

Inclusive Leadership Practices and Sustainable School Improvement in Kaduna State Secondary Schools, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined inclusive leadership practices and sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study determined the extent of inclusive leadership practices among principals and the level of sustainable school improvement, while examining the relationships between four dimensions of inclusive leadership—openness and accessibility, recognition and valuing of contributions, availability and support, and stakeholder participation in decision-making—and sustainable school improvement. A correlational survey research design was adopted. The population comprised principals and teachers in public secondary schools across Kaduna State, from which 400 respondents were sampled using a multi-stage sampling technique. Data were collected using the Inclusive Leadership and Sustainable School Improvement Questionnaire (ILSSIQ), which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.84. Of the 400 questionnaires administered, 384 were validly returned, representing a 96% response rate. Data were analysed using mean, standard deviation, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, and regression analysis. Findings revealed that inclusive leadership was generally practiced to a high extent (grand mean = 2.61), although stakeholder participation in decision-making was low ($M = 2.39$). Sustainable school improvement was also rated at a high overall level (grand mean = 2.53), but institutionalization of collaborative structures was low ($M = 2.41$). All four dimensions of inclusive leadership had statistically significant positive relationships with sustainable school improvement, with recognition and valuing of contributions showing the strongest relationship ($r = 0.61, p < .05$). The study concluded that inclusive leadership is important for sustaining school improvement and recommended institutionalizing stakeholder participation and strengthening collaborative structures in schools.

Keywords: *Inclusive Leadership, Sustainable School Improvement, Educational Leadership, Stakeholder Participation, Public Secondary Schools, Kaduna State.*

Introduction

Leadership remains one of the most influential factors in determining the extent to which schools achieve and sustain improvement over time. In an increasingly diverse educational landscape characterized by differences in gender, ethnicity, ability, socio-economic background, and religion, school leaders are confronted with the challenge of leading in ways that recognize and harness this diversity rather than suppress it. Inclusive leadership has emerged as a distinct leadership orientation concerned with creating an environment in which staff and students, regardless of their background or status, feel a genuine sense of belonging while also being valued for their unique contributions. As a leadership approach, inclusive leadership is characterized by openness, accessibility, and availability of the leader, active recognition and appreciation of individual and group contributions, and deliberate efforts to involve stakeholders, including teachers, non-teaching staff, students, and parents, in decision-making processes that affect the school (Fujimoto and Uddin 2022).

Fullan (2005) opined that sustainable school improvement, refers to a school's capacity to engage continuously in the complex process of instructional, structural, and cultural improvement in a manner that endures beyond the tenure of a particular leader or the lifespan of a specific reform initiative. Unlike short-lived improvement projects that fade once external support or funding ends, sustainable school improvement is embedded in the ongoing culture, structures, and practices of the school. Scholars have long argued that the sustainability of school improvement depends not merely on the technical quality of reform initiatives but on the extent to which leadership builds the collective capacity, ownership, and commitment of all school stakeholders to continue the improvement process independently.

In the Nigerian context, and particularly in Kaduna State, public secondary schools face persistent challenges including large and diverse student populations, gender disparities in access and retention, resource constraints, and historically top-down and exclusionary administrative practices. Within this context, the extent to which principals adopt inclusive leadership practices, actively listening to and involving teachers and other stakeholders, recognizing diverse contributions, and building shared ownership of improvement efforts, may be a critical determinant of whether school improvement initiatives take root and endure. However, empirical evidence on the relationship between inclusive leadership practices and sustainable school improvement specifically within the Kaduna State context remains limited, thereby providing the rationale for this study (Okoli, 2015).

Despite growing global and national recognition of inclusive leadership as an important driver of positive organizational and educational outcomes, many public secondary schools in Kaduna State continue to be administered through largely centralized, top-down leadership approaches in which decision-making is concentrated in the hands of the principal, with limited structured involvement of teachers and other stakeholders. This exclusionary pattern of leadership has been associated in the broader literature with weak staff commitment, low morale, resistance to change, and the eventual collapse of school improvement initiatives once external monitoring or funding support is withdrawn. While previous studies have examined transformational and instructional leadership practices among Nigerian secondary school principals, comparatively little empirical attention has been paid to inclusive leadership specifically, and to its relationship with the sustainability, rather than merely the initiation, of

school improvement efforts in Kaduna State. It is this gap that the present study seeks to address.

