

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP IN FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Inclusivity constitutes a fundamental pillar of contemporary educational practice and is closely linked to the principles of sustainable development. Promoting equal opportunities, recognizing diversity and empowering all members of a school community contribute significantly to the creation of resilient and fair societies. In the school context, inclusivity acquires particular importance, as the school functions as a space for socialization, value formation and the preparation of students for their active role in future society. The school principal plays a central role in this process, since his or her leadership stance and decisions largely determine whether and how a climate of acceptance, cooperation and solidarity will be cultivated.

The purpose of this study is to highlight leadership strategies that can strengthen inclusivity and to examine the challenges that principals face in implementing them. By formulating a shared vision, encouraging dialogue and promoting participatory practices, the principal mobilizes human resources, empowers teachers and reinforces the cohesion of the school community. The development of emotional intelligence, effective conflict management, systematic professional development and close collaboration with parents and local stakeholders are critical prerequisites for the success of this effort. Furthermore, the identification of good practices, continuous evaluation and adaptation to new social conditions contribute to the sustainability of such initiatives.

The connection between inclusivity and sustainable development is crucial, as strengthening equality and justice leads to the responsible use of resources, promotes cooperation among diverse social groups and creates solid foundations for long-term progress. In conclusion, the principal's contribution to the acceptance of inclusivity is essential and constitutes a necessary condition for advancing sustainable development through a school environment that fosters values of equality, respect, social justice and active participation.

Key words: *Inclusivity, school leadership, sustainable development, educational equity*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of inclusion in education has assumed a leading role in the 21st century, as societies are called upon to respond to increasingly complex challenges associated with globalization, migratory flows, social inequality and the climate crisis. Within this context, education cannot be confined to the transmission of knowledge. It must function as a lever for social change and empowerment and as a vehicle for promoting values that uphold democracy, justice, and sustainable development (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2020). Inclusive education—which emphasizes equality of opportunity, respect for diversity and the

empowerment of all students regardless of background—lies at the heart of this endeavor (Eurydice, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development incorporates inclusion as a fundamental dimension of Goal 4 on quality education, seeking “to eliminate disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of learning for vulnerable people” (United Nations, 2025). This implies that education systems must create structures and practices that do not exclude but actively integrate students into a learning process with social and pedagogical meaning. Inclusion, therefore, is not merely a pedagogical option but an ethical and political commitment directly linked to sustainable development (Ainscow, 2020).

In this regard, the role of the school principal is of critical importance. The principal is not only an administrative manager but also a leader who is called upon to inspire, mobilize and guide staff toward creating a school environment that fosters acceptance, collaboration and solidarity (Harris & Jones, 2020). Leadership strategies associated with emotional intelligence, conflict management, participation and vision-building play a decisive role in shaping a school culture that promotes inclusion.

International literature highlights that inclusive leadership is positively associated with teachers' job satisfaction, enhanced collaboration and improved learning outcomes (OECD, 2021). At the same time, promoting participatory practices—such as developing a shared vision and empowering teacher teams—contributes to strengthening the resilience of the school community in the face of social and pedagogical challenges (Netolicky, 2020). Participatory leadership, combined with cultivating a climate of trust and mutual respect, lays the groundwork for embracing diversity as a source of learning and development.

Despite clear progress in recent decades, implementing inclusion policies continues to encounter obstacles. Some of these relate to limited infrastructure, inequalities between schools in different socio-economic areas and resistance stemming from social prejudices. The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to the fore, such as the digital divide and the need to adapt inclusive practices to remote learning environments (Zhao, 2020). These conditions make the need for leadership that can respond to constantly changing environments and ensure access to quality education for all even more pressing.

Linking inclusion to sustainable development lends additional strategic weight to the work of school principals. By investing in practices that reduce inequalities, promote collaboration among diverse social groups and reinforce responsibility toward the common good, schools function as laboratories of democracy and social cohesion (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022). In this way, inclusive leadership benefits not only students and teachers but society at large, laying the foundations for fairer and more resilient communities.

This article seeks to explore how school principals can adopt leadership strategies that strengthen inclusion, focusing on both the opportunities and challenges that emerge. Through a review of contemporary literature and examples of good practice, it aims to show how leadership can be organically connected with sustainable development. The research proceeds from the premise that inclusion cannot be considered a supplementary dimension of education but constitutes an integral element of its quality.

