

Leading with Empathy: Exploring the Psychological Traits of Academic Leaders in Inclusive Education Settings

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Abstract

There is a growing need to understand the mechanisms in the implementation of inclusive education, particularly how leadership, institutional culture, and individual traits interact to shape inclusive outcomes. While policies and frameworks provide structural guidance, their success largely depends on how they are interpreted and enacted at the school level. This paper explored the psychological traits of academic leaders towards implementing inclusive education policies and guidelines within their institution. Academic leaders (n=16) were purposively sampled to be interviewed about their personal traits and how it influences the implementation. The study found that academic leaders in inclusive education settings demonstrated key psychological traits, such as empathy, respect for differences, and commitment to equity, that shaped their leadership behaviors and decisions. Empathy enabled leaders to connect with students on a personal level, while respect for diversity guided their inclusive practices and rejection of tokenism. They viewed equity not as uniform treatment but as the moral obligation to respond to individual needs through systemic change. In decision-making and leadership practices, these traits were manifested through ethical reasoning, conflict sensitivity, and the promotion of a shared vision. Leaders prioritized fairness, transparency, and collaborative engagement, often challenging institutional norms to uphold inclusive values. They believed in creating environments where every stakeholder felt seen, heard, and valued, and emphasized the importance of emotional intelligence in navigating complex interpersonal and cultural dynamics. Consequently, inclusive and transformative leadership is not solely about policy enforcement but deeply rooted in personal character, moral conviction, and relational competencies.

Keywords: empathy, inclusive education, inclusivity, personality, transformative leadership

Introduction

Global education systems have increasingly embraced inclusive education as a pivotal reform strategy, rooted in mid-20th-century movements for equity and social justice. By the 1980s, this movement had matured into a functional paradigm aimed at eliminating the traditional divide between mainstream and special education, which helps in facilitating equitable access for all learners. At its core, inclusive education seeks to balance the distribution of educational resources, accommodate varied learning profiles, and promote meaningful social participation (Zorde & Lapidot-Lefler, 2025). Inclusive education mainly covers social cohesion, cultural inclusion, and long-term economic advancement (Yang et al., 2025). Despite its growing theoretical and policy relevance, inclusive education still lacks a coherent analytical structure capable of capturing its complexity.

Inclusive education in the Philippines is still in its early stage. Many Filipino teachers receive insufficient support from the school administration, which in turn affects how inclusive education is being

implemented (Beltran et al., 2025; Macabenta et al., 2023). This lack of institutional support manifests in various ways, such as limited access to training on inclusive pedagogy, inadequate classroom resources, and the absence of a clear policy framework to guide inclusive practices (Beltran et al., 2025). As a result, many teachers feel unprepared and overwhelmed when addressing the diverse needs of learners, particularly those with disabilities or learning difficulties.

Studies on organizational management emphasized the importance of academic leaders in the implementation of inclusive education. Leadership ensures that educational systems and practices are deliberately structured and enacted with a central emphasis on equity and the realization of social justice (Ezzani et al., 2023). Theoharis (2007) believes that educational leadership strengthens the reformation of educational institutions toward greater equity and justice, emphasizing the necessity for leaders to proactively implement systemic changes that respond to the needs of marginalized populations and confront entrenched inequities within educational structures. Leadership for social justice, thus, reflects a moral imperative grounded in equity (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014) and necessitates ongoing, intentional, and adaptive efforts that respond to evolving societal conditions (Bogotch, 2002). For Chaaban, Badwan and Arar (2025), such leadership dismantles rigid and authoritarian structures in favor of an ethic grounded in empathy, critical reflection, and a commitment to advancing the public good.

Now, the goal of this paper was to determine the traits of academic leaders in achieving sustainable implementation of inclusive education. Traits such as vision creation, implementation capacity, and followership development are necessary for effective organizational management (Teame et al., 2022). Adaptive capabilities and strategic thinking could help in addressing dynamic environments, particularly in educational and organizational settings (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Emotional intelligence and relational competencies are also significant, particularly in crisis contexts where leaders must offer supportive and helpful engagement (Gray et al., 2022).

