

Exploring the Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices of Headmasters in the Implementation of Inclusive Education Programs..

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Abstract

The implementation of the Inclusive Education Program (IEP) in schools requires the leadership of principals who are responsive to the diversity of cultures, backgrounds and needs of students to ensure a fair and inclusive learning environment. However, there are still challenges in school leadership practices to meet the needs of students with special educational needs (SEN) in the context of school cultural diversity. In this regard, this study aims to explore the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals in the implementation of the IEP in primary schools. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis involving head teachers, special education teachers and mainstream teachers involved in the implementation of PPI. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis methods to identify key themes related to culturally responsive leadership practices. The findings of the study showed that principals practiced culturally responsive leadership by building an inclusive school culture, actively engaging with diverse school communities, supporting collaboration among teachers, and providing professional development opportunities related to inclusive education. In addition, principals also demonstrated sensitivity to the needs of students and families from diverse cultural backgrounds in the decision-making process and implementation of school programs. This study contributes to the expansion of knowledge in the field of educational leadership by highlighting the role of culturally responsive leadership as an important element in strengthening the effectiveness of IEP. The findings indicate that the study objectives have been achieved effectively and provide practical implications for school leaders in their efforts to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.....

Keywords: Inclusive Education Program (IEP), Special Educational Needs (SEN), Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices , Thematic Analysis Methods, Qualitative Approach..

INTRODUCTION

Culturally Responsive Leadership (CRL) is receiving increasing attention in educational research for its ability to support social justice, educational equity and acceptance of student diversity. In the context of the Inclusive Education Program (IEP), principals act as agents of change that ensure that all students, including students with special educational needs (SEN), have equal access, participation and achievement. Recent research shows that the success of inclusive education depends not only on policies and resources, but also on leadership practices that are responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, identities and needs of students. CRL has received increasing attention in educational research because of its role in promoting social justice, educational equity, and respect for student diversity. School leaders who practise culturally responsive leadership recognise and value students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and social identities while creating equitable and inclusive learning environments for all learners (Mun et al., 2020; Chaaban et al., 2025).

The implementation of the IEP is one of the key priorities in education systems worldwide, aiming to ensure equitable, quality, and meaningful access to education for all students regardless of their cultural, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, or learning backgrounds. This aspiration is consistent with international commitments to inclusive

and equitable quality education, which require schools to respond effectively to increasingly diverse student populations (UNESCO, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

Within this context, the effectiveness of inclusive education depends not only on educational policies and the provision of adequate resources but also on the quality of school leadership. Research has consistently demonstrated that principals play a pivotal role in developing an inclusive school vision, establishing supportive organisational conditions, strengthening teachers' instructional capacity, and fostering collaborative relationships with families and communities to ensure equitable participation and achievement for all students, including students SEN. (DeMatthews, Conroy, & McKenzie, 2026).

At the same time, CRL has gained increasing attention because it enables school leaders to recognise, value, and respond to students' diverse cultural, linguistic, and social identities. Through culturally responsive leadership practices, principals are able to promote social justice, educational equity, inclusive school climates, and culturally sustaining teaching and learning practices that enhance students' sense of belonging and academic success (Mun, Ezzani, & Lee, 2020; Chaaban et al., 2025). Recent systematic literature also concludes that culturally responsive leadership strengthens equity, inclusion, and educational outcomes in multicultural school settings by addressing systemic inequities and supporting diversity-responsive leadership practices (Jumaah, Hamid, & Mansor, 2026). CRL refers to the ability of school leaders to understand, recognize, respect, and integrate cultural diversity in decision-making processes, organizational management, curriculum development, and teaching and learning practices. In a diverse educational environment, principals serve as agents of change responsible for building an inclusive school culture through leadership practices that are sensitive to the social, cultural, and educational needs of school members. Although the concept of culturally responsive leadership has received increasing attention in the educational leadership literature, studies examining how these practices translate into the implementation of IEP, particularly in the context of schools in Malaysia, are still limited and require further exploration.