Against this backdrop, the research questions guiding the analysis are:

1. Which leadership strategies of school principals enhance inclusion?
2. What challenges do principals encounter in their efforts to cultivate an inclusive climate?
3. In what ways does inclusive leadership contribute to sustainable development at local and international levels?

The significance of these questions is particularly great, as education is called upon to respond to a dynamic and often uncertain environment. Leadership grounded in inclusion seeks not only the achievement of learning objectives but also the formation of citizens

capable of collaboration, critical thinking and commitment to the principles of equality and justice. Inclusion and sustainable development are inextricably linked and the principal significantly influences this relationship. By developing strategies that promote collaboration, recognition of diversity and the active participation of all members of the school community, leadership can make a substantive contribution to shaping an educational and social future grounded in equality, respect and resilience.

2. INCLUSION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Education in the 21st century is characterized by growing recognition of inclusion as a fundamental principle of quality and equity in education systems. The notion of inclusion goes beyond the simple integration of students with special needs and extends to creating an environment in which every student—regardless of socio-economic background, gender, language, nationality or abilities—can participate equitably in the learning process (UNESCO, 2020). Inclusion is recognized as a key factor that strengthens social justice (OECD, 2021) and is an integral component of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2025) and for European education policy frameworks (European Commission, 2020).

Contemporary literature emphasizes that inclusion must be understood both as a value-laden principle and as practice. At the level of values, it presupposes recognizing diversity as an asset rather than an obstacle. At the practical level, it concerns designing pedagogical methods, school policies and community partnerships that facilitate the active participation of all students (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022). Within this framework, the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) proposes strategies that ensure teaching practices respond to multiple needs and learning styles. Thus, inclusion is directly linked to pedagogical innovation and to the adaptation of school systems to changing social conditions (OECD, 2021).

Inclusive education is considered a prerequisite for achieving social justice. In an era of widening social inequalities, schools are called upon to act as mechanisms for reducing exclusion and strengthening equity (Eurydice, 2020). According to Ainscow (2020), inclusion is the “reformist principle” that transforms education from an instrument reproducing inequalities into a vehicle for social change. Strengthening inclusion is also associated with building societies that are more resilient to crises. As the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated, educational institutions that had invested in inclusive practices were able to respond more effectively to remote learning, ensuring continuity of learning even for vulnerable groups (Zhao, 2020).

The connection between inclusion and sustainable development is multi-layered. On the one hand, inclusive education reduces social inequalities that hinder social cohesion and economic progress. On the other hand, it empowers students to become active citizens with a sense of responsibility toward the environment and society. UNESCO (2020) argues that education that is not inclusive cannot be considered sustainable because it reproduces exclusions that undermine long-term development.

In parallel, inclusion is linked to responsible resource management and the cultivation of a culture of collaboration. When students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds learn to work together, the foundations are laid for societies that promote dialogue, peace and democratic participation. This aligns with SDG 16, which concerns the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies (United Nations, 2025).

According to Harris and Jones (2020), school leadership is crucial for promoting inclusion. The principal shapes the vision, influences culture and mobilizes the human resources of the school community. The authors note that in times of crisis, such as the pandemic, inclusion-based leadership is pivotal for the psychological and pedagogical

resilience of schools. Transformational leadership is recognized as particularly effective in this context: the principal serves as a role model, inspires and empowers teachers, encouraging them to develop innovative practices. In parallel, distributed leadership facilitates the participation of all community members in decision-making, strengthening the sense of belonging (OECD, 2021).

Despite progress, implementing inclusive policies faces challenges. Emphasis on performance and standardized assessment often conflicts with the principles of inclusion, leading to practices that exclude the most vulnerable students. Furthermore, lack of resources and unequal distribution across schools in different areas complicate the implementation of inclusive strategies (UNESCO, 2020). In addition, social prejudices and stereotypical perceptions regarding disability, language or cultural diversity function as barriers that often extend beyond the school setting. Here, the importance of leadership is once again underscored, as the principal must create a climate of trust and cultivate values of acceptance and respect.

