

Principal's Strategy in Building an Inclusive Culture of SDN Mejing 2 Candimulyo District

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out how strategies are used by school principals in building an inclusive school culture and the challenges and obstacles faced by school principals in building an inclusive culture. The research method used is a qualitative research method with an approach with interview, observation, and documentation techniques. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the success of the principal of SDN Mejing 2 in building an inclusive school culture is the result of the implementation of a directed and comprehensive strategy and even though SDN Mejing 2 faces various challenges, both from within the school environment (internal) such as the teacher's lack of understanding of the concept of inclusion, limited facilities, and from outside (external) such as lack of parental support and community stigma, the principal did not stay silent. This evaluation process includes an assessment of the effectiveness of planning, program implementation, and the involvement of all school elements in realizing inclusive values

Keywords : *Principal Strategy, Inclusive Culture, Inclusive Education, School Leadership*

1. Introduction

The An inclusive culture in the elementary school environment plays a crucial role in creating a learning environment that is fair, friendly, and respectful of the diversity of students (Asnur et al., 2024; Markiano Solissa et al., 2023; Uluk et al., 2024). Basic education is the initial phase of the formation of children's character and social values, so that the implementation of an inclusive culture from an early age can foster tolerance, empathy, and sensitivity to differences (Agus Supriyadi et al., 2023; Dewanto et al., 2024; Zulkifli et al., 2022). Schools that develop an inclusive culture focus not only on the academic aspect, but also on the recognition of the right of every child to learn without discrimination, whether due to social background, economic, physical ability, or special needs (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Thus, an inclusive culture is an important foundation for the realization of equitable and sustainable education (Osiname, 2018).

Furthermore, an inclusive culture not only benefits students with special needs, but also enriches the learning experience of all students (Heristyo Endro Baruno et al., 2025). When schools succeed in building a climate that respects differences and supports collaboration, it creates a positive, mutually supportive, and stigma-free learning community (UNESCO, 2020). Research shows that elementary schools that apply inclusive principles tend to have a healthier social climate, less conflict, and increased student participation and motivation to learn (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Therefore, it is important for primary schools to actively develop inclusive cultural strategies through policies, teaching practices, and school leadership that are in favor of all learners (Daries, 2021).

Principals play a strategic role in shaping and directing an inclusive culture in the school environment (Limboro, 2024). In his managerial capacity, the principal is responsible for managing resources, setting policies, and creating a learning environment that supports all learners without exception. This managerial function includes planning inclusive programs, organizing teacher training, supervising the implementation of differentiated learning, and continuous evaluation of inclusion policies. Moreover, principals who implement transformational leadership strive to be agents of change by providing inspiration, motivation, and moral support to teachers and education staff in adopting an inclusive approach (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). This leadership style is important in shaping a shared vision, increasing collective commitment, and creating a collaborative culture within the school community (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990).

The implementation of inclusive values in school daily practice requires a systematic and sustainable strategy from the principal (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023). This strategy includes strengthening a diversity-friendly curriculum, developing learning methods that are adaptive to various student needs, and implementing a fair and flexible assessment system. Principals must also ensure that all school residents understand and apply inclusive principles in daily interactions, such as respecting students' different social, cultural, and individual backgrounds (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). In addition, school principals need to build partnerships with parents and communities as part of a collective effort to create a participatory and supportive learning environment for all. With this strategy, schools become not only a place of learning, but also a space that reflects social justice and respect for humanity (Hollowell, 2019).

SDN Mejing 2 is located in Candimulyo District, Magelang Regency, Central Java Province—an area with semi-rural geographical characteristics surrounded by agricultural land and residential areas. As a public elementary school, SDN Mejing 2 serves people from various socioeconomic backgrounds, including farming families, day laborers, and informal workers. Student demographics show diversity in terms of learning ability, social status, and cultural background, which is both a challenge and an opportunity in the management of inclusive education. With a relatively small number of students, the school has the potential to apply a more personalized and responsive approach to learning to the individual needs of students (Ryan, 2006); Huda, 2025).

The initial indication of the implementation of an inclusive culture at SDN Mejing 2 is reflected in the efforts of the principal and teachers in accommodating the diversity of students' learning abilities, including the existence of students with mild learning barriers who are still involved in regular classroom activities. School principals have also begun to encourage the use of differentiation approaches in the learning process, as well as open spaces for parents and community participation in supporting the educational process (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024). However, the strategies implemented are still partial and have not been systematically documented. Therefore, a study of the principal's strategy in building an inclusive culture is important to reveal the approach taken, the obstacles faced, and the potential for its development. This research is expected to make a practical contribution to strengthening inclusive leadership in primary schools in similar regions (Lijun & Te, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that principals' leadership plays a vital role in fostering an inclusive school culture. One study by Sharma, Loreman, and Forlin (2012) found that effective leadership strategies in the context of inclusion involve strengthening an inclusive vision, ongoing teacher training, and the creation of a physical and social environment that supports

the participation of all students. The study emphasizes the importance of the principal's commitment to bringing together all stakeholders—teachers, parents, and the community—to jointly build a diversity-friendly education system. In addition, the results of Florian and Spratt's (2013) research underline that the success of the implementation of inclusive education is highly dependent on leadership that is able to direct changes in the culture of school organizations as a whole.