While scholarship has made significant strides in establishing the theoretical foundations of inclusive education and outlining systemic or policy-level strategies (Zorde & Lapidot-Lefler, 2025; Yang et al., 2025; Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2022), it has not adequately addressed the role of leaders' emotional intelligence, adaptability, social awareness, and ethical behavior in translating these frameworks into everyday practice. The dominance of macro-level analysis has inadvertently overshadowed micro-level leadership dynamics, particularly the ways leaders' personal dispositions, such as empathy, resilience, and integrity, facilitate or hinder the creation of inclusive school cultures. Without a clearer understanding of these human factors, educational institutions may struggle to develop leadership development programs that align with the real demands of inclusive education. Addressing this gap would contribute not only to leadership theory but also to practical interventions aimed at developing leaders who are both personally equipped and contextually responsive to the demands of inclusive education.

The goal of this study was to explore the psychological traits that characterize effective academic leadership in the context of inclusive education. Specifically, the research aimed to identify how traits such as empathy, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and ethical behavior contribute to the sustainable implementation of inclusive practices within educational institutions. This would contribute to an in-depth understanding of leadership in inclusive settings and offers insights for leadership development programs that are better aligned with the emotional and social demands of inclusive education.

Literature Review

The concept of inclusive leadership within educational contexts is inherently interconnected with the broader framework of inclusive education. This pedagogical orientation extends beyond the superficial support of learners with disabilities and instead cultivates a comprehensive school-wide culture that values and actively supports diverse identities and backgrounds, including but not limited to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and linguistic heritage (Kenny et al., 2023).

Inclusive education covers more than facilitating school access; it also necessitates comprehensive teacher preparation, curricular flexibility, and the promotion of meaningful student engagement (Aderemi, 2022). Leaders in inclusive education are expected to advocate for social justice and uphold democratic ideals, ensuring that the principles of accessibility, equity, and inclusive participation are actualized for every learner (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2022; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). In addition, inclusive leaders are called upon to engage in critical examination of entrenched power dynamics, interrogate prevailing norms, and actively pursue the transformation of inequitable educational structures (Mezirow, 2008; Sweet, 2023).

This paper explored the concept of inclusive education within the framework of transformative leadership. The quality of personal transformation experienced by stakeholders in an educational organization is largely shaped by its leadership style. Building a transformative organizational climate demands leaders who prioritize and actively promote equity.

Transformative leadership has gained prominence as a framework rooted in the pursuit of equity, social justice, and democratic values. These principles are especially vital in advancing inclusive education. Shields (2010) noted that this leadership model emphasizes systemic change that dismantles exclusionary practices and ensures inclusivity. Caldwell et al. (2012) argue that transformative leadership integrates core elements from various leadership models, including transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), servant leadership (Hamilton & Nord, 2005), charismatic leadership (Conger et al., 2000), Level 5 leadership (Collins, 2001), principle-centered leadership (Covey, 2006), and covenantal leadership (Pava, 2003). Central to transformative leadership is the emphasis on moral purpose, ethical commitment, and collaborative vision-building, which are particularly relevant for inclusive education contexts. For example, transformational leadership provides a structure that aligns institutional and individual goals, which helps in cultivating an inclusive environment that values all learners, including those with diverse needs. Similarly, charismatic leadership, with its emphasis on ethically grounded relationships, further supports this vision by motivating stakeholders to embrace inclusive values and practices (Diaz et al., 2024).

Personal traits might be a driving factor for leadership, as characteristics such as empathy, integrity, resilience, and open-mindedness often shape how a leader responds to challenges and relates to others. One key aspect that shapes leader's behavior and effectiveness is their personality, which reflects unique individual traits and can be a valuable indicator and resource for cultivating leadership potential and capacity (Hirayama et al., 2023; Jung, 1991; Myers & Myers, 1997; Waite & McKinney, 2018). For example, social intelligence, which involves the ability to perceive and interpret the emotions of others, is another key leadership quality. Socially intelligent leaders can respond appropriately to team dynamics, design their interactions, and support the emotional needs of others (Belessova et al., 2023). Similarly, charisma is important because it enables leaders to inspire, energize, and intellectually stimulate their followers (Lestari et al., 2023). Leaders in inclusive education must not only understand diversity but actively respond to it through supportive, relational engagement; hence, requiring them to be socially competent.

