



Instructional Leadership and Data-Driven Inclusive Learning: A Bibliometric–Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

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Research integrating instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and inclusive learning in nature-based elementary schools remains limited, particularly in terms of empirical evidence and contextual application. This study aims to synthesize existing literature and identify research trends and gaps related to principals' instructional leadership in supporting data-driven inclusive learning. This study employed a bibliometric–systematic literature review design. Data were retrieved from the Crossref database using the SEforRA search engine, yielding 9,967 initial records. Through systematic screening stages (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion) based on predefined criteria, 397 articles were identified as relevant, and 36 articles were included in the final analysis. The study applied bibliometric mapping (publication trends, citation, and co-word analysis) and thematic synthesis. As a literature-based study, statistical measures such as mean differences, p-values, and effect sizes were not applicable. The results indicate that instructional leadership is consistently associated with collaborative practices, systematic data use, and technology integration in inclusive learning environments. Evidence suggests that data-informed practices support improved academic decision-making, learning personalization, and student outcomes. However, persistent challenges—including limited resources, insufficient professional development, and resistance to change—remain significant barriers. Bibliometric findings also show increasing research trends, although studies focusing on nature-based elementary schools remain scarce. In conclusion, instructional leadership is an important factor in advancing data-driven inclusive learning; however, further empirical and context-specific research is needed to examine its effectiveness and long-term impact.

Keywords:

academic decision-making; data-driven learning; inclusive education; instructional leadership; nature-based elementary schools

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INTRODUCTION

Principals' instructional leadership plays a central role in improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly in the development of data-driven inclusive learning environments. In this context, instructional leadership operates as a mechanism that shapes how data are collected, interpreted, and translated into instructional actions. Through structured supervision, collaborative inquiry, and continuous feedback, principals influence teachers' cognitive and behavioral processes, including data literacy, reflective thinking, and evidence-based decision-making (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020). These



processes enable teachers to adapt instruction, personalize learning, and respond more effectively to diverse student needs.

Empirical evidence indicates that instructional leadership contributes to the successful implementation of inclusive education by fostering collaboration and strengthening teachers' professional capacity. For instance, leadership practices that emphasize data-informed planning and ongoing professional learning have been shown to improve the implementation of individualized and inclusive instructional strategies (Lambrecht et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). In addition, the use of data in academic decision-making has been associated with improved instructional quality and student learning outcomes, particularly when supported by appropriate data systems and teacher competencies (Visscher, 2020; Schelling & Rubenstein, 2021). However, these benefits are often constrained by challenges such as limited data literacy, insufficient professional development, and resistance to organizational change (Engelbrecht, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2025).

Despite the growing literature on instructional leadership, inclusive education, and data-driven decision-making, most studies have been conducted in conventional school settings. Research focusing specifically on nature-based elementary schools remains very limited. This context is characterized by experiential, environment-based learning and flexible pedagogical approaches, which may influence how data are generated, interpreted, and used in instructional decision-making. As a result, existing findings cannot be directly generalized, indicating a clear theoretical and empirical gap.

Furthermore, prior studies tend to examine instructional leadership, data use, and inclusive learning as separate domains, with limited integration into a unified framework. There is still insufficient understanding of how instructional leadership activates data-driven processes to influence academic decision-making, particularly in context-specific environments such as nature-based schools.

Therefore, this study aims to synthesize existing literature and identify research trends and gaps related to instructional leadership in data-driven inclusive learning. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does instructional leadership influence the implementation of data-driven inclusive learning?
2. What cognitive and behavioral processes are activated through data-driven instructional leadership?
3. What are the key challenges and enabling factors in implementing data-driven inclusive learning?
4. What research gaps exist, particularly in the context of nature-based elementary schools? Principals' instructional leadership plays a central role in developing effective data-driven inclusive learning models, particularly within the context of nature-based elementary schools.

