



Ethical role modeling as a leadership strategy for inclusive education development

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Abstract. This study examines ethical role modeling of the school principal as a strategic driver in the development of inclusive education. Inclusive education requires not only structural readiness but also ethical leadership capable of fostering equitable learning environments; however, prior studies have predominantly emphasized pedagogical and infrastructural aspects rather than leadership exemplarity. This research aims to explore how ethical role modeling is enacted, experienced, and institutionalized in inclusive school practices. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, conducted at a public junior secondary school implementing inclusive education. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, including the principal, teachers, administrative staff, and students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using qualitative descriptive procedures involving data reduction, categorization, and conclusion drawing. Findings reveal that ethical leadership is manifested through fairness,

empathy, and moral responsibility, operationalized via behavioral consistency, disciplinary modeling, and value-based communication. These practices institutionalize inclusive policies, strengthen pedagogical readiness, and improve resource facilitation, thereby impacting inclusive school culture, teacher professionalism, and student participation. The study concludes that ethical role modeling functions as a moral institutional bridge, transforming inclusive values into sustainable educational practice. Therefore, leadership development programs and inclusive education policies should prioritize ethical exemplarity as a foundational competency to ensure sustainable and culturally embedded inclusive school transformation.

Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central element of the global educational agenda, aimed at ensuring equitable, non-discriminatory, and high-quality learning opportunities for all learners. International commitments such as Education for All and the Sustainable Development Goals emphasize that education systems must accommodate learner diversity, including students with disabilities and varied learning needs, within mainstream schooling structures. Contemporary studies underscore that inclusive education is not merely about access but about systemic transformation that requires pedagogical, organizational, and cultural adjustments within schools (Kenny et al., 2023; Lindner & Schwab, 2025; Shutaleva et al., 2023). This transformation demands readiness at multiple levels of the education system, particularly at the school level, where inclusive values are operationalized in daily teaching and learning practices.

In many national contexts, including Indonesia, inclusive education has gained strong policy and legal recognition. Regulatory frameworks have encouraged regular schools to provide inclusive services, enabling students with diverse abilities to learn in the same environment as their peers. However, the institutionalization of inclusive policies does not automatically translate into effective practice. Structural adjustments such as curriculum adaptation and accessible infrastructure are necessary, yet a deeper transformation is required in school culture, professional norms, and leadership orientation (Reinius et al., 2024; Torres, 2022; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023). Inclusive education implementation, therefore, relies heavily on how school actors interpret and enact inclusive mandates within their institutional settings (Purnadewi et al., 2023).

Recent empirical evidence indicates that although the number of inclusive schools continues to grow, implementation readiness remains uneven. One persistent challenge concerns the shortage of specialized support personnel, which increases the instructional burden on regular teachers. This condition often affects teaching discipline, pedagogical consistency, and the quality of inclusive classroom services (Gal et al., 2025; Lapidot-Lefler, 2025; Yermakova et al., 2025). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of inclusive education is shaped not only by structural provision but also by leadership capacity, institutional climate, and professional commitment within schools. However, prior studies predominantly conceptualize leadership in inclusive settings through managerial efficiency, instructional supervision, or transformational frameworks, with limited attention to ethical role modeling as a strategic mechanism shaping inclusive institutional culture.

At the secondary education level, inclusive schooling presents complex challenges, including teacher preparedness, adaptive pedagogical competence, infrastructural limitations, and the extent to which school communities internalize inclusive values (Widana et al., 2023). In navigating these dynamics, the school principal's role becomes strategically significant. Principals function not only as administrative managers but also as cultural leaders who shape institutional ethos, professional conduct, and organizational direction (Susanti et al., 2025). Their leadership orientation influences how inclusive policies are interpreted, legitimized, and implemented at the school level. Within this leadership landscape, ethical role modeling emerges as a critical yet insufficiently examined dimension. Ethical exemplarity refers to leaders' demonstrated integrity, fairness, accountability, and consistency in decision-making and interpersonal relations. Research indicates that principals who exhibit ethical conduct foster trust, strengthen collegial collaboration, and encourage inclusive pedagogical practices among teachers (Ballangrud & Aas, 2022). Nevertheless, these studies primarily examine ethical leadership as an organizational climate variable rather than as a structured strategic pathway that influences the development of inclusive education.

