

The Impact of Headmasters' Culturally Responsive Leadership on the Development of Students with Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Education Programs: A Systematic Literature Review (SLR)

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ABSTRACT:

Headmasters' Culturally Responsive Leadership (HCRL) is increasingly recognized as an important element in creating an inclusive and equitable school environment, especially for students with special educational needs (SEN) in the Inclusive Education Program (IEP). This study aims to systematically examine the impact of headmasters' culturally responsive leadership on the development of SEN, covering academic, social, emotional and student well-being aspects. This study emphasizes the need to strengthen culturally responsive leadership practices among headmasters as an important strategy to ensure the success and sustainability of IEP. This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines by analyzing published empirical articles. The study methodology involved a systematic literature review that included planning, conducting and reporting the review. This process involved searching and evaluating articles from databases such as Mycite, MyJurnal, Google Scholar, Jstor and Scopus for articles published from 2019 to 2025. The results of the study showed that out of the 30 articles reviewed, only 16 articles were found to be relevant. Overall, the study showed that there were five themes that could be classified in terms of past research themes in Malaysia and abroad. These themes are 1) culturally responsive leadership, 2) principals, 3) development, 4) students with special educational needs and 5) Inclusive Education Programs. The implications of this study are hoped to be a guide for policymakers, school administrators and researchers in improving the quality of inclusive education in Malaysia.

Keywords: Headmasters' Culturally Responsive Leadership (HCRL), Systematic Literature Review (SLR), Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), Inclusive Education Program (IEP).

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is an important agenda in the global education system that emphasizes the right to equal access to quality education for all students, including students with Special Educational Needs

(SEN). In line with UNESCO's aspirations through the education for all framework and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), the implementation of the Inclusive Education Programme (IEP) aims to ensure that SEN receive learning opportunities in a meaningful and comprehensive mainstream

environment. Inclusive education is an approach that focuses on providing quality education to all students, no matter their differences or disabilities, within regular school environments (N. J. de Borba et.al., 2024). In Malaysia, this commitment is translated into policies and guidelines formulated by the Ministry of Education Malaysia to strengthen the implementation of inclusive education in primary and secondary schools.

However, the success of IEP implementation does not only depend on policies and support structures, but is also influenced by the quality of school leadership, especially the role of the principal as the main leader of the school organization. In the context of the diversity of student backgrounds in terms of culture, socioeconomic, language and ability, the culturally responsive leadership approach is seen as increasingly significant. This concept refers to the ability of school leaders to understand, appreciate and integrate cultural diversity in decision-making, curriculum management, teacher professional development and building an inclusive and fair school climate.

Principals who practice culturally responsive leadership have the potential to create a learning environment that supports the academic, social and emotional development of SEN. Such leadership can influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusivity, increase collaboration between special education teachers and mainstream teachers, and strengthen parental and community involvement. Indirectly, this leadership practice can contribute to the holistic development of SEN in terms of academic achievement, social skills, self-confidence and emotional well-being.

However, research findings related to the impact of culturally responsive leadership on the development of SEN in the context of inclusive education are still fragmented and diverse in terms of approach, study location and methodology. Therefore, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is needed to identify, evaluate and synthesize existing empirical evidence in a comprehensive and structured manner. The SLR approach allows researchers to identify patterns of findings, research gaps and suggestions for improvement in inclusive education practices and policies. In this regard, this study aims to

systematically examine the literature related to the impact of culturally responsive leadership of headmasters on the development of SEN in the IEP. The results of this review are expected to contribute to strengthening the theoretical framework, enrich academic discussions and provide practical implications for school leaders, policy makers and education practitioners in their efforts to realize more effective and equitable inclusive education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusive leadership is pivotal in enhancing education at various local and international levels. Successful leaders in schools and education systems actively engage with all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and students, fostering open dialogue and understanding. They collaborate with their teams to develop and implement a shared vision for transformation. Inclusive leaders are dedicated to equity and ensuring every child has access to high-quality educational opportunities. Historically, inclusive education has primarily focused on special education, supporting children with disabilities and integrating them into regular classrooms. However, in recent years, the definition of inclusive education has expanded to encompass a broader commitment to addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparities, and inequalities in access, participation, and learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2020).

Education and its subsequent policies and practices cannot be comprehended without recognizing their strong influence from an increasingly interconnected global economy (Apple, 2017). Based on the points raised above, there is a need to explore other issues and challenges which are confronting school leadership in inclusive education. This study addressed a gap in the role of school administrators in fostering academic success through the lens of inclusive education. The findings of this study illuminate the requisite actions for school administrators to support educators within inclusive classroom environments. This research holds paramount significance as it addresses the formidable task encountered by school administrators in furnishing instructional leadership to educators within the context of

inclusive classroom settings. Therefore, this research aimed to explore the school leadership's vision and commitment impact the contextualization of academic success in inclusive education, the extent does collaborative decision-making among educational administrators contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education, the role does professional development for inclusive practices play in enhancing the school leadership's effectiveness in inclusive education, the policy framework can be developed based on the results of the study.

