

Perceptions of Inclusive Leadership and Its Implications for Achieving Socio-Educational Performance

Ion Albulescu

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: ion.albulecu@ubbcluj.ro
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7284-805X>
<https://ror.org/02rmd1t30>

Adriana-Denisa Manea

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: adriana.manea@ubbcluj.ro
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1300-4209>
<https://ror.org/02rmd1t30>

Mirela Albulescu

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: mirela.albulecu@ubbcluj.ro
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7146-1686>
<https://ror.org/02rmd1t30>

Cristian Stan

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: cristian.stan@ubbcluj.ro
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0629-6095>
<https://ror.org/02rmd1t30>

Daniel Andronache

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: daniel.andronache@ubbcluj.ro
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0351-2215>
<https://ror.org/02rmd1t30>

Abstract: Inclusive leadership has become a key paradigm in contemporary educational management, promoting equity, collaboration, and responsiveness to diversity. This study investigates how inclusive leadership is perceived and applied by educational leaders in the Romanian K-12 education system, while focusing on both operational leaders (teachers) and strategic leaders (principals and school inspectors). Based on a cross-sectional, non-probabilistic sample of 296 respondents, the research employed a quantitative methodology, including descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, multiple linear regression, and k-means cluster analysis. These methods were used to examine differences in perceptions, the influence of managerial experience and training, and the level of acceptance of inclusive leadership practices. The findings reveal significant perceptual gaps between teachers and strategic leaders, especially

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regarding the importance of concrete actions associated with inclusive leadership. While formal training and managerial seniority had no significant effect on acceptance levels, a critical relationship has been identified between awareness of implementation challenges and a reduced enthusiasm for the model. The study proposes a typology of three leadership profiles, specifically, practical, strategic, and adaptive, and emphasizes the need for differentiated professional development strategies tailored to each profile. These results contribute to a better understanding of how inclusive leadership can be more effectively embedded in diverse educational contexts through systemic support, reflective practice, and policy alignment.

Keywords: *inclusive leadership, educational management, professional development, school leadership, equity in education, teacher leadership.*

1. Introduction

Educational leadership directly influences the success of schools, by shaping both organizational climate and academic performance. Traditionally, leadership was associated mainly with principals and high-level administrators. Over time, however, a broader perspective has emerged that recognizes teachers as integral actors in leadership (Adams et al., 2023). Rather than merely implementing policies, teachers now actively help cultivate a collaborative and inclusive learning environment by adapting to students' needs (Gómez-Hurtado et al., 2021). In this context, inclusive leadership has gained prominence as a model that emphasizes shared responsibility, equity, and cooperation among all members of the school community. This approach extends leadership beyond formal hierarchies, thus involving teachers in decision-making and change management processes that impact learning and school improvement.

Despite the broad endorsement of inclusion, the understanding and application of inclusive leadership can differ markedly by role and experience. Teachers working directly with students often view inclusive leadership as a relational practice grounded in communication, support, and trust, whereas school principals and inspectors tend to adopt a more strategic, policy-oriented view of inclusion (Roberson & Perry, 2021). Similarly, leaders' experience levels shape their outlook: seasoned administrators frequently evaluate inclusive leadership through the lens of practical challenges and feasibility, whereas early-career leaders focus on its theoretical benefits and ideals. This divergence can create tensions, for example, what teachers see as essential inclusive practices in the classroom may be viewed as secondary considerations by those managing the broader strategy, and vice versa. Such differences underscore the need for differentiated leadership development, tailored to both strategic leaders who shape the policy and to teachers who implement inclusive practices at the classroom level.

Building on these considerations, the present study aims to analyse how inclusive educational leadership is perceived and practiced within the school system, while highlighting both the advantages and the challenges of this model. We focus specifically on (a) the perceptual differences between front-line teachers and higher-level leaders

(principals and inspectors), (b) the factors influencing the acceptance of inclusive leadership, and (c) the perceived impact of inclusive leadership on educational outcomes. Gaining insight into these dimensions is essential for developing adaptive leadership strategies that can transform education into a more equitable, collaborative, and high-performing system. While our study is centered on the Romanian context, these issues resonate with international trends. Indeed, inclusive leadership has become a global priority in education (United Nations, 2015), and similar questions about bridging inclusive policy and practice are being asked in various national settings (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). We therefore consider whether the patterns observed in Romania align with those reported elsewhere, thereby situating our investigation in the broader international discourse on inclusive school leadership.

2. Theoretical Background

In contemporary educational management, leadership is widely recognized as a key driver of school effectiveness and student achievement. This has led to an increasing emphasis on inclusive leadership as a fundamental principle for organizing and improving educational institutions. Inclusive leadership transcends the traditional hierarchical models by promoting collaboration, active participation, and equity in school governance (Grill et al., 2023; Erath et al., 2021). Rather than viewing inclusion as merely assembling diverse teams, this approach treats inclusivity as a core value that informs all aspects of an institution's culture and practices (Manea, 2015; Stan & Manea, 2014). The need for such leadership is underpinned by broad social changes: the diversification of student populations and teaching staff, shifts in communication styles, and evolving labour market demands all call for leadership that is adaptive and responsive (Ainscow, 2024). Inclusive leaders are expected to proactively foster an organizational climate supporting teacher autonomy, pedagogical innovation, and continuous professional development (Tabassum et al., 2023). In essence, inclusive leadership involves a commitment to managing diversity effectively, and not only acknowledging demographic diversity but also leveraging it as a strategic resource for school improvement. This means integrating cultural, social, linguistic, gender, and ability differences into decision-making and policy formulation, such that all members of the school community feel valued and empowered to contribute. Developing the leaders' diversity competence is therefore crucial. For example, Stănescu and Andronache (2024) find that the ability to manage cultural, religious, or gender diversity is a strong predictor of organizational effectiveness in education. Inclusive leaders must cultivate critical self-reflexivity and an openness to 'otherness', thus ensuring that personal factors (e.g., age, personal beliefs) do not hinder the creation of an equitable and responsive school climate.

A defining feature of inclusive leadership is the recognition and empowerment of emerging leaders at all levels of the educational community. Unlike traditional

models cantered on a single authority, inclusive leadership is inherently distributive: it entails sharing leadership roles and encouraging active involvement of teachers, staff, parents, and even students in decision-making (Harris & Jones, 2023). By distributing responsibilities, school leaders can optimize team dynamics and value each individual's expertise, fostering a sense of ownership and collaboration across the organization (Bush, 2024). An inclusive–distributed leadership approach has been shown to reduce hierarchical barriers and enhance professional autonomy, resulting in a more open and adaptable school culture. Recent studies indicate that schools adopting such shared leadership models experience greater teacher participation in decisions and more innovative pedagogical practices. This perspective aligns with findings that collective decision-making and shared vision among leadership teams can improve organizational performance (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020).

