



## LEADING INCLUSION: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION IN SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOOLS

Kristianus Viktor Pantaleon<sup>1\*</sup>, Fransiskus Sawan<sup>2</sup>, Marselus Ruben Payong<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [christianvictor1979@gmail.com](mailto:christianvictor1979@gmail.com)

### Article History

Received : 21/11/2025

Revised : 30/12/2025

Accepted : 18/02/2026

### Keywords:

Instructional leadership,  
Curriculum development,  
Special needs school,  
Inclusive education.

**Abstract.** The implementation of inclusive education in Special Needs Schools (SNS) in Indonesia continues to face enduring challenges, particularly in the contextualization of school-based curricula and developmental strategies. This study investigates the impact of instructional leadership and innovativeness among school principals on their ability to formulate responsive School-Based Curriculum (SBC) and School Development Plans (SDP) within SNS environments. A mixed-methods approach with a contemporaneous triangulation design was employed to collect data via questionnaires from five principals and 77 teachers, in-depth interviews with four principals and four teachers, and document analysis of SBC and SDP materials. Quantitative findings indicated a substantial association between instructional leadership and curricular planning competence ( $r = 0.377, p < 0.001$ ), as well as between innovativeness and planning competence ( $r = 0.253, p = 0.022$ ). Qualitative findings indicated that although school leaders shown dedication to instructional leadership and pursued several innovations, these initiatives were frequently disjointed and devoid of institutional backing. Document analysis revealed a discrepancy between policy aims and actual planning practices. The study indicates that successful curriculum development in SNS necessitates robust individual leadership, methodical innovation, and organizational commitment. These findings provide guidance for policy reform, leadership development, and the creation of inclusive educational planning frameworks.

**How to Cite:** Pantaleon, K. V., Sawan, F., & Payong, M. R. (2026). LEADING INCLUSION: INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP AND INNOVATION IN SPECIAL NEEDS SCHOOLS. *Prima Magistra: Jurnal Ilmiah Kependidikan*, 7(2), 257-266. <https://doi.org/10.37478/jpm.v7i2.7615>

### Correspondence address:

Jalan Jenderal A. Yani 10, Ruteng, Manggarai, Nusa Tenggara Timur. [christianvictor1979@gmail.com](mailto:christianvictor1979@gmail.com)

### Publisher:

Program Studi PGSD Universitas Flores. Jln. Samratulangi, Kelurahan Paupire, Ende, Flores.

[primagistrauniflor@gmail.com](mailto:primagistrauniflor@gmail.com)

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, inclusive education has emerged as a global priority, grounded in principles of equality and the universal right to education for all learners (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2022; UNESCO, 1994). Following the Salamanca Statement, several nations have committed to developing educational systems that embrace diversity, including children with impairments (Buchner & Proyer, 2020).

In Indonesia, inclusive education is implemented through a dual-track system comprising inclusive mainstream schools and special needs institutions, commonly known as *Sekolah Luar Biasa* (SLB). These schools serve students with diverse physical, intellectual, sensory, and behavioral conditions (Kadarisman et al., 2024; Wahyudi et al., 2020). Despite national reforms such as the *Merdeka Curriculum*, the implementation of inclusive practices in SLBs remains uneven, particularly in rural and under-resourced regions where leadership capacity, institutional support, and professional development opportunities are often limited (Samsuddin et al., 2023; Wong & Mohd Rashid, 2022). Recent studies increasingly emphasize the importance of school leadership in fostering inclusive cultures, strengthening teacher readiness, and enabling adaptive curriculum and school planning, especially in contexts characterized by diversity and resource constraints (Feng et al., 2025; Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2024). However, much of this research continues to focus on mainstream inclusive settings or teacher-level strategies, with limited attention to leadership dynamics in special needs school contexts.

One persistent challenge in SLBs is contextualizing the School-Based Curriculum (SBC) and School Development Plans (SDP) to address learners' heterogeneous needs. While national curriculum frameworks provide general guidelines, they often offer limited flexibility for local adaptation, resulting in gaps between prescribed standards and classroom realities (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). These challenges are further exacerbated by infrastructural constraints, shortages of specialized teachers, and weak intersectoral coordination (Kassah et al.,

2018). As a result, adaptation and personalization emerge as critical mechanisms for translating curriculum policy into inclusive practice (Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023). Nevertheless, empirical understanding remains limited regarding how school leaders navigate these demands in developing functional and responsive SBC and SDP within special needs schools.