A number of empirical studies provide support for the proposition that inclusive and participatory leadership practices are positively associated with organizational commitment, collaboration, and improvement outcomes. Carmeli (2010), stated that generally organizational literature, inclusive leadership has been found to enhance psychological safety, employee voice, and willingness to learn from errors, all of which are important preconditions for continuous improvement processes. Similarly, inclusive leadership has been linked to reduced inequality and improved socio-economic outcomes within organizations, reinforcing the argument that inclusive leadership practices generate positive, sustained institutional effects rather than short-term gains alone.

Within the education sector specifically, research on school leadership for inclusion by Ainscow (2020), has found that leadership practices which prioritize collaboration structures, professional development, and distributed decision-making are positively associated with the implementation and continuity of inclusive and improvement-oriented practices in schools. Distributed leadership has similarly been shown to mediate the relationship between teacher autonomy and inclusive school improvement, particularly in contexts where marginalized groups are at risk of exclusion, lending support to the proposition that inclusive, distributed forms of leadership are more likely to sustain improvement than centralized, exclusionary approaches.

In the Nigerian context, studies on principals' leadership roles for effective inclusive education programmes by Aliyu et al (2020), have emphasized the importance of principals actively involving staff and communities in planning and decision-making to ensure the success of inclusive education initiatives. Related research on challenges to secondary school principal leadership in the northern region of Nigeria has documented that exclusionary, top-down administrative practices, combined with limited staff involvement in decision-making, constitute major obstacles to effective school leadership and improvement in the region, a finding of direct relevance to the Kaduna State context examined in this study. More broadly, studies on principals' leadership functions in Nigerian secondary schools have identified teachers' attitude, inadequate resources, and limited collaborative structures as recurring challenges that inclusive leadership practices, by fostering ownership and shared commitment, may help to mitigate.

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests a plausible and theoretically grounded positive relationship between inclusive leadership practices and sustainable school improvement; however, the paucity of empirical studies testing this relationship specifically within Kaduna State's public secondary school system underscores the contribution of the present study.

Purpose of the Study

The study examines inclusive leadership practices and sustainable school improvement in kaduna State secondary schools, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the extent to which principals of public secondary schools in Kaduna State practice inclusive leadership;
2. examine the level of sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State;

Research Questions

1. What is the extent of inclusive leadership practices among principals of secondary schools in Kaduna State, Nigeria?
2. What is the level of sustainable school improvement in secondary schools in Kaduna State, Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between principals' openness and accessibility, and sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State.

H₀₂: There is no significant relationship between recognition and valuing of contributions, and sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between leaders' availability and support, and sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State.

H₀₄: There is no significant relationship between stakeholder participation in decision making, and sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State.

Methodology

The study adopted a correlational survey research design, which is appropriate for examining the relationship between two or more variables, in this case, inclusive leadership practices (independent variable) and sustainable school improvement (dependent variable), without manipulating either variable. The population of the study comprised all principals and teachers in public secondary schools across the three education zones of Kaduna State, namely Kaduna Central, Kaduna North, and Kaduna South. For the purpose of this study, the population is estimated at 420 principals and 8,600 teachers. A multi-stage sampling technique was adopted. First, stratified random sampling was used to select schools proportionately from each of the three education zones. Second, purposive sampling was used to select principals while simple random sampling was used to select teachers within the selected schools. Using the Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination at a 5% margin of error, a sample of 400 respondents was drawn, comprising 60 principals and 340 teachers, proportionately distributed across the three education zones. A self-structured questionnaire titled "Inclusive Leadership and Sustainable School Improvement Questionnaire" (ILSSIQ), Items were structured on a four-point modified Likert scale of Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1), with a criterion mean of 2.50 as the benchmark for determining high or low extent of practice.

The instrument had two sections. Section A was Bio-data, and Section B contains items structured in line with the research questions.

The face and content validity of the instrument were established through review by 2 experts in the field of Educational Administration and Planning, and in Measurement and Evaluation, from Ahmadu Bello University. They assessed the items for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness in relation to the study's objectives. Feedback from these experts was collected, and all necessary corrections were made by the researcher to enhance the validity of the instrument. The instrument's reliability was assessed through the pilot study, and data collected was analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha technique, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.84. This indicates a high level of consistency in the instrument's measurements. Copies of the questionnaire were administered directly to principals and teachers in the sampled schools. Of the 400 copies administered, 384 were correctly completed and returned, representing a 96% response rate, which was considered adequate for analysis.