The literature on educational leadership highlights a critical need for school leaders who are not only equipped to navigate the complexities of modern educational environments but are also committed to advancing equity and inclusion. Across the various frameworks examined, a consistent theme emerges: the essential role of school leaders in shaping educational practices that meet the diverse needs of all students, particularly those from marginalized or minoritized communities. Effective leadership preparation programs are identified as foundational to fostering equity in schools. Research demonstrates that when leadership training is intentionally designed around equity, it can significantly impact student outcomes by equipping principals with the necessary skills and knowledge to create inclusive learning environments (Richard & Cosner, 2024). However, current programs often fall short in adequately preparing leaders for this critical task. Key components such as program vision, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are crucial in developing highquality, equity-centered preparation programs. These elements ensure that school leaders are not only aware of the importance of equity but are also equipped to implement strategies that can transform school environments.

The findings of the study show that principal leadership that is responsive to the diversity of cultures, backgrounds and needs of students is able to strengthen the implementation of IEP. IEP through school policy support, teacher professional

development, collaboration with parents and the creation of an inclusive school climate. In addition, such leadership also contributes to increasing the participation of SEN in mainstream activities, reducing discrimination and strengthening students' sense of acceptance and self-esteem. This study emphasizes the need to strengthen culturally responsive leadership practices among principals as an important strategy to ensure the success and sustainability of the IEP.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted an SLR by referring to the literature highlights from past studies obtained from the websites Scopus, Mycite, MyJurnal, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar and Jstor. To achieve the objectives of this research, a systematic literature review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) protocol. This method provides a comprehensive process for selecting relevant and quality articles, facilitates detailed examination of the various views of researchers and authors, and can address specific questions and open up space for finding research gaps (Hoque et al., 2022). PRISMA consists of three stages for searching and selecting articles for analysis, namely the Identification Phase, the Screening Phase and the Eligibility Phase.

3.1 Identification Phase

According to PRISMA guidelines, the first step of this protocol is the Identification Phase. Scopus was used as a database to conduct searches based on the selected keywords. The relevant keywords were the impact of culturally responsive leadership of headmaster (ICRLH) on the development of students with SEN in the IEP and words synonymous with it. These keywords were used with Boolean searches in conducting searches on the Scopus website and are shown in Table 1. From this phase, the researcher obtained 30 articles related to the scope of the study.

Table 1: The search string in Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar

Database	Keywords
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (Student AND (“Culturally Responsive Leadership” OR “Culturally Responsive”) AND (“Inclusive Education Program” OR “Inclusive Education” OR “Special Educational Needs” OR “Special Educational” OR “special education students”))
ScienceDirect	“Inclusive education” AND “leadership” AND “special needs” AND “school leader” AND “headmaster” AND “school”
Google Scholar	“principal” AND “inclusive education” AND “school” AND “disabilities”

3.2 Screening Phase

In this phase, articles are screened based on title and abstract. Articles that do not meet the required

criteria are removed. In this phase, 20 articles were selected to proceed to the next phase. The criteria set are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Selection Criteria

Entry Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
This study was conducted between 2019 – 2025. Research articles from journals and proceedings Impact of Culturally Responsive Leadership on Principals, Students with Special Educational Needs, Inclusive Education Programs.	Research before 2019. In addition to research articles from journals and proceedings, the Impact of Culturally Responsive Leadership on Principals, Students with Special Educational Needs, and Inclusive Education Programs

After the screening process based on these criteria, 16 articles were selected while 4 were removed as they were not relevant to the scope of the study. The

screening and selection process of articles is explained through the Article Screening Process in Figure 1.

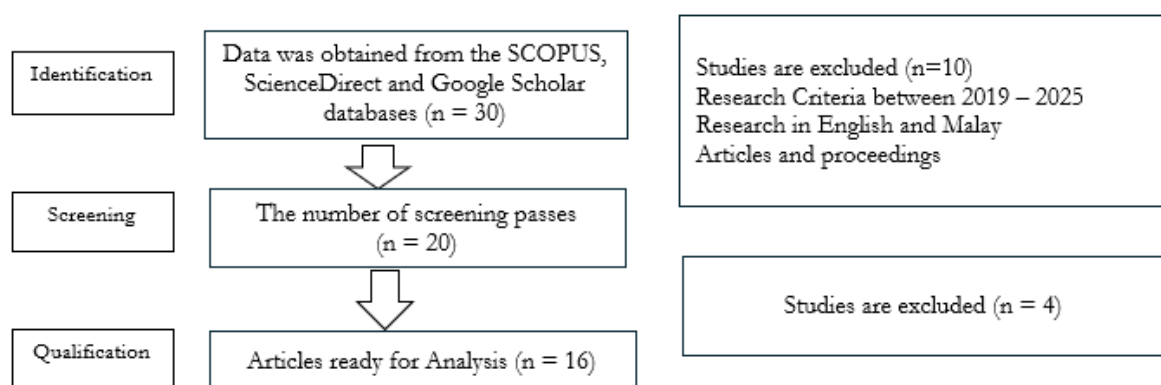


Figure 1: Article Filtering Process

3.3 Transparency of Research Methodology Through Thematic Analysis

Through the study titled *The ICRLH on the Development of Students with SEN in IEP: A SLR*, the data analysis process was carried out using a thematic analysis approach to identify, evaluate and interpret the main themes that emerged from the literature. Thematic analysis was chosen because this approach allows researchers to systematically and in-depth examine meaning patterns related to culturally responsive leadership and its impact on the development of students with SEN. The thematic analysis process in this study was guided by the framework proposed by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021), which involved six main steps. The first step was the process of familiarisation with data, in which the researcher read and reviewed the selected articles repeatedly to understand the content, context and main findings of each study. At this stage, the researcher also noted initial ideas and patterns related to culturally responsive leadership, inclusive education and SEN development.

