CHAPTER 3
THEORY AND METHODS OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

THE EDUCATIONAL LEADER AS A CATALYST FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

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Abstract. *The relevance of this study lies in the urgent need for Ukrainian educational institutions to move beyond formal policies and foster inclusion through cultural transformation at the school level. As the education system undergoes reform, the role of school leadership in developing inclusive values and practices becomes critical. The purpose of the research is to explore how principals and management teams contribute to shaping an inclusive culture through leadership strategies, team development, and community engagement. The study employs a qualitative methodology combining interviews with school principals, analysis of institutional documents, and interpretation of structured survey data. Data collection focused on schools implementing inclusive education, providing insights into leadership practices and systemic challenges. The methodology allowed for the identification of patterns in leadership behavior that support or hinder the creation of inclusive environments. The results reveal that inclusive education is integrated only partially into strategic planning. Leadership engagement varies, with many schools lacking systematic structures for inclusion and professional development. Coordination of inclusive processes remains inconsistent, and discussions about inclusive values are often rare. Nevertheless, many principals recognize the effectiveness of transformational and democratic leadership in promoting inclusion. The research identifies five essential elements for fostering inclusive culture: commitment to core inclusive values; empowerment of staff through distributed leadership; understanding inclusion as a dynamic process; proactive management of challenges; and the use of reflective tools like feedback systems. These findings highlight that inclusion is not a single achievement but a continuous cultural evolution requiring vision, participation, and resilience. School leaders must act as catalysts for embedding inclusive principles into every aspect of school life.*

Keywords: *inclusive leadership; school culture; Ukraine; educational management; diversity; school principal; transformational leadership.*

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Formulas: 0; fig.: 6; tabl.: 0; bibl.: 7

Introduction. Inclusive education has become a global priority, reflecting broader shifts toward equity, human rights, and educational democratization. In Ukraine, this shift is evident in national legislation and reform initiatives, but the implementation of inclusive values depends largely on the internal culture of schools. The principal, as both a cultural leader and a manager, plays a pivotal role in cultivating these values through everyday practices, decision-making, and communication. This paper examines the strategic and psychological dimensions of that role, offering insights into how leadership shapes inclusive transformation in Ukrainian schools.

Literature Review. The development of an inclusive culture in educational institutions is increasingly recognized as a leadership-driven process. School leaders are not merely administrators of policy but active agents of cultural transformation who shape how inclusion is understood, implemented, and sustained. The literature consistently positions leadership as a central determinant of inclusive success, especially in environments where diversity is growing and systemic support structures may be lacking.

Inclusive leadership theory emphasizes the importance of values-based decision-making and relational competence. According to Booth and Ainscow (2011), inclusion must be embedded in the school's vision, daily routines, and communication systems, and school leaders play a pivotal role in setting this tone. Their framework, the *Index for Inclusion*, suggests that inclusive cultures are co-constructed through shared values, participatory leadership, and structural alignment with inclusive goals.

Transformational leadership has also been shown to be effective in advancing inclusive practices. Leaders who act as visionaries, build trust, and motivate teams contribute to a more engaged school climate that embraces difference and prioritizes equity (Ryan, 2012). This style contrasts with traditional managerial approaches that focus primarily on compliance and operations, often neglecting the deeper cultural and emotional dimensions of inclusion.

Recent research emphasizes distributed leadership as a critical factor in sustaining inclusive change. When leadership is shared among staff, including special educators, support teams, and even students, the sense of ownership over inclusive values expands (Harris & Jones, 2019). This collaborative model is particularly important in contexts with limited resources, where the leader's role shifts from directive authority to cultural facilitator and team enabler.

Barriers to inclusive leadership are also well documented. Slee (2011) identifies systemic challenges such as standardized accountability regimes and rigid curricula as constraints that limit the agency of school leaders. Moreover, UNESCO (2020) highlights that without targeted training and policy coherence, even well-intentioned leaders struggle to implement inclusive visions in practice.