These commonalities between inclusive and distributed leadership have sparked debate over whether inclusive leadership is a distinct paradigm, or it largely overlaps with distributed leadership theory. On the one hand, inclusive leadership is clearly compatible with distributed leadership: both emphasize decentralized authority and broad participation as (a) means to create a collaborative school culture. Some scholars even suggest that practicing inclusive leadership essentially requires a distributed structure that empowers diverse voices in the school (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). On the other hand, there are some authors arguing that inclusive leadership adds a unique focus on equity and the inclusion of marginalized stakeholders, going beyond the scope of generic distributed leadership. Indeed, inclusive leadership was initially discussed in the context of other leadership frameworks, for example, as a form of relational or participative leadership – but it has since evolved into a distinct domain cantered on ensuring belongingness and value for uniqueness within the group (Clarke, 2018; Roberson & Perry, 2021). In contrast to distributed leadership's structural focus on the one who leads, inclusive leadership places additional emphasis on how leadership is enacted so that to make all members feel included and heard. This theoretical tension remains unresolved, but it highlights that, simply, a distribution of leadership roles does not automatically guarantee an inclusive ethos. Effective inclusive leadership likely requires not just shared decision-making, but also intentional cultivation of inclusive values, norms, and interpersonal relationships within those distributed structures.

The implementation of inclusive leadership is complicated by persistent tensions in perspectives and practice, and one major challenge is the lack of a unified understanding of what inclusive leadership entails, which makes it difficult to generalize research findings or best practices (Uygur et al., 2020). Educational institutions worldwide often endorse the principles of inclusion at a policy level, yet the degree of actual implementation varies widely depending on the local organizational culture, the extent of institutional support, and ongoing professional development for leaders (Medina-García et al., 2020; Munby & Fullan, 2016). This discrepancy between the strategic intent and the everyday practice reflects a troubling policy–practice gap: inclusion

may be celebrated in official rhetoric but realizing it in classrooms and hallways proves difficult without concrete guidance and support. In an attempt to bridge this gap, experts emphasize the importance of sustained training and resources that help leaders translate inclusive values into actionable strategies (UN, 2015). Indeed, integrating comprehensive inclusive education content into leadership preparation programs is seen as essential for the lasting adoption of inclusive leadership models.

Another facet of this tension is the contrast between relational and strategic orientations toward leadership. As noted, teachers and school-level leaders (e.g., department heads or lead teachers) tend to conceptualize inclusive leadership in relational terms, while focusing on interpersonal support, team-building, and direct facilitation of inclusive practices in classrooms. In their view, effective inclusive leadership is exemplified by open communication, collaborative problem-solving, and mutual trust within the school community. By contrast, high-level administrators, principals, inspectors, and policymakers often adopt a more strategic or declarative stance, associating inclusive leadership with setting the vision, aligning the policies to inclusive values, and orchestrating large-scale initiatives. These differing viewpoints can lead to contradictions. For instance, a classroom teacher might prioritize adapting instruction to every learner and see inclusive leadership in the hands-on coordination of that process, whereas a principal might emphasize crafting an inclusion policy or strategic plan as the hallmark of inclusive leadership. Misalignment can occur if strategic leaders focus on formal plans without adequately supporting the relational work needed for implementation, or if teachers pursue classroom innovations that lack backing at the policy level. Bridging this divide requires deliberate efforts to align the declarative and practical aspects of inclusive leadership ensuring that strategic plans are informed by on-the-ground realities, and that grassroots inclusive practices are scaled up through supportive policies. Recent research underscores this need for alignment, showing that leaders' espoused values must be matched by their capacity to implement those values in practice.

A related issue is how leadership experience influences the enactment of inclusive leadership, thereby contributing further to the policy–practice gap. Early-career leaders often embrace inclusive education with enthusiasm, thus espousing its benefits and ideals, and yet they may lack the organizational authority or practical know-how to fully put it into practice. In contrast, veteran school leaders bring greater experience with systemic constraints and thus tend to be more cautious or even resistant toward sweeping inclusive reforms (Michalle et al., 2021; Bush, 2024). Studies indicate that some experienced administrators hesitate to delegate power or disrupt established routines, even if they publicly endorse inclusion. This decoupling between inclusive policy and practice is often a matter of 'doing what we say', as long-serving leaders might articulate inclusive values in principle but struggle to integrate them into entrenched organizational practices. Consequently, without critical reflection and continuous learning, leadership longevity can inadvertently reinforce a top-down or a *status quo*

approach, which would be at odds with the collaborative spirit of inclusion. Addressing this requires targeted professional development and culture change strategies that would encourage experienced leaders to adopt more participatory and flexible approaches, while also equipping novice leaders with practical tools to implement their inclusive vision. To summarize, recognizing and managing the contradictions between strategic versus relational perspectives, and between policy versus practice (often correlated with experience levels), is central to advancing inclusive leadership in education. This calls for an ongoing dialogue and capacity-building at all levels of the system so that inclusive ideals are consistently translated into inclusive actions.

Despite these challenges, a growing body of research documents the positive impacts of inclusive leadership on school communities. At the organizational level, schools that embrace inclusive leadership report more positive and stable climates, characterized by a stronger teacher morale and a greater involvement of parents as well as community stakeholders. By ensuring that every member of the school community feels valued and heard, inclusive leaders build trust and cohesion that strengthen the overall learning environment. Notably, inclusive leadership's commitment to equity means that student outcomes can improve as well: when all students, regardless of their background or ability, are given supportive and high-expectation learning conditions, academic engagement and achievement tend to rise (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020). Research has linked inclusive leadership with narrowed achievement gaps and better student socio-emotional development, as these leaders champion practices which ensure that each learner benefits from a positive educational experience. By promoting collaboration and collective responsibility, inclusive leadership also cultivates an ethos of continuous improvement; teachers and staff feel empowered to innovate in instruction and address problems proactively, which further enhances educational quality (Crisol Moya et al., 2020; Özdemir et al., 2022). In one recent study, combining inclusive strategies with transformational leadership techniques led to notable gains in both academic excellence and student well-being, which suggests that inclusive leadership can go together with a drive for high performance. Thus, far from being a 'soft' approach, inclusive leadership is denoted by strategic value in driving forward school effectiveness and improvement.

