

An Analysis of School Principals' Leadership in Implementing Inclusive Education in Early Childhood Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a national policy established by the Indonesian government to realize equal access to education for all citizens. However, its implementation in early childhood education still faces various challenges due to limitations at the educational unit level. In this case, school principals play a strategic role in shaping an inclusive school culture through visionary, collaborative, and adaptive leadership. This study aims to understand school principals' perspectives on inclusive education and analyze the SWOT factors (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) in their leadership. A qualitative descriptive approach was used through in-depth interviews and document analysis with three school principals: TK Fun and Play, TK Labschool UNNES, and TK Talenta Semarang. The results indicate that TK Fun and Play has strengths in clarity of vision and collaboration but relies heavily on external institutions for support. TK Labschool UNNES excels in using data as a basis for decision-making but faces challenges in collaborating with the foundation. Meanwhile, TK Talenta stands out in academic integration, with the challenge of unrealistic parental expectations. This study provides empirical contributions to policy development, leadership training, and an education system that is more responsive to the diverse needs of children from an early age.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental right for everyone, including children with special needs. This right is enshrined in Article 31 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and reinforced by Law No. 20 of 2003, which states that every child has the right to quality education. In the past, children with special needs were often separated from the general education system, which only reinforced stigma and injustice. As a solution to this, inclusive education was created with a system that allows all children to learn together in public schools without discrimination (Ainscow, 2020). Inclusive education is not just about providing access to schools; it is about making schools truly welcoming places for all students (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Waitoller and Lubienski (2019) emphasize that, in addition to physical access, the success of inclusion can be explained by the existence of flexible curricula and adaptive teaching methods, as well as fair assessment systems. This aligns with the spirit of Law No. 20 of 2003, which states that special education (including for children with disabilities, or gifted and talented children) must be implemented inclusively. This approach enables schools not only to fulfill their legal obligations but also to lay the foundation for a more inclusive society (Shofwan et al., 2023).

The need for inclusive education is becoming increasingly important in early childhood education, as the golden age (0-6 years) will shape who the child will be in the future. Shonkoff et al.

(2021) demonstrate that proper stimulation at an early age, particularly in an inclusive environment, has a significant impact on children's social skills, motivation, and academic growth. [Farmer et al. \(2022\)](#) suggest that children with special needs in inclusive early childhood education are more skilled at socializing compared to those in special schools. This indicates that inclusion is not only a matter of fairness but also implies the optimization of every child's potential from an early age. Therefore, inclusive education should not only be a policy, but also a desire to make the world a more equitable place. Schools that can accommodate every student (in terms of curriculum, practices, and infrastructure facilities) will not leave any child behind. This is the true nature of humanistic education ([Rose & Strangman, 2020](#)).

Although schools claim to be inclusive, this does not necessarily mean that they effectively implement inclusive education. It can be said that several signs indicate that early childhood education institutions still face various challenges in implementing inclusive education ([Fontil et al., 2020](#)). The main challenges associated with adopting this comprehensive model include the absence of professional teachers in the field of inclusion, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, ineffective curricula, the mindset of parents and teachers who have not yet adapted to the presence of children with special needs among them, and inclusive learning that ultimately is not truly inclusive ([Kushadiwijayanto et al., 2024](#); [Muzdalifah & Rahmaniah, 2024](#); [Meilina, 2025](#)).

[Mitchell \(2016\)](#) highlights the poor attitude shown by general education teachers at Soroako Kindergarten towards students with disabilities, due to various reasons, including high workloads, numerous tasks, and inadequate training, which hinders the gradual implementation of inclusive education. A lack of training and preparation can leave teachers feeling frustrated and ineffective. The absence of a supportive environment in schools is also due to inadequate facilities, infrastructure, funding, and low-quality specialized curricula ([Mitchell, 2018](#)). This situation can be viewed as a sign of broader issues in the field of inclusive education in Indonesia, and additional measures are necessary to ensure that inclusion is promoted at all levels of education, including early childhood education ([Kurniawati et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, improving standards for inclusive education and establishing inclusive schools will be key aspects in developing inclusive education in Indonesia.

Integrated education in schools requires good educational management to achieve it. This is a process of planning, organizing, and supervising to achieve predetermined goals ([Junaidi, 2020](#)). Similar steps are also emphasized in meeting the needs of each student in inclusive early childhood education management ([Odom et al., 2016](#)). All educational functions, such as students, curriculum, teaching staff, facilities, budget, and community relations, fall under the direct authority of the school principal ([Leithwood et al., 2020](#)). They play a role in formulating beneficial policies, staff and teacher training, and creating a vision. Every child must receive an adequate education, and for this, the school principal must strive to build an inclusive school culture ([Williamson et al., 2020](#)).