Empirical studies in post-socialist countries—including Ukraine—point to additional constraints such as inherited bureaucratic traditions, weak autonomy of school management, and limited access to professional development. Nonetheless, local research (e.g., Sysoieva & Dolynska, 2021) shows that when principals engage with inclusive values at the level of belief, relationships, and pedagogy, significant cultural shifts are possible—even in resource-constrained environments.

In summary, the literature confirms that the school leader's role in inclusive culture development is multi-dimensional, encompassing strategic, ethical, and interpersonal domains. Successful leadership requires a combination of value-driven vision, participatory management, and reflective practice. Where these qualities are present, schools are more likely to develop inclusive cultures that respond effectively to the needs of all learners.

Aims. To explore the role of school leaders in shaping and promoting an inclusive culture in educational institutions and to identify effective managerial practices that contribute to the sustainability of inclusive values in everyday school operations.

Methodology. This qualitative study combines a literature review, semi-structured interviews with 10 school principals from inclusive schools across Ukraine, and content analysis of strategic school documents. The research is guided by theories of transformational and distributed leadership, and draws upon inclusive education frameworks such as Booth & Ainscow's Index for Inclusion.

Results. The results of the survey provide valuable insights into how school principals perceive and implement their role in fostering an inclusive culture within Ukrainian educational institutions. The findings reveal both progress and critical gaps across several dimensions of inclusive leadership.

1. Integration of Inclusion into Strategic Planning. Only 34% of respondents reported that inclusive education is fully integrated into their institution's development strategy, while 40% stated that it is partially addressed, and 26% indicated that it is not included at all. This suggests that, although awareness of inclusive principles exists, strategic alignment remains inconsistent across schools.
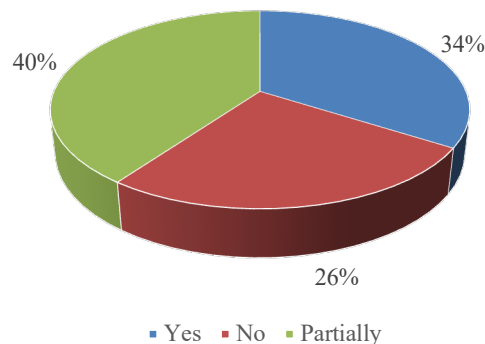
Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the question "Is inclusive education part of your institution's development strategy?"
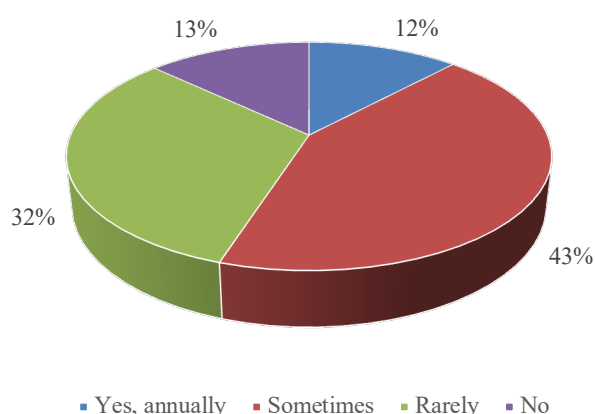*Source: developed by the author based on survey results*

2. Management Team Engagement. When asked about the level of involvement of the school management team in shaping an inclusive culture, just 12% of respondents described their teams as "very actively" engaged. The majority (37%) rated involvement as moderate, while 25% described it as minimal, and 26% reported no involvement. These results highlight a need to strengthen leadership teams' capacity and commitment to inclusion.

