

The Role of the School Principal in Ensuring the Fulfillment of the Needs of Individuals with Disabilities and Special Needs in Educational Settings

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Abstract: This study explores the pivotal role of school principals in the inclusion of students with disabilities and special needs in general education environments. The research examines how principals' engagement and leadership impact the successful implementation of inclusive education policies and practices. Using a Likert scale survey, data was collected from 100 participants to measure various factors, including the frequency of training for inclusive education, principals' roles, and the number of students with disabilities.

The analysis revealed a significant negative correlation between the principal's role and the number of students with disabilities ($r = -0.309$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that proactive and supportive leadership can create an environment where fewer students require separate classification. However, only 9.6% of the variance in the number of students with disabilities could be explained by the principal's role, indicating the influence of other factors as well.

Furthermore, the study found that many principals lack adequate knowledge and training in special education laws and effective inclusive practices, which hinders their ability to support students with disabilities fully. The findings underscore the need for continuous and specialized training for school leaders and the importance of a holistic approach that involves the entire school community in creating an inclusive environment.

Based on these results, the study recommends enhancing training programs for principals, investing in resources and support systems for staff and students, and fostering a collaborative culture that promotes the inclusion of students with disabilities. By addressing these areas, schools can better meet the diverse needs of all students, ensuring equal opportunities for effective education in general education settings.

Keywords: inclusive education, school principals, special needs, disabilities, leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of the school principal is vital in ensuring that the needs of individuals with disabilities and special needs are met in educational settings. In an education system that aspires to be inclusive and equal for all students, the school principal plays a multiple role as a leader, manager, and advocate for the rights of students with special needs. This role includes creating a supportive school climate, providing necessary resources, and collaborating with educational staff and students' families to ensure an appropriate and inclusive learning environment. Through his continued commitment and determination to address any challenge that may arise, the school principal contributes to the development of a school culture where every individual, regardless of their abilities, can reach their full potential.

To achieve these objectives, the principal must have a deep understanding of educational policies that support inclusion, as well as their effective implementation in practice. He must be equipped with leadership and communication skills to motivate and guide the educational staff in fulfilling these policies. Another key aspect is collaboration with different professionals, such as psychologists, therapists and counsellors, to ensure that each

student receives the appropriate support. In addition, the principal should promote a school culture of awareness and respect for diversity, educating students and staff on the importance of inclusion and equality. Through a comprehensive and coordinated approach, the principal can ensure that the school is a place where every student feels welcome, supported and able to achieve academic and personal success.

1.1 Literature review

When we talk about the part of education and schooling, it can be said convincingly that children with limited abilities and special needs have not had the opportunity of schooling. They were forced to learn at home, to be institutionalized or to be educated in special classes or even special schools. Later, parents who had children with atypical development began to look for different opportunities to create opportunities for adequate education and schooling for their children. Thus, they created a kind of movement together with the Civil Rights. This kind of "war" which had to do with equality took place during the 1950s and 1960s and opened the doors to the change of the educational and legal system for persons with limited abilities and special needs (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010).

Sirait (2017) emphasized that children's rights are part of all human rights which must be protected and fulfilled by parents first, then the family as a whole, by the wider community, the state and the government. All these actors are obliged to provide for the children and give them the opportunity for schooling and education. Pratiwi with co-authors (2022) come to the conclusion that children with special needs should have their right to education to be educated the same as their peers with typical development and to fulfill all their educational rights and needs.

This is how various researches began to be done, which showed the role of the school director in an adequate inclusion of children with special needs within regular classes. Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) showed us that school principals are key actors in managing and directing the administrative functions of schools, ensuring that they function successfully and effectively. They bear important responsibilities for maintaining the internal workings of school systems, representing the school in the community, and implementing educational policies accurately. Also, they serve as role models for the ethical and professional development of teachers and other educational staff. Ultimately, principals indirectly but significantly influence student learning by meeting their diverse needs and abilities and by creating and implementing school systems and policies.

Dyal et al. (1996) emphasize that the school principal plays an essential role in creating an educational climate that provides equal learning opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. They add that the principal can build a cohesive community of learners or allow classrooms, students and teachers to operate autonomously. Principals' attitudes, roles, relationships and visions are key elements of an inclusive school environment. Additionally, the authors point out that principals should take several steps to facilitate the creation of inclusive schools, including crafting a strong mission statement that aims for the success of all children and builds on principals' sense of responsibility. Similarly, Cohen (2015) argues that the school principal is the most important factor in promoting and implementing a successful inclusive program, acting as the primary change agent within the school.