The second step involves generating initial codes. In this process, the researcher identifies important information from the articles that are relevant to the study objectives and assigns specific labels or codes to the data. For example, codes such as “principal support”, “inclusive school culture”, “parental collaboration”, and “challenges in implementing inclusiveness” are used to classify findings that have similar meanings. Next, the third step is searching for themes, where codes that are related to each other are combined to form a broader theme. For example, several codes related to acceptance of student diversity, emotional support and social engagement are combined under the theme of “inclusive school climate”. The fourth step is reviewing themes, which is the process of assessing the suitability of the themes with the original data and ensuring that each theme has clarity and consistency of meaning.

The fifth step involves defining and naming themes. At this stage, the researcher details the meaning of each theme and its relationship to the research questions and theoretical framework used. The final themes are then used to describe the impact of

culturally responsive leadership on the academic, social and emotional development of SEN in the IEP. The final step is producing the report, where the findings are critically analyzed and linked to theory and previous studies to produce a comprehensive discussion.

To ensure the reliability and consistency of the coding process, the researchers conducted a process of peer checking and code comparison repeatedly. In this process, some articles were analyzed by more than one researcher to ensure that the interpretation of themes was consistent and not influenced by individual bias. Any differences in coding were discussed until a consensus was reached. In addition, the researchers also used an audit trail process by recording each step of the analysis, coding results, and the theme formation process to increase the transparency of the study. In addition, the data validation process is also carried out by reviewing the suitability of the themes with the study objectives and previous literature findings. This approach is important to ensure that the themes produced truly reflect the study findings and have strong conceptual validity. Researchers also always make critical reflections throughout the analysis process to avoid overly subjective interpretations of the data.

If it involves the use of data analysis technology, this study can use software such as NVivo to assist in the process of managing and analyzing data systematically. The software is used to organize articles, store codes, classify themes and facilitate the process of finding relationships between identified themes. The use of NVivo helps to increase the accuracy of the analysis because the data can be managed in a more organized and systematic manner, in addition to facilitating the process of reviewing codes and themes throughout the study. However, the final interpretation of the data still depends on the researcher's analytical judgment based on the objectives and theoretical framework of the study.

3.4 Data Reliability

In the study titled *The ICRLH on the Development of Students with SEN in IEP: A SLR*, several strategies were used to ensure the accuracy,

reliability and validity of the study findings. The use of these strategies is important to increase the credibility of the analysis process and ensure that the themes produced truly reflect the findings of the systematically analyzed literature. Among the strategies used are member checking, peer debriefing, audit trail and thick description. To ensure the validity of data interpretation, researchers implemented a member checking process. Although this study was in the form of a SLR and did not involve participants directly like a field study, the principle of member checking was applied through a review of the interpretation of themes and findings by supervisors or experts in the field of inclusive education and educational leadership. This process aims to ensure that the interpretation made is in line with the context of the study, research objectives and the actual content of the articles analyzed. Any suggestions for improvement or conflicting views will be discussed and refined to improve the accuracy of the interpretation of themes.

In addition, a peer debriefing strategy was also used to increase the reliability of the analysis process. In this process, the researcher discussed with fellow researchers or academic experts who have knowledge in the fields of special education, inclusive education or qualitative analysis. The discussion allowed the researcher to gain a critical external perspective on the coding process, theme formation and interpretation of the study findings. Through this approach, the possibility of researcher bias could be reduced because the findings were analyzed from various academic perspectives.

In addition, the researcher also systematically prepared an audit trail throughout the research process. The audit trail refers to complete documentation related to each step of the research, including the article search process, study selection, inclusion and exclusion criteria, data coding process, theme formation and analysis results. All these records are kept in a systematic manner to allow the research process to be reviewed by other researchers. This strategy helps to increase the transparency of the study and allows readers to

understand how the final findings and themes were generated from the literature reviewed. Next, thick descriptions are used to ensure that the study findings are described in depth and meaningfully. In this study, the researcher provides a detailed explanation of the context of culturally responsive leadership, the challenges of inclusive education and the experience of SEN based on the findings of previous studies. The identified themes are not only reported briefly, but are described with interpretations, theoretical relationships and implications for inclusive education practices. This approach allows readers to understand the study situation more clearly and assess the extent to which the findings are suitable for application in other educational contexts.

Overall, the use of strategies such as expert review, peer briefing, audit trail and robust reporting helped to enhance the credibility, reliability and transparency of this SLR study. These strategies ensured that the analysis process was conducted systematically, reflectively and guided by strong qualitative research standards, thus producing more meaningful findings in understanding the ICHLR on the development of students with SEN in IEP.

3.5 Eligibility Phase

30 articles were selected through a more in-depth analysis process to understand the content and themes of the research that had been conducted through qualitative methods and to obtain information on the scope of the study and the gaps that could be found. The researcher then compiled and analyzed the information obtained from the literature review to produce a summary table of articles on the study ICRLH on the development of students with SEN in the IEP of the based on the author's name, article title, study purpose, methodology, sampling, approach and study findings in Table 3. Each information entered was carefully checked to ensure accuracy and could be used for further analysis. A total of 16 articles were identified through the SLR process which focused on discussions related to the ICRLH on the development of students with SEN in the IEP.

