

# The Role of the School Principal in Improving the Quality of Inclusive Education at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera, North Maluku Province

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## ABSTRACT

Inclusive education has emerged as a pivotal policy mandate in Indonesia, requiring schools to accommodate all learners, including those with special needs, within regular educational settings; however, its quality implementation remains a formidable challenge, particularly in resource-constrained and geographically isolated areas. Effective school leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of successful inclusive education, yet empirical evidence from junior secondary schools in remote island regions of Eastern Indonesia is critically lacking. This study aims to examine the role of the school principal in improving the quality of inclusive education at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera, North Maluku Province. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews, direct observations, and document analysis from purposively selected informants comprising the principal, teachers, and educational staff; data validity was ensured through source and technique triangulation. The findings reveal that the principal executes five interrelated roles, educator, manager, supervisor, motivator, and innovator, to build an inclusive school culture, with key strategies including socialization of inclusive education concepts, enhancement of teacher competencies, adaptation of learning methods and assessment systems, and the creation of a non-discriminatory school environment. Supporting factors include government policy support, strong commitment from the principal and teachers, and active parental participation, while inhibiting factors encompass limited facilities and infrastructure, a shortage of special education personnel, and insufficient training opportunities for regular classroom teachers. These findings affirm that participatory and adaptive school leadership is the central driver of inclusive education quality, even in severely resource-limited contexts, and that human leadership capital can effectively compensate for infrastructural deficits. This study implies that targeted leadership development programs and collaborative support networks for

principals in remote Indonesian schools are urgently needed to sustain and scale inclusive education quality.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, principal's role, quality of education, remote schools, school leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

Education constitutes a fundamental right of every citizen, without exception, including learners with special needs. The Indonesian National Education System Act (Law No. 20 of 2003) explicitly affirms that every citizen is entitled to quality and equitable education. Inclusive education, defined as a system that enables all students, regardless of physical, cognitive, social, or cultural differences, to learn together in regular school settings, represents a cornerstone policy for translating this right into practice. As UNESCO (2020) defines it, inclusive education is the process of strengthening educational systems to reach all learners, particularly those vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization, while guaranteeing not only access but also quality of learning.

Despite growing policy support, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesian schools remains complex and uneven. Schools are required to demonstrate readiness across multiple dimensions, including human resources, physical infrastructure, flexible curricula, and adaptive school management. Without robust systemic management, inclusive education risks becoming a formal compliance exercise rather than a transformative educational practice. At the junior secondary level, where students navigate the critical developmental transition of early adolescence, these challenges are particularly acute, demanding leadership that simultaneously addresses academic achievement, social integration, and character formation.

School principals occupy the most strategic position in translating inclusive education policy into classroom reality. As Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) assert, school leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning, with principals uniquely positioned to shape teacher behavior, school culture, resource allocation, and community partnerships. In the context of inclusive education, the principal's capacity to act as educator, manager, supervisor, motivator, and innovator determines whether policy mandates become lived educational experiences for students with special needs (Mulyasa, 2021).

A growing body of literature has examined the relationship between school leadership and inclusive education quality. Azizah and Sulistyorini (2025) demonstrated that transformational leadership, characterized by proactive vision, SWOT-based strategic planning, and collaboration with external experts, significantly enhances curriculum adaptation and special needs services in inclusive schools. Aminatuzzuhriyah et al. (2025) found that principals who design inclusive visions, guide teachers, and build school-community collaboration create stronger foundations for inclusive policy implementation. Roseju et al. (2025) identified five principal strategies, transformational leadership, teacher capacity development, resource management, inclusive culture reinforcement, and external collaboration, as collectively effective in building inclusive learning environments. Cahyaning et al. (2023) similarly highlighted that the success of inclusive education management largely mirrors the principal's strategic orientation, particularly in program planning and the engagement of special education teachers (GPK).

These studies converge on the centrality of principal leadership in inclusive education. However, they predominantly focus on urban or semi-urban primary schools in Java and Aceh, contexts characterized by relatively better infrastructure, greater proximity to specialist resources,

and higher teacher training intensity. The dynamics of inclusive school leadership in geographically isolated junior secondary schools in Eastern Indonesian archipelagic regions, where resource constraints are compounded by geographic and logistical barriers, remain underexplored.

