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Inclusive Leadership in the Context of Wetland Ecology: Realizing Child Friendly Schools and Character Building for Elementary School Students

Fathul Jannah*, Aslamiah

Doctoral Program in Educational Administration, Lambung Mangkurat University, South Kalimantan, 70113, Indonesia

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* *Corresponding author:*

E-mail: fathul.jannah@ulm.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education and leadership that is responsive to social diversity and the surrounding environment are increasingly recognized as essential elements in creating child friendly schools. In the context of wetland ecology which is a vital but often overlooked ecosystem in the educational curriculum, inclusive leadership plays an important role. This study aims to analyze the application of inclusive leadership in elementary schools located in wetland areas to create child friendly schools and instill character in students. This research identifies four main issues, namely, the role of inclusive leadership in creating child friendly schools in wetland areas; the application of inclusive leadership in character education; implementation challenges; and strategies that can be implemented by school principals to strengthen the implementation of child friendly schools and character education. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a literature study method. The results of the study show that inclusive leadership is essential in integrating the values of diversity and environmental awareness in education in elementary schools located in wetland environments. The conclusion of this study is that inclusive leadership based on the ecological context of wetlands can be an effective model for creating child friendly schools and developing student character in primary schools.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become one of the key themes in the global and national education system, with a focus on ensuring that every child has equal access to quality education, regardless of their social, economic, or physical background. In Indonesia, inclusive education is officially guaranteed through government policies, but its implementation on the ground still faces many challenges. The main challenges often faced include the lack of guidance for educators and limited

resources to support the effective implementation of inclusive education (Novrizal & Manaf, 2024). Inclusive leadership in schools is one of the keys to creating a fair, open, and safe learning environment for all students, including those with special needs.

Along with the importance of diversity, both socially and environmentally, the ecological context also plays a very strategic role in character development. One ecosystem that offers great potential for character education is the wetland environment. Wetland environments with high biodiversity and vital ecological functions offer many benefits that can be harnessed as contextual learning mediums. In Indonesia, areas such as Banjarmasin located in wetland areas provide an opportunity to integrate ecology based learning into character education for primary school students. The wetland environment can serve as a learning resource that not only enriches students' experience in understanding the environment, but also instills values such as social responsibility and environmental awareness (Sholahuddin et al., 2021).

Despite this potential, the implementation of inclusive leadership in schools in wetland environments presents complex challenges. The diversity of student backgrounds, limited resources and infrastructure, and difficulties in integrating ecological values into the curriculum are the main obstacles (Rusmilawati et al., 2025). In addition, the need to accommodate various diverse student characteristics, both from social, economic, and physical aspects, further strengthens the urgency of adaptive and contextual leadership in school management (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024).

Various previous studies have shown that the leadership of school principals has a strategic role in improving the quality of education. Collaborative and supportive leadership has been proven to be able to improve teacher professionalism, especially in strengthening digital competence. Research by Rini and Lestari (2025) reveals that a participatory leadership approach encourages active involvement of teachers in self-development, although its implementation is still faced with obstacles in the form of limited facilities, skills gaps, and high administrative burdens. These findings confirm that leadership effectiveness is not only determined by leadership style, but also by adequate system support.

In addition, the principal as a manager has an important role in integrating character education into the curriculum, learning activities, and school culture. Dewi et al. (2025) show that structured and sustainable management of character education is able to increase students' positive behaviors, such as discipline, responsibility, and cooperation. This emphasizes that school leadership is not only oriented to academic achievement, but also to the formation of students' character as a whole. Furthermore, the principal's innovation through the development of superior programs is also an important factor in improving the quality of the school. Natasya and Maksum (2025) found that innovative programs that are systematically designed are able to improve students' academic and non-academic achievements. However, the implementation of these innovations still faces challenges in the form

of limited resources and resistance to change, requiring leadership that is able to manage change effectively and collaboratively.

From the perspective of education management, the implementation of school-based management shows that school principals have multidimensional roles as educators, managers, leaders, supervisors, innovators, and motivators. Muzdalifa et al. (2025) emphasized that the success of school management is highly determined by the ability of the principal to empower all components of the school and create a conducive organizational culture. This shows that effective leadership must be flexible and contextual according to the needs of the school environment. In addition, leadership based on local wisdom has also proven to be effective in building a school quality culture. Rohyadi et al. (2025) show that the integration of local values such as mutual cooperation, togetherness, and religiosity into educational practices is able to strengthen students' character while creating a more relevant and contextual learning environment. This approach shows that leadership rooted in cultural values has great potential in supporting sustainable character education.

