



INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP FOR ACHIEVING SECONDARY SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS IN FCT, ABUJA

Ayoku, Oba Baba, Ajayi, Rilwan Abayomi & Shittu, Afeez Adeshina, Sagaya, Abiodun Amdalat

^{1,2,3,4} Department of Educational Management and Counselling, Faculty of Education, Alhikmah
University Ilorin Nigeria
Email: obaayoku@alhikmah.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study examined the imperative of inclusive school leadership as a strategic approach for achieving school effectiveness in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Drawing on Distributed Leadership Theory, the paper argued that leadership functions should be shared across principals, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to enhance collaboration, participation, and collective problem-solving within school environments. The theory provided a useful lens for understanding how inclusive leadership supports shared decision-making, strengthens school climate, and improves instructional quality. Schools in the FCT operate within rapidly expanding and culturally diverse contexts, which present complex administrative and instructional challenges that traditional hierarchical leadership models can no longer address effectively. Inclusive leadership, supported by the principles of distributed leadership, promotes fairness, equity, communication, and teacher empowerment, thereby improving motivation and student learning outcomes. The paper identifies key barriers to inclusive leadership in FCT schools, including centralized decision-making cultures, resistance to change, leadership skills gaps, and cultural as well as bureaucratic constraints. It highlights the implications for principals, teachers, policymakers, and community members and concludes with practical suggestions such as leadership capacity building, strengthening teacher leadership roles, establishing collaborative structures, improving communication channels, and implementing systematic monitoring and evaluation practices. The paper demonstrated that adopting inclusive and distributed leadership approaches is essential for improving school effectiveness and supporting sustainable educational development in Abuja.

Keywords: Inclusive leadership, school effectiveness, stakeholder participation, shared decision making, school climate.

Introduction

School leadership is a decisive factor in determining the quality and performance of schools in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Bush (2020) explained that school leaders strongly influence teaching quality, teacher commitment, and the overall school climate, particularly in environments where learners come from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Abuja has experienced rapid population growth, leading to overcrowded classrooms and increased learner diversity, which places greater demands on school principals. Pont (2021) noted, urban school systems now require leadership approaches that are flexible, collaborative, and responsive to changing educational realities.



Traditionally, many FCT schools have relied on centralized and authority-based leadership structures where principals make most decisions. While this model once supported administrative stability, it is becoming less effective given current school complexities. Eacott (2018) argued that leadership systems dependent solely on hierarchy often fail to respond to the needs of modern schools. Increasing enrolment and rising expectations from parents in Abuja place new pressures on schools, making collaborative and participatory forms of leadership more necessary for sustaining school effectiveness.

Inclusive school leadership offers a more suitable leadership approach for addressing these challenges. Ryan (2016) described inclusive leadership as a model that values participation, fairness, and shared responsibility among stakeholders. When principals engage teachers, students, and parents in decision-making processes, they build trust and strengthen the school community. Ainscow (2020) added that inclusive leadership fosters belonging and respect, which improves motivation among teachers and confidence among learners. This collaborative culture supports school improvement and enhances overall school performance.

Research has consistently shown that shared decision-making improves instructional quality and strengthens teacher commitment. Leithwood and Sun (2018) explained that teachers contribute more effectively when they participate in designing school policies because they better understand the realities of the classroom. Harris and Jones (2019) added that opportunities for teachers to lead committees or academic initiatives promote professional growth and deepen collaboration. However, many FCT schools still struggle with centralized practices that limit participation and reduce morale. Day et al. (2020) found that such non-inclusive practices weaken teamwork and slow down school improvement.

These gaps highlight the urgent need for FCT schools to adopt more inclusive leadership models. Schools that maintain one-directional communication, restricted decision-making, and limited stakeholder engagement often experience resistance, low morale, and reduced accountability. Murphy (2017) observed that when communication is weak or exclusionary, misunderstandings increase and collaboration declines. Given the diversity and rapid growth of schools in Abuja, inclusive leadership is necessary for creating responsive, equitable, and effective learning environments.

Therefore, this paper argues that inclusive school leadership is essential for achieving and sustaining school effectiveness in the Federal Capital Territory. As the OECD (2022) emphasized, effective school systems require leadership that promotes equity, shared responsibility, and collaboration. Inclusive leadership provides a strategic pathway for FCT schools to strengthen school climate, improve instructional practices, and enhance student outcomes. This introduction sets the foundation for examining how inclusive leadership can transform school practices and contribute to long-term educational improvement in Abuja.

