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Leading Inclusive Preschools: An Investigation Into Principals' Attitudes, Perceived Barriers, And Facilitators For The Inclusion Of Children With Special Needs

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Abstract: Background: The successful inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood education is a global priority, with institutional leadership identified as a critical factor for implementation. While teacher attitudes are well-documented, the nuanced perspectives of preschool principals—who mediate policy, practice, and culture—remain less explored. This study aims to investigate the attitudes of preschool principals towards inclusion and to identify the primary barriers and facilitators they encounter in practice.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative research design, conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with twelve principals from a diverse range of preschool institutions. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedural framework established by Braun and Clarke [7], to identify recurrent patterns and themes related to the principals' lived experiences with inclusive education.

Results: The findings revealed a significant dichotomy. Principals universally expressed a strong philosophical commitment to the principles of inclusion, viewing it as a moral imperative. However, this positive attitude was consistently counteracted by significant systemic and practical barriers. Key challenges included inadequate funding and resources, a perceived lack of relevant and continuous professional development for staff [19, 20], and ambiguity in national policies. The principals' proactive leadership in fostering a supportive school

culture [2, 11] and engaging in complex relational work with the parent community was identified as the most critical facilitator for overcoming these obstacles.

Conclusion: Preschool principals are willing and philosophically aligned champions of inclusion, but they cannot enact meaningful change in isolation. The findings underscore an urgent need for cohesive support systems that include clear policy guidelines, targeted professional development for leadership, and sufficient resource allocation. Empowering principals is essential to bridge the persistent gap between inclusive policy and its effective implementation in early childhood settings.

Keywords: Inclusive education, Early childhood education, Educational leadership, Principals' attitudes, Children with special needs, Qualitative study, Educational barriers.

Introduction:

1.1 The Global Imperative for Inclusive Education

The movement towards inclusive education represents one of the most significant shifts in global educational policy and philosophy over the past several decades. Championed by international bodies, the principle of inclusion is fundamentally rooted in the recognition of education as a basic human right for all individuals, irrespective of their abilities or disabilities. The landmark Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education [34] served as a pivotal moment, asserting that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are "the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (p. ix). This foundation was further solidified by the UNESCO Education 2030 Agenda, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" as its fourth Sustainable Development Goal [35]. More than a mere policy directive, inclusion is a transformative process that involves strengthening the capacity of education systems to welcome and support all learners [36]. It challenges institutions to move away from a model of integration, where a child must adapt to fit into a pre-existing system, towards a model of genuine inclusion, where the system itself is flexible and responsive to the diverse needs of every child [4, 32].

1.2 The Critical Role of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Within this global movement, the significance of the early years cannot be overstated. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provides the foundational learning and developmental experiences upon which all subsequent education is built [13]. For children with special needs, high-quality inclusive ECEC is particularly crucial. It offers vital opportunities for early intervention, fosters social and emotional development alongside peers, and can significantly improve long-term academic and life outcomes [14]. The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education emphasizes that an "all means all" approach must begin from the earliest stages of learning to prevent the marginalization and exclusion that can become entrenched in later years [12]. Research increasingly suggests that inclusive preschool environments benefit not only children with special needs but also their typically developing peers, who show enhanced empathy, social skills, and an appreciation for diversity [21, 26]. However, the successful implementation of inclusive ECEC is complex, with regional disparities and systemic challenges often hindering progress, as seen in studies analyzing inclusion indicators across different contexts [15].

1.3 Leadership as the Lynchpin for Successful Inclusion

While policy frameworks provide the mandate for inclusion, their translation into meaningful practice at the institutional level is heavily dependent on effective leadership. School principals are the lynchpins who connect policy to the playground. Their vision, values, and actions are instrumental in shaping an institution's culture and capacity for inclusion [2]. As Angelides and Antoniou [3] found in their case study, the development of an inclusive school culture is a process profoundly influenced by the principal's leadership. Effective leaders do more than manage; they inspire a shared vision, empower staff, and model inclusive values in their daily interactions [11]. The literature on transformational leadership, for instance, shows a strong association between leadership behaviors that inspire and motivate staff and positive student achievement outcomes [33]. In the context of inclusion, this leadership role becomes even more critical, as principals must navigate complex challenges, advocate for resources, and foster a climate of collective responsibility for all learners [1, 31].