The motivation for this study stems from the need to understand how principals practice CRL in managing the implementation of inclusive education in schools with diverse students and communities. Although various policies and guidelines have been introduced to strengthen the implementation of PPI, there are still challenges related to school acceptance of diversity, the provision of an inclusive learning environment, collaboration with parents and the community, and the management of the needs of students with special educational needs. This situation raises the question of the extent to which principals apply CRL elements in an effort to ensure the successful implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, this study was inspired by the need to generate a deeper understanding of leadership practices that support inclusivity and educational equity in the school context. Based on the identified knowledge gaps, this study attempts to answer several key questions, namely: What are the culturally responsive leadership practices practiced by principals in the implementation of the IEP? How do principals translate the values and principles of cultural responsiveness into inclusive school management? What are the challenges and strategies used by principals in managing cultural diversity and student needs in the context of inclusive education? These questions are important to explore in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the role of school leadership in realizing the goals of inclusive education.

The rationale for this study is based on the need to enrich the literature related to CRL and inclusive education by providing empirical evidence based on the actual context of the school. From a theoretical perspective, this study has the potential to contribute to expanding understanding of the relationship between CRL and the implementation of inclusive education. From a practical perspective, the study findings can be used as a reference by policymakers, school leaders, educational training institutions, and other stakeholders in planning leadership development strategies that are more responsive to cultural diversity and student needs. In addition, this study can help identify best practices that can be used as a guide to strengthen the effectiveness of the implementation of the IEP in schools.

This study aims to explore the CRL practices of principals in the implementation of the IEP in schools. Specifically, the study objectives are to:

Identify CRL practices practiced by principals in the implementation of the IEP.

Exploring how principals integrate culturally responsive principles into school management that supports inclusive education.

Examine the experiences, challenges, and strategies of principals in managing cultural diversity and student needs in the context of inclusive education.

Build a conceptual understanding of the role of CRL in strengthening the implementation of IEP.

Overall, this study focuses on an in-depth exploration of the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals in the context of inclusive education, with the aim of producing knowledge that can contribute to the development of theories and practices of school leadership that are more inclusive, fair, and responsive to cultural diversity. This approach allows the scope of the study to be clearly understood by the reader and clarifies the aspects that will be examined and evaluated throughout the research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Culturally Responsive Leadership in Inclusive Education

CRL refers to the practices of school leaders who recognize, respect and utilize cultural diversity as an asset in learning. Culturally responsive leaders develop an inclusive school environment, eliminate discrimination and promote the participation of all school members regardless of ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic or disability background. According to Muhammad Zakwan Abdul Rahim, Nurfaradilla Mohamad Nasri and Mohamad Asyraf Abd Talib (2020), a culturally responsive approach is very important in creating an effective learning ecosystem in a society with diverse cultural backgrounds. Their study found that teachers have a high awareness of the importance of culturally responsive practices although some of them still need more in-depth knowledge and training to implement them effectively.

Meanwhile, Mohd Norlizam Mohd Razali and Aida Hanim A. Hamid (2022) emphasized that CRL is an appropriate leadership practice in the Malaysian education context because school leaders need to understand, respect and manage the cultural diversity of school members to ensure organizational effectiveness and student well-being. In the context of inclusive education, a study by Norhayati Ohman (2023) found that principals' culturally responsive leadership practices were at a very high level and showed a significant relationship with the competence of teachers in the IEP. These findings indicate that leadership sensitive to the diverse abilities and backgrounds of students with SEN can support the successful implementation of inclusive education in schools. According to a systematic study by Jumaah, Hamid and Mansor (2026), culturally responsive leadership is built through three main dimensions:

1. Leadership beliefs and orientations that support diversity.
2. Teaching and curriculum that are responsive to student culture.
3. Creating a school climate that is inclusive and fair to all students.

2.2 Theme 1: Shaping an Inclusive School Vision and Culture

Recent research shows that principals play a key role in shaping a shared vision for inclusive education. DeMatthews, Conroy and McKenzie (2026) found that school leaders who successfully practice inclusive education consistently emphasize a collective commitment to the participation of all students and build a school culture that accepts diversity as an organizational norm. In the context of cultural responsiveness, the vision of the school is not simply to accept SEN in the mainstream classroom but to ensure a learning experience that values the cultural identity and uniqueness of each student. Culturally responsive school leaders integrate the values of equality, social justice and respect for diversity into the school's mission and daily practices. This finding is in line with transformational leadership theory which emphasizes the formation of a shared vision. However, current studies show that inclusive visions need to be strengthened with cultural sensitivity as the challenges of inclusive education are often influenced by stereotypes, prejudices and negative perceptions of students with special needs.