METHODS

This study employed a bibliometric–systematic literature review (B-SLR) design, integrating quantitative bibliometric mapping with qualitative thematic synthesis to provide a comprehensive understanding of research trends, patterns,

and conceptual developments (Marzi et al., 2024; Walsh & Rowe, 2022; Lim & Kumar, 2023; Chen & Song, 2019; Zupic & Čater, 2014). The scope of this study focuses on instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and inclusive learning within elementary school contexts, particularly in nature-based settings. The literature search was conducted using the Crossref database via the SEforRA search engine, which aggregates multiple academic sources, including Semantic Scholar and PubMed. From 1,429,006 indexed records, 9,967 articles were initially retrieved using 21 structured and iterative search strings that combined key terms such as instructional leadership, inclusive education, data-driven decision-making, and elementary schools, along with their synonyms across various contexts.

The study followed PRISMA guidelines consisting of four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. In the identification stage, 9,967 records were retrieved. During the screening stage, duplicate records, non-English publications, non-peer-reviewed articles, and studies not aligned with the research focus were excluded, resulting in 488 articles for full-text review. In the eligibility stage, articles were assessed based on predefined inclusion criteria, including studies addressing instructional leadership, inclusive learning, or data-driven decision-making, conducted in school or elementary education contexts, and providing empirical findings, systematic reviews, or strong theoretical contributions. Exclusion criteria included non-English or non-peer-reviewed publications, studies not relevant to the research focus, and studies lacking methodological clarity or sufficient data. This process resulted in 397 relevant articles, from which 36 articles were selected for final analysis.

A quality appraisal was conducted to evaluate methodological rigor, relevance, and theoretical contribution, focusing on clarity of research design, data validity, and alignment with the core variables. A systematic coding procedure was then applied to categorize the selected studies into key thematic areas, including instructional leadership practices, data use in academic decision-making, inclusive learning models, and implementation challenges and enabling factors. Bibliometric analysis was conducted using indicators such as publication trends, citation analysis, co-citation, co-word analysis, and bibliographic coupling to map the intellectual structure of the field (Klarin, 2024; Lazarides et al., 2023; Passas, 2024; Lyu et al., 2023; Durieux & Gevenois, 2010; Belter, 2015; Zupic & Čater, 2014). In parallel, thematic synthesis was employed to interpret relationships among variables, identify research gaps, and generate conceptual insights. The reduction from 397 to 36 articles was guided by methodological quality, relevance to the integration of the three core constructs, and contribution to addressing the identified research gap, particularly in nature-based elementary school contexts. This methodological procedure ensures transparency, rigor, and replicability of the review process.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The identified studies comprise empirical research, systematic reviews, case studies, and policy analyses conducted across diverse national contexts and elementary school settings. Overall, the findings indicate a growing scholarly

Instructional Leadership and the Development of Inclusive Models

Principals' instructional leadership has been widely recognized as a critical factor in fostering collaborative school cultures, designing and evaluating inclusive programs, and strengthening teachers' professional capacity through continuous development and sustained instructional support (DeMatthews, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020a; DeMatthews et al., 2020b; Lambrecht et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020; Moya et al., 2020; Ketikidou & Saiti, 2022; Kwan, 2020).

Effective instructional leadership models further emphasize collaboration, data-informed planning, and ongoing professional learning as foundational components of inclusive school development (Haines et al., 2021; DeMatthews, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020a; DeMatthews et al., 2020b; Lambrecht et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020; Moya et al., 2020; Ketikidou & Saiti, 2022; Kwan, 2020).

