



An Exploration of a Practical Leadership Model for Building Inclusive School Culture: A Case Study of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Islamic Elementary School) in Indramayu, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Inclusive education has become a global priority, emphasizing equitable learning access for all children regardless of ability or background. However, many schools, including Islamic elementary schools (Madrasah Ibtidaiyah) in Indonesia, continue to face barriers stemming from limited teacher preparedness, unsupportive environments, and cultural resistance. These challenges highlight the need for leadership models that can transform inclusive policy into daily practice. **Objective:** This study aims to explore and develop a practical leadership model that strengthens inclusive school culture in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah in Indramayu, Indonesia. The model is positioned as a response to both global calls for inclusion and the local need to integrate inclusive values with Islamic educational principles. **Method:** Employing a qualitative multiple-case study combined with a design-based research (DBR) approach, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and document analysis. Participants consisted of school principals, teachers, and parents, ensuring triangulation and comprehensive perspectives throughout all DBR cycles of analysis, design, implementation, evaluation, and refinement. **Results:** The study found that principals play a central role in demonstrating inclusive values through daily behavior, mentoring teachers, and encouraging collaboration with families and communities. Leadership practices such as participatory decision-making, adaptive policy enactment, and community engagement contributed significantly to the development of inclusive culture. Yet, practical challenges remained, including inadequate resources, limited training access, and varying levels of parental acceptance. **Conclusion and Contribution:** The research proposes an applicative leadership framework that merges participatory and adaptive leadership with Islamic moral grounding, providing a culturally relevant approach to inclusion. By linking the visionary dimension of transformational leadership with the contextual responsiveness of practical leadership, the framework offers a bridge between inclusive ideals and everyday educational realities in faith-based primary schools.

INTRODUCTION

The global pursuit of equitable and quality education has heightened the urgency of strengthening inclusive practices in schools. UNESCO (2023) reports that more than 240 million children with disabilities remain out of school, reflecting a persistent global disparity in access to education. This issue extends beyond low-income nations and

continues to challenge middle-income countries such as Indonesia, where systemic and structural barriers hinder the realization of inclusive education. Despite national policy commitments, only about 15% of Indonesian schools have formally implemented inclusive frameworks (Rusli, 2024). These figures illustrate a critical gap between policy intentions and classroom realities, underscoring the need for leadership models that can effectively translate inclusive ideals into practice. In this regard, the concept of applicative leadership becomes essential not merely as an administrative approach, but as a form of leadership grounded in the moral, social, and spiritual principles of Islamic education. Rooted in values such as justice (*'adl*), compassion (*rahmah*), and communal responsibility (*ukhuwah*), applicative leadership provides a culturally resonant pathway for realizing inclusive practices in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

Inclusive education is understood as a pedagogical approach that ensures all students regardless of background, ability, or identity gain meaningful learning opportunities in mainstream classrooms (Velarde et al., 2022). At its core, inclusion depends not only on policies but also on the creation of an inclusive school culture characterized by shared values, mutual respect, and participatory practices. Research consistently shows that the actions of school leaders strongly influence whether such cultures can be achieved (Sharma et al., 2022). Effective leadership must therefore move beyond formal compliance and demonstrate daily practices that embody inclusivity.

Previous studies emphasize that transformational leadership that inspires change through vision, motivation, and teacher empowerment is vital for creating positive school climates that support inclusion (Lambrecht et al., 2022). However, transformational leadership alone may be insufficient in contexts with limited resources or strong socio-cultural constraints. To address these realities, scholars have advanced the idea of applicative leadership, an approach that integrates the visionary and motivational dimensions of transformational leadership with the responsiveness and contextual adaptability demanded by inclusive education (Herranz-Hernández, 2024). Applicative leadership thus bridges the gap between ideals and practice by promoting participatory decision-making, contextual problem-solving, and policy adaptability.