Inclusive leadership also contributes to the professional growth and engagement of teachers. In schools with inclusive leadership, teachers are more likely to adopt innovative teaching methods and collaborate closely with colleagues to share successful practices. This culture of openness and collective learning helps disseminate effective pedagogical strategies and fosters continuous professional development. Inclusive leaders actively encourage a participatory decision-making process, inviting teachers to take on leadership roles and to have a voice in shaping school policies and programs. As a result, teachers feel a greater sense of agency and investment in the school's mission. Studies have found that when teachers perceive themselves as valued partners in leadership, their job satisfaction and commitment increase, and they become more responsive to diverse needs of their students (Ackaradejruangsri et al., 2022). The

inclusive leadership approach thus taps into teachers' intrinsic motivation by creating a supportive environment, in which, the teachers' contributions matter. Furthermore, inclusive leaders prioritize building relationships based on trust and respect, which is a cornerstone for effective collaboration. A climate of trust enables better conflict resolution and stronger team cohesion among staff and the leaders who communicate openly, and model inclusive values help establish norms of mutual respect and constructive dialogue. Related research on sustainable communication in schools highlights that competencies such as reflection, active listening, intercultural understanding, along with non-violent communication are critical for maintaining a healthy, inclusive climate (Stănescu et al., 2022). Inclusive leadership intentionally cultivates these skills and norms, thereby reinforcing a virtuous cycle: strong interpersonal relationships support inclusive practices, which, in turn, further strengthen trust and collaboration across the school community.

Considering the above-outlined theoretical insights, inclusive leadership emerges as a multidimensional construct that requires both structural and human capacities. Its successful practice depends on *distributed power* and participatory structures as well as on *inclusive values* and competencies among leaders and followers. However, its implementation is mediated by role-based perspectives, leader experience, and context factors that can either facilitate or impede the realization of true inclusivity in leadership. Upon recognizing this complexity, our study adopts a conceptual framework that captures several key dimensions of inclusive leadership. Drawing on the literature, we synthesize four essential dimensions for operationalizing inclusive leadership: (1) acceptance of inclusive principles, i.e., the degree to which leaders embrace the values and philosophy of inclusion; (2) inclusive leadership actions, referring to the concrete practices and behaviours through which leaders enact inclusivity; (3) leader characteristics, which mean the traits or qualities (such as empathy, openness, collaboration skills) that enable a leader to be inclusive; and (4) perceived applicability of inclusive leadership, which involves stakeholders' beliefs about how feasible and effective the inclusive leadership model is in their educational context. These four dimensions guided the design of our research, serving as focal points for formulating the study's objectives and methods. By structuring our inquiry around these dimensions, we ensure a close alignment between our theoretical foundation and the empirical investigation. In the following sections, we detail how these concepts informed our research questions and hypotheses, providing a coherent bridge from the theoretical framework to the study's methodology and analysis. This approach allows us to systematically examine inclusive leadership in practice and to address the identified gaps, including role-based differences, conceptual tensions, and the policy–practice divide, with evidence from the field.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Aim of the Research

The aim of this study is to analyse perceptions of inclusive leadership among educational leaders and to identify potential differences arising from managerial experience, leadership style, and engagement with the specific actions associated with this model. Furthermore, based on these differences, the study seeks to propose a typology of educational leaders that may inform the design of effective training strategies for inclusive leadership development.

3.2. Hypotheses

In line with the aim of the study and the existing literature on inclusive leadership, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

- H1.** *There are significant differences between classroom teachers and school principals/inspectors in terms of the perception and acceptance of inclusive leadership.*
- H2.** *Perceptions of inclusive leadership are primarily influenced by the extent to which the concrete actions associated with this model are understood and valued.*
- H3.** *Managerial experience and professional training have a significant influence on the overall perceptions of inclusive leadership.*

3.3. Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of 296 respondents active within the Romanian K-12 education system, selected through a non-probabilistic, purposive convenience sampling method, with the aim of capturing two distinct levels of educational leadership. Of these, 262 respondents (88.5%) are teaching staff who exercise direct leadership at the classroom level (referred to in this study as *operational leaders*). The remaining 34 respondents (11.5%) hold leadership positions at the institutional or inter-institutional level: these are school principals and school inspectors (referred to in this study as *strategic leaders*). This distribution reflects the structure of the Romanian educational system, in which operational leaders are significantly more numerous. At the same time, it enables the investigation of differences in perception and implementation of inclusive leadership based on the role occupied.

The participants come from various counties, representing both urban and rural environments, as well as all levels of pre-university education. Their leadership experience ranges from 1 to 6 years, with a mean of 3.3 years. Approximately half of the respondents completed training programs in educational management, allowing for an examination of the influence of formal preparation on the perceptions studied.

The sample size is adequate for testing the proposed hypotheses, including comparative analyses and multiple regressions. However, the smaller size of the strategic

leader's subgroup is acknowledged as a methodological limitation; it shall be discussed in the corresponding section.

3.4. Research Tools

The construction of the questionnaire was grounded in a theoretical analysis of the specialized literature (Adams et al., 2023; Roberson & Perry, 2021; Crisol Moya et al., 2020), which enabled the identification of five relevant dimensions for evaluating inclusive educational leadership: managerial experience, level of leadership position, perceived qualities of the inclusive leader, concrete leadership actions, and the degree of acceptance of inclusive leadership. The items were formulated as statements and measured by using 5-point Likert scales (ranging from '1' – 'not true at all', to '5' – 'completely true').

Content validation of the instrument was carried out through consultation with three experts in educational sciences, and item clarity was tested through a preliminary pilot study with a sample of 15 teachers. Internal consistency was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The overall value for the entire questionnaire was 0.81, while the coefficients for the individual dimensions ranged between 0.74 and 0.88, which indicates a 'good-to-very-good' level of internal reliability.

3.5. Standardization of Variables for Cluster Analysis

Since the variables included in the k-means analysis (e.g., years of managerial experience, leadership level, perceived leader qualities, leadership actions, and acceptance of inclusive leadership) were measured on different scales, it was necessary to standardize them prior to applying the method.

Standardization was performed by transforming raw scores into standardized scores (Z-scores), by using the formula: $Z = (X - \mu) / \sigma$, where X is the raw value of the variable, μ is the sample mean, and σ is the standard deviation.

As a result, each variable was centred around a mean of 0 and scaled to a standard deviation of 1. This allowed for comparability across variables and prevented the clustering structure from being disproportionately influenced by variables with a greater numerical range.

