

Supporting Inclusive School Leadership

Literature Review



EUROPEAN AGENCY
for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Literature Review

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education



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INTRODUCTION

The overall goal of the Supporting Inclusive School Leadership project is to investigate how to effectively develop and promote inclusive school-level leadership through national- and local-level policy frameworks and support mechanisms. To do this, three key project questions guide the project activities:

1. What policy frameworks are required to develop and support inclusive leadership across the whole education system?
2. What are the essential competences needed for effective inclusive leadership practice at school level?
3. What support and professional development opportunities are required to develop and sustain effective inclusive school leaders?

This literature review aims to examine the available international and European literature (post-2012 and key literature published earlier) in order to:

- identify key concepts underpinning policy and practice for inclusive school leadership;
- agree operational definitions of key terms and concepts to be used during the project.

This review will draw on the Agency's [Organisation of Provision to Support Inclusive Education](#) and [Raising the Achievement of All Learners in Inclusive Education](#) projects. It will help to clarify focus areas for further exploration. These may include, for example:

- Structures and processes for collaboration and decision-making
- Increasing capacity for diversity
- Tackling prejudice and discrimination
- Closing the policy-practice gap
- Managing change
- Engaging stakeholders
- Considering the learner voice
- Ensuring equity within education.

The literature review, as well as a parallel [policy review](#) (European Agency, 2018), also underpins:

- the development of a conceptual framework for examining and exploring inclusive school leadership;
- a review and 'mapping' of country policy that impacts on school leadership. Based on these initial desk research findings, a survey has been developed to gather information from Agency member countries. The survey examines definitions, roles and responsibilities of school leaders, with a particular focus on inclusive leadership practice.



This review is organised around important factors for inclusive school leadership. After a short section on the review [methodology](#), the subsequent sections aim to answer the following questions regarding inclusive school leadership:

- What is leadership and what is its core purpose?
- What leadership models are important for inclusive schools?
- What kind of training, support and professional development are needed to develop the necessary competences for inclusive school leadership?
- What are the roles/functions of school leaders in an inclusive education system?



METHODOLOGY

This review draws on relevant research information from international sources. The desk research has focused on literature from 2012 onwards covering inclusive school leaders, but also includes influential works published earlier. Given the extensive research available on school leaders in general, this review starts from a concept of leadership that is guided by a sharp focus on equity and social justice, i.e. a leadership approach that encourages leaders to ask critical questions about involvement (participative justice), respect (cultural justice), learning (developmental justice) and resources (distributive justice) (Kikis-Papadakis, 2015). This builds upon previous work, rather than replicating existing findings and outputs, and considers existing materials, such as toolkits produced by the European Policy Network on School Leadership (no date).

The following sections will:

- explore the [core functions](#) of school leadership;
- describe three [leadership models](#) for developing inclusive schools;
- discuss the [development of competences](#) through initial training, professional development and support for school leaders;
- discuss [implications for policy](#) regarding inclusive school leaders.



THE CORE FUNCTIONS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Before going further with discussions about inclusive school leadership, it is important to define the concept of leadership. Leadership has been interpreted in different ways, but at the core it is found in social relationships with social goals; it is defined as a process of providing direction and applying influence (Lumby and Coleman, 2016). It has to do with managing people's emotions, thoughts and actions decisively in order to influence others towards a preferred direction (Diamond and Spillane, 2016). In this description, it is inherent that leadership resides in the relationship between leaders and others. The relationship is built on relating the motivation and commitment of both parties, moving people to action by influencing and challenging their thinking and having them reflect on the values and understandings that constitute the basis of their practice (Krüger and Scheerens, 2012).

This literature review uses the term **school leader** to refer to all those in key leadership roles in schools and learning communities. Such leaders may also be referred to as head teachers, school directors or principals. In this role, they focus on enlisting and guiding the talents and energies of teachers, learners and parents towards achieving common educational aims. Leading a school involves both leadership and management. It is important to acknowledge that school leaders need a balance of these two processes as leadership is focused on values, vision and the future, whereas management is concerned with making the present work (West-Burnham and Harris, 2015).

The landscape of educational leadership has changed drastically as schools and school systems have developed. This is due to growing diversity and other factors, such as increasing school autonomy, which call for greater accountability for school leaders (Bauer and Silver, 2018; European Commission, 2017). A constant variable through these developments is that the school leader is likely to be solely responsible for their decision-making and they are most often held responsible for school outcomes.

