

Professional Competence of School Principals in Inclusive School Management: A Multi-Site Study in Sidoarjo, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to describe and analyze the professional competence of school principals in managing inclusive schools through a multi-site study conducted at Buduran 2 Junior High School and Sidoarjo 6 Junior High School. **Method:** This research employed a descriptive qualitative design with a multi-site study approach. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis involving school principals, teachers, and other school stakeholders. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis procedures consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing to obtain a comprehensive understanding of school principals' professional competence in inclusive education management. **Results:** The findings indicate that the professional competence of school principals is reflected in the internalization of an inclusive vision into strategic school policies and the establishment of specialized organizational structures to support services for students with special needs. The implementation includes the development of adaptive curricula through Individualized Education Programs (IEP), the application of differentiated learning strategies, and the provision of accessible infrastructure and psychosocial protection within the school environment. **Novelty:** This study highlights how professional leadership of school principals contributes to optimizing resource allocation, promoting academic equity through flexible assessment practices, and fostering a tolerant and accountable school ecosystem that supports inclusive education for all stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of inclusive education is a concrete step towards changing the public's perception of children with special needs (Slowik et al., 2023). Many people still hold negative views, regarding children with special needs as individuals experiencing limitations or obstacles in their physical, emotional, social, and even psychological development (Pangga et al., 2025). Consequently, they are considered to lack potential and talent, unable to socialize, and unable to pursue an education (Locke et al., 2020; Beadle-Brown et al., 2021; Slowik et al., 2023). This view often leads to discrimination against children with special needs, such as being ostracized and lacking support from their surroundings. Consequently, children with special needs' psychological and mental well-being is disrupted, leaving them with the impression that they have no future, equal to that of normal individuals in general. According to Dul et al. (2024), the professional competence of school principals who implement Servant Leadership successfully creates a collaborative culture and increases the participation of all stakeholders in the educational process. Recent studies in educational innovation also highlight the importance of technology-supported learning environments and interactive learning strategies to enhance students' engagement and problem-solving abilities (Alhusni et al., 2025a; Fransiska & Citra, 2025; Lintangesukmanjaya et al., 2025; Mahendra et al., 2025; Noviyanti et al., 2025). Therefore, inclusive education services are needed that prioritize the values of tolerance and diversity among individuals.

Inclusive education is an educational system that provides opportunities for all

students with disabilities and potential intelligence and/or special talents to participate in education or learning in a single educational environment alongside students in general (Locke et al., 2020; Çankaya et al., 2022; Alhusni et al., 2025b; Izzati et al., 2025). This is emphasized in Ministerial Regulation Number 70 of 2009 as an effort to fulfill the human right to quality, non-discriminatory education. To fulfill the right to education based on democratic, equitable, and non-discriminatory principles, inclusive education can be provided to students with disabilities through educational institutions, namely inclusive schools (Fitroni et al., 2025; Izzati et al., 2025; Nasution et al., 2025).

Educators or subject teachers are also a determining factor in the success of inclusive schools. School principals need a comprehensive approach to improving the quality of subject teachers, both in terms of pedagogical competence, in carrying out their duties in inclusive schools (Rivana et al., 2024; Alhusni et al., 2025c; Troedson et al., 2025; Fiantini & Rifa'i, 2026). Pedagogical competence is essential in inclusive education because it helps subject teachers manage the learning process and interact with all students. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has created a tiered training program for inclusive education, consisting of training modules that can be studied by principals, educators or teachers, and school supervisors (Stromholt et al., 2024). This program aims to realize an inclusive learning process by creating a diverse learning environment for students. Inclusive schools also need the support and guidance of specialized educators or special guidance teachers during the learning process. Special guidance teacher are teachers assigned to assist the special guidance teachers at the school, whether from the educational unit itself or from a nearby special needs school (Hanaa & Evani, 2022; Wray et al., 2022; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2023).

In managing an inclusive school, the principal must possess competency standards relevant to their area of expertise, namely inclusion. A competent principal will meet the specified competency standards in carrying out their duties. A principal must possess strong competencies because competency plays a crucial role in school management and influences educational development and student well-being (Anwar, 2024). According to Benty et al. (2024), principal competency is the knowledge, skills, and core values reflected in consistent habits of thought and action that enable them to be competent or capable of making decisions about the provision, utilization, and enhancement of existing resource potential to improve the quality of education in their school. One effort to improve the quality of principal leadership is through establishing competency standards using the principal competency model as a reference.