Theoretical Framework

Distributed Leadership Theory

This study is anchored on Distributed Leadership Theory, which provides a suitable analytical lens for understanding inclusive school leadership in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Distributed Leadership Theory emerged from the work of Spillane (2006), who argued that leadership should not reside in one individual but should be stretched across people, situations, and interactions within a school. The theory proposes that leadership is a collective



social process in which multiple actors share responsibility for decision-making, problem-solving, and school improvement. This framework aligns strongly with the principles of inclusive leadership because it emphasizes collaboration, shared expertise, and active participation of all stakeholders.

Distributed leadership assumes that teachers, parents, and other school community members possess important knowledge and skills that can support organizational effectiveness. Harris (2023) explained that when leadership responsibilities are shared, schools develop more innovative practices, strengthen professional relationships, and enhance teacher commitment. Leithwood (2020) also noted that distributed leadership increases teacher motivation because it recognizes teachers as partners in shaping instructional and organizational decisions. This is particularly relevant in FCT schools, where diverse learner needs and rapid school expansion require a leadership approach that effectively mobilizes collective expertise.

The theory further supports inclusive leadership by promoting collaborative structures within the school. Gronn (2009) stated that distributed leadership thrives in environments that encourage mutual trust, shared responsibility, and open communication. When school leaders intentionally distribute tasks, teachers feel valued and become more willing to contribute to school improvement. This reduces overreliance on the principal and creates a culture where leadership becomes a shared endeavour rather than an individual burden. Such an approach is essential in Abuja schools, where principals often manage large populations and face complex administrative and instructional demands.

Distributed Leadership Theory also underscores the importance of context in leadership practice. Spillane and Diamond (2017) noted that leadership interactions depend on the organisational environment, available resources, and the relationships among staff. This suggests that for inclusive leadership to be effective in the FCT, schools must create enabling environments where teachers and parents feel confident to express ideas, participate in committees, and contribute meaningfully to decision-making. When stakeholders perceive leadership as open and participatory, collaboration increases and school effectiveness improves.

In summary, Distributed Leadership Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for examining inclusive school leadership in FCT, Abuja. Its emphasis on shared responsibility, collaboration, and stakeholder participation reflects the central arguments of this paper. By adopting distributed leadership principles, schools can strengthen teacher engagement, enhance instructional quality, and build positive school climates that support improved student outcomes. The theory therefore offers a relevant framework for explaining how inclusive leadership contributes to school effectiveness in diverse and rapidly growing educational contexts.

Conceptual Clarifications

Inclusive School Leadership

Inclusive school leadership referred to a leadership style in which principals created conditions that enabled all members of the school community to participate meaningfully in decisions, teaching, learning, and school improvement. Ryan (2020) explained that inclusive leaders reduced barriers that limited the participation of teachers, parents, and students in school activities. Ainscow and Messiou (2021) noted that this form of leadership recognised individual strengths and ensured that everyone had opportunities to contribute. They added that inclusion



required leaders to build belonging, respect, and trust. Schools that applied inclusive leadership encouraged open dialogue, collaboration, and joint problem-solving.

The relevance of inclusive leadership increased as schools became more diverse. Li (2022) stated that when schools served students and teachers from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, principals could not rely on top-down decisions. Inclusive leaders sought out different perspectives and ensured that underrepresented voices were heard. Bush (2023) explained that this leadership used consistent communication, regular consultation, and structures that involved teachers and parents in policy development and school governance. These practices reduced isolation and strengthened cohesion.

Shared decision-making was a key feature of inclusive leadership. Armstrong (2022) argued that inclusive leaders created participatory cultures in which teachers contributed to decisions on instruction, resources, and school policies. Omodan (2023) added that giving teachers opportunities to lead committees or programmes improved their confidence and sense of ownership. This strengthened collaboration and supported instructional improvement. Ryan (2020) emphasised that inclusive principals balanced authority with empowerment.