Instructional leadership is widely recognized as a key factor in addressing such challenges. Effective principals are expected to guide curriculum development, support teacher learning, and facilitate collaborative problem-solving processes (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020). In special education settings, collaborative, distributed, and learning-oriented leadership models are particularly salient, as principals often rely on collective expertise to compensate for limited technical capacity and complex instructional demands (Li et al., 2023; Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2024; Supovitz & Auria, 2019).

Alongside leadership, innovation plays a crucial role in transforming learning to meet students' diverse needs. Context-based, teacher-led innovations—such as differentiated instruction, adaptive assessment, and multisensory learning approaches—have been shown to enhance student engagement and functional skill development in inclusive and special education contexts (Ainscow, 2020; Keshav et al., 2018; Q. Lin, 2022; Wu et al., 2017). Furthermore, research highlights that grassroots innovation rooted in teacher creativity, reflective practice, and professional learning communities (PLCs) can sustain inclusive education even in low-resource schools (Carrington et al., 2024; Hogan et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024; Wilshire et al., 2025; Parejo et al., 2022). PLCs enable collaborative inquiry, peer mentoring, and shared problem-solving, supporting teachers in adapting curriculum policies into locally meaningful practices, particularly when formal training opportunities are limited (Basister, 2024; Wilshire et al., 2025).

Despite these advances, the existing literature tends to examine instructional leadership, teacher innovation, and PLCs as separate, isolated phenomena, often within mainstream or relatively well-resourced educational settings (Dewi, 2024; Padmadewi et al., 2024). Relatively little empirical attention has been given to how instructional leadership interacts with teacher-led innovation and professional learning structures to strengthen curriculum development and school planning capacity in special needs schools, particularly in Global South contexts such as Indonesia (Kenny et al., 2023; Pratiwi, 2024).

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the influence of instructional leadership and teacher innovativeness on principals' capacity to formulate responsive SBC and SDP in Indonesian SLBs. By integrating leadership and innovation as complementary dimensions, this study contributes empirical evidence to the discourse on inclusive instructional leadership in understudied, resource-limited settings. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretically to leadership and inclusion scholarship and practically to policy formulation and school-level efforts to strengthen inclusive education in special needs schools.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods approach with concurrent triangulation to thoroughly investigate the relationships among instructional leadership, innovativeness, and school principals' capacity to foster SBC and SDP in SLB. This form was selected because it enables simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, allowing for triangulation and mutual reinforcement of findings. This approach is considered suitable for examining complex social phenomena, such as inclusive leadership in special education contexts (Robinson, 2007).

The research was conducted during four months, from February to May 2025, in five SLBs located in both urban and rural areas of Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, Indonesia. The participants comprised five school principals and 77 instructors, selected specifically for their direct involvement in curriculum development and instructional collaboration at their respective schools. The limited sample size reflects both the scarcity of SLBs in the region and the logistical challenges in acquiring schools with complete SBC and SDP documentation. Despite these limitations, the diversity in school settings and participant backgrounds provided significant contextual data relevant to the study's aims.



A pilot test was conducted at SLB Negeri Tenda in Langke Rembong Subdistrict, with 30 respondents, before the main study. The analysis indicated that the instructional leadership variable was assessed using eight questions, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.801. The innovativeness variable comprised six components, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.832. The variable evaluating principals' capacity to produce SBC and SDP was assessed using 8 questions, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.812. These coefficients demonstrate robust internal consistency and are considered suitable for instruments employed in social science research.

The data collection included three methods: surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The questionnaire was developed based on the theoretical frameworks of instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020) and educational innovation (Lin et al., 2022), utilizing a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four school principals and four teachers, including three from urban schools and one from a rural school in each group. A structured interview guide was used, comprising open-ended questions to elicit participants' viewpoints and experiences regarding leadership techniques, curricular innovation, and challenges in special education settings. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed for analysis.

