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Manuscript ID:
EDU-2025-13049291

Volume: 13

Issue: 4

Month: September

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2320-2653

E-ISSN: 2582-1334

Received: 15.07.2025

Accepted: 20.08.2025

Published Online: 01.09.2025

Citation:

Srinivasavarathan, S., & Rajendran, P. (2025). The Interplay of Policy, Culture, and Practice: Perceptions of Principals' through the Index for Inclusion. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 13(4), 67–77.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v13i4.9291>



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The Interplay of Policy, Culture, and Practice: Perceptions of Principals' through the Index for Inclusion

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Abstract

Purpose: Assessing the Inclusive Education (IE) process is not linear and poses challenges to researchers because of several factors. One such factor is the complexity of defining the indicators for assessment inclusion. Using the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011), the researchers attempted to examine the opinions of school principals towards IE in Chennai City, Tamil Nadu State, India.

Design/methodology/approach: This study used a descriptive survey approach involving 81 school principals from secondary and higher secondary schools in Chennai city, Tamil Nadu State, India, using convenient sampling. The researchers used the Index for Inclusion (adapted from Booth & Ainscow, 2011) to measure school principals' perceptions of IE. This index measures three dimensions of inclusion: creating an inclusive culture, producing inclusive policies, and evolving inclusive practices. Principals were asked to rate their perceptions of IE in their schools on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = need more information, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree to some extent, 4 = definitely agree). Descriptive statistics, such as Mean and Standard Deviation, were used to determine principals' perceived level of inclusion in their schools. In addition, inferential statistics such as the Kruskal-Wallis test were used to determine the differences in the perception of principals based on the number of trainings they received in IE and the number of students with special needs (SWSN) in their schools. Spearman's correlation was used to determine the relationship between the three dimensions of the Index for Inclusion.

Findings: Descriptive data analysis revealed that the majority (88%) of the principals perceived that their schools performed at moderate to low levels in IE. In addition, of the 47 indicators, school principals were perceived to have a high level of inclusion with respect to eight indicators, a low level in eight indicators, and a moderate level of inclusion in 31 indicators. In addition, the results revealed that the number of trainings received in IE and the number of SWSN enrolled in their schools did not influence principals' perceptions of IE. Furthermore, significant positive correlations were reported between the dimensions of the Index for Inclusion, revealing the interconnectedness of inclusive school culture, policies, and practices.

Practical Implications: Given that 88% of principals perceive their schools to perform at moderate to low levels of inclusion, school improvement plans should be developed to focus on specific indicators where schools are underperforming. Such schools should be provided with targeted and practical support to improve IE. As the number of trainings received by principals did not influence their perceptions of inclusion, this suggests the need to revisit the content and delivery of IE training programs. As the number of special needs students did not influence principals' perceptions, inclusion efforts should focus on all students, not just those with disabilities. Schools should work to better align their inclusive policies, culture, and practices as these areas are interconnected.

Originality/value: This study's findings contribute to the existing body of literature by offering valuable insights into how principals' perceptions of IE can be measured using the Index for Inclusion.

Keywords: Index for Inclusion, Policy, Culture, Practice, Inclusive Education, School Principals, Perception, Chennai City, India

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) of the Government of India and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the [United Nations \(2015\)](#), particularly SDG4, place emphasise inclusive and quality education for all at the national and international levels, respectively. In this context, it is crucial to understand the performance of schools in inclusive education (IE). Measuring the implementation of IE in schools involves assessing various aspects, including school culture, practices, policies, and student outcomes, to determine how well they support all students, including those with disabilities, from diverse backgrounds or with unique learning needs ([Ainscow, 2020](#)). To address these imperatives, schools require practical tools to translate IE goals into actionable strategies. One such tool is the globally recognised Index for Inclusion.

Booth and Ainscow developed the Index for Inclusion as a practical and reflective tool to support inclusive school development. Its creation was a collaborative and iterative process that extended over three years, and involved a range of stakeholders with experience in education and inclusion. A key feature of the development process was multidisciplinary collaboration, which included teachers, parents, governors, researchers, and representatives from disability organisations. Their diverse expertise helped shape the index to address real-world challenges of exclusion in schools ([Booth and Ainscow 2011](#)).