Inclusive leadership also promoted fairness and equity. Armstrong (2022) found that inclusive principals identified individuals at risk of marginalisation and helped them participate fully in school life. This included new teachers, students with learning needs, and parents who were less involved. Ainscow and Messiou (2021) explained that such practices created cultures where differences were valued. This improved relationships, reduced conflict, and strengthened engagement.

Studies further showed that inclusive leadership supported teacher development. Omodan (2023) explained that inclusive leaders encouraged teachers to join professional development programmes and take leadership roles. Li (2022) noted that distributed leadership helped teachers grow professionally and build shared visions. Bush (2023) added that these practices improved teacher retention because teachers felt respected and valued.

In FCT schools, inclusive leadership was especially important. Abuja schools were diverse and faced challenges linked to population growth and staffing variations. Inclusive leadership helped build trust, encouraged professional collaboration, and promoted responsive school environments. Ryan (2020) concluded that inclusive leadership was essential for addressing modern school challenges and achieving school effectiveness.

School Effectiveness

School effectiveness referred to the ability of a school to achieve its goals in teaching, learning, and institutional development. Mulford (2020) explained that it included academic performance, teaching quality, school climate, and relationships among stakeholders. Scheerens (2021) added that effective schools set clear objectives, used structured curricula, monitored teaching and learning, and applied evidence-based strategies. This approach recognised that outcomes depended on leadership, teacher competence, resources, and student engagement.

School climate was central to effectiveness. Thapa (2022) found that schools with supportive and safe climates achieved stronger academic and behavioural outcomes. Harris (2023) explained that effective schools valued communication, fairness, and respect, which strengthened teaching and learning. Okeke (2022) added that in Nigeria, strong leadership,



teacher collaboration, and parental engagement supported effectiveness, even when resources were limited.

Leadership played a major role in determining effectiveness. Harris (2023) noted that effective leaders motivated teachers, allocated resources wisely, and supported instructional quality. Mulford (2020) added that combining instructional leadership with participatory practices improved teacher commitment and school culture.

Teacher professionalism and collaboration were also important. Scheerens (2021) stated that teacher commitment, professional growth, and participation in decision-making were indicators of effectiveness. Thapa (2022) found that supportive leadership and positive climates encouraged innovative teaching that improved outcomes.

Parental and community involvement strengthened school effectiveness. Okeke (2022) concluded that meaningful engagement improved accountability and learning outcomes. Epstein (2018) added that school–family partnerships enhanced students’ experiences and supported shared responsibility.

School effectiveness depended on leadership quality, teacher competence, positive climate, and stakeholder involvement. Harris (2023) emphasised that these elements shaped a school’s ability to meet its academic and social goals. In FCT schools, achieving effectiveness required leaders who integrated instructional guidance, teacher development, and participatory leadership into everyday practice.

Rationale for Inclusive School Leadership in FCT, Abuja

Inclusive school leadership is crucial in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, because schools serve diverse learners and teachers who require collaborative and equitable approaches. Principals need leadership practices that encourage participation and shared responsibility. Ryan (2020) noted that inclusive leadership helps schools manage complex environments by valuing stakeholder contributions and supporting collective problem-solving. Involving teachers, parents, and students in decisions strengthens relationships and promotes a sense of belonging. This approach enables schools to build positive cultures where everyone feels connected to the school’s goals.

a. Diversity of Learners and Teachers in FCT: The Federal Capital Territory brings together students and teachers from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Bush (2023) noted that this diversity creates varied learning needs and expectations, while teachers also differ in training and teaching styles. Harris (2023) explained that this diversity can be challenging but also beneficial when principals use inclusive leadership. By promoting collaboration and knowledge sharing, inclusive leaders ensure all learners are supported. Without such practices, some groups may become marginalized, affecting school outcomes.

b. Need for Shared Decision-Making: Shared decision-making is central to inclusive leadership. Leithwood (2020) explained that policies become more effective when principals consult teachers and stakeholders. Teachers’ classroom experience makes their contributions vital to planning. Ryan (2020) added that involvement builds ownership and commitment. In FCT schools, shared decision-making reduces conflict, enhances motivation, and ensures policies match classroom needs, leading to better school effectiveness.



