRSL can help the principal develop an inclusive school climate and an atmosphere that can engage all kids. The use of CRSL to manage inclusive school education for principals has been the subject of several prior studies. In order to create a leadership that acknowledges that student diversity adds complexity to extra teaching duties, CRSL was conceived as culturally responsive leadership (Koutrouba et al., [2018](#)). As a leader, CRSL can help the principal develop an inclusive school climate and an atmosphere that can engage all kids.

According to other studies, CRSL implementation can investigate how principals regulate school policies and how they need to be informed, involved, and sensitive to the requirements of kids with special education (Lazaridou, [2019](#)). Applying CRSL to principals is crucial for the following three reasons: (1) A key element of successful school leadership is CRSL. (2) If the principal applies CRSL consistently, it may be sustained. (3) Self-reflection on leadership behaviour, the development and upkeep of CRSL instructors and curriculum, the promotion of an inclusive school climate, and the engagement of students, parents, and the community are some of the distinctive leadership behaviour traits of CRSL (Vlachou et al., [2016](#)).

According to a review of earlier studies, a more thorough and in-depth study is still required, even if a number of them have claimed that CRSL implementation can serve as a framework for principals to build and execute inclusive education. In order to comprehend patterns, methodologies, and findings pertinent to the research issue, this study will take a closer look at earlier research. Since the implementation of CRSL is still frequently found in inclusive schools with diversity in general (diversity based on race, culture, and marginalised groups), the scientific novelty of this research lies in its primary focus, which is specifically examining the role of principals in the implementation of inclusive education for students with special needs. In order to comprehend patterns, methodologies, and findings pertinent to the research issue, this study will take a closer look at earlier research. Since the implementation of CRSL is still frequently found in inclusive schools with diversity in general (diversity based on race, culture, and marginalised groups), the scientific novelty of this research lies in its primary focus, which is specifically examining the role of principals in the implementation of inclusive education for students with special needs (CRPD, 2016).

According to Edmondson ([1999](#)), psychological safety is the assurance that one won't face consequences or embarrassment if one voices their ideas, queries, or worries. Employees in these settings are more inclined to take chances, think creatively, and give their best at work because they feel appreciated for their efforts.

Thus, in addition to raising participation, inclusive leadership promotes long-term success and organisational innovation. Inclusive leadership involves awareness of the diversity within the team and actively seeks to use it. Leaders who are inclusive create a culture where employees feel valued and respected, encourage open communication, and demonstrate empathy. The study finds that inclusive leadership raises employee engagement by fostering psychological safety and a feeling of community, two things that are necessary for engagement.

Employee Engagement

The sentimental commitment and interest that employees have in their organization and its goals is referred to as "employee engagement". Engaged employees exhibit greater creativity, greater loyalty to the organization, and go above and above the call of duty. Previous study has identified a number of factors, including job design, leadership, organizational culture, and well-being, that have an influence on employee engagement.

Inclusive Leadership in Fostering Employee Engagement

To increase employee engagement in firms, inclusive leadership must be characterized by openness, accessibility, and a commitment to diversity. Inclusive leaders aggressively seek to establish a work atmosphere where all employees feel valued, respected, and vital to the company's success, regardless of their identity or background. This leadership strategy



not only acknowledges and values the diversity of perspectives and abilities found in the workforce, but it also cultivates a sense of belonging, which is essential for high levels of engagement. Research indicates that when employees see their leaders as inclusive, they are more likely to feel psychologically at ease, which inspires them to offer innovative solutions, engage fully, and get profoundly immersed in their work (Carmeli et al., [2010](#)).

Additionally, it has been discovered that workers with inclusive leadership have higher levels of dedication, job satisfaction, and overall wellbeing—all of which are highly connected with engagement. Leaders that are inclusive are more likely to be understanding of the needs and challenges that their employees face, allowing them to provide the tools and support needed for individuals to be successful in their roles.

In diverse workplaces where employees may differ in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, or other diversity-related criteria, inclusive leadership has a major influence on employee engagement. Leaders who practise inclusion make sure that all opinions are heard and that the team's varied contributions are taken into account when making decisions. This strategy improves decision-making quality and boosts employee engagement and morale since workers feel their distinct viewpoints are valued and have an influence (Shore et al., [2011](#)). Leaders may effectively bridge the gap between diversity and engagement by cultivating an inclusive culture that ensures all workers are engaged and dedicated to the organization's goals. Furthermore, as corporate social responsibility and globalisation gain prominence, inclusive leadership becomes increasingly crucial.

The capacity to lead inclusively and involve a diverse staff is becoming more and more important for long-term success as firms grow globally (Nishii, [2013](#)). To summarize, inclusive leadership has the potential to significantly increase employee engagement by establishing a work environment in which all staff members feel empowered to provide their best efforts and make valuable contributions to the success of the company.

School Principals as Inclusive Leaders

Since they are in charge of determining the overall culture of the school, administrators play a crucial role in promoting diversity. Teachers and students are more likely to feel empowered and motivated in environments created by principals who exhibit inclusive leadership. According to DeMatthews ([2018](#)), inclusive principals collaborate with staff to develop inclusive methods and participate in reflective practices that challenge their own prejudices.