1.4 The Problem Statement and Research Gap

A considerable body of research has been dedicated to understanding the attitudes of educators towards inclusion. Studies have extensively explored teachers' perceptions, self-efficacy, and concerns across various national contexts [9, 10, 24, 38]. This research consistently indicates that while attitudes may be generally positive, they are often tempered by concerns about training, resources, and support [19, 22]. However, a significant gap exists in the literature concerning the specific perspectives of preschool principals. As the primary administrative and pedagogical leaders of their institutions, principals occupy a unique position. They are tasked with interpreting and implementing top-down policy mandates while simultaneously supporting the bottom-up, practical needs of their teachers, students, and families [32]. Little in-depth, qualitative research has focused on how these leaders experience the push for inclusion, what specific barriers they perceive from their vantage point, and what strategies they employ to foster an inclusive environment. This study seeks to address this gap by moving beyond general attitudes to explore the lived realities and strategic thinking of preschool principals.

1.5 Aims, Objectives, and Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to conduct an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the attitudes, perceived challenges, and strategic approaches of preschool principals regarding the inclusion of children with special needs. To achieve this, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the prevailing attitudes of preschool principals towards the inclusion of children with special needs?
2. What do principals identify as the main barriers to successful inclusion within their institutions?
3. What strategies and facilitators do principals perceive as critical for promoting and sustaining inclusive practices?

By investigating these questions, this study aims to contribute valuable insights to the academic discourse on educational leadership and inclusive ECEC. Furthermore, it seeks to provide practical knowledge for policymakers and professional development providers who are instrumental in supporting principals in their vital role.

METHODS

2.1 Research Paradigm and Design

To capture the rich, multifaceted experiences of preschool principals, this study adopted a qualitative research paradigm. A qualitative approach is uniquely suited for exploring complex social phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing them, allowing for a deep, contextualized understanding of their beliefs, challenges, and strategies [8]. Specifically, this study employed a multiple case study design, enabling an intensive examination of the phenomenon of inclusive leadership within several real-world contexts. This design facilitates a nuanced exploration of individual experiences while also allowing for cross-case analysis to identify common patterns and divergent perspectives.

2.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy. This non-probability technique was chosen to identify and select "information-rich" cases, specifically preschool principals with direct experience in managing inclusive environments. The primary selection criterion was that participants must be currently serving as a principal or director of a preschool institution that explicitly enrolls children with identified special needs. A secondary aim was to achieve diversity within the sample in terms of institutional type (public and private), size, and geographical location (urban and suburban). An initial pool of potential participants was identified through publicly available records and professional networks. An invitation letter explaining the study's purpose and assuring confidentiality was sent, and from the positive responses, a final sample of twelve principals was selected for participation.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This format provided a flexible yet consistent framework, allowing for the exploration of key topics while giving participants the freedom to elaborate on issues of personal significance. An interview protocol was developed, grounded in a review of the relevant literature on inclusive pedagogy [16, 25] and educational leadership [2, 11]. The protocol included open-ended questions covering themes such as: personal philosophies on inclusion, perceived benefits and challenges, resource allocation, staff training and support, parental engagement, and experiences with policy implementation. Before its use,

the protocol was pilot-tested with two former principals to refine the questions for clarity, flow, and effectiveness in eliciting detailed responses. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with explicit consent, and was professionally transcribed verbatim.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The analysis followed the six-phase procedural framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [7]:

1. Familiarization with data: The research team read and re-read the transcripts to become deeply immersed in the content.
2. Generating initial codes: Salient features of the data relevant to the research questions were systematically coded across the entire dataset.
3. Searching for themes: Codes were collated and organized into potential overarching themes. This involved a process of examining the relationships between codes and combining them into broader patterns of meaning.
4. Reviewing themes: The potential themes were reviewed and refined. This phase involved checking the themes against the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the participants' narratives.
5. Defining and naming themes: Once a satisfactory thematic map was established, each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, descriptive name.
6. Producing the report: The final analysis involved selecting vivid, compelling quote extracts and writing a scholarly narrative that connects the themes to the research questions and existing literature.