c. Importance of Equity and Participation: Equity and participation are essential for inclusive leadership. Armstrong (2022) stated that inclusive principals identify underrepresented groups and provide opportunities for engagement. In FCT schools, this may involve supporting new teachers, learners with difficulties, and parents with low involvement. Ainscow and Messiou (2021) explained that such practices build belonging and motivation. Schools that prioritise fairness and inclusion improve trust, collaboration, and teaching–learning outcomes.

d. Need to Address Leadership–Teacher Relationship Gaps: Leadership–teacher relationship gaps hinder school effectiveness in Abuja. Bush (2023) observed that directive leadership limits teacher engagement and lowers morale. Omodan (2023) explained that inclusive leadership closes these gaps by promoting trust, open communication, and recognition of teachers’ expertise. When teachers are treated as partners, instructional quality and commitment improve, creating a more cohesive school environment.

The diversity in FCT schools, the need for shared decision-making, the importance of equity, and the need to strengthen leader–teacher relationships all justify adopting inclusive leadership. Ryan (2020) stressed that inclusive leadership helps mobilise stakeholders, build capacity, and improve student outcomes. For FCT schools facing rapid growth and high expectations, inclusive leadership is essential for achieving effectiveness.

Barriers to Inclusive School Leadership in FCT, Abuja

Inclusive school leadership has strong potential to improve participation and equity, but several barriers make its implementation difficult in FCT, Abuja. These barriers include centralized decision-making, resistance to change, inadequate leadership training, and cultural or administrative constraints.

a. Centralized decision-making culture: Many Nigerian schools, including those in the FCT, operate under highly hierarchical systems where authority rests with a few individuals. Ebokwa (2021) noted that such centralization limits teacher and community involvement because major decisions are made without consultation. This discourages shared leadership and reduces responsiveness to the diverse needs of FCT school communities.

b. Resistance to change: Inclusive leadership requires moving away from traditional top-down management, yet many stakeholders remain reluctant to adopt new practices. Joseph (2025) reported that entrenched habits and scepticism toward participatory models hinder inclusive efforts. Some principals fear shared decision-making will slow administration, while some teachers see it as added workload, making it difficult to sustain inclusive initiatives.

c. Inadequate leadership training and capacity-building: Many school leaders lack the skills and confidence needed for inclusive practices. Uwakwe (2025) found that weak leadership preparation and accountability hindered equitable education. ScholarLink Institute (2025) also highlighted funding shortages and limited professional development opportunities for principals. Without targeted training on participation, equity, and change management, inclusive leadership is difficult to implement consistently in FCT schools.

d. Cultural and administrative constraints: Cultural beliefs and administrative structures also restrict inclusion. Okaforcha (2025) noted that principals often navigate deep-seated norms that limit engagement with marginalized groups. Bureaucratic systems in schools’ further complicate change. Ike (2018) observed that rigid administrative procedures slow innovation and reduce principals’ ability to distribute leadership.



These barriers create systemic challenges for inclusive leadership in FCT schools. Centralization weakens shared governance, resistance slows progress, weak training reduces leadership capacity, and cultural or bureaucratic constraints limit participation. Addressing these issues through reforms, professional development, and cultural change is essential for inclusive leadership to thrive.

Implications for School Administration in FCT

Inclusive school leadership has major implications for how schools in the Federal Capital Territory operate. Harris (2023) noted that leadership practices influence school culture, instructional quality, and overall performance. When principals lead inclusively, they promote collaboration, fairness, and participation among teachers, parents, and community members. Understanding these implications helps guide policies and interventions that support school effectiveness in the FCT.

For principals, inclusive leadership shifts their role from directing to facilitating. Ryan (2020) explained that principals must involve teachers and stakeholders in decisions, build trust, and support professional development. This requires strong communication, emotional intelligence, and the ability to manage diverse viewpoints. Principals must therefore move away from rigid hierarchical leadership toward more collaborative and responsive approaches.

Teachers also experience significant changes under inclusive leadership. Omodan (2023) reported that teachers gain greater ownership of school initiatives and become more confident and committed when they participate in decision-making. Inclusive leadership expects teachers to collaborate, communicate openly, and contribute to curriculum and instructional improvements, which supports their professional growth.

For policymakers and UBEB, inclusive leadership demands supportive policies, effective training, and strong accountability systems. Ebokwa (2021) emphasized that participatory leadership succeeds only when structures exist to help principals and teachers adopt inclusive practices. Policymakers must therefore prioritise training in shared leadership, equity, and stakeholder engagement, while ensuring schools receive ongoing support.