Research by Suryani and Rahmawati (2020) shows that school principals who implement participatory and collaborative leadership approaches are more successful in implementing inclusive education in primary schools in Indonesia. They highlighted the need to strengthen inclusive values through school policies, adaptive classroom management, and teacher involvement in decision-making. These studies are a strong theoretical foundation to explain the relevance and urgency of this study, especially in the context of SDN Mejing 2 Candimulyo which is trying to build an inclusive culture in a more structured manner through the principal's leadership strategy. Based on this, this study aims to find out how the strategies used by school principals in building an inclusive school culture and the challenges and obstacles faced by school principals in building an inclusive culture.

2. Research Methods

This type of research is a qualitative research with interview, observation, and documentation techniques. This research was carried out within one month, namely May 2025 at SDN Mejing 2 Kec. The research subjects are the Principal, Teachers, Students, and Parents. The research steps carried out are: (1) Problem Formulation, (2) Bibliography, (3) Research Design, (4) Data Collection, (5) Data Analysis, (6) Result Reporting, Data Collection Techniques and Data Analysis as follows: (1) The source of this writing data is the principal's strategy in making the school's vision and mission. (2) Qualitative data consists of responses, opinions, and opinions of principals, teachers, students and parents. (3) Data collection techniques about qualitative data in the form of data on the results of school principals make strategies in building an inclusive school culture.

3. Result and Discussion

School Principal's Strategy in Building an Inclusive School Culture

To find out the principal's strategy in building an inclusive school culture at SDN Mejing 2, the researcher collected data by interviewing the principal, teachers, students, and parents. Conducting data collection with documentation techniques for the preparation of school vision and mission, collaborative learning activities. In addition, the researcher also collected data with observation techniques on teacher empowerment, communication and support from the principal to teachers as well as increasing student participation, as well as positive attitudes of school residents (Setia et al., 2021).

The ability of the principal to formulate an inclusive vision and mission reflects leadership competencies that are oriented towards equality, diversity, and participation of all school residents (Osiname, 2018). In the context of inclusive education, school principals are not only required to have knowledge of the concept of inclusion, but also be able to translate it concretely into the direction and strategic goals of the school. Effective principals are able to explain the meaning of inclusion as an educational approach that accommodates individual

differences, including students with special needs. Recognize that inclusive education is not just about accepting students with disabilities, but also creating a welcoming, equitable, and supportive environment for all students. This understanding is the foundation for developing a vision and mission that is non-discriminatory and reflects the spirit of equality (Dodge et al., 2021).

The principal's strategy in building an inclusive school culture is a key element in creating an educational environment that is friendly, fair, and respectful of diversity. Principals have a central role in directing the school's vision and mission towards inclusivity by ensuring that all policies, teaching practices, and social interactions in schools support the full participation of all students, including those with special needs. According to Ainscow & Sandill (2010), effective principals in building an inclusive culture demonstrate transformational leadership that is oriented towards collaboration, critical reflection, and strengthening teachers' capacity in implementing inclusive education principles. Strategies such as teacher professional development, strengthening inclusion support teams, and curriculum adjustments are important parts of creating an inclusive school climate.

In addition, the principal must develop open and transparent communication with all stakeholders, including parents, the community, and external support agencies (Minsih & Hidayat, 2022). Cross-sector collaboration is very important in strengthening support systems for students with diverse backgrounds, both in terms of ability, socio-economy, and culture. Booth & Ainscow (2016) emphasize that a culture of inclusion is formed through a systemic approach that includes changing school values, attitudes, and organizational structures. Therefore, the principal's strategy is not only administrative but also reflects an ethical and pedagogical commitment to the right of every child to an equal and meaningful education in an atmosphere that supports diversity.

Obstacles and Challenges of Carrying Out Their Leadership Role

In carrying out leadership roles, school principals are faced with various obstacles and complex challenges. One of the main challenges is resistance to change from teachers and school staff. Many teachers who have become accustomed to old work patterns are uncomfortable with new policies that demand inclusivity, collaboration, and a student-centered approach to learning. According to Fullan (2007), the success of educational change is highly dependent on the ability of school leaders to build a shared commitment and manage organizational culture change gradually and sustainably. Without support from the school community at large, principals' efforts to realize a progressive leadership vision are often hampered (Khaleel, 2020).

