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Building Quality Inclusive Schools through Transformational Leadership, School Culture, and Digitalization: An Empirical Study in Public Elementary Schools in Tugu District, Semarang City

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization on the quality of inclusive elementary schools in Tugu District, Semarang. As the foundation of national development, education requires not only knowledge transfer but also the cultivation of character and values. Despite being categorized as "Good," most elementary schools in Tugu District have experienced a decline in learning quality, as indicated by the 2023 national assessment. Key challenges include teacher shortages, competency mismatches, excessive workloads, and limited understanding of the Merdeka Curriculum. Additional obstacles such as high administrative burdens and inadequate digital infrastructure further impede effective learning. Employing a quantitative, correlational explanatory approach, this study involved 120 teachers selected through proportional random sampling. Data were collected using validated and reliable Likert-scale questionnaires and analyzed with multiple linear regression. The results show that transformational leadership, positive school culture, and digitalization are each rated highly by teachers and have a significant positive impact on the quality of inclusive schools. Transformational leadership fosters vision and innovation, school culture promotes collaboration and achievement, while digitalization enhances access and adaptive learning. The findings highlight the importance of integrating these factors to improve inclusive education, ensuring equitable and adaptive learning environments for all students, including those with special needs.

Keywords: transformational leadership; school culture; digitalization; inclusive school quality; elementary education.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the fundamental foundation of national development, not only facilitating the transmission of knowledge but also shaping the character, values, and vision of future generations. Schools, as primary educational institutions, play a central role in ensuring the sustainability of quality learning. In the 21st century, building quality education must prioritize inclusivity ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, receive equitable learning opportunities through systemic support, cultural change, and digital adaptation. Inclusive education is not an add-on but a fundamental right and a key measure of educational equity (UNESCO, 2021). This study focuses on how inclusive school quality can be strengthened through transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization three interrelated pillars that support inclusive practices at the school level.

The concept of "inclusive schools" in this study is defined in line with international commitments such as the Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), which mandate that schools must adapt their physical environment, teaching strategies, curriculum, and values to accommodate all learners, particularly those with disabilities. Inclusion is not simply about integrating children with special needs into general classrooms, but transforming the entire education system to meet the diverse needs of all students. According to Kemdikbudristek (2023), an inclusive school must not only provide equal access but also ensure an adaptive, participatory, and non-discriminatory learning environment.

In facing the dynamics of inclusive education, especially in the context of primary education in Tugu District, Semarang City, several real challenges remain. According to interviews with the Head of KORSATPEN, obstacles such as teacher shortages, mismatched teaching competencies, excessive workloads, and weak understanding of the "Merdeka Curriculum" pose serious barriers to improving education quality for all students, particularly those with learning difficulties or disabilities. In addition, high administrative burdens and limited infrastructure, such as teaching aids and ICT devices, reduce the effectiveness of inclusive learning. These issues are reflected in the 2023 National Assessment data (released in 2024), which show declining learning outcomes in most public elementary schools in Tugu District, although most still fall within the "Good" category.

Table 1. Education Report Card of Public Elementary Schools in Tugu District, Semarang City

No	School Name	Achievement Score	Achievement Label	Rank
1	SDN Tugurejo 01	77	Good	Top
2	SDN Tugurejo 02	78,32	Good	Top
3	SDN Tugurejo 03	65,39	Good	Medium
4	SDN Karanganyar 01	59,15	Medium	Medium
5	SDN Karanganyar 02	77,04	Good	Top
6	SDN Mangkang Kulon 01	57,53	Medium	Medium
7	SDN Mangkang Kulon 02	73,59	Good	Top
8	SDN Mangkang Kulon 03	67,44	Good	Medium
9	SDN Mangkang Wetan 01	61,12	Medium	Medium
10	SDN Mangkang Wetan 02	56,87	Poor	Bottom
11	SDN Mangkang Wetan 03	68,96	Good	Medium
12	SDN Randugarut	65,39	Good	Medium
13	SDN Mangunharjo	68,77	Good	Medium

Source: Supervisory Report 2024

To address these challenges and advance inclusive school quality, the present study explores three core variables: transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization. These variables were selected based on their strategic relevance to inclusive education. While other factors such as parental involvement and inclusive policies are also critical (UNESCO, 2021; Idris & Jamal, 2021), this study focuses on internal school mechanisms that can directly influence inclusive practices at the operational level.

Transformational leadership is a vital entry point because it inspires systemic change, promotes teacher development, and fosters inclusive visioning at the school level (Hidayat, 2017; Danim, 2019). Principals with this leadership style can overcome resistance to change, build inclusive commitments, and transform traditional teaching paradigms into more adaptive and collaborative approaches, especially important for supporting students with special needs (Hidayah, 2022; Kartono, 2023).