Table 3: List of Articles

The Impact of Headmasters' Culturally Responsive Leadership on the Development of Students with Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Education Programs.

No.	Study	Background	Study Problems	Study Method	Findings
1.	Lilis Afrianti, Ridwan, Hasan Hariri, Riswanti Rini, Sowiyah. (2025) Principals Role in Inclusive Education: A Literature Review	determine (1) what leadership style does the principal apply? (2) What strategy did the principal use? (3) What affects the leadership style and strategy of the principal in carrying out inclusive education?	The main factor influencing student participation in developing inclusive education is culture or what can be called norms, values and ways of acceptance in implementing inclusive practices.	Qualitative	The results of the review show that (1) principals adopt different leadership styles and (2) principals implement various strategies. (3) The factors that influence the various styles and strategies are diverse resources, government policies, and local values.
2.	Woolfson, L. M. (2025) Is inclusive education for children with special educational needs and disabilities an impossible dream?	Examines the evidence for improved academic and social outcomes for learners with SEND in inclusive schools and proposes that psychological outcomes now need to be measured too.	1. There is still a lack of clarity around the definition of inclusion, its theoretical underpinnings, its implementation in practice and evaluation of success. 2. Teachers often still report the same problems of insufficient resources and express the same concerns about lack of skills and knowledge as reported in the early days. 3. A key question is, do children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) achieve better outcomes in	Qualitative	Effective inclusive education for children with SEND is indeed possible and we are working our way ever closer to that goal.

			inclusive educational settings?		
3.	Garces-Bacsal, R.M., Loyd, D., Opoku, M.P., Alhosani, N.M., Elhoweris, H., Almuhairey, O. et al. (2025) Examining Teachers' Perceived Competence in Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices in Inclusive classrooms in the United Arab Emirates	Examine teachers' perceived competence in implementing culturally responsive teaching practices with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms	The extent to which culturally responsive teaching is reflected in inclusive classrooms across the country has not been captured.	Cross-Sectional Survey	The results indicate that teachers perceive competence in implementing culturally responsive teaching practices in inclusive classrooms.
4.	Susan Vicente D. Villarente & Vania Mercy N. Durante (2025) The Role of School Leadership in Inclusive Education: A Policy Framework Towards Academic Success	Evaluated school administrators' challenges in implementing inclusive education and described their experiences managing these programs	Highlighted that leadership vision and commitment, collaborative decision-making, and professional growth are critical factors influencing the success of inclusive education initiatives	Qualitative	These results ensure educators have the knowledge, skills, and strategies to implement inclusive practices effectively.
5.	L. Anyanwu & D. A. Olaitan (2025) Culturally Responsive Pedagogy And Universal Design For Learning: For Building Inclusive and Accessible Curriculum For Diverse Learners	Exploring the concept of and the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, universal design for learning, assessment for learning differentiated instructions to 21st century teaching and learning.	Benefits and challenges of inclusive pedagogy are reported to consist of barriers and opportunities which must be surmounted by the educationists and policymakers.	Qualitative	Inclusive education gives all learners an equal chance to learn regardless of background or ability. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) converge in supporting inclusive classrooms by merging cultural relevance with teaching flexibility.

6.	Hamed B. Kumaka, EdD1, Harris M. Sinolinding (2025) Exploring Teachers' Perspectives on Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices Among School Heads	This study aimed to examine the impact of culturally responsive leadership on teacher retention intentions and student inclusivity in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), focusing specifically on the division of the Special Geographic Area (SGA).	This study highlights the need for integrating cultural competence into leadership training programs and policies to address the diverse needs of students and teachers. Its findings can guide the development of inclusive educational policies, particularly in culturally sensitive regions like BARMM.	Qualitative	The study's conclusions highlighted the importance of culturally responsive leadership in fostering a sense of belonging, trust, and collaboration within the school community. It was determined that sustaining these practices is essential for improving both teacher retention and student inclusivity.
7.	Yulu Feng, Dan Zhou and Yihong Wei1 (2025) The Impact of School Leadership on Inclusive Education Literacy: Examining the Sequential Mediation of Job Stress and Teacher Agency	Examines how school leadership affects inclusive education literacy among teachers in regular classrooms, focusing on the mediating roles of job stress and teacher agency	The leadership instrument lacked style differentiation, preventing comparison of specific leadership types impacts. Future studies should refine leadership dimensions to examine how particular styles influence inclusive education literacy.	Qualitative	Results indicate school leadership directly enhances inclusive education literacy while also operating through job stress and teacher agency as parallel mediators.
8.	Rachelle M. Johnson, David Hernández-Saca, and Mércédes Adell Cannon (2024) Creating a School Leadership Culturally Responsive Special Education Climate Through	This article's objective is to provide an understanding and description of the leadership role of principals to increase engagement and to establish an environment of acceptance for children with special needs in inclusive schools through Culturally Responsive School	The leadership instrument lacked style differentiation, preventing comparison of specific leadership types impacts. Future studies should refine leadership dimensions to examine how particular styles influence inclusive education literacy.	Qualitative	Grounded in the Job Demands-Resources model, systematically demonstrates how school leadership predicts teachers' inclusive education literacy through a sequential 'stress reduction-empowerment' mechanism.