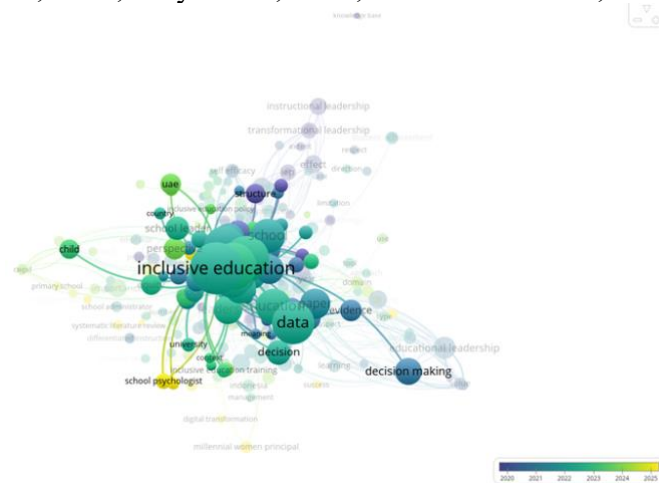


Figure 3. Visualization of research on inclusive education from 2020 to 2025

Addressing the first research question, the literature consistently demonstrates that principals' instructional leadership significantly influences the implementation of data-driven inclusive learning. Instructional leadership facilitates the establishment of collaborative school cultures, supports data-informed planning, and strengthens teachers' professional capacity through continuous development and instructional supervision (DeMatthews, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020a; DeMatthews et al., 2020b; Lambrecht et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020; Moya et al., 2020; Ketikidou & Saiti, 2022; Kwan, 2020). Effective leadership practices encourage the systematic use of data to guide instructional strategies and inclusive interventions, thereby enhancing the quality and consistency of academic decision-making (Haines et al., 2021).

Data-Driven Academic Decision-Making

The use of data in academic decision-making within inclusive elementary schools has been shown to enhance decision quality, support personalized learning, and improve student learning outcomes (Wilcox et al., 2021; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; Schelling & Rubenstein, 2021; Barthakur et al., 2025; Visscher, 2020). However, despite these benefits, the literature consistently identifies several

persistent challenges, including limited data literacy among educators, insufficient and fragmented professional training, and resistance to organizational change, all of which hinder effective implementation of data-driven practices (DeMatthews et al., 2025; White & Fletcher, 2025; Schelling & Rubenstein, 2021; Humaira et al., 2023; Shutaleva et al., 2023; Engelbrecht, 2020; Visscher, 2020).

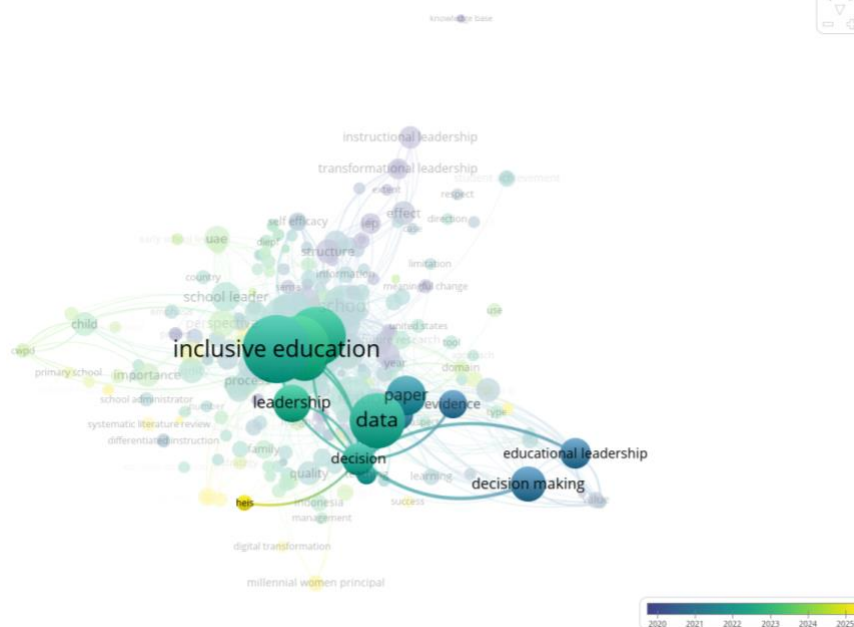


Figure 4. Visualization of research topics on decision-making from 2020 to 2025

In response to the second research question, instructional leadership activates several key cognitive and behavioral processes among educators. These include data literacy, reflective thinking, collaborative inquiry, and evidence-based decision-making. Teachers are encouraged to interpret student data, engage in professional dialogue, and adjust instructional practices based on empirical evidence (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; Schelling & Rubenstein, 2021). Behaviorally, this process fosters collaboration, shared responsibility, and continuous professional learning, which are essential for sustaining inclusive and adaptive learning environments.

