

Enlarging Inclusive Leadership in Education

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ABSTRACT

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This paper overviews conceptual insights from various studies to understand the role of inclusive leadership in imagining education that values social justice and diversity of all its learners in collaboration with multiple stakeholders. Inclusive leadership is an umbrella concept encompassing various leadership practices, including educational leadership. Notably, education leadership is shaped by an inclusive approach, however, it is difficult to draw a systemic picture of these changes. Due to the extensive scale of inclusive leadership, we employ computer-assisted mapping techniques to discover key points that help to understand the relationship between inclusive and educational leadership. Firstly, our findings illustrate that transformational leadership, management, and innovations are three promising bridging nodes where inclusive and educational leadership overlap for social transformation in learning campuses and society. Secondly, we consider accountability as a restrictive node for inclusive leadership in education. The implications of the study suggest that inclusive educational leadership practices need to be explored in more depth.

Keywords: Education, educational leadership, inclusive leadership, innovation, mapping review.

INTRODUCTION

We have a strong vision to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all based on political-level agenda documents such as The Global Agenda for Education 2030 [1] and the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals [2]. Therefore, exploring practices that enable the successful implementation of inclusion is important. Arguably, educational leadership plays a pivotal role in education for all agenda by transforming systemic practices, teacher and student performance, and school culture, setting a vision, and involving various stakeholders in a shared responsibility [3], [4], [5]. Notably, we have a rapidly growing interest in inclusion and inclusive leadership [6]. Moreover, inclusive leadership has climbed into the popular consciousness [7]. In such a context, we assume that educational leadership should become more inclusive, especially considering that inclusive leadership has “become a universally desirable style of leadership” [8]. However, from our perspective, the evolution of educational leadership towards inclusivity is progressing slowly and faces numerous barriers.

To begin with, inclusive education encounters significant challenges due to the complex and diverse environments in which educational leadership operates, often characterized by deeply entrenched discriminatory practices. One significant challenge is the persistence of hierarchical leadership approaches that promote exclusion by centralizing decision-making responsibilities in the hands of individual leaders, such as school administrators or principals [9]. Furthermore, there has been an increasing emphasis on accountability measures, such as standardized testing and evaluations that frequently promote exclusion by focusing narrowly on quantifiable outcomes [10]. Consequently, other leadership voices within the educational community, particularly those of teachers, parents, and students, are often overlooked in educational research that predominantly highlights administrative functions, such as setting growth direction, creating a shared vision, and providing professional development opportunities for staff members, and others [11], [12], [13].

Inclusive leadership faces additional struggles within the hierarchical nature of educational institutions, which fundamentally shapes teachers' and principals' perceptions and expectations [14]. On the other hand, there is an increasing emphasis on collaborative work that prioritizes equitable educational policies, practices, and scholarship [9],[15]. Nevertheless, many educational leaders, particularly principals, feel unprepared to implement inclusive practices effectively due to a lack of training and support [16]. Additionally, various cultural and organizational barriers hinder leaders' ability to foster innovation and inclusivity, particularly when bureaucratic practices and accountability frameworks are highly restrictive [17], [18]. As Ryan (2006) observes [9], traditional leadership models are often incompatible with inclusion, emphasizing that "leadership and social justice are not natural bedfellows; nor are leadership and inclusion" (p. 7).

The objectives of this paper are twofold. Firstly, it aims to provide an overview of research findings to describe the impact of inclusive leadership on education. Secondly, it employs bibliometric exploration to map out existing literature on an inclusive leadership topic, identifying gaps and overlapping issues in the research literature. To our knowledge, our study is among the first mapping reviews of inclusive leadership in relation to educational leadership. We aim our study to shed light on inclusive leadership from the standpoint of education and facilitate awareness about inclusive leadership in education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overviewing Pathways of Inclusive Leadership Education Selecting

The idea of inclusive leadership in education is closely related to inclusive education. Inclusive educational practices go beyond just integrating students with disabilities; they involve a school-wide ethos that respects all dimensions of diversity, including race, socioeconomic background, gender, and language [19], [20]. Furthermore, inclusive education is more than just ensuring access to schools; it also involves adequately preparing teachers, adapting curricula, and encouraging active learner participation [21]. Therefore, the roles inclusive leadership is expected to play are multifold. Firstly, inclusive educational leaders should promote social justice and democratic principles within educational systems and embody the ideals of access, equity, and participation for all learners [22], [23], [24]. Secondly, inclusive leadership should critically reflect and challenge the current oppressive structures and raise questions about the existing assumptions and the need for better practices [25], [26]. Therefore, inclusive leadership is closely related to other leadership practices and often overlaps with them.