2.3 Theme 2: Teacher Capacity Development and Culturally Responsive Competence

One of the main practices of principals is to improve teachers' competence in managing student diversity. Tanzi and Hermanto (2024) emphasize that principals need to develop teachers' capabilities through professional training on inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogy. Such training helps teachers understand students' cultural backgrounds and adapt teaching strategies that are appropriate to individual needs. Rachel U. Mun, Miriam D. Ezzani and Lindsay Ellis Lee (2020), this systematic review found that culturally relevant leadership can reduce educational inequalities through the development of policies, practices and fairer access for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Culturally responsive school leaders were found to emphasize equity,

recognition of diversity and equitable distribution of learning opportunities. Implications for IEP are Principals need to integrate principles of social justice and appreciation for diversity in the management of inclusive education. Meanwhile, a statement by Muhamad Tanzi and Hermanto Hermanto (2024) stated that this study emphasizes that the success of inclusive education depends on the ability of the principal or head teacher to build a school culture that accepts the diversity of students. The findings show three main elements of culturally responsive leadership, namely leadership reflection, teacher competency development and the formation of an inclusive school environment. The implications for PPI are that the head teacher needs to be an agent of change that connects the needs of students with special educational needs with an inclusive school culture.

A systematic review of culturally responsive pedagogy in inclusive education also found that continuous professional development is an important factor in increasing teachers' effectiveness in managing diverse classrooms. Teachers who have culturally responsive competence are better able to create active participation and reduce social isolation among students with SEN. Despite frequent professional training, most studies report that teachers still face constraints in terms of specific knowledge about cultural diversity and disability. Therefore, principals need to function as instructional leaders who provide ongoing support and guidance based on the school context.

2.4 Theme 3: Multicultural Family and Community Engagement

Research beyond 2020 shows that parent and community engagement is an important component of culturally responsive leadership. Mun, Ezzani, and Lee (2020) assert that school leaders who prioritize community networks can reduce educational access gaps for marginalized groups. In inclusive education, principals need to establish collaborative relationships with families of students with SEN from diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach allows for shared educational decisions and ensures that students' needs are understood holistically. Although many studies recognize the importance of school-community collaboration, empirical research on the actual practices of principals in the context of inclusive education is still limited, especially in developing countries including Malaysia. This gap opens up space for more in-depth doctoral research.

2.5 Theme 4: Organizational Management and Inclusive School Policy

DeMatthews et al. (2026) found that effective school leaders in inclusive education develop organizational structures that support the participation of all students through the allocation of resources, program coordination, and provision of professional support. From a CRL perspective, organizational management involves:

Equitable allocation of resources.

Providing access to flexible curricula.

Reducing institutional discriminatory practices.

Improving school policies that celebrate diversity.

Current literature suggests that CRL cannot focus solely on individual teacher change but must involve transforming the school structure as a whole. This is consistent with a social justice perspective that sees inequality as a systemic issue rather than an individual weakness. In fact, a study by Noor Azlee Jumaah, Aida Hanim A. Hamid and Azlin Norhaini Mansor (2026) identified three main themes of culturally responsive leadership: (i) multicultural leadership beliefs and orientation, (ii) inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, and (iii) learning outcomes that support student diversity. Findings show that leaders' beliefs about diversity have a significant influence on shaping an inclusive and culturally responsive school climate. The implications for IEP are that the success of inclusive education requires head teachers who have high cultural awareness and are able to translate this into school practices.

David E. DeMatthews, Karly Conroy and Lauren McKenzie (2026), stated that this study identified three main domains of inclusive leadership, namely building a shared commitment to inclusivity, creating an organizational environment that supports inclusion, and developing teaching and leadership capacity for inclusion. The study also emphasized that school leadership plays a critical role in ensuring that students with special educational needs have access to and meaningful participation in mainstream education. The implications for IEP are that principals need to lead organizational change and build the capacity of school staff to support the implementation of inclusive education.