Consequently, inclusion is a necessary precondition for sustainable development and school leadership is a basic prerequisite for its realization. Inclusive education is not confined to the classroom; it extends to the social and political levels, influencing social cohesion, economic development and environmental responsibility. To the extent that schools succeed in embedding the principles of inclusion, they contribute to creating societies that are fairer, more resilient and better equipped to meet future challenges.

3. THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CLIMATE

The school unit is a microcosm of society, where diverse identities, values and experiences intersect. In this context, the principal's role goes beyond administrative management to include culture-building, staff guidance and creating an environment that nurtures inclusion. Leadership decisively shapes how teachers, students and families experience school life. Based on current literature, leadership strategies that promote inclusion relate to developing a shared vision, strengthening participation, cultivating emotional intelligence, effectively managing conflict and fostering collaboration with the wider community (OECD, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020).

A principal is not merely a resource manager, but primarily a pedagogical leader who shapes the learning climate. International research shows that leadership aligned with the values of inclusion can empower teachers, increase their sense of commitment and improve learning outcomes (Netolicky, 2020). A leader who places equity and respect for diversity at the center sets—by example—the behavioral framework for the entire school community. The pedagogical dimension of leadership is evident in the shaping of school policies (Buskila & Chen-Levi, 2021). A principal who prioritizes access for all students to quality learning reinforces education as a public good rather than a privilege. This implies redefining success not only in terms of performance but also in terms of inclusion, participation and social cohesion.

Crafting a shared vision for inclusion is foundational. Such a vision cannot be imposed top-down; it must be co-constructed with teachers, students and families. OECD (2021) reports that schools where the vision for inclusion emerges from collective processes demonstrate greater resilience and commitment to implementing equity principles. The vision functions as a compass for everyday decisions. Through strategic planning, the principal sets goals related to reducing exclusion, improving access to resources and creating a climate of mutual respect. Moreover, indicators for monitoring progress are incorporated so that movement toward inclusion is measurable and transparent.

Inclusion cannot be achieved without teacher participation. The principal must cultivate a culture of collaboration in which every staff member feels they have a voice and a role. Distributed leadership is particularly significant here, since it proposes delegating responsibilities to teacher teams, enabling them to contribute actively to shaping policies and practices (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Teacher empowerment is also linked to professional development (Buskila & Chen-Levi, 2021). Principals encourage continuous training by offering opportunities for collaborative learning, sharing good practices and engaging in innovative pedagogical approaches. In this way, professional growth is tied to a personal sense of purpose and contributes to commitment to inclusion (Li et al., 2024).

It should be emphasized that inclusion presupposes the principal's ability to recognize and manage the emotions of community members. Emotional intelligence emerges as a crucial leadership tool, enabling principals to perceive students' needs, address parents' concerns and support teachers during times of pressure (Li et al., 2024; Goleman, 2020). Conflicts are inevitable in any school setting, particularly when expectations and cultural perspectives differ. Principals must manage conflicts in ways that foster dialogue and understanding. Mediation practices, dialogue groups and established dispute-resolution mechanisms strengthen a climate of trust and stability.

Inclusion cannot be confined within classroom walls. Collaboration with parents and the local community is a critical leadership dimension. Schuelka and Engsig (2022) underscore that school inclusion acquires meaning only when accompanied by the active participation of families and local agencies. Principals enhance transparency and communication with parents by organizing regular meetings, workshops and initiatives that promote understanding of inclusion's principles. In parallel, they cultivate partnerships with local organizations, social services, and NGOs, expanding the support network for students with diverse needs.

Cultivating a culture of trust is essential to consolidating inclusion. By example, the principal shapes the attitudes and behaviors of community members. Transparency, fairness, and consistency in decisions strengthen feelings of safety and acceptance. This culture is expressed in the school's daily functioning: treating diversity as a source of learning, recognizing and celebrating all students and reinforcing cooperative classroom practices. In this context, inclusion is not presented as an obligation but as an organic dimension of school life.

Crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—further highlighted leadership's importance in maintaining inclusion. Principals faced challenges such as the digital divide, supporting students with limited access to technology and providing psychological support to families affected by social and economic difficulties (Zhao, 2020). Inclusive leadership in such conditions entails rapid adaptation, flexibility and creating mechanisms to ensure learning continuity for all. Adopting hybrid teaching models, providing support for students with special needs, and strengthening communication with parents were practices that confirmed the principal's central role as an agent of inclusion.