This role gives principals a crucial role in forming school inclusion policies. Their leadership determines the school culture and practices that shape how inclusion is understood by teachers, students, and parents ([Sailor, 2015](#)). The value of shared leadership should not be underestimated. Principals who can effectively communicate with teachers, parents, and other stakeholders can build an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all students. School principals with the right vision for inclusion can inspire their staff to be inclusive ([Fullan & Quinn, 2015](#)). They must be able to disseminate information to parents and the community, supporting teachers and encouraging the professional growth of identified teachers. School principals play a key role in the future of inclusive practices in schools. By developing a culture that enables them to embrace, celebrate, and accommodate diversity, they can positively impact teacher dedication and student academic performance. By actively supporting inclusion, school principals can not only secure a rise in teachers' commitment to their profession but also promote their overall academic and social well-being

(Sintiawati, 2023). It is thus significant that school principals should remain champions of inclusion, as they need to ensure that learning programs are accommodating in terms of facilities and teaching methodologies, and that school stakeholders are also well-informed on these issues.

However, realizing the benefits of inclusive education is not an easy task. At this stage, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis is used by school principals as a strategic mechanism. Astuti (2022) states that this strategy enables the identification of internal strengths and external opportunities while mitigating weaknesses and threats. SWOT analysis has been widely applied in various fields, including education, as it provides a comprehensive view before making decisions (Dyson et al., 2021). Furthermore, integrating SWOT with other approaches may result in more fulfilling strategies (Kangas et al., 2019). School principals will be able to formulate more focused long-term strategies for inclusive early childhood education based on this analysis. Several studies have proven the effectiveness of SWOT in assessing inclusive leadership. For example, Tiara & Khotimah (2023) found that the principal of Taman Kanak-Kanak Pertiwi Pati 01 was able to build democratic cooperation with staff and teachers, despite limited funds for teacher training. On the other hand, Ediyanto and Kawai (2023) found that the situation was different at TK Islam Inklusif Cahaya Kautsar Jakarta, where parental involvement was more positive. However, teachers needed to improve teaching strategies related to children with special needs and ensure adequate conditions. These results highlight that SWOT analysis can help principals maximize potential amid challenges.

Several inclusive early childhood education institutions in Semarang, including TK Talenta, TK Labschool UNNES, and TK Fun and Play, have experimented with various methods to achieve inclusion. Thus, SWOT-based leadership analysis is critical for developing effective strategies. Understanding internal and external situations enables school principals to develop more effective policies, foster an inclusive learning environment, and promote fair education for all children, including those with special needs. This research is related to educational leadership, identifying the ideal leadership model for inclusive early childhood education in Semarang through a SWOT analysis. The findings of this research are expected to serve as a practical guide for school principals in optimizing potential and overcoming challenges, ultimately leading to an effective, inclusive education system. In particular, this research enriches the scientific treasure by presenting SWOT analysis-based leadership strategies that can be applied in the context of inclusive education, providing a theoretical and practical basis for policy development and practice in the field.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method to understand the leadership practices of inclusive early childhood education principals in Semarang. The qualitative descriptive approach was chosen because it helps researchers explore and understand the meanings of several individuals or groups of people who face social problems. Sampling in this study was conducted using a purposive sampling approach. The subjects selected were from three inclusive schools in the city of Semarang, namely the principal of TK Fun and Play, the principal of TK Labschool UNNES, and the principal of TK Talenta Semarang. These three subjects were selected because. The selection of samples was based on purposive criteria, where the three principals had been in leadership roles for at least two years, had active students with special needs, and were willing to share school policy data, thereby fulfilling the principle of transferability, where findings can be applied to other inclusive early childhood education institutions in Semarang with similar characteristics.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, including school organizational data, curriculum, and annual reports. Interviews are primary data sources, as they were obtained directly from the research participants, while documents are secondary data that have been previously available. The aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how school

principals carry out their roles in inclusive education (Creswell et al., 2021). The interview instruments and documents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Instruments