The inclusion index is structured in three main dimensions:

- **Creating Inclusive Cultures:** This dimension emphasises establishing a welcoming and inclusive school culture where diversity is valued. Schools are encouraged to develop positive ethos that promotes respect, collaboration, and a sense of community among all stakeholders.
- **Producing Inclusive Policies:** This dimension focuses on developing policies that ensure that inclusivity is at the core of school operations. This involves examining and restructuring policies to eliminate exclusionary practices and ensure that school policies support participation, diversity, and equal opportunities.

- **Evolving Inclusive Practices:** This dimension aims to transform daily practices in classrooms and school activities to support diverse learning needs. It encourages adapting teaching methods, provides flexible support, and fosters an environment in which all students can participate meaningfully.

Each dimension included specific indicators and reflective questions designed to help schools assess their level of inclusion, identify barriers, and develop strategies for improvement. Thus, the index enables schools to align their culture, policies, and practices with inclusive values through a structured process of self-evaluation and improvement. It employs a five-phase model, from raising awareness to reviewing progress, which supports systematic school self-review ([McMaster and Elliot 2014](#); [Nes 2009](#); [Hick 2005](#)). Rather than serving as an external audit tool, it acts as an internal driver of change, encouraging dialogue on inclusion and equity among all members of the school community ([Booth, 2017](#); [Collins, 2012](#)).

A major strength of this index is its adaptability. International studies from contexts such as Norway, Spain, and the UAE show that it can be effectively tailored to suit various sociocultural and educational settings ([Alborno & Gaad, 2014](#); [Nes, 2009](#); [Azorin & Ainscow, 2020](#)). [Carrington and Duke \(2014\)](#) recognised it as a versatile resource applicable across various global settings. This flexibility allows schools to modify indicators and guide questions to meet their needs, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance. Consequently, the Index supports a more authentic, context-sensitive school improvement that integrates inclusive principles into ongoing development efforts and professional learning ([Azorín & Ainscow, 2020](#)).

Importantly, the Index views inclusion not as a specialised concern for students with disabilities but as a universal value. This calls for school-wide engagement by demonstrating how inclusive principles enhance teaching, leadership, and community relationships. This perspective positions inclusion as both a moral and practical responsibility aimed at dismantling exclusionary practices and affirming every learner's right to meaningful participation ([Booth & Ainscow, 2002](#); [Collins, 2012](#)).

Given the comprehensive nature of the Index for Inclusion, the role of school principals is pivotal in translating its principles into practice. As instructional leaders and policy implementers, principals are uniquely positioned to influence school culture, drive inclusive policy reforms, and support the evolution of classroom practices ([Higham & Booth, 2018](#); [Swaffield & Major 2019](#); [Dibessa, 2021](#), [Hick 2005](#); [Braunsteiner, & Mariano-Lapidus, 2021](#)). Their beliefs, attitudes, and leadership styles significantly shape how inclusivity is understood and enacted within schools ([Srinivasavarathan & Rajendran, 2023](#)). Therefore, understanding principals' perceptions of inclusion is critical, as their commitment and vision can either facilitate or hinder meaningful school-wide transformation. In this context, the present study surveyed school principals using the Index for Inclusion to examine their perceptions of IE across the dimensions of culture, policy, and practice.

School principals' perceptions of implementing IE through the Index for Inclusion can vary widely based on their experiences, resources, and the unique needs of their schools. For instance, [McMaster and Elliot \(2014\)](#) describe how one principal in New Zealand successfully used the index to foster inclusive practices by adapting it to the school's bicultural context and specific student needs, highlighting the framework's flexibility and the influence of school-specific factors on its implementation. Many principals view the Index for Inclusion positively because of its emphasis on creating inclusive cultures. They often appreciate the framework's focus on building a welcoming and respectful school environment where diversity is seen as a strength. Principals recognise that fostering an inclusive culture can enhance school climate, improve student engagement, and reduce behavioural issues ([Higham & Booth, 2018](#); [Swaffield & Major 2019](#); [Dibessa, 2021](#), [Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2021](#)).