2.5 Ethical Considerations and Rigor

The study was conducted in accordance with the highest ethical standards. Prior to participation, all individuals received a detailed information sheet and provided written informed consent. To protect participants, pseudonyms were assigned to all individuals and their institutions to ensure anonymity and confidentiality in the final report. All digital recordings and transcripts were stored securely on

encrypted devices. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, several measures were employed. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data and peer debriefing sessions among the research team. Transferability was addressed by providing a rich, detailed description of the participants and their context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Finally, dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining a clear audit trail, including verbatim transcripts, coded data, and detailed analytical memos.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes that encapsulate the attitudes, challenges, and strategies of preschool principals regarding the inclusion of children with special needs. These themes are: (1) A Deep-Seated Philosophical Commitment to Inclusion; (2) Systemic and Practical Barriers to Implementation; (3) The Principal as an Agent of Inclusive Culture; (4) Navigating the Complex Terrain of Parent and Community Engagement; and (5) Unmet Professional Development Needs. The findings are presented below, substantiated with illustrative quotes from the participants, who are identified by pseudonyms.

3.1 Theme 1: A Deep-Seated Philosophical Commitment to Inclusion

Across all interviews, a powerful and consistent theme emerged: principals expressed a profound and unwavering philosophical commitment to inclusion. This belief was not merely a passive acceptance of policy but an active, moral conviction rooted in principles of social justice, equity, and the inherent right of every child to belong. Principals articulated this commitment as central to their professional identity and the mission of their institutions.

Principal Davies summarized this sentiment: "For me, inclusion isn't an 'add-on' or a box to tick. It is the very core of what education should be. We are not just teaching academics; we are teaching humanity. And you cannot teach humanity in a segregated environment. Every child has a right to be here, and every child brings a gift to our community."

This belief extended to the perceived benefits of inclusion for all children. Participants frequently argued that an inclusive environment prepares typically developing children for a diverse world, fostering empathy, patience, and leadership skills. As Principal Sharma noted: "The other children learn so much. They

learn that not everyone communicates in the same way, that some friends need a bit more help, and that difference is normal and interesting. It's a powerful lesson that you can't get from a textbook. It builds character." This deep-seated belief system served as the primary motivator for principals, fueling their efforts to overcome the numerous challenges they faced.

3.2 Theme 2: Systemic and Practical Barriers to Implementation

Despite their strong philosophical commitment, every principal detailed a formidable array of barriers that constrained their ability to fully realize their inclusive vision. This theme captures the significant gap between the ideal of inclusion and the daily reality of implementing it on the ground.

3.2.1 Resource Scarcity

The most frequently and passionately discussed barrier was the chronic lack of adequate resources. This encompassed insufficient funding for specialized equipment, a scarcity of therapeutic materials, and, most critically, unfavorable staff-to-child ratios that made individualized attention difficult. Principal Rodriguez expressed a common frustration: "The state mandates inclusion, but they don't fund it. I am told to provide one-on-one support for a child with complex needs, but I am given the same budget as a school with none. I am constantly trying to stretch a dollar into ten. We do our best with what we have, but our staff are stretched thin, and it's not sustainable." This scarcity often forced principals into a reactive, crisis-management mode rather than allowing for proactive, strategic planning for inclusion.

3.2.2 Gaps in Professional Knowledge

A second major barrier was the perceived gap in the professional knowledge and skills of their teaching staff. Principals reported that while many teachers were willing, they often felt unprepared and overwhelmed when faced with children with diverse and significant needs. Initial teacher education was seen as providing only a superficial introduction to inclusion [19]. Principal Chen explained: "My teachers have huge hearts, but many lack the practical tools. They might have had one course on special education in college years ago. That doesn't prepare you for a

non-verbal child with autism or a child with significant behavioral challenges. They need ongoing, practical, in-the-classroom coaching, not just a one-day workshop at the start of the year." This highlights a demand for more robust and continuous professional learning opportunities [20].

