



Inclusive Leadership in Education

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Abstract. The paper examines inclusive leadership in education as a key condition for developing equitable, accessible, and diversity-oriented school systems. It analyzes the concept of the inclusive school, emphasizing the transition from integration-based approaches to systemic inclusion focused on removing barriers to participation and learning for all students. The article highlights the strategic role of educational leaders in building inclusive cultures, organizing accessible learning environments, promoting professional collaboration, and supporting personalized teaching adapted to student diversity. It also discusses relevant theoretical foundations, including the social model of disability, socio-constructivist learning, Universal Design for Learning, distributed leadership, and social justice perspectives. Special attention is given to the Romanian legislative framework, particularly Law no. 198/2023, which supports inclusive education through principles of equity, institutional responsibility, support mechanisms, and interprofessional collaboration. The paper concludes that inclusive leadership is not merely an administrative requirement, but a transformative managerial approach that translates inclusive values and policies into everyday educational practices, contributing to quality education for all students.

Keywords: inclusive leadership; inclusive education; inclusive school; educational equity; student diversity; accessible learning environments; personalized teaching; professional collaboration; Universal Design for Learning.

1 The Inclusive School

The inclusive school and inclusive education have long dominated the theoretical and practical concerns of education systems. In Romania, inclusive education has represented an objective and an educational benchmark institutionally assumed since the 1990s, with the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, ratified by Law no. 18/1990) and the adherence to the principles of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). A defining characteristic of the inclusive education process is the dynamic nature of its approach and interpretation, such that what inclusive education represents today (meaning, conceptualization, content, modes of implementation, etc.) differs significantly from the vision of four or five decades ago and will likely differ from what this concept will become in the future.

The inclusive school is an educational model that ensures equal access to education for all students, regardless of their differences (abilities, disabilities, cultural background, social status, language, or learning style). It represents the institutional framework within which inclusive education is carried out: all students learn together in the same environment, and the teaching process is adapted to respond to each individual's needs (UNESCO, 2020).

The concept of inclusive education is intensively analyzed in international educational debates. This model is based on the principle that every student, regardless of their personal, social, or cultural background, has the right to quality education—a principle globally assumed through Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations (UN), 2015), which places equitable and inclusive education at the center of sustainable development.

Inclusive education transcends the integration paradigm, which primarily focused on including students with disabilities in mainstream educational structures, adopting instead a broader, more systemic vision. As emphasized by UNESCO in *Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education* (2009), inclusion involves removing barriers that limit participation and learning for all students. This perspective was further developed in *A Guide for Ensuring Inclusion and Equity in Education* (UNESCO, 2017), which highlights that inclusion requires the deep transformation of educational systems to respond to the diversity of all learners, and reaffirmed in *Embracing Diversity: Toolkit for Creating Inclusive Learning-Friendly Environments* (UNESCO, 2021), which stresses that inclusion is not merely about placing students in mainstream classrooms, but about restructuring the educational environment as a whole. At the European level, this direction is supported by the *Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030* (European Commission, 2021) and the *European Parliament Resolution of 2023 on quality inclusive education*. In Romania, the legislative framework is defined by the *Pre-university Education Law no. 198/2023* (as subsequently amended) and the *National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2022–2027* (Government of Romania, 2022).

Inclusive education aims to ensure equity, participation, and educational success for all students, regardless of their individual characteristics. From this perspective, schools are no longer simple institutions for transmitting knowledge but become welcoming communities for all educational actors operating within them. Inclusive education represents one of the fundamental directions of contemporary educational policies, ensuring equitable access to education for all students, including those with special educational needs (SEN) (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022). However, the gap between principles and practice remains significant. The *Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education – All means all, Easy to read version, key messages, recommendations* (UNESCO, 2020) shows that progress remains uneven worldwide, and systemic barriers—such as lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and the absence of coherent policies—continue to limit the actual implementation of inclusion. This conclusion is confirmed by subsequent reports: the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2022) notes that in many

European countries inclusion remains largely declarative, while OECD (2023) *Education at a Glance 2023* highlights that students with disabilities and those from disadvantaged backgrounds remain most at risk of school dropout and educational exclusion.

Inclusive education is grounded in various approaches and theoretical models that guide its design and implementation. One of these is the social model of disability, which emphasizes that difficulties are not exclusively attributable to individual characteristics but arise from the interaction between the person and inadequate social or institutional contexts (Oliver, 2013; Slee, 2011). This model has profoundly influenced inclusive educational policies internationally, shifting the responsibility for adaptation from the student to the system.