Empirical observations further suggest that ethical principalship contributes to teacher creativity, responsiveness to diverse learners, and participatory student engagement. Ethical modeling nurtures psychological safety and moral commitment, both of which are essential for sustaining inclusive practices (Burhan et al., 2023; Qasim & Laghari, 2025). When principals embody inclusive values through concrete actions, they reinforce institutional legitimacy for inclusive education and cultivate supportive learning environments. Nevertheless, the implementation of inclusive education continues to be constrained by operational challenges. Studies report variability in teachers' competence in adapting instruction, limited availability of assistive learning media, and infrastructural inaccessibility (Beyene et al., 2023; Hanifah et al., 2025; Santi et al., 2025). In addition, school cultures in some contexts remain partially resistant to diversity, reflected in limited empathy, acceptance, and participatory equity among school members. Such socio Hemming & Hailwood (2024); Santi et al. (2025). Existing research tends to treat these barriers as structural or pedagogical problems, while paying limited attention to how ethical leadership may function as a mediating variable that transforms school culture and professional norms to overcome them.

These persistent challenges highlight the urgency of leadership approaches that extend beyond managerial coordination (Mphatsoane-Sesoane & Jita, 2025). This study advances the argument that ethical role modeling constitutes not merely a moral attribute of leadership but a strategic moral institutional bridge that connects inclusive values with structural implementation mechanisms. Unlike previous studies that focus on teacher readiness or resource adequacy, this research positions ethical exemplarity as a catalyst for the institutionalization of policy, the strengthening of pedagogy, and cultural transformation within inclusive schools. Furthermore, by employing a qualitative descriptive approach in a secondary school context, this study contributes context-specific evidence demonstrating how ethical leadership is operationalized and experienced in localized inclusive settings, an area that remains underexplored in recent literature.

Based on this rationale, the study is guided by three research questions: (1) How is ethical role modeling enacted by the school principal in the development of inclusive education? (2) How do teachers and school members experience and interpret the principal's ethical exemplarity in supporting inclusive practices? (3) How does ethical role modeling influence inclusive school culture, teacher professionalism, and student participation? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to explore the strategies of ethical role modeling practiced by the principal, examine teachers' lived experiences of ethical leadership, and analyze its influence on inclusive educational practices. Through this positioning, the study offers a theoretical contribution by integrating ethical leadership and inclusive education development frameworks, and a practical contribution by proposing ethical exemplarity as a foundational competency for sustainable inclusive school transformation.

Method

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes surrounding ethical role modeling of the school principal in the development of inclusive education. The phenomenological approach was selected to capture participants' subjective interpretations, professional reflections, and experiential consciousness regarding ethical leadership practices within inclusive schooling contexts. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of how ethical exemplarity is enacted, experienced, and institutionalized in everyday school life (Tolibas & Lydia, 2022).

Research Site and Duration

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Seluma, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia, an inclusive secondary school implementing policies that accommodate students with diverse learning needs. The site was selected purposively based on three criteria: (1) formal designation as an inclusive school, (2) active leadership involvement in inclusive program development, and (3) observable ethical leadership practices within school governance. Fieldwork was undertaken over a four-month period, allowing prolonged engagement to obtain experiential depth and contextual understanding.

Research Subjects and Sampling Technique

Participants in this study were determined using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure experiential relevance and depth of information aligned with the phenomenological focus. The purposive strategy was initially applied to identify key actors directly involved in implementing inclusive education and those who interacted intensively with the principal's leadership practices. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed to expand participant recruitment, drawing on recommendations from primary informants, particularly to capture experiential variation across pedagogical and organizational roles. Selection criteria comprised: (1) active involvement in

inclusive education services, (2) sustained professional interaction with the school principal, and (3) willingness to articulate lived experiences related to ethical leadership and inclusive practices (Hadi et al., 2021).