Another challenge is the limitation of resources, both human and material resources. Principals often have to manage schools with limited budget support, while they are required to improve the quality of education and meet the needs of all students, including those with special needs. This is a serious obstacle in the implementation of innovative and inclusive programs. Leithwood et al. (2004) emphasize that systemic support from the government and local education authorities is essential to ensure that principals have the capacity and flexibility to allocate resources effectively and efficiently.

On the other hand, the lack of inclusivity-based leadership training is also a significant challenge. Many school principals have not received adequate training related to diversity management, conflict management, and the development of an organizational culture that is

responsive to differences. An inability to understand diversity issues often leads to principals failing to build a welcoming and safe learning environment for all students. According to Theoharis (2007), inclusive school principals need to have moral courage and practical knowledge to challenge exclusive practices that are already rooted in the school environment.

Another challenge that school principals face is high administrative pressure. Burdensome administrative tasks, such as budget management (Hollingworth et al., 2018), routine reporting, and accreditation, often take up a significant portion of the principal's time, leaving them with limited space to focus on instructional leadership roles. Hargreaves & Fullan (2012) note that principals who are overburdened with administrative tasks tend to miss out on opportunities to build meaningful relationships with teachers and students, even though these interactions are essential in creating a healthy and productive school culture.

In addition, external influences such as pressure from national education policies can also be an obstacle in carrying out effective leadership roles. Policies that are top-down and less involved in local contexts often create tensions between principals and education authorities. This makes it difficult for the principal to align the school's vision with the ever-changing external demands. According to Spillane et al. (2001), school principals need to have the capacity of distribution leadership in order to involve all stakeholders in navigating the complexity of dynamic education policies (Limboro, 2024).

Finally, the psychological and emotional aspects are also challenges. Effective leadership demands mental resilience, high interpersonal skills, and the ability to manage stress and pressure. When faced with internal conflicts, teacher dissatisfaction, or even intimidation from outsiders, the principal needs emotional and professional support to maintain his motivation and integrity. Day & Gu (2010) stated that personal resilience is an important quality that must be possessed by school principals in order to be able to carry out leadership consistently and oriented towards positive change in the long term.

Strengthening Teacher Capacity through Professional Development

Teacher professional development is a crucial element in building educator capacity to realize quality inclusive education. In the context of inclusive schools, teachers are required to have a deep understanding of learning differentiation, curriculum adaptation, and pedagogical approaches that are responsive to the diversity of students. Therefore, structured training and capacity building are an important means to improve teachers' pedagogic competence, inclusive attitudes, and collaborative skills. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective professional development is not only theoretical, but must be contextual, sustainable, and based on real practice in the classroom (Saryanto et al., 2023, 2024).

Principals have a strategic role in designing professional development programs that are relevant to the needs of teachers and the learning challenges faced. At SDN Mejing 2 Candimulyo, the principal's strategy includes the implementation of internal training, collaborative workshops, and peer learning as part of the school's shared learning culture. In addition, the principal also encourages teachers to take part in external training organized by the Education Office or organizational partners. This approach is in line with the findings of Borko (2004) who emphasized that effective professional development must take place on a continuous basis and create an active professional learning community.

Strengthening teachers' capacity also includes reflective and evaluative skills on learning practices that have been carried out. Teachers are involved in the evaluation process of inclusion programs and are given space to discuss the challenges they face (Minsih & Hidayat, 2022). This strengthens the adaptive teaching-learning cycle and encourages innovation in developing teaching strategies that suit the individual needs of students. Guskey (2002) states that changes in teacher behavior in learning often stem from changes in perceptions obtained through direct experience and systematic support in professional development.

In the process of professional development, it is also important to pay attention to the affective and motivational dimensions of teachers. Recognition of teachers' role in building an inclusive culture and appreciation for their initiative and creativity can increase intrinsic motivation and a sense of ownership towards school transformation. At SDN Mejing 2, the principal actively provides positive feedback, reinforcement, and opportunities for teachers to be involved in school decision-making, which has an impact on increasing teachers' commitment and confidence in carrying out inclusive practices (Aryani & Haryadi, 2023)

Overall, strengthening teacher capacity through professional development is a long-term investment that greatly determines the success of the transformation towards an inclusive school culture (Esza, 2024). This process must be carried out in a systematic, structured manner, and supported by progressive school policies. With effective professional development, teachers become not only policy implementers, but also agents of change who are able to transform the classroom into an inclusive, adaptive and empowering learning environment for all learners without exception (Oktarina et al., 2021; Winiasri et al., 2023; Zulyusri et al., 2023).

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the research that has been conducted on the principal's strategy in building an inclusive culture at SDN Mejing 2, it can be concluded that the success of the principal of SDN Mejing 2 in building an inclusive school culture is the result of the implementation of a directed and comprehensive strategy. Furthermore, even though SDN Mejing 2 faces various challenges, both from within the school environment (internal) such as teachers' lack of understanding of the concept of inclusion, limited facilities, and from outside (external) such as lack of parental support and community stigma, the principal does not stay silent.

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