■ Very actively   ■ Moderately   ■ Minimally   ■ Not involved
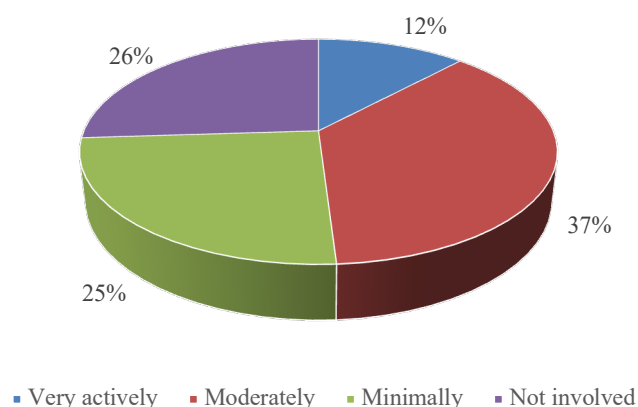
Figure 2. Respondents' answers to the question "How actively is your management team involved in shaping an inclusive school culture?"
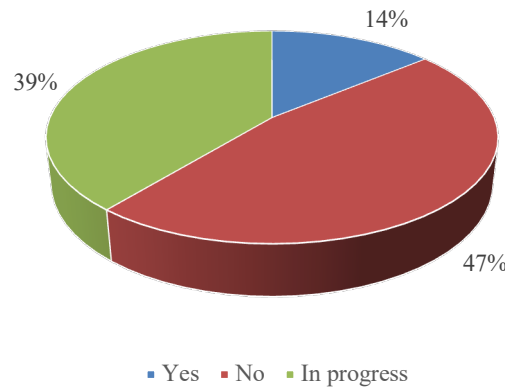*Source: developed by the author based on survey results*

3. Professional Development for Staff. Responses indicate that only 12% of schools provide annual professional development related to inclusion. 43% offer such opportunities sometimes, 32% rarely, and 13% not at all. These findings point to an insufficient and irregular approach to building teacher capacity for inclusive practice.

■ Yes, annually   ■ Sometimes   ■ Rarely   ■ No

Figure 3. Respondents' answers to the question "Do your teaching staff regularly receive professional development related to inclusion?"
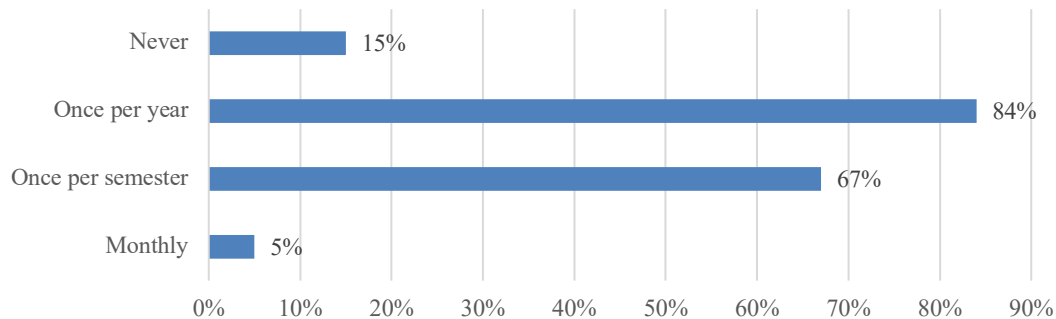*Source: developed by the author based on survey results*

4. Coordination of Inclusive Processes. Only 14% of schools have a dedicated team or individual responsible for managing inclusion. Nearly half (47%) of schools lack any formal coordination, while 39% are in the process of developing such structures. This reflects a systemic gap in organizing and sustaining inclusive efforts within institutions.

Figure 4. Respondents' answers to the question "Does your school have designated individuals or a team responsible for coordinating inclusive processes?"

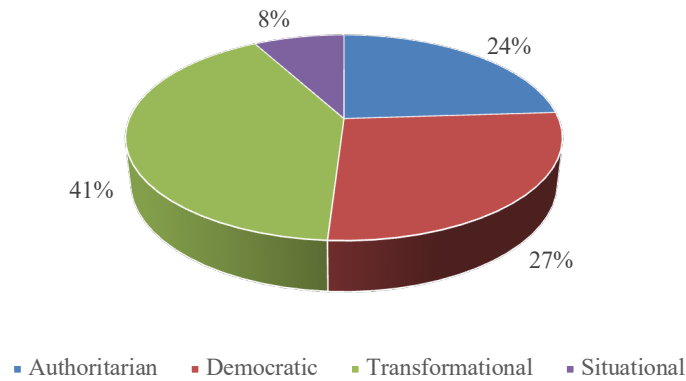*Source: developed by the author based on survey results*

5. Communication on Inclusive Values. Regular dialogue on inclusive values remains limited. Just 5% of principals conduct monthly discussions with teachers. The majority (67%) reported holding such discussions once per semester, while 84% stated they do it only once per year, and 15% admitted to never addressing the topic. This lack of ongoing communication may undermine the cultural integration of inclusive principles.