Although these studies have examined principal leadership from a variety of perspectives, most have focused on the general aspects of educational leadership and have not specifically examined inclusive leadership in the context of wetland ecology. In fact, the characteristics of wetland environments demand a leadership approach that is not only responsive to social diversity, but also able to integrate ecological awareness into educational practices in a contextual manner. Based on this description, this article aims to analyze the application of inclusive leadership in creating child friendly schools and instilling character in elementary school students in wetland ecological areas, as well as identify implementation challenges and formulate relevant leadership strategies in these contexts.

2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method. Literature study is a series of activities focused on collecting, reading, recording, and managing relevant research materials, such as books, journals, and scientific articles, that aim to solve research problems (Smela et al., 2023). This method allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of theoretical concepts, empirical findings, and research trends related to the topic being researched. In the context of this study, a literature study was conducted by collecting various sources from the last five years, selected based on their relevance to inclusive leadership, child friendly schools, character education, and wetland ecology contexts, which were then systematically and critically analyzed based on the research questions asked.

The research instrument in this study is the researcher himself as the main instrument (human instrument), which is assisted by document analysis sheets to identify, classify, and synthesize data from various literature sources. The sources used in this study consisted of 30 scientific articles, which were spread across

several databases, namely 15 articles indexed in Scopus, 10 indexed articles in Sinta, and 5 articles obtained from other sources such as reputable national and international books and journals that were not indexed in Scopus or Sinta. The selection of these sources is based on relevance and contribution to the research topic. The focus of this research is to analyze the application of inclusive leadership in creating child friendly schools and instilling character in elementary school students, especially in wetland ecological areas that have unique environmental and social characteristics. This study aims to analyze the challenges faced in implementing inclusive leadership in elementary schools with wetland ecological characteristics that require adaptive and contextual approaches, as well as strategies that can be applied by school principals systematically and sustainably to strengthen the implementation of child friendly schools and character development in elementary schools.

Data collection techniques are carried out by: a) Searching and collecting relevant sources (journal articles, academic books, official documents) that are closely related to the research topic. b) Categorize information based on themes or key variables to facilitate systematic analysis. c) Analyze and synthesize findings using a thematic approach in order to identify key patterns, relationships, and concepts. d) Draw conclusions based on the results of the analysis and synthesis process. All sources were critically and comprehensively analyzed to obtain conceptual and theoretical data that supported the research objectives and frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3. Results and Discussion

Inclusive leadership is considered an important factor in shaping a child friendly school, where every student regardless of their background can thrive optimally. In areas with unique ecosystems such as wetlands, the role of inclusive leadership becomes more complex because it must accommodate the diversity of local ecosystems. In the context of wetland environments, schools are in an ecosystem characterized by high biodiversity, hydrological dependence, and environmental vulnerability that shape the daily lives and social interactions of students and the surrounding community. These ecological characteristics not only serve as background conditions but actively build social values, learning patterns, and interaction systems within the school, thus requiring principals to align inclusive leadership practices with ecological realities.

Based on a literature review conducted on inclusive leadership, child friendly schools, and the context of wetland ecology, several important findings have emerged that provide insights into the implementation and challenges of education in primary schools located in wetland environments. The findings suggest that wetland ecology serves as a contextual learning space where inclusive leadership is realized through direct engagement with local environmental characteristics, such as community dependence on wetland ecosystems, ecological vulnerability, and the values of collective cooperation. This means that inclusive leadership is not only reflected in equality and participation policies, but also in how principals translate

ecological interdependence into collaborative learning structures, shared decision-making, and adaptive school management. These characteristics allow school principals to integrate environmental awareness, community participation, and inclusive decision-making into school culture and learning activities, thereby strengthening child friendly practices and character development. In the specific context of wetland environments, inclusive leadership is strengthened through direct engagement with the ecological characteristics that shape students' daily lives, such as hydrological dependence, environmental vulnerability, and strong community ties to natural resources. For example, community dependence on wetland ecosystems encourages principals to adopt an inclusive leadership approach that reflects local cooperative practices in which students, teachers, and communities are collaboratively involved in problem-solving and environmental management.

Local communities' dependence on wetland ecosystems also fosters collective values, such as cooperation, shared responsibility, and social concern, which can be deliberately integrated by school principals into child friendly school policies and character education. Inclusive principals in wetland environments translate this ecological reality into leadership strategies by encouraging participatory decision-making, involving parents and communities in school curricula, and ensuring that all students have a safe, adaptive and inclusive learning experience, regardless of social, economic or physical background. Wetland ecosystems also serve as authentic learning spaces where inclusive leadership becomes contextual and meaningful. Environmental challenges such as flooding, limited infrastructure, and ecosystem sensitivity encourage school principals to adopt a flexible, empathetic, and collaborative approach to leadership. These environmental constraints directly shape leadership strategies, where flexibility in learning schedules, the use of adaptive spaces, and the priority of student safety become integral components of inclusive leadership practices.