Another approach supporting inclusion is the socio-constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning processes and promotes collaborative teaching methodologies (Florian, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective views learning as an active and social process, where knowledge is constructed through interaction between the individual and their social environment. It is mainly associated with the theory of Lev Vygotsky (1978), who highlighted that cognitive development is fundamentally influenced by the social and cultural context. This theory is highly valued in collaborative pedagogy in inclusive contexts (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014), where social interaction becomes the engine of cognitive development—an assumption with direct implications for the design of inclusive learning environments.

A significant theoretical contribution is also made by the process-based approach to inclusion, defined by Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) as a set of actions aimed at increasing participation and reducing exclusion in all its forms. Operationalized through tools such as the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, revised 2022), this approach fundamentally shifts the perspective on education, placing emphasis not on “adapting the student” to existing norms, but on the continuous transformation of the school to respond to student diversity. Recent research confirms that the implementation of this model is conditioned by the school’s organizational culture, educational leadership, and the level of teacher training (European Agency, 2022; Oportti, Brady & Duncombe, 2021).

2 Inclusive Leadership in the Educational Context

Inclusive education cannot be achieved without leadership capable of promoting shared values and guiding educational practices. Inclusive leadership plays a triple strategic role: it defines a shared vision of inclusion; supports educational innovation; and builds and promotes an organizational culture based on equity, participation, and shared responsibility (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

As Bush (2011) emphasized, effective educational leadership does not merely involve school administration but successfully translates theoretical principles into concrete practices, actively involving all stakeholders in the school community. This perspective is reinforced by Shields (2024), who introduces the concept of transformative leadership, defined as a form of leadership that addresses structural inequalities and mobilizes the school community around shared educational projects.

In the school context, inclusive leadership is a distributed and collaborative practice (Spillane, 2006). The school principal is not the sole actor or promoter of the inclusive vision but acts as a facilitator of participatory processes involving teachers, students, families, and the entire community. This redistribution of leadership responsibility does not diminish its role but redefines it—from control to facilitation, from unilateral decision-making to collective construction (Ryan, 2022).

The main dimensions of inclusive leadership implementation include activities aimed at:

- A. Building an inclusive culture in the educational institution;
- B. Organizing and adapting accessible and stimulating learning environments for all students;
- C. Promoting professional collaboration in educational contexts;
- D. Supporting personalized teaching that generates personalized learning.

A. Building an inclusive culture within the educational institution

Inclusive culture is based on a complex set of theoretical frameworks that guide its interpretation and application in educational practice.

The theory of social justice emphasizes the need to ensure equity and equal opportunities, counteracting structural inequalities within educational systems (Slee, 2011). In this sense, inclusion is not only a pedagogical issue but also an ethical and political one, aimed at redistributing resources and recognizing diversity as a fundamental value. Fraser (2009) extends this perspective, arguing that social justice in education involves redistribution, recognition, and representation—three inseparable dimensions of an equitable educational system.

A significant contribution is also brought by the Index for Inclusion, which defines inclusive culture as the set of shared values and practices that promote the active participation of all members of the school community (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). The Index is not only an evaluation tool but also a guide for institutional development, offering schools a systematic framework for self-reflection and organizational transformation.

Additionally, the ecological approach, inspired by Bronfenbrenner's model (1979), highlights the importance of interactions between individuals and their environment, emphasizing how inclusion depends on a variety of interconnected factors—from classroom climate and school culture to national policies and the community context (Ainscow et al., 2006).

The construction of an inclusive culture can be analyzed through three fundamental dimensions: inclusive values, policies, and practices.

Inclusive values represent the foundation upon which an inclusive organizational culture is built. These include respect for differences, the promotion of equity, and the recognition of each individual's right to fully participate in school life. As UNESCO (2017) emphasized, valuing diversity is a key element in developing equitable and cohesive educational systems, and this must be reflected not only in policy documents but also in the everyday attitudes of all school actors.

Inclusive policies refer to the set of regulations, rules, strategies, and institutional mechanisms adopted to ensure access and participation for all students. These are oriented toward removing barriers to learning and participation, in line with OECD (2018, 2023), which highlights the importance of equitable educational systems for social mobility.