Table 1. Research Participants Distribution

No	Participant Category	Role Description	Number of Participants
1	School Principal	Key informant; institutional leader	1
2	Subject Teachers (Inclusive and Regular)	Implement inclusive instruction	6
3	Homeroom Teachers	Classroom management and student development	3
4	Administrative Staff	School governance and administration support	2
5	Students (Inclusive Classrooms)	Experiential beneficiaries of inclusive education	3
Total			15 Participants

Researcher Presence and Positionality

The researcher functioned as the primary research instrument, engaging directly in field immersion, classroom observation, and relational interaction with participants. Reflexive bracketing was applied to minimize personal bias, ensuring that participants' lived experiences were captured authentically. Field notes, reflective journals, and interaction memos were maintained throughout the study to document contextual nuances and analytical insights.

Data Collection Techniques

Data in this study were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and document analysis, and were analyzed within a triangulated framework to strengthen interpretive credibility. Phenomenological, semistructured interviews were conducted iteratively to elicit participants' experiential narratives regarding the enactment of ethical leadership and inclusive education practices, thereby allowing probing, clarification, and meaning expansion (Hadi et al., 2021).

Principal In-depth Interview Guide

To obtain an in-depth understanding of the principals' lived experiences regarding ethical role modeling in the development of inclusive education, phenomenological in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol. The interview guide was designed to elicit reflective narratives, experiential meanings, and leadership interpretations rather than normative or procedural responses. The detailed phenomenological interview framework used in this study is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Phenomenological Interview Guide

No	Focus	Indicator	Main Question	Probing Question
1	Ethical exemplarity	Conceptual understanding	How do you understand ethical role modeling in school leadership?	Why is it important?
2	Ethical values	Leadership principles	What ethical values guide your leadership?	How are they enacted daily?
3	Exemplary behavior	Leadership practice	Can you share concrete examples?	In what situations?

No	Focus	Indicator	Main Question	Probing Question
4	Strategy	Implementation	What strategies ensure staff emulates ethical conduct?	Effectiveness?
5	Decision-making	Conflict handling	How do you manage differing opinions?	Who is involved?
6	Inclusion handling	Special needs cases	How are inclusive student issues addressed?	Case examples?
7	Policy	Institutional support	How is an inclusive policy developed?	Since when?
8	Leadership role	Direct involvement	What direct actions support inclusion?	Dominant forms?
9	Challenges	Barriers and solutions	What are the main challenges?	How are they resolved?

Instrument Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of research instruments, several qualitative validation procedures were applied. Content validity of the interview guide was established through expert judgment by two senior lecturers in educational management, who reviewed the alignment among research objectives, indicators, and interview questions. Revisions were made in response to their feedback to ensure conceptual clarity and relevance. Reliability was strengthened through pilot interviews conducted with two teachers outside the research participants to test question consistency and comprehensibility. Additionally, triangulation across interviews, observations, and document analysis was employed to enhance data credibility and consistency.

Data Validity and Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study was established through multiple qualitative rigor strategies to ensure the integrity and credibility of the findings. Credibility was achieved through prolonged engagement in the field, enabling in-depth familiarity with the research context, alongside methodological triangulation across interviews, observations, and documentation, and member checking to validate interpretive accuracy with participants. Transferability was addressed by providing thick, context-rich descriptions of the school setting, leadership practices, and participants' experiences, enabling readers to assess applicability to comparable contexts. Dependability was maintained through systematic audit trails and detailed documentation of research procedures, analytical decisions, and field processes. Confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling to monitor researcher subjectivity and peer debriefing to obtain external analytical scrutiny, thereby reinforcing the neutrality and transparency of the interpretive process (Leavy & Patricia, 2017).