	the Inclusion of Student Voice in Time of Transitions	Leadership (CRSL) framework.			
9.	Mohd Norlizam Mohd Razali, Aida Hanim A. Hamid, Bity Salwana Alias, Azlin Norhaini Mansor (2024) The relationship among culturally responsive leadership and PLC practices in small schools in Peninsular Malaysia	Find out how much culturally responsive leadership headmasters are employed and how many professional learning community (PLC) are set up in small schools	School headmasters practiced a culturally responsive leadership style, and teachers also participated a lot in PLC.	Quantitative Survey Design	Culturally responsive leadership practices are important in contributing to teachers' practices in PLC, which in turn will improve student learning.
10.	Muhamad Tanzi, Hermanto (2024) The Role of Principals in Implementing Inclusive Education Through Culturally Responsive School Leadership	Memberikan pemahaman tentang peranan kepimpinan pengetua dalam meningkatkan penglibatan dan mewujudkan persekitaran penerimaan bagi kanak-kanak berkeperluan khas di sekolah inklusif melalui kerangka Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL).	Principals must face the real challenge of creating a school climate that supports inclusive education, given the still limited understanding and the complex changes needed to achieve this goal.	Qualitative	Principal leadership is essential to developing inclusive education management. Principals need to be responsive and serious about the diversity of students with special needs.
11.	(Van Miegheem et al., 2023) Professional Development Initiatives as a Lever for Inclusive Education: A Multiple Case Study Using Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)	To investigate the relationship between professional development initiatives (PDI) and the Qualitative Comparative Analysis readiness to accept students with special needs (SEN) into regular classrooms.	This study examines the way in which professional development initiatives (PDI) supporting inclusive education can reduce resistance.	Qualitative Comparative Analysis	Teachers' positive interactions with pupils who have special needs have a greater influence than professional development. Additionally, it appears that specialists who work with students with special needs can foster a stronger willingness to involve these

					individuals in the educational process.
12.	Emam & F. Hendawy Al-Mahdy (2022)	To develop and verify the Inclusive School Climate Scale (ISCS) and evaluate how Oman's schools are developing their ability for effective inclusive education practises	Lack of valid and reliable instruments to assess inclusive school climate and school capacity to support inclusive education in the Omani context. Although inclusive education policies have been adopted in Oman and many other countries, there is a lack of specific psychometric tools that comprehensively assess how schools implement and shape inclusive environments.	Qualitative	To develop and verify the Inclusive School Climate Scale (ISCS) and evaluate how Oman's schools are developing their ability for effective inclusive education practises.
13.	Jardi et al., (2022) Building successful partnerships between teaching assistants and teachers: Which interpersonal factors matter?	To explore and understand the interpersonal factors that affect the partnerships between teaching assistants (TAs) and teachers.	In the context of inclusive education, TAs are often given an important role to support students with special needs, but the professional relationship between TAs and teachers is not always effective, due to differences in roles, poor communication, and a lack of mutual respect and trust between these parties.	Qualitative Phenomenology Study	Collaboration between teachers and teacher assistants can work in schools. When pairing instructors and assistant teachers, schools should think about what can be done to foster excellent interpersonal interactions and mutually productive collaborations.
14.	Van Mieghem, Struyf, et al., (2022) Leadership as a Lever for Inclusive Education in Flanders: A Multiple Case Study Using Qualitative	Identifying combinations of leadership dimensions related to readiness and positive attitudes towards inclusive education in schools in Flanders.	Many schools still face reluctance or hesitation in including students with special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream schools due to a lack of	Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)	Not all leadership dimensions are effective on their own — but a combination of certain dimensions involving a clear vision, support for problem discussion, and the use of support

	Comparative Analysis		support, effective practices, and leadership strategies that drive the change.		tools has the most positive impact on school team readiness for inclusion.
15.	Mohd Norazmi Bin Nordin, Mohamad Zaid Bin Mustafa, Abdul Rasid Bin Abdul Razzaq (2020) Headmaster Leadership Effect on Task Load of Special Education Integration Program Teacher	Determine whether these factors affect the task load of the SEIP teacher.	The leadership of a headmaster at the school has a major influence on school management and teacher management. These influences also impact the task load of the Special Education Integration Program (SEIP) teacher.	Quantitative	This finding shows that CFA for headmaster leadership achieves the fit. It also shows that all of these factors have a direct impact on the construct.
16.	(Esposito et al., 2019) Ensuring Inclusive Environments for Students with Disabilities: School Leaders Play a Linchpin Role	To examine the responsibilities of principals in providing accessible environments for children with special needs and to provide historical context for the inclusion movement.	This study is motivated by the imperfect implementation of inclusive education in schools, where despite legislation and policies supporting inclusive education (for example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the US), many schools still fail to create a truly inclusive environment for students with disabilities.	Qualitative	Principals play a crucial role in setting inclusive practices into place to build a culture that respects the principles of inclusive education.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Leadership Styles That Are Sensitive to the Diverse Backgrounds of Students with Special Educational Needs

The culturally responsive leadership style of principals is capable of creating a more equitable,

safe and supportive school environment. Principals who practice culturally responsive leadership will ensure that policies, teaching practices and interventions are tailored to the individual needs of students with special needs, including taking into account language, socioeconomic, religious and community values. In the context of the IEP, this

approach can increase students' self-confidence, encourage active participation in mainstream classrooms, and strengthen collaboration between special education teachers, subject teachers and parents. Indirectly, culturally responsive leadership not only supports academic achievement, but also builds the social and emotional development of students with special needs holistically.