However, there are other traits that are important to consider. Early works on leadership (McCleskey, 2014) highlight traits like intelligence and dominance as significant, yet later research emphasizes that intelligence alone is not sufficient. For example, researchers believed on the importance of cognitive ability but also acknowledged the role of emotional stability and social understanding. Recently, traits such as integrity, competence, self-confidence, and innovativeness could also help in shaping a leader's capacity to drive transformation. Leadership is ultimately about producing results, which requires effectiveness, ethical responsibility, and a focus on long-term impact (Alemu, 2025; Rosário & Boechat, 2025).

Much of the existing research focuses on systemic reforms, institutional policies, and broad pedagogical frameworks (Shields, 2010; Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2022), but pays insufficient attention

to the individual characteristics that shape leadership behavior in inclusive contexts. Specifically, there is limited empirical insight into how psychological traits interact with leadership practices to create transformative and inclusive educational climates. This lack of focus on the personal and relational dimensions of leadership presents a theoretical and practical void, especially given the increasing diversity in educational settings.

This study contributes to bridging the identified gap by exploring the role of academic leaders' psychological traits and strategies in building inclusive education. It provides a lens through which inclusive leadership can be understood not only as a structural or ideological practice but as a deeply personal and relational process. The study thus supports the development of more effective leadership training programs that emphasize self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and emotional intelligence. In doing so, it advances both scholarly discourse and real-world applications by aligning individual leader development with broader goals of equity, accessibility, and transformation in educational institutions.

Objectives

This paper analyzed the experiences of academic leaders in managing school systems for inclusive education. It assessed different personal and institutional mechanisms that might help in improving the implementation of inclusive education. Below are the specific objectives of the study.

1. To explore the psychological traits that reflect the concept of inclusive education.
2. To examine how academic leaders' psychological traits influence their decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and leadership practices within inclusive education environments.

Methods

Research Design

There is a need to understand the psychological traits of academic leaders towards the implementation of inclusive education. This paper explored different psychological traits of academic leaders and analyzed how these traits build the foundations of inclusive education within their institutions. Exploratory studies are commonly employed to understand topics that are either newly emerging or insufficiently examined (Entong et al., 2024; Lösch et al., 2023). This approach typically incorporates structured methods that uncover significant patterns and trends within the datasets (Chavez, 2022; Chavez et al., 2024). Through such strategies, researchers can systematically analyze psychological and sociocultural dimensions connected to the research focus (Adalia et al., 2025; Chavez & Ceneciro, 2023). Although some scholars have questioned the dependability and stability of exploratory approaches, more recent academic discourse has highlighted their contribution to expanding theoretical frameworks and supporting the process gathering of qualitative findings (Magno et al., 2024). This paper would like to establish context on how specific psychological traits among academic leaders influence inclusive education policies and practices. This study aims to uncover essential behaviors and mindsets that promote inclusive education.

Participants and Sampling

Exploratory research often involves a limited number of participants to enable a focused and thorough investigation of key themes relevant to the study purpose (Divinagracia, 2023). This approach prioritizes in-depth analysis on specific group or context and does not require broad statistical generalization (Magno et al., 2024). Sample size in such studies remains flexible, determined largely by the richness of the data provided by participants and the point at which additional responses no longer yield new insights (Rahimi, 2024). In qualitative research, purposive sampling is frequently used to deliberately select individuals (Chavez & Vicente, 2025). This method involves a targeted recruitment process, ensuring that participants meet specific criteria relevant to the research (Chavez & Del Prado, 2023). For this study, online purposive sampling (Lenton et al., 2018) was employed by disseminating Google Forms designed