Data Analysis Technique

The phenomenological data analysis in this study was conducted through a rigorous, iterative, and reflective process designed to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences regarding ethical role modeling in the development of inclusive education. Analysis began concurrently with data collection, allowing early insights to inform subsequent interviews and observations. The analytical procedure followed systematic phenomenological stages that moved from descriptive reduction toward interpretive synthesis, ensuring that meanings emerged inductively from participants' narratives rather than being imposed by prior assumptions (Leavy & Patricia, 2017).

Table 3. Phenomenological Data Analysis Stages

No	Analysis Stage	Analytical Focus	Operational Activities	Analytical Output
1	Horizontalization	Identification of significant statements	Transcribing interviews, reviewing field notes and documents, extracting statements relevant to ethical leadership and inclusive education experiences, and treating all statements with equal value	List of significant statements representing participants' lived experiences
2	Meaning Unit Clustering	Thematic grouping of experiential meanings	Categorizing significant statements into clusters such as fairness, empathy, moral responsibility, inclusive policy support, and participatory leadership practices	Thematic clusters/meaning units
3	Textural Description	Description of what participants experienced	Developing narrative descriptions based on participants' perceptions, feelings, and responses toward ethical role modeling and inclusive practices	Textural narratives of lived experiences
4	Structural Description	Description of how experiences occurred	Analyzing situational contexts, leadership interactions, institutional structures, and cultural conditions shaping the experiences	Structural narratives explaining contextual dynamics
5	Essence Synthesis	Integration of experiential meanings	Synthesizing textural and structural descriptions to formulate the core essence of ethical leadership in inclusive education development	Composite essence / overarching themes

The overall research design framework is illustrated in the following diagram.

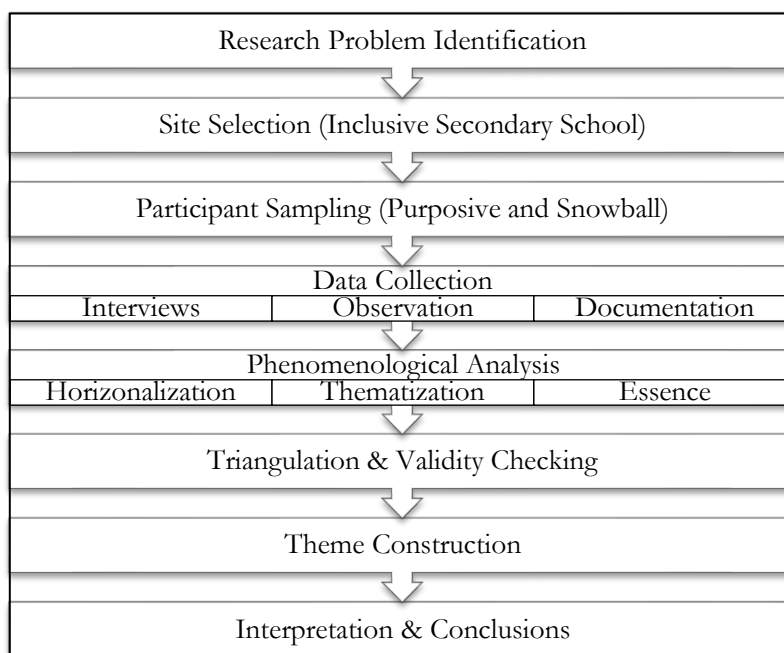


Image 1. Research Design Diagram

Results and Discussion

The results and discussion of this phenomenological study are presented in an integrated manner, reflecting the essence of participants' lived experiences regarding ethical role modeling of the school principal in the development of inclusive education. Findings are organized sequentially in alignment with the research objectives and questions.