Nazmin Abdullah, Surianti Lajuma, Mohd Fairuz Jafar and Mohd Nadzri Ishak (2026), this study found that effective leadership strategies in inclusive education involve developing a supportive school culture, effective resource management, collaboration with teachers and parents, and continuous professional development. While the implications for IEP are that principals need to practice collaborative and responsive leadership towards the needs of students with special educational needs. Based on the latest literature review, studies between 2020 and 2026 consistently show that CRL is a critical component in strengthening the implementation of inclusive education. School leaders who practice the values of equity, social justice, appreciation for cultural diversity, and collaboration with various stakeholders are able to create a more inclusive school climate and support the participation of students with SEN. However, most previous studies have focused more on the role of principals in general and literature reviews, while empirical studies that explore in depth the CRL practices of principals in the context of the IEP in primary schools are still limited. Therefore, there is a need to explore the actual experiences and practices of headmasters to produce a CRL model that is more contextual and relevant to the implementation of the IEP in Malaysia.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Culturally Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) framework developed by Muhammad A. Khalifa and extended through his most recent work in 2024. While the updated framework retains the original four dimensions of CRSL—critical self-reflection, developing culturally responsive teachers, creating inclusive school environments, and community engagement—Khalifa (2024) argues that culturally responsive leadership should now be understood as a dynamic, systemic, and equity-driven process rather than merely a set of leadership practices enacted by individual principals.

According to Khalifa (2024), culturally responsive school leadership is fundamentally rooted in social justice, educational equity, critical consciousness, and community-centered leadership. School leaders are expected to challenge institutional inequities, recognize and value students' cultural identities, and transform school structures so that every learner has equitable opportunities to succeed. Rather than focusing solely on improving teaching and learning within individual schools, the updated CRSL framework emphasizes that sustainable educational equity requires leadership at multiple levels, including schools, districts, and educational systems. Consequently, culturally responsive leadership should be supported through district policies, leadership preparation, professional development, and system-wide accountability structures. The revised CRSL framework continues to organize culturally responsive leadership around four interrelated dimensions.

i. Critical Self-Reflection

Critical self-reflection requires school leaders to continuously examine their personal beliefs, assumptions, biases, and leadership practices that may perpetuate educational inequities. Through reflective practice, principals become more aware of how race, culture, language, disability, and other social identities influence educational experiences. This critical consciousness enables leaders to make more equitable decisions and advocate effectively for historically marginalized students. Recent studies further demonstrate that structured critical self-reflection strengthens culturally responsive instructional leadership and improves leaders' ability to address systemic bias within schools.

ii. Developing Culturally Responsive Teachers

The second dimension highlights the principal's responsibility to build teachers' capacity to implement culturally responsive pedagogy. Principals are expected to provide continuous professional learning, coaching, collaborative inquiry, and instructional support that enable teachers to recognize students' diverse cultural backgrounds as educational assets. Teacher development extends beyond instructional strategies to include developing teachers' own critical consciousness, equity-oriented beliefs, and inclusive classroom practices. Research between 2020 and 2026 consistently identifies leadership support for teacher learning as a critical factor in improving equitable student outcomes.

iii. Creating an Inclusive School Environment

The third dimension emphasizes creating school cultures where diversity is respected, inclusion is normalized, and every student experiences belonging and psychological safety. Culturally responsive principals examine school policies, disciplinary procedures, curriculum implementation, resource allocation, and organizational culture to eliminate structural barriers affecting marginalized learners, including students with disabilities.

Inclusive school environments therefore become intentional outcomes of leadership decisions guided by equity rather than equality alone.

iv. Community and Family Engagement

Community engagement remains a defining characteristic of culturally responsive school leadership. Khalifa (2024) argues that schools should move beyond traditional parental involvement toward authentic partnerships where families and communities actively participate in decision-making and school improvement. Community knowledge, cultural traditions, and local experiences are recognized as valuable educational resources that enrich teaching, leadership, and student learning. Through reciprocal collaboration, principals develop trust, strengthen school-community relationships, and ensure that educational decisions reflect community aspirations and cultural contexts.