The examination of documents focused on the SBC and SDP materials from the five educational institutions. The aim was to evaluate the congruence between stated curricular objectives and their practical execution, the integration of inclusive elements, and the flexibility of school design to meet student needs. Attention was concentrated on how these texts exemplified differentiation, the utilization of assistive technologies, and strategies for institutional innovation.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's product-moment correlation, and multiple linear regression to examine relationships among the independent variables (instructional leadership and innovativeness) and the dependent variable (principals' capacity to develop SBC and SDP). Thematic analysis was performed on qualitative data gathered from interviews and document reviews, utilizing an inductive coding approach. Themes were derived from data patterns and validated against quantitative results to enhance interpretative validity and analytical rigor.

The study employed member verification, peer debriefing, and methodological triangulation to confirm the trustworthiness of qualitative findings. The questionnaire's construct validity was confirmed through expert assessment by two education academics specializing in inclusive education. The internal consistency coefficients obtained in the pilot test confirmed reliability. The researcher conducted interviews, supervised data collection, and assessed documents. To reduce bias, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the inquiry, and peer consultations were utilized to examine data interpretations. The researcher maintained a non-intrusive approach during participant interactions to preserve the authenticity of responses.

The Institute for Research and Community Service (LPPM) at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng granted ethical approval for this work. All participants were informed of the research objectives and methodology and provided written informed permission. The investigation meticulously maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of persons and institutions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Influence of Instructional Leadership on SBC and SDP Development in Special Schools

The quantitative findings indicate that instructional leadership has a significant and positive influence on principals' capacity to develop SBC and SDP in Indonesian Special Needs Schools (SLBs). The correlation analysis reveals a moderate but statistically significant relationship between instructional leadership and curriculum and school planning capacity ( $r = 0.377$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Further regression analysis confirms that instructional leadership is a significant predictor, positively contributing to principals' ability to coordinate curriculum development processes and



school planning activities ( $\beta = 0.356, p < 0.001$ ). These results suggest that stronger instructional leadership practices are associated with higher levels of institutional readiness to adapt curricula and formulate responsive school plans in special education contexts.

Qualitative evidence further illuminates how instructional leadership is enacted in SLB settings. Principals consistently described their leadership role as facilitators of collective curriculum work rather than as sole decision-makers. Instructional leadership was manifested through the establishment of curriculum development teams, regular coordination meetings, internal workshops, and reflective discussions involving teachers, supervisors, and, in some cases, parents. One principal noted that curriculum development in SLBs required “continuous dialogue and shared responsibility,” particularly due to the heterogeneity of students’ needs and the absence of standardized instructional models tailored to special education contexts. These practices highlight how instructional leadership in SLBs operates through collaborative structures that enable collective sense-making and adaptive decision-making.

Despite strong leadership commitment, several principals acknowledged limitations in their technical expertise related to instructional supervision and curriculum design. As a result, instructional leadership was often exercised through strategic delegation and collaboration, including reliance on external supervisors, peer mentoring among teachers, and guidance from local education authorities. Rather than weakening leadership effectiveness, these practices reinforced a collaborative and learning-oriented leadership approach. Principals emphasized empathy, moral responsibility, and shared ownership as central leadership values, reflecting a form of instructional leadership grounded in trust and professional solidarity.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings underscores that instructional leadership in SLBs exerts its influence not primarily through direct instructional control but through orchestrating collective processes that support curriculum adaptation and school planning. This aligns with contemporary perspectives on instructional leadership that emphasize distributed responsibility, collective learning, and goal alignment as key mechanisms for school improvement (Dematthews et al., 2020; Leithwood et al., 2020; Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2024; Supovitz & Auria, 2019). In special education settings, where instructional complexity is heightened and resources are constrained, principals’ ability to mobilize teacher expertise and foster collaborative curriculum work becomes particularly critical.

Moreover, instructional leadership played a central role in bridging policy expectations and school-level realities. Principals were actively involved in translating national curriculum frameworks into locally meaningful SBCs by facilitating contextual adjustments aligned with students’ functional abilities and learning needs. School development planning similarly reflected leadership-driven prioritization, focusing on teacher capacity building, inclusive learning environments, and gradual institutional strengthening rather than compliance-oriented planning. These findings support prior research suggesting that effective instructional leadership enhances schools’ adaptive capacity by aligning curriculum, professional development, and organizational goals within a coherent improvement framework (Dematthews et al., 2020; Tsirantonaki & Vlachou, 2024).