A systematic review by [Li and Omar \(2024\)](#) sheds light on the vital role that school principals play in implementing IE and explores the challenges they encounter across various school settings. They emphasise that principals are pivotal agents in fostering inclusive learning environments ([Graham & Spandagou, 2011](#)). Their leadership influences not

only the development of inclusive school policies but also shapes school culture and classroom practices that accommodate diverse learners. Continuous professional development is seen as essential, as principals play a central role in building the capacity of teachers through training, mentoring, and distributed leadership practices ([DeMatthews, 2015](#)). Such support not only empowers teachers, but also helps them develop inclusive pedagogies that meet the needs of all learners.

This review underscores a range of persistent challenges that principals face in implementing IE. A major obstacle is a lack of adequate preparation and professional development related to inclusive practices. Many principals report being ill-equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead inclusive schools effectively ([Ira 2015](#)). This gap is often compounded by insufficient support systems, leading to a sense of isolation from decision makers and educational authorities ([Luddeckens et al., 2022](#)). Resource limitations exacerbate these problems. Many schools lack the financial resources, infrastructure, and specialised personnel required to meet the diverse needs of students. Overcrowded classrooms, limited access to assistive technologies, and insufficient professional development opportunities hinder the delivery of quality inclusive education ([Sijuola and Davidova 2022](#); [Subba et al. 2019](#)).

[Li and Omar \(2024\)](#) documented a lack of structured support for inclusive leadership. For instance, fewer than half of the 20 countries reviewed had specific policies addressing the role of principals in IE, indicating a lack of systemic prioritisation ([European Agency, 2018](#)). Furthermore, misalignment between district-level objectives and school-level practices creates confusion and inconsistency in their implementation ([Shields & Hesbol, 2020](#); [Emam & Alkharusi, 2018](#)). Principals often lack access to robust evaluation frameworks and reliable data, which limits their ability to make informed strategic decisions ([Fitzgerald and Radford, 2022](#)).

In addition, deeply rooted traditional mindsets, hierarchical decision-making structures, and insufficient teacher involvement in school-wide planning pose significant barriers for principals

to cultivate inclusive values ([Li & Omar, 2024](#)). Negative attitudes and misconceptions about disabilities and diversity among stakeholders (teachers, parents, and peers) continue to hinder progress. Furthermore, teachers often lack training and confidence in adopting inclusive pedagogies, and large class sizes reduce the feasibility of providing individualised support ([Mpu & Adu, 2021](#); [Yazicioglu, 2021](#)). Moreover, existing curricula and assessment methods often fail to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs, signalling the need for more inclusive and adaptive instructional tools.

Principals have the potential to be powerful advocates for IE. However, these efforts are often undermined by the systemic, cultural, and practical barriers discussed above. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that aligns policy, strengthens an inclusive school culture, and equips school leaders and teachers with the necessary tools and competencies. [Srinivasavarathan and Rajendran \(2023\)](#) documented that in the Indian context, research pertaining to school principals is scarce and available literature has examined only the leadership styles of principals, but has not analysed their influence on IE practices. In addition, the need to research their attitudes, beliefs, and practices towards IE is highlighted. Thus, in the present study, the investigators attempted to study the principals' perception of implementing IE in their schools using the Index for Inclusion through the following stated objectives.

Objectives

- To examine the perceptions of school principals on IE in their schools using an Index for Inclusion (policies, school culture, and practices).
- To determine the significant differences in the school principals' perceptions of IE due to variations in the number of trainings they received in IE and the number of SWSN in their school.
- To determine the relationship between school principals' perceptions of IE related to policies and school culture, school culture and practices, and practices and policies.

Assumptions

The level of school principals' perceptions of IE in their schools may vary.

Hypotheses

- There is no significant difference in the perception of school principals on IE due to variations in the number of trainings they received in IE.
- There is no significant difference in the perception of school principals regarding IE due to variations in the number of SWSN in their schools.
- There is no significant positive relationship between school principals' perceptions of IE related to policies and school culture.
- There is no significant positive relationship between school principals' perceptions of IE related to school culture and practices.
- There is no significant positive relationship between school principals' perceptions of IE related to practices and policies.