Overall, Khalifa's (2024) revised CRSL framework broadens the original theory by emphasizing that culturally responsive leadership is not solely the responsibility of individual principals. Instead, educational equity requires coordinated action across schools, districts, and education systems to sustain culturally responsive practices over time. This theoretical perspective provides an appropriate framework for examining principals' culturally responsive leadership practices in inclusive education programmes because it integrates leadership, equity, inclusion, teacher development, and community engagement within a comprehensive model of systemic educational change.

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a multi-site case study design to explore in depth the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals in the IEP. This design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon of leadership in the actual context of the school and examine the interaction between values, beliefs and leadership practices that influence the implementation of inclusive education. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Data analysis was conducted thematically through inductive and deductive coding processes to identify key themes that explain the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals. This approach allowed for the construction of a rich and in-depth interpretation of how principals shape a school culture that is inclusive, responsive to diversity and supports the participation of students with special educational needs in the mainstream.

3.2 Eligibility Criteria: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In the study Exploring the CRL Practices of Headmasters in IEP, participant selection was done through purposive sampling to ensure that the selected participants had experience, knowledge and direct involvement in the phenomenon being studied. The determination of inclusion and exclusion criteria is important to increase the suitability of participants with the study objectives and to ensure that the data obtained can contribute to a deeper understanding of culturally responsive leadership practices in the context of Inclusive Education Programs (PPI).

3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

Participants selected for this study must meet the following criteria:

- i. Serving as a principal in a government primary school implementing the IEP.
- ii. Having experience leading a school implementing the IEP for at least three years to ensure that participants have sufficient experience in implementing the program.
- iii. Being directly involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring and improvement of the IEP in the school.
- iv. Having experience interacting with students with special educational needs, special education teachers, mainstream teachers, parents and the school community in the context of inclusive education.
- v. Willing to voluntarily consent to participate in the study and be involved in the interview session and related data collection process.
- vi. Able to provide rich, in-depth and relevant information regarding culturally responsive leadership practices based on their professional experience.

3.2.2 Exclusion Criteria

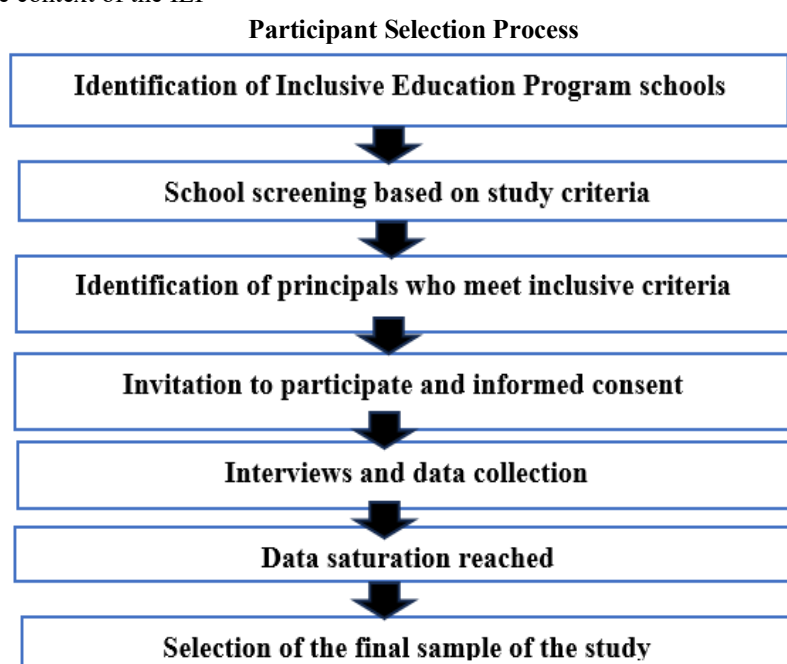
Participants will not be selected if they meet any of the following criteria:

- i. Headmasters who have no experience in managing or implementing IEP in schools.
- ii. Newly appointed headmasters with less than three years of experience in managing schools implementing IEP.
- iii. Senior assistants, special education teachers or mainstream teachers who do not hold the position of headmaster.
- iv. Headmasters who are on long leave, study leave or are unable to commit throughout the data collection period.
- v. Individuals who do not agree to participate in the study or withdraw from the study at any time during the research process.