Overall, the findings affirm that instructional leadership constitutes a foundational factor in strengthening principals’ capacity to develop inclusive and contextually responsive SBC and SDP in special needs schools. While structural constraints and limited technical resources remain persistent challenges, instructional leadership enables schools to navigate them through collaboration, shared learning, and a moral commitment to inclusion. In the context of Indonesian SLBs, instructional leadership thus emerges not merely as a managerial function but as a relational and transformative practice that sustains inclusive curriculum development and school planning under conditions of complexity and resource limitation.

## 2. The Role of Innovativeness in Supporting Curriculum Adaptation and Planning

The quantitative findings indicate that teacher innovativeness has a positive and statistically significant relationship with principals’ capacity to adapt the SBC and formulate SDP in Indonesian SLBs, although its contribution is comparatively weaker than that of instructional leadership. Correlation analysis shows a significant association between innovativeness and



curriculum and school planning capacity ( $r = 0.253, p = 0.022$ ). Regression results further confirm innovativeness as a meaningful predictor, contributing positively to curriculum adaptation and planning processes ( $\beta = 0.219, p < 0.05$ ). These findings suggest that innovative practices among teachers support inclusive curriculum development, but their impact is more situational and contingent upon organizational conditions within the school.

Qualitative findings provide deeper insight into how innovativeness manifests in SLB contexts. Teachers' innovative practices were primarily context-driven, focusing on adapting learning activities to students' functional abilities rather than introducing technologically sophisticated solutions. Principals described a range of teacher-led innovations, including individualized learning programs, differentiated instructional strategies, the use of concrete and multisensory learning materials, flexible assessment practices, and modifications to learning targets to align with students' developmental progress. In several schools, teachers creatively repurposed locally available materials and designed simple visual aids to support communication and motor skill development among students with intellectual and sensory impairments.

These innovations were often initiated at the classroom level and later shared through informal peer discussions or school-based professional forums such as teacher working groups (*Kelompok Kerja Guru*), internal workshops, and reflective meetings. Principals emphasized that such grassroots innovation emerged from teachers' moral commitment and empathy toward students rather than from formal innovation policies or external mandates. As one principal explained, "innovation in our school is not about technology, but about understanding students and adjusting learning to their daily realities." This highlights that innovativeness in SLBs is deeply embedded in pedagogical sensitivity and contextual awareness.

However, qualitative evidence also reveals that the effectiveness of innovativeness is constrained when not supported by strong organizational structures. Several principals noted that innovative teaching practices often remained fragmented and dependent on individual teachers, particularly in schools lacking systematic documentation, mentoring mechanisms, or institutional follow-up. In such cases, innovation contributed to classroom-level improvement but had limited influence on broader curriculum coherence or long-term school planning. This helps explain the relatively lower quantitative contribution of innovativeness compared to instructional leadership, as innovation alone may not be sufficient to drive systemic change without supportive leadership and coordination.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that innovativeness functions most effectively as a complementary factor within a broader leadership-driven framework. These findings resonate with prior studies that emphasize that teacher innovation in inclusive and special education settings is most sustainable when embedded in collaborative cultures and professional learning communities (Carrington et al., 2024; Lin, 2022; Parejo et al., 2022). Grassroots innovation, when supported by reflective dialogue and shared learning, can enhance curriculum relevance and responsiveness even in low-resource environments.

In the context of curriculum adaptation and school planning, innovativeness enabled schools to translate national curriculum standards into functional learning goals aligned with students' individual needs. Teachers' adaptive practices informed principals' decisions to revise SBC content, prioritize teacher development programs, and allocate resources within the SDP. This process illustrates how bottom-up innovation generates valuable experiential knowledge that enriches institutional planning. Nevertheless, without deliberate leadership efforts to align and institutionalize these innovations, their impact remains uneven and difficult to sustain.

Overall, the findings indicate that innovativeness plays a supportive yet critical role in strengthening inclusive curriculum adaptation and school planning in SLBs. While instructional leadership provides direction, coherence, and institutional alignment, innovativeness supplies the pedagogical creativity and contextual responsiveness necessary for inclusive practice. In Indonesian special needs schools, where structural limitations persist, innovation emerges as a vital yet insufficient condition for systemic improvement, underscoring the need for its integration into leadership-supported organizational processes.