Within Islamic education, inclusive values are deeply embedded in religious principles. The Qur'anic teaching of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for all creation) emphasizes education as a means to unify rather than divide. The Prophet Muhammad (SAW) demonstrated inclusive practices by affirming the dignity of people with disabilities, while Surah Al-Hujurat (49:13) highlights the equality of all humans before God (Onilivia & Noptario, 2024; Nadlir et al., 2024). These foundations reinforce global pedagogical perspectives while offering unique ethical grounding for Muslim-majority contexts. *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (MI), as the first formal stage of Islamic education, is therefore strategically positioned to embody both global inclusive principles and Islamic educational values.

Despite the strong conceptual basis, empirical research on inclusive leadership in Islamic elementary schools remains limited. Most studies on inclusive leadership have focused on general schooling contexts (Ashikali et al., 2021), while little attention has been given to how leadership operates within MIs where socio-religious expectations, material conditions, and community engagement significantly shape educational experiences. This leaves a gap in both theory and practice, particularly in articulating leadership approaches that are pragmatic, culturally grounded, and responsive to local realities.

To address these gaps, the present study investigates how a practical leadership model can contribute to the development of inclusive school culture in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* in Indramayu, Indonesia. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) explore how a practical leadership model influences the creation and sustainability of inclusive environments; (2) identify the challenges in implementing inclusive policies at the MI level and strategies to overcome them; and (3) examine how collaboration among principals, teachers, parents, and communities enhances inclusive education. By situating the analysis in a socio-religious context, the study offers new insights into how applicative leadership blending transformational vision with practical responsiveness can advance inclusive practices in faith-based schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed to explore and develop a practical leadership model that supports inclusive school culture in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (Islamic elementary schools) in Indramayu, Indonesia. Recognizing the complex nature of inclusive education specially in socio-religious educational settings this research adopted a qualitative methodology, drawing upon a multiple-case study design integrated with elements of design-based research (DBR). This combination enabled both in-depth contextual understanding and iterative development of a leadership model in collaboration with school stakeholders.

Design-Based Research Component

In addition to the multiple-case study design, this research incorporated elements of Design-Based Research (DBR) to ensure that the proposed leadership model was iteratively refined in collaboration with school stakeholders. DBR was operationalized through a series of structured cycles, each consisting of analysis, design, implementation, evaluation, and reflection (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).

1. Problem Analysis: The first cycle began with semi-structured interviews and document analysis to identify contextual challenges related to inclusive leadership in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*. These data provided a grounded understanding of existing practices and barriers.
2. Initial Design: Based on the findings, a preliminary framework of practical leadership strategies was drafted. This stage involved collaborative input from principals and selected teachers during focus group discussions.
3. Implementation and Observation: The preliminary framework was then introduced in schools through mentoring sessions and collaborative lesson-planning activities. Researchers conducted classroom and school environment observations to assess the enactment of these strategies in real settings.
4. Evaluation and Reflection: Feedback was collected from teachers and principals regarding the feasibility and effectiveness of the proposed strategies. This evaluation highlighted both strengths and limitations of the initial framework.
5. Refinement: The model was revised to address identified gaps, such as the need for clearer community engagement strategies and adaptive professional development approaches. The refined model was then reintroduced in subsequent cycles for further validation.

By repeating these cycles across three different school contexts (urban, semi-urban, and rural), the DBR process allowed continuous alignment between theoretical constructs and practical realities. Importantly, the iterative collaboration with

stakeholders ensured that the final leadership model was both context-sensitive and empirically grounded, increasing its applicability in broader Madrasah Ibtidaiyah settings. To maintain analytical consistency throughout these cycles, the Constant Comparative Method was employed to continually compare data from interviews, observations, and reflections, enabling emerging insights to inform the ongoing refinement of the leadership model.

General Background of Research

The methodological approach was grounded in the need to bridge theoretical understanding with practical realities in educational leadership. Design-based research, as employed in this study, allows researchers to engage closely with participants in real educational settings to co-develop actionable solutions. Simultaneously, the case study method serves as a robust empirical strategy to capture the nuanced dynamics of inclusive leadership implementation across different school environments. This dual approach ensures that the proposed leadership model is not only theoretically sound but also practically grounded.