Challenges, Innovations, and Directions for Novelty

Key implementation challenges identified in the literature include limited institutional resources, the need for sustained and coherent professional development, and resistance to change embedded within existing school cultures (DeMatthews et al., 2025; White & Fletcher, 2025; Huda et al., 2021; Humaira et al., 2023; Shutaleva et al., 2023; Engelbrecht, 2020). These constraints often limit schools' capacity to adopt and sustain inclusive, data-informed practices effectively.

Recent innovations in the field highlight the growing use of artificial intelligence-supported decision-making systems, learning analytics dashboards, and collaborative models that actively engage multiple stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, and external partners (Wang, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2024;

Barthakur et al., 2025; Kahardani et al., 2025). Such innovations demonstrate the potential of technology-enabled leadership to enhance instructional planning, inclusivity, and responsiveness to diverse learner needs.

Future research novelty lies in the integration of data-driven inclusive learning models with an ecosystem-based approach that strengthens instructional leadership and advances data-driven academic decision-making competencies among educators and students within nature-based elementary school contexts. This direction offers a promising pathway for bridging leadership theory, inclusive education practices, and emerging digital innovations.

Table 1. Comparison of Key Articles in the Fields of Instructional Leadership, Inclusive Education, and Data-Driven Decision-Making in Elementary Schools

Article	Methodology	Sample	Key Findings
Wilcox et al. (2021)	Literature review, case study	Diverse (international)	Data-driven practices support inclusive decision-making, particularly for students with special educational needs
DeMatthews (2020)	Qualitative study, observations and interviews	2 principals, teachers, administrators	Collaboration, data-based planning, and evaluation are key success factors for inclusive education
Lambrecht et al. (2020)	Path analysis model, survey	135 schools in Germany	Instructional and transformational leadership significantly influence collaboration and the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
Mandinach & Schildkamp (2020)	Literature analysis, commentary	Global	Clarifies common misconceptions regarding data-driven decision-making in education
Hallinger et al. (2020)	Bibliometric analysis, science mapping	1,206 articles	Instructional leadership research is expanding globally, with emerging integrated models

Table 2. Main Contributors: Most Relevant Researchers and Journals Key Researchers

Researcher	Articles
David E. DeMatthews	DeMatthews (2020); DeMatthews et al. (2020a); DeMatthews et al. (2020b); DeMatthews et al. (2025)
E. Mandinach	Mandinach & Schildkamp (2020)
Edda Óskarsdóttir	Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020)
Journal	Articles
Journal of Educational Administration	DeMatthews (2020); DeMatthews et al. (2020b); Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020); Wang (2021)
International Journal of Inclusive Education	Lambrecht et al. (2020); Miller et al. (2020); Rapp & Corral-Granados (2021); Fitzgerald & Radford (2020)

Sustainability Chigbu & Makapela (2025); Moya et al. (2020); Shutaleva et al. (2023); Massouti et al. (2023); Massouti et al. (2024)

Source: Authors' analysis

This study reinforces the critical role of principals' instructional leadership in the development of effective data-driven inclusive learning models in elementary schools (DeMatthews, 2020; DeMatthews et al., 2020a; DeMatthews et al., 2020b; Lambrecht et al., 2020; Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020; Moya et al., 2020; Ketikidou & Saiti, 2022; Kwan, 2020). Instructional leadership that prioritizes collaboration, data-informed planning, and professional learning provides a strong foundation for inclusive school development.

The systematic use of data in academic decision-making enables more accurate instructional judgments, supports learning personalization, and contributes to improved student learning outcomes (Wilcox et al., 2021; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; Schelling & Rubenstein, 2021; Barthakur et al., 2025; Visscher, 2020). However, despite these benefits, persistent implementation challenges remain. Limited resources, insufficient and fragmented professional training, and resistance to change embedded in school culture continue to act as significant barriers to the effective adoption of data-driven inclusive practices (DeMatthews et al., 2025; White & Fletcher, 2025; Huda et al., 2021; Humaira et al., 2023; Shutaleva et al., 2023; Engelbrecht, 2020).