### 3. Integrating Instructional Leadership and Innovativeness in Inclusive Curriculum and School Planning

The integration of instructional leadership and innovativeness emerges as a critical mechanism for strengthening inclusive curriculum development and school planning in Indonesian SLBs. Quantitative analysis indicates that the combined contribution of instructional leadership and innovativeness explains a meaningful proportion of variance in principals' capacity to develop SBC and SDP ( $R^2 = 0.19$ ). While this suggests that other contextual and structural factors also play a role, the findings confirm that leadership and innovation together constitute key organizational drivers of inclusive curriculum and planning practices.

Qualitative findings further reveal that instructional leadership provides the structural coherence through which teacher innovativeness can be aligned, sustained, and institutionalized. Principals described their leadership role as creating enabling conditions that transform individual innovative practices into collective and school-wide initiatives. This was evident in the formalization of teacher innovations into curriculum documents, the integration of adaptive teaching strategies into SBC revisions, and the prioritization of innovation-driven teacher development programs within SDP planning. These practices demonstrate that innovation gains institutional significance only when guided and coordinated through instructional leadership.

This interaction reflects contemporary conceptualizations of instructional leadership as a distributed and learning-oriented practice rather than a hierarchical supervisory function. Instructional leadership exerts its influence primarily through building collective capacity, aligning goals, and fostering shared responsibility for learning improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020). In the SLB context, where instructional challenges are complex and standardized solutions are limited, principals' ability to orchestrate collaborative curriculum work becomes essential for translating innovative classroom practices into coherent school plans.

Moreover, the findings align with theories of distributed leadership, which highlight that leadership effectiveness in complex educational settings depends on the productive interaction between formal leaders and professional communities (Li et al., 2023; Supovitz & Auria, 2019). In the schools studied, principals intentionally relied on teacher expertise, peer mentoring, and collaborative forums such as professional learning communities (PLCs) and teacher working groups to refine curriculum adaptations and planning priorities. These collective structures functioned as mediating spaces where innovation and leadership converged, enabling reflective dialogue and shared problem-solving.

From an innovation perspective, the findings reinforce the argument that innovation in inclusive and special education settings is predominantly context-driven and pedagogically oriented rather than technology-centered. Consistent with Lin (2022) and Parejo et al. (2022), teacher innovativeness in SLBs was rooted in adaptive pedagogical strategies, empathy, and moral commitment to students' learning needs. Instructional leadership amplified the impact of these innovations by embedding them within organizational routines, professional development agendas, and planning frameworks, thereby enhancing their sustainability.

The integration of leadership and innovation also played a critical role in bridging national curriculum policy and local school realities. Principals served as mediators, interpreting policy mandates, facilitating collaborative curriculum adjustments, and ensuring that innovations remained aligned with inclusive education goals. This finding supports Dematthews et al. (2020) who argue that inclusive instructional leadership requires principals to balance policy compliance with responsiveness to learner diversity. In SLBs, this balance was achieved through leadership practices that valued flexibility, contextual judgment, and collective learning.

Importantly, the findings highlight that innovation without leadership support tends to remain fragmented and uneven, while leadership without innovation risks reproducing rigid and compliance-oriented practices. The synergy between instructional leadership and innovativeness thus emerges as a necessary condition for developing functional and inclusive SBC and SDP. This integration enables schools to move beyond isolated classroom adaptations toward systematic and sustainable curriculum and planning practices that respond to students' diverse needs.

In the Indonesian SLB context, where schools operate under conditions of limited



resources, geographic isolation, and diverse disability profiles, the integration of instructional leadership and innovativeness constitutes a strategic response to structural constraints. Rather than relying solely on external training or standardized models, principals leverage internal professional capacity and contextual innovation to strengthen institutional planning and curriculum development. This finding extends existing research on inclusive education by demonstrating how leadership-driven innovation functions as a practical mechanism for sustaining inclusive practices in resource-limited special education settings.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive instructional leadership by empirically demonstrating that leadership and innovation are not independent variables but mutually reinforcing dimensions of effective curriculum development and school planning. By situating this interaction within Indonesian SLBs, the study offers new insights into how inclusive education can be advanced through leadership practices that integrate pedagogical innovation, collective professionalism, and contextual responsiveness.