Various studies relate different leadership models, such as transformational, distributed, instructional, principled, and participative to inclusive leadership. It is implied that transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership are linked to successful inclusion practices [27], [28]. Distributed leadership is described as a good pathway for inclusive leadership by creating a shared responsibility among staff and encouraging teamwork and social networking. It is widely endorsed as a method of inclusivity [29], [30], [13] as it leverages the unique insights of each staff member, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of student needs. Instructional leadership might be employed in fostering a learning environment with clear goals, curriculum, and evaluation of learner outcomes [27], [3]. According to Rigby (2014), instructional leaders often navigate competing priorities, such as innovation and accountability [31]. Thus, it is imperative to understand entrepreneurial logic, which focuses on innovation, competition, and efficiency, and social justice logic, which is about equity for marginalized groups to address systemic inequalities in educational settings [31].

The instructional leadership approach is more focused on outcomes and concerned with ensuring that the school's curriculum, teaching strategies, and assessment practices are effective and aligned with educational goals. Arguably, if educational goals are clearly focused on inclusion, it means that instructional leadership will serve and support teachers in reaching the envisioned goal through effective planning and problem-solving. Therefore, instructional leadership is focused on the principal's role in improving school effectiveness through interactions with teachers, classroom observations, and the development of curriculum and instructional practices [32].

To our point of view, instructional leadership is not a catalyzation factor for inclusion, however, it might serve as a very important tool by supporting teachers' training, and resource allocation, establishing a measurable criterion for

educational success, providing constructive feedback, etc. However, instructional leadership plays an important role because it sets clear requirements for leadership effectiveness and promotes a belief that strong leadership is essential for a school environment.

Principled leadership is defined as a value-based approach that emphasizes ethics, trust, moral character, and a commitment to principles of equity and justice. At its core, principled leadership focuses on moral intelligence, with leaders making decisions that develop trust, transparency, and increase the well-being of the organization [33]. Principled leaders are guided by the principles of equity and social justice, using these values to influence their organizational environments [34]. Furthermore, principled leadership positively impacts organizational behavior by fostering trust and promoting an inclusive organizational culture [35]. As such, principled leadership and inclusive leadership are closely interrelated, both underscoring values of justice, fairness, trust, ethics, and social inclusion. Principled leadership helps individuals and organizations reflect their core values in decision-making.

Participative leadership (also named democratic leadership) can be conceptualized as involving input from all institution members, including teachers, students, parents, and administrators, in collaborative discussions and decision-making. In this way, the collaborative culture, commitment, and transparency are ensured, and diverse perspectives are heard [36]. Consequently, by using a participative leadership style, leaders enhance motivation and provide opportunities for growth and engagement of their employees, which increases job satisfaction [37]. Thus, the participative leadership style prioritizes inclusion because it aims to create a learning environment where members from diverse backgrounds can be involved in cooperation and join decision-making, which empowers and gives them a sense of agency. We can assume that participative leadership is highly effective in fostering inclusivity.

In much research, inclusive leadership is associated with transformative leadership. Transformative leadership emphasizes a school-wide vision of inclusivity and implements changes that align with this vision. It empowers change in institutional practices and removes barriers, enabling students' successful participation in the educational process [16]. Inclusive leaders foster social transformation through collaboration, fairness, and social justice by amplifying the voices of teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other groups that have been traditionally marginalized [19], [38], [39]. Many leadership theories relate social transformation to the commitment of the leaders to implement changes on the structural, systemic, and policy levels. Furthermore, they are in line with the cultural, emotional, and psychological dynamics of change in educational settings [40].

Transformation entails identifying the hidden assumptions and creating new ways of thinking and being that allow personal growth and social change [41], [42], [43]. According to Adams and colleagues (2023), social conditions can be transformed through conversation because change starts with individuals and then proceeds to groups and broader societal structures [44]. Thus, the need for collaboration, dialogue, and reflexivity is instrumental in promoting inclusive practices in educational institutions [45], [46]. Leaders who shift their thinking and take time to learn various conversational strategies—such as framing, questioning, and listening—incorporate them into their communication patterns and may encourage environments that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness [44], [47]. Thus, the transformational process starts with individuals and trickles down to the collective effort of educational communities working together. Consequently, transformational leadership might be considered an essential pathway for inclusive leadership.