The literature reviewed for the Raising Achievement project (European Agency, 2016) shows that leadership practices are both directly and indirectly connected with positive outcomes for learners (Mac Ruairc, 2013). Research has identified the main organisational functions that must be performed for inclusive schools to run effectively (Billingsley et al., 2017; McLeskey and Waldron, 2015; Skoglund and Stäcker, 2016). Figure 1 depicts these functions, which fall into the three broad categories of setting direction, human development and organisational development.



Figure 1. The core functions of school leadership (adapted from Skoglund and Stacker, 2016)

Fulfilling these functions supports leaders to challenge a school culture that identifies and reacts to learner deficits. It enables them to create an inclusive school culture with a focus on the learning environment, where every learner is a valuable participant expected to achieve through quality education. The following three sections elaborate on the main functions described in Figure 1.

Setting direction and building a vision

Leadership is important for giving direction, with a focus on the values underscoring inclusive practice and on the discourse that supports inclusive practice. Furthermore, it is essential for exploring and sharing meanings about inclusion, aiming to promote the best interests of learners both academically and socially, through fairness, justice and equity (Stone-Johnson, 2014). The vision of an inclusive school needs to be grounded in reflection among stakeholders about what constitutes inclusive practice, as well as discussions about the values contributing to that practice (Ekins, 2013).

An important factor in achieving the strategic vision is attending to the development of professional competences of teachers and staff in working with diverse groups of learners.

Human development

The Agency’s recent *Empowering Teachers* report (European Agency, 2015) notes that leadership is one of the main drivers of the quality of teaching, and teacher quality is the



most important school-level influence on learner achievement. According to Dorczak, the school leader's main role is 'to release and develop the talents of all teachers or other members of staff as well [as] recognising and activating the potential of all students' (2013, p. 55). This is supported by Ammann et al. (2017), who state that school leaders are partly responsible for the professional and career development of their staff. Thus, school leadership focused on improving teachers' motivation, capacities and working environment is most likely to improve learner achievement.

At the centre of this strategic role is monitoring and evaluating teaching, in order to collect information to provide professional development which will support and motivate each teacher to work for all learners (Black and Simon, 2014). This is based on leadership's ability to build capacity by developing teachers' knowledge and skills, and to promote a school-wide professional community that facilitates reflective dialogue and collaboration about inclusive instructional practices (Humada-Ludeke, 2013; Erbring, 2016).

The *Empowering Teachers* report (European Agency, 2015) further recognises the need for leaders to develop leadership skills in others – for example, in teachers and middle managers – in order to share or 'distribute' leadership tasks and create an inclusive school culture.

Organisational development

School leaders play a critical role in implementing inclusive policy and practice and, in particular, in creating a school culture that embraces diversity and promotes inclusion (Cherkowski and Ragoonaden, 2016; Mac Ruairc, 2013). Thus, school leaders are responsible for maintaining a school culture that is collegial, interactive and focused on supporting teachers and learners throughout the educational process. Organising the school to set the tone for an inclusive culture requires school leaders to place emphasis on nurturing teacher morale, partnerships with parents and professional collegiality. This will then affect the learning environment created for learners (Fultz, 2017).

Key aspects of that inclusive culture involve embracing:

- a common definition of inclusion;
- an authentic sense of belonging;
- a commitment that 'all' means each and every learner;
- a presumption of competence for ALL learners (Theoharis and Causton, 2014).

This means that for the school to fully embrace inclusion, the school's leadership team needs to have an agenda and a strategic vision of how to work towards that agenda. Having the authority to set a strategic direction and develop school plans and goals that are in alignment with curriculum standards, but at the same time responsive to local needs, is dependent on the school leaders' level of autonomy and responsibility (Palomares, 2006). This is an important contextual factor. It determines the degree to which school leaders can influence organisational development and make important decisions about the curriculum, assessment and teacher recruitment and the extent to which they can focus on improving learner achievement (Pont, 2014).



Using human and financial resources strategically and aligning them with pedagogical purposes can influence the way school activities improve teaching and learning. Thus, it is important that school leaders are involved in decisions regarding teacher recruitment. Being able to select teaching staff is central to establishing a school culture and capacity that have beneficial effects on learners' achievement (Stoll and Temperley, 2009).

Summary

This section has outlined the main functions of school leaders. The literature shows that, to fulfil these key functions, school leaders need more than management skills to develop and maintain an inclusive school. Their role is complex and calls for engagement with different stakeholders at all system levels, including policy-makers and others able to provide professional development opportunities. School leaders need to be empowered to make decisions and set a course. They need appropriate forms of accountability that support inclusive measures. These factors can possibly determine a school leader's effectiveness in creating and leading an inclusive school.