Research questions	
What is the background to organizing inclusive education?	How does the principal provide support and appreciation?
What is the goal of organizing an inclusive program in this school?	How do school principals use data to make decisions?
What is the vision and mission that support the existence of an inclusive education program?	How do principals ensure voting rights for all?
How is the process of forming the vision and mission?	What are the means and infrastructure that schools have to organize inclusive education?
Does the school have a maintenance permit from the office?	Have the facilities and infrastructure met the needs of all students and teachers?
Does the school have guidelines for implementing inclusive programs?	What curriculum is used in inclusive programs in your school?
Does the school cooperate with institutions/agencies that support the implementation of inclusive school programs?	Have you ever attended training on implementing inclusive education?
How does the principal plan regarding the implementation of inclusive education?	Is there any monitoring and supervision carried out by school principals related to the implementation of inclusive programs?
What opportunities do you get in organizing inclusive education?	What is the strength of the inclusion program?
How do principals design organizations?	What are the disadvantages of inclusion programs in institutions?
How do principals build teaching teams?	What are the supporting factors for the implementation of inclusive programs?
How do principals build staff capacity?	What are the obstacles and threats to implementing inclusive education programs?

Data triangulation was employed to validate the findings by comparing interview data with documents. The data collection process was conducted directly in each school environment. The interviews focused on the principals' perspectives and practices in implementing inclusive education within their institutions, as well as an analysis of the SWOT factors they faced during their leadership in inclusive institutions. School document analysis was conducted to complement the data from the interviews. All data were recorded and organized systematically to facilitate analysis. The data were then analyzed using Miles and Huberman's analysis.

Miles and Huberman's data analysis was conducted through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results of the interviews and documents were compared to find patterns and similarities. The research findings are presented in the form of clear narrative descriptions, illustrating the principal's perspective on inclusive education, their practices in implementing inclusive education within their institution, and a SWOT analysis of the principal's leadership in an inclusive institution. This research offers an in-depth understanding of leadership in inclusive early childhood education, grounded in the data collected from research subjects and the realities on the ground.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion of the research that answers the research questions: 1) the perspective of school principals on the implementation of inclusive education in inclusive early childhood education institutions and 2) the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats faced by school principals in implementing inclusive education. The research findings are based on interviews with three principals of inclusive-based kindergartens in the city of Semarang. The principal's perspective as a source of information and its contribution to the school's leadership. [Koa and Mutia \(2021\)](#) suggest that a person's perspective on any subject is shaped by their experiences, knowledge, and personal views. The effectiveness of inclusive education initiatives is heavily dependent on the principal's perspective and comprehension of the program.

Based on the results of interviews and document analysis, the views of inclusive early childhood education principals in Semarang regarding inclusive institutions indicate that all of them hold a positive perspective on implementing inclusive institutions. This perspective is formed from within through personal experience, (b) through educational background, and (c) through training and teaching experience. The principals of TK Fun and Play, TK Labschool UNNES, and TK Talenta all support inclusive education techniques. The principle of TK Fun and Play has a favorable attitude toward inclusive education, based on the parents' own experience with a child with special needs. Her experience has given her a great desire to assist children with exceptional needs, as many schools in Semarang only admit children with special needs under particular conditions. She collaborates with her husband, a lecturer and specialist in early childhood education and child psychology, to develop an adaptable learning system tailored to her pupils' individual needs. They also make connections with local experts and officials, develop the school's vision and goal, and adhere to the philosophy of inclusiveness.

The principal of TK Labschool UNNES shares a good vision of inclusive education, which she learned while working as an early childhood educator. The principal believes that children's right to an education, especially those with special needs, is crucial, and their inclusion is a vital component of her commitment as an educator. The principal emphasizes the necessity of creating an inclusive culture at the school, viewing the presence of children with special needs as an opportunity to instill empathy and social values in their peers. Inclusion is viewed as an enrichment of the learning experience for all participants, not only those with special needs. The principal of Labschool UNNES sees inclusion as an institutional obligation, as the school serves as a laboratory for future teachers. She recognizes that maintaining the ideals of fair and equal education is critical to make this school a model. Rejecting children with special needs goes against the spirit of inclusion and is not consistent with the objective of training inclusive educators. The principal of TK Talenta Semarang has a favorable outlook on inclusive education, influenced by learning experiences that include training and technical assistance for inclusive school principals. The principal provides regular training and welcomes other instructors to share their skills for free. If training is available from other institutions, teachers who require it will be included. Meeting students' learning requirements involves a practical understanding that is constantly enhanced through collaborative learning processes, rather than relying solely on theory.