The existing literature presents a critical gap: there is limited empirical evidence examining how principals navigate inclusive education quality under conditions of simultaneous resource scarcity, geographic isolation, limited specialist staff, and insufficient teacher training access, specifically at the junior secondary level in Eastern Indonesia. Most studies have either examined primary schools, focused on urban settings, or addressed transformational leadership styles without contextualizing findings within severe resource constraints. Furthermore, previous research has not sufficiently explored the emotional and communicative dimensions of the principal's motivational role, particularly how interpersonal communication strategies can sustain teacher commitment to inclusive principles even when institutional support structures are weak.

The novelty of this study lies in three dimensions. First, it documents how inclusive education quality can be actively constructed through leadership capital even when physical and financial capital are deficient, providing evidence for a leadership-centered model of inclusive school quality. Second, it illuminates the specific communicative and motivational strategies through which principals in resource-constrained remote schools build a genuine inclusive school culture beyond formal policy compliance. Third, it contributes the first in-depth qualitative investigation of principal roles in inclusive education within a junior secondary school in the South Halmahera archipelago, a context with its own distinct geographic, cultural, and resource profile.

This study aims to: (1) examine the role of the school principal in improving the quality of inclusive education at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera, North Maluku Province; (2) describe the strategies implemented by the principal in supporting inclusive education; and (3) identify the supporting and inhibiting factors in the implementation of inclusive education at the school.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education is an educational system that provides equal learning opportunities for all students in regular schools without discrimination. According to UNESCO (2020), inclusive education is the process of strengthening educational systems to reach all learners, especially those vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization. In Indonesia, inclusive education is governed by the National Education System Law and Government Regulation No. 17 of 2010, which mandates that regular schools accommodate students with special needs. The fundamental principles of inclusive education are equality, justice, and respect for diversity (Yusuf & Sugandhi, 2020).

### **Quality of Inclusive Education**

The quality of inclusive education refers to a school's capacity to deliver effective, equitable, and needs-responsive educational services to all students. Quality is not measured solely by academic outcomes but also encompasses the learning process, school climate, and the social acceptance of students with special needs (Sallis, 2019). Key quality indicators include teacher readiness, curriculum flexibility, availability of supportive infrastructure, and an inclusive school climate. Achieving inclusive education quality requires well-planned, sustained school management that integrates inclusive values across all organizational dimensions (Ainscow, 2020).

### **The School Principal as Educational Leader in Inclusive Settings**

The school principal is the primary educational leader responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating all school programs, including inclusive education. Wahjosumidjo (2020) defines the principal as an educator who has been assigned additional responsibilities to lead and manage school resources toward educational goals. Mulyasa (2021) elaborates seven core principal roles: educator (edukator), manager, administrator, supervisor, leader, innovator, and motivator. In inclusive education, these roles intersect to create a multi-functional leadership profile: the principal must simultaneously shape inclusive values among staff, allocate resources adaptively, supervise classroom differentiation, motivate teachers facing professional challenges, and innovate solutions around structural limitations (Riehl, 2020).

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors**

The implementation of inclusive education is influenced by a complex interplay of facilitating and constraining factors. Key supporting factors include the principal's leadership commitment, teacher competence and positive attitudes toward diversity, adequate infrastructure, parental participation, and enabling government policy frameworks (Sunardi, 2019). Inhibiting factors commonly identified in the Indonesian context include limited teacher training in special education methods, insufficient specialist staff, inadequate physical accessibility, and social stigma (Riowati et al., 2025; Maulina & Susetyo, 2025). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory provides a useful explanatory lens, situating the school within multiple interacting environments, institutional, community, and policy, each contributing to or constraining inclusive education quality.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design, appropriate for examining complex, context-dependent phenomena such as school leadership in inclusive education settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera, North Maluku Province, Indonesia, a state junior secondary school located in the archipelago of Mandioli Utara subdistrict, characterized by geographic isolation and limited access to specialist educational support services.