Mapping Bridging Nodes Between Inclusive and Educational Leadership

We employed a computer-assisted co-word analysis as the most often used bibliometric tool for analyzing and visualizing knowledge structure. "Co-word analysis explores associations and connections between concepts that contribute to the development of a research area or field" [48]. VOSviewer software is designed to visualize collected literature as a co-citation network, with co-cited references visualized as nodes in different sizes and colors, as shown in Fig. 1. Keywords with high correlation with each other are placed into the same cluster, which may consist of several nodes of the same color. All clusters are displayed in different colors, ranging from red to blue, that retrospectively correspond with the highest and lowest item density. The sizes of the nodes show the occurrence frequency. Arguably, the smaller the size, the lower the occurrence frequency is. The line depicts the connection relationship between the two words. Thus, the thicker line between the two words represents the stronger connection.

We retrieved 859 publications in English over 25 years (2000-2024) by using a CA WoS engine to search keyword combinations under the Topic: (“inclusive leadership” OR “education* leadership”) AND (impact OR innovat*). Records are exported in Plain Text File format. We chose CA WoS as it is the world’s leading scholarly literature reference database that provides the most complete coverage from various disciplines in line with high-quality publication standards.

The overall map consists of 229 keywords with a frequency of 5 times (Fig. 1).

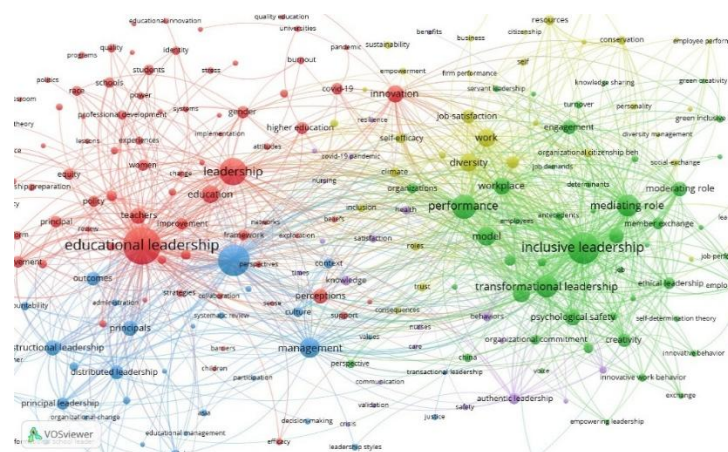


Figure 1. Co-occurrence network on inclusive leadership and educational leadership by VOSviewer

The red color signifies that the cluster of “educational leadership” is greater in intensity compared to inclusive leadership (Fig. 1). Moreover, greater intensity leads us to suppose that this cluster represents studies of better-development levels. The cluster of “Inclusive leadership” deals mainly with issues of creative teaching, innovative behavior, engagement, transformational leadership, and others that aim to facilitate inclusion. The cluster “Educational leadership” deals mainly with professional development, equity, policy, social justice, gender, and identity issues.

With the help of VOSviewer zooming functionality, we explore promising bridging nodes between educational leadership and inclusive leadership. We identify innovation, management, and transformational leadership as three bridging nodes that are illustrated respectively in Fig. 2A, Fig. 2C, and Fig. 2D. Corresponding to the colors, we consider innovations as being better developed compared to the other two bridging nodes of management and transformational leadership.

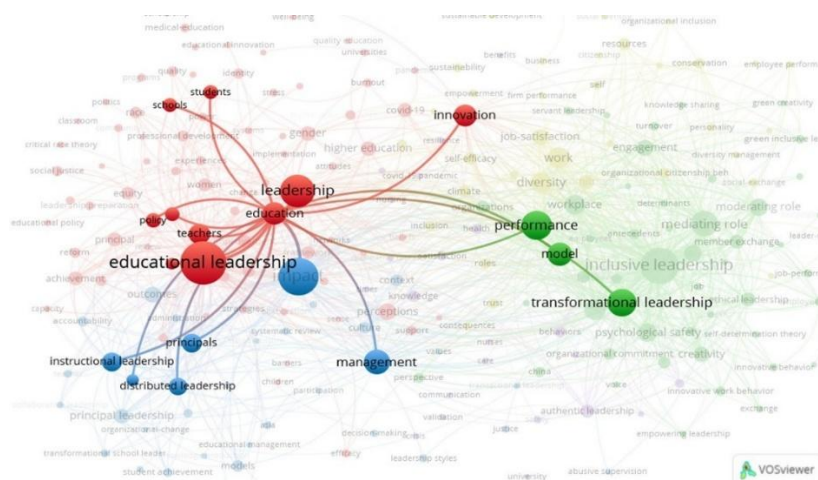


Figure 2A. Education as a bridging node of inclusive and educational leadership by VOSviewer.