In sum, the principal plays a multidimensional role in creating an inclusive climate. Through a shared vision, teacher empowerment, emotional intelligence, collaboration with parents and the community and crisis management, the principal determines the success or failure of inclusion efforts. Leadership imbued with the values of equity, justice and acceptance benefits not only the school community but also contributes to shaping societies that are more resilient, fairer and better able to meet the challenges of sustainable development.

4. PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING INCLUSION

Moving from recognizing the importance of inclusion in theory to its actual implementation in schools is among the most critical issues in educational policy and practice. School principals, as leaders who define the climate and strategy of learning organizations, are called upon to adopt specific practices and strategies that ensure inclusion does not remain an abstract ideal but becomes a daily reality (Bao et al., 2024). These practices relate to pedagogical approaches, continuous professional development for teachers, collaboration with parents and the community, creation of support systems for students with diverse needs and the adoption of internationally validated good practices (UNESCO, 2020).

At the core of every inclusion strategy lies pedagogy. Teachers are called upon to design instruction that responds to students' different needs, abilities and learning styles. Differentiated instruction is also essential. Through methods such as cooperative learning, the use of multimedia and interdisciplinary approaches, teachers can address the particular needs of students with disabilities, students learning the language of instruction as an additional language or those facing socio-economic difficulties (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022). Moreover, integrating technology can strengthen inclusion. Tools such as adaptive learning platforms, assistive technologies and online libraries offer opportunities for personalization and facilitate access to knowledge for students with diverse abilities (OECD, 2021; Zhao, 2020).

Naturally, inclusion cannot be achieved without adequately prepared teachers. Professional development is vital for cultivating the skills, attitudes and knowledge that underpin inclusive pedagogy. Training programs should focus on differentiated instruction, intercultural education, classroom management and the use of innovative learning tools. Equally important is collaborative learning among teachers themselves. Principals can encourage professional learning communities in which teachers exchange experiences, discuss challenges and co-design solutions. Such communities strengthen the sense of collective responsibility and foster a culture of continuous improvement (Bao et al., 2024; Netolicky, 2020). In addition, mentoring and coaching support novice teachers and help disseminate good practices. Principals who cultivate these structures empower their staff and ensure that inclusion is not the responsibility of individuals but a collective commitment.

Inclusion is most successful when the school community partners with parents and the local society. Parents are valuable allies who bring knowledge, experience and cultural values that enrich the learning environment. Principals can strengthen parental engagement through frequent and meaningful communication, workshops, participation in school councils and the creation of support networks (UNESCO, 2020). Collaboration with local agencies—such as social services, NGOs and cultural associations—also bolsters inclusive practices. Partnerships with organizations specializing in disability or migration, for example, can provide additional support and targeted interventions for students who need them.

Inclusion cannot be limited to general principles; specific support systems are required to meet students' distinct needs. These include creating teams of specialist educators, psychologists and social workers who collaborate with teachers to develop individualized learning plans. Providing psychosocial support is also crucial. The pandemic showed that students need reinforcement not only cognitively but also emotionally. Schools that offer listening spaces, counseling and mental-health support contribute to students' holistic development (Harris & Jones, 2020).

Inclusive practices extend beyond teaching to the school's everyday operation. Establishing student councils, encouraging student participation in decision-making and cultivating a culture of respect for human rights transform the school into a laboratory of democracy. Students engaged in such structures develop leadership, collaboration and responsibility, while learning to value diversity. In this way, inclusion becomes not only an

educational strategy but a social experience that shapes the citizens of the future (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022).

International examples can offer valuable lessons. In Finland, for instance, education places strong emphasis on inclusion, with support teams in every school and a culture of collaboration among teachers, parents and communities. In Canada, policies aimed at strengthening Indigenous and immigrant students show how education can contribute to intercultural understanding. In Singapore, emphasis on teacher professional development and technology integration enhances all students' access to learning (OECD, 2021). Adapting such good practices to each social and cultural context is essential. Principals who recognize the specificities of their communities can draw inspiration from international experience and tailor it to their school's needs.