Recent innovations, including the integration of artificial intelligence-supported systems and learning analytics dashboards, offer new opportunities to strengthen data-driven inclusive learning models by enhancing data accessibility, enabling real-time feedback, and supporting evidence-based instructional planning (Wang, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2024; Barthakur et al., 2025; Kahardani et al., 2025). In parallel, bibliometric findings indicate that research in this domain is expanding rapidly, with a discernible shift toward integrated and collaborative leadership models that emphasize shared responsibility, cross-stakeholder engagement, and systemic capacity building (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2024; Hallinger et al., 2020).

The scientific novelty of this research lies in the development of a data-driven inclusive learning ecosystem model that integrates instructional leadership, technological innovation, and cross-stakeholder collaboration. This ecosystem-oriented perspective extends existing leadership and inclusion frameworks by positioning nature-based elementary schools as dynamic learning environments in which data-informed practices, inclusivity, and leadership interact synergistically to enhance academic decision-making skills among both educators and students.

Table 3. Synthesis of Findings and Their Significance

Statement	Strength of Evidence	Review Summary	Articles
Principals' instructional leadership enhances the effectiveness of data-driven inclusive learning models	Strong (9/10)	Robust evidence from empirical studies, systematic reviews, and policy analyses across multiple countries	DeMatthews (2020); DeMatthews et al. (2020a); DeMatthews et al. (2020b); Lambrecht et al. (2020); Óskarsdóttir et al.

			(2020); Moya et al. (2020); Ketikidou & Saiti (2022); Kwan (2020); Hallinger et al. (2020)
Data use in academic decision-making improves student learning outcomes	Strong (8/10)	Intervention studies and literature reviews demonstrate positive effects on learning and personalization and achievement	Wilcox et al. (2021); Mandinach & Schildkamp (2020); Schelling & Rubenstein (2021); Barthakur et al. (2025); Visscher (2020)
Key implementation challenges include limited resources and insufficient professional training	Moderate (7/10)	Qualitative studies and surveys identify major barriers across diverse educational contexts	DeMatthews et al. (2025); White & Fletcher (2025); Huda et al. (2021); Humaira et al. (2023); Shutaleva et al. (2023); Engelbrecht (2020)
Technological innovations (AI, learning dashboards) strengthen data-driven inclusive learning models	Moderate (6/10)	Emerging studies highlight the potential of AI and dashboards, although evidence remains largely preliminary	Wang (2021); Ahmad et al. (2024); Barthakur et al. (2025); Kahardani et al. (2025)
Teachers' attitudes and competencies influence the success of inclusive model implementation	Moderate (6/10)	Survey-based and qualitative research emphasizes the importance of professional development and ongoing support	Dewa (2025); White & Fletcher (2025); Alkhateeb et al. (2023); D'Intino & Wang (2021); Lindner et al. (2023); Humaira et al. (2023); Werner et al. (2021)
Empirical research on data-driven inclusive learning models in nature-based elementary schools remains limited	Weak (3/10)	Existing literature predominantly focuses on conventional schools, with minimal empirical evidence from nature-based settings	Huda et al. (2021); Kahardani et al. (2025)

Source: Authors' analysis

Addressing the third research question, the findings reveal both enabling factors and persistent challenges in implementing data-driven inclusive learning. Enabling factors include strong instructional leadership, access to data systems, professional development, and collaborative school cultures (Wilcox et al., 2021; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2020; Visscher, 2020). However, the literature consistently identifies significant barriers, such as limited data literacy, insufficient and fragmented training, resource constraints, and resistance to organizational change (DeMatthews et al., 2025; White & Fletcher, 2025; Huda et al., 2021; Humaira et al., 2023; Shutaleva et al., 2023; Engelbrecht, 2020). These challenges hinder the effective adoption and sustainability of data-driven practices.

