

# INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION: TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE THROUGH EQUITY, EMPATHY, AND DIGITAL INNOVATION

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## Abstract

The rapid evolution of global education systems in the digital era requires leadership models that not only prioritize academic excellence but also cultivate inclusive, empathetic, and equitable school cultures. This study explores the transformative role of inclusive leadership in fostering a culture of equity, empathy, and digital innovation within educational institutions. Grounded in the theoretical framework of transformational and inclusive leadership, this research investigates how school leaders integrate digital technologies to promote inclusive practices that address diverse learner needs. Using a mixed-method approach involving surveys and interviews with teachers and administrators across 20 schools, the study examines the relationships between inclusive leadership behaviors, digital inclusion strategies, and school culture transformation. Findings reveal that inclusive leaders who emphasize empathy-driven decision-making, equitable digital access, and collaborative innovation significantly improve teacher morale, student engagement, and institutional adaptability. Moreover, digital innovation acts as a key enabler for fostering participation and reducing barriers in educational communities. The research concludes that sustainable educational transformation in the 21st century requires leaders to embrace inclusivity not only as a moral imperative but also as a strategic framework for digital equity and cultural growth. These insights provide a foundation for policy formulation, leadership training, and the redefinition of school management paradigms toward more inclusive and future-ready learning environments.

**Keywords:** Inclusive leadership, School culture, Equity, Empathy, Digital innovation.

## INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, education systems worldwide are undergoing rapid transformation driven by globalization, technological advancement, and increasing sociocultural diversity. These dynamic forces demand a new paradigm of leadership—one that transcends traditional hierarchical models and embraces inclusivity, empathy, and digital innovation as fundamental values for sustainable school development (Shields, 2023; Fullan & Quinn, 2022). Inclusive leadership in education emphasizes fairness, respect, and shared responsibility, creating an environment where all individuals—students, teachers, and staff—feel valued, empowered, and capable of contributing meaningfully to the school community (Khalifa, 2021). This leadership model recognizes diversity not as a challenge but as a strategic asset that fosters creativity, collaboration, and collective growth (Nguyen et al., 2023).

The increasing integration of digital technologies in education further underscores the need for inclusive leadership practices. As schools adopt artificial intelligence, data analytics, and digital learning platforms, educational leaders face the dual challenge of ensuring equitable access to digital resources and cultivating an empathetic culture that humanizes technology-driven learning (Zhao & Watterston, 2023). Research shows that when leaders apply empathy and equity-oriented principles to digital transformation, they not only bridge access gaps but also enhance social cohesion and well-being within the learning environment (Ainscow & Messiou, 2022; Leithwood et al., 2021). Therefore, digital innovation

must be approached not merely as a technical upgrade but as a holistic process that aligns with inclusive values and pedagogical ethics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the urgency of such leadership. School closures, digital divides, and social isolation revealed systemic inequities and highlighted the need for empathetic, adaptable, and digitally literate leaders (UNESCO, 2021). Inclusive leaders responded to these challenges by fostering communication, providing psychosocial support, and ensuring that learning continuity prioritized both access and emotional well-being (Harris & Jones, 2022). Their actions underscore a critical insight: inclusive leadership is not only about representation and equity but also about resilience and collective empathy in the face of uncertainty.

Despite growing scholarly attention, there remains a gap in understanding how inclusive leadership practices specifically transform school culture through digital innovation. Many schools struggle to integrate digital technologies in ways that genuinely reflect inclusivity and shared empowerment (Baehr, 2023). This study addresses that gap by examining how inclusive educational leaders leverage equity, empathy, and digital innovation to create collaborative, inclusive, and future-ready school cultures. Grounded in transformational and inclusive leadership theories, the research explores the interconnections between leadership behaviors, technological adaptation, and cultural transformation within diverse educational contexts.

Ultimately, this paper argues that inclusive leadership is not merely a desirable trait but a foundational framework for reimagining educational culture in the digital age. By fostering empathy-driven decision-making, equitable access to technology, and shared digital innovation, inclusive leaders can cultivate educational environments that are both human-centered and future-oriented—transforming schools into thriving communities of learning, belonging, and innovation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualizing Inclusive Leadership in Education

Inclusive leadership is grounded in the principles of democratic participation, respect for diversity, and ethical responsibility. According to Khalifa (2021), inclusive leadership in schools involves “recognizing and dismantling barriers that hinder participation and belonging while promoting justice-oriented practices that empower marginalized voices.” This form of leadership integrates the moral imperative of social inclusion with pragmatic strategies for institutional reform (Shields, 2023). Unlike transactional leadership, which prioritizes efficiency and compliance, inclusive leadership emphasizes relational ethics and shared vision—qualities that nurture collaboration and collective efficacy (Leithwood & Sun, 2023).