Advancing inclusion requires continuous evaluation of practices. Principals should implement mechanisms for collecting data—such as questionnaires, interviews, and performance analyses—to determine whether inclusion strategies are effective. Evaluation should not be punitive but serve as a tool for reflection and improvement. Systematic feedback from students, teachers and parents allows timely adaptation of strategies and strengthens their effectiveness (UNESCO, 2020).

In practice, inclusion requires a web of strategies combining pedagogical innovation, professional development, community collaboration, targeted support and a culture of democracy. As leaders of this process, principals are called upon to coordinate and inspire, ensuring that every student has equal opportunities to participate and thrive. Through systematic implementation and adaptation of these practices, the school community can become a place where diversity is a strength and education contributes meaningfully to sustainable development.

5. CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING INCLUSIVE POLICIES

Promoting inclusion is a strategic objective of education policy and a foundational element of sustainable development. However, translating the principles of inclusive education into practical actions within schools faces a range of challenges. These are linked to institutional, social, cultural, economic and pedagogical factors that create barriers to policies aimed at equity, justice and the empowerment of all students.

One of the most significant challenges concerns the unequal distribution of resources. In many education systems, schools in disadvantaged areas have limited access to infrastructure, digital technologies and specialized staff (OECD, 2021; Eurydice, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this issue acutely, as students from low-income families had greater difficulty accessing remote learning due to lack of computers, internet access or suitable study spaces at home (UNESCO, 2020). Even when policies promote equity, differences in resource allocation often reproduce inequalities. Thus, schools with the greatest needs are in a worse position to implement inclusive practices, intensifying the risk of social exclusion.

Implementing inclusion policies also often encounters resistance within the school community. Teachers—especially those who have worked for many years in traditional settings—may perceive changes as a threat to their professional identity or as an additional workload. Parents may also express concerns about the quality of their children's education when schools enroll students with diverse needs or cultural backgrounds. Such resistance often stems from limited information and understanding of inclusion and requires strategic action by principals to cultivate a culture of trust (Goleman, 2020).

Societal attitudes and prejudices constitute deeper obstacles to inclusion. In many societies, persons with disabilities or students of migrant origin continue to face suspicion or stigma. These attitudes often carry over into schools, hindering the creation of a climate of

acceptance (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022). Overcoming prejudice requires not only education and training but systematic efforts to change culture. Introducing courses on intercultural understanding, showcasing success stories of students from diverse backgrounds, and ongoing collaboration with parents and the community can gradually dismantle stereotypes.

A particularly complex issue is the tension between inclusion and prevailing assessment systems. In many contexts, assessment focuses on standardized examinations and performance indicators, creating pressures toward uniformity and excluding students with different abilities or ways of learning (UNESCO, 2020). Principals face the challenge of balancing system demands with the need to adapt teaching to all learners. This calls for innovative forms of assessment that recognize diversity as an advantage rather than a problem.

Finally, the pandemic period revealed new dimensions of inclusion challenges. The digital divide, psychological strain on students and teachers and the need to adapt quickly to remote learning created additional difficulties (Netolicky, 2020). The most vulnerable groups bore a disproportionate burden, as lack of access to digital tools and limited support at home exacerbated educational inequalities. Crises are not limited to the pandemic; climate change, economic crises and migratory flows also create challenges affecting school functioning. Principals must develop resilience strategies to ensure continuity of learning under uncertainty. Despite widespread recognition of professional development's importance for inclusion, many systems still do not provide sufficient training opportunities. Programs are often fragmented, overly theoretical and poorly connected to daily practice, leaving teachers feeling unprepared for the challenges of differentiated instruction (OECD, 2021). The absence of mentoring and support for novice teachers compounds the problem. Principals who do not invest in a culture of continuous learning struggle to cultivate collective commitment to inclusion.

At the policy level, a lack of coherence and strategic planning is often evident. Inclusion policies are implemented piecemeal rather than embedded in a broader reform framework, leading to practices with limited long-term impact (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, insufficient teacher participation in policy design heightens alienation and reduces the effectiveness of interventions.