to collect initial background data from potential participants. Five sampling characteristics were considered in choosing the participants: (1) an academic leader in any Philippine academic institution, (2) has at least 5 years of experience, (3) familiar with the provisions under inclusive education, (4) demonstrates support towards implementing inclusive education, and (5) willingness to participate in one-on-one interviews. There were 26 who responded to the online screening, but only 16 were chosen to be interviewed.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview protocol was carefully constructed to guide the data collection process. The development followed the process outlined by Kallio et al. (2016), which includes several key steps: establishing study objectives, thoroughly reviewing existing literature, formulating initial interview questions, conducting a preliminary pilot phase, and improving the instrument based on expert recommendations. The interview guide was designed with probing questions to encourage participants to provide comprehensive and specific answers (Yilmaz, 2023). To further ensure its credibility and reliability, it underwent expert validation (Bhalla et al., 2023). Three evaluators participated in this process: one qualitative research specialists, one tourism educator, and a classroom management officer. They assessed the instrument for question clarity, logical structure, alignment with research goals, and the appropriateness of the probing prompts. Following this, a pilot test was administered to evaluate how well the questions captured meaningful insights, as well as to verify their clarity and contextual relevance (Bryant, 2025). The final version of the protocol was revised based on feedback gathered from both expert reviewers and pilot participants (see **Table 1**).

Table 1 Final guide questions asked during the one-on-one interviews

Objectives	Interview Questions
To explore the psychological traits that reflect the concept of inclusive education.	1. Can you describe a personal experience that significantly influenced your views on inclusive education? 2. What psychological traits do you believe are most important in leading an inclusive academic environment, and why? 3. How have your values or personality traits, such as empathy or resilience, guided your leadership in inclusive settings?
To examine how academic leaders' psychological traits influence their decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and leadership practices within inclusive education environments.	1. How do your personal traits influence the way you make decisions regarding inclusive education policies or practices? 2. In what ways do your psychological traits affect how you build relationships with faculty, staff, and students from diverse backgrounds? 3. Can you share an example of a leadership challenge in an inclusive setting and how your psychological disposition helped you address it?

Data Collection

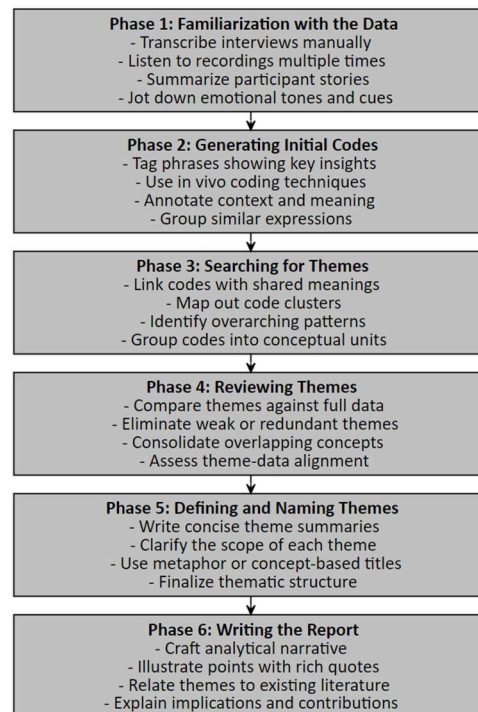
Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main technique for gathering data, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' viewpoints, actions, and shared meanings. This flexible interview format allows both structure and responsiveness, enabling detailed and inductive conversations that promote data accuracy and contextual richness (Belina, 2023). Its adaptability made it well-suited for addressing the open-ended nature of exploratory research questions (Ceneciro, 2025; Dela Calzada et al., 2025). Before the interviews, participants were recruited through an online purposive sampling, with