Research informants were selected through purposive sampling and included the school principal, classroom teachers, and educational support staff. Data were collected using three complementary techniques: in-depth semi-structured interviews, direct observation of school activities and learning processes, and document analysis (school profile, principal activity logs, teacher supervision records, and school policy documents). This triangulation of methods strengthened data completeness and contextual richness.

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) interactive model, comprising three concurrent stages: data reduction (systematic selection and focus of raw data), data display (organization into descriptive narrative structures), and conclusion drawing and verification (iterative interpretation of patterns). Data validity was ensured through source triangulation (cross-checking data across informants) and technique triangulation (cross-checking data across collection methods). Member checking was employed to confirm that interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Role of the Principal in Improving Inclusive Education Quality**

The findings reveal that the school principal at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera executes five interlocking leadership roles in improving inclusive education quality: educator, manager, supervisor, motivator, and innovator. As educator, the principal systematically builds shared understanding among teachers regarding the imperative of non-discriminatory, equitable service provision. Through formal staff meetings, informal discussions, and individual consultations, the principal promotes a pedagogical paradigm that positions student diversity as an educational asset rather than an administrative burden. This aligns with Mulyasa's (2021) theoretical formulation of the principal's educative function and is corroborated by Aminatuzzuhriyah et al. (2025), who found that principals who proactively communicate inclusive values foster greater teacher openness to heterogeneous classroom management.

As manager, the principal undertakes planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating programs that support inclusive practices. This includes adjusting teacher assignments to match student needs, advocating for supplementary instructional materials, and adapting classroom organization within the constraints of available resources. As noted by Rohman and Wibowo (2022), effective managerial leadership in inclusive schools is distinguished not merely by resource abundance but by the principal's capacity to optimize existing resources strategically. The present findings confirm this mechanism: although the school operates with limited specialist staff and minimal adaptive equipment, the principal's managerial ingenuity sustains a functional inclusive learning environment.

As supervisor, the principal conducts regular academic supervision visits to observe classroom instruction and provide formative feedback to teachers. This supervisory function ensures that adaptive and differentiated instructional approaches are progressively implemented, even among teachers without formal special education credentials. Leithwood et al. (2020) identify instructional supervision as one of the most direct pathways through which principals influence student learning; this study confirms that supervisory feedback is particularly vital in inclusive classrooms where teachers face complex, multi-need learner groups without specialist co-teaching support.

As motivator, the principal fosters teacher commitment through regular encouragement, moral support, and the explicit affirmation of inclusive education as a professional and ethical responsibility. Wahyu Candra Dewi et al. (2025) found that participatory and transformational leadership styles increase teacher motivation and student engagement in inclusive elementary schools; the present study extends this finding to the junior secondary level, demonstrating that motivational leadership sustains teacher effort even in the absence of material incentives or reduced class sizes.

As innovator, the principal develops contextual solutions to structural constraints by establishing collaborative relationships with parents, school committees, and community stakeholders. This collaborative innovation—reflected in joint problem-solving sessions, parent communication channels, and community resource mobilization—partially offsets limitations in specialist staffing and training access. Roseju et al. (2025) and Cahyaning et al. (2023) both identify external collaboration and innovation as hallmarks of successful inclusive school leadership; this study deepens this finding by showing how collaborative innovation functions as a compensatory mechanism specifically under conditions of resource scarcity in remote settings.

### **Principal Strategies in Supporting Inclusive Education**

The principal implements five evidence-grounded strategies to operationalize inclusive education at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera. First, socialization and paradigm-building: the principal conducts regular sessions, through staff briefings, internal discussions, and coordination meetings, to build staff consensus that inclusive education is a shared moral and professional mandate, not merely a government regulation. This strategy directly addresses attitudinal barriers, which the literature identifies as a primary inhibitor of inclusive practice (Sunardi, 2019; Maulina & Susetyo, 2025).

Second, enhancement of teacher competencies: the principal encourages ongoing professional development through peer learning, internal workshop discussions, and experience sharing among teachers. While access to formal specialist training is limited by the school's geographic location, the principal leverages informal professional learning communities as an accessible and sustainable alternative. Fauzan and Suyanto (2021) similarly found that collaborative professional learning, facilitated by the principal, is a key mechanism for building inclusive instructional capacity in underserved schools.