MODELS OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TO DEVELOP INCLUSION

Recent Agency work, particularly the Organisation of Provision (European Agency, 2013) and Raising Achievement (European Agency, 2017) projects, has highlighted school leadership as a crucial factor in developing inclusive education systems. Furthermore, leadership is identified as a key issue in providing quality support for learners – this includes a positive school culture and, most importantly, flexible responses to diversity.

International research has identified three main models of school leadership linked to successful inclusive practices: [transformational leadership](#), [distributed leadership](#) and [instructional leadership](#). These have a common focus on developing a shared vision and shared ownership and decision-making (Kershner and McQuillan, 2016; Urick, 2016). Transformational leadership comes from the management literature (Burns, 1978), while instructional and distributed leadership originate in research on educational administration.

The aims of these three types of leadership are different. As such, looking at how the three interact and can be used together is more important than focusing on each one in isolation. While transformational and distributed leadership focus on the ‘how’ of leadership, instructional leadership focuses on the ‘what’, or important tasks for school leaders to perform.

This section discusses these three types of leadership and how they can be connected to effective inclusive school practice.

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership emphasises vision-setting and inspiration. It focuses on establishing structures and cultures that enhance the quality of teaching and learning, setting direction, developing people and (re)designing the organisation (Day et al., 2016). Transformational school leadership is traditionally associated with the ability to facilitate change and innovation by impacting on people and cultures within schools (Navickaitė, 2013).

School leaders aiming to reform organisational structures to develop an inclusive school may take up transformational leadership to establish and communicate a vision, create opportunities for professional development, build capacity and encourage professional learning and innovation (Urick, 2016). According to transformational leadership theory, given adequate support, school leaders can influence school staff to become highly engaged and motivated by setting inspirational goals that are associated with values in which the staff members believe or are persuaded to believe (Leithwood and Sun, 2012). This means that leaders need to identify which values are critical to their staff’s performance and focus on leadership practices most likely to have a positive influence on those values.



Research on successful school leaders has found that the ability to improve or transform schools in the long term is connected to the leaders' understanding and analysis of the school's needs and the way they apply clearly articulated, shared educational values (Day et al., 2016).

Distributed leadership

Delegating or distributing leadership can simply stand for the formal division of labour in a school between middle managers and other staff. However, theories of distributed leadership evident in recent research literature emphasise collaborative efforts based on a network of relationships between people (Hansen, 2013). Leadership in that sense is not the property of individuals, but is inherent in interactions and practices across the school context.

Types of distributed leadership in the literature include shared leadership, participative leadership and democratic leadership (ibid.). These particular approaches to leadership reflect inclusive values, as they are essentially democratic, supporting participation and shared accountability among school staff members. Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the practice of leadership, rather than specific leadership roles or responsibilities. In a school, there are many influences, formal and informal, which may be sources of leadership.

The distributed leadership approach goes beyond traditional leadership that focuses on top-down hierarchical styles. In particular, distributed leadership does not only refer to the head teacher or principal. It extends to the role of other teacher-leaders (Liasidou and Svensson, 2013) and, in general, to any other staff member, learner or parent who takes on a leading role within the school. Such actors are important because they become 'enforcers' or 'drivers' of the change process and multiply the head teacher's actions.

Distributed leadership firstly involves the devolution of responsibilities to middle management teams that are able to support and manage the transfer of knowledge and skills when necessary. Secondly, it enables all staff and school stakeholders to take responsibility by promoting flexibility and sharing practice. Thus, this leadership model involves the interactions between those in formal and informal leadership roles much more than the actions they perform. The main concern is how leadership influences organisational and instructional improvement (Harris, 2013). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), distributed leadership leads to a greater sense of purpose in schools, as it promotes teamwork and multi-disciplinary and professional collaboration among teaching and non-teaching staff, other stakeholders, professionals and services.

Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership emphasises the importance of establishing clear educational goals, planning the curriculum and evaluating teachers and teaching. The prime focus is on the leaders' responsibility for promoting better measurable outcomes for learners, highlighting the importance of enhancing the quality of classroom teaching and learning (Day et al., 2016). Instructional leadership furthermore emphasises the creation of a



supportive, encouraging work environment that can support the development of teaching practices best suited to improve academic performance (Hansen and Lárusdóttir, 2015). This type of leadership has also been termed ‘learning-centred leadership, leadership for learning or curriculum leadership’, as one key dimension focuses on developing and co-ordinating an effective school curriculum (Gumus et al., 2018).

