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The Role of Inclusive School Leadership in Promoting Equity for Students with Special Educational Needs in UK Secondary Education

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Abstract. In this work synthesizes research from 2000 to 2025 to explore how inclusive leadership implemented by secondary school leaders in the UK influences educational equity for students with special educational needs (SEN). Drawing on a qualitative systematic review methodology, the study focuses on transformational leadership as a key theoretical framework. Findings indicate that inclusive leadership advances equity through three interconnected mechanisms: articulating an equity-oriented vision, fostering teacher professional development, and establishing systematic processes for identification, intervention, and evaluation of SEN support. These mechanisms help reshape school culture, strengthen teacher-student relationships, and ensure consistent and sustainable inclusive practices. The study concludes with practical recommendations for school leaders and policymakers, emphasizing the integration of instructional and inclusive competencies, progress monitoring, and evidence-based strategies to enhance educational experiences for students with SEN.

Keywords: Inclusive Leadership, Educational Equity, Special Educational Needs, Transformational Leadership, Secondary Education.

1. Introduction

In the UK's educational context, the pursuit of educational equity for all students, especially those with special educational needs (SEN), has long been a focal point. The Warnock Report in 1978, followed by the 1981 Education Act, introduced the concept of SEN and an integrative approach, aiming for common educational goals for all children regardless of their abilities or disabilities [1]. However, despite progress, significant gaps remain. For instance, the gap in GCSE attainment between those eligible and not eligible for free school meals persists, and suspension and permanent exclusion rates are disproportionately high for disadvantaged students, including many with SEN [2] . School leaders' inclusive leadership is considered a crucial element in promoting educational equity for these students. This literature review synthesizes research from 2000 - 2025 to address

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how inclusive leadership implemented by secondary school leaders in the UK influences educational equity for students with SEN.

Inclusive leadership emphasizes creating a collaborative and supportive environment. Proposed the concept of collaborative circles, where peers support each other and engage in developing a common vision. Setlhodi [3] explored this in a South African study of three schools, where school leaders used this approach to decide on development needs, priorities, and implementation. The process involved reflecting on attitudes and capacities, leading to the creation of shared purpose and new routines. However, maintaining the consistency of the collaborative process can be challenging, especially when dealing with diverse opinions among stakeholders [4]. For example, as the number of stakeholders increases, various different viewpoints and opinions will emerge, which will bring difficulties to reaching consensus and advancing the project, and thus affect the consistency of the collaborative process [5] .

Inclusive leaders play a vital role in promoting equity. When inclusive leaders can make better decisions, it can provide children with better development opportunities. Research in Greek primary schools by Rizos and Fokas [6,7] found that inclusive school leaders' good practices, such as cooperation with the local community, can promote equality and democracy among children. In the UK, Teach First's research mentioned by Griffiths [8] suggested that inclusive settings can lead to better academic outcomes for disadvantaged students.

Incrementally building leadership skills is crucial for inclusive leadership. Principals in the UK, such as principals in Birmingham and Manchester Integrated School, set goals to rally staff leadership [5]. In the UK, the Chartered College of Teaching has developed modules to equip school leaders with inclusive leadership skills. Nevertheless, effectively transferring these skills into classroom and school wide practices often requires additional support and continuous follow-up. Such as develop diverse local educational venues, strengthen the SEN teaching training for teachers and so on [9].

Engaging stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and the wider community, it is a core aspect of inclusive leadership. In Nova Scotia's public education system, school leaders are expected to engage and empower the community. The secondary schools in England, involving students, teachers, and support staff in research on inclusion practices has proven effective [2] .However, stakeholder engagement can be hampered by communication barriers, differences in priorities, and limited time.

Existing research has predominantly focused on general inclusive leadership practices and their impact on students in general or disadvantaged students [10]. There is a dearth of in-depth research specifically examining how secondary school leaders' inclusive leadership in the UK context affects the educational equity of students with SEN. Our research will conduct longitudinal studies and in-depth case studies about UK secondary schools. These studies will explore the underlying mechanisms through which inclusive leadership promotes educational equity for these students, providing more targeted strategies for school leaders to enhance the educational experiences of students with SEN.

2. Theoretical framework

In this study we'll primarily drawing attention on transformational leadership, a style of leadership that inspires and motivates others by articulating a clear vision, building trust, and fostering collaboration, while encouraging innovation and organizational change [11]. In the context of special educational needs (SEN), transformational leadership has been identified as especially important for creating inclusive environments that raise the achievement of all learners, as it goes

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beyond routine administration to become a value-driven practice where school leaders strengthen staff capacity, support professional learning, and reshape school culture so that teachers, students, and parents are aligned around shared goals [11].