Recent developments in the literature point to emerging innovations, including the integration of artificial intelligence, learning analytics dashboards, and ecosystem-based collaboration models that involve multiple stakeholders (Wang, 2021; Ahmad et al., 2024; Barthakur et al., 2025; Kahardani et al., 2025).

These innovations have the potential to enhance data accessibility, improve real-time decision-making, and strengthen inclusive practices.

The novelty of this study lies in proposing a data-driven inclusive learning ecosystem model that integrates instructional leadership, technological innovation, and cross-stakeholder collaboration. This model provides a conceptual foundation for enhancing academic decision-making skills among both teachers and students, particularly within the underexplored context of nature-based elementary schools.

Although a substantial body of literature addresses instructional leadership, inclusive education, and data-driven decision-making, empirical studies that explicitly integrate these three dimensions within nature-based elementary school contexts remain extremely limited. Moreover, research examining the long-term impact of data-driven inclusive learning models on the academic decision-making skills of both students and teachers in such settings is still scarce.

Table 4. Research Gap Matrix Across Key Topics and Study Attributes

Research Topic / Study Attribute	General Schools	Nature-Based Schools	Empirical Studies	Conceptual Studies	Intervention Studies
Instructional Leadership	18	2	10	7	3
Inclusive Learning Models	20	1	8	9	4
Academic Decision-Making	15	1	7	6	3
Data and Technology Integration	12	GAP	5	5	2
Cross-Stakeholder Collaboration	10	1	4	5	2

Source: Authors' analysis

Future research should focus on developing context-sensitive data-driven inclusive learning models for nature-based elementary schools, evaluating their long-term impacts, and identifying key factors that determine successful implementation across diverse educational settings.

Table 5. Open Research Questions for Future Studies

Research Question	Rationale
How effective are data-driven inclusive learning models in enhancing academic decision-making skills in nature-based elementary schools?	This question is crucial for examining the actual impact of the model on learning outcomes and academic decision-making within nature-based school contexts.
What are the key success factors and barriers in implementing instructional leadership for the development of data-driven inclusive learning models?	Identifying enabling and constraining factors will support the design of more effective and sustainable leadership and instructional interventions.
How can the integration of technology (e.g., artificial intelligence and learning dashboards) strengthen academic decision-making in inclusive elementary schools?	Technological integration has the potential to accelerate learning personalization and data-informed decision-making; however, empirical evidence remains limited.

How effective are data-driven inclusive learning models in enhancing academic decision-making skills in nature-based elementary schools?	This question is crucial for examining the actual impact of the model on learning outcomes and academic decision-making within nature-based school contexts.
What are the key success factors and barriers in implementing instructional leadership for the development of data-driven inclusive learning models?	Identifying enabling and constraining factors will support the design of more effective and sustainable leadership and instructional interventions.

Source: Authors' analysis

CONCLUSION

This study synthesizes existing literature on instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, and inclusive learning in elementary school contexts, with particular attention to nature-based settings. The findings indicate that instructional leadership is consistently associated with collaborative practices, systematic data use, and the development of inclusive learning environments. In addition, the integration of data-informed practices appears to support more effective academic decision-making and learning personalization, although the evidence remains largely derived from studies conducted in conventional school contexts .

However, this study has several limitations. As a bibliometric–systematic literature review, the findings are based on secondary data and do not provide direct empirical validation of a specific instructional model. Furthermore, the limited number of studies focusing on nature-based elementary schools restricts the generalizability of the conclusions to this context. The synthesis is also dependent on the quality and scope of the selected articles, which may influence the interpretation of trends and relationships.

Therefore, while this study proposes a conceptual framework for a data-driven inclusive learning ecosystem, it does not claim empirical confirmation of the model. Instead, it offers a theoretical foundation that requires further validation through context-specific empirical research.

Future research is recommended to develop and empirically test data-driven inclusive learning models in nature-based elementary schools, examine their long-term impact on academic decision-making skills, and identify key success factors and implementation challenges across diverse educational contexts.

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