From a theoretical perspective, professional competence can be understood as a form of competency-based leadership in which principals integrate knowledge, managerial skills, and professional values into strategic decision-making and school management practices (Anwar, 2024; Benty et al., 2024). In the context of inclusive education, such competence must also be aligned with the principles of inclusive leadership, which emphasize equity, participation, and responsiveness to student diversity (Ainscow, 2020; Rivana et al., 2024). Inclusive leadership requires school principals not only to manage administrative processes but also to create an institutional culture that respects diversity and ensures that students with special needs can participate fully in learning activities (Troedson et al., 2025). Therefore, professional competence in inclusive school management reflects the ability of principals to translate inclusive values into policies, organizational structures, and instructional practices that support equitable learning

opportunities. Although previous studies have examined inclusive education policies, teacher readiness, and leadership roles in promoting inclusive schools (Wray et al., 2022; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2023; Rivana et al., 2024), limited research has specifically explored how principals' professional competence is operationalized in managing inclusive schools within real institutional contexts. Existing studies tend to focus on either teacher competencies or general leadership characteristics, while the processes through which principals integrate inclusive values into school policies, curriculum adaptation, and resource management remain relatively underexplored. Moreover, empirical evidence that compares leadership practices across multiple inclusive schools within the same regional context is still limited.

Therefore, this study aims to describe and analyze the professional competence of school principals in managing inclusive schools through a multi-site qualitative investigation conducted at Buduran 2 Junior High School and Sidoarjo 6 Junior High School in Sidoarjo, Indonesia. This study contributes to the literature by providing contextual and empirical insights into how professional competence is enacted through inclusive leadership practices, particularly in the development of inclusive policies, adaptive curriculum implementation, and collaborative school ecosystems that support students with special needs. By examining these practices across different school settings, this research seeks to deepen the understanding of how school leadership competence influences the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach using a multi-site research design conducted at two inclusive junior high schools, namely Buduran 2 Junior High School and Sidoarjo 6 Junior High School. A qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the professional competence of school principals in managing inclusive schools within their natural contexts. Multi-site research enables researchers to examine similarities and differences across research locations and to obtain a broader interpretation of leadership practices in inclusive education. According to Subedi (2023), qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena experienced by research participants, such as behavior, perceptions, motivations, and actions, holistically and within real-life situations. In qualitative educational research, such an approach is particularly useful for examining leadership practices and organizational processes within their real institutional contexts (Aprilia & Rizal, 2022).

The use of a multi-site design was intended to enable comparative analysis across schools implementing inclusive education within the same regional context. Buduran 2 Junior High School and Sidoarjo 6 Junior High School were selected purposively because both schools have formally implemented inclusive education programs and actively serve students with special needs. At the same time, the two schools represent different institutional contexts in terms of school size, organizational support structures for inclusive services, and the maturity of inclusive program implementation. This variation allows researchers to examine how principals' professional competence is enacted in different school environments and to identify patterns that may emerge across sites (Aprilia & Rizal, 2022). The participants in this study consisted of school principals, teachers, educational staff, and parents who were directly involved in the implementation of inclusive education in the selected schools. A total of 22 participants

were involved in this study, consisting of two school principals, eight subject teachers, two special guidance teachers, two counseling teachers, two educational staff members, and six parents or guardians of students with special needs. Informants were determined purposively based on their roles, experiences, and involvement in school management and inclusive learning services.

Purposive sampling was applied to identify information-rich participants who possessed direct experience and responsibilities in inclusive education practices (Bendermacher et al., 2020; Subedi, 2023). The inclusion criteria included: (1) principals responsible for policy and leadership in inclusive school management; (2) teachers who had experience teaching students with special needs and implementing differentiated instruction or Individualized Education Programs (IEP); (3) educational staff who supported administrative and facility management related to inclusive education; and (4) parents who were actively involved in communication and collaboration with the school regarding inclusive learning services. These participants were selected because their experiences provided valuable insights into the implementation of inclusive leadership and school management practices.