selection based on clearly defined inclusion criteria that ensured their relevance to the study's focus. Once eligible individuals were identified, they received formal invitations and were scheduled for individual interviews. Each session followed a standardized protocol, which included obtaining informed consent, implementing ethical guidelines, maintaining confidentiality, and adhering to consistent procedures for data handling (Pilbeam et al., 2022). During the interviews, participants were invited to speak in the language they felt most comfortable using to encourage open dialogue and reduce language-related barriers (Skjeggstad et al., 2017). Interviewers employed probing techniques, like requesting elaboration on personal experiences, to uncover deeper meanings and enhance the richness of the responses (Yilmaz, 2023). With participant approval, all interviews were recorded using encrypted mobile devices for security. Key observations and emerging insights were organized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, laying the groundwork for the subsequent phases of qualitative data analysis.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the qualitative data obtained from individual interviews. This approach involved systematically organizing, coding, and analyzing textual content to uncover meaningful insights rooted in participants' real-life experiences (Chavez & Vicente, 2025). Reflexive thematic analysis is well-suited for exploratory research, as it promotes the emergence of themes through inductive reasoning rather than imposing pre-existing theoretical models (Clarke, V., & Braun, 2013). Originally developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the method is structured around several key phases: becoming immersed in the data, generating initial codes, identifying and refining patterns, defining each theme clearly, and ultimately synthesizing the overall findings (see **Figure 1**). A defining characteristic of this analytical technique is reflexivity, which involves the researcher's ongoing self-awareness and critical engagement with the data, acknowledging how their own perspectives might shape the analytical process (Nicmanis, 2024). In addition, an inductive method was employed throughout, allowing the themes to arise organically from the participants' accounts rather than being influenced by researcher assumptions (Braun et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach ensured that the narratives were interpreted in a way that preserved their depth, complexity, and contextual relevance.

Figure 1 Data analysis implemented in the study



Results

Objective 1: To explore the psychological traits that reflect the concept of inclusive education.

Theme 1: Empathy towards Others

The academic leaders demonstrated empathy as a defining psychological trait that significantly influenced their approach to inclusive education. They regarded empathetic listening not as a passive act, but as an intentional process of understanding students' personal struggles without judgment or haste. This emotional attunement enabled them to go beyond administrative obligations and connect meaningfully with the lived realities of learners.

They emphasized the importance of truly understanding a student's perspective. This approach indicated a shift from authoritative problem-solving to emotionally intelligent engagement. Such behavior demonstrated an awareness that emotional safety is as critical as academic success in inclusive education.

"When a student opens up about their struggles, I listen not to respond, but to understand."

"Empathy helps me bridge the gap between administrative decisions and the human experiences behind them."

The academic leaders acknowledged that students frequently carried psychological and emotional burdens into the classroom, which required leaders to craft responsive and compassionate policies. Even minimal expressions of understanding, such as a kind word or attentive presence, were perceived to have a transformative effect on student motivation and self-esteem.

"Some students carry emotional burdens into the classroom. I try to create policies that acknowledge and respond to that reality."

They believed in how minor expressions of empathy could generate substantial psychological and emotional outcomes for learners. They believed that students responded positively when they felt understood by their leaders. Empathy was not limited to institutional interventions but could also be shown in brief, meaningful interactions. For them, inclusive education depended on leaders who cared about the well-being of others on both emotional and professional levels.

"I've learned that even a small act of understanding can significantly impact a learner's motivation and self-worth."

"My leadership style is grounded in compassion. I strive to make sure students and faculty feel seen, heard, and valued."

Theme 2: Respect for Differences

The framework for inclusive education might include attitudes of openness, fairness, and appreciation for varied cultural, cognitive, and experiential student backgrounds. Leaders who demonstrated respect for differences avoided stereotyping and instead embraced inclusive practices that welcomed all learners. The psychological trait of respecting differences allowed academic leaders to create compassionate, adaptive, and socially just learning environments.

"I believe that diversity is not a challenge but a strength that enriches our academic culture."

For example, the academic leaders believed inclusivity began with acknowledging students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds. They saw each learner's individuality as essential to shaping equitable and meaningful educational practices. Inclusive education should maintain empathy and cultural humility within leadership, promoting emotional connection and educational justice.

"Inclusive education starts with recognizing that every student brings a unique story. We need to honor that."

"I know that students have varied learning needs, cultures, and beliefs."