#### 4. Structural Constraints and Capacity Building in Indonesian Special Needs Schools

The findings reveal that the development of inclusive SBC and SDP in Indonesian SLBs is shaped not only by leadership and innovation but also by persistent structural constraints. Principals consistently reported challenges related to limited human resources, shortages of teachers with formal special education qualifications, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient access to specialized professional development. These constraints were particularly pronounced in rural and geographically isolated areas, where schools operate with minimal external support and limited institutional infrastructure.

Quantitative results indicate that instructional leadership and innovativeness together account for 19% of the variance in principals' curriculum and planning capacity, suggesting that a substantial portion of school effectiveness is influenced by contextual and systemic factors beyond individual leadership practices. Qualitative findings corroborate this pattern, revealing that principals' efforts to strengthen curriculum development and planning were often constrained by structural limitations that could not be resolved solely through internal initiatives. These findings underscore the importance of situating leadership effectiveness within broader organizational and policy environments.

Despite these constraints, principals demonstrated adaptive strategies for capacity building by leveraging internal resources and fostering professional learning cultures within their schools. In the absence of systematic external training, schools relied heavily on peer learning, self-directed professional development, and collaborative reflection through teacher working groups, internal workshops, and informal mentoring. Digital platforms such as the *Platform Merdeka Mengajar*, webinars, and open-access learning resources were frequently cited as alternative means for enhancing teacher competence. This reflects a shift toward school-based capacity building grounded in collective professionalism rather than reliance on formal training structures.

These practices align with research emphasizing the role of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in sustaining educational improvement under conditions of resource scarcity (Basister et al., 2024; Wilshire et al., 2025). In SLBs, PLCs functioned as adaptive spaces where teachers and principals jointly negotiated curriculum priorities, shared innovative practices, and responded to students' evolving needs. Instructional leadership played a critical role in legitimizing these collaborative efforts and integrating them into formal school planning processes, thereby transforming informal learning into institutional capacity.

Furthermore, capacity building in SLBs was closely linked to principals' moral commitment and inclusive values. Principals framed curriculum adaptation and school planning not merely as technical tasks but as ethical responsibilities toward students with special needs. This moral dimension motivated sustained efforts to improve instructional quality despite limited resources and institutional barriers. Such findings resonate with inclusive leadership frameworks that highlight the importance of values-driven leadership in fostering equity and social justice in education (Ainscow, 2020; Dematthews et al., 2020).

The findings also highlight the need for systemic support to complement school-level leadership and innovation. While principals demonstrated resilience and adaptability, long-term



improvement in inclusive curriculum development and school planning requires policy alignment, targeted professional development, and cross-sector collaboration involving education authorities, universities, and support services. Without such support, leadership-driven innovation risks becoming overburdened and unsustainable, particularly in schools serving students with complex and diverse needs.

In the context of Indonesian SLBs, structural constraints should therefore be understood not as barriers that negate leadership effectiveness but as conditions that shape how leadership and innovation are enacted. The study demonstrates that capacity building in resource-limited special education settings is a cumulative process, emerging from the interaction between instructional leadership, teacher innovativeness, collaborative learning structures, and supportive policy environments. Recognizing and strengthening these interactions is essential for advancing inclusive education in special needs schools.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study demonstrates that principals' capacity in Indonesian SLBs to develop inclusive and contextually responsive SBC and SDP is shaped by the dynamic interaction between instructional leadership and teacher innovativeness. Instructional leadership provides strategic direction, coherence, and collective alignment, enabling schools to translate national curriculum policies into locally meaningful and inclusive practices. Teacher innovativeness contributes to pedagogical adaptability and contextual responsiveness, particularly in addressing students' diverse functional needs. The findings indicate that inclusive curriculum development in SLBs is not merely a technical or policy-driven process but a relational and organizational practice grounded in collaborative leadership, professional learning, and moral commitment to inclusion. This confirms the expectations articulated in the introduction and substantiates how leadership and innovation operate together within resource-limited special education contexts.

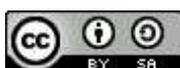
The study further suggests that strengthening inclusive education in SLBs requires systemic support that reinforces school-level leadership and institutionalizes teacher innovation through collaborative structures such as professional learning communities. For policy and practice, the findings highlight the importance of leadership development programs tailored to special education settings and flexible curriculum frameworks that allow contextual adaptation. Future research is encouraged to examine additional structural and contextual factors—such as policy implementation, parental involvement, and inter-agency collaboration—that may influence inclusive curriculum development and school planning. Longitudinal and comparative studies across regions would enrich understanding of how instructional leadership and innovation evolve over time in sustaining inclusive education in diverse educational contexts.