Methodology

A survey method was used in this study. For the purpose of the study, the investigators adapted the Index for Inclusion ([Booth & Ainscow, 2011](#)) and slightly modified the reflective questions (indicators) to suit the study context. The questionnaire included 47 indicators assessing school culture (13), inclusive policies (15), and inclusive practices (19). The study was conducted in Chennai City, and permission to collect data was obtained from the Chief Educational Officer. Further, the principals who volunteered only were asked to rate each indicator on a 4-point Likert scale (1= need more information, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree to some extent, 4 = definitely agree). The Index for Inclusion turned out to be a valid and reliable tool (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.904$ in the present study) to measure the inclusion process, and was administered to the school principal through an online survey. Eighty-one principals responded to the survey; therefore, the sample consisted of 81 school principals from 29 high and 52 higher secondary schools in Chennai City, Tamil Nadu State. Responses were received from 62 female principals (76.5%) and 19 male principals (23.5%). Descriptive statistics (mean, SD, mean $\pm$ 1SD) and inferential statistical techniques (Kruskal–Wallis test

and Spearman correlations) were used to analyse the data.

Results and Discussion

To determine the number and percentage of principals who perceived their schools to perform at low, moderate, and high levels of school functioning in IE, the mean and SD scores were calculated for each school principal. Using the mean $\pm$ 1 SD, the index for the inclusion scores of school principals was divided into three levels: low, moderate, and high. Accordingly, the principals having index for inclusion scores of 3.89 and above were perceived to be performing high in IE, 3.54 to 3.88 were moderate and 3.55 and below were low. The numbers and

percentages of principals in each group are presented in table1.

Level of Inclusion at Schools in Chennai as Perceived by Principals

From table1, it is evident that the majority (88%) of the principals perceived their schools to perform at moderate to low levels in implementing IE. This suggests a significant gap between the aspiration for IE and its current realisation in many schools. The results of [Sanahuja et al. \(2017\)](#) study contradict the present findings, which reported a high perceived level of IE implementation. In the present study, only 12 percentage of principals perceived that their schools performed high in IE.

Table1 Levels of Inclusion at Schools in Chennai as Perceived by Principals

Level of Inclusion	Percentage of Schools – Dimension wise			Percentage of Schools - Overall Inclusion
	Creating Inclusive Culture	Producing Inclusive Policies	Evolving Inclusive Practices	
High	-	27% (22)	17% (14)	12% (10)
Moderate	84% (68)	57% (46)	67% (54)	73% (59)
Low	16% (13)	16% (13)	16% (13)	15% (12)

Note: Number of Principals given within brackets

School Principals' Self-Reported Perceptions using the Index for Inclusion in Chennai City

Table 2 Principals' Perceived Level of Inclusion - Indicator Wise

Indicator	Mean	SD	Level
Dimension 1: Creating Inclusive School Culture			
Welcoming environment	3.716	0.656	M
Peer support among students	3.741	0.441	M
Teacher collaboration	3.704	0.535	M
Mutual respect between teachers and students	3.778	0.418	M
Teacher-parent partnerships	3.593	0.587	M
Principal-teacher collaboration	3.901	0.300	H
Community engagement	3.704	0.459	M
High expectations for all	3.654	0.595	M
Shared philosophy of inclusion	3.716	0.597	M
Equal student value	3.938	0.242	H
Humanising relationships	3.901	0.300	H
Removing learning barriers	3.840	0.369	M

Combating discrimination	3.889	0.316	H
Dimension 2: Making Inclusive Policies			
Inclusive vision and mission	3.778	0.500	M
Fair teacher recruitment	3.765	0.638	M
Supporting new teachers	3.741	0.667	M
Open admission policies	3.938	0.242	H
Accessible infrastructure	3.889	0.316	H
Supporting new students	3.988	0.111	H
Inclusive teaching groups	3.728	0.592	M
Coordinated support services	3.827	0.380	M
Inclusive teacher development	3.827	0.380	M
Inclusive education policies	3.716	0.553	M
Supportive department guidelines	3.802	0.431	M
Holistic curriculum	3.617	0.582	M
Reduced disciplinary exclusions	3.395	0.701	L
Improved attendance	3.642	0.482	M