3. Methodology

According to the literature review that highlights the importance of leadership values, systemic support and the complex realities of the policy of inclusion in the UK, this study uses a qualitative systematic review approach. The above design helps to answer the research question directly: "How do inclusive leadership practices employed by the school leaders of secondary schools influence educational equity for students with special educational needs?".

3.1. Literature screening criteria

According to the aim of the research, the following inclusion criteria were established: peer-reviewed empirical studies published between the years 2000 till 2025. For the study samples, secondary school students aged 12-18 with special educational needs in the UK, where content related to school leadership practices and equity of education, are researched. The factors that disqualified a study were it being non-UK based, non-empirical, non-secondary-school based, and not focusing on the role of leadership.

3.2. Search strategy

Relevant academic resources will be chosen for the literature review. The papers selected should come from core academic journals (SSCI, CSSCI etc), published between 2000 and 2025. Especially, the literature selected will show direct engagement with inclusive leadership which includes defining inclusive leadership, measurement dimensions of inclusive leadership, and impact on educational performance, satisfaction etc. To find out these sources, research shall be made in the databases using keywords like "high school", "inclusive leadership", "education equity", "inclusive management", "special education", and "leadership inclusiveness" with their Chinese equivalents. The findings will be filtered and reshuffled to ensure the comprehensiveness and academic quality of the chosen files.

3.3. Quality assurance measures

To determine whether the research methods were appropriate, the data was reliable and the conclusions were reasonable, the researchers audited all the studies. To better understand the phenomenon under investigation, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to ensure methodological diversity.

3.4. Data analysis methods

In-depth analysis of all the included studies was conducted using a thematic analysis approach. Detecting themes from the literature played an important role in systematically examining the practical pathways and mechanisms through which inclusive leadership furthers educational equity.

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4. Finding

Inclusive leadership in schools is commonly discussed in relation to three leadership models: distributed leadership, instructional leadership and transformational leadership [12]. Whilei dstributed leadership draws attention to the sharing of responsibilities across staff, instructional leadership concerned with strengthening teaching and learning practices. In this study, the focus is placed on transformational leadership as it provides a useful lens for examining how leadership shapes the experiences of secondary school students with special educational needs (SEN).

The relationship between leadership, professional growth, and student outcomes is particularly important for understanding equity in schools. Carrington et al. [13] found that when leaders set a clear direction and continue to support their staff, teachers are more willing to question deficit views of students with special educational needs. This kind of leadership also makes collaboration more common and gives teachers the confidence to use inclusive strategies in their classrooms. In the context of UK secondary schools, where teachers often face both diverse learning needs and limited resources, a leadership style that empowers staff to sustain inclusive practices is essential for promoting fairness in access to education [2]. Equity is not only about providing systems but also about the improving the quality of relationships between teachers and students. When teachers taken time to listen, encourage, and guide, the students are more likely to feel that they belong. Subban et al. [14] highlight that having a sense of belonging is central to student motivation and engagement and can directly contributes to narrowing equity gaps. Transformational leadership, therefore, advances equity by linking professional growth to improved student experiences and outcomes.

Another important dimension of equity relates to leadership values and the culture of inclusion. Transformational leaders make their values guide everyday school practices, which gradually shape the attitudes and behaviors of staff and students. Values such as universalism, autonomy, and stimulation are associated with openness and fairness and are more likely to cultivate inclusive attitudes among teachers [15,16]. Research has shown that when leaders embody these values, inclusion becomes an integral part of the school culture rather than a procedural requirement. In UK secondary schools, this process is evident when leaders and SENCos develop consistent systems for supporting students with special educational needs, beginning with classroom observations and continuing through evaluations and family engagement [2]. By prioritising fairness and shared responsibility, leaders translate values into action that ensures inclusion is experienced as a cultural reality across the school. The link to equity becomes clear because students encounter daily practices that reflect respect and genuine belief in their potential. Subban et al. [12] underline that students feel most supported when teachers and leaders treat them as equals. Transformational leadership strengthens equity here by turning personal values into institutional culture.