Research suggests that the best way to raise learner achievement is to improve teachers’ instructional practices. A further, powerful factor is the leadership practice of the head teacher or principal in facilitating both learner and teacher learning (OECD, 2014). Central to that goal is attending to the pedagogical repertoire, decision-making skills, sense of self and professional efficacy of both teachers and leaders (Donnelly et al., 2016). Thus, while teachers are pedagogical experts, school leaders co-ordinate the efforts of teachers and teacher-leaders to support each other and the central mission of the school (Urlick, 2016).

An OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in 23 countries found that there are various degrees of instructional leadership in different national contexts, but school leaders with a stronger instructional leadership focus are associated with:

- greater collaboration between teachers;
- more positive teacher-learner interactions;
- increased recognition of teacher innovation (Day and Sammons, 2014).

A further analysis of the TALIS 2013 found that, in schools where instructional leadership is favoured, teachers in primary and secondary education are also more engaged in reflective dialogue (OECD, 2016).

Instructional leadership sees the leaders’ prime focus as responsibility for promoting better measurable outcomes for learners by enhancing the quality of classroom teaching and learning (Gawlik, 2017). However, the challenge is to identify **how** leaders can facilitate teacher learning and what it is that teachers need to be able to do to implement the kind of instruction that will support learners in achieving educational goals (Neumerski, 2013).

Defining a model of an inclusive school leadership

Following the review of some key concepts that underpin inclusive school leadership, this section moves on to define a new model of inclusive school leadership. This model can be developed by bringing together the different foci from the three leadership models (transformational, distributed and instructional) and the three core practices of school leadership: setting direction and building a vision, human development and organisational development.



Figure 2. Inclusive leadership

Figure 2 shows how the leadership models can influence and support the core functions of inclusive school leaders. Transformative leadership is valuable for building a vision and setting an inclusive direction. Distributed leadership is important for sharing leadership to support both human and organisational development. Instructional leadership affects human and organisational development towards inclusive education. When these three leadership models co-exist in an integrated practice, there is a substantial impact on learner achievement, pedagogical quality and the development of professional learning communities in schools (OECD, 2016).

The following section will consider the training and professional development required to develop the competences needed to fulfil these core functions.



INITIAL TRAINING, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Leading a school is a demanding mixture of tasks related to the core functions outlined in the model above. This role requires, among other competences, a vision, a capacity for strategic thinking and efficient resource management, and the ability to improve learning environments and learning cultures (European Commission, 2017). The way school leaders balance these tasks will influence the success of teachers and learners in education. Therefore, the training, preparation and on-going development of leaders in understanding all aspects of their role are of great importance.

Supporting and developing effective leaders becomes an imperative part of recruiting and retaining the best teachers for marginalised children and young people, as retaining good teachers can prove problematic in schools where there are ineffective school leaders (Khalifa et al., 2016; Valle, 2013). Effective leaders must be capable of promoting and sustaining an environment stable enough to attract and maintain capable teachers and support their further professional development. Considering these factors, the initial training, support and professional development of school leaders are important concerns for the development of inclusive school systems.

Initial training

Most countries offer specific training programmes for school leaders, although their length and content vary greatly among countries (European Commission, 2017). However, despite the availability of training, school leaders across the OECD countries widely reported that they lacked the training needed to assume their posts (Schleicher, 2012).

As the tasks of school leaders are varied and complex, no initial training can equip every participant with the knowledge and skills to address all that is required for successful school leadership – especially now, in a rapidly changing social, economic and technological context. What initial preparation programmes for school leaders can do, however, is raise the level of critical thinking, practical know-how and creative and innovative practice of school leaders and provide them with a solid theoretical grounding for their actions (Schratz, 2013).

According to a recent research synthesis (Billingsley et al., 2018), the details of training for leading inclusive schools might differ within and across countries, but at the core the commitments are similar:

- developing a strategic vision that supports the success of all learners, including those with disabilities;
- holding asset- rather than deficit-based perspectives;
- working collaboratively with a range of stakeholders to assist them in increasing their professional capacity to improve outcomes for all learners.



Inclusive school leaders require a range of highly developed competences underpinned by these commitments, such as:

- an ability to motivate and inspire;
- sound managerial, pedagogical and communication skills.

Furthermore, the competences include those that enable the leaders to act as role models for both learners and teachers and create an effective and attractive school environment which encourages learning. Central to this is the competence to work with others and sustain networking. School leaders are key actors in building effective connections between different levels of education and training, with families, the world of work and the local community, building on the shared goal of raising learner achievement (Council of the European Union, 2014).