In sum, implementing inclusive policies encounters multiple challenges related to resources, social attitudes, assessment regimes, crises and policy contradictions. As leaders of the school community, principals must address these barriers with strategy, sensitivity and vision. Recognizing challenges does not imply abandoning the goal but acknowledging the need for continual adaptation and innovation. Inclusion is not only an educational objective but a social commitment. Overcoming challenges requires collaboration at all levels—from education policy and school leadership to families and local communities—so that education can fulfill its role as a foundation of equity, social justice and sustainable development.

6. LINKING INCLUSION TO SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability has been established as a global priority, particularly since the adoption of the UN's 2030 Agenda. Education—recognized as a fundamental driver of social change—is central to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, education's contribution to sustainability cannot materialize without the full integration of inclusion's principles. Inclusion is not simply a pedagogical choice or a social policy; it is a prerequisite for creating societies that are resilient, just, and capable of addressing the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Sustainable development cannot be achieved in societies characterized by inequalities and exclusions (United Nations, 2025). Inclusive education lowers social barriers, strengthens social cohesion and creates conditions for resilience in the face of crises. The COVID-19

pandemic showed clearly that the most marginalized groups suffered disproportionate consequences—educational, social and economic (Netolicky, 2020). Schools that had invested in inclusion, with support systems and networks of collaboration with parents and the community, responded more effectively to maintaining learning (Harris & Jones, 2020; Netolicky, 2020). The resilience generated by inclusion concerns not only emergency responses but also societies' long-term adaptability (OECD, 2021). Students who grow up in environments where diversity is considered a resource learn to collaborate, resolve conflicts and face challenges collectively—skills essential to sustainable societies.

It should be noted that sustainability is not only environmental; it is also a matter of social justice. SDG 10 focuses on reducing inequalities, recognizing that without social equity there can be no sustainable progress. Inclusive education directly contributes to reducing inequalities by ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have access to quality learning (UNESCO, 2020). The social justice fostered through inclusion extends beyond school. When students experience equality and respect in their daily schooling, they form values that endure into adulthood, becoming citizens with a heightened sense of social responsibility, willing to sustain institutions that promote justice and democracy.

The economic dimension of sustainability is closely tied to education. Research shows that lack of access to quality education leads to lower productivity, limited career opportunities, and the reproduction of poverty cycles (OECD, 2021). Conversely, education systems that embed inclusion cultivate human capital capable of contributing to innovation, development and fairer distribution of resources. Inclusive education mobilizes the talents of the entire population, not only the privileged. Societies that do not invest in inclusion squander vast human potential; those that do benefit from diversity, creativity and wider participation.

The environmental dimension of sustainability is also linked to inclusion. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) emphasizes the need to cultivate skills and values that lead to responsible environmental choices. Inclusive education fosters these skills by teaching collaboration, empathy and solidarity—values critical to protecting the planet (UNESCO, 2020). Experiencing diversity within the school community helps students understand the interconnectedness of people and the environment. Students who learn to respect diversity are more likely to adopt responsible attitudes toward nature and to promote sustainability practices in daily life.

The school principal is central to unifying inclusion and sustainability. Through vision and strategy, principals can shape schools that function as microcosms of a just and sustainable society. Principals who embed sustainability in decision-making—from resource management to cultivating a democratic culture—reinforce the idea of education as a public good. Their practices include promoting green initiatives, fostering environmental awareness through student projects and encouraging partnerships with local actors that advance sustainability. At the same time, cultivating a climate of acceptance and respect within the school provides the pedagogical groundwork for social and environmental responsibility.

Sustainability is directly connected to democratic participation. Inclusive education offers students experiences of democracy through participation in collective bodies, opportunities to voice their opinions and encouragement of collaboration. The participatory culture cultivated in school carries over into society, creating citizens ready to engage responsibly in decision-making and to respect diversity (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022). This relationship is central to sustainability, as societies characterized by active, equitable civic participation are more resilient and better able to address future challenges.

International experience shows that countries investing in inclusive policies have strengthened their progress toward sustainability. In Finland, embedding inclusion in the national curriculum aligns with a broader strategy for social equality and sustainability. In

Canada, promoting intercultural education and recognizing Indigenous rights advances social justice. In Singapore, strong emphasis on teacher professional development and technology use promotes inclusion while preparing students for a knowledge-based, sustainable economy (OECD, 2021). By contrast, countries that have not invested in inclusion face deep social inequalities that obstruct long-term development goals.