4. Results

4.1. Differences in Perceptions of Inclusive Leadership Between Operational and Strategic Leaders

The inventory of perceptions of inclusive leadership among institutional leaders, on the one hand, and those leading at the classroom level, on the other hand, is carried out by identifying the determining factors underlying these differences. The statistical analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1.

Significant differences between teachers and strategic leaders regarding perceptions of inclusive leadership (t-test)

Variable	t-Statistic (df=294)	p-Value	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Years of managerial experience	6.21	0.000	1.13
Leadership level	2.67	0.009	0.49
Acceptance of inclusive leadership	7.83	0.000	1.43
Essential qualities of an inclusive leader	3.12	0.003	0.57
Specific actions of inclusive leadership	2.98	0.012	0.54

The analysis of differences between classroom teachers and school inspectors/principals regarding their perceptions of inclusive leadership revealed statistically significant variations across multiple dimensions. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the two groups, with degrees of freedom calculated based on the full sample ($df = 294$). The results indicate that the role occupied within the educational system significantly influences how inclusive leadership is perceived and applied.

The largest difference was observed for the acceptance of inclusive leadership. Teachers reported significantly higher levels of acceptance than principals and inspectors, scoring $t(294) = 7.83$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.43$, which represents a very large effect size according to Cohen's benchmarks. This finding highlights a strong divergence in perspectives: teachers, positioned on the front line of classroom practice, tend to embrace inclusive leadership as an immediate and tangible necessity, while strategic leaders approach the concept more cautiously, often viewing it through the lens of policy, resources, and institutional feasibility.

Differences were also identified in relation to the leadership level, at $t(294) = 2.67$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.49$, thus indicating a medium effect size. This suggests that the hierarchical position within the education system shapes how inclusion is conceptualized. Teachers, with their daily student contact, associate inclusive leadership with relational and pedagogical practices, whereas inspectors and principals tend to prioritize institutional planning and compliance with system-level strategies.

Perceptions of the essential qualities of an inclusive leader also differed significantly between the groups, at $t(294) = 3.12$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.57$ (medium effect). Teachers placed greater emphasis on qualities such as empathy, relational competence, and open communication, while inspectors valued decisional capacity, strategic thinking, and administrative skills. These differences mirror the contrasting responsibilities attached to each role.

Finally, the groups diverged in their evaluations of the specific actions required of an inclusive leader, yielding $t(294) = 2.98$, $p = .012$, $d = 0.54$ (medium effect). Teachers predominantly emphasized direct classroom-based actions, such as adapting

instruction, building collaborative peer relations, and ensuring inclusive participation, whereas strategic leaders stressed institutional strategies and systemic approaches.

Together, these findings indicate that differences in perceptions of inclusive leadership are not marginal, but, actually, substantial across several domains. The strongest divide is in acceptance of the model itself, where the effect size suggests a practical as well as statistical significance. Medium-sized effects in the other domains reinforce the conclusion that a managerial position plays a critical role in shaping the leaders' understanding of inclusion.

Therefore, *Hypothesis 1 (H1)* is *fully supported*: significant differences exist between classroom teachers (operational leaders) and institutional leaders (principals and inspectors) in terms of how inclusive leadership is perceived, valued, and accepted. These differences are mediated less by demographic variables and more by role-specific expectations and experiences, thereby underscoring the importance of aligning strategic visions with classroom realities to advance inclusive leadership in schools.

4.2. Determinants of the Acceptance of Inclusive Leadership

To test Hypotheses H2 and H3, we examined the determining factors that influence the acceptance of inclusive leadership. The statistical analysis of these factors is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Multiple regression results for the analysis of factors influencing the acceptance of inclusive leadership

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	95% CI for B
Intercept	1.201	0.070	-	17.26	<.001	[1.064, 1.338]
Years of managerial experience	-0.020	0.015	-0.07	-1.29	0.199	[-0.050, 0.010]
Leadership level	-0.007	0.014	-0.03	-0.47	0.637	[-0.034, 0.021]
Leadership actions	-0.002	0.001	-0.15	-2.56	0.011	[-0.004, -0.001]
Level of professional training	0.000	0.016	0.00	-0.01	0.996	[-0.031, 0.031]
R = 0.171 R ² = 0.029						

To explore the determinants of acceptance of inclusive leadership, a multiple regression analysis was conducted with four predictors: years of managerial experience, leadership level (operational vs. strategic), perception of leadership actions, and professional training level.

The overall regression model was not statistically significant, scoring $F(4, 291) = 2.17$, $p = .073$, which explains as little as 2.9% of the variance in acceptance ($R^2 = .029$, adjusted $R^2 = .016$). This indicates that the predictors, taken together, had limited explanatory power in accounting for how inclusive leadership is accepted among the respondents.

Despite the low variance explained, the analysis yielded a notable and somewhat paradoxical finding. Perceptions of leadership actions emerged as the only significant predictor, at $\beta = -.15$, $t(291) = -2.56$, $p = .011$. The negative coefficient suggests that the respondents who placed a stronger emphasis on the importance of concrete inclusive leadership actions tended to express lower levels of acceptance of the model.

This counterintuitive relationship highlights a tension between valuing inclusion in principle and believing in its feasibility in practice. Teachers, for example, are those most directly involved in implementing inclusive actions in classrooms. While they may strongly endorse specific practices, such as differentiated instruction, collaboration with peers, and supporting diverse learning needs, they may also experience the constraints that make these practices difficult to sustain, including limited resources, lack of training, or insufficient institutional backing (cf. DeMatthews, Serafini, & Watson, 2021; Khaleel, Alhosani, & Duyar, 2021). Their high valuation of actions may thus coexist with scepticism about whether inclusive leadership can truly function under current systemic conditions.

By contrast, strategic leaders (principals and inspectors) are less directly involved in day-to-day classroom realities, and they tend to approach inclusive leadership as a normative or policy-level construct. For them, acceptance may not hinge on feasibility at the micro level but rather on its alignment with broader institutional or governmental strategies (cf. Bush, 2024; Harris & Jones, 2024). This difference in perspective likely explains the negative association observed in the regression: the more concretely leaders think about actions, the more they recognize the obstacles, which, in turn, lowers their overall acceptance.

The other predictors, years of managerial experience ($\beta = -.07$, $p = .199$), leadership level ($\beta = -.03$, $p = .637$), and professional training ($\beta = .00$, $p = .996$) did not significantly contribute to the model. These findings are noteworthy because they challenge common assumptions in both research and practice. One frequent expectation is that more experienced leaders would naturally be more inclined to adopt inclusive leadership practices (cf. Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020), or that formal management training would foster acceptance of inclusion-oriented approaches (cf. Lambrecht et al., 2022). Our data suggest otherwise: formal experience and training alone are insufficient. Instead, perceptions appear shaped by the leaders' personal interpretations of feasibility and their exposure to actual implementation challenges.