Results

Research Questions 1 and 2 were answered using mean and standard deviation, with a criterion mean of 2.50 used to determine whether the extent or level of a variable was high or low. The four null hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC) to determine the strength and direction of the relationships between each dimension of inclusive leadership and sustainable school improvement. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Research Question 1

Table 1: Extent of Practice of Inclusive Leadership

Dimension of Inclusive Leadership	N	Mean	SD	Remark
Openness and accessibility	384	2.81	0.62	High extent
Recognition and valuing of contributions	384	2.64	0.71	High extent
Availability and support	384	2.58	0.68	High extent
Stakeholder participation in decision-making	384	2.39	0.74	Low extent
Grand Mean	384	2.61	—	High extent

Table 1 shows that principals of public secondary schools in Kaduna State practiced inclusive leadership to a **generally high extent** (grand mean = 2.61). Openness and accessibility recorded the highest mean score ($M = 2.81$), followed by recognition and valuing of contributions ($M = 2.64$) and availability and support ($M = 2.58$). However, stakeholder participation in decision-making recorded a mean score of 2.39, which was below the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating a comparatively low extent of structured stakeholder involvement in school-level decision-making.

Research Question 2

Table 2: Level of Sustainable School Improvement

Indicator of Sustainable School Improvement	N	Mean	SD	Remark
Continuity of improvement initiatives	384	2.55	0.69	High extent
Institutionalization of collaborative structures	384	2.41	0.73	Low extent
Staff commitment to improvement goals	384	2.69	0.64	High extent
Embeddedness in school culture	384	2.47	0.70	Low extent
Grand Mean	384	2.53	—	High extent

Table 2 shows that sustainable school improvement was achieved to a generally high extent (grand mean = 2.53). Staff commitment to improvement goals recorded the highest mean ($M = 2.69$), followed by continuity of improvement initiatives ($M = 2.55$). However, institutionalization of collaborative structures ($M = 2.41$) and embeddedness in school culture ($M = 2.47$) were below the criterion mean of 2.50. This indicates that although staff commitment to improvement goals was relatively high, the structures and school-culture mechanisms necessary for embedding improvement processes remain comparatively weak.

Table 3 indicated a moderate overall level of sustainable school improvement (grand mean = 2.53), with staff commitment to improvement goals rated highest and institutionalization of collaborative structures rated lowest, suggesting that while individual commitment existed the structural embedding of improvement processes remains an area requiring strengthening.

Hypotheses Test

The following are the result of the hypotheses testing using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMC);

Hypothesis One: There is no significant relationship between openness and accessibility, and sustainable school improvement.

Table 3: Analysis of Significant Relationship Between Openness and Accessibility, and Sustainable School Improvement

Variables	N	R	r ²	p-value	Decision
Openness & Accessibility vs. Sustainable School Improvement	384	0.52	0.27	0.000	Rejected

Since $p < .001$, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, H_0 was rejected. This indicates a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship between openness and accessibility and sustainable school improvement ($r = .52$, $p < .001$). The positive coefficient indicates that

higher levels of openness and accessibility are associated with higher levels of sustainable school improvement.

Hypothesis Two (H02):

Table 4: There is no statistical significant relationship between recognition and valuing of contributions, and sustainable school improvement.

Variables	N	R	r ²	p-value	Decision
Recognition & Valuing of Contributions vs. Sustainable School Improvement	384	0.61	0.37	0.000	Rejected

Since $p < .001$, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, H₀₂ was rejected. This indicates a **statistically significant, moderately strong positive relationship** between recognition and valuing of contributions and sustainable school improvement ($r = .61$, $p < .001$). Among the four dimensions examined, this was the **strongest observed** bivariate relationship.

Hypothesis Three (H03):

Table 5: There is no statistical significant relationship between availability and support, and sustainable school improvement.

Variables	N	R	r ²	p-value	Decision
Availability & Support vs. Sustainable School Improvement	384	0.47	0.22	0.000	Rejected

Since $p < .001$, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, H₀₃ was rejected. This indicates a **statistically significant, moderate positive relationship** between availability and support and sustainable school improvement ($r = .47$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis Four (H04):

Table 6: There is no statistically significant relationship between stakeholder participation in decision-making, and sustainable school improvement.

Variables	N	R	r ²	p-value	Decision
Stakeholder Participation vs. Sustainable School Improvement	384	0.58	0.34	0.000	Rejected

Since $p < .001$, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance, H₀₄ was rejected. This indicates a **statistically significant, moderately strong positive relationship** between stakeholder participation in decision-making and sustainable school improvement ($r = .58$, $p < .001$).