The link between inclusion and sustainability is indisputable and multi-faceted. Inclusive education is not simply a tool for pedagogical improvement. It is a foundation for societies aspiring to be just, resilient, and environmentally responsible. By promoting social resilience, justice, economic development, environmental responsibility and democratic participation, inclusion operates as a core pillar of sustainable development. The principal's role is decisive for embedding this linkage at the school level: through vision, strategy and daily practice, schools can become communities that reflect the values of equity and sustainability.

7. CASE STUDIES AND GOOD PRACTICES

Debates on inclusion and sustainability often take on a theoretical character. Their real force emerges through concrete case studies and good practices implemented in schools and systems worldwide. These practices confirm that inclusion can be a driver of social justice, pedagogical innovation, and environmental responsibility. They also show how leadership, collaboration and systematic support can translate principles into daily reality.

Finland is among the most recognized examples of successfully integrating inclusion into its education system. In Finnish schools, differentiation and individualized support are not add-ons but structural features of the curriculum. Support teams—including psychologists, special educators and social workers—ensure no student is left behind. This strategy has proven highly effective in reducing inequalities and creating a school climate grounded in trust and collaboration. Finland's experience also highlights the principal's decisive role as coordinator of multi-layered support and as a cultivator of a culture of acceptance (OECD, 2021).

Canada, as a multicultural society, has invested heavily in intercultural education and recognition of Indigenous rights. Schools emphasize learning environments that acknowledge and respect diversity of language, religion, and cultural practices. Programs such as "Indigenous Ways of Knowing" have been incorporated into curricula so that students learn about the history and culture of Indigenous communities. Parent participation in learning is also emphasized, strengthening the link between school and community. This has contributed not only to reducing inequalities but also to promoting social cohesion in a country marked by pronounced cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2020).

Singapore offers a different but equally important example, emphasizing technology use and teacher professional development. Schools invest in digital learning platforms that enable personalized instruction while implementing systems of continuous teacher training. This strategy has a dual benefit: it promotes inclusion through personalization and prepares students for a knowledge- and technology-based economy. The principal's role is to ensure that technology is used not merely as a teaching tool but as a means of enhancing participation for all students (OECD, 2021).

In Greece, inclusion has been promoted through policies concerning the integration of students with disabilities, migrants, and refugees into mainstream schools. Despite challenges related to limited resources and institutional inconsistencies, important initiatives point the way toward more inclusive education. Integration classes and parallel support services assist students with special educational needs. Programs in intercultural education have improved

access for students of migrant origin. The principal's role remains crucial to the effectiveness of these policies by shaping a climate of acceptance and encouraging community cooperation.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge yet also offered lessons on inclusion's importance. Schools that had developed mechanisms of collaboration with families and invested in differentiated teaching were better positioned to respond to remote learning (Harris & Jones, 2020). The crisis also underscored the need to strengthen digital equity, as students without access to technology were disadvantaged. This led to new policies and strategies, such as providing devices to low-income students and developing open-access learning platforms.

International organizations such as UNESCO, OECD, and UNICEF are pivotal in disseminating good practices and offering frameworks to advance inclusion. UNESCO (2020) stresses inclusive education as an integral part of a new social contract for education. OECD provides data and assessment tools enabling comparative study and contextual adaptation of policies. UNICEF supports programs focusing on vulnerable groups (e.g., refugee children) and provides material support in low-resource contexts.

Across the above cases, several common elements characterize successful inclusion strategies:

1. **Systemic support:** institutional mechanisms that ensure long-term policy implementation.
2. **Visionary leadership:** the principal as a central agent cultivating a culture of acceptance and participation.
3. **Community collaboration:** active engagement of parents and local actors in the learning process.
4. **Continuous professional development:** strengthening teachers' skills as a prerequisite for success.
5. **Technology and innovation:** leveraging digital tools to reduce exclusion and differentiate instruction.

Case studies and good practices confirm that inclusion is not a utopia but an achievable goal when accompanied by strategy, collaboration, and continuous evaluation. Experiences from Finland, Canada and Singapore show that inclusion can strengthen sustainability and create fairer, more resilient societies. For countries still working to implement inclusive policies, these examples offer useful lessons and encourage the adaptation of international experience to local conditions. Ultimately, inclusion is an integral part of the vision for education that contributes meaningfully to sustainable development.