Ethical Role Modeling Enactment in Inclusive Education Development

The first research question examined how the principal enacts ethical role modeling. Analysis revealed that ethical exemplarity was operationalized through three dominant dimensions: fairness in decision-making, empathic leadership relations, and moral responsibility in inclusive policy support. Participants consistently described the principal as demonstrating procedural justice in school governance. Teachers emphasized transparency in workload distribution, student placement decisions, and inclusive class arrangements. *"The principal never decides alone. Inclusive class assignments are discussed together, so we feel treated fairly."* (Teacher 3). Observational data corroborated this perception. Leadership meetings showed participatory dialogue, particularly when addressing the needs of students with disabilities. Such fairness aligns with ethical leadership theory, which positions justice and accountability as core determinants of organizational trust (González-Cánovas et al., 2024; Kurniawati & Ramli, 2024; Laufer et al., 2025).

Empathy emerged as a second ethical dimension. Teachers noted the principal's attentiveness to instructional challenges when working with diverse learners. *"When we struggle teaching inclusive students, the principal listens first before giving direction."* (Homeroom Teacher 2). Empathic engagement fostered psychological safety, enabling teachers to experiment with differentiated instruction. This finding supports research indicating that empathic leadership strengthens teacher efficacy in inclusive environments (Jiang et al., 2025; Khattak et al., 2025). Moral responsibility was particularly visible in institutional advocacy for inclusive students. Documentation analysis revealed budget allocations for assistive learning tools and teacher training initiatives. The principal framed inclusion as a moral obligation rather than regulatory compliance. This reflects ethical leadership praxis, in which moral commitment drives institutional transformation beyond administrative mandates (Moreno-Menéndez et al., 2026; Yasa et al., 2023). The thematic structure of ethical leadership enactment is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Ethical Leadership Enactment

Sub-Theme	Leadership Practice	Experiential Meaning
Fairness	Participatory decision-making	Institutional trust
Empathy	Emotional and professional support	Teacher confidence
Moral responsibility	Advocacy for inclusive resources	Inclusive legitimacy

Strategies of Ethical Role Modeling

The phenomenological findings indicate that ethical role modeling by the principal extended beyond value articulation to strategic behavioral reproduction mechanisms that enabled the internalization of ethical norms across the school community. Through the horizontalization of interview transcripts and observational records, participants' experiential narratives converged on patterned leadership strategies that operationalized ethical exemplarity in daily institutional practice. These strategies did not function in isolation but were enacted relationally, symbolically, and communicatively, thereby shaping teachers' professional consciousness and reinforcing their commitments to inclusive education.

Behavioral consistency emerged as the most salient experiential theme in participants' accounts. Teachers and staff repeatedly emphasized the congruence between the principal's verbal directives

and the conduct enacted. This alignment was perceived as the foundation of moral legitimacy in leadership. One administrative staff member reflected: *"He asks teachers to be punctual, but he always arrives earlier. Even before the security staff sometimes."* From a phenomenological standpoint, such consistency was not merely a matter of discipline but of ethical authenticity. Participants described feeling morally compelled to mirror the principal's conduct because expectations were modeled rather than imposed. A senior teacher elaborated: *"When leaders practice what they say, we feel embarrassed if we do not follow. It becomes self-awareness, not pressure."* This internalization process illustrates how ethical leadership operates through social learning pathways, where behavioral congruence strengthens follower emulation and professional identification. The finding aligns with contemporary ethical leadership scholarship, asserting that leaders' integrity-based consistency enhances trust formation and normative compliance (Mohi Ud Din & Zhang, 2023).

The second strategic dimension concerned disciplinary exemplarity. Unlike bureaucratic enforcement models, discipline was enacted symbolically through visible leadership routines. Observational field notes documented the principal standing at the school gate every morning, greeting students, including those with special needs, by name. This ritualized presence conveyed attentiveness, accessibility, and care. Teachers interpreted this practice as a moral signal rather than a procedural duty. *"It is not about attendance control. It shows that every student matters, including inclusive students."* (Homeroom Teacher). Students echoed similar sentiments: *"When the principal greets us, we feel recognized. It makes us confident to come to school."* (Inclusive Student) From a structural description perspective, this symbolic discipline functioned as relational leadership, fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety. For inclusive students, who often experience marginalization, such gestures reinforced emotional inclusion. The findings resonate with inclusive leadership studies, which highlight visibility and relational accessibility as key drivers of an inclusive climate (Zallio et al., 2024; Pangestu & Wijayanti, 2025).