Therefore, inclusion and exclusion criteria were set to ensure that the selection of participants was in line with the purpose of the study and capable of producing rich and meaningful data. In this study, participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience as head teachers who were directly involved in the implementation of the IEP. The selection of participants who had significant leadership experience allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of how culturally responsive leadership practices are translated into the context of inclusive school management. On the other hand, individuals who did not meet the experience criteria or had no direct involvement in the IEP were excluded to ensure the validity, relevance and saturation of the data obtained. The setting of these criteria also supports the principles of credibility and reliability of findings in qualitative research by ensuring that only participants who actually experienced the phenomenon being studied were selected as the main data source.

3.3 Study Selection Process

The process of selecting participants in this study was carried out in stages through the criterion-based purposive sampling method. At the initial stage, primary schools implementing the IEP were identified through collaboration with the State Education Department and District Education Office. Next, headmasters who met the inclusion criteria were screened based on leadership experience, involvement in the implementation of the IEP and willingness to participate in the study. Participants who met the requirements were then officially contacted and given an explanation regarding the purpose of the study, research procedures and aspects of research ethics. Participant selection continued until data saturation was reached, which is when the data collected no longer produced significant new information or themes. This systematic selection process allowed researchers to obtain participants who had authentic experiences and were able to provide rich data to explore the CRL practices of headmasters in the context of the IEP



Data Collection Process

The data collection process in this study was carried out systematically through the use of various methods to gain a holistic understanding of the CRL practices of principals in the IEP. The primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews that provided participants with space to describe their experiences, understandings and leadership practices in depth. To strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the findings, the researchers also conducted non-participant observations and document analysis related to the implementation of the IEP in schools.

3.5.1 Tables

Table 1 : Summary Table of Data Collection Process

Method	Purpose	Period
Semi-structured interview	Exploring culturally responsive leadership experiences and practices	60–90 minutes per participant
Non-participant observation	Observing actual practice in the school context	Throughout the study period
Document analysis	Support and confirm interview and observation findings	Continuously
Field notes	Recording researcher reflections and observations	Continuously
Member Checking	Verifying the accuracy of data interpretation	After transcription

3. Data Extraction

Data extraction was carried out systematically to identify, organise, and synthesise information related to the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals in the implementation of the Inclusive EIP. The extraction process involved recording key information from each selected study, including the authors, year of publication, country, research design, participants, data collection methods, leadership practices, and key findings. A standardized data extraction form was used to ensure consistency, transparency, and accuracy throughout the review process, as recommended by Roland Brian Büchter, Alina Weise, and Dawid Pieper (2020), and further reinforced in the updated Joanna Briggs Institute Manual for Evidence Synthesis edited by Edoardo Aromataris and colleagues (2024).

The extracted data covered key aspects such as principals' understanding of cultural diversity, leadership strategies practiced in managing an inclusive school environment, collaborative approaches with various stakeholders, as well as efforts implemented to ensure access and participation of students with special educational needs in mainstream education. The identified information was then coded and categorised according to themes that emerged from the data to facilitate the analysis and interpretation process.

To increase the consistency and reliability of the findings, the data extraction process was carried out iteratively through cross-checking between different data sources. This approach allowed the researchers to identify patterns, similarities and differences in the CRL practices of principals and to explain how these practices support the effectiveness of the implementation of the IEP in schools. The results of the data extraction were then used as a basis for the formation of themes and sub-themes that comprehensively describe the experiences, perspectives and practices of culturally CRL of principals in the context of inclusive education. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of school leadership in creating a learning environment that is fair, responsive and values the cultural diversity of students.

4.0 Study Methodology

This chapter describes the methodological design used in the study which aims to explore the CRL practices of principals in the IEP. This study uses a qualitative approach that is exploratory in nature to gain a deep understanding of the practices, experiences and perspectives of principals in implementing leadership that is responsive to cultural diversity in the school environment.