3.2.3 Policy-Practice Disconnect

Principals often felt caught between the aspirational language of national or regional inclusion policies and the lack of clear, practical guidelines for implementation. Policies were frequently described as "vague," "ambiguous," or "lacking teeth" [31]. This disconnect left principals to interpret and operationalize complex mandates on their own. As Principal Okoro stated: "I read the policy documents, and they are full of beautiful words like 'equity' and 'access'. But there is no roadmap. It doesn't tell me what to do when a child's needs exceed my staff's training, or how to access the specialist support I am technically entitled to. It feels like we are building the plane while we are flying it." This lack of clear guidance added a significant layer of administrative burden and uncertainty to their roles.

3.3 Theme 3: The Principal as an Agent of Inclusive Culture

In the face of these barriers, principals positioned themselves as proactive agents of change, working tirelessly to cultivate an inclusive school culture from the ground up. This theme highlights the strategies and leadership behaviors they employed to translate their philosophical commitment into tangible practices.

3.3.1 Fostering a Collaborative and Supportive School Climate

The most crucial strategy identified was the intentional cultivation of a collaborative and supportive atmosphere among staff. Principals emphasized the importance of building a "team" ethos where every staff member felt a collective responsibility for every child. Principal Sharma described her approach: "My office door is always open. We have weekly team meetings where we don't just talk about logistics; we talk about the children. We share challenges and celebrate small victories. I make it clear that no teacher is an island. If someone is struggling, we all rally to support them. That culture of support is everything" [1, 2].

3.3.2 Championing Inclusive Pedagogy

Effective principals actively championed and modeled inclusive pedagogical approaches. They encouraged their teachers to move away from a "one-size-fits-all" model towards more flexible, child-centered practices like Universal Design for Learning (UDL) [29]. Principal Chen explained: "I encourage my staff to think about how they can make the lesson accessible from the start, rather than creating an adaptation later. It's about offering choices in how children learn and how they show what they know. I will often go into the classroom to co-teach a lesson or demonstrate a strategy. I have to be the lead learner" [17, 23].

3.4 Theme 4: Navigating the Complex Terrain of Parent and Community Engagement

Beyond internal institutional challenges, a significant and emotionally demanding aspect of the principals' work involved managing relationships and expectations within the broader school community. Principals described their role as a delicate balancing act, requiring them to be advocates, educators, mediators, and counselors to parents with diverse perspectives and needs. This theme encapsulates the complex relational work necessary to build and sustain a community that not only accepts but genuinely embraces inclusion.

3.4.1 Building Trust and Co-Constructing Partnerships with Parents of Children with Special Needs

For principals, the foundation of successful inclusion was a strong, trusting partnership with the parents of children with special needs. They universally recognized that these parents were often their child's first and most knowledgeable advocate, and that collaboration was non-negotiable. However, this partnership was not automatic; it had to be intentionally cultivated through empathy, active listening, and a commitment to shared goals.

Principal Rodriguez spoke at length about this process: "When a parent first comes to you, they are often carrying a heavy burden. They've been to countless appointments, maybe they've had to fight to get a diagnosis, and they are terrified their child won't be accepted. My first job is not to talk about our programs. My first job is to listen. I ask them, 'Tell me about your child. What do you love most about them? What makes them laugh?' I need to see the child

through their eyes before we can even begin to talk about a support plan. Trust starts there."

This foundational trust was crucial for navigating the formal processes of creating and implementing support plans. Principals emphasized a move away from a model where the school dictates terms towards one of co-construction. As Principal Chen described: "We don't just present parents with a finished IEP. We hold a preliminary meeting where we bring our observations, and they bring theirs. We are partners in this. The parent knows what works at home, what triggers anxiety, what soothes their child. That information is pure gold. As research suggests, understanding perceived parent needs is vital for improving their participation and making therapies or support effective [30]. We are building a bridge between home and school, and it has to be strong enough to hold us all."