The third strategic cluster centered on value-based communication. Ethical values were systematically embedded within institutional discourse channels, including teacher briefings, assemblies, and policy socialization forums. Rather than delivering procedural instructions, the principal framed inclusive education within moral narratives of justice, responsibility, and educational equity. One teacher recalled: *"He always reminds us that inclusive students are our shared responsibility, not just the homeroom teacher's duty."* Another participant noted: *"Every meeting begins with reflections about fairness and empathy before discussing technical matters."* Such discursive reinforcement transformed ethical values into institutional language. Phenomenologically, participants did not perceive inclusive education as an administrative program but as a shared moral mission. This communicative strategy institutionalized ethical consciousness and minimized resistance to inclusive pedagogical adjustments. The finding supports ethical leadership communication models emphasizing value framing as a mechanism for shaping organizational meaning systems (Abbas et al., 2025). The structured thematic framework for ethical role-modeling strategies is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Ethical Strategy Framework

Strategy	Operational Form	Institutional Effect
Consistency	Word action alignment	Moral legitimacy
Discipline modeling	Time and duty exemplarity	Professional culture
Ethical communication	Value reinforcement	Inclusive commitment

Institutionalization of Inclusive Education

At the policy level, ethical leadership served as a catalytic force in formalizing commitments to inclusive education. Document analysis confirmed the issuance of inclusive admission policies, internal decrees regulating classroom services, and guidelines for supporting students with special

needs. Participants highlighted that these policies did not emerge solely from external mandates but were internally initiated and strengthened by the principal's ethical vision. As expressed by the vice principal, *"Inclusive policy started when the principal formalized support guidelines. Before that, support existed but was informal."* Phenomenologically, participants experienced policy formation as a moral institutionalization in which inclusive values were legitimized through regulatory structures. Ethical leadership thus bridged normative ideals with bureaucratic systems, ensuring sustainability and organizational accountability.

Beyond regulatory development, ethical role modeling was manifested through sustained instructional support. Teachers reported increased opportunities to participate in professional development programs focusing on differentiated instruction, adaptive assessment, and inclusive classroom management. Such initiatives were perceived not merely as capacity-building programs but as leadership-driven moral investments in pedagogical equity. One teacher stated, *"Training on inclusive teaching made us feel supported. The principal wants us to be ready, not just responsible."* This aligns with scholarship asserting that ethical leaders prioritize professional empowerment to sustain inclusive pedagogical transformation (Saeed, 2025).

The third institutional domain concerned resource facilitation. Although participants acknowledged infrastructural limitations, observational and documentary evidence revealed gradual improvements in inclusive learning facilities. These included modified seating arrangements, adaptive learning media, counseling services, and flexible classroom layouts designed to accommodate diverse learners. Participants interpreted these developments as indicators of leadership authenticity. *"Even with limited funds, the principal tries to prioritize inclusive students' needs."* (Teacher 2). Such efforts reflect moral prioritization in resource allocation, where ethical considerations guided institutional budgeting and planning. Rather than perceiving limitations as barriers, the principal leveraged available resources to incrementally enhance accessibility. This finding supports ethical leadership perspectives emphasizing responsibility and stewardship in resource governance. Collectively, these three institutional domains illustrate how ethical role modeling transcended symbolic leadership and became embedded within the structural architecture of inclusive education. Policy frameworks legitimized inclusion administratively, instructional support operationalized inclusion pedagogically, and resource facilitation sustained inclusion materially. Through phenomenological synthesis, participants experienced these institutional transformations as authentic expressions of ethical commitment rather than compliance-driven initiatives. The thematic institutionalization framework is summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Inclusive Education Development

Domain	Leadership Action	Inclusive Outcome
Policy	Inclusive regulations	Institutional structure
Instruction	Teacher training	Pedagogical readiness
Resources	Assistive support	Learning accessibility