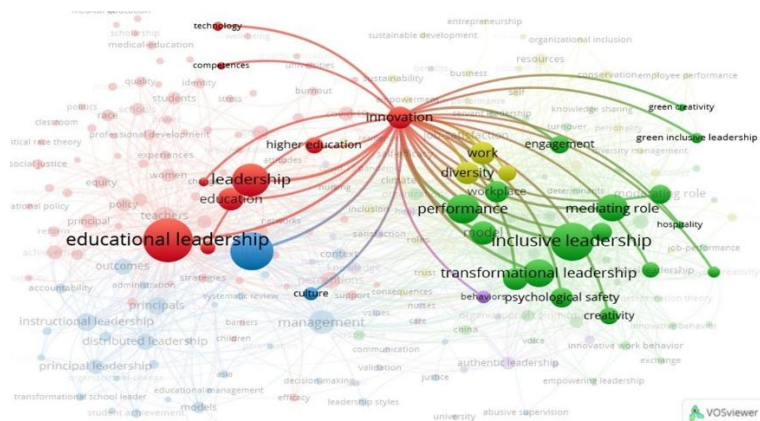


Figure 2B. Innovation as a bridging node of inclusive and educational leadership by VOSviewer.

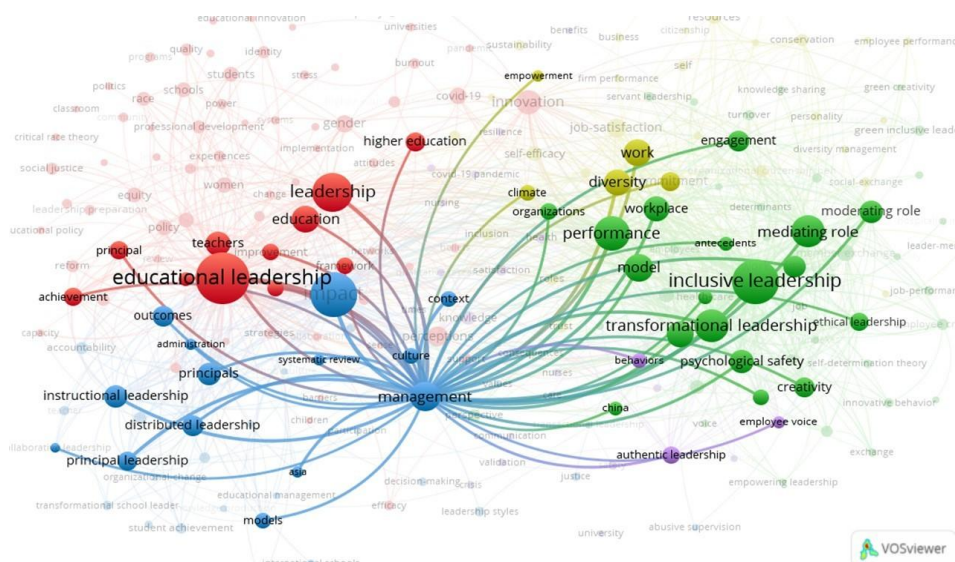


Figure 2C. Management as a bridging node of inclusive and educational leadership by VOSviewer.

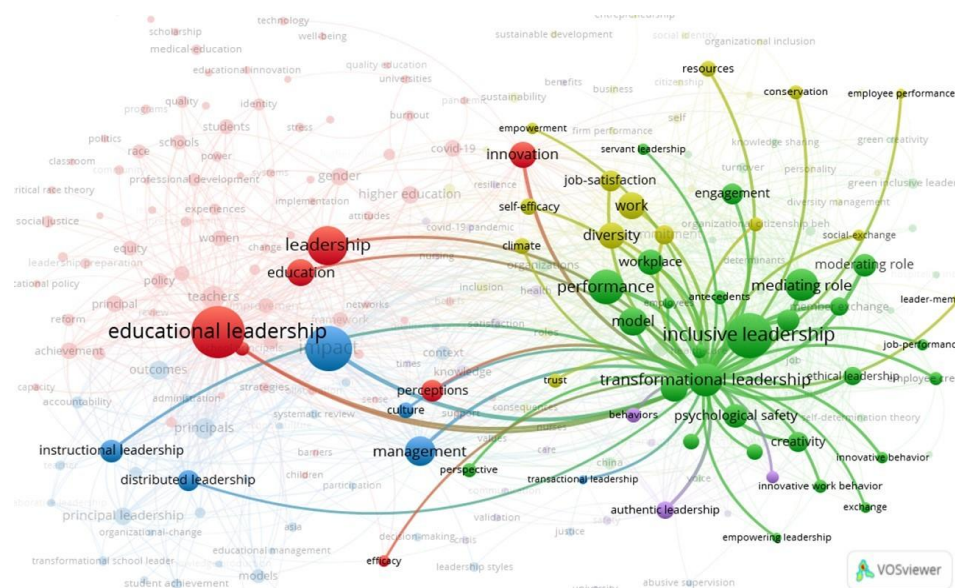


Figure 2D. Transformational leadership as a bridging node of inclusive and educational leadership by VOSviewer.