From a hypothesis-testing perspective, the results offer *partial* support for *Hypothesis 2 (H2)*: perceptions of leadership actions significantly influenced acceptance,

though in a negative rather than positive direction. *Hypothesis 3 (H3) was not supported*, as neither managerial experience nor training demonstrated significant effects.

Taken together, these results indicate that acceptance of inclusive leadership is not primarily determined by structural factors such as the role, experience, or training. Rather, it seems linked to how concretely respondents conceptualize inclusion and their recognition of the practical obstacles involved. This reinforces earlier findings from the *t*-test analysis (see Table 1), which showed systematic differences between teachers and strategic leaders, and it points toward a deeper paradox: the leaders most aware of the importance of inclusive actions may simultaneously be the most critical of their feasibility.

This paradox aligns with what Quinn (2022) describes as the risk of “distributed leadership rhetoric”, where policy-level discourse emphasizes empowerment, yet frontline educators stress the need for tangible inclusive practices. It also resonates with findings by Mor Barak, Luria, and Brimhall (2021), who highlight a persistent ‘policy–practice decoupling’ in inclusive leadership, where values are promoted rhetorically but not always translated into concrete action. At the same time, international research underscores that inclusive leadership requires not only a commitment to values but also the resources, support, and systemic alignment necessary for effective implementation (Ainscow, 2024; Fullan & Munby, 2016).

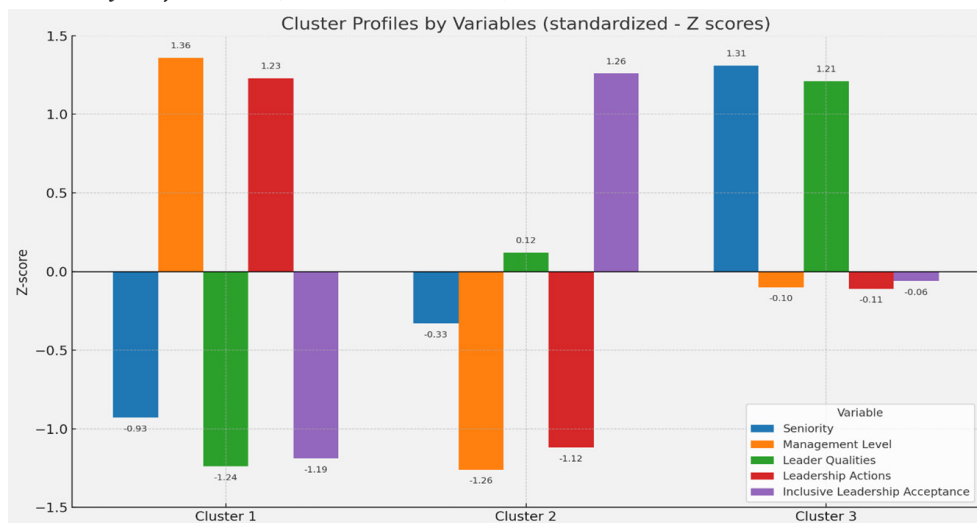
To highlight differences in the perception of how inclusive leadership is operationalized, a k-means clustering analysis was conducted. Given that the variables involved were measured on different scales, the analysis was performed by using standardized scores (Z-scores), which ensured comparability across the variables and allowed for a balanced structuring of the clusters. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

Cluster profiles based on managerial experience, leadership level, and perceptions of inclusive leadership

Cluster	Seniority (Z)	Management Level (Z)	Leader Qualities (Z)	Leadership Actions (Z)	Inclusive Leadership Acceptance (Z)
1	-0.93	+1.36	-1.24	+1.23	-1.19
2	-0.33	-1.26	+0.12	-1.12	+1.26
3	+1.31	-0.10	+1.21	-0.11	-0.06

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the final centres of the three clusters, based on standardized values (Z-scores) for each of the analysed variables. This visual representation allows for a direct comparison of the cluster profiles, and highlights the relative positioning differences across dimensions such as managerial experience, leadership level, and acceptance of inclusive leadership.

Figure 1.*Cluster Profiles by Variables (standardized – Z scores)*

The cluster analysis revealed the existence of three distinct typologies of educational leaders, differentiated by managerial experience, leadership level, perceptions of the essential qualities of an inclusive leader, the importance attributed to specific inclusive leadership actions, and the level of acceptance of this leadership model. These results offer a clear picture of the diversity of perspectives on inclusive leadership among educational leaders and suggest that managerial experience and administrative position significantly influence how this model is perceived and applied. This allows for the development of a typology of educational leaders based on their perception of inclusive leadership.

The three identified clusters reflect the existence of clearly differentiated profiles, shaped by the leadership level and by their practical, strategic, or innovative orientation toward inclusive leadership.

a. Action-oriented practical leaders (Cluster 1).

The first category consists of leaders with moderate managerial experience, typically between three and five years, who generally hold leadership positions within pre-university educational institutions, such as principals and vice-principals. These leaders demonstrate a moderately high appreciation for the qualities of an inclusive leader; however, what differentiates them is their strong emphasis on the importance of specific inclusive leadership actions. They view the implementation of this model as contingent on concrete measures, such as active collaboration with teachers, facilitation of an inclusive climate for students, and support for initiatives that promote educational equity.

Nevertheless, acceptance of inclusive leadership is low among this group, suggesting a critical perspective on the practical applicability of the model. This positioning is

confirmed by the standardized scores: leaders in this cluster registered a high score for leadership actions ($Z = +1.23$) and leadership level ($Z = +1.36$), but low scores for acceptance of inclusive leadership ($Z = -1.19$) and for inclusive leader qualities ($Z = -1.24$). Their managerial experience appears to have provided them with a realistic view of the challenges involved in implementing inclusive leadership, which may explain their reluctance regarding its practical effectiveness. This attitude may be shaped by difficulties encountered in applying inclusive principles, such as organizational resistance, lack of resources, or the challenge of translating theoretical concepts into concrete and effective practices.

b. Strategic leaders with a reserved stance toward inclusive leadership (Cluster 2).