Experiential Impacts on School Culture

Participants consistently described a perceptible cultural shift in attitudes toward students with disabilities. Teachers reported that inclusive education, which was initially perceived as an additional burden, gradually became normalized through sustained ethical modeling by the principal. One teacher explained: *"Before, some teachers hesitated to teach inclusive students. Now we see it as normal."* This statement reflects cultural internalization, in which inclusive values transitioned from externally mandated expectations to collectively embraced norms. Observational data further indicated reduced discriminatory behavior and increased collaborative support among teachers in handling inclusive classrooms. Phenomenologically, inclusion was no longer experienced as a program but as an ethical school identity. This transformation aligns with the inclusive leadership

literature, which asserts that ethical exemplarity fosters value internalization and acceptance of diversity within educational institutions (Han & Graham, 2024).

Ethical role modeling also generated significant impacts on teacher professionalism. Participants described heightened responsibility, instructional creativity, and moral commitment toward inclusive pedagogy. Teachers perceived the principal's dedication as a motivational mirror influencing their own conduct. *"We feel ashamed if we are not serious, because the principal is very committed."* (Teacher 4). Such moral mirroring illustrates the operation of social learning processes in ethical leadership contexts, in which followers emulate observed leader behaviors. Teachers reported increased willingness to modify lesson plans, adopt differentiated instruction, and provide individualized support for students with special needs. These findings align with ethical leadership frameworks emphasizing modeling as a driver of professional engagement and pedagogical innovation (Jia et al., 2022; Macpherson, 2025).

From the student perspective, the impact of ethical leadership was experienced through enhanced psychological safety and social inclusion. Students, particularly those in inclusive classrooms, expressed feeling more respected, supported, and confident in participating in academic and extracurricular activities. *"Teachers treat us the same. We can join activities."* (Inclusive Student). This experiential shift indicates the maturation of an inclusive school climate where participation barriers were reduced. Observations confirmed that inclusive students were increasingly involved in group learning, school events, and peer collaborations. Ethical leadership thus indirectly influenced student engagement by shaping teacher attitudes and school relational environments. Integrating these experiential domains reveals that ethical role modeling functioned as a cultural transformation mechanism. Leadership exemplarity influenced belief systems, professional norms, and relational interactions, thereby embedding inclusion within the lived reality of the school community. The structured thematic impacts derived from phenomenological synthesis are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Experiential Impacts

Aspect	Observed Change	Experiential Meaning
Culture	Diversity acceptance	Inclusive ethos
Teachers	Professional commitment	Moral motivation
Students	Participation increase	Psychological safety

From a comparative standpoint, the findings both corroborate and extend prior scholarship. Consistent with ethical leadership research, the study affirms that leaders' moral conduct significantly shapes institutional culture and organizational trust (Kaasa & Andriani, 2022). The results further align with the inclusive leadership literature, which emphasizes empathy and justice as foundational drivers of inclusive pedagogy (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2022; Wang & Tian, 2023). Yet, in contrast to resource-centered analyses that foreground infrastructural constraints, this study illustrates that moral leadership can partially mitigate structural limitations by mobilizing commitment, creativity, and collaborative responsibility. Moreover, cultural resistance as a dominant barrier to inclusive education, the present findings reveal that sustained ethical modeling can gradually transform resistant cultures, positioning leadership behavior as a moderating variable in inclusive school change (Rusanti S et al., 2025). The integrated thematic pathway is illustrated in the following Image 2.



Image 2. The integrated thematic pathway

The analytical interpretation of this study can be understood through three interrelated explanatory lenses. First, at the descriptive level (what), the principal's ethical role modeling manifested concretely through leadership practices grounded in fairness, empathy, and moral accountability. Second, at the explanatory level (why), ethical exemplarity served as a generative force, cultivating relational trust, legitimizing inclusive values, and stimulating professional emulation among school members. Third, at the expansive interpretive level (what else), the influence of ethical leadership extended beyond interpersonal dynamics into structural institutionalization and cultural transformation.