The design of this study is a case study that allows researchers to examine the phenomenon of culturally responsive leadership in depth in the actual context of the implementation of the Inclusive Education Program in selected schools. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for understanding the processes, interactions and meanings formed by study participants in natural situations without manipulating variables. The study sampling was carried out through purposive sampling to select participants who have knowledge, experience and direct involvement in the implementation of the IEP. The study participants consisted of principals, special education teachers, mainstream teachers and other stakeholders relevant to the context of the study. The selection of these participants allowed the data obtained to be rich, in-depth and relevant to the research questions.

The main data collection methods in this study involved semi-structured interviews, observation and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the views and experiences of study participants directly related to CRL practices. Observations were conducted to directly observe leadership practices in the actual context of implementing IEP in schools, while document analysis was used to support and strengthen data from other sources such as school strategic plans, program reports and records of inclusive education implementation. The data obtained were analyzed using thematic analysis which involved the process of coding, categorization and theme formation. This analysis process was carried out systematically to identify patterns, meanings and relationships that exist in the data related to the culturally responsive leadership practices of headmasters. The resulting themes were then used to answer the research questions and build a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, this study used several strategies such as data triangulation, member checking and audit trail. Triangulation was carried out through the use of various data collection methods, while member checking was carried out to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation of the data obtained. The audit trail was used to record the entire research process systematically and transparently. Overall, the methodological approach used in this study is in line with the exploratory purpose of the study, which is to deeply understand the CRL practices of principals in the context of the implementation of the Inclusive Education Program. The study design, data collection methods and analysis procedures used enable the researchers to produce rich, in-depth findings based on the real context of leadership practices in schools.

4.1 Formulas and Equations

This study does not involve statistical analysis based on mathematical equations, but rather uses a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis. However, to explain the relationship between the main constructs of the study, a conceptual model was developed as a representation of the relationship between culturally responsive leadership elements and the effectiveness of the implementation of the IEP.

Conceptually, CRL among head teachers can be understood as a function of three main domains, namely cultural awareness (CA), inclusive leadership practices (ILP) and community engagement (CE). This relationship can be expressed symbolically as follows:

$$PPIE = g(CRL, S, R)$$

where:

- PPIE (Implementation of Effective Inclusive Education Programs)
- CRL (Culturally Responsive Leadership)
- S (Supporting School Systems and Policies)
- R (Teacher Resources and Competencies)

This conceptual model shows that the effectiveness of inclusive education implementation is not linear, but rather influenced by the complex interaction between school leadership, organizational support and human resource capacity. Therefore, this conceptual formula is used as an analytical framework to help researchers understand the relationships between study constructs in a more structured way, although this study is not based on numerical calculations or inferential statistical analysis.

4.2 Markers

In this qualitative study, markers are used as analytical elements to identify, track and organize meaning in data related to the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals in the IEP. These markers function as conceptual clues that help researchers detect patterns, signals and indicators that appear repeatedly in interview data, observations and document analysis.

The main markers in this study are formed based on the construct of CRL which includes aspects of CA, fairness in decision-making, inclusive practices in school management and community involvement. Each of these markers is used as an initial reference in the open coding process to identify units of meaning related to the actual practices of principals in the field. Among the identified markers are statements that describe appreciation for student diversity, pedagogical adaptation strategies by teachers, school policies that support inclusivity, and forms of collaboration between schools, parents and the community. These markers function as initial indicators of the existence of CRL practices in the context of the implementation of the IEP.

In addition, markers were also used to distinguish the intensity of CRL practices, whether they were at an early, developing or established level. These differences were identified through the frequency, consistency and depth of data obtained from the study participants. This approach allowed the researcher to make a more detailed interpretation of the variation in leadership practices among head teachers. Overall, the use of markers in this study helped to strengthen the thematic analysis process by providing an initial structure for data classification. These markers in turn facilitated the formation of more comprehensive themes and subthemes related to CRL practices in the IEP, in line with the objectives and research questions that had been set.

5. Results and Discussions

This chapter presents the findings of the study and discussion regarding CRL practices practiced by principals in the implementation of the IEP. The findings of the study were obtained through a qualitative data analysis conducted systematically based on themes and subthemes that emerged from the field data. The subsequent discussion connects the findings with the conceptual framework of the study, CRL theory and previous studies to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Data analysis shows that the CRL practices of principals in the IEP are influenced by the level of awareness of cultural diversity, the ability to build inclusive interpersonal relationships, and the commitment to ensuring educational equality for all students. This finding shows that principals not only act as school administrators, but also act as agents of change that promote acceptance of diversity and strengthen an inclusive culture in the school community.