The regular classroom is often recognized as an inclusive environment for children with disabilities. Inclusion means integrating these children into regular classrooms alongside children without disabilities (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010). Federal law demonstrates a continuing commitment to placing children with disabilities in the environment they would be in if they did not have a disability (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotis, 2005). The goal of inclusion is to give these children equal opportunities to receive an effective education in a general education environment, supported by appropriate services. Educational programs for children with disabilities are based on the idea that a variety of options for educational services should be provided. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which must be selected from a range of alternative placements (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

The implementation of inclusive schools presents greater challenges than the organization of regular schools due to the diversity of the needs of children with special abilities and the difficulties in their full acceptance by the school community (Darma & Rusyidi, 2015). In this context, the success of principals is measured by their ability to use policies as progressive and strategic opportunities to create a sustainable culture and conditions that

support staff in updating teaching practices (Gu, 2023). In order to optimize the management of inclusive education, the principal's role as the main decision-maker significantly influences the definition of the school's vision and mission (Sholihah & Chrysoekamto, 2021).

The principal's leadership role is essential in the inclusion process. His leadership is one of the most important factors for the successful implementation of inclusion. To ensure the success of this inclusion, principals must demonstrate behavior that supports the integration, acceptance, and success of children with disabilities in the general education environment (Praisner, 2003). Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) found that many principals lack the necessary knowledge to implement inclusion, including knowledge of special education law, behavior management, and authentic strategies to support inclusion. Lack of knowledge about special education legal issues, especially regarding requirements and procedures, challenges their ability to implement inclusive schools (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to analyze the role of school principals in supporting the inclusion of individuals with disabilities and special needs in educational settings. The research aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and practices of the principals in providing suitable conditions for these individuals and to identify the areas that require improvement.

2.2 Research Approach

The research used a quantitative approach to collect and analyze data. In this case, questionnaire methods were used to collect information from the respondents.

2.3 Population and Sample

The research in question was developed in the state of Kosovo, in which case several cities from this state take part. The sample of the research was 100 respondents, who had different professions such as: school leaders, teachers, special education teachers, and support staff in different schools, in several cities such as: Mitrovica, Pristina, Ferizaj and Gjilan.

Out of 100 participating respondents, 60% were male and 40% female. Then 7% were aged 20-29, 33% aged 30-39, 27% aged 40-49, 20% aged 50-59 and 13% aged 60. Most of the respondents, about 86%, were teachers, while the rest, about 14%, were school principals, support teachers or special education assistants.

About 47% of the respondents had work experience of 20 years or more, 13% had 15-19 years of work experience, 13% had 10-14 years of work experience and 27% had 5-9 years of work experience.

20% of respondents worked in schools located in rural areas and 80% in urban areas. While the name of the schools participating in the research remains anonymous

2.4 The instruments used for the research

For this research, a questionnaire compiled by the researchers was used based on the title and purpose of the research. The main questions were of the closed type, mainly formulated with a Likert scale to collect data from the respondents. It is worth noting that the questions are formulated in several categories:

- Principals' knowledge and experiences regarding inclusion.
- Policies and practices implemented in schools.
- The level of support and resources provided to individuals with disabilities.
- Effectiveness of training and professional development for staff.

At first, the questionnaire after its compilation is distributed for piloting to 10 professionals in the field of education, to see if it is adequate and suitable to continue working with it. After the positive feedback from the 10 educational professionals, the questionnaire was distributed to the rest of the respondents.

The questionnaire in question was compiled through email and the online platform and data collection lasted 4 weeks to ensure a sufficient number of responses.

2.5 Data Procedure

The data were statistically analyzed to assess the level of agreement with the questionnaire statements and to identify trends and patterns in the responses of the respondents. Also, the results have been processed descriptively and inferentially to draw conclusions on the role of directors and the effectiveness of their practices in support of inclusion. In this case, frequency, correlation and regression analysis were used.

It is important to note that the data will be kept confidential and secure, and are used only for research purposes. Also, the participants were informed about the nature of the research and their consent was given to participate in the research before the data collection. The identity of the respondents will remain anonymous.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis for the topic "The role of the school principal in ensuring that the needs of individuals with disabilities and special needs are met in educational settings" has produced some important findings. Here is a detailed description of the results:

Correlation between the number of students with disabilities and the frequency of staff training

There is a positive and significant correlation ($r = .316$, $p < .01$) between the number of students with disabilities in the school and the frequency of training organized for the staff on the inclusion of these students. This suggests that schools with more students with disabilities tend to organize more frequent training for their staff to support effective inclusion.