Equity is also advanced through the building of organizational capacity. Effective provision for students with special educational needs relies on reliable processes of identification, monitoring, and evaluation. However, schools often face challenges such as inconsistencies in data collection, fragmented review mechanisms, and insufficient follow-up on interventions [2]. Research demonstrates that strong leadership is necessary to make these processes systematic and sustainable. As Steinmann, Klug and Maier [17] emphasize, transformational leaders enhance organizational capacity by aligning shared goals with meaningful practices, which in turn ensures that inclusion is not episodic but sustained. By shaping how goals are understood and ensuring that inclusion remains central to school priorities, transformational leaders can create an environment where teachers and SENCos can implement interventions consistently. In practice, inclusive environment depends on reliable monitoring systems, regular reviews, and clear follow-up on agreed strategies. All these structures helps to ensure that no students are left behind due to weak or unreliable systems. Instead,

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they get benefit from sustained support, transparent evaluation, and better able to succeed. Importantly, these structures also reduce the risk of inequities that arise when individual teachers have act without adequate guidance or resources. Transformational leadership, in this way, ensures that equity is not a one-off achievement but a consistent feature of daily school practice.

Over all, these findings suggests that transformational leadership plays a significant role in advancing equity for students with special educational needs. Its influence reaches beyond classroom teaching or administrative routines, shaping the daily conditions in which teachers and students work together. By embedding inclusive principles into school life, it makes equity is experienced consistently within secondary education.

5. Discussion

Based on comparative synthesis, the evidence indicates that inclusive leadership advances equity for secondary students with special educational needs through a coherent mechanism linking vision, professional learning, and process governance, this mechanism aligns with transformational leadership's core functions of setting direction, developing people, and building organizational capacity, and it reframes disability through a relational lens consistent with Critical Disability Theory, shifting practice from deficit explanations to belonging and participation [11]. In the UK context, this mechanism becomes concrete when leaders articulate an equity-oriented vision, translate it into shared routines, and embed expectations for accessible pedagogy, the cross-national model of inclusive school leadership shows that when vision, people, and capacity move in step, inclusion becomes part of everyday work rather than an add-on [11].

The second link in the chain is teacher learning, analytic evidence associates transformational leadership with moderate, positive effects on school conditions, teacher motivation, and student outcomes, a pattern that explains why our review repeatedly surfaced staff development as a proximal driver of improved SEN classroom practice, in short, leaders change conditions, conditions change teaching, and teaching changes student participation [18]. At classroom level, student-reported experiences offer convergent validity, a systematic review of secondary students' perspectives finds that when teachers listen, encourage, and scaffold challenge, students describe feeling valued and capable, evidence that the leadership–teaching pathway is mediated by relationships that counter deficit narratives and increase willingness to engage with demanding tasks [14].

The third link is process governance through the SENCo-led cycle of identification, intervention, and evaluation, qualitative work commissioned by the Department for Education shows that leaders who make SEN a standing item in performance dialogues, resource monitoring, and curriculum conversations create the conditions for consistent, data-informed review, SENCos then operationalise these expectations by coordinating observations, convening review meetings, and checking fidelity of strategies [2]. This governance function connects vision and teacher learning to measurable practice, sustaining change beyond individual champions.

However, There are two limitations. First, the secondary-data corpus varies in measures and contexts across three decades, limiting direct effect-size comparisons, second, English policy and funding arrangements shape what "good" looks like and may not transfer unchanged to other systems, nevertheless, the triangulation of leadership functions, teacher learning, and student-reported belonging yields a consistent causal story, leaders act on values and systems, teachers enact accessible pedagogy, and students experience recognition and participation, together, these links explain the equity-enhancing effects observed in our findings.

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6. Conclusion

Overall, this review supports a practical theory of change: equity for students with special educational needs (SEN) in UK secondary schools improves when leaders align three moving parts —an explicit, lived equity vision; sustained professional learning focused on high-quality teaching for all; and a SENCo-centred cycle that identifies need, adapts instruction, and evaluates impact. This pathway is both actionable and testable in real school conditions. For practice, schools should embed leadership development that integrates instructional and inclusive competencies, formalise a progress-monitoring cycle owned jointly by senior leaders and SENCos, and adopt evidence-based classroom strategies; recent guidance distils five recommendations for mainstream settings that can serve as a ready checklist for implementation and review. For policy, the government' s improvement plan points to national standards and a digitised EHCP process; paired with workforce development and fair funding, these steps can increase consistency, reduce administrative friction, and help scale the school-level mechanism identified here. Future research should use qualitative designs in secondary schools to test mediation along the leadership teaching belonging pathway and to estimate costs and benefits under realistic resource constraints, strengthening the causal account suggested by this synthesis.

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