## REFERENCES

- Ainscow, M. (2020). Promoting inclusion and equity in education : lessons from international experiences experiences. *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 6(1), 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20020317.2020.1729587>
- Basister, M. P., Petersson, J., & Bacongus, R. D. (2025, July). Educational innovations for an inclusive learning environment: Insights from the teachers' collaboration through Lesson Study. In *Frontiers in Education* (Vol. 10, p. 1610749). Frontiers Media SA. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1610749>
- Buchner, T., & Proyer, M. (2020). From special to inclusive education policies in Austria—developments and implications for schools and teacher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(1), 83–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2019.1691992>
- Carrington, S., Park, E., Mckay, L., Sagers, B., Harper-hill, K., & Somerwil, T. (2024). Evidence of transformative leadership for inclusive practice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 141(November 2023), 104466. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104466>
- DeMatthews, D., Billingsley, B., McLeskey, J., & Sharma, U. (2020). Principal leadership for students with disabilities in effective inclusive schools. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 58(5), 539-554. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-10-2019-0177>



- DeMatthews, D. E., Kotok, S., & Serafini, A. (2020). Leadership Preparation for Special Education and Inclusive Schools: Beliefs and Recommendations From Successful Principals. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 15(4), 303–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775119838308>
- Dewi, G. R. (2024). The implementation of inclusive pedagogy in elementary schools. *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Pengajaran*, 57(1), 195-204. <https://doi.org/10.23887/jpp.v57i1.56173>
- Feng, Y., Zhou, D., & Wei, Y. (2025). The Impact of School Leadership on Inclusive Education Literacy: Examining the Sequential Mediation of Job Stress and Teacher Agency. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(11), 1572. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15111572>
- Hernández-Torrano, D., Somerton, M., & Helmer, J. (2022). Mapping research on inclusive education since Salamanca Statement: a bibliometric review of the literature over 25 years. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(9), 893–912. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1747555>
- Hogan, J. A., Montalbano, C., Coviello, J., McQueston, J., Kirby, M., Koo, B. J., ... & Lang, J. (2025). Developing inclusive educators: Analyzing the effectiveness of a short-term technical assistance model for best practices. *Education Sciences*, 15(5), 578. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15050578>
- Kadarisman, K., Fatmasari, R., Siswanto, R., & Budi, L. (2024). Strategy to Increase Accreditation of Special Education Schools Through Accelerating the Fulfillment of National Education Standards. *Scaffolding: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam Dan Multikulturalisme*, 5(2), 1067–1082. <https://doi.org/10.37680/scaffolding.v5i2.4588>
- Kassah, B. L. L., Kassah, A. K., & Phillips, D. (2018). Children with Intellectual Disabilities and Special School Education in Ghana. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 65(3), 341–354. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2017.1374358>
- Kemendikbudristek. (2021). Kurikulum Untuk Pemulihan Pembelajaran. *Pusat Kurikulum Dan Pembelajaran*, 130. [https://smansamendobarat.id/pluginfile.php/765/coursecat/description/Kemendikbudristek\\_bskap\\_2022%20Kajian%20Akademik%20Kurikulum%20untuk%20Pemulihan%20Pembelajaran.pdf](https://smansamendobarat.id/pluginfile.php/765/coursecat/description/Kemendikbudristek_bskap_2022%20Kajian%20Akademik%20Kurikulum%20untuk%20Pemulihan%20Pembelajaran.pdf)
- Kenny, N., McCoy, S., & O’Higgins Norman, J. (2023). A Whole Education Approach to Inclusive Education: An Integrated Model to Guide Planning, Policy, and Provision. *Education Sciences*, 13(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090959>
- Keshav, N. U., Vahabzadeh, A., Abdus-Sabur, R., Huey, K., Salisbury, J. P., Liu, R., & Sahin, N. (2018). Longitudinal socio-emotional learning intervention for autism via smartglasses: Qualitative school teacher descriptions of practicality, usability, and efficacy in general and special education classroom settings. *Education Sciences*, 8(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8030107>
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2020). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership and Management*, 40(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1596077>
- Li, Y., Cai, Y., & Tang, R. (2023). Linking instructional leadership and school support to teacher expertise: The mediating effect of teachers’ professional development agency. *Sustainability*, 15(4), 3440. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043440>
- Lin, P. H., Huang, L. R., & Lin, S. H. (2022). Why teaching innovation matters: Evidence from a pre- versus peri-COVID-19 pandemic comparison of student evaluation data. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(August), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.963953>
- Lin, Q. (2022). The relationship between distributed leadership and teacher innovativeness: Mediating roles of teacher autonomy and professional collaboration. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(July), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.948152>
- Liu, J., Aziku, M., Qiang, F., & Zhang, B. (2024). Leveraging professional learning communities in linking digital professional development and instructional integration : evidence from 16 , 072 STEM teachers. *International Journal of STEM Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40594-024-00513-3>
- Wilshire, J. M., Voelkel Jr, R. H., Pazez, B., & Van Tassell, F. (2025). Inclusive Professional