School culture, on the other hand, establishes the normative environment in which inclusive values are embedded. A strong culture that respects diversity and collaboration contributes to the creation of safe, welcoming, and participatory learning environments for all learners, including those with disabilities (Mulyasa, 2022; Sudrajat, 2016). Culture becomes the collective habitus that either supports or hinders inclusive implementation.

The third pillar digitalization serves as a technological enabler of inclusion. With the rise of Industry 4.0 and Society 5.0, digital tools such as e-learning platforms, adaptive content, assistive technology, and digital data systems offer immense potential to personalize learning and improve access for students with disabilities (Rahardjo, 2023; Bejinaru, 2019).

Digitalization supports Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles by enabling flexible representation, expression, and engagement options tailored to diverse learning needs.

Thus, in the framework of equitable educational development, the concept of quality inclusive schools becomes the central narrative of this study. A quality inclusive school is one that not only ensures access but also nurtures meaningful participation and achievement for all students, regardless of ability. It is characterized by adaptive leadership, inclusive values, and effective use of digital tools to support individualized learning. According to Soetopo (2019), Idris & Jamal (2021), and Rahardjo (2023), school quality is determined by a combination of leadership, teacher quality, organizational culture, infrastructure, technology involvement, and participatory, data-driven management.

In modern education frameworks, quality is not only assessed based on academic output but also on the school's success in creating a safe, inclusive, and transformative environment (Pusat Standar dan Kebijakan Pendidikan, 2023). The dimensions of school quality according to Suprayitno (2021) include input (human, physical, and software resources), process (student-centered learning, inclusive climate), and output (student competence and character). In the context of inclusive education, schools must also have systems that enable full participation of students with special needs, through supportive facilities, inclusive-trained teachers, and adaptive strategies (Aprilia, 2017). This study aims to empirically investigate how transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization collectively contribute to the development of quality inclusive public elementary schools in Tugu District, aligning local practices with national and global standards of inclusive education.

METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory correlational research type, aimed at explaining the influence of independent variables transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization on the dependent variable of inclusive school quality. This approach was chosen because it is capable of testing the relationships between variables statistically and explaining the causal patterns among these variables (Sugiyono, 2021).

The population in this study consists of all teachers working in public primary schools in Tugu District, Semarang City, totaling 183 teachers across 13 schools. Based on preliminary data from the local education office, all schools in the sample have at least one or more students with disabilities enrolled, ranging from physical, intellectual, to learning disabilities. Most of these students are placed in regular classrooms, in line with the inclusive education policy implemented at the primary level. Therefore, the inclusion of schools with students with disabilities ensures the study is grounded in actual inclusive practice environments.

The sample was drawn using proportional random sampling, a technique for selecting a proportional random sample based on the number of teachers in each school. Based on Isaac and Michael's table at a 5% significance level, the sample size was determined to be 120 teachers. The inclusion criteria for participants were: (1) certified teachers, (2) actively teaching in inclusive classrooms or in schools with enrolled students with disabilities, and (3) having teaching experience of at least one academic year. These criteria were used to ensure that respondents had sufficient exposure to inclusive teaching practices.

Data were collected using a closed questionnaire that had been tested for validity and reliability. The measurement scale used was a Likert scale with five response options, ranging from strongly disagree (STS) to strongly agree (SS). The questionnaire items measured teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership practices, school culture, digitalization implementation, and the quality of inclusive school management, including

specific items targeting inclusive practices such as the availability of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the use of assistive technologies, adaptation of learning materials, and collaboration with special education teachers.

Validity testing was performed through item-total correlation analysis, and reliability testing used Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. The results of the tests showed that all statement items were valid ($r > 0.30$) and reliable ($\alpha > 0.70$), in accordance with measurement standards in social research (Arikunto, 2020).

The quality of inclusive schools was measured based on indicators synthesized from national inclusive education guidelines (Kemdikbudristek, 2023) and adapted from international frameworks, particularly the Salamanca Statement (1994) and UNCRPD (2006). These indicators included: (1) the existence of inclusive policies and administrative accommodations, (2) the extent of teacher preparedness in inclusive pedagogy, (3) the use of adaptive learning strategies and assistive technology, and (4) collaboration among stakeholders to support inclusive values and practices. This multidimensional approach allows for a comprehensive assessment of inclusive school quality from the teacher's perspective.