The theoretical foundation of inclusive leadership draws on transformational leadership and distributed leadership models. Transformational leadership inspires followers toward shared goals and personal growth, while distributed leadership encourages collaborative decision-making (Fullan & Quinn, 2022). Inclusive leadership, however, adds a moral and cultural dimension: it seeks not only to empower but to ensure that empowerment is equitable and empathetic (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2022). Within educational contexts, this translates into practices such as participatory governance, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the creation of psychologically safe spaces for learning (Ainscow & Messiou, 2022).

### Equity and Social Justice in Educational Leadership

Equity forms the ethical foundation of inclusive leadership. As argued by Ospina and Foldy (2023), equitable leadership involves redistributing power and resources to counteract structural inequalities embedded in educational systems. In schools, equity manifests through differentiated instruction, access to digital learning tools, and inclusive policy frameworks that address socioeconomic disparities (Nguyen et al., 2023). Scholars have shown that when leaders intentionally prioritize equity, they foster a sense of fairness and belonging that directly enhances student engagement and teacher motivation (Murtadha & Watts, 2021).

The concept of equity has evolved alongside changing educational paradigms. Recent research underscores the need for intersectional approaches, recognizing how gender, ethnicity, and disability intersect with digital access and learning outcomes (Ainscow & Messiou, 2022; Dervin, 2022). For instance, UNESCO’s *Education for All* report (2021) highlights that equitable digital learning environments are essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasizes inclusive and quality education for all. Inclusive leaders, therefore, play a crucial role as mediators—balancing the tension between policy mandates and local realities by contextualizing equity-based strategies within diverse communities.

### Empathy as the Core of Inclusive Leadership

Empathy is not only an interpersonal skill but a leadership philosophy that sustains inclusive practices. Goleman and Boyatzis (2021) describe empathy as the “emotional intelligence competency that enables leaders to sense, understand, and respond appropriately to others’ emotions.” In educational settings, empathetic leadership cultivates trust, strengthens teacher-student relationships, and enhances organizational well-being (Baehr, 2023). Studies indicate that empathetic leaders create environments where both teachers and students feel psychologically secure, thereby encouraging risk-taking and innovation (Harris & Jones, 2022).

Furthermore, empathy is essential in managing conflict and navigating diversity. Inclusive leaders must balance accountability with compassion, ensuring that disciplinary or policy decisions are made through dialogic and restorative

approaches (Theoharis, 2023). During crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—empathy proved to be the most critical leadership competency, enabling leaders to sustain communication, emotional support, and adaptive decision-making amidst uncertainty (Leithwood et al., 2021). Thus, empathy transforms leadership from a managerial function into a relational process grounded in humanity and ethical responsiveness.

### **Digital Innovation and Inclusive Leadership**

Digital innovation has become an inseparable component of modern educational leadership. However, while technology can enhance learning and accessibility, it can also exacerbate inequities if not implemented inclusively. Inclusive leaders recognize this paradox and seek to leverage digital tools to promote equity, enhance engagement, and personalize learning (Zhao & Watterston, 2023). According to Sun and Chen (2023), inclusive digital leadership requires integrating technology in ways that humanize, rather than depersonalize, the learning experience.

Empirical evidence suggests that schools led by digitally literate and inclusive leaders exhibit stronger adaptability, teacher collaboration, and innovation readiness (Nguyen & Spector, 2023). Leaders who promote equitable access to technology and encourage digital competence across all stakeholders foster more inclusive cultures that support lifelong learning. Moreover, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and data analytics in education necessitates new ethical frameworks that align digital practices with human-centered values (Akgün & Greenhow, 2021). Inclusive leaders, therefore, act as ethical gatekeepers—ensuring that technological transformation enhances, rather than undermines, human dignity and inclusion.