Arguably, it is important to point out that the node of education is not directly related to inclusive leadership (Fig. 2A). This is a significant message, reconsidering our assumption that educational leadership is getting more inclusive. We can see that education is directly connected with educational leadership, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and transformational leadership issues, among which we cannot find inclusive leadership. It seems that education is strongly contextualized in the aforementioned leadership models, and transformational leadership serves as the pivotal node for integrating inclusive leadership into educational leadership (Fig. 2D).

DISCUSSION: ENCOUNTERING RESTRICTIONS WITH INNOVATION

Educational leadership is going through a slow evolution towards inclusive educational leadership. According to DeMatthews (2021), this situation emerges because education systems were not originally designed to support inclusion [49]. The overview of the literature refers to accountability as a systemically restricting determinant on the way to inclusive leadership. This overview trend corresponds with bibliometric mapping (Fig. 1).

Accountability occurs in contradiction with inclusivity because regulated assessments often prefer academic outcomes over inclusivity [10], [19]. Thus, leaders become diverted from efforts to promote inclusivity. However, we need more evidence of how standardized testing may contribute to the exclusion of diverse student populations and already marginalized students, for example, from less privileged backgrounds [50], [51]. As a result of mandatory assessments, schools and principals may target to select high-achievement students and further entrench inequality [19], [52]. Overall, researchers must call for reforms in policies that would bring more flexibility in assessment without compromising academic goals and incorporate feedback from various institutions and community stakeholders [53], [54].

Accountability may push institutions to seek innovative solutions to improve teaching strategies by creating personalized learning supported by data-informed models. An accountability system supported by innovative solutions can help significantly improve teaching practices and learning outcomes for all students. Thus, innovations might become a strong response to performance-based accountability [55]. Also, accountability may be encountered with teachers' self-innovativeness [56] because well-crafted accountability systems can encourage innovative teaching [57]. Innovations might help to ensure that diverse needs are met and broader participation is developed. In addition, innovation development is closely related to education policy. Innovations should correlate with greater autonomy of schools to enhance effective practices tailored to specific contexts and individuals [58]. Educational leadership plays a pivotal role in education policy development and should be on the frontlines of the education system to ensure policies are aligned with schools' interests.

The results also demonstrate that innovation (Fig. 2B) serves as a bridge between education and inclusion, highlighting their close interconnection. First, innovation is essential for creating well-functioning, inclusive educational environments that embrace diversity and remain sustainable and up-to-date. Leadership that adopts innovative practices should focus on re-evaluating existing policies, practices, and teaching methodologies to ensure equity for all students [9]. Innovation, in turn, fosters creative and collaborative dialogue among different stakeholders. Second, innovation plays a key role in addressing and dismantling current systemic barriers in education. Innovative leaders are better prepared to implement changes and promote social justice and equity in school contexts [59], [60]. This involves adopting more collaborative leadership models that involve teachers, parents, students, and the broader community in shared decision-making. The synergy between inclusive practices and innovation empowers educational leaders and other stakeholders to implement long-lasting improvements in schools and educational institutions [13], [11].

CONCLUSIONS

Enlarging inclusive leadership as a goal in educational research and practice will take time. This review showed that there are some gaps in how inclusivity and education are connected in literature. The overlap between educational and inclusive leadership is primarily seen in transformational leadership and innovation, with a light connection to management themes. Innovations, in particular, have received significant attention in the research on both educational and inclusive leadership, thus, they might be a helpful link between the two concepts. Additionally, the

mapping findings reveal that educational leadership is indirectly related to inclusive leadership within the context of instructional, distributed, principled, and transformational leadership. Consequently, adopting the best inclusive practices from these models and determining how to apply them in specific educational contexts, through collaborative dialogue with the educational community, could be a sustainable approach.

This overview of the literature aligns with the identified mapping trends in educational leadership, identifying the close connection between educational and inclusive leadership, particularly in the context of transformation and innovation. Inclusivity must be recognized as a crucial pathway to effective educational leadership, especially as diversity becomes increasingly valued in society and in the educational environment. To achieve this, we need to prioritize the development of inclusive leadership that places inclusion at its core. Inclusive educational leadership should not only embrace diversity but also ensure that it is integrated as a fundamental vision and goal, guiding the development of innovative, equitable policies and practices for all students.

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