This partnership also involved managing the emotional journey of the parents. Principal Davies shared a poignant reflection: "Sometimes you are the first person who has ever said something truly positive about their child's potential. There can be a lot of grief and fear wrapped up in a diagnosis. Part of my role is to hold that space for them, to be a source of hope and relentless optimism, while also being realistic about the challenges. It's a profound responsibility."

3.4.2 Addressing the Anxieties and Misconceptions of the Wider Parent Community

While building partnerships with some parents, principals simultaneously had to engage in a different kind of relational work: proactively educating and reassuring the parents of typically developing children. Many principals reported that overt opposition to inclusion was rare; instead, they faced subtle anxieties and persistent misconceptions.

Principal Okoro detailed the common concerns he encountered: "The questions are often indirect. 'Will the teacher have enough time for my child?' 'Will resources be diverted?' 'Is the classroom going to be chaotic or unsafe?' These are legitimate fears coming from a place of love for their own child. My response cannot be defensive. It has to be educational. I have to show, not just tell, how inclusion benefits everyone."

Principals employed several strategies to achieve this. One key approach was transparent communication through newsletters, parent evenings, and informal conversations. They would share stories and examples of collaborative learning and friendships that blossomed in inclusive classrooms. Principal Sharma explained her strategy: "I make it a point to highlight these positive

interactions. In my weekly newsletter, I might share an anecdote about how a group of children worked together to help a friend in a wheelchair join their game. It normalizes difference and reframes it as an opportunity for growth and compassion. It's about shaping the narrative of who we are as a school community."

Another effective strategy was to create opportunities for parents to see the inclusive environment in action. Principal Davies noted: "I have an open-door policy. I invite parents to volunteer in the classroom. When they see with their own eyes a child with autism helping to water the plants alongside their own child, and they see the teacher skillfully managing the needs of all the students, their fears just melt away. Experience is the most powerful antidote to misconception." This educational role was seen as a continuous, vital process for maintaining community cohesion.

3.4.3 The Principal as Mediator and Advocate in a Web of Relationships

Inevitably, the complexities of an inclusive environment led to situations requiring principals to act as skilled mediators and advocates. This could involve mediating conflicts between children, navigating disagreements between parents and teachers, or resolving tensions between different parent groups.

Principal Rodriguez shared an example of a mediation role: "Last year, we had a child with significant behavioral challenges who, in a moment of frustration, pushed another child. The parent of the second child was, understandably, very upset. I had to have separate meetings with both families. With one, it was about acknowledging their fear and reassuring them of our safety protocols. With the other, it was about working on a better behavior plan without shaming the child or the family. Then, I had to bring them together, not to assign blame, but to talk about how we, as a community, can help both children succeed. It was emotionally draining but absolutely essential."

Furthermore, principals often had to extend their advocacy beyond the school walls. When a child required specialist services that the school could not provide, the principal would often take the lead in connecting the family with external agencies, helping them navigate bureaucratic hurdles, and ensuring a continuity of support. Principal Chen saw this as an integral part of her responsibility: "My job doesn't stop at the school gate. If a family needs help accessing

speech therapy or occupational therapy, I'm on the phone with them. I'll write letters of support. We are part of a larger ecosystem of care, and I have to help my families navigate it. This advocacy builds immense trust and reinforces the message that we are truly in this together."

3.5 Theme 5: Unmet Professional Development Needs

A final, cross-cutting theme was the principals' own sense of unmet professional development needs. While they were focused on training their staff, they also recognized gaps in their own knowledge and skills related to leading inclusive change. They expressed a strong desire for training that went beyond administrative duties to focus on the unique challenges of inclusive leadership.