In addition to human participants, supporting data were also obtained from school documents such as activity reports, photographs, policy documents, and records related to inclusive education practices. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Participant observation was carried out to obtain direct information regarding school activities, leadership practices, and interactions among school members within the inclusive education environment. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and strategies related to the management of inclusive schools. Meanwhile, document analysis was used to examine relevant institutional documents, including school policies, learning plans, and reports that support the implementation of inclusive education. The use of multiple data collection techniques enables triangulation of information and enhances the credibility of qualitative findings (Bendermacher et al., 2020; Subedi, 2023).

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles et al., (2013), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data condensation involved selecting, simplifying, and organizing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documents. The data were then presented systematically to facilitate interpretation and identification of patterns related to the professional competence of school principals in managing inclusive schools. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and verifying findings continuously throughout the research process to ensure the validity and consistency of the results.

To strengthen the rigor of the multi-site design, the analysis was conducted in two stages. First, within-site analysis was carried out to identify key themes related to principals' professional competence and inclusive school management practices in each school. Second, cross-site comparison was conducted to examine similarities and differences between Buduran 2 Junior High School and Sidoarjo 6 Junior High School. This cross-site analytical process allowed researchers to identify shared leadership patterns as well as context-specific practices influenced by institutional conditions (Miles et al., 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study focuses on the professional competence of school principals in managing inclusive schools. Based on the findings obtained through observations, interviews, and document analysis, the results are presented in three main themes: the professional competence of school principals, the implementation of that competence in inclusive school management, and its implications for the development of inclusive education.

Professional competence of school principals

The professional competence of school principals represents an integration of knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes reflected in consistent patterns of thinking and actions in managing educational resources effectively (Mustamin & Yasin, 2012; Benty et al., 2024). In the context of inclusive education, this competence involves the strategic ability to internalize inclusive values into school policies such as the School Work Plan (RKS), positioning inclusion as a fundamental value or the “spirit” of the institution rather than merely an administrative program. This process is supported by the establishment of specific organizational structures, such as an Inclusive Quality Assurance Team and cross-sector working groups involving special education teachers, subject teachers, and counseling teachers to ensure structured services for students with special needs.

The implementation of professional leadership is also reflected in the development of adaptive curricula and the creation of a participatory learning culture. School principals encourage the preparation of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and the implementation of differentiated instruction that adjusts learning methods and media according to the unique potential of each student, both academically and vocationally. In addition, social climate development is strengthened through programs such as the “Inclusive Friendship” or Buddy System, which aim to foster empathy and collaboration between regular students and students with special needs. Through modified extracurricular activities and the reinforcement of tolerance values, principals ensure that the school environment remains accessible and free from discrimination for all members of the school community.

From a managerial perspective, school principals apply data-based decision making and partnership synergy to ensure program sustainability. Data derived from diagnostic assessments, learning profiles, and functional assessments are used within the School Learning Community to evaluate teaching effectiveness and determine appropriate resource allocation. In addition, principals advocate for the provision of specialized facilities through collaboration with education authorities and strengthen cooperation with parents through Focus Group Discussions (FGD). These initiatives not only focus on improving learning quality within the school but also emphasize the future development of students through educational transition planning to higher levels.

These findings indicate that professional competence in inclusive leadership operates as a strategic capacity that enables principals to align institutional policies, organizational structures, and instructional practices with inclusive values. In this sense, professional competence is not limited to administrative management but also reflects the ability to transform school culture and decision-making processes to accommodate student diversity.

Implementation of the professional competence of school principals

The implementation of professional competence in inclusive leadership begins with strengthening regulatory foundations and formalizing systematic organizational structures. Referring to operational standards aligned with the Regulation of the Minister of National Education Number 70 of 2009, school principals establish strategic policies through official decrees that appoint inclusive development teams, service coordinators, and supporting groups such as “Teman TIFA.” These measures aim to ensure legal certainty and effective service governance for students with special needs. In terms of infrastructure, the implementation includes the development of accessible facilities such as ramps, disability-friendly toilets, and Braille labels, as well as psychosocial protection through the establishment of anti-bullying task forces. These efforts contribute to creating a safe, inclusive, and non-discriminatory learning environment.