Participants and Case Selection

Three *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* were selected as case units using purposive sampling. Selection criteria included: (1) formal implementation of inclusive education for a minimum of two years; (2) geographical diversity (urban, semi-urban, and rural); and (3) willingness to participate in collaborative leadership model development. The schools varied in accreditation status and governance (public and private), offering a diverse contextual base for comparison and model refinement.

Table 1. Profile of Inclusive Schools Involved in the Study

Case Code	Location	Status	Type	Students with Disabilities	Accreditation
MI-01	Indramayu City	Public	Inclusive MI	12	A
MI-02	Jatibarang	Private	Inclusive MI	8	B
MI-03	Haurgeulis	Public	Inclusive MI	5	B

These case units reflect variations in demographic, administrative, and infrastructural contexts, which are essential for shaping a leadership model that is adaptable across school types. Participant involvement was distributed across all stages of the DBR process to ensure both empirical depth and collaborative ownership of the model. During the problem analysis stage, principals and teachers participated in semi-structured interviews and document reviews to identify leadership challenges. In the design stage, principals and selected teachers co-developed the preliminary framework through focus group discussions. During implementation, teachers and principals enacted the model in daily practice while researchers conducted observations. In the evaluation phase, both groups provided feedback on model feasibility and impact, while parents contributed insights on community engagement effectiveness. Finally, in the refinement stage, all participants principals, teachers, and parents jointly reviewed findings and suggested adjustments to strengthen cultural and contextual fit. This systematic involvement across DBR stages ensured that the emerging leadership model reflected authentic school realities and stakeholder perspectives.

Instruments and Procedures

Data collection employed four primary methods to ensure triangulation and validity:

1. Semi-structured Interviews: Conducted with principals and a selected teacher from each school to explore leadership strategies, implementation challenges, and perceptions of inclusive practices. The interviews allowed for in-depth, flexible discussions while maintaining a consistent thematic structure.
2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Each school hosted a focus group involving 4–6 teachers, including classroom instructors and special education coordinators. These discussions enabled the capture of collective experiences, particularly regarding institutional support systems and perceived obstacles in fostering inclusion.
3. Observations: Direct, non-intrusive classroom and school environment observations were conducted to validate leadership behaviors and assess the day-to-day enactment of inclusive policies. Particular attention was given to the interactions among school leaders, teachers, and students.
4. Document Analysis: School policy documents, vision and mission statements, and inclusive education guidelines were examined to assess alignment between stated policies and actual practices. This also offered insight into institutional commitment toward inclusivity.

Table 2. Data Collection Techniques Used in the Study

Technique	Description	Purpose
Semi-structured Interviews	Conversations with principals and teachers	Explore leadership strategies and personal experiences
Focus Group Discussions	Group reflections involving teaching staff	Understand collective perceptions of inclusive practices
Observations	On-site observation of daily practices and interactions	Assess real-time implementation of inclusive leadership
Document Analysis	Review of official school documents related to inclusivity	Analyze consistency between policy and leadership implementation

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out using two complementary qualitative techniques:

1. Thematic Analysis: Following Braun & Clarke, (2021) , thematic coding was applied to interview and FGD transcripts. Key themes were identified around leadership practices, collaborative dynamics, institutional challenges, and value alignment.
2. Constant Comparative Method: Used to continuously contrast findings from interviews, observations, and document reviews. This method allowed iterative refinement of categories and ensured that the emerging leadership model was coherent and evidence-based.

Systematic Research Steps

The research process was organized into five structured stages:

1. Preparation: A comprehensive literature review was conducted on inclusive and transformational leadership in faith-based and public education contexts.

2. Data Collection: Fieldwork involving interviews, FGDs, observations, and document reviews at the three selected schools.
3. Data Analysis: Employing thematic and constant comparison methods to analyze and synthesize findings.
4. Model Development: An applicative leadership model was developed through iterative refinement based on field insights.
5. Reporting: A research report was compiled presenting the analysis, findings, and policy recommendations.