Figure 5. Respondents' answers to the question "How often do you initiate or conduct discussions with teachers about inclusive values?"

Source: developed by the author based on survey results

6. Preferred Leadership Style. When asked about the most effective leadership style for developing an inclusive culture, 41% favored transformational leadership, which emphasizes vision, motivation, and team empowerment. 27% selected democratic leadership, and 24%still viewed authoritarian leadership as effective. Only 8% preferred situational leadership. The dominance of transformational and democratic styles indicates growing recognition of inclusive, participatory leadership models, though a significant portion still favors more hierarchical approaches.

8%

24%

41%

27%

- Authoritarian - Democratic - Transformational - Situational

Figure 6. Respondents' answers to the question "Which leadership style do you believe is most effective for developing an inclusive culture?"
Source: developed by the author based on survey results

The survey reveals that while inclusive culture is gaining some traction in Ukrainian schools, its implementation is often fragmented, under-coordinated, and inconsistently supported by leadership. To advance inclusive education meaningfully, school leaders must move beyond rhetorical commitment and invest in sustained professional development, collaborative structures, and regular values-based dialogue. Strengthening transformational leadership at all levels appears essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice in inclusive school culture.

Discussion. The study identifies five interconnected elements through which school leaders significantly influence the development of an inclusive culture within educational institutions.

First and foremost, value-based leadership emerges as a foundational component. Principals who consistently and visibly uphold principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion not only model these values but also embed them into the everyday life of the school. Their leadership creates a strong cultural anchor that shapes the attitudes and behaviors of staff and students alike.

Secondly, the empowerment of staff and the provision of targeted professional development are critical for practical implementation. Leaders who distribute responsibility for inclusive practices across their teams—while simultaneously supporting the continuous professional growth of educators—build a resilient internal framework. This collaborative environment enhances the school's capacity to meet diverse learner needs effectively and sustainably.

Third, the study emphasizes that inclusion must be viewed as an ongoing process, rather than a static outcome. Schools that are truly inclusive do not treat inclusion as a checklist of services or procedural compliance. Instead, they approach it as a dynamic, evolving cultural practice that adapts to changing contexts, student populations, and community expectations. This perspective requires leaders to be flexible, visionary, and responsive.

Despite progress, the fourth finding highlights that significant challenges persist. Issues such as insufficient funding, unprepared or undertrained staff, and limited community support continue to act as barriers. However, the research shows that

proactive leadership—grounded in empathy, strategic planning, and problem-solving—can effectively mitigate many of these obstacles. Leaders who anticipate resistance and address it with clarity and support are more likely to sustain inclusive momentum.

Finally, the use of reflective tools strengthens inclusive culture over time. Leaders who institutionalize feedback mechanisms, actively engage student voice, and prioritize continuous evaluation contribute to an environment of shared learning and adaptive improvement. These tools not only monitor progress but also deepen participation, transparency, and trust within the school community.

Together, these five elements illustrate that inclusive leadership is not merely a managerial function but a cultural force that shapes the ethos and long-term sustainability of educational inclusion.

Conclusion: School leaders are critical agents of inclusive cultural transformation. Their influence extends beyond administration into the symbolic, relational, and value-driven fabric of school life. Building sustainable inclusive environments requires leaders who model respect, prioritize shared responsibility, and integrate inclusion into the institutional mission. Investment in leadership development for inclusion is essential to support this transformation at scale.

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