Inclusive practices involve concrete actions through which values and policies are translated into authentic learning experiences, such as: adopting differentiated teaching methodologies, using compensatory tools and assistive technologies, promoting cooperative learning, and implementing formative assessment focused on individual progress. These practices enable flexible and effective responses to students' diverse needs, promoting educational success for all learners (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

B. Organizing and adapting accessible and stimulating learning environments for all students

Contemporary schools are required to respond to challenges arising from the diversity of students' needs in terms of abilities, cultural backgrounds, and learning styles. This diversity can no longer be treated as an exception to be managed but must be recognized as a structural reality of any school community (UNESCO, 2020).

In this context, organizing accessible learning environments is not limited to arranging the physical space but involves intentional design that considers different ways of accessing knowledge. As UNESCO (2017) emphasized, accessibility is a fundamental prerequisite for ensuring equity and inclusion in education systems, without which inclusive principles remain merely declarative.

The importance of accessibility in the educational environment is supported by several established theories and concepts. The social model of disability shifts the focus from the individual to the environment, highlighting how difficulties often arise from contextual and institutional barriers rather than personal deficits (Slee, 2011; Oliver, 2013).

A key contribution is provided by the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework, which promotes the design of flexible and adaptable environments capable of meeting the needs of all students (CAST, 2018). UDL is based on three fundamental principles: providing multiple means of representation, offering various ways of action and expression, and promoting active and motivated student engagement. Recent research confirms the effectiveness of this framework in increasing participation and academic performance in heterogeneous classrooms (Rose et al., 2013; Rao et al., 2017).

Accessibility in the educational environment can be analyzed through several interconnected dimensions: physical accessibility, educational accessibility, digital accessibility, and relational accessibility.

Physical accessibility refers to designing school spaces so they can be used by all students. This includes: ergonomic classroom arrangements, flexible and adaptable furniture, clear and intuitive signage, and spaces that allow different forms of student activity organization—individual, in pairs, or in groups.

Educational accessibility refers to the differentiated and flexible design of content and learning activities, including: the use of multimodal materials, differentiation of

instruction based on students' individual needs, and the integration of compensatory tools where necessary (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

Digital accessibility concerns the integration of digital technologies as a key element of inclusion. This requires: accessible platforms, adaptable digital content, and the use of assistive technologies as tools for equalizing opportunities (European Agency, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Relational accessibility refers to the quality of interactions among members of the school community. An inclusive environment must promote mutual respect, collaboration, and active participation of all students, as the sense of belonging has been shown to be a significant predictor of academic success and student well-being (Goodenow, 1993; Allen et al., 2021).

C. Promoting professional collaboration in educational contexts

Professional collaboration is a fundamental element for ensuring quality, equity, and inclusion in teaching and learning processes. Contemporary schools can no longer be conceived as a set of isolated individual practices but rather as a professional community in which collective work constitutes a strategic resource for institutional development and student success.

According to Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), collaboration among teachers contributes to the development of professional capital, improving both individual skills and teaching competencies, as well as the overall effectiveness of the school organization, most visibly reflected in student learning outcomes. This perspective is reinforced by Hattie (2015), who demonstrates that collaborative practices among teachers are among the factors with the most significant impact on student performance.

The role of professional collaboration is highlighted by numerous theoretical approaches emphasizing its educational and organizational value.

The theory of communities of practice emphasizes how professional learning occurs through active participation in shared social contexts (Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, teachers learn through discussion, reflection, and co-construction of knowledge. Similarly, distributed leadership promotes a vision of the school as a system in which responsibility is shared among different stakeholders (Spillane, 2006), encouraging participation in decision-making processes and strengthening the sense of professional belonging.

The concept of the learning organization highlights the importance of collaboration for the continuous improvement of a school (Senge, 2006), through the use of collective intelligence, structured collaboration, and shared reflection.

Professional collaboration can be analyzed through several interconnected dimensions: instructional collaboration, organizational collaboration, interprofessional collaboration, and collaboration with families.

Teaching collaboration involves joint planning of educational activities, defining shared objectives, and collegial evaluation of learning progress. It represents the core of professional collaboration, with a direct impact on instructional quality (Murawski, 2010; Murawski & Lochner, 2011).

Organizational collaboration involves teachers' participation in school management through working groups, committees, and departments, contributing to a coherent institutional culture and a sense of collective responsibility for the school's mission.