Table 3. Research Stages in the Implementation of Inclusive Leadership

Step	Description
Research Preparation	Literature review on inclusive leadership and education policies
Data Collection	Interviews, FGDs, classroom observation, and policy document review
Data Analysis	Thematic and comparative analysis to extract and validate core findings
Model Development	Refinement of leadership framework based on empirical evidence
Report Writing	Final synthesis into academic manuscript with practical implications

Justification for Methodological Choice

The decision to adopt a qualitative, multi-case design was based on the study's objective to understand leadership practices in their natural, complex settings. Case study methodology is particularly effective in educational research where behaviors, interactions, and institutional processes are shaped by cultural, religious, and social factors. Moreover, the incorporation of design-based research elements allowed for iterative learning, adaptation, and model construction in collaboration with field practitioners ensuring that the final leadership model is both context-sensitive and practically useful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study explored practical leadership in shaping an inclusive school culture in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) in Indramayu District. Practical leadership in this context refers to contextually grounded and actionable practices that directly support inclusive values, promote stakeholder collaboration, and address both structural and cultural barriers in schools. The results are presented according to the three guiding research questions.

Implementation of Practical Leadership

Across the three MIs, principals demonstrated a variety of practical leadership strategies. A principal from MI-01 emphasized the importance of personal involvement with inclusive students, stating, *"I always make sure I'm involved directly when we have inclusive students, so the teachers feel they are not alone."* At MI-02, the school leader introduced weekly mentoring sessions to strengthen teachers' ability to apply inclusive

teaching methods. Meanwhile, MI-03 developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for inclusive classrooms and monitored their implementation closely.

These strategies resulted in visible outcomes. Teachers reported increased confidence in handling diverse learners, while students demonstrated improved engagement and participation. At the community level, parents expressed a greater willingness to attend meetings and support school programs once they observed the commitment of principals and teachers.

Table 4. Practical Leadership Strategies and Outcomes

Strategy	Outcome
Leading by example	Improved parental involvement and student presence
Teacher mentoring and training	Increased teacher confidence in inclusivity
Promoting inclusive values	Greater student belonging and socialization
Community involvement	Stronger school-community relationships

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Policies

Despite the application of practical leadership strategies, principals and teachers across the three Madrasah Ibtidaiyah reported persistent challenges in implementing inclusive policies. A recurring concern was the inadequacy of learning facilities, particularly the absence of specialized resources such as assistive tools for students with disabilities. Teachers also highlighted time constraints, as professional development sessions often overlapped with teaching schedules, limiting their ability to participate fully.

One teacher from MI-03 explained, *"The training sessions are too few and always during teaching hours – we can't leave the class."* Similar challenges were reported in MI-01 and MI-02, where teachers indicated the need for more accessible training formats. Another obstacle was the limited acceptance of inclusive education among parents. In two schools, some parents expressed concern that inclusive classrooms might reduce the attention given to their children.

Table 5. Key Challenges Reported in Implementing Inclusive Policies

Challenge	Example from Field Data	Reported Impact
Inadequate learning facilities	Lack of assistive tools for students with visual impairment	Difficulty in providing equal access
Limited training opportunities	Training held during teaching hours (MI-03 teacher statement)	Teachers unable to attend professional sessions
Teacher readiness	Some teachers hesitant to adapt inclusive methods	Slower adoption of inclusive practices
Parental reluctance	Parents in MI-01 and MI-02 feared reduced attention to children	Resistance to inclusive class enrollment

These findings show that, while inclusive leadership practices were initiated, structural and cultural barriers continued to challenge the sustainability of inclusive education across the three schools.

Stakeholder Collaboration

Stakeholder engagement was consistently highlighted as a critical factor in supporting inclusive education. All three schools organized regular parent-teacher

meetings to strengthen home-school communication. At MI-02, principals collaborated with local health offices and the social services department, inviting them to provide consultation sessions for students with disabilities once per semester.

Teachers across the schools also worked collectively to design inclusive lesson plans, ensuring consistency in teaching approaches. In some cases, local religious leaders were invited to reinforce moral support for inclusive practices, helping to build broader community acceptance.