Based on Table 1 above, if the study is viewed from a logistical perspective, studies related to the impact of culturally responsive leadership of principals in the development of SEN in IEP are conducted beyond the country and globally. This finding supports the findings of all researchers who emphasize that studies related to the impact of culturally responsive leadership, although widely implemented, have given less emphasis to SEN in IEP and have various focus areas and elements by researchers such as participation in inclusive education (Lilis Afrianti, Ridwan, Hasan Hariri, Riswanti Rini, Sowiyah., 2025); special education students in inclusive (Woolfson, L. M. 2025); culturally responsive practices in the classroom (Garces-Bacsal, R.M., Loyd, D., Opoku, M.P., Alhosani, N.M., Elhoweris, H., Almuhairy, O. et al., 2025); leadership challenges (Susan Vicente D. Villarente & Vania Mercy N. Durante., 2025); cultural relevance (L. Anyanw & D. A. Olaitan., 2025); belonging, trust and collaboration (Hamedi B. Kumaka, EdD, Harris M. Sinolinding., 2025) and educational literacy (Yulu Feng, Dan Zhou and Yihong Wei., 2025).

4.2 Logistics of the Study of the Impact of Culturally Responsive Leadership on the Development of Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Education Programs

The logistics of studies by domestic and foreign researchers show similarities in terms of systematic planning requirements involving the selection of a sample of inclusive schools, the use of valid and reliable instruments, data collection through questionnaires, interviews and observations, and thematic or statistical data analysis. This approach allows the relationship between culturally responsive leadership and the development of SEN to be identified more comprehensively and based on

empirical evidence. The ICLRH on the Development of Students with SEN in the IEP shows that leadership practices that are responsive to cultural diversity have a positive and significant impact on the academic, social and emotional development of SEN. Local study findings also show that the support of school leadership that is sensitive to cultural diversity and the individual needs of SEN helps strengthen the implementation of the IEP. Schools with administrators who are proactive in teacher training, resource provision and parental involvement record higher levels of social adjustment and learning motivation of SEN.

Even other studies related to the impact of leadership types (Rachelle M. Johnson, David Hernández-Saca and Mércédes Adell Cannon., 2024); professional learning community (PLC) (Mohd Norlizam Mohd Razali, Aida Hanim A. Hamid, Bity Salwana Alias, Azlin Norhaini Mansor., 2024) and inclusive education management (Muhamad Tanzi, Hermanto., 2024); SEN interaction (Van Mieghem et al., 2023); the ability of inclusive education (Emam & F. Hendawy Al-Mahdy., 2022); inclusive environment (Van Mieghem, Verschueren, et al., 2022); the challenges of inclusive education practices (Van Mieghem, Verschueren, et al., 2022); interpersonal factors (Jardi et al., 2022); positive attitudes (Van Mieghem, Struyf, et al., 2022) and the influence of inclusive leadership (Mohd Norazmi Bin Nordin, Mohamad Zaid Bin Mustafa, Abdul Rasid Bin Abdul Razzaq., 2020) and the lack of inclusive education., Esposito et al., 2019).

It was found that the most related studies were done in Asian and western countries, namely in the Philippines (Hamedi B. Kumaka, EdD, Harris M. Sinolinding., 2025); (Katherine Cumings Mansfield and Marina Lambrinou, 2024); Belgium Van Mieghem, Struyf, et al., (2022); Saudi Arabia (Garces-Bacsal, R.M., Loyd, D., Opoku, M.P., Alhosani, N.M., Elhoweris, H., Almuhairy, O. et al., 2025) and Oman (Emam & F. Hendawy Al-Mahdy., 2022).

Overall, the researchers' findings conclude that the impact of culturally responsive leadership not only influences the school climate, but is also an important factor in ensuring the holistic

development of SEN in the IEP, encompassing academic, social, emotional and personal well-being aspects.

4.3 Proposed New Issues to be Researched in the Impact of Culturally Responsive Leadership in the Development of Students with Special Educational Needs in Inclusive Education Programs

The SLR analysis in Table 4 explains previous studies related to the impact of school leaders'

culturally responsive leadership on the development of SEN in IEP. Indirectly, it has helped subsequent studies to examine what has been done in addition to finding new issues in this field which are the objectives of the study. Here are 16 proposed new issues that can be studied related to the impact of headmasters' culturally responsive leadership on the development of SEN in IEP as follows in Table 4.

Table 4: Proposed New Issues to be Researched in the Impact of Cultural Responsive Leadership in SEN Development at EPI.