Through the integration of environment based learning activities, community participation, and adaptive school management, inclusive leadership connects ecological awareness with character building, fostering the values of responsibility, cooperation, environmental concern, and resilience among students. Thus, the wetland environment is not just a physical setting but a pedagogical and social space that strengthens inclusive leadership in realizing child friendly schools and holistic character development. This research focuses on the role of inclusive leadership in creating child friendly schools in wetland environments characterized by unique ecological and social conditions, the application of inclusive leadership in character development for students, implementation challenges and strategies that can be applied by school principals to strengthen the implementation of child friendly schools and character development for students.

The Role of Inclusive Leadership in Creating Child Friendly Schools in Wetland Environments

Inclusive leadership plays an important role in creating a child friendly school that focuses not only on academic achievement but also on the development of students'

social character and environment. Tsirantonaki and Vlachou (2024) explain that inclusive school leaders play an important role in creating spaces where all students, regardless of their social, economic, or physical backgrounds, can thrive optimally. In schools in wetland ecosystems, the role of inclusive leadership becomes more complex because school leaders must manage the social diversity of students while understanding the diversity of local ecosystems. This dual responsibility requires leaders to bridge social inclusion with ecological inclusion, ensuring that the learning environment reflects student diversity and environmental realities. Jannah et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of leaders who can integrate these two dimensions. This is in line with Mayasari et al. (2025) who state that inclusive school leaders create an environment that values differences and encourages students to actively engage in environment based learning.

Inclusive leadership that integrates social and environmental diversity goes a long way in creating child friendly schools, especially in wetland environments. Tsirantonaki and Vlachou (2024) highlight that inclusive school leaders can create an environment that encourages academic progress while respecting social diversity and ecosystems within schools. Hoover (2021) added that integrating local ecosystems into the curriculum will shape students who care about environmental sustainability. In the context of wetlands, this integration becomes more concrete as students are directly exposed to ecological dynamics such as water cycles, seasonal flooding, and biodiversity, which are then used by school leaders as an entry point for inclusive experiential learning. This integration positions wetland ecosystems not only as learning objects, but as living classrooms where inclusive leadership is enforced through participatory decision-making, experiential learning, and equitable student engagement in environmental activities.

Managing local ecosystem diversity is a key aspect of inclusive leadership in wetland areas. Gan (2021) stated that school leaders must integrate environmental issues into students' character education, such as through wetland restoration projects. Iksal et al. (2024) show that involving students in local ecosystem based activities not only increases academic knowledge but also forms a character that cares about environmental conservation. The activities reflect inclusive leadership practices where all students are given equal opportunities to participate, collaborate, and contribute based on their abilities, strengthening inclusivity through ecological engagement. Rakhmadi et al. (2025) emphasize that education that combines social and environmental awareness can form individuals who are more responsive to social and environmental changes. Through these practices, inclusive leadership serves as a bridge that connects social inclusion, environmental management, and character education in wetland-specific ecological settings. Therefore, inclusive school leaders need to design a curriculum that accommodates character values, social responsibility, and concern for nature.

The Application of Inclusive Leadership for Student Character Development

Inclusive leadership plays an important role in shaping students' character, making them accountable, caring, and empathetic. Jannah et al. (2025) stated that project-based learning involving students in environmental activities such as wetland

conservation can strengthen students' character. Schools located in wetland areas have a significant advantage in being able to integrate the local ecosystem into character education, directly connecting students with their environment. This direct interaction transforms character values that are abstract into real experiences, where students practice responsibility and cooperation in a concrete ecological context.

Direct interaction with wetland ecosystems allows students to experience first-hand environmental interdependence, reinforcing character values such as cooperation, responsibility, and respect for nature in an inclusive learning environment. Inclusive leadership ensures that this experience is accessible to all students, including those with different abilities by adapting activities and providing equitable participation opportunities. Thus, wetland ecology becomes a strategic medium where inclusive leadership strengthens character formation while maintaining a child friendly learning atmosphere. Corpuz et al. (2022) show that environment based learning not only enriches students' knowledge but also shapes their character to care about ecosystem sustainability.