Principal Rodriguez articulated this need clearly: "I know how to manage a budget and handle staffing. But I need more training in how to lead a complex change process. How do I coach a teacher who is resistant? How do I have difficult conversations with parents? How do I effectively advocate for my school at the district level? We need a network, a community of practice where we can learn from other leaders who are doing this work." This highlights a critical need for targeted leadership development programs focused on the specific competencies required to lead inclusive preschools effectively.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the attitudes, barriers, and strategies of preschool principals regarding the inclusion of children with special needs. The findings present a compelling narrative of passionate, philosophically committed leaders who are constrained by significant systemic and practical obstacles. This discussion will interpret these findings in the context of existing literature, consider their implications for policy and practice, and acknowledge the study's limitations before offering a conclusion.

4.1 The Attitude-Behavior Gap in Inclusive Leadership

The central finding of this study is the profound dissonance between principals' overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards inclusion and their reported ability to fully implement it. Their philosophical commitment aligns with the moral and ethical foundations of the global inclusion movement [34, 36]. However, the numerous barriers they face create an "attitude-behavior gap," a phenomenon also observed

in research on teachers [38]. While teachers often report positive attitudes coupled with concerns about their capacity to enact inclusive practices, this study reveals that principals experience a similar, albeit structurally different, dilemma. They are not concerned with their own classroom practice but with the entire institutional capacity—staff skills, resources, and policy supports—to deliver on their inclusive vision. This suggests that positive attitudes at the leadership level, while essential, are an insufficient condition for successful inclusion. Without the necessary supports, even the most dedicated leader's efforts can be frustrated.

4.2 The Criticality of an "Architecture of Resources"

The barriers identified by the principals—inadequate funding, gaps in professional knowledge, and ambiguous policies—can be understood through the framework of an "architecture of resources" necessary for effective implementation [1]. The findings powerfully illustrate that principals cannot be expected to build inclusive environments in a vacuum. The lack of specialized, ongoing professional development for staff is a particularly critical failure point, a finding consistent with studies that raise concerns about the adequacy of teacher preparation for inclusion [19]. Principals in this study understood that inclusive pedagogy is not innate; it is a skill that must be taught, coached, and supported [16, 17, 20]. Similarly, the "policy-practice disconnect" aligns with research highlighting the challenges of implementing top-down reforms without clear, practical, and well-resourced guidance [31, 32]. The principals' experiences suggest that policymakers must move beyond articulating broad principles and engage in co-designing implementation frameworks with practitioners on the ground.

4.3 The Principal as Relational Leader: Mediating the Parent-School Nexus

A powerful and emergent finding from this study is the sheer complexity and centrality of the principal's role in managing the parent-school nexus. The data moves far beyond a simplistic view of "parent management" and illuminates the principal as a relational leader who actively co-constructs partnerships, educates the community, and performs significant emotional labor to create a cohesive, inclusive environment. This finding warrants a dedicated analysis, as it connects the daily, on-the-ground practices of principals to

broader theories of community building and collaborative practice.

The strategies employed by principals to build trust with parents of children with special needs—such as active listening, seeing the child through the parents' eyes first, and co-constructing support plans—are practical manifestations of the partnerships that are essential for effective school-based therapies and support [30]. The work of Murphy et al. [30] highlights the importance of understanding and addressing perceived parent needs to improve participation and outcomes. The principals in this study demonstrated an intuitive grasp of this concept; they understood that a parent who feels heard, respected, and valued as an expert on their own child is a parent who will become a genuine partner. This contrasts sharply with a more traditional, hierarchical model where schools prescribe interventions to families. The principals' narratives suggest that effective inclusive leadership requires a fundamental shift in posture from authority to partner, a shift that is demanding but essential for creating the "bridge between home and school" that Principal Chen described.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the significant emotional labor inherent in inclusive leadership. Principals are not just managing systems; they are absorbing, processing, and managing the emotions of their entire community. They hold space for parental grief, absorb the anxieties of other parents, and mediate emotionally charged conflicts. This aspect of the role is often invisible in policy documents and leadership frameworks but was a dominant theme in the participants' experiences. This emotional work is critical for building the psychological safety necessary for a truly inclusive culture, where parents feel safe enough to be vulnerable and teachers feel supported enough to take risks. It is this relational work that underpins the development of the inclusive school cultures described by Ainscow and Sandill [2] and Angelides and Antoniou [3].