Discussion of Findings

The finding that principals practiced inclusive leadership to a generally high extent, while stakeholder participation in decision-making was comparatively low, suggests that principals may demonstrate openness and accessibility without necessarily institutionalizing broad-based participation in school-level decisions. The relatively high mean for openness and accessibility

($M = 2.81$) indicates that principals were generally perceived as accessible and approachable, whereas the lower mean for stakeholder participation ($M = 2.39$) suggests that opportunities for teachers and other stakeholders to participate systematically in decision-making may be limited. This finding is consistent with Olowoselu and Bello (2015), who identified challenges associated with centralized leadership practices and limited staff involvement in decision-making in secondary schools in northern Nigeria.

The finding that sustainable school improvement was generally high ($M = 2.53$), while institutionalization of collaborative structures ($M = 2.41$) and embeddedness in school culture ($M = 2.47$) were comparatively low, suggests that schools may demonstrate commitment to improvement without having fully established the organizational structures and cultural practices required to sustain such improvement. The relatively high level of staff commitment to improvement goals ($M = 2.69$) indicates willingness among staff to support improvement efforts, but the lower scores for collaborative structures and cultural embeddedness suggest that such commitment may not yet be fully translated into institutionalized practices.

The significant positive relationship between openness and accessibility and sustainable school improvement ($r = .52$, $p < .001$) indicates that schools in which principals are perceived as accessible and open tend to report higher levels of sustainable school improvement. This finding is consistent with the inclusive leadership perspective, which emphasizes leader openness and accessibility as important conditions for encouraging communication, employee voice, participation, and psychological safety (Carmeli et al., 2010). In the school context, accessible principals may create opportunities for teachers and other stakeholders to communicate concerns, exchange ideas, and participate in improvement-related activities.

The significant positive relationship between recognition and valuing of contributions and sustainable school improvement was the strongest relationship observed among the four dimensions examined ($r = .61$, $p < .001$). This finding suggests that recognition of teachers' and other stakeholders' contributions is strongly associated with sustainable school improvement. The finding is consistent with the Work Group Inclusion Model proposed by Shore et al. (2011), which emphasizes the importance of both belongingness and being valued for one's uniqueness. When school leaders recognize and value the contributions of staff, teachers may develop a stronger sense of belonging and value, which can encourage greater engagement with collective school improvement efforts.

The significant positive relationship between availability and support and sustainable school improvement ($r = .47$, $p < .001$) suggests that principals' availability and willingness to provide support are associated with more positive perceptions of sustainable school improvement. This finding underscores the importance of supportive leadership relationships in creating conditions in which teachers can seek guidance, address challenges, and participate in improvement activities. Leaders who remain available to staff may facilitate communication and provide the support necessary for improvement initiatives to continue.

The significant positive relationship between stakeholder participation in decision-making and sustainable school improvement ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) further demonstrates the importance of participatory leadership practices. The finding indicates that greater stakeholder involvement

in school decision-making is associated with higher levels of sustainable school improvement. This finding is consistent with Oduro and Kobeli (2025), who highlighted the importance of distributed leadership and teacher autonomy in inclusive school improvement. Participation in decision-making may strengthen stakeholders' sense of ownership and commitment to school improvement initiatives.

Conclusion

This study examined inclusive leadership practices and sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State, Nigeria. The findings showed that principals practiced inclusive leadership to a generally high extent, particularly in terms of openness and accessibility, recognition and valuing of contributions, and availability and support. However, stakeholder participation in decision-making was comparatively low.

Sustainable school improvement was also found to be generally high, although institutionalization of collaborative structures and embeddedness in school culture were below the criterion mean. The findings further showed that all four dimensions of inclusive leadership openness and accessibility, recognition and valuing of contributions, availability and support, and stakeholder participation in decision-making had statistically significant positive relationships with sustainable school improvement.

The study therefore concludes that inclusive leadership practices are meaningfully associated with sustainable school improvement in public secondary schools in Kaduna State. The findings particularly highlight the importance of recognizing stakeholders' contributions and creating meaningful opportunities for their participation in school decision-making. Nevertheless, because the study adopted a correlational design, the observed relationships should not be interpreted as evidence that inclusive leadership practices directly cause sustainable school improvement.

Recommendations

1. Principals of public secondary schools should institutionalize meaningful stakeholder participation in school decision-making through functional committees, regular consultative meetings, inclusive planning sessions, and structured feedback mechanisms that give teachers and other relevant stakeholders genuine opportunities to contribute to school improvement decisions.
2. The Kaduna State Ministry of Education and school principals should strengthen systems for recognizing and valuing teachers' and other stakeholders' contributions while simultaneously developing collaborative structures such as school improvement teams and professional learning communities, supported by clear improvement plans, regular monitoring, and capacity-building activities.

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