Data analysis was performed using multiple linear regression analysis to examine the simultaneous and partial effects of the three independent variables on the quality of inclusive schools. Classical assumption tests including normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity were conducted before regression testing to ensure the data met the assumptions required for parametric analysis. Data processing was done using the latest version of SPSS software. Descriptive analysis was also performed to determine the tendency of respondents toward each variable. The tendency categories were based on the Likert scale interval, divided into five classifications: very low, low, moderate, high, and very high. The following is the operationalization of each variable:

Table 2. Operationalization Details for Each Variable

Variable	Sub-Variable/Dimension	Source
Transformational Leadership	Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individualized Consideration	Bass & Riggio in Hidayah (2022)
School Culture	Values, habits, traditions, school norms	Sudrajat (2020)
Digitalization	Digital management, digital learning, educator digital literacy	Rahardjo (2023), Nasution (2024)

By clarifying the inclusion of students with disabilities, aligning the measurement with national and international inclusive education frameworks, and ensuring that teacher respondents were directly involved in inclusive education, this methodological design aims to generate empirical findings that are valid, relevant, and applicable to the development of quality inclusive schools in Indonesia.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Finding(s)

The description of data for each variable is presented to show the tendency levels of each research variable. For the Transformational Leadership variable, based on descriptive analysis, the mean score obtained was 115.33 out of an ideal score of 135, which is equivalent to 85.43%, categorized as high. This indicates that most teachers perceive the school principals as applying an inspirational leadership style, providing motivation, individual attention, and encouraging innovation within the school environment. Many respondents noted that their principals were proactive in creating inclusive visions,

facilitating professional learning, and offering emotional and pedagogical support to teachers handling students with special needs.

For the School Culture variable, the average score obtained was 109.88 out of a maximum score of 135, or 81.39%, which also falls into the high category. This reflects that the school culture in public elementary schools in Tugu District has embraced values of togetherness, discipline, mutual respect, and achievement orientation. In particular, inclusive schools reported strong collaborative norms, such as peer mentoring between general and special education teachers, mutual respect for student diversity, and scheduled inclusive case conferences.

For the Digitalization variable, the average score was 104.50 out of a maximum score of 135, or 77.41%, classified as high. This suggests that schools have integrated technology relatively well into both learning and school management. However, some teachers expressed concerns about inconsistent access to assistive devices, limited ICT infrastructure in special classrooms, and the lack of specific digital platforms tailored to students with disabilities.

Meanwhile, for the Inclusive School Quality variable, the average score obtained was 108.92 out of a maximum score of 135, or 80.97%, also classified as high. In inclusive education terms, this score suggests that most public elementary schools in Tugu District have implemented inclusive practices in a structured manner. This includes the availability of inclusive classrooms, application of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), curricular adaptations, and teacher training on inclusive pedagogy. Several schools reported positive student outcomes, such as improved participation of children with disabilities in classroom discussions and increased peer support behavior. Nonetheless, while the quantitative score is high, there remain qualitative gaps in consistent application across schools, especially in terms of facilities and specialized instructional strategies.

To strengthen the contextual understanding, Table 3 presents the inclusive status of the participating schools:

Table 3. Inclusive Status of Participating Public Elementary Schools in Tugu District

School Name	Enrolled Students with Disabilities	Type of Disabilities	Inclusive Classroom Practices
SDN Tugurejo 01	3	Learning & Speech Delay	Peer tutoring, seating adjustments
SDN Mangkang Kulon 01	1	Physical Impairment	Ramps, flexible scheduling
SDN Karanganyar 02	2	Hearing Impairment	Use of visual aids, simplified instructions
SDN Mangkang Wetan 02	1	Intellectual Disability	IEPs, collaboration with special education teachers
SDN Mangunharjo	3	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Reduced class sizes, behavioral intervention strategies

The normality test using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that all variables had significance values above 0.05, indicating that the data were normally distributed. The multicollinearity test revealed that all variables had tolerance values > 0.1 and VIF values < 10, meaning that there were no signs of multicollinearity. Meanwhile, the heteroscedasticity test using the Glejser test showed that all significance values were > 0.05, indicating no heteroscedasticity issues.

Simple linear regression tests were conducted for each independent variable against the dependent variable: (1) For Transformational Leadership, the t-test value was 6.022 with a significance of 0.000 < 0.05 and $R^2 = 0.239$, meaning that 23.9% of the variation in inclusive school quality is directly influenced by this leadership style. (2) For School Culture, the t-test value was 6.807, significance 0.000, and $R^2 = 0.283$, suggesting that 28.3% of the variation is explained by school culture alone. (3) For Digitalization, the t-test value was 4.399, significance 0.000, and $R^2 = 0.141$, indicating that 14.1% of inclusive school quality variation is influenced by digital integration.