Finally, the principals' proactive efforts to educate the wider parent community position them as crucial community builders. Their work to dispel myths and shape a positive narrative around inclusion reflects an understanding that a school is not a closed system but a micro-community that reflects and shapes broader societal attitudes [4]. By inviting parents into the classroom and sharing positive stories, they are actively engaging in the work of "combating discriminatory attitudes" and "creating welcoming communities," as called for in the Salamanca Statement [34]. This demonstrates that for these leaders, inclusion is not just a special education initiative but a whole-school, whole-community project. Their role transcends that of an

administrator to become that of a community leader, responsible for nurturing a shared set of inclusive values.

4.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study offer several important implications.

- For Policymakers: There is an urgent need to create more coherent and supportive policy environments for inclusive ECEC. This involves not only clarifying mandates but, crucially, aligning them with adequate and equitable funding streams. Policies must be developed in consultation with school leaders to ensure they are practical and address the real-world challenges of implementation [12, 13].
- For Professional Development Providers: The study highlights a dual need. First, teachers require access to continuous, job-embedded professional learning that provides them with practical strategies for diverse learners [29]. Second, and less commonly addressed, is the need for bespoke leadership development programs for principals. Such programs should focus on strategic planning for inclusion, coaching and mentoring staff, building community partnerships, and advocating for systemic change.
- For Principals: The findings validate the critical importance of a principal's role in cultivating a positive school culture [2, 3]. While they cannot control external factors like funding, they can exert significant influence over the internal school climate. The strategies described—fostering collaboration, championing inclusive pedagogy, and engaging in relational leadership—are powerful tools. The findings suggest that focusing on building a resilient, collaborative professional culture is a principal's most effective strategy for mitigating the impact of external barriers. This echoes principles of transformational leadership, where leaders empower their teams to achieve extraordinary outcomes, even in challenging circumstances [33].

4.5 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a qualitative study, the findings are based on a small, purposive sample and are not intended to be statistically generalizable. The experiences of these twelve principals provide deep insight but may not be representative of all preschool principals. Furthermore, the study relied on self-

reported data, which can be subject to social desirability bias, although the depth and consistency of the reported challenges suggest a high degree of candor.

These limitations point to several avenues for future research. A large-scale quantitative survey could be used to determine the prevalence of the barriers identified in this study across a wider population of principals. Comparative research, similar to cross-national studies on teacher attitudes [9, 28], could explore how principals' experiences with inclusion differ across various policy and cultural contexts. Finally, longitudinal studies that follow a cohort of new principals through leadership development programs could provide invaluable data on which training and support mechanisms are most effective in helping them build and sustain inclusive schools.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative inquiry into the perspectives of preschool principals reveals a group of dedicated leaders who are deeply committed to the philosophy of inclusion but are often thwarted by a lack of systemic support. The central narrative is one of a significant gap between the moral imperative for inclusion, which these leaders wholeheartedly embrace, and the practical realities of their daily work. They grapple with insufficient resources, under-prepared staff, ambiguous policies, and the complex relational dynamics of their school communities. Yet, despite these obstacles, they demonstrate remarkable agency, leveraging their leadership to build supportive cultures and champion the rights of every child.

The primary contribution of this study is its illumination of the nuanced, multifaceted, and emotionally demanding role of the preschool principal in the journey towards inclusion. It underscores that principals are more than managers; they are cultural architects, pedagogical guides, and community mediators. Their success is not merely a function of their individual skill but is profoundly associated with the "architecture of resources" [1] that surrounds them. Therefore, the findings issue a clear call to action for policymakers and educational authorities. To move from inclusive policy to inclusive practice, we must invest in our leaders. This involves providing coherent and well-funded policies, creating targeted and continuous professional development for leadership, and establishing networks of support. By empowering principals, we empower them to transform the foundational promise of early childhood education into a tangible reality for all children, creating learning environments where every child truly belongs.

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