This section explains how the SWOT analysis of school principal leadership practices is applied in the implementation of inclusive education in Semarang. Data was collected from interviews with principals of inclusive kindergartens in Semarang: TK Fun and Play, TK Labschool UNNES, and TK Talenta. Based on the interview results and document analysis, the researcher categorized the school principal's leadership practices in implementing inclusive education at inclusive institutions into 10 themes: 1) Establishing a clear and firm vision regarding inclusivity; 2) Involving stakeholders in collaborative planning; 3) Involving teachers and school staff in collaborative planning; 4) Conducting

an Equity Audit; 5) Redesigning the School Organization; 6) Building a Teaching Team and Teacher Leadership: Collaboration for Inclusive Learning; 7) Building Staff Capacity; 8) Emotional Support and Appreciation; 9) Ensuring a Voice for All; 10) Using Data in Decision-Making.

A thorough analysis of the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) faced by school principals is necessary to understand the effectiveness of leadership in inclusive education. Through this study, the author will discuss leadership in three early childhood education institutions in Semarang City that have adopted an inclusive approach, namely TK Fun and Play, TK Labschool UNNES, and TK Talenta Semarang. Each school principal has a unique management approach and leadership style tailored to the school's demands and the students' characteristics. This SWOT analysis aims to demonstrate how their leadership fosters a supportive, flexible, and sustainable learning environment. Based on the results of interviews and document analysis, the SWOT factors of TK Fun and Play, Labschool UNNES, and Talenta are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. SWOT Analysis of Inclusive School Principal Leadership

Principals			
	TK Fun and Play	TK Labschool UNNES	TK Talenta Semarang
SWOT			
Strengths	-Clarity and operationality of vision and mission -Strong collaboration with many stakeholders -Character-based recruitment	-Data-Based Approach in Decision Making -Strategic Placement of Human Resources -Transparency of Policies that Build Trust	-Leadership Practice and Scientific Integration -Guided Autonomy in Teacher Empowerment -All-Open Communication Policy
Weakness	-Reliance on external resources -Excessively centralized leadership -Lack of participation from students with special needs and parents	-Excessive Instructional Leadership Style -Dependency on External Resources -Fault of Innovation in Inclusion Policies	-Reporting of unsystematic practice - Lacks mediation skills
Opportunities	-Being a Role Model of Collaborative Leadership to other Schools -Independent Teacher Capacity Development -Raising the Effect on Inclusion Awareness	-The use of the Academic Network -Capacity Building Grant Program -Best Practice Exchange Forum	-The Inclusive Education Association networking -National Speaking Opportunities -Experts Mentoring Program
Threats	-Burnout risk to school principals -Alternation of Government or Local Government Policy -Parental Stigma and Resistance of Regular Students	-Bureaucracy on campus that inhibits innovation -Perceptual differences with the school committee -The Demands of Becoming a Leader and an Academic	-Unrealistic Parents' Expectations -Swings in education policy -Support Professional Shortage

The principal of TK Fun and Play demonstrates excellent leadership through a clear vision and mission that is operationalized in the "Sahabat Kecil" program, which serves as a daily evaluation. The program focuses on creating a comfortable environment and optimal stimulation, as outlined in the school document. Another strength lies in the collaborative network established by the school principal with various stakeholders, including parents, therapy centers, and the government, as expressed in the statements "Alhamdulillah, we have full support from the mayor" and "we collaborate with the Therapy Center in Solo," which strengthens inclusive services through the sharing of resources and knowledge, in line with the findings of (Khaleel et al., 2021) on the importance of partnerships in inclusive education. The recruitment process, which focuses on character through psychological tests emphasizing empathy, as emphasized by the principal, "We do not need smart people here, but people with hearts," results in teacher placements that align with children's needs and form a solid team, supported by Mansfield et al. (2023), which proved that teachers with high emotional intelligence produce 35% better learning outcomes for students with special needs.

TK Fun and Play faces several leadership weaknesses, particularly in terms of its dependence on external resources, where the school still relies on external teaching assistants and therapists—a practice that has the potential to cause long-term dysfunction in the implementation of inclusive education (DeMatthews et al., 2021). In addition, leadership that is too centralized in the principal is evident in his involvement in almost all operational aspects, from licensing and training to supervision. Although it seems effective, this approach risks causing leader burnout and reducing teacher initiative, which could threaten the sustainability of the inclusion program if, at some point, the principal is unable to perform their role optimally. Furthermore, the lack of participation by students with special needs and their parents is a crucial issue, because although parents have the right to consultation, there is no systematic mechanism for them or their children to provide feedback. However, inclusive policies should be based on the needs of service recipients, not merely on internal observations by the school team (Florian & Beaton, 2018; Florian, 2019). This disparity highlights the need for more participatory and sustainable policy reforms.