The second category includes leaders with more extensive managerial experience, typically between five and seven years, who occupy higher-level administrative roles, such as policy coordinators, school inspectors, or other institutional-level leadership positions. These leaders express a strong appreciation for the essential qualities of an inclusive leader but assign lower importance to the concrete actions required to implement this model. This category of leaders tends to adopt a more abstract view of inclusive leadership, perceiving it as a broad organizational strategy rather than a set of practices that can be directly applied at the school level. Unlike the action-oriented leaders, these individuals do not necessarily view inclusive leadership as dependent on concrete measures or targeted interventions. Acceptance of inclusive leadership is moderate within this group, indicating openness to the model but without a strong commitment to its operational implementation. This tendency is reflected in the standardized values: acceptance of inclusive leadership registers a high score ($Z = +1.26$), while leadership actions ($Z = -1.12$) and leadership level ($Z = -1.26$) are significantly below average. This group of leaders can be characterized by a strategic approach to leadership, in which decisions are made at a macro level without direct involvement in the daily application of inclusive leadership principles in schools.

c. Leaders open to change, innovation, and the adoption of inclusion (Cluster 3).

The third category consists of leaders with the most extensive managerial experience, over seven years, who hold leadership positions both within educational institutions and at higher-level administrative structures. These leaders show the highest level of appreciation for the essential qualities of an inclusive leader and assign a moderate level of importance to the specific actions associated with inclusive leadership. Their profile is supported by standardized scores showing above-average values for managerial experience ($Z = +1.31$) and inclusive leader qualities ($Z = +1.21$), while acceptance of inclusive leadership is close to the mean ($Z = -0.06$), which indicates a stable and realistic attitude toward this model.

In contrast to the leaders in the other two categories, these respondents display the highest overall level of acceptance of inclusive leadership, which suggests that extensive managerial experience contributes to the development of a favourable view of the model. Although their acceptance is high, the moderate emphasis placed on concrete

actions suggests that these leaders view implementation as a complex process, not one that depends solely on specific measures, but also on contextual factors, institutional support, and the alignment of educational strategies with the principles of inclusive leadership.

This category of leaders is the most favourable toward the implementation of inclusive leadership, yet they consider its success to depend on a systemic approach and its integration into the organizational structure of educational institutions.

5. Discussion

The findings reveal a marked divergence in the way how teachers and strategic leaders perceive inclusive educational leadership. Classroom teachers emphasize the concrete actions and day-to-day practices required to include all students, whereas principals and inspectors (strategic leaders) often view inclusion more abstractly, as a broad strategic or conceptual ideal. This contrast aligns with the sample composition, where teachers comprised nearly 88.5% of the respondents and strategic leaders made up only 11.5%. It underscores a paradox of influence versus numbers: a small cadre of decision-makers (principals, inspectors) holds disproportionate power to shape inclusive policies, even as the bulk of on-the-ground implementation falls to the far more numerous teachers. Such imbalance can create tension between relational leadership at the classroom level and strategic leadership at the institutional level. Indeed, prior research observes that hierarchical structures and collaborative, participatory cultures “don’t always sit comfortably together”, highlighting that, simply, a distribution of leadership roles does not guarantee an inclusive ethos.

The divergent perspectives in our study echo what Quinn (2022) describes as a risk of “distributed leadership rhetoric”, where policy-level discourse emphasizes empowerment, yet front-line educators emphasize the need for tangible inclusive practices. Similarly, Mor Barak, Luria, and Brimhall (2021) highlight the gap between what leaders say and what they do, thus pointing to a persistent *policy–practice decoupling* which resonates with the ‘practical–political divide’ observed in our findings. These differences cannot be fully explained by simple demographics like seniority or formal management training. In fact, neither years of experience nor completion of management courses had any significant effect on the leaders’ acceptance of inclusive leadership in our data. This suggests that the personal values, context, and role-related expectations, rather than formal qualifications, shape one’s view of inclusion. Our findings reinforce calls in the literature to bridge strategic and relational orientations, ensuring that top-level commitment to inclusion is meaningfully connected to everyday inclusive practices in classrooms. In other words, operational and strategic leaders must develop a shared understanding: principals need insight into classroom realities, and teachers need to be empowered as partners in school-wide inclusive change (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). By reconciling these perspectives, schools

can better align inclusive ideals with implementation, thus fostering both the high-level vision and the relational trust necessary for lasting inclusion.

A notable and somewhat paradoxical result of this study is the negative correlation between the leaders' awareness of specific inclusive practices and their overall acceptance of the inclusive leadership model. In our regression analysis, greater appreciation of the concrete actions needed for inclusion predicted lower enthusiasm for the model (β negative, $p = 0.011$). This led to a very low explained variance ($R^2 \approx 0.03$) in the regression, which means that our predictors accounted for only about 3% of the variation in acceptance. In practical terms, as the respondents became more cognizant of what inclusive leadership entails in practice, their optimism about it tended to decrease. Qualitative evidence from the data illustrates why: teachers on the front lines, who directly grapple with implementing inclusive strategies under real-world constraints, often perceive inclusive leadership as an idealized model that is difficult to achieve fully in the absence of sufficient resources and consistent support. From their viewpoint, the gap between the rhetoric and the reality is stark inclusion, and yet it is a worthy goal, but one that can feel 'difficult to realize' amid large classes, diverse needs, and limited aid. By contrast, principals and inspectors, looking from a broader systemic vantage point, affirm the importance of inclusive leadership in principle, and yet they tend to see its concrete implementation as heavily dependent on organizational and policy factors beyond their immediate control. This dynamic helps explain the sceptical undercurrent: those who are most aware of the challenges of inclusive practice are also those who gauge its feasibility most critically. Such an acceptance–action paradox has been observed in other contexts as well. Michalle et al. (2021) describe a similar policy–practice decoupling in schools, where leaders espouse inclusion publicly but struggle to create a truly inclusive climate in everyday practice. Likewise, Quinn (2022) notes that distributed leadership reforms can sometimes amount to a rhetorical repackaging of hierarchy rather than genuine empowerment if the underlying power dynamics and resource needs are not addressed. Our results underscore that bridging this gap between inclusive ideals and on-the-ground reality is crucial. The very fact that formal experience and training show no impact on inclusive leadership acceptance suggests that current professional development may not be adequately tackling these implementation challenges. It may be that the currently existing management courses give insufficient attention to inclusive leadership, or that attitudes are shaped more by one's personal trial-and-error experiences than by theory. In either case, the low explanatory power of our quantitative model signals that many unmeasured factors (e.g., the school culture, individual belief systems, or the local policy context) are influencing the leaders' receptivity to inclusion. To uncover these nuances, a qualitative follow-up is warranted. Consistent with Brimhall and Palinkas's (2020) recommendations, deeper inquiry through interviews, focus groups or mixed methods could explore why some leaders remain hesitant, for example, by probing their past encounters with 'failed' inclusion initiatives or perceived barriers in their

environment. Such research could provide a richer insight into the psychological and contextual drivers behind the scepticism, beyond what survey data alone can reveal. To sum up, addressing the implementation gap requires not only acknowledging the very real challenges which front-line educators face, but also actively involving them in problem-solving. Closing this gap is essential if inclusive leadership is to move from (an) aspirational policy to (an) effective practice. Recent studies emphasize the need for practical support structures that help leaders translate inclusive values into action – for instance, coaching, collaborative planning time, and exemplars of successful inclusive practice (Ainscow, 2024). Without such supports, even well-intentioned leaders may continue to view inclusion as a distant ideal rather than an achievable goal.