A multiple linear regression test was performed to examine the simultaneous and partial effects of the independent variables. The F-test showed F = 29.384, significance 0.000 < 0.05, meaning that transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization significantly influence inclusive school quality together.

Table 4. Results of t-test Linear Regression

Variable	t-value	Sig.	Explanation
Transformational Leadership	3.540	0.001	Significant
School Culture	4.659	0.000	Significant
Digitalization	2.625	0.010	Significant

The coefficient of determination (R^2) value was 0.439, meaning that 43.9% of the variation in inclusive school quality can be explained by the combination of transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization. The remaining 56.1% is influenced by other factors, such as parental involvement, inclusive policy enforcement, or teacher attitudes, which were not part of this study. Additional findings from this research indicate that transformational leadership is a primary enabler in shaping a school culture that is both adaptive and open to digitalization. Although digitalization is rated highly by teachers, disparities in infrastructure and inconsistent training in inclusive technologies remain significant barriers. Disaggregated responses also show that teachers directly involved in inclusive classrooms tended to rate leadership and school culture more favorably than general classroom teachers, indicating a closer appreciation of support mechanisms essential for inclusion.

Finally, the quality of inclusive education is deeply rooted in the presence of collaborative values, empathy, and a shared school vision that supports all learners. These form the foundation for building school systems that are genuinely responsive to the diverse needs of every student.

Discussion(s)

The results of this study show that transformational leadership has a significant effect on inclusive school quality, contributing 23.9% to the variation. Principals who implement transformational leadership tend to build emotional connections with teachers, provide moral and intellectual support, and create an inclusive vision reflected in daily school practices. In inclusive education, such leadership is crucial in creating welcoming environments for students with disabilities, encouraging teachers to adopt inclusive pedagogies, and supporting classroom-level accommodations. For example, principals can advocate for the use of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), facilitate collaboration with special education teachers, and allocate time for inclusive planning.

These findings are in line with Khumalo and Mji (2021), who state that transformational leaders can create a safe and supportive educational environment for students with special needs. Naicker et al. (2020) also emphasize the importance of values-based leadership in shaping inclusive school cultures. Sultana and Ali (2023) found that inspiring leaders increase teacher engagement in designing adaptive learning, while Haritha and Purushothaman (2021) noted that creative and autonomous leadership strengthens school readiness to embrace diversity. Similarly, Chataika and McKenzie (2021) highlight that transformational leadership helps bridge inclusion policy and its practical implementation. Sharma (2022) further confirms that leadership fostering collective commitment is key to inclusive paradigm shifts in education.

School culture had the most dominant partial effect on inclusive school quality, with an R^2 of 28.3%. In inclusive terms, this means that shared values such as tolerance, empathy, cooperation, and openness to difference become the cultural backbone of inclusive practice. Schools with a culture that normalizes student diversity are more likely to provide adjusted instruction, differentiated assessment, and peer-assisted learning for students with disabilities.

Abid and Hossain (2022) assert that a positive school environment increases both student and teacher motivation in overcoming challenges related to inclusivity. Ahmad and Nasir (2020) highlight that organizational culture fosters a collective spirit to embrace diversity. Widiastuti and Firman (2021) find that teacher participation in decision-making enhances their commitment to inclusion. Shree and Shukla (2023) emphasize that school traditions rooted in acceptance support the integration of students with special needs. Ncube (2023) adds that internal communication and trust among educators build inclusive culture. Maharani et al. (2022) stress the importance of internalizing mutual cooperation to ease curriculum adaptation for children with special needs.

However, these cultural strengths also come with challenges. In some schools, cultural change toward full inclusion is still resisted by a minority of teachers who feel unprepared or lack confidence in inclusive strategies. Inadequate infrastructure, such as lack of disability-friendly toilets or resource rooms, and minimal community involvement, are also frequently noted as hindrances to fostering a fully inclusive culture.

Digitalization, while having the smallest partial effect at 14.1%, plays an enabling role in personalized learning and accessibility for students with disabilities. Teachers reported the use of learning management systems (LMS), multimedia learning tools, and digital communication platforms to deliver differentiated content and involve parents in inclusive planning. However, the impact is uneven due to disparities in internet connectivity, limited access to assistive technology, and gaps in teacher digital literacy.

Rahardjo (2023) asserts that technology expands access and learning flexibility. Khan et al. (2021) highlight the usefulness of LMS in supporting students with various needs. Choi and Lee (2022) show that inclusive digital schools better identify student needs and give adaptive feedback. Putri and Rahman (2021) found digital platforms facilitate collaboration between teachers and parents. Kusuma and Pratama (2023) explain the benefit of mobile apps for visually or auditorily inclined learners. Nevertheless, Novianti and Salam (2022) warn that digital literacy gaps remain a critical barrier to inclusive implementation.