No	Suggestions	New Issue	To Be Studied
			New Angle
1.	Cultural Sensitivity in SEN Placement Decisions.	How do school leaders' understanding of cultural background, language and family values influence the decision to place SEN in inclusive classes?	1.Cultural bias in perceptions of SEN “readiness”. 2.The impact of cultural stereotypes on inclusive opportunities.
2.	Culturally Responsive Leadership and SEN School-Family Relations.	The ability of school leaders to build trust with parents of SEN from diverse ethnicities, languages and socioeconomic statuses.	Study Elements 1.Culturally Sensitive Two-Way Communication. 2.Family Participation in IEP Planning. 3.Impact on Student's Social and Emotional Development
3.	Culturally Responsive Leadership in Mainstream Teacher Management.	How school leaders influence the attitudes, understanding and willingness of mainstream teachers to accept SEN from different cultural backgrounds.	New Focus 1.Culturally based professional training. 2.Leadership as an inclusive model. 3. Changing school climate.
4.	Cultural Gaps in the Implementation of Inclusive Curriculum.	The suitability of the inclusive curriculum and pedagogy with the cultural background of SEN.	Study Questions 1.Do school leaders provide space for culturally sensitive curriculum adaptation? 2.Impact on academic achievement and motivation of SEN.
5.		New Issues That Are Rarely Studied	Impact on SEN

	Culturally Responsive Leadership and SEN Self-Identity.	The role of school leaders in creating an environment that recognizes the cultural identity of SEN.	1. Self-esteem. 2. Feeling accepted. 3. Active involvement in IEP.
6.	Educational Technology, Culture and Inclusive Leadership.	Contemporary Issues How culturally responsive leaders ensure equitable use of inclusive technology for SEN from different cultural backgrounds.	Focus 1. Technology access. 2. Digital medium of instruction. 3. Adaptive learning support.
7.	Culturally Responsive Leadership in Addressing SEN Stigma.	Critical Issues The role of school leaders in challenging cultural stigma against disability in the school community.	Impact 1. Peer attitudes. 2. Social acceptance of SEN. 3. Effectiveness of EIP.
8.	The Role of Culturally Responsive Leadership in Reducing Stigma Against SEN.	Study Issues How can principals use a culturally responsive approach to build an inclusive school culture and reduce discrimination against people with disabilities?	Study Group There is still a lack of research that looks at school leadership as an agent of cultural change regarding the stigma of special education.
9.	Culturally Responsive Leadership Training and Competencies.	Issues, policies and practices The level of readiness of school leaders in practicing culturally responsive leadership for inclusive special education.	Study Angle 1. Specific training needs. 2. Gaps in policy and actual practice. 3. Suggested leadership training Models.
10.	The Influence of Culturally Responsive Leadership on Teacher Self-Efficacy in Managing SEN.	Study Issues To what extent do headmasters' culturally responsive leadership practices increase the confidence and competence of mainstream teachers in teaching SEN in inclusive classrooms?	Study Gap Most studies focus on teacher attitudes, but less has been done to examine how principals' leadership styles directly shape teacher efficacy.
11.	The Relationship Between Culturally Responsive Leadership and Socio-Emotional Well-being SEN.	Study Issues Does culturally sensitive leadership help create a school climate that supports social acceptance and emotional well-being of SEN?	New Value Linking leadership dimensions with psychosocial outcomes of SEN, not just academic achievement.
12.	Culturally Responsive Leadership and SEN Parental Involvement in IEP.	Study Issues How does the headmaster integrate SEN family cultural values in the planning and implementation of IEP?	New Elements Assessing the relationship between culturally responsive leadership and culturally diverse school-community collaboration.
13.		Study Issues	Theoretical Contributions

	A Conceptual Model of Culturally Responsive Leadership for Holistic Development of SEN.	Develop and test a culturally responsive leadership model specific to the EIP context in Malaysia.	Contribute to the development of a school leadership model that focuses on cultural inclusivity and special education.
14.	The Impact of Culturally Responsive Leadership on Academic Achievement and Curriculum Adaptation of SEN.	Study Issues	Study Gap
		Does culturally responsive leadership influence the level of implementation of curriculum differentiation for SEN in inclusive classrooms?	There is a lack of research that directly links leadership to inclusive pedagogical practices.
15.	Mediator and Moderator in Cultural Responsive Leadership Relationships and SEN Development.	Advanced Study Issues	
		Does school climate act as a mediator? Does teacher teaching experience act as a moderator? Does organizational support influence the strength of the relationship?	

5. STUDY ANALYSIS

The literature review shows that the culturally responsive leadership of principals plays a significant role in shaping the educational experiences of students with SEN in the IEP. However, analysis of past studies should not be limited to reporting on what parents, teachers or schools say. Instead, the findings need to be interpreted more deeply to understand the underlying meaning behind their experiences and views. For example, when parents state that they want a principal who “understands the needs of their children”, this statement is not simply referring to the academic needs of the SEN, but reflects the hope for school leadership that is empathetic, fair and able to recognize the diversity of students as a strength, not a weakness.

Literature findings also show that culturally responsive leadership has an impact on the social, emotional and academic development of SEN through the formation of a more inclusive school climate. In this context, the principal not only functions as a school administrator, but as an agent of change that influences the culture of the school organization. This situation can be explained through the Culturally Responsive School Leadership Theory which emphasizes that school leaders need to understand the cultural background, identity and experiences of students to ensure that

educational justice can be implemented meaningfully. In addition, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory also explains that the development of SEN is influenced by the interaction between school, family and community. Therefore, culturally responsive leadership can be seen as an important factor that connects various support systems in students' lives.