- Learning Communities and Special Education Collaboration: A Qualitative Case Study in Texas. *Education Sciences*, 15(10), 1279. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15101279>
- Padmadewi, N. N., Sukadana, I. M. S. A., Artini, L. P., Ana, I. K. T. A., Lesmana, K. Y. P., & Susiani, K. (2024). Inclusive Education: Survey on Teachers' Perception of Its Implementation. *Indonesian Journal of Instruction*, 5(3), 315-330. <https://doi.org/10.23887/iji.v5i3.81932>
- Parejo, J. L., Revuelta-Domínguez, F. I., Guerra-Antequera, J., & Ocaña-Fernández, A. (2022). An analysis of educational innovation culture by a Delphi expert panel. *Frontiers in Education*, 7(October), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2022.991263>
- Pratiwi, D. (2024). Situational Leadership in Special Education During COVID-19: A Study of SLB Negeri 2 Yogyakarta. *Indonesia Journal of Islamic Education Management Research*, 2(1), 9-18. <https://doi.org/10.14421/jiemr.2024.21-02>
- Robinson, P. (2007). Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 31(4), 388. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-6405.2007.00096.x>
- Rusconi, L., & Squillaci, M. (2023). Effects of a universal design for learning (UDL) training course on the development teachers' competences: A systematic review. *Education Sciences*, 13(5), 466. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13050466>
- Samsuddin, S., Ghani, M. F. A., & Muhith, A. (2023). The Effectiveness of School Leaders' Leadership in National Special Education School in Kuala Lumpur. *Tarbawi: Jurnal Keilmuan Manajemen Pendidikan*, 9(02), 317-326. <https://doi.org/10.32678/tarbawi.v9i02.9224>
- Tsirantonaki, S., & Vlachou, A. (2024). Leadership and Inclusive Education: School Principals' Role in Supporting the inclusion of Disabled Student in mainstream education. *European Journal of Inclusive Education*, 3(1), 119-141.. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ejie.v3i1.142505>
- Supovitz, J. A., D'Auria, J., & Spillane, J. P. (2019). Meaningful & Sustainable School Improvement with Distributed Leadership. CPRE Research Report# RR 2019-1. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED597840.pdf>
- UNESCO. (1994). The Salamanca statement and framework for action. *Policy*, June, 50. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000098427>
- Wahyudi, A., Yani, M., & Df, A.M. (2019). The Urgency of Inclusive Education in Realizing Sustainable Development. *Proceedings of the Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Environment and Sustainability Issues, ICESI 2019, 18-19 July 2019, Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia*. <https://doi.org/10.4108/eai.18-7-2019.2290104>
- Wong, M. T., & Mohd Rashid, S. M. (2022). Challenges of Special Education Teachers in Implementation Individual Education Plan (IEP) For Students With Learning Disabilities (LD). *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(11), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v12-i11/15159>
- Wu, W. L., Yang, Y. F., Chu, I. H., Hsu, H. T., Tsai, F. H., & Liang, J. M. (2017). Effectiveness of a cross-circuit exercise training program in improving the fitness of overweight or obese adolescents with intellectual disability enrolled in special education schools. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 60, 83–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2016.11.005>