The novelty of this study lies in three principal dimensions. Conceptually, it advances the integration of ethical leadership theory with inclusive education development, positioning ethical role modeling as a strategic praxis rather than a peripheral moral attribute. Empirically, the study provides context-rich evidence demonstrating how ethical exemplarity is enacted, internalized, and institutionalized within inclusive secondary school settings. Methodologically, the use of a phenomenological design offers original insight into the lived experiences, interpretive meanings, and consciousness formations of teachers and students' dimensions that remain underexplored in prior leadership and inclusion studies. By foregrounding experiential internalization, this research extends existing scholarship beyond organizational outcomes toward moral cultural transformation processes.

The findings of this study contribute theoretically by strengthening the integration between ethical leadership theory and inclusive education development frameworks. The study demonstrates that ethical role modeling serves as a mediating mechanism linking moral leadership values to institutional and cultural transformation processes. In practice, the results provide actionable insights for school leaders, policymakers, and teacher training institutions by emphasizing that ethical exemplarity, manifested through fairness, empathy, and moral responsibility, can enhance inclusive policy implementation, teacher professionalism, and student participation. These findings highlight that sustainable inclusive education requires not only structural readiness but also ethically grounded leadership practices.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the research was conducted in a single secondary school context, which may limit generalizability across different educational levels and socio-cultural environments. Second, the qualitative phenomenological design focuses on in-

depth experiential interpretation rather than measurable outcomes, thereby limiting statistical generalization. Third, the findings rely on participants' self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. These limitations provide opportunities for future multi-site, mixed-method, or longitudinal investigations to validate and expand the present findings.

Future research is encouraged to examine ethical role modeling across diverse educational settings, including primary schools and higher education institutions, to assess contextual variations. Comparative studies involving multiple schools could strengthen generalizability, while mixed-method approaches may integrate qualitative depth with quantitative measurement of leadership impact. Longitudinal research designs are also recommended to analyze the sustainability of ethical leadership influence over time.

Grounded in the empirical findings, several strategic recommendations are proposed. First, school leadership development programs should systematically incorporate ethical role modeling competencies, emphasizing behavioral consistency, empathic engagement, and moral decision-making as core leadership standards in inclusive schools. Second, education policymakers should design institutional frameworks that support principals in translating ethical commitments into inclusive regulations, teacher capacity-building initiatives, and equitable resource allocation systems. Third, schools implementing inclusive education should institutionalize value-based communication practices to ensure that inclusion is embedded as a shared ethical commitment rather than a compliance-based obligation. These recommendations are directly derived from the study's evidence demonstrating that ethical leadership significantly influences institutionalization processes and cultural transformation.

Conclusion

Ethical role modeling enacted by the school principal functions as a strategic and transformative driver in the development of inclusive education. Through the internalization of ethical values, particularly fairness, empathy, and moral responsibility, the principal's leadership was experienced by teachers, staff, and students as a credible moral reference that shaped professional conduct, strengthened inclusive pedagogical commitment, and fostered participatory school culture. Ethical exemplarity was operationalized through consistent behavior, disciplinary modeling, and value-based communication, which collectively institutionalized inclusive education across policy frameworks, instructional support systems, and resource facilitation. These processes generated experiential impacts, reflected in increased acceptance of diversity, enhanced teacher professionalism, and expanded student participation. The findings affirm that ethical leadership bridges moral vision and institutional practice, positioning inclusive education not merely as policy compliance but as lived educational culture; therefore, school leadership development programs should systematically integrate ethical role modeling competencies as core professional standards, education policymakers should provide structural support enabling principals to translate ethical commitments into inclusive policy and resource allocation, and schools should cultivate value-based communication cultures that reinforce inclusion as a shared moral responsibility. Future research is encouraged to examine ethical leadership across diverse educational contexts, using comparative or mixed-method designs to strengthen generalizability and deepen theoretical refinement.

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