Furthermore, academic leaders emphasized that inclusion must be embedded in every layer of institutional life, not just academics. They saw inclusive education that extends into leadership styles, interpersonal relationships, and everyday administrative decisions. They acknowledged that inclusive values must be reflected in tone, policies, and even informal interactions across the school.

"Respecting differences goes beyond the curriculum. It's about how we communicate, interact, and make decisions."

Importantly, respect involves amplification of perspectives, not just passive acknowledgment of difference. They rejected tokenism by creating avenues for meaningful engagement, feedback, and influence from diverse stakeholders. For them, inclusion required more than empathy because it also demanded structural change and power redistribution.

"In leadership, I make space for voices that are often marginalized. That's how respect turns into inclusive action."

Theme 3: Commitment to Equity

Equity requires proactive, continuous evaluation of academic systems and policies to prevent or correct any unintended biases or privileges. They demonstrated awareness that some students face systemic disadvantages, and that educational leaders have a responsibility to dismantle these barriers through policy reform and inclusive practices. Equity, for them, was more than a policy, it's a guiding moral principle that shaped their leadership decisions, from curriculum design to institutional resource allocation.

"Equity means giving students what they need to succeed, even if it's different from what others receive."

"Equity is a moral responsibility. I treat it as a guiding principle in every initiative I lead."

They presented an ongoing commitment to ensuring fairness by critically reviewing academic policies regularly. Policies, while appearing neutral, might unintentionally disadvantage particular student demographics over time. Their dedication to equity was evident in their refusal to accept status quo assumptions as fair. Their actions promoted justice through careful scrutiny of systemic norms that shaped students' educational opportunities and success.

“I consistently evaluate our academic policies to make sure they don’t favor one group over another.”

“My role is to identify systemic barriers and find ways to dismantle them so that no student is left behind.”

True equity required leaders to understand the differences in students’ backgrounds, needs, and experiences, and to respond accordingly. They did not define fairness as treating everyone the same but rather ensuring that every learner received the support necessary to thrive, even if it meant differential treatment.

Objective 2: To examine how academic leaders’ psychological traits influence their decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and leadership practices within inclusive education environments.

Theme 1: Ethical Leadership in Inclusion

Academic leaders should have a strong internalized moral compass, which drives them to embed equity, fairness, and justice into every aspect of institutional decision-making. Their decisions are not reactive or politically motivated but rather grounded in deliberate ethical reasoning. This includes ensuring that resources are distributed with fairness in mind, challenging entrenched institutional norms when they conflict with inclusive values, and maintaining transparency and accountability as leadership imperatives.

“When dilemmas arise, I pause and consider what is morally right for the marginalized voices we serve.”

Every initiative they led was filtered through an equity framework to ensure just, inclusive outcomes. They intentionally designed initiatives that prioritized the needs of disadvantaged or marginalized students within the institution. Their leadership trait involved recognizing disparities and taking corrective steps to balance access and support.

“When allocating resources, I prioritize those who are most underserved, because fairness requires intentional action.”

Leaders exhibited psychological courage by prioritizing fairness, even in the face of institutional resistance. Psychological conviction gave them the strength to initiate necessary reforms despite potential backlash or critique. Fairness guided them through complex dilemmas, pushing against norms that upheld inequality or exclusion.

“I always anchor my decisions on fairness, even when it means challenging institutional traditions or norms.”

Leaders internalized ethical responsibility as a critical benchmark for evaluating institutional policy implementation. These leaders aligned organizational decisions with their moral commitment to fairness and nondiscrimination. Their policy choices reflected thoughtfulness rooted in justice and psychological consistency with inclusive beliefs.

“I ensure that every policy we implement aligns with our ethical responsibility to serve all students equally.”

Lastly, academic leaders considered transparency as an essential component of ethical leadership. They recognized that trust must be earned through clarity, accountability, and moral clarity in leadership. Transparent leadership was used to dismantle hidden power dynamics and promote equity.

“I make transparency a non-negotiable principle because inclusion starts with trust and honest leadership.”