Third, adaptation of instructional methods and assessment: the principal directs teachers to employ differentiated instruction strategies, discussion-based learning, cooperative group work, and individualized assessment, to accommodate the heterogeneous ability profiles of inclusive classrooms. This strategy is consistent with Bush's (2011) principle that effective educational leadership develops organizational strategies encompassing flexible, student-centered learning processes. Hidayati and Rahmawati (2022) corroborate this, identifying instructional flexibility as a non-negotiable element of inclusive school quality.

Fourth, creating a welcoming and non-discriminatory school environment: the principal actively cultivates an inclusive school culture by embedding values of respect, tolerance, and peer acceptance into school routines, co-curricular activities, and classroom norms. Setia et al. (2025) argue that a genuinely inclusive school environment is determined more by relational school culture than by formal policy declarations; the present findings affirm this, showing that the principal's daily behavioral modeling and norm-reinforcement substantially shape the school's social climate.

Fifth, building school-parent communication networks: the principal establishes consistent communication channels with parents to gather comprehensive information about students' developmental needs and to align home and school support. Mardiana and Khoiri (2021) found that involving parents in inclusive education processes optimizes learning service delivery; this study confirms that parent partnerships are especially critical in remote settings where specialist diagnostic services are unavailable, as parents become primary sources of knowledge about their children's needs.

### **Supporting and Inhibiting Factors**

Three primary supporting factors were identified. First, government policy frameworks provide the school with legal legitimacy and normative guidance for inclusive enrollment and service provision, enabling the principal to justify resource requests and teacher orientation activities. Second, the principal's and teachers' commitment constitutes the most powerful endogenous driver of inclusive education quality; the school's relative success in the face of structural constraints is primarily attributable to this committed human leadership capital. Third, parental participation serves as both an informational resource and a community accountability mechanism, sustaining the school's inclusive orientation beyond formal institutional mandates.

Three primary inhibiting factors were also identified. First, limited facilities and infrastructure, including the absence of specialized learning media, inadequate physical accessibility

for students with mobility needs, and insufficient adaptive learning tools, constrain the depth and consistency of inclusive instructional practices. These findings are consistent with Riowati et al. (2025), who identify infrastructural deficits as a systemic barrier to inclusive education quality assurance in Indonesian schools. Second, a shortage of special education teachers (GPK) means that the principal and regular classroom teachers must manage complex special needs without specialist co-teaching support, placing disproportionate pedagogical burden on inadequately prepared staff. Third, limited training opportunities, partly a function of the school's geographic isolation from urban professional development centers, prevent systematic competency upgrading in inclusive instructional strategies, corroborating findings by Dewi et al. (2025) on training limitations as a persistent barrier in remote inclusive schools.

A notable theoretical contribution of this study is the demonstration that inhibiting factors, while real and significant, do not deterministically prevent inclusive education quality where strong leadership commitment and adaptive strategies are present. This finding aligns with Ainscow (2020), who argues that school-level agency, anchored in principled leadership, can generate meaningful inclusive progress independent of system-level resource sufficiency.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the school principal at SMP Negeri 6 South Halmahera plays a strategic and multidimensional role in improving the quality of inclusive education through the integrated exercise of educator, manager, supervisor, motivator, and innovator functions. The principal's participatory and adaptive leadership, evidenced through socialization of inclusive values, enhancement of teacher competencies, instructional adaptation, inclusive culture-building, and school-parent partnerships, constitutes the primary determinant of inclusive education quality at the school, even under conditions of severe resource scarcity and geographic isolation.

The study confirms and extends prior research by demonstrating that leadership capital, particularly the principal's communicative, motivational, and collaborative capacities, functions as an effective compensatory mechanism for infrastructural and specialist staffing deficits. This finding has significant implications for Indonesian educational policy: improving inclusive education quality in remote and resource-limited schools cannot be achieved solely through infrastructure investment; it requires targeted leadership development programs, including coaching for adaptive management, inclusive culture formation, and collaborative community engagement strategies for principals in isolated settings.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to trace the cumulative effects of principal leadership on inclusive education quality outcomes, and comparative studies across multiple remote schools in Eastern Indonesia would strengthen the transferability of these findings.

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