Strategies for Fostering Academic Engagement

When it comes to putting methods in place that encourage student academic engagement, principals are essential. Effective principals, according to Robinson et al. ([2008](#)), concentrate on developing instructional practices as they have a direct influence on student participation. This means fostering inclusive educational practices in teacher professional development and creating opportunities for staff cooperation. Differentiated education is one strategy that inclusive principals employ to meet the diverse needs of their students. Tomlinson ([2014](#)) asserts that varied instruction allows teachers to adapt their teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learning preferences and skill levels, which may increase student engagement.

Supporters of differentiated teaching include inclusive leaders who give teachers training and resources and encourage candid conversations about the challenges and successes of their pupils. Creating a feeling of community among students is another important strategy. According to Goodenow and Grady ([1993](#)), students are more likely to be engaged in their academic work when they feel like they belong at school. In order to promote a feeling of community among all students, inclusive principals implement mentorship programs, solicit student opinions, and deal with bullying and prejudice (Ainscow & Sandill, [2010](#)).

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study was the following.

1. To describe the school principals' role as inclusive leaders to foster academic engagement.

Research Methodology

The study was qualitative in nature. Secondary school Principals were selected as participants in the study. There were 15 secondary school principals who participated in the study. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The responses to questions were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings

Theme 1: Valuing Diversity and Inclusion

The necessity of leaders appreciating diversity and actively fostering inclusiveness was one of the main topics that came out of the interviews, according to the majority of the principals. When their leaders acknowledged and applauded a range of viewpoints, backgrounds, and achievements, participants expressed greater levels of involvement. Employee commitment and a sense of belonging were said to increase under inclusive leaders who promoted a range of opinions in decision-making.

Theme 2: Open Communication and Feedback

The need of open communication in promoting participation was another important issue. The significance of leaders who are personable, actively listen to staff problems, and offer constructive criticism was underlined by the participants.

Theme 3: Psychological Safety

Psychological safety—the belief that one may express oneself without fear of negative consequences—was identified as a crucial element of engagement. Participants underlined that inclusive leaders create a psychologically safe environment where employees feel comfortable sharing innovative ideas, taking risks, and raising concerns. This sense of safety was directly linked to higher levels of involvement.

Theme 4: Empowerment and Autonomy

The final component relates to the autonomy and empowerment that inclusive leaders provide. Participants saw that leaders who trusted them with decision-making authority and encouraged their professional growth fostered a stronger feeling of engagement. When workers felt empowered, they were inspired to work more since it was seen as a sign of respect and confidence in their abilities.

Discussion

The study's findings are consistent with previous research showing that inclusive leadership improves employee outcomes. Nonetheless, this study advances knowledge by offering concrete instances of how workers in various industries view and experience inclusive leadership strategies.

School administrators have a crucial role as inclusive leaders in encouraging students' academic participation, especially in inclusive and varied learning environments. It has been demonstrated that inclusive leadership fosters situations where all students feel encouraged and inspired to participate academically. This is typified by a dedication to equity, teamwork, and an appreciation of diversity (DeMatthews, [2015](#)). By adopting inclusive leadership strategies, principals may better meet the varied needs of their student bodies and guarantee that every kid has the chance to succeed.

Fostering an inclusive and equitable school culture is one of the main ways administrators encourage academic involvement. According to research by Ryan ([2006](#)), inclusive leaders proactively seek to eliminate obstacles to education, such as bias and discrimination, and provide every student with a feeling of inclusion. Since students who feel appreciated and respected are more likely to actively participate in their education, this sense of belonging is essential for academic engagement (Freeman et al., [2007](#)). A school climate that puts each student's achievement first is established by principals who set an example of inclusivity and support fair policies.

Furthermore, inclusive principals are essential in helping teachers adopt inclusive teaching methods. Principals enable instructors to differentiate teaching and meet the various learning requirements of their pupils by offering



resources and chances for professional development (Ainscow & Sandill, [2010](#)). Making sure that the teachings are understandable and pertinent to every student, in turn, improves academic engagement. In order to boost student performance, inclusive leaders also encourage staff cooperation, sharing best practices and group problem-solving (Hoppey & McLeskey, [2013](#)).

Conclusion

As inclusive leaders, school administrators play a critical role in encouraging students' academic participation. Principals may foster a school culture that promotes every student's academic performance by promoting equality, diversity, and inclusive practices. To guarantee that every student has the chance to succeed in an inclusive learning environment, it is necessary to address the difficulties and obstacles associated with putting inclusive leadership into practice. Academic engagement is strongly influenced by inclusive leadership. Leaders may greatly increase team engagement by embracing diversity, encouraging open communication, fostering a psychologically secure atmosphere, and empowering their staff. Adopting inclusive leadership techniques will be crucial as businesses continue to manage the challenges of a diverse workforce in order to retain an engaged and driven.

Recommendations

The recommendations were the following.

1. Leaders should establish spaces where staff members may freely share their opinions and concerns without worrying about criticism or retaliation.
2. On the basis of the findings, the study recommended that inclusive leadership practices might be based on cultural competency and unconsciousness.
3. Create sponsorship and mentoring initiatives that connect senior executives with a diverse workforce. This makes it possible to guarantee that every worker has an equal chance to advance.
4. Put together groups of people with different experiences, abilities, and viewpoints to encourage creative problem-solving and judgement. Inclusive leaders should encourage collaboration in addition to making sure that everyone's viewpoints are taken into consideration.
5. Policies that actively support diversity and inclusion should be developed by organizations. Fair hiring, promotion, and decision-making procedures that value and promote diversity of viewpoints are all examples of this.

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