In addition, the literature also shows that collaboration between principals, special education teachers and parents helps to increase the inclusion of SEN in mainstream classrooms. However, these findings also show that the success of inclusive education does not only depend on school policies, but also on the extent to which school leadership succeeds in building collaborative relationships and a culture of acceptance within the school community. This situation is in line with the theory of distributed leadership that sees leadership as a shared responsibility and not solely the responsibility of a particular individual. Although many studies report the positive effects of culturally responsive leadership, there are some obvious contradictions and tensions in the implementation of inclusive education. For example, some schools are seen to support the concept of inclusion in principle, but at the same time still maintain a school culture that is too oriented towards mainstream academic achievement. This situation creates a tension between the goal of inclusion and the

pressure of school performance. As a result, SEN may be physically accepted in regular classrooms, but still face difficulties in actively engaging in the learning process and social interaction.

In addition, there is also a discrepancy between principals' commitment to inclusive education and teachers' ability to implement inclusive practices effectively. Although principals demonstrate support for student diversity, a lack of professional training, resources and pedagogical knowledge results in inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom. This suggests that culturally responsive leadership requires more than just symbolic or policy support, but rather a comprehensive transformation of school attitudes, competencies and structures.

Overall, the literature review demonstrates that the culturally responsive leadership of principals has a significant influence on the development of SEN in the IEP. However, the study findings also show that the implementation of inclusive education is still affected by various challenges and tensions that require critical attention. Therefore, understanding culturally responsive leadership needs to be seen not only as a school management practice, but as an effort towards creating social justice and true educational inclusion for all students.

6. INTEGRATION OF THEORY IN THE STUDY

A review of the literature on the impact of culturally responsive leadership of principals on the development of students with SEN in the IEP shows that the effectiveness of inclusive implementation does not only depend on educational policies alone, but is also influenced by school leaders' understanding of cultural diversity, student needs and social justice in education. In this context, the culturally responsive leadership approach can be understood more deeply through the integration of several theoretical frameworks such as Inclusive Education Theory, Social Model of Disability and Ecological Systems Theory.

Through the perspective of Inclusive Education Theory, education is seen as the right of all students regardless of their background, abilities or disabilities. Therefore, the culturally responsive

leadership of principals plays an important role in ensuring that SEN have fair access to learning, social participation and personal development opportunities in mainstream school environments. The study highlights that principals who practice inclusive leadership tend to create a more open school culture, accept diversity and encourage the involvement of all students in academic and social activities. This situation shows that school leadership is not just an aspect of organizational management, but is an important mechanism in realizing the principles of equality and inclusiveness in education.

In addition, the findings of the literature can also be explained through the Social Model of Disability which emphasizes that the main barriers faced by SEN do not stem from individual disabilities alone, but from social structures, societal attitudes and environments that are unresponsive to their needs. In this context, culturally responsive leadership by principals can be seen as an effort to reduce these barriers through the formation of more inclusive school policies, the provision of learning support and the development of a culture of acceptance within the school community. For example, several studies have shown that when principals prioritize teacher training, collaboration with parents and adaptation of the learning environment, SEN are more likely to be actively involved in the learning process and social interaction. This shows that the development of SEN is greatly influenced by the extent to which schools have succeeded in eliminating discrimination and stigma against disability.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory also helps explain how the development of SEN is influenced by the interaction of various systems in their lives. Based on this theory, schools are part of a microsystem that directly affects students' social, emotional and academic development. At the same time, the relationship between schools, families and communities forms a mesosystem that influences the effectiveness of inclusive education. Therefore, principals who practice culturally responsive leadership not only pay attention to the internal management of the school, but also build collaborative relationships with parents, teachers

and the community to support the development of SEN holistically. However, the literature also shows that there are some tensions in the implementation of inclusive education. Although many schools express a commitment to inclusive principles, there is still a school culture that is oriented towards mainstream academic achievement, resulting in fewer opportunities for SEN to participate meaningfully. In addition, there are also situations where headteachers show support for inclusive education, but teachers still lack the training and resources to implement teaching that is responsive to the needs of students with diverse abilities. This situation shows that the success of culturally responsive leadership depends on the willingness of the entire school ecosystem to embrace change and implement inclusive practices consistently.

Overall, the integration of Inclusive Education Theory, Social Model of Disability and Ecological Systems Theory helps explain that culturally responsive leadership of principals has a significant influence on the development of SEN in IEP. Such leadership not only helps to increase student access and participation in education, but also plays a role in shaping a school culture that is more equitable, responsive and values student diversity as a whole.

7. CONCLUSION

It was concluded that teachers perceived culturally responsive leadership among their school heads to be demonstrated through inclusivity and cultural respect, equitable and supportive environments, and empowered cultural collaboration and communication. The findings revealed that school leaders actively honored cultural diversity, involved community voices in decision-making, and encouraged the integration of students' cultural backgrounds in teaching practices. These efforts fostered a sense of belonging, trust, and collaboration within the school community. The study further concluded that open communication and community engagement served as essential foundations for cultivating inclusive school cultures where all stakeholders felt valued and respected. School leaders must be aware of the possible challenges linked to its implementation. Placing too much emphasis on character can result in operational inefficiencies or hesitance to make tough decisions, highlighting the need for a balanced strategy. Consequently, the strategic application of character leadership is crucial, enabling leaders to adjust their approach according to the specific requirements of their educational environment.

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