Reduced bullying	3.728	0.707	M
Dimension 3: Evolving Inclusive Practices			
Inclusive lesson planning	3.901	0.339	H
Inclusive learning activities	3.827	0.412	M
Understanding of diversity	3.728	0.592	M
Student ownership in learning	3.481	0.594	L
Collaborative learning	3.667	0.500	M
Supportive assessment	3.716	0.506	M
Respect-based discipline	3.840	0.402	M
Teacher collaboration in planning	3.877	0.331	M
Regular teacher–special educator collaboration	3.543	0.895	L
Use of teaching assistants	3.235	1.040	L
Inclusive homework	3.728	0.475	M
Inclusive extracurricular activities	3.642	0.532	M
Diversity as a teaching resource	3.358	0.913	L
Use of staff expertise	3.815	0.477	M
Resource development	3.765	0.507	M
Community resource use	3.506	0.635	L
Fair resource allocation	3.778	0.447	M
Active SMC participation	3.519	0.910	L
SMC monitors inclusion	3.370	1.018	L

Note: Low - Mean values 3.55 and below; Moderate: Mean values between 3.88 and 3.54; High: Mean values 3.89 and above

From Table 2, it is revealed that out of the 47 indicators, school principals perceived a high level of inclusion with respect to eight indicators. These indicators primarily reflect the foundational aspects of creating a welcoming environment and ensuring access and respect. The indicators perceived as high in dimension 1 suggest that principals believe their schools have a relatively strong interpersonal foundation of respect and a stated commitment to valuing all students and minimising discrimination. Those in dimension 2 indicate that schools generally have policies and practices in place to welcome new students, ensure physical accessibility, and uphold a basic open-door admission policy within their locality. Only one indicator within dimension 3

was perceived as high. This suggests that principals believe that teachers conceptually consider diverse learning needs during planning, even if actual implementation faces challenges.

A significant majority (31 of 47 indicators) were perceived by principals to be at a moderate level of inclusion. These moderate scores highlight areas where some efforts are being made, but consistent or fully realised inclusive practices may still be developing. These indicators suggest ongoing efforts in fostering community, formalising inclusive intent, and engaging in supportive practices, but imply there is still significant room for growth and consistent implementation across all schools.

Crucially, eight indicators were perceived as performing at a low level of inclusion (eliminating disciplinary exclusions, student ownership in learning, collaboration between class teachers and special educators, use of teaching assistants, valuing diversity as resources, using community resources, active SMC participation, and monitoring). These represent critical areas in which school improvement plans need to be explicitly developed and targeted, and practical support is provided. The challenges highlighted by these low-scoring indicators align with broader issues principals often face, such as resource limitations, teacher preparedness, and systemic support. The UNESCO study by [Booth and Black-Hawkins \(2005\)](#) in a special primary school at Chennai revealed similar findings where the school had only limited contact with other individuals in the community and had difficulty in communication among themselves due to language issues. In addition, the investigators of the present study felt the need for teaching assistants to support teachers during the teaching-learning process and to reduce their workload. To achieve this, pre-service teachers may be engaged as teaching assistants during their internships or the government should recruit teaching assistants. Furthermore, the role of SMC is limited, and their participation is not active but passive in all tasks related to policy, culture, and practice, where attention is needed. Further implications for enhancing school performance in the low level of inclusion indicators are discussed.

Influence of Number of Trainings in IE and Number of SWSN on Principals' Perception on Implementation of IE at their Schools

Table 3 Influence of the Number of IE Trainings

	Creating inclusive cultures	Producing inclusive policies	Evolving inclusive practices	Overall index for inclusion
Chi-Square	0.147	4.982	2.268	2.279
df	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.986	.173	.519	.517

Note: The groups included those with no training, 1-3 training, 4-5 training, and >5 training.

The Kruskal-Wallis test results in table 3 indicate that the significance level was greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that there were no statistically significant differences in the overall inclusion index and its three dimensions among the groups of principals based on the number of training programs they attended. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_1) is not rejected.