Theme 2: Conflict Sensitivity

There is a need for a mindful, emotionally intelligent approach to resolving conflict, particularly those rooted in cultural, linguistic, or ideological differences. Leaders exercised empathetic listening and withheld judgment, ensuring that each stakeholder felt heard, regardless of their background or position.

They believed inclusion meant embracing difficult conversations rather than avoiding them, creating structured opportunities for these exchanges to take place in a supportive environment.

For example, sensitivity should involve active listening to the concerns of other people. Listening to all perspectives showed a commitment to fairness, equity, and responsible decision-making practices. Such practice reflected ethical awareness, showing that leadership must be dialogical and participatory in diverse settings.

“I listen deeply to all sides before making a decision because every voice matters in a diverse institution.”

“Inclusion requires that I create space for difficult conversations and ensure that they are constructive.”

Some exhibited a strong capacity for impartiality and emotional balance when managing intercultural misunderstandings. The refusal to take sides revealed their understanding that fairness transcends personal biases and social affiliations. In addition, being emotionally grounded enabled the leader to think clearly and respond with reason rather than impulse.

“When cultural misunderstandings arise, I act quickly to mediate without taking sides or escalating tension.”

“I’ve learned that being calm and emotionally present helps de-escalate sensitive situations among students and staff.”

Calm leadership created an atmosphere where sensitive matters could be discussed without fear or hostility. Through this approach, they reinforced the values of respect, self-awareness, and community responsibility. Teaching the team to respond constructively showed leadership grounded in emotional regulation and social modeling. This strategy enhanced group cohesion and reduced instances of interpersonal misunderstanding and miscommunication.

“I coach my team to respond, not react, to conflict so we maintain respectful dialogue across differences.”

Theme 3: Shared Vision

Leaders emphasized that a shared vision was not a one-time communication of goals, but a continuous process of co-creation, regular consultation, and mutual accountability. They anchored their leadership in the belief that authentic inclusion requires that every member of the institution feels both represented and responsible for achieving common goals.

“I always involve teachers, students, and parents when building initiatives—everyone should see themselves in our goals.”

“When people feel heard during planning, they’re more committed to inclusive outcomes and collective success.”

Academic leaders viewed collaboration as an essential component of effective and ethical inclusive leadership. Their intrinsic psychological orientation rejected authoritative control in favor of mutual empowerment and agency. They preferred decision-making processes that emphasized collective insight, rather than unilateral declarations or directives.

“Shared vision, for me, means ongoing collaboration and co-creation, not just top-down directives.”

Some academic leaders conducted regular assessments of institutional policies to check whether they still abide with the current education guidelines imposed by the government. They understood that institutional alignment required constant communication, recalibration, and reinforcement of inclusive commitments.

“I revisit our institutional values with my team regularly to ensure we are aligned and inclusive.”

Inclusive education should present a shared values among its stakeholders. The leader rejected elitist leadership in favor of widespread engagement and inclusive contribution. Their leadership exhibited emotional intelligence, valuing every contributor as essential to institutional progress. Through shared vision, they ensured institutional direction was inclusive, democratic, and culturally responsive.

“I lead with the belief that sustainable change happens when the vision is owned by many, not few.”

Discussion

Conventional frameworks of school leadership have traditionally been characterized by top-down, administrative paradigms that insufficiently prioritize inclusivity and equity (Bush, 2020). Nevertheless, the evolving composition of student demographics, along with heightened recognition of enduring inequities within educational systems, has prompted the need to reconceptualize leadership methodologies in schools (White et al., 2025). Academic leaders' psychological traits, such as empathy, respect for diversity, and commitment to equity, significantly influenced how they shaped inclusive education through emotionally attuned, ethically grounded, and equity-centered leadership. Their decision-making processes were deeply informed by moral responsibility, collaborative visioning, and conflict sensitivity, enabling them to build institutional cultures grounded in fairness, dialogue, and shared purpose.