In the instructional dimension, principals demonstrate their competence by facilitating adaptive and flexible curriculum development based on students’ individual needs. The preparation of Individualized Education Programs is conducted collaboratively by special education teachers, subject teachers, and parents using the results of initial diagnostic assessments. Teachers are encouraged to apply differentiated learning strategies in terms of content, process, and product to accommodate diverse learning styles, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners. Besides strengthening basic academic skills such as literacy and numeracy, the curriculum also includes vocational training and life-skills development implemented in resource rooms as specialized learning spaces.

Program sustainability is further ensured through adaptive assessment systems and progressive professional supervision. Principals support modifications in assessment techniques, such as oral examinations, practical tests, and extended time allocations. The results are reported transparently through qualitative descriptions of students’ holistic development. Continuous monitoring of the achievement of Individualized Education Programs is conducted to evaluate students’ social, emotional, and independent development. Additionally, school principals play a strategic role in facilitating educational transitions through orientation programs to higher education levels and outdoor learning activities that promote social integration.

However, the implementation of inclusive leadership is not always free from challenges. The findings indicate that principals must often navigate practical constraints such as limited availability of specialized teachers, varying levels of teacher readiness to implement differentiated instruction, and constraints in infrastructure development. In some cases, teachers initially experience uncertainty in adapting instructional strategies for students with diverse learning needs. These challenges require principals to adopt adaptive leadership strategies, including continuous professional support, collaborative reflection within school learning communities, and gradual institutional adjustments to strengthen inclusive practices.

Implications of the professional competence of school principals

The professional competence of school principals in managing inclusive institutions has significant implications for optimizing resource mobilization and improving the efficiency of educational resource allocation. Through diversified funding sources including government operational funds, regional government allocations, and partnerships through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principals are able to ensure the availability of learning aids, the maintenance of resource rooms, and the continuous

development of accessible facilities. From an instructional perspective, professional leadership contributes to the creation of academic equity through personalized services and flexible assessment systems. The structured implementation of Individualized Education Programs enables teachers to modify assessments by adjusting the number of questions, using oral examinations, and providing extended time for task completion. As a result, evaluations are able to measure students' learning achievements without being hindered by physical or sensory limitations. This approach also promotes the development of students' functional independence and life skills, enabling students with special needs to develop not only cognitively but also practically in their daily lives.

In terms of social and institutional management, the competence of school principals contributes to transforming school culture into a more tolerant and inclusive ecosystem while increasing public trust in educational institutions. The integration of inclusive values into the school operational curriculum helps reduce bullying and encourages empathy and social maturity among students. Furthermore, collaborative partnerships with external institutions such as health centers, psychologists, and disability organizations strengthen the role of parents as active partners in education. These collaborative efforts create psychological security for families and ensure smoother educational transitions for students with special needs to higher levels of education.

Discussion

Professional competence of school principals in inclusive school management

The findings of this study indicate that the professional competence of school principals plays a crucial role in shaping inclusive school management. Professional competence is reflected not only in administrative capabilities but also in the ability to formulate strategic policies that support inclusive education. The integration of inclusive values into school visions, missions, and programs demonstrates how leadership commitment can influence institutional transformation. When principals position inclusion as a core value of the school, the entire educational system becomes more responsive to the needs of students with diverse backgrounds and abilities. This finding aligns with previous research emphasizing that school leadership is a key factor in building inclusive school cultures and ensuring equal learning opportunities. Effective principals are able to coordinate teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to create collaborative environments that support students with special needs (Rivana et al., 2024; Troedson et al., 2025). Furthermore, the establishment of inclusive organizational structures such as special education teams and collaborative support groups illustrates how leadership competence translates into concrete institutional practices.

In addition, the ability of principals to promote inclusive values contributes to the reduction of discrimination and strengthens social acceptance within schools. Inclusive leadership therefore extends beyond policy implementation and influences how members of the school community interact and cooperate. These results support the argument that inclusive education requires leadership that is both strategic and empathetic in responding to students' diverse needs (Ainscow, 2020).