Based on the thematic analysis, several main themes were identified that describe the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals. The themes include understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, the creation of an inclusive school climate, teacher empowerment in the implementation of inclusive education, parental and community involvement, and decision-making practices that take into account the needs of various student groups. These themes show that culturally responsive leadership is a holistic practice and involves interactions between individual, organizational and community dimensions.

The study findings also show that principals who practice CRL are able to create a school environment that supports the active participation of students with special educational needs in mainstream classes. The approach implemented involves adapting school policies, distributing resources equitably, teacher professional development and strengthening cooperation between schools and families. This practice is in line with the principles of inclusive education which emphasizes the right of every student to receive a quality education regardless of cultural, language, ethnic or ability background.

From a discussion point of view, the study findings confirm that CRL plays a significant role in supporting the effectiveness of the implementation of the IEP. The ability of principals to understand and appreciate cultural diversity was found to help reduce social and institutional barriers that can affect student participation in the learning process. This finding is in line with the views of scholars who emphasize that school leaders need to have cultural competence to ensure that educational policies and practices are implemented equitably and inclusively. In addition, this study found that collaborative relationships between principals, teachers, parents and the community are an important element in strengthening an inclusive culture in schools. The collaboration that is established allows various perspectives and needs of students to be taken into account in the process of planning

and implementing educational programs. This shows that CRL is not limited to administrative aspects alone, but also involves efforts to build social networks that support the development and well-being of students as a whole. Overall, the study findings show that CRL practices of principals are an important factor contributing to the success of the implementation of the IEP. Leadership based on CA, social justice and strategic collaboration is able to create an inclusive learning environment, respect diversity and meet the needs of all students. Therefore, strengthening CRL competencies among principals should be given attention as one of the main strategies to increase the effectiveness of inclusive education in schools.

6. Conclusions

This chapter summarizes the main findings of the study related to the culturally responsive leadership practices of principals in the implementation of the IEP. Based on the analysis and discussion that has been conducted, this study shows that culturally responsive leadership practices are an important element that influences the effectiveness of the implementation of inclusive education in schools. Principals are found to play a significant role in creating a school environment that values diversity, encourages the participation of all students and ensures that the principle of educational equality can be realized comprehensively.

The study findings show that culturally responsive leadership is translated through the ability of principals to understand and appreciate the diversity of backgrounds of students, teachers and the school community. These practices are manifested through the formation of an inclusive school climate, the implementation of fair policies and procedures, the empowerment of teachers through continuous professional development, and the strengthening of collaboration with parents and the community. This approach allows the needs of diverse students, especially students with SEN, to be given more systematic and effective attention.

This study also found that the success of the implementation of the IEP does not only depend on aspects of school management and administration, but is also influenced by the level of cultural competence possessed by school leaders. Principals who practice CRL are found to be more capable of addressing diversity-related challenges, reducing discriminatory practices and building a school culture that supports the active involvement of all school members. This situation further contributes to increasing student access, participation and achievement in an inclusive educational environment. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the expansion of knowledge related to CRL in the context of inclusive education by showing how such leadership practices are applied in a primary school environment. This study confirms that the elements of CA, social justice, collaboration and educational advocacy are key components that support the effective implementation of inclusive education.

From a practical aspect, the study findings provide important implications for policymakers, educational leadership training institutions and school management. Strengthening culturally responsive leadership competencies among principals needs to be given attention through training programs, professional development and policy formulation that is more responsive to the needs of student diversity. This step is important to ensure that the aspiration of inclusive education can be implemented sustainably and effectively at all levels of the school. Overall, this study concludes that the CRL practices of principals are the main catalyst in creating a school environment that is inclusive, fair and respectful of diversity. Leadership based on appreciation for cultural differences, equality of educational opportunity and community collaboration is able to strengthen the implementation of the IEP and support the development of the potential of every student regardless of their background, cultural identity or ability. Therefore, CRL should be made one of the core competencies in school leadership development to realize a more inclusive and equitable education system.

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