Grounded in Transformative Leadership Theory (TLT) (Shields, 2020), transformative leadership emphasizes self-awareness, organizational understanding, and contextual responsiveness. It calls on leaders to dismantle inequitable structures and reconstruct them to build justice and inclusivity. When it comes to inclusive education, leaders displayed a consistent belief that diversity strengthens institutional culture, and inclusion begins with the intentional acknowledgment of individual experiences. Respecting differences translated into inclusive curriculum reviews, culturally responsive pedagogy, and leadership behaviors that challenged stereotypes.

Generally, the context of transformative leadership in inclusive education often covers important psychological grounding like empathy, respect, equity, ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence, and inclusivity, to develop reasonable decisions, creating a more just and responsive educational environment.

Transformational school leaders have an important role in cultivating institutional cultures that promote inclusion and uphold principles of social justice. Their responsibilities include encouraging collaborative partnerships, articulating a collective vision of inclusivity, and enhancing the professional competencies of educators (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). Positioned as key facilitators of inclusive transformation, these leaders are expected to operationalize policy frameworks into comprehensive and context-sensitive programs that support and unify teaching staff in pursuing inclusive objectives across the school community (Pedaste et al., 2024). In this study, academic leaders ensure that every policy they implement aligns with ethical responsibility to serve all students equally. Leaders who held strong positive beliefs about inclusive education were more likely to actively develop and promote policies that ensured equitable access and participation for all learners. Their attitudes shaped their willingness to prioritize inclusion not only as a policy mandate but as a moral and professional obligation rooted in social justice.

Transformational school leaders can offer both emotional and administrative support to inclusive practitioners while encouraging inclusive practices throughout the entire school community (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). For example, one academic leader believed in the importance of shared values among the stakeholders as this would help them to build a consistent inclusive framework within the institution. When such leaders actively cultivate shared values among faculty, staff, students, and parents, they are essentially laying the foundation for a school culture where inclusion is deeply rooted at its core. When school leaders consistently model these values in their decisions and actions, they set clear expectations and inspire others to align their behaviors accordingly.

Inclusive education extends beyond simply providing access to schools; it also involves teacher preparedness, curriculum adaptation, and fostering active student engagement (Aderemi, 2022). As such, the responsibilities of inclusive leadership are diverse. First, inclusive academic leaders must uphold social justice and democratic values within education systems, advocating for access, equity, and meaningful participation for all learners. Second, they must engage in critical reflection to confront and question oppressive structures, challenging prevailing assumptions and advocating for improved educational practices. Similarly, theorists emphasized that transformation involves uncovering underlying assumptions and developing new perspectives and ways of being that encourage personal development and drive social change (Gardner, 2006). Through these traits, academic leaders become agents of transformation, driving systemic change, dismantling barriers to learning, and building environments where diversity is not just acknowledged but embraced as a strength.

Conclusion

This paper explored different psychological traits of academic leaders towards the implementation of inclusive education. The findings revealed that academic leaders possess key psychological traits, like empathy, respect for differences, and a commitment to equity, which significantly influence their leadership practices. These traits shaped how leaders responded to student needs, developed inclusive policies, and created emotionally safe learning environments. In addition, the study found that these psychological traits translated into ethical leadership practices, including transparency, fairness, and participatory decision-making. Leaders grounded in ethical reasoning were more likely to confront institutional norms that perpetuated exclusion. Their leadership was marked by emotional intelligence and sensitivity to conflict, enabling them to deal with social tensions constructively.

There is a growing need to expand the understanding of inclusive education at both the institutional and personal levels. broadening the scope of inclusive education means recognizing it as both a structural responsibility and a personal moral imperative, requiring coordinated action, reflection, and ongoing professional growth across all levels of the educational community. Institutions should embed core values into leadership assessments, hiring criteria, and professional development frameworks to ensure that the inclusive ethos is consistently applied across all levels of decision-making and practice. Leaders must actively involve teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in co-developing institutional goals and policies. This ensures that inclusive practices are not perceived as top-down mandates but are collectively owned and contextually relevant. When inclusive education is grounded in collaboration and shared responsibility, it becomes more adaptive, resilient, and capable of meeting the diverse needs of learners.

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