Community involvement is another key implication. Okaforcha (2025) explained that active engagement from parents and local organizations strengthens school–community relationships and improves accountability. In the diverse context of FCT, such participation helps schools respond effectively to community needs and enhances both teaching and learning.

Suggestions

Adopting inclusive school leadership in the Federal Capital Territory requires deliberate strategies that target principals, teachers, policymakers, and the wider community. Research consistently demonstrated that inclusive practices improve school effectiveness, teacher motivation, and student outcomes when implemented systematically (Ryan, 2020; Omodan, 2023). The following suggestions provide practical steps for strengthening inclusive leadership in FCT schools.

a. Training and Capacity Building on Inclusive Leadership

Principals and school leaders must receive targeted training that equips them with the knowledge and skills required for participatory, equity-focused leadership. Harris (2023) explained that professional development programs should focus on collaborative decision-



making, instructional leadership, conflict resolution, and cultural competence. Training should include workshops, mentoring programs, and coaching sessions that help principals transition from hierarchical models to facilitative leadership styles. Uwakwe (2025) emphasized that ongoing capacity building is essential for principals to respond effectively to diverse student populations and teacher teams. By investing in leadership development, schools ensure that principals can lead inclusively and build cultures of trust, collaboration, and accountability.

b. Strengthening Teacher Leadership Roles

Inclusive leadership requires teachers to actively participate in decision-making and take on leadership responsibilities within the school. Omodan (2023) explained that teachers should be encouraged to lead committees, mentor colleagues, coordinate academic programs, and contribute to professional development initiatives. This involvement increases teacher ownership, motivation, and professional growth. Bush (2023) further emphasized that distributing leadership responsibilities reduces the burden on principals while promoting collaboration and innovation. In FCT schools, principals should establish formal structures for teacher participation, such as instructional committees, curriculum development teams, and peer mentoring systems, to enhance collective decision-making and strengthen instructional practices.

c. Establishing Collaborative Decision-Making Structures

Schools must create clear and sustainable structures that facilitate shared decision-making among principals, teachers, and stakeholders. Ryan (2020) explained that inclusive leadership works best when participation is institutionalized rather than occasional. Schools can establish committees, councils, and forums that regularly review school policies, monitor progress, and propose improvements. Harris (2023) noted that collaborative structures improve transparency, reduce misunderstandings, and align school policies with classroom realities. In FCT, where schools face diverse student needs and large teacher teams, structured collaboration ensures that decisions reflect the collective expertise of all stakeholders and that school goals are effectively achieved.

d. Improving Communication Channels

Effective communication is central to inclusive leadership. Principals must establish mechanisms for open dialogue with teachers, students, parents, and community members. Okaforcha (2025) explained that communication channels should be regular, transparent, and accessible, allowing stakeholders to share ideas, provide feedback, and express concerns. Digital platforms, newsletters, and structured meetings can be used to maintain consistent engagement. Clear communication ensures that decisions are understood, feedback is incorporated, and stakeholders feel valued. In the FCT, where schools serve culturally and socioeconomically diverse communities, effective communication is essential for building trust, improving cooperation, and sustaining school improvement initiatives.

e. Monitoring and Evaluation of Leadership Practices

Inclusive leadership should be continuously assessed to ensure that it positively impacts school effectiveness. Ebokwa (2021) emphasized that monitoring and evaluation systems must measure participation levels, teacher engagement, student outcomes, and community involvement. UBEB and school management teams can use regular performance reviews, stakeholder surveys, and classroom observations to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership practices. Feedback from these evaluations should inform professional development and policy adjustments. Continuous monitoring ensures that inclusive practices are maintained, challenges



are addressed promptly, and schools consistently improve teaching, learning, and management processes.

Conclusion

Inclusive school leadership is important in FCT, Abuja because it helps school leaders respond effectively to the diversity and evolving needs of their school communities. It enables principals to involve teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in meaningful decision-making, which improves trust, strengthens collaboration, and creates a positive school climate. Through inclusive practices, leaders promote fairness, encourage shared responsibility, and ensure that every member of the school community feels respected and connected to the school's vision. This approach ultimately enhances teaching, learning, and overall school performance.

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