### **Transforming School Culture through Inclusive Leadership**

School culture encompasses the values, beliefs, and norms that define the social and emotional fabric of a learning community. Inclusive leadership transforms school culture by embedding empathy, equity, and innovation into daily practice (Fullan & Quinn, 2022). Boonstra and Mol (2021) found that inclusive leaders create participatory environments where collaboration replaces competition and collective well-being becomes the foundation of success. This cultural shift enhances both organizational resilience and academic outcomes.

Recent frameworks suggest that the interaction between leadership and digital culture shapes the inclusivity of educational institutions (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2022). Schools that adopt inclusive digital practices—such as open communication platforms, shared decision-making tools, and collaborative innovation hubs—tend to demonstrate higher levels of engagement and trust. Therefore, digital innovation is not merely a technical matter but a cultural catalyst that redefines how schools operate as communities of belonging and growth (Yue et al., 2023).

### **Synthesis and Research Gap**

The existing literature converges on the idea that inclusive leadership is essential to transforming education in the digital age. However, empirical studies often treat inclusivity, empathy, and digital innovation as separate constructs rather than interconnected forces shaping school culture (Nguyen & Spector, 2023; Zhao & Watterston, 2023). There is limited research exploring how these elements synergistically drive systemic transformation. Moreover, while equity-based and empathetic leadership practices are well-documented, their operationalization through digital tools and innovation ecosystems remains underexplored—particularly in diverse, resource-limited contexts.

This study addresses these gaps by analyzing how inclusive leadership behaviors, guided by empathy and equity principles, interact with digital innovation to transform school culture. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical exploration, the research contributes to the evolving discourse on educational leadership in the 21st century—advocating a holistic, human-centered approach to educational transformation.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

A convergent parallel mixed-method design was adopted to triangulate quantitative and qualitative insights. Quantitative data were collected through standardized surveys measuring inclusive leadership behaviors, perceptions of school culture, and the degree of digital innovation adoption. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with educational leaders, teachers, and administrative staff. This design allowed for both statistical generalization and contextual depth, ensuring that numerical trends were complemented by rich, narrative insights (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2021).

The study was conducted across 20 public and private schools in diverse geographic regions, including urban, suburban, and rural settings. This multi-site approach enabled the exploration of how contextual variables—such as resource availability and digital infrastructure—shape the practice and impact of inclusive leadership (Shields, 2023).

### **Participants**

The research involved 320 participants, including 40 school principals, 220 teachers, and 60 administrative staff members. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants had relevant experience with digital transformation and inclusive school initiatives. The inclusion criteria required at least three years of professional

engagement in the education sector and active participation in school-level leadership or innovation projects. Gender, age, and subject area were balanced to represent diverse perspectives within each school context (Leithwood & Sun, 2023).

To protect participant confidentiality, all responses were anonymized and coded during the data processing stage. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants before data collection began.

### Instruments and Measures

Three validated instruments were used to collect quantitative data:

1. Inclusive Leadership Inventory (ILI) – adapted from Carmeli et al. (2022), consisting of 25 items measuring dimensions such as openness, accessibility, and empowerment on a 5-point Likert scale.
2. School Culture Assessment Scale (SCAS) – based on the model by Gruenert and Valentine (2021), assessing collaboration, trust, shared values, and innovation climate.
3. Digital Innovation Index (DII) – developed for this study to measure the extent of digital technology integration, digital equity practices, and the use of empathy-driven technology policies.

Qualitative data were gathered using semi-structured interview guides with open-ended questions focused on how leaders embody inclusivity, implement digital innovation, and cultivate empathy within their institutions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and validated through participant member-checking.

### Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place over a four-month period from **February to May 2025**. Surveys were distributed electronically through institutional email systems to ensure accessibility and environmental sustainability. Follow-up reminders were sent to maximize response rates, achieving a return rate of 90%.

Qualitative interviews were conducted via hybrid modes—both face-to-face and virtual sessions—depending on participants' digital accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes. Focus group discussions, involving 6–8 participants each, were used to stimulate reflective dialogue on the collective experiences of inclusive leadership and its influence on school culture (Harris & Jones, 2022).

### Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 28) for descriptive and inferential statistics. Reliability tests using Cronbach's alpha were conducted to ensure internal consistency of the instruments, with all scales demonstrating acceptable reliability ( $\alpha \geq 0.85$ ). Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were employed to explore relationships between inclusive leadership, digital innovation, and school culture transformation.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), following six stages: familiarization, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and interpretation. NVivo 14 software facilitated the organization and coding of narrative data. The triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results allowed for a richer interpretation, validating findings through cross-data comparison.

### Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To enhance validity, methodological triangulation was used, combining survey and interview data. Member-checking and peer debriefing strengthened the credibility of qualitative findings, while statistical tests ensured reliability of quantitative measures. The transferability of findings was enhanced through detailed contextual descriptions of each school setting. Ethically, the study adhered to the *American Educational Research Association (AERA)* ethical guidelines (2022). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Data were securely stored in encrypted files to maintain confidentiality and privacy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Quantitative Results

#### a. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics indicate that participants rated inclusive leadership practices as *highly prevalent* within their institutions ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.54$  on a 5-point scale). Among the subdimensions, empathy and accessibility scored highest ( $M = 4.35$ ), followed by equity-driven decision-making ( $M = 4.12$ ). Similarly, the School Culture Assessment Scale (SCAS) showed strong indicators of positive school culture transformation, particularly in dimensions related to collaboration ( $M = 4.29$ ) and shared trust ( $M = 4.18$ ).

Meanwhile, the Digital Innovation Index (DII) revealed moderate-to-high integration of technology in daily school operations ( $M = 3.98$ ), suggesting that while schools have begun adopting digital platforms for teaching and management, the level of equity in access and digital fluency remains uneven across contexts. This finding underscores the continuing challenge of ensuring inclusive technological adoption across socioeconomic lines (Zhao & Watterston, 2023).

### b. Correlation and Regression Analysis

A Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among inclusive leadership, digital innovation, and school culture transformation ( $r = 0.74, p < 0.01$ ). Multiple regression analysis further demonstrated that inclusive leadership explained 62.5% of the variance in school culture transformation ( $R^2 = 0.625$ ), with digital innovation acting as a partial mediator ( $\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$ ). This suggests that while inclusive leadership directly impacts cultural transformation, its influence is amplified through effective use of digital innovation. Leaders who strategically integrate empathy-driven digital policies and equitable access mechanisms foster more collaborative and trust-rich environments, thereby strengthening institutional resilience (Nguyen & Spector, 2023).

### Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview and focus group data revealed three major themes and nine subthemes that further illuminate how inclusive leadership transforms school culture.

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative Insights (Condensed)
1. Equity as a Foundation for Cultural Transformation	(a) Redistributing digital access; (b) Empowering marginalized voices; (c) Contextual equity policies	“We started by identifying who was left behind during remote learning and ensured devices and mentorship were redistributed accordingly.” ( <i>Principal, Urban School A</i> )
2. Empathy-Driven Leadership Practices	(a) Emotional connection and trust; (b) Restorative dialogue; (c) Psychological safety	“Teachers feel heard. Leadership meetings now start with check-ins rather than reports—this changed our relationships.” ( <i>Teacher, Rural School D</i> )
3. Digital Innovation as a Cultural Catalyst	(a) Collaborative digital platforms; (b) Pedagogical flexibility; (c) Humanizing technology	“Technology is not about automation; it’s about bringing everyone to the table—even those who were previously silent.” ( <i>Administrator, Private School B</i> )

### Discussion

The results align with and extend the theoretical perspectives of inclusive and transformational leadership, demonstrating that educational leaders who embrace empathy and equity actively shape cultures of belonging and innovation (Khalifa, 2021; Shields, 2023). This section discusses key implications under three interrelated dimensions: equity, empathy, and digital innovation.

#### Equity as the Structural Core of Inclusivity

The findings reinforce that equity-oriented leadership practices are essential for cultivating inclusive school environments. Leaders who deliberately redistribute digital resources, accommodate diverse learning needs, and advocate for equitable policies nurture systemic fairness and cultural cohesion (Ainscow & Messiou, 2022). The significant positive correlation between inclusive leadership and digital innovation also reflects that technology, when implemented equitably, serves as a leveling mechanism rather than a divider (Ospina & Foldy, 2023). This aligns with recent global findings from UNESCO (2023), which emphasize that digital inclusion in education must prioritize equitable infrastructure, access, and participation. The schools in this study that implemented context-sensitive equity policies—such as providing internet subsidies or community digital hubs—demonstrated higher levels of collaboration and morale.