The regression analysis shows that transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization simultaneously explain 43.9% of the variation in inclusive school quality. This reinforces the notion that successful inclusive education is not built on a single factor but requires a systemic synergy among managerial, cultural, and technological dimensions. Mulaudzi and Makoelle (2021) support this, stating that inclusive education in elementary schools thrives when adaptive leadership, a collaborative culture, and tech-based

management co-exist. Khong et al. (2022) also argue for aligning formal structures with digital and cultural support. Alzahrani and Ahmed (2023) point to the principal's role in promoting innovation and facilitating inclusive technology use. Ariffin and Mulyana (2020) advocate for a holistic approach encompassing social, structural, and digital elements. Osei (2021) found that countries with high inclusion rates employ integrated strategies, while Sari and Handayani (2024) show that success in Southeast Asia stems from synchronized cultural and digital transformation.

Despite these promising results, this study has limitations. First, it relies solely on teacher perceptions through questionnaires. While this provides insights into their views, it does not capture the voices of students with disabilities or verify actual classroom practices through direct observation. Therefore, perception bias may occur, especially considering the social desirability effect teachers may provide responses that align with expected norms rather than actual conditions.

Second, the lack of student-level or parent data limits the holistic assessment of inclusive outcomes. Some respondents may also not be directly involved in teaching students with disabilities, thus their views might not fully represent inclusive practices. Moreover, challenges such as teacher resistance to inclusion, lack of assistive facilities, and low student engagement among children with disabilities were only briefly acknowledged by respondents, suggesting the need for more qualitative exploration.

In summary, the integration of transformational leadership, inclusive school culture, and strategic digitalization plays a vital role in shaping quality inclusive schools. Each component, while interrelated, uniquely supports the inclusion of students with disabilities through vision and empowerment, through values and participation, and through access and personalization. However, advancing inclusive education requires more than internal synergy; it also demands listening to students, improving infrastructure, and bridging the gap between perception and practice.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted in public elementary schools in Tugu District, Semarang, it can be concluded that transformational leadership, school culture, and digitalization play significant and interrelated roles in shaping the quality of inclusive schools. First, transformational leadership has been proven to significantly affect the quality of inclusive schools. Principals who demonstrate visionary, inspirational, and supportive leadership foster a learning environment that is more open, adaptive, and responsive to the diverse needs of students, especially those with disabilities. The ability of school leaders to encourage teacher collaboration, facilitate inclusive planning, and promote innovation is essential in implementing inclusive education. Second, school culture emerges as the most influential factor. Schools that uphold values of togetherness, mutual respect, democratic participation, and open communication tend to be better prepared in applying inclusive strategies. A strong culture of empathy and cooperation enables schools to accommodate differences, including through curriculum adaptation and classroom practices that support every learner's potential. Third, digitalization also contributes significantly by enabling the personalization of learning content, increasing access to inclusive resources, and facilitating technology-assisted support for students with special needs. However, gaps in infrastructure, teacher digital literacy, and availability of assistive technologies remain obstacles that require systemic intervention. Simultaneously, these three variables contribute 43.9% to the quality of inclusive schools, confirming that inclusion is not the product of a single effort but rather the result of synergistic interactions between leadership, culture, and digital

capacity. Building a quality inclusive school requires a comprehensive approach where leadership drives policy, culture shapes daily practice, and technology bridges learning gaps.

Policy and Practice Recommendations: (1) For policymakers: Provide targeted training for school leaders on inclusive leadership competencies, including managing diversity and inclusive decision-making, (a) Allocate funding to equip schools with assistive technologies and develop inclusive digital learning platforms. (b) Develop monitoring frameworks based on inclusive indicators such as student participation, individual support plans, and family involvement. (2) For school leaders: (a) Build professional learning communities that emphasize inclusive pedagogies and shared responsibilities for all learners. (b) Encourage classroom practices that include universal design for learning (UDL) principles. (c) Facilitate teacher collaboration in planning and reflecting on inclusive strategies, particularly for students with special needs.

This study is limited by its reliance solely on teacher perceptions through questionnaires, without incorporating student voices, parental perspectives, or direct classroom observations. Moreover, while the study measured perceptions of inclusive school quality, it did not assess actual practices or learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Future research should incorporate qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and classroom ethnographies to capture the lived experiences of students with disabilities and their families. It would also be valuable to examine policy implementation gaps, inclusive resource allocation, and the role of inter-professional collaboration in different school contexts.

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