Interprofessional collaboration involves external professionals such as psychologists, educators, counselors, and social workers, in order to address the complex needs of students. The European Agency (2022) emphasizes that this form of collaboration is essential in inclusive education contexts.

Collaboration with families is often underestimated but has a proven impact on students' educational success. Research shows that authentic family involvement—beyond formal communication—is associated with better academic outcomes, increased student motivation, and reduced dropout rates (Epstein et al., 2019).

D. Supporting personalized teaching that generates personalized learning

Personalized teaching is one of the fundamental pillars of inclusive education, as it proposes a coherent and effective pedagogical response to student diversity. In contemporary educational contexts, characterized by cultural, cognitive, and social heterogeneity, the standardization of teaching processes is increasingly inadequate, and the school's capacity to respond in a differentiated manner to individual needs becomes a condition of educational quality (OECD, 2023).

According to Tomlinson (2014) and Tomlinson & Imbeau (2023), the personalization of learning involves the adaptation of content, processes, and learning products to the individual characteristics of students. From this perspective, personalized teaching is not a methodological option, but a structural necessity in order to ensure equity and educational success for all students. Recent research confirms that personalized teaching practices are associated with increased motivation, engagement, and academic performance, especially in heterogeneous classes (Hattie, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023).

Personalized teaching is highlighted by numerous theoretical frameworks. According to Lev Vygotsky, learning is approached as a dynamic process, mediated by context and relationships. Thus, the socio-constructivist perspective emphasizes the active role of the student in the learning process and the importance of social interactions, learning being conceived as a dynamic process, mediated by context and relationships (Vygotsky, 1978). Likewise, the theory of multiple intelligences highlights the variety of learning modalities, emphasizing the need for diversified approaches that capitalize on different cognitive profiles (Gardner, 2011). A key contribution is provided by the Universal Design for Learning model, which promotes the design of flexible and accessible learning pathways for all students (CAST, 2018).

It is important to make a distinction between individualization and personalization, two concepts often used synonymously but with different meanings. Individualization represents the adaptation of teaching strategies in order to allow all students to achieve the same learning objectives, while maintaining a common curriculum, whereas personalization targets the design of differentiated learning pathways that take into account the interests, potential, and individual objectives of each student. As Baldacci (2005)

emphasized, personalization represents a more advanced level of attention to the student's subjectivity, recognizing each individual's uniqueness not as a problem to be managed, but as a pedagogical resource.

The dimensions of personalized teaching are multiple and interdependent and target curricular adaptation, which involves taking into account several didactic aspects such as:

- personalization of content, which involves adapting teaching materials and the topics addressed according to students' levels of competence, interests, and previous experiences;
- personalization of process, which targets the differentiation of learning strategies and methods, offering students multiple ways of accessing knowledge – through exploration, collaboration, demonstration, or individual reflection;
- personalization of product, which refers to the diversification of the ways in which students demonstrate what they have learned, allowing the expression of acquired competences in varied forms, adapted to individual styles and capacities (Tomlinson, 2014; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023);
- personalization of the learning environment, as a determining factor of student engagement and cognitive comfort (Rose et al., 2013).

Personalized teaching is an effective response to the complexity of educational contexts, which allows the valorization of individual differences and the promotion of educational success for all students. From an inclusive perspective, personalization does not represent an additional intervention intended for students with special needs, but is considered a fundamental principle of everyday educational practice.

Personalized teaching represents an essential direction for the development of an equitable and efficient educational system. It responds to student diversity and contributes to the achievement of authentic inclusive education. In order to become a sustainable practice, it is recommended that personalized teaching be integrated into the organizational culture of the school, be supported through appropriate educational policies, and be anchored in systematic teacher training programs (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

3 The legislative framework in Romania supporting inclusive leadership in education

Inclusive leadership in education represents an essential element for the development of equitable and diversity-oriented school systems. In Romania, the current legislative framework reflects an increasingly explicit orientation towards inclusion, through regulations that promote equal access to education, the adaptation of teaching processes, and managerial responsibility towards all students.

In the context of contemporary educational transformations, inclusive leadership becomes a fundamental component of school management. It involves the promotion of equity, the valorization of diversity, and the creation of educational environments accessible to all students (Bush, 2011; Ryan, 2022). This form of leadership is not limited

to the observance of administrative norms, but involves an assumed vision and an organizational culture in which inclusion is promoted as a value.