Table 4 Influence of the Number of SWSN

	Creating inclusive cultures	Producing inclusive policies	Evolving inclusive practices	Overall index for inclusion
Chi-Square	5.730	7.440	4.605	7.218
df	3	3	3	3
Asymp. Sig.	.125	.059	.203	.065

Note: The groups included schools with no SWSN, 1-5, 6-10, and >10 SWSN.

The Kruskal-Wallis test results from table 4 indicate that the significance level was greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). This suggests that there are no statistically significant differences in the overall inclusion index and its three dimensions among the different groups of principals based on varying levels of enrolment of SWSN. Thus, the null hypothesis (H_2) is not rejected.

Relationship between School Principals' Perception on IE Related to Policies and School Culture; School Culture and Practices; and Practices and Policies

Table 5 Correlation Values of the Dimensions of the Index for Inclusion

		Creating Inclusive Cultures	Producing Inclusive Policies	Evolving Inclusive Practices	Overall Index for Inclusion
Spearman's rho	Creating Inclusive Cultures	1.000	.700**	.602**	.832**
	Producing Inclusive Policies		1.000	.527**	.807**
	Evolving Inclusive Practices			1.000	.886**

The results of Spearman's rho correlation in Table 5 indicate a strong positive correlation between Creating Inclusive Cultures and Producing Inclusive Policies ($r = +0.700$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that schools that prioritise inclusive cultures tend to develop policies that reflect inclusive ideals. Therefore, null hypothesis (H_3) is rejected.

A strong positive correlation ($r = +0.602$, $p < 0.05$) was found between Creating Inclusive Cultures and Evolving Inclusive Practices, indicating that inclusive cultures support practical inclusion strategies. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_4) is rejected.

There is a strong positive correlation ($r = +0.527$, $p < 0.05$) between inclusive policies and practices, suggesting that well-developed inclusive policies are linked to more inclusive practices within schools. Therefore, null hypothesis (H_5) is rejected.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r = +0.832$, $p < 0.05$) between Creating Inclusive Cultures and the Overall Index for Inclusion, demonstrating that fostering inclusive school cultures significantly contributes to the overall inclusiveness of the school environment. The correlation ($r = +0.807$, $p < 0.05$) between Producing Inclusive Policies and the Overall Index for Inclusion was found to be positive and significant, underscoring the role of comprehensive policies in enhancing the overall inclusive environment within schools. The correlation between Evolving Inclusive Practices

and the Overall Index for Inclusion was large and positive ($r = +0.886$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting that schools with strong inclusive practices significantly contribute to the overall inclusion.

Similar to the current results, [Nes \(2009\)](#) highlighted that these three dimensions in the Index for Inclusion are intertwined and influence each other in developing inclusive schools in the Norwegian context. For example, in order to realise respect for diversity (culture dimension), one has to prioritise strategies for minimising bullying (policy dimension), which will encourage stakeholders to practice building good relationships in and beyond classrooms (practice dimension). Similar views have been documented by [Conn and Davis \(2023\)](#) in the Welsh context.

Implications for School Development and Students Inclusion

Eighty-eight percent of the principals perceived their schools to perform at moderate to low levels of inclusion. Therefore, school improvement plans need to be developed to focus on the specific indicators where principals perceive their schools as underperforming.

In schools that are perceived by the principals to be performing at low inclusion levels, the principals and other stakeholders should be provided more targeted, practical support to improve IE.

To reduce discriminatory exclusions, the school culture should avoid zero-tolerance policies, avoid labelling of students, use restorative justice approaches, and provide positive behavioural interventions and support.

To enhance self-paced learning among students, inclusive pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning and enquiry-based activities should be followed to transact concepts. In addition, personalised learning plans should be developed. Schools should be encouraged to use digital platforms that facilitate the delivery of immediate feedback to students, thereby enhancing self-paced learning. In addition, frameworks such as UDL can be utilised by schools to overcome barriers, such as the digital divide in the teaching-learning process, and to include all students ([Rajendran et al., 2023](#)).

Recruitment of additional special education teachers at each block will enhance the collaboration between special education and regular teachers. In addition, adapting the co-teaching methodology will help the partnership between special and general school teachers which further enhances students' teaching-learning processes.