TK Fun and Play has the opportunity to become a model of collaborative leadership for other schools in Semarang through its extensive partnership network, where school principals can present best practices in collaboration with external stakeholders, including the government and professionals. The systematic implementation of this model can encourage adoption by other schools that have not yet experienced the benefits of inclusion, as demonstrated by Khaleel et al. (2021), who show that collaborative-based inclusive schools can be a point of systemic change. Additionally, schools have the opportunity to enhance teacher capacity independently by developing internal mentoring programs, such as pairing new teachers with senior mentors, thereby reducing reliance on external training and strengthening the sustainability of inclusive practices. Azizah et al. (2023) found that teachers' inclusive competencies are effectively developed through internal learning communities. Another opportunity is to raise public awareness about inclusion by leveraging the trend of compassion-based education through outreach activities, such as seminars or open houses, to showcase the success of inclusive models while reducing stigma, in line with UNESCO's (2023) recommendations on the importance of public advocacy for the acceptance of inclusion.

Leadership at TK Fun and Play faces several serious threats, including the risk of physical and emotional exhaustion for the principal due to an excessive workload that encompasses administrative and technical tasks (Syahroni et al., 2020). This condition can disrupt the inclusion program, which is highly dependent on the leader's central role. Another threat stems from the instability of government policies regarding licensing and funding, which form the backbone of inclusion programs; changes in local government priorities can threaten the sustainability of these programs. In addition, schools continue to face the challenge of stigma from parents and resistance from regular students to the

presence of disabled peers, which, according to [Rosita et al. \(2020\)](#), is a major social barrier to the implementation of inclusive education. If not appropriately managed, this resistance has the potential to trigger conflict and disrupt the overall inclusive learning process.

A data-driven approach to decision-making characterizes the strengths of the principal of Labschool UNNES. The admission rules set by the principal are always based on psychological test results. He refuses to accept students with special needs unless they provide a complete description of their needs, demonstrating his dedication to evidence-based leadership. This method aligns with the concept of inclusive leadership proposed by [Loreman et al. \(2016\)](#). Additionally, the principal implements strategic human resource allocation. Teachers are assigned based on student characteristics, such as pairing teachers with strong communication skills with children who have speech difficulties, while teachers with a firm demeanor work with children who require structure. This approach reflects distributed leadership ([Wang et al., 2022](#)) where responsibilities are delegated according to the team's capabilities to optimize learning outcomes.

On the other hand, policy transparency is also a crucial factor in building trust. The principal communicated the inclusion policy to all stakeholders, including by stating, "Each class has a maximum of two students with special needs who receive intensive support" during parent meetings. This openness reduced misunderstandings and strengthened stakeholder support, in line with the principles of inclusive leadership emphasized by ([DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2020](#)). The principal of Labschool UNNES exhibits weaknesses in three main aspects: an overly dominant instructional style ([Shirley et al., 2020](#)), excessive reliance on external assessment without internal capacity building ([Srivastava et al., 2015](#)), and stagnation in inclusive policy innovation ([Florian, 2019](#)). School principals tend to make decisions unilaterally without involving teachers, rely entirely on external psychologists for special needs assessments, and are unresponsive to recent developments in inclusive education. This pattern, according to [DeMatthews et al. \(2021\)](#), can hinder the development of effective inclusive schools.

The principal of Labschool UNNES has several strategic opportunities for inclusive leadership development, including through a close academic network with the main campus, which provides access to the latest information on inclusion. The principal has initiated a cooperation plan with the psychology faculty for a mentoring program, which can enrich knowledge about inclusive leadership ([Smith et al., 2021](#)). Additionally, the Ministry of Education's capacity-building assistance program provides funding opportunities for teacher training in inclusive practices, which can help address existing weaknesses ([O'Leary et al., 2020](#)). Another opportunity arises from the best practice exchange forum through participation in the national inclusive school principals' community, where the principal plans to present the teacher placement scheme as a topic for discussion to obtain innovative input ([Brown et al., 2022](#)). Such interactions can be a catalyst for the development of more effective inclusion policies in the future.