Professional development

Initial training cannot be considered the only necessary support for school leaders. New school leaders, as well as those with more experience, need to have access to continuous professional development opportunities so that they can update their skills and keep up with new developments. This presents a challenge for policy-makers, school boards and those that employ school leaders, for those providing professional development for school leaders and for the school leaders themselves: sustaining a high-level performance calls for a supply of continual practice-oriented, reflective development programmes (Schratz, 2013).

Lack of access to professional development opportunities for school leaders can be a barrier to developing effective inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2018). Setting clear standards at policy level for school leadership can provide a framework and reference to the skills and competences needed of a school leader, as well as an indication for their professional development (Pont, 2014).

Support for school leaders

Opportunities for coaching and mentoring can provide useful supports for new school leaders and enable those established in the role to pass on their experience and expertise, while gaining new insights at the same time. School leaders' effectiveness can depend on the support they receive from national, local and regional authorities and the community at large, especially when introducing new developments or transforming practice (Billingsley et al., 2018).

One way to support school leaders is to create networks at local, regional and national level that, while respecting the autonomy of schools and their leaders, can connect them in focused collaboration. This leads to improved outcomes and strong collective accountability for achieving those outcomes (Munby and Fullan, 2016). This solution connects schools and school leaders to the political and accountability systems in a coherent, positive and pro-active manner.



Providing career development opportunities for school leaders can help avoid head teacher/principal burnout and make school leadership a more attractive career option. There are many ways to make the profession more flexible and mobile, allowing school leaders to move between schools, as well as between leadership and teaching and other professions. Current country practice provides some examples to draw from, including alternatives to lifetime contracts through renewable fixed-term contracts and options for head teachers to step up to new opportunities. These include jobs in educational administration, leadership of groups or federations of schools and consultant leadership roles (Day and Sammons, 2014).



INCLUSIVE SCHOOL LEADERS – IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

School leaders operate at the interface between educational policies and their implementation in schools. This provides them with the potential to extend their sphere of influence well beyond the school to also play a key role in managing change and supporting wider system transformation. The core functions and models for school leadership describe the possible roles and functions of inclusive school leaders and show where their responsibilities lie. Bringing these together, policies for the profession of school leadership should aim at:

- ensuring access to preparation, professional development and support for school leaders to lead inclusive pedagogy and practice;
- requiring accountability, for supporting quality inclusive school development;
- increasing autonomy, supporting school leaders to set a strategic vision and follow it through.

The preparation of school leaders is critical for the development of effective inclusive schools, as the leaders need to be knowledgeable and well prepared to meet the needs of each learner, tackle inequalities and withstand the resistance they are likely to encounter in their school community (Billingsley et al., 2018; Lumby and Coleman, 2016).

Policies to support school leaders in fulfilling their roles should include additional structures at local or district level to provide access to networks, opportunities for coaching and mentoring, support for evaluation and consultation on school improvement. School leaders can also be supported by policies that reduce complex administrative duties while focusing on transformative, instructional and distributed leadership.

Monitoring and evaluating school development and quality requires policies that ensure accountability is focused on inclusive education measures (Radó et al., 2013). This external accountability calls for school leaders' skills in monitoring progress and using evidence and data to plan and design appropriate improvement strategies, with a positive impact on learner outcomes (DELECA, 2015; Álvarez, 2006). Accountability also requires financial administration skills, as control over budgets can create opportunities for school leaders to prioritise resources to certain areas of development (Pont et al., 2008). In this way, leaders can secure an equitable allocation of resources within the school.

The extent to which the system is decentralised has an impact on school leaders' autonomy and their inherent responsibilities and must be considered in policy development. School leaders working in systems where there is strong national prescription have a more limited role than those with more autonomy (Pont, 2014).

All these issues have implications for leadership preparation, professional development and support. Implementing policies for school leadership calls for an alignment of government structures and a consideration of the autonomy, capacity and relevant responsibilities of school leaders and other stakeholders who are held to account for the quality of education.



Concluding remarks

To conclude, the literature shows that to fulfil the key functions of leadership – setting direction and building a vision, human development and organisational development – there is need for three key levers: access, autonomy and accountability.

Autonomy is dependent on the extent to which the education system is decentralised. In education systems with strong national prescription, school leaders have more limited roles (Pont, 2014). It follows that, as the autonomy (and accountability) of school leaders increases, there must be a concomitant increase in relevant professional development and access to on-going support to enable them to meet these increasingly complex obligations and responsibilities.

These three key levers influence the ways in which school leaders are enabled to perform their roles and fulfil their responsibilities and can determine the effectiveness of a school leader in creating and leading an inclusive school. Supporting inclusive school leaders is, therefore, essential for improving the efficiency and equity of schooling and for influencing a wider change in the system (Pont et al., 2008).



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