Correlation between the number of students with disabilities and the principal's role in inclusion

A negative and significant correlation ($r = -.309$, $p < .01$) was found between the number of students with disabilities and the perception of the principal's role in inclusion. This implies that in schools with more students with disabilities, the principal's role may be less prominent in inclusion efforts, perhaps because of the many challenges they face.

Correlation between participation in comprehensive education training and training frequency

There is a negative and highly significant correlation ($r = -.775$, $p < .01$) between participation in inclusive education training and the frequency of organized staff training. This may indicate that when staff training is frequent, individuals may report less need to attend additional training, as they feel prepared by the ongoing training provided in the school.

Correlation between participation in inclusive education training and the principal's role

A positive and significant correlation ($r = .437$, $p < .01$) was found between participation in inclusive education training and the principal's role. This suggests that in schools where principals are more engaged and supportive of inclusion, there is a higher probability that staff will participate in inclusive education training.

Correlation between the frequency of training and the role of the director

There is a negative and highly significant correlation ($r = -.899$, $p < .01$) between the frequency of staff training and the role of the director. This suggests that when training is organized regularly, it may be less necessary for principals to have a very prominent role in involvement, as staff are more prepared and autonomous.

These results highlight several important relationships that should be considered for improving the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. It is clear that ongoing training and support of principals are critical elements for successful inclusion, but it also shows that when staff are well trained, the need for principal intervention can be reduced. This highlights the importance of building capacity and resources for school staff to achieve effective inclusion.

Table 1. The relationship between the variables of the instruments used

		1	2	3	4
1. The number of students with disabilities	Pearson Correlation	1	.000	.316**	-.309**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		1.000	.001	.002
	N	100	100	100	100
2. Attending any comprehensive education training	Pearson Correlation	.000	1	-.775**	.437**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000		.000	.000
	N	100	100	100	100
3. Organization of trainings for the staff regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in the school	Pearson Correlation	.316**	-.775**	1	-.899**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000		.000
	N	100	100	100	100
4. The role of the principal in the management of an inclusive school	Pearson Correlation	-.309**	.437**	-.899**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.000	
	N	100	100	100	100

3.2 Regression analysis

Correlation Coefficient (R)

$R = .309$: The correlation coefficient shows a moderate positive relationship between the principal's role and the number of students with disabilities. This value indicates that there is an average relationship between these two variables.

Coefficient of Determination (R Square)

$R \text{ Square} = .096$: This value shows that only 9.6% of the variance in the number of students with disabilities can be explained by the principal's role. This suggests that there are other important factors influencing the number of

students with disabilities and the role of the principal explains only a small part of this variable.

Adjusted Coefficient of Determination (Adjusted R Square)

Adjusted R Square = .086: This value, which is adjusted for the number of predictors in the model, is slightly lower than R Square, indicating that the inclusion of the director's role in the model explains only a small portion of the variance in the number of students with disabilities when other factors are taken into account.

Standard Error of the Estimate (Std. Error of the Estimate)

Std. Error of the Estimate = .679: This value shows how far the data points are from the regression line. A lower standard error would suggest that the model predicts more accurately, while a higher value suggests less accuracy.

The results show that the principal's role has a moderate influence on the number of students with disabilities in the school, explaining only a small part of the variance. This fact suggests that besides the role of the principal, there are many other factors that influence the inclusion and number of students with disabilities. These factors may include school policies, support from other staff, available resources and the overall school environment.

Table 2. The role of the principal in the management of an inclusive school

	R	R square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
The role of the principal in the management of an inclusive school	,309 ^a	,096	,086	,679

a. Dependent variable: The number of students with limited abilities and special needs

b. Predictor: (Constant), The role of the principal in the management of an inclusive school

3.3. T-test analysis

Based on the provided data, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the commitment of urban and rural school principals to creating a supportive environment for children with disabilities.

The results of the independent samples t-test suggest that there is no statistically significant difference in the commitment to creating a supportive environment for children with disabilities between urban and rural school principals. The means are very close (4.03 for urban and 3.90 for rural).

Since both significance values (0.692 and 0.705) are greater than 0.05, indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean commitment to creating a supportive environment for children with disabilities between urban and rural school principals.

The mean difference between the two groups is 0.121, with a standard error difference of approximately 0.304 (equal variances assumed) and 0.315 (equal variances not assumed).

- For equal variances assumed: -0.482 to 0.723
- For equal variances not assumed: -0.523 to 0.764

The confidence intervals include zero, further supporting the conclusion that there is no significant difference between the groups.