One way our study adds nuance to these issues is through the identification of three distinct leadership profiles via cluster analysis. This person-centered analysis yielded: (1) Action-oriented practical leaders: school leaders with moderate managerial experience, highly focused on specific inclusive actions but often critical regarding the feasibility of the model; (2) Strategic leaders with a reserved stance toward inclusive leadership: more experienced leaders in higher-level roles who embrace inclusive values conceptually but show limited focus on concrete practices; and (3) Leaders open to change, innovation, and the adoption of inclusion: the most experienced group, strongly supportive of inclusive leadership and inclined to view it as a systemic, evolving process shaped by organizational and cultural factors.

The existence of these differentiated typologies confirms the complexity of inclusive leadership perceptions in our context. Not all leaders who endorse inclusion do so in the same way, and one-size-fits-all assumptions do not hold. Our cluster analysis adds value by moving beyond a simple teacher-vs-principal comparison and by illustrating how multiple factors (leadership level, experience, personal orientation) converge into specific mindsets or profiles. This aligns with integrative frameworks that conceptualize leadership as a multidimensional construct, combining relational, instructional, transformational, and inclusive dimensions, rather than a uniform trait. For example, Ackaradejruangsri et al. (2022) argue that effective leadership involves balancing various roles (informational, entrepreneurial, inclusive, etc.), and our findings echo that by showing leaders clustered according to different blends of priorities.

Each profile we have identified is denoted by distinct strengths and developmental needs. Action-oriented practical leaders are commendably focused on tangible inclusion practices, but their lower acceptance suggests they may feel overwhelmed or unconvinced that these practices can succeed system-wide. This group corresponds to what Bush (2024) describes in a global context as pragmatically minded leaders who see inclusion as necessary yet fraught with on-the-ground obstacles. They might benefit most from evidence of successful inclusive initiatives and resources that address feasibility concerns.

Strategic leaders with a reserved stance toward inclusive leadership, by contrast, fully embrace the idea of inclusive leadership but may not translate it into concrete

action plans. This attitude mirrors a known pitfall in some distributed leadership approaches: a tendency to remain at the level of declarations of shared leadership without fully operationalizing power-sharing (a concern raised by Quinn (2022) and Lumby (2013)). Leaders in this category may require support in operationalizing inclusive values, for instance, training in planning inclusive interventions, setting up collaborative teams, or monitoring inclusive practices beyond policy statements.

Finally, leaders open to change, innovation, and the adoption of inclusion represent the most favourable profile for implementation. They not only support the model but actively adapt and innovate, understanding that inclusion is context-dependent and requires continuous learning. These leaders embody a synergy of transformational and inclusive leadership qualities, aligning with recent evidence that combining a vision for change with inclusivity yields positive outcomes. Far from needing basic convincing, they thrive on advanced challenges, such as scaling up best practices, mentoring peers, and driving cultural change.

Recognizing these profiles has clear implications for professional development, because a central recommendation of this study is to implement differentiated training strategies tailored to each leadership profile. Generic workshops on inclusive leadership may not meet everyone's needs; instead, training should be profile-specific. For the more strategic or conceptual leaders, programs should focus on building concrete competencies, on the ways how to translate inclusive values into day-to-day policies, how to design support structures for teachers, and how to measure progress on inclusion goals. These leaders might, for example, engage in scenario-based learning where they practice turning inclusive principles into actionable school improvement plans. By contrast, operational practitioners (e.g., teachers in leadership roles or newly appointed principals) might need hands-on guidance in classroom strategies for inclusion, managing diverse learning needs, and fostering collaborative teacher teams. For them, sharing best practices through case studies, coaching, and peer networks can be particularly beneficial. Additionally, those leaders already innovating could be given opportunities to lead pilot programs or mentor others, thereby multiplying their positive influence.

Recent international literature strongly supports this differentiated approach. Munby and Fullan (2016) argue that developing inclusive schools requires aligning leader learning with the real diversity of leadership contexts, exactly the diversity our profiles reflect. There is also growing evidence of the effectiveness of tailored professional development: for instance, a randomized study by Grill, Pousette, and Björnsdotter (2023) demonstrated that focused managerial training improved leaders' inclusive and functional leadership behaviours. Harris and Jones (2023), likewise, report that collaborative leadership development initiatives can integrate inclusive practices into school routines, fostering a culture of continuous innovation.

In line with these findings, our study underscores that capacity-building for inclusive leadership should be differentiated. Strategic-level leaders (inspectors, principals) may

require advanced training in systemic change management, policy implementation for equity, as well as training on how to nurture an inclusive school culture at scale. Meanwhile, teachers and teacher-leaders should be supported in refining their everyday inclusive teaching techniques and in leading from within collaborative teams. Such multi-tiered professional development ensures that inclusive leadership is not just a lofty ideal held at the top, nor is it a burden carried only by classroom teachers, but a distributed capacity across the institution.

Ultimately, the diversity of leadership profiles identified in our research is not a weakness to be levelled out, but, instead, a reality to be leveraged. By acknowledging these different starting points, policymakers and educators can design interventions that meet leaders 'where they are' and guide them further along the inclusive leadership continuum. This not only addresses the reviewers' concerns about the added value of the cluster analysis but also provides a practical roadmap: differentiated training and support can help each profile of leader contribute optimally to an inclusive school system.

To generalize, our discussion points to a fundamental lesson – that inclusive leadership cannot be advanced through a uniform approach. It requires nuanced understanding of the leaders' perspectives, robust strategies to bridge the gap(s) between values and practice, along with ongoing, tailored development efforts. Only by integrating these insights can educational systems hope to move inclusive leadership from theory into sustained, meaningful action.