8. DISCUSSION - CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

A systematic exploration of the role of inclusion in education and its relationship to sustainable development underscores both its complexity and strategic significance. This article analyzed the theoretical foundations, the principal's role, practices and strategies for implementation, the challenges encountered in practice, the link to sustainability and good practices from diverse social and cultural contexts. This final section synthesizes the findings to extract conclusions and highlight future directions.

First, leadership is decisive in creating an inclusive climate. The principal operates not merely as a manager but as a carrier of values, a motivator and a strategic guide. The capacity to inspire, empower staff, cultivate trust and promote community partnerships is critical to the success of any initiative (OECD, 2021; Harris & Jones, 2020).

Second, inclusion is inseparable from social justice and equity. Inclusive education does not only support students with special needs or minority groups; it constitutes a broader strategy aimed at reducing social inequalities and creating schools that function as

communities of justice. This renders inclusion not simply a pedagogical choice but a policy priority with societal impact (UNESCO, 2020).

Third, sustainability and inclusion are intrinsically linked. There can be no sustainable society without education that promotes equity, nor can education be considered inclusive if it ignores sustainability's challenges—environmental crises, social inequalities and economic imbalances (Schuelka & Engsig, 2022).

Despite international progress, significant challenges continue to hinder inclusive policy implementation. Unequal resources, social prejudices, resistance to change and standardized assessment systems reproduce inequalities and impede progress (UNESCO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the digital divide and socio-economic disparities, highlighting the need for greater investment in digital equity and psychosocial support (Netolicky, 2020). Policy contradictions also arise: while inclusion is often endorsed rhetorically, interventions are sometimes fragmented and not embedded in a coherent strategy, limiting effectiveness and undermining teacher commitment.

Case studies from Finland, Canada, and Singapore demonstrate that inclusion becomes reality when anchored in key pillars: systemic support, teacher professional development, participatory leadership, community collaboration and innovation. These examples cannot be replicated mechanically, but they provide valuable lessons adaptable to diverse contexts (OECD, 2021). A major lesson is the necessity of culture-building. Policies alone are insufficient; shifts in attitudes, values and daily practices are required. Schools investing in trust and acceptance achieve better outcomes in implementing inclusive practices.

International organizations—UNESCO, OECD—play a decisive role by providing policy frameworks, data and good practices, thereby strengthening systems' capacity to tailor strategies to local needs. Transnational school networks also foster exchange and innovation. International cooperation is particularly important for sustainability, since issues such as climate change, migration and social inequality transcend national boundaries. Education, as a global public good, requires inclusive, globally coordinated responses.

Looking ahead, the debate on inclusion and sustainability should focus on several key directions:

1. **Holistic approaches:** Policies must not treat inclusion as an isolated action but consider every dimension of the education system—from curriculum and teacher development to resource management and assessment.
2. **Investment in professional development:** Teachers are the primary agents of inclusion. Continuing education, mentoring and collaborative learning communities should be standard practice.
3. **Technology as catalyst:** Leverage digital tools for differentiated instruction, develop open-access platforms and ensure digital equity to reduce exclusion.
4. **School–community linkage:** Strengthen cooperation with parents, local agencies and organizations to support inclusion and foster social cohesion.
5. **Embedding inclusion in ESD:** Integrate environmental and social dimensions so students develop responsibility and solidarity—foundations of a just and sustainable society.

The discussion leads to a central conclusion: inclusion and sustainability are interdependent and cannot be addressed separately. Inclusion is the pathway to sustainability and sustainability provides the horizon that gives inclusion meaning. As leader of the school community, the principal must act as the catalyst for this connection, while policies must ensure coherence, continuity and adequate resources. International organizations and collaboration networks offer tools and guidance, but success depends on the commitment of local school communities.

Ultimately, inclusion is not only an educational matter, but a societal choice—the foundation upon which fairer, more resilient societies can be built, capable of meeting future challenges. Investing in inclusive education is therefore the most reliable investment in sustainable development, as it cultivates citizens with the values, skills and capacities to build a better world.

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