The post of teaching assistant should be created. Teaching assistants should be appointed to each school to meet the needs of the individual students. In this regard, pre-service teachers can be trained to act as teaching assistants during their internship period to support teachers in general classrooms.

The low scores in School Management Committee (SMC)-related indicators highlight a critical need for systematic policy-driven improvements. This implies a necessity for strengthening internal governance and accountability mechanisms within schools, including the effective and active functioning of SMCs, to ensure consistent monitoring and implementation of inclusive practices.

Thus, low-performing indicators pinpoint areas requiring targeted and actionable interventions, encompassing shifts in pedagogical approaches, resource allocation, and systemic governance structures to truly foster inclusive environments.

The number of IE trainings received by the principals did not influence their perceptions of inclusion. Therefore, there is a need to revisit the content and delivery of IE training programmes.

The number of special students in the schools also did not influence the principals' perceptions. This implies that inclusion efforts should focus on all students, not just on those with disabilities.

Schools should work on better aligning their inclusive policies, culture, and practices, as these areas are interconnected.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

While insightful, the study's findings should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. First, it relied solely on principals' self-reported perceptions using an adapted Index for Inclusion, which, while valuable for internal reflection, may introduce social desirability bias and may not reflect actual inclusive practices. Future research should incorporate multi-informant designs that include the voices of teachers,

students, parents, and support staff to triangulate the data and better understand the realities of inclusive implementation. Second, the use of convenience sampling from 81 principals in Chennai limits the generalisability of the results beyond this local context. To enhance external validity, future studies should consider employing random or stratified sampling techniques across a broader geographic and demographic spectrum, including rural and under resourced schools, to capture a more diverse range of experiences and challenges in implementing IE. Third, the descriptive, correlational design allows the exploration of relationships between dimensions of inclusion, but does not establish causality. Strong correlations found between inclusive culture, policies, and practices cannot confirm directional influence; future research should consider longitudinal or experimental designs to examine how changes in one dimension (e.g. inclusive policy reform) lead to subsequent changes in culture or classroom practices over time; although no significant effects were found in the number of inclusive education trainings or SWSN enrolled, the study did not explore other influencing factors or investigate why these variables showed limited impact. These constraints highlight the need for more robust, mixed-method, and longitudinal studies to deepen our understanding of IE implementation.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the critical leadership role of school principals in advancing IE in Chennai, highlighting principals' perceptions of policies, culture, and practices. With 88% of principals perceiving their schools to operate at moderate-to-low levels of inclusion, the need for decisive, reflective, and responsive school leadership is more evident than ever. The use of the Index for Inclusion has made it clear that inclusive culture, policies, and practices are not isolated constructs but deeply interwoven dimensions that require strategic alignment—an endeavour that sits squarely within the principal's sphere of influence.

Importantly, the study found that neither the number of IE trainings attended by principals nor the number of students with special needs enrolled in schools significantly affected perceptions of

inclusion. This underscores a vital truth: it is not the frequency of professional development but the quality, relevance, and practical application of such training—facilitated and championed by school leaders—that drives meaningful change. It also reinforces the necessity for principals to lead inclusion as a whole-school approach, extending beyond disability to embrace diversity in all forms. The strong correlation observed between inclusive culture, policies, and practices further reinforces the principal's central role in cultivating inclusive values, designing inclusive policies, and ensuring their enactment through daily school practices. As instructional leaders and culture-builders, principals are uniquely positioned to model inclusive attitudes, foster collaborative teaching approaches, ensure the use of differentiated pedagogies, and support student-centred learning environments.

Therefore, school principals must view inclusion not as an administrative obligation or externally imposed agenda but as an ethical and professional commitment to equity and excellence for all students. By spearheading efforts to strengthen school culture, ensure inter professional collaboration, and enhance governance through empowered School Management Committees, principals can create environments where every learner feels valued, supported, and able to succeed. The future of inclusive education depends significantly on how school principals interpret their role—not merely as managers of systems but as transformational leaders who inspire inclusive practices and shape educational communities that truly leave no child behind. Future efforts must focus on enhancing principal preparation and embedding inclusive values at all levels of the educational ecosystem.

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