6. Conclusions and Limitations

This study has provided a detailed, context-sensitive examination of how inclusive educational leadership is perceived and enacted by different actors within a national education system. The findings confirm significant perceptual gaps between operational leaders (teachers) and strategic leaders (principals, inspectors) in Romania, reflecting a tension between the concrete, relational focus of classroom practitioners and the broader, declarative outlook of system-level administrators. Importantly, these differences were not attributable to simple variables like the educational level, seniority, or prior management training. Instead, they appear linked to personal dispositions and distinct role expectations, leading to the emergence of three leadership profiles with respect to inclusive leadership: action-oriented practical leaders, strategic leaders with a reserved stance toward inclusive leadership, and leaders open to change, innovation, and the adoption of inclusion. By identifying these typologies, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of inclusive leadership, while emphasizing that it is not a monolithic construct but rather a multi-faceted practice that leaders engage with in varied ways. In doing so, the research aligns with and adds depth to recent international scholarship on inclusive and distributed leadership (e.g., Adams et al., 2023; Ackaradejruangsri et al., 2022; Roberson & Perry, 2021; Crisol Moya et al.,

2020) which stresses the need to align the leaders' espoused values with their capacity for practical implementation. Our results underscore that inclusive leadership is more than a theoretical ideal or a 'fashionable' term; it is a necessary, concrete response to today's educational realities of diversity, equity, and participation. When effectively realized, inclusive leadership can foster a positive school climate, improve interpersonal relationships, and even enhance student outcomes by ensuring all members of the school community feel valued and engaged. However, realizing these benefits requires deliberate effort to build the leaders' competencies, translating inclusive values into tangible policies, classroom strategies, and collaborative practices.

From a practical standpoint, the study's implications point toward differentiated professional development and system-wide support. Strategic-level leaders need guidance and tools to carry inclusive values into policy-making and organizational change, while teacher-leaders and mid-level staff need empowerment to integrate inclusive principles into daily teaching and team leadership. Additionally, the profile of leaders who are open to change, innovation, and the adoption of inclusion identified here can be harnessed to disseminate good practices and mentor others through professional learning networks and communities of practice. In essence, a contextualized and tiered approach is required: inclusive leadership should be cultivated through tailored training, reflective practice opportunities, and sustained institutional backing, rather than a uniform or purely theoretical mandate. By advocating such an approach, the study addresses the reviewers' concerns about how the three leadership profiles can inform differentiated training and capacity-building strategies.

Despite its contributions, this research has several important limitations that temper the generalizability of the conclusions. First, the study is embedded in the specific national context of the Romanian education system, which is structured in a three-tier hierarchy (central ministry, county inspectorates, schools). This structure shapes leadership roles and may influence how inclusive leadership is understood at each level. As a result, direct comparisons with findings from countries having different educational governance models are not straightforward, and caution is warranted in extending these results internationally. The absence of cross-country data or international benchmarks in our research is a limitation noted by reviewers: inclusive leadership is a global concern, but our insights remain grounded in one country's policy and cultural environment. Future studies should incorporate international comparisons to determine whether the patterns observed here, such as the operational-strategic gap or the profile typologies, hold in other contexts or whether they vary under different educational policies (Bush, 2024; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020).

Second, the sample itself was imbalanced in favour of teachers (operational leaders), with a much smaller subgroup of strategic leaders (34 out of 296 respondents). While this reflects the reality that teachers vastly outnumber administrators in the system, it also means that the voices of those with formal decision-making power were relatively few. The perspectives of principals and inspectors, who arguably exert a

major influence on system-wide inclusive practices, might have failed to capture the same depth or variability as those of teachers. This limitation was partly mitigated by our use of statistical techniques (e.g., heterogeneity analyses and clustering) intended to ensure that the strategic leaders' data were interpreted in context, but it remains a constraint nevertheless. Gender was another factor not examined in our analysis. We did not collect any data on the participants' gender, nor did we include gender as a variable, even though leadership approaches and attitudes toward inclusion could conceivably differ by gender (as suggested in broader leadership literature). Similarly, we did not differentiate our respondents by their school setting (urban vs. rural), which might moderate how inclusive leadership is practiced due to differences in community resources, class sizes, or cultural expectations in different locales. These unexamined demographic and contextual variables present avenues for further research; including them could provide a more fine-grained picture of inclusive leadership dynamics.

Third, our study did not systematically investigate certain organizational and experiential factors that could impact perceptions of inclusive leadership. For instance, we did not measure each school's organizational culture or climate, which likely influences how openness and inclusion are valued in their day-to-day routine operation. We also did not account for individuals' prior experiences with inclusion (e.g., whether they have worked in inclusive programs before, or if they have personal commitments to equity), nor the level of institutional support they are currently receiving (such as resources, training, or encouragement from superiors). Any of these factors could be significant in shaping a leader's attitude towards inclusive leadership, and their absence in our model may help explain why the regression's explanatory power was so low. Considering this, we echo the suggestion (raised by both our own analysis and the reviewers) to pursue qualitative and longitudinal research going forward. Conducting in-depth interviews or focus groups with different categories of educational leaders would allow exploration of the motivations, beliefs, and contextual pressures that underlie their survey responses. Qualitative data could illuminate, for example, what practical hurdles make some leaders sceptical, or what experiences have turned others into passionate advocates of inclusion. Moreover, a longitudinal approach, following educational leaders over time, could observe how their perceptions and practices evolve with additional experience, changing school demographics, or after targeted professional development. Such studies would respond directly to the call for more nuanced and dynamic understandings of inclusive leadership, and could test the stability of the profiles we identified: do leaders move from one profile to another as they gain experience or support? Answering these questions would significantly enhance the field's knowledge base and inform more effective training interventions.

In conclusion, our research reinforces the view of inclusive leadership as a model with transformative potential for education, but one that must be continually adapted to real-world contexts and accompanied by genuine commitment and support at all levels. The paradoxes and profiles identified in this study highlight that achieving an

inclusive school culture is as much about mindset and collaboration as it is about policy. The willingness of school leaders to embrace inclusive values, teachers' engagement and agency, and the availability of robust support structures (resources, training, and collegial networks) all emerge as critical ingredients in moving from intention to action. These findings provide a realistic framework for interpreting the challenges of implementing inclusive leadership and open several relevant directions for future research. By acknowledging its limitations, this study invites further inquiry, both in Romania and internationally, to build a more comprehensive, evidence-based understanding of how inclusive educational leadership can be effectively nurtured and sustained. Ultimately, translating the promise of inclusive leadership into tangible outcomes will require a concerted, context-aware effort: only through integrated strategies that bridge strategic vision, along with everyday practice, can inclusive leadership evolve from an aspirational concept into a widespread, impactful reality in schools around the world.

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