Table 6. Examples of Stakeholder Collaboration and Impact

Collaboration Type	Impact
Parent-teacher routine meetings	Improved communication between home and school
Internal teacher collaboration	Consistency in inclusive lesson planning
Community partnerships	Additional resources for students with special needs
Religious leader involvement	Greater moral support and empathy within community

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that leadership in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* operates as a hybrid form combining transformational, distributed, and applicative elements. This synthesis represents a novel contribution, showing how faith-based schools adapt global leadership theories to Islamic educational values. Principals in this study enacted leadership not merely through formal authority but through daily role modeling, shared decision-making, and emotional engagement with teachers and parents. These practices illustrate a transformation from policy-driven compliance to a culture of inclusion grounded in *rahmah* (compassion) and *'adl* (justice). Such alignment between professional leadership and Islamic ethics strengthens the authenticity and sustainability of inclusive initiatives.

The hybrid nature of this model marks a departure from conventional frameworks that treat transformational and distributed leadership as separate paradigms. In these *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, principals integrated both providing vision and motivation while distributing responsibility through collaborative lesson planning and mentoring. This combination proved effective in resource-limited environments where adaptive, participatory solutions were essential. The iterative refinement observed across DBR cycles confirmed that inclusivity thrives when leadership evolves responsively rather than adhering to prescriptive structures.

What distinguishes this model further is its *applicative* dimension the translation of abstract inclusive values into practical actions consistent with Islamic social ethics. Leadership behaviors such as inclusive assemblies, co-teaching, and community dialogues embodied the Qur'anic principles of equality and mutual respect. By embedding these values in daily routines, leaders transformed inclusivity from an external mandate into a lived cultural practice. This demonstrates that effective inclusive leadership in Islamic contexts requires both moral anchoring and contextual adaptability.

While structural constraints such as limited facilities and teacher preparation persist, these challenges serve as testing grounds that reveal the model's adaptability. The study highlights that the strength of the hybrid model lies in its flexibility: it allows

leaders to reinterpret inclusion within the realities of Indonesian *madrasah* without abandoning its universal ethical foundations. Consequently, the model provides a framework that is both globally relevant and locally resonant.

In conclusion, this study advances the discourse on inclusive leadership by offering a contextually grounded hybrid model that unites transformational vision, distributed agency, and applicative moral practice. It bridges the gap between abstract leadership theories and the lived experiences of educators in faith-based schools, illustrating that inclusive transformation is not achieved through structure alone but through culturally embedded, emotionally intelligent, and participatory leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that practical leadership, when grounded in contextual realities and inclusive values, plays a transformative role in shaping an inclusive school culture in *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* (MI) in Indramayu District. Principals who modeled inclusive behavior, mentored teachers, and engaged parents and communities were central to creating equitable learning environments. These practices addressed structural and cultural barriers while also strengthening trust and collaboration across the school ecosystem. The findings confirm that inclusive leadership in faith-based and resource-limited contexts must be emotionally intelligent, context-sensitive, and action-oriented.

Implications

The study contributes by proposing an applicative leadership model that combines transformational, distributed, and contextually adaptive strategies. This model provides a practical framework that can inform leadership training programs and guide school policy formulation. For policymakers and education practitioners, the model offers actionable insights into how inclusive leadership can be aligned with religious, social, and infrastructural realities. By grounding inclusive leadership in everyday practices, the model helps bridge the gap between policy directives and their implementation in schools.

Limitations and Future Research

This research was conducted in three *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah* within a single district and did not directly include the perspectives of students with disabilities. As such, the model developed here may require adaptation when applied to other educational levels or secular institutions. Future studies should consider longitudinal approaches to assess the sustainability of the model over time. In addition, participatory research that actively involves students, parents, and community leaders as co-researchers would enrich the inclusivity of the process. Expanding this line of inquiry across regions and school types would further clarify how practical leadership can strengthen inclusive education in diverse contexts.

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