#### Empathy as a Transformational Mechanism

Empathy emerged as a defining characteristic of effective inclusive leadership. Leaders who practiced active listening, emotional transparency, and restorative dialogue fostered trust and collective efficacy among teachers and staff (Goleman & Boyatzis, 2021). Empathy-driven decision-making was particularly critical during crisis contexts, where leaders’ ability to balance compassion and accountability created stability and resilience (Harris & Jones, 2022). The qualitative narratives reveal that empathy is not simply a personal trait but a *strategic cultural practice* that influences morale, engagement, and innovation. Teachers in empathetically led schools reported higher motivation to adopt new technologies and co-create pedagogical solutions. This finding resonates with Baehr’s (2023) assertion that empathy is the emotional engine of inclusive school transformation.

#### Digital Innovation as a Cultural Enabler

Digital innovation serves as both a tool and a symbol of inclusive transformation. Schools led by digitally competent and inclusive leaders demonstrated stronger collaborative cultures, adaptability, and creative pedagogical experimentation. The integration of collaborative platforms (e.g., Microsoft Teams, Google Workspace) and AI-driven analytics improved communication and inclusivity in decision-making processes. However, the study also revealed the persistent digital divide within under-resourced schools. Inclusive leaders mitigated this challenge by initiating digital mentoring programs and open-access resource sharing, embodying the principles of *digital humanism*—a perspective emphasizing the ethical use of technology to serve human development (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023). The findings suggest that when empathy and equity guide digital innovation, technology becomes a transformative force that strengthens human connection rather than replacing it.

### Interplay between Leadership, Innovation, and Culture

The integrated findings affirm that inclusive leadership acts as a **cultural catalyst**—reshaping institutional norms from hierarchical structures toward collaborative ecosystems. Digital innovation functions as the conduit through which inclusive values are operationalized, while empathy and equity provide the moral and emotional scaffolding for sustainable transformation (Fullan & Quinn, 2022). This triangulated model supports the argument that inclusive leadership in the digital era requires **adaptive intelligence**, or the ability to align moral purpose with technological advancement (Nguyen & Spector, 2023). Schools that exhibited strong alignment between these dimensions were characterized by heightened trust, creativity, and shared ownership—core attributes of a transformative school culture.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

From a policy perspective, the results advocate for embedding inclusive leadership competencies into educational leadership training and certification programs. Ministries of Education and accreditation bodies should promote frameworks that emphasize digital equity, emotional intelligence, and participatory governance (Leithwood & Sun, 2023). Practically, the study suggests that schools should establish digital inclusion task forces, peer empathy circles, and shared leadership committees to operationalize inclusivity. Such structures institutionalize collaboration and sustain cultural transformation beyond individual leadership tenure.

### Summary of Key Findings

Dimension	Core Findings	Transformative Impact
Equity	Redistribution of digital and learning resources fosters inclusion.	Enhanced fairness, participation, and social cohesion.
Empathy	Emotional intelligence drives trust and engagement.	Strengthened relationships and psychological safety.
Digital Innovation	Technology amplifies inclusivity when guided by ethical leadership.	Improved adaptability, collaboration, and innovation capacity.

The synthesis of these results confirms that inclusive leadership—when rooted in empathy and equity—transforms digital innovation from a technical endeavor into a cultural revolution. It redefines schools as communities of belonging, creativity, and shared human progress.

### CONCLUSION

The empirical findings provide compelling evidence that inclusive leadership significantly correlates with school culture transformation, accounting for over 60% of the variance in cultural outcomes. The study identifies three interdependent levers—equity, empathy, and digital innovation—as the essential pillars of cultural transformation.

- Equity ensures that resources, opportunities, and digital access are distributed fairly, enabling every student and teacher to participate meaningfully in educational processes. Equity-driven leaders reimagine fairness not as sameness but as responsiveness to contextual and individual differences (Ainscow & Messiou, 2022).
- Empathy functions as the emotional and moral foundation of inclusive leadership. It fosters psychological safety, interpersonal trust, and a shared sense of purpose that strengthens organizational resilience (Baehr, 2023; Harris & Jones, 2022).
- Digital innovation, guided by ethical principles, transforms technology from a mechanistic tool into a humanizing medium that amplifies inclusivity and creativity. This aligns with the emerging discourse on digital humanism in education, which advocates for technology that serves human dignity and agency (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2023).

Together, these elements redefine leadership not as a position of authority but as a *shared relational process* that cultivates empowerment, collaboration, and co-agency across the school ecosystem.

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