However, complex campus bureaucracy is a significant obstacle to the implementation of innovative policies, as convoluted administrative processes often divert time and resources to less essential curriculum changes, thereby reducing responsiveness to the needs of students with special needs ([O'Leary et al., 2020](#)). Another challenge arises from differing perceptions with the school committee, where some members still view inclusion as an additional burden and prioritize the academic achievements of regular students, creating difficulties in strategic decision-making ([Canfield et al., 2020](#)). Role conflict also poses a serious threat, as the dual demands of being both a school leader and an academic cause a split focus between developing inclusive learning and research obligations, potentially reducing overall leadership quality ([Newcomer et al., 2022](#)).

The principal of TK Talenta demonstrates excellent leadership by integrating scientific theory into policy and practice. The principal, who holds a doctorate in education, has successfully

implemented the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model in curriculum development. The principal's statement, "We implement flexible learning," demonstrates a commitment to an evidence-based, inclusive approach that, according to [Khaleel et al. \(2021\)](#), can strengthen the implementation of inclusion. This leadership style is reinforced by a guided autonomy system for teachers, which facilitates educational innovation within a clear framework of inclusive principles. As one teacher stated, "We are not alone and feel supported," indicating a balance between creativity and quality standards. Another important aspect is the open communication policy, which is facilitated through weekly consultation programs and an open-door policy, fostering a sense of shared ownership of the inclusion program among all stakeholders.

Some of the main weaknesses in the principal of TK Talenta leadership include unsystematic reporting of inclusion practices, where most effective inclusion projects are not well-documented because they focus more on implementation than on recording, making it difficult to evaluate the success and replication of programs ([Smith et al., 2021](#)). Additionally, there is a lack of mediation skills in handling conflicts between parents of children with disabilities and teachers, where school principals tend to avoid confrontation even though effective conflict resolution is a crucial aspect of inclusive leadership ([O'Leary et al., 2020](#)). The leadership of Principal Talenta shows some significant weaknesses, especially in the overly instructional leadership style, where principals tend to dominate decision-making without adequately involving teachers ([DeMatthews et al., 2021](#)). Over-reliance on external resources for assessing children with special needs is also a critical issue, while innovation in inclusion policies is hindered by complacency with the existing system. Talenta's preschool leadership, on the other hand, highlights developmental opportunities through the Indonesian Inclusive Teachers Association network, which provides access to up-to-date resources ([Smith et al., 2021](#)). Speaking opportunities at national forums have opened up new insights into inclusion practices, while mentoring programs from the Ministry of Education offer systematic solutions to address weaknesses ([O'Leary et al., 2020](#)). This combination of challenges and opportunities illustrates the complex dynamics of inclusive education leadership development in Indonesia.

Leadership at TK Talenta faces several serious threats, including unrealistic parental expectations of children with special needs. Many parents are overconfident that ordinary learning can produce significant changes in children with special needs ([Sheppard-Jones et al., 2021](#)), which creates unnecessary psychological pressure for educators. Rapid changes in education policy that do not take inclusivity into account ([Brown et al., 2022](#)) often make curriculum adaptation difficult and disrupt long-term strategic planning. In addition, the shortage of professionals who understand the school's vision of inclusion is a major obstacle ([Newcomer et al., 2022](#)), as the lack of available experts forces principals to take on the role of bridging the competency gap while struggling to maintain the quality of the inclusion program that has been built. Each of the three principals employed a unique approach to inclusive leadership: Fun and Play (with its group work), Labschool UNNES (with its focus on facts), and Talenta (with its theory-practice interface). The general problems include a shortage of human resources, change resistance, and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, through professional networks and capacity-building programs, they can enhance their path towards becoming transformational leaders who can make quality, inclusive education a reality. Successful performance in this situation is based on striking a balance between clear vision and adaptability in implementing it.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of research data, the application of local wisdom-based discovery learning significantly enhances students' critical thinking skills. This is reflected in their increased analytical abilities, active participation, and positive responses to the applied methods. The main findings revealed that students were more effective in identifying problems, formulating hypotheses, analyzing

data from experiments, and drawing logical conclusions. They also demonstrated improved collaboration and communication during group activities. This study contributes to educational science by demonstrating that integrating local wisdom into discovery learning is an effective way to improve learning quality, particularly in fostering critical thinking skills. It also serves as a valuable reference for educators in designing more contextual and meaningful learning experiences. However, the research had limitations, especially related to the availability of laboratory equipment and facilities, which may have influenced the implementation quality. Future studies are recommended to address this issue by ensuring the availability of adequate tools.

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