In Romania, the development of such a type of leadership is supported by a continuously evolving legislative framework, which emphasizes inclusion as a central principle of the educational system (Ministry of Education, 2023). This framework is in line with European and international orientations that place inclusion at the center of educational policies (UNESCO, 2017; European Commission, 2021).

3.1 Principles of inclusion in Romanian educational legislation

An essential reference point is represented by the Pre-university Education Law no. 198/2023, which explicitly presents the principle of inclusion in education as a foundation of the education system (Ministry of Education, 2023). According to this law, the state guarantees the right to quality inclusive education for all students, emphasizing that inclusion involves a set of measures aimed at ensuring the development of each child according to their individual needs, potential, and individual pace (Ministry of Education, 2023). At the same time, this law specifically targets vulnerable groups, such as students with special educational needs, children from disadvantaged environments, or ethnic minorities, in accordance with the principles of equity promoted at the international level (OECD, 2018).

3.2 Institutions and support mechanisms for inclusion

The Romanian legislative framework provides for the existence of institutions and support mechanisms that facilitate the implementation of inclusion at the level of educational units.

A central role is held by the County Centers for Educational Resources and Assistance (CJRAE), regulated by Order of the Ministry of Education no. 5555/2011 and consolidated through the provisions of Law no. 198/2023. These provide evaluation, counseling, intervention, and support services for students with special educational needs, contributing to the adaptation of the educational process to students' individual needs. CJRAE functions as an institutional interface between the school, the family, and the social protection system, ensuring an interdisciplinary approach to inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2023; Ministry of National Education, 2017).

Alongside CJRAE, the School Centers for Inclusive Education (CSEI) fulfill a complementary role, providing specialized educational programs and support resources for mainstream schools that integrate students with disabilities or with complex learning needs. The collaboration between these centers and inclusive schools represents an intervention model recommended both by national policies and by European guidelines in the field (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022).

At the same time, recent educational policies promote the development of structures dedicated to inclusion at the level of each school unit, in accordance with international recommendations regarding equitable education (European Commission, 2018; European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2023).

3.3 Educational leadership in an inclusive legislative context

The current legislative framework redefines the role of the educational leader, especially that of the school principal, who ceases to be merely an administrator and becomes an agent of change. Inclusive leadership involves the promotion of an organizational culture based on respect, equity, and the valorization of diversity, as well as the implementation of educational practices adapted to the needs of all students (Ainscow et al., 2006; Ryan, 2022).

In this sense, Law no. 198/2023 supports the development of managerial competences oriented towards inclusion, through the emphasis placed on the continuous training of teaching staff, on interinstitutional collaboration, and on holding school leadership accountable for the educational outcomes of all students (Ministry of Education, 2023). This orientation is in line with the research of Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), which shows that effective leadership systematically invests in the professional capital of the teaching staff as a premise for improving the quality of education.

The application of the legislative framework has direct implications on how educational institutions are led. Educational leaders are responsible for: developing inclusive internal policies, promoting collaboration among teachers, adapting the curriculum to student diversity, and systematically monitoring the progress of each student. These responsibilities reflect the transition from administrative management to pedagogical, participatory, and equity-oriented management (Shields, 2024; Spillane, 2006).

Despite legislative progress, the implementation of inclusion faces numerous difficulties, such as the lack of material and human resources, insufficient teacher training in the field of inclusive education, and resistance to change at the institutional level (Florian, 2014; Slee, 2011). At the same time, there are often discrepancies between assumed educational policies and actual practices in schools, which limits the effectiveness of inclusive measures (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2022; OECD, 2018, 2023). This gap between intention and practice represents, in essence, the central challenge to which inclusive leadership must respond.

The legislative framework in Romania provides a solid basis for the development of inclusive leadership in education, through the promotion of equity, diversity, and participation. The normative acts, especially Law no. 198/2023, contribute to transforming the school into an inclusive space, in accordance with international standards (European Commission, 2021; UNESCO, 2017). However, the success of these initiatives cannot be reduced to legislative compliance, but depends on the capacity of educational leaders to effectively implement these policies, to translate the normative framework into an assumed vision, into a coherent organizational culture, and into everyday pedagogical practices that make inclusion a concrete reality, not merely an administrative obligation (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusive leadership thus represents not a managerial option, but an essential condition for achieving quality education for all students.

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