From a broader international perspective, these findings converge with studies on inclusive leadership that emphasize the role of school principals as change agents who institutionalize inclusive values through organizational policies and collaborative practices (Ainscow, 2020). However, the present study also highlights the contextual dimension of inclusive leadership in Indonesian schools, where principals must balance policy mandates with practical constraints in school resources and teacher capacity. This

suggests that inclusive leadership competence is not merely a theoretical construct but a dynamic practice shaped by local institutional conditions.

Implementation of professional competence in inclusive education

The implementation of professional competence among school principals is evident in their ability to facilitate adaptive learning systems and collaborative practices. One of the key findings of this study is the use of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and differentiated instruction to accommodate students' varying abilities. These instructional practices indicate that inclusive education requires flexibility in teaching approaches and curriculum design. Principals who encourage teachers to apply adaptive learning strategies contribute significantly to the development of more inclusive classrooms. Previous studies highlight that teacher effectiveness in inclusive education is strongly influenced by leadership support and professional development opportunities. When principals provide guidance, resources, and collaborative spaces for teachers, educators become more confident in implementing inclusive teaching practices (Wray et al., 2022). In this context, the role of the principal extends to instructional leadership that guides teachers in modifying learning content, processes, and assessments to meet students' individual needs.

Another important aspect of implementation involves the development of supportive learning environments and accessible infrastructure. Facilities such as ramps, resource rooms, and adaptive learning materials help ensure that students with disabilities can participate fully in educational activities. Collaboration with external institutions including health professionals and community organizations also strengthens schools' capacity to support students comprehensively. Research suggests that such partnerships are essential in inclusive education because they provide schools with additional expertise and resources (Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the implementation process also reveals several tensions that characterize inclusive leadership in practice. Principals often face dilemmas between policy expectations and available resources, particularly in relation to infrastructure development, teacher training, and specialized support services. These tensions highlight the importance of adaptive leadership strategies, where principals must continuously negotiate institutional limitations while maintaining a commitment to inclusive values.

Implications of professional competence for inclusive school development

The implications of school principals' professional competence extend to multiple dimensions of inclusive school development. One of the most significant implications is the improvement of resource management and the optimization of educational support systems. Principals who are capable of mobilizing resources from various sources including government programs and community partnerships can ensure the availability of facilities and services required by students with special needs. In addition, professional leadership contributes to the development of equitable learning environments. Flexible assessment systems, personalized learning approaches, and supportive classroom interactions allow students with diverse abilities to demonstrate their potential. These practices reflect the principle of educational equity, which emphasizes fairness and accessibility in learning processes. Studies on inclusive education policy also highlight the importance of leadership in ensuring that schools provide equal opportunities for all learners (Pangga et al., 2025).

Moreover, the competence of school principals influences the broader school culture and public trust in educational institutions. By promoting inclusive values and encouraging collaboration between teachers, parents, and communities, principals help create school environments that respect diversity and foster mutual understanding. Such environments are essential for ensuring the social integration and emotional well-being of students with special needs. At the same time, the findings suggest that strengthening principals' professional competence requires continuous institutional support, including leadership training, policy alignment, and resource provision. Without such systemic support, the implementation of inclusive education may depend heavily on individual leadership initiatives rather than sustainable institutional structures.

Despite these positive implications, this study also acknowledges certain limitations. The research was conducted in a limited number of schools within a specific regional context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Nevertheless, the insights gained from this study provide valuable contributions to the understanding of inclusive school leadership and highlight the importance of strengthening the professional competence of school principals.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This study shows that the professional competence of school principals plays a key role in managing inclusive schools. Inclusive leadership is reflected in the integration of inclusive values into school policies, adaptive curriculum development, and collaborative support systems involving teachers, parents, and other stakeholders. These findings contribute to international discussions on inclusive leadership by showing how school principals translate inclusive education policies into practical school management. **Implication:** Strengthening principals' professional competence through leadership training and institutional support is essential to improve inclusive education implementation. This also aligns with global efforts to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments. **Limitation:** This study was conducted in two schools within a specific regional context, which may limit the generalization of the findings. **Future Research:** Future studies may conduct cross-country comparisons, quantitative validation of leadership competence dimensions, or longitudinal research to examine the sustainability of inclusive education reforms.

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