Table 4. T-test analysis about group statistics

		Variable	No.	MA	SD	Errors in SD
Inclusive environment	Equality of variance supposedly	Urban	79	4,03	1,219	,137
	Equality of variance not to assuming	Rural	21	3,90	1,300	,284

Table 5. Independent Sample Test

Leven Test for Equality of Variance		F	Sig.	t-test for Mean Equality						
				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Errors in SD.	95% Reliability Interval of changes	
									Lower	Upper
Inclusive environment	Equality of variance supposedly	,349	,556	,397	98	,692	,121	,304	-,482	,723
	Equality of variance not to assuming			,383	30,222	,705	,121	,315	-,523	,764

IV. DISCUSSIONS

The role of the school principal in ensuring that the needs of individuals with disabilities and special needs are met is essential to creating an inclusive and supportive environment. Principals must ensure that school policies and practices are designed to support these students. Also, they must ensure that teaching staff are trained and prepared to work with students with special needs.

While many principals are aware of the importance of inclusion, the lack of sufficient knowledge of special education laws and support methods indicates a need for more training and professional development. The lack of adequate resources and infrastructure also poses a major challenge to the successful implementation of inclusion.

The results of the regression analysis show that the role of the principal has a significant and negative impact on the number of students with disabilities. This suggests that principals who are more active and engaged in inclusive policies can create an environment where students with disabilities are less in need of special classification. However, only 9.6% of the variance in the number of students with disabilities can be explained by the principal's role, indicating that other factors also play an important role. The t-test results indicate no significant difference in the level of commitment to creating a supportive environment for children with disabilities between urban and rural school principals. This suggests that geographic location does not play a critical role in shaping principals' dedication to inclusive education.

Many principals lack sufficient knowledge of legal issues and special education practices, which hinders the effective inclusion of students with disabilities. This lack of knowledge and training indicates the need for continuous and specialized education for school leaders.

To successfully support students with disabilities, it is necessary to have adequate resources and support for all staff. A holistic approach involving the whole school and community is essential to creating an inclusive environment.

Other studies and research have confirmed and expanded the findings of this study, emphasizing the importance of the role of principals in the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) have argued that school principals are key actors in creating an environment conducive to inclusive teaching and learning. They have identified that principals' behaviors and practices are essential for improving the performance of students with disabilities.

Dyal et al. (1996) have emphasized that principals play a vital role in creating an educational climate that provides equal opportunities for all students. They have noted that principals' attitudes and actions are critical to the success of inclusion.

Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) have identified that many principals lack sufficient knowledge of special education laws and practices, hindering effective involvement. They have recommended continuous and specialized training for principals to improve their knowledge and skills in this area.

Jackson et al. (2000) and Hussain (2017) have emphasized the importance of a comprehensive approach involving the whole school and community. They have argued that inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms requires sufficient support and resources for staff and students.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the research, we reach the following conclusions:

The results show that the principal's role has a moderate and negative influence on the number of students with disabilities in the school, explaining 9.6% of the variance. This suggests that principals who are more active and engaged in inclusive policies can create a more supportive environment for these students.

Many school principals do not have sufficient knowledge of special education and inclusive practices. This lack of training and knowledge hinders the effective inclusion of students with disabilities, emphasizing the need for ongoing and specialized education for school leaders.

To successfully support students with disabilities, it is necessary to have adequate resources and support for all school staff. A holistic and collaborative approach is essential to creating an inclusive environment.

Principals have a key role in setting the school's vision and mission and in creating a culture that supports inclusion. Their decision-making directly affects the implementation of comprehensive policies and supports school staff to improve teaching practices.

Providing the necessary support and resources to school staff and students is essential to the success of inclusion. Investing in assistive technology, psychological support and training for all staff can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment.

From the findings of the research, we arrive at these recommendations:

Ongoing Training: Provision of ongoing and specialized training for principals regarding inclusive education and support for students with disabilities. These trainings should include knowledge of special education laws, behavior management, and strategies for creating a supportive environment.

Holistic Approach: Encouraging a holistic approach involving the whole school and community to support inclusion. This includes developing policies and practices that support and encourage the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Investing in Resources: Investing in additional resources for students with disabilities and the staff who work with them. This may include assistive technology, psychological support and training for all school staff.

Staff Support: Ensuring that school staff have the support and resources necessary to implement inclusive practices and successfully support students with disabilities.

Policy Continuity Evaluation: Continuous monitoring and evaluation of comprehensive policies and practices to ensure they are effective and up-to-date. This includes gathering data and feedback from staff, students and parents to make continuous improvements.

Implementation of these recommendations can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment for students with disabilities, thus increasing their academic and social success in mainstream schools.

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