Yusuf and Fajari (2025) emphasized that activities that connect students with nature, such as wildlife observation or environmental restoration, can increase students' sense of responsibility for nature. Corpuz et al. (2022) found that students who engaged in nature based activities showed increased concern for the environment. This is in line with the view of Yan et al. (2025) who explain that inclusive school leaders can create an environment that not only supports academic progress but also develops students' social and environmental awareness. Gan (2021) emphasizes the importance of integrating social and environmental education into the curriculum, which supports the achievement of social character and environmental awareness in students.

Character based education that integrates ecosystems as a learning context is essential in schools located in wetland areas. Haul et al. (2021) emphasized that environmental character education forms an attitude of concern for nature and others. Sidik et al. (2024) show that students' involvement in nature based activities enhances their understanding of ecosystem diversity and the importance of nature conservation. Tsirantonaki and Vlachou (2024) suggest that environment based education, which involves local ecosystems such as wetlands, encourages students to become agents of change who care about nature and ecosystem sustainability. Thus, wetland ecology becomes a strategic medium where inclusive leadership strengthens character formation while maintaining a child friendly learning atmosphere.

Challenges in Implementing Inclusive Leadership in Child Friendly Schools in Wetland Environments

The implementation of inclusive leadership in elementary schools in wetland environments has great potential, but it also faces extraordinary challenges. Nasruddin et al. (2022) revealed that limited infrastructure, especially in flood- or disaster-prone areas, hinders the implementation of effective outdoor learning

activities. This condition underscores the importance of context-sensitive leadership, where inclusive leaders are required to continuously adjust strategies to ensure accessibility, safety, and learning continuity for all students. In addition, Setiawan and Saputra (2022) noted that many teachers in this area have not been trained to implement inclusive teaching methods that integrate character education with environmental awareness. Hoover (2021) emphasizes that adequate teacher training is essential to effectively integrate student diversity and local ecosystems into the curriculum. Without adequate training, teachers struggle to manage student diversity and implement teaching methods that encourage character development and environmental concern.

Saputra et al. (2025) add that school leaders in wetland areas are often hampered by limited resources in implementing inclusive leadership. Gan (2021) also highlights that although many school leaders have an inclusive vision, the main challenge lies in the lack of systemic support, both in the form of training and the provision of adequate facilities. Sidik et al. (2024) show that school leaders need to understand the characteristics of local ecosystems and integrate environmental awareness into the curriculum, although limited facilities and training are still significant constraints. McKay (2024) emphasized that the lack of support for outdoor environmental conservation education activities is the main obstacle in the implementation of environment based learning in schools. This challenge is especially seen in educational institutions located in wetland areas, where geographical conditions, limited infrastructure, and minimal access to adequate learning facilities limit outdoor learning opportunities. Limited resources, including learning media, safety equipment, and teacher guidance, make it difficult to design and implement effective environmental education activities. As a result, the potential of wetlands as a meaningful learning environment to foster environmental awareness and student character development has not been optimally utilized.

Strategies for Strengthening the Implementation of Child Friendly Schools and Student Character Development

To address the challenges of realizing inclusive leadership based child friendly schools and environmental education, several strategies need to be implemented, such as the importance of school principals developing a curriculum that includes not only academic aspects but also values such as social responsibility and concern for nature (Piranggada et al., 2025). In the context of wetlands, the curriculum must explicitly incorporate local ecological knowledge, community practices, environmental challenges as core learning resources and ensure contextual and meaningful learning experiences. Corpuz et al. (2022) show that integrating environmental education into the curriculum can increase students' knowledge of environmental issues and shape their character to care about sustainability. This integration is achieved through systematic and well-planned learning activities, allowing students to understand ecological issues more comprehensively and contextually. In addition, environmental education supports the development of essential values, such as responsibility, empathy, and awareness of environmental conservation. As a result, students not only gain academic information but also

develop positive character traits that encourage a long-term commitment to environmental sustainability.

The next strategy is to build partnerships between schools and local communities that have in-depth knowledge of wetland ecosystems (Yusuf & Fajari, 2025). This collaboration reflects inclusive leadership in practice, where the decision-making and learning process involves multiple stakeholders, reinforcing shared responsibility and ecological awareness. Local communities can contribute to environmental restoration projects, providing an authentic learning experience for students. Iksal et al. (2024) support this by stating that collaboration with local communities enhances students' understanding of ecosystem conservation, which not only impacts academic knowledge but also shapes characters who care about nature. Such partnerships also strengthen inclusive leadership by engaging many stakeholders in shared decision-making and responsibility for child friendly education.

In addition, strengthening the capacity of human resources through training is an equally important strategy. Yan et al. (2025) recommend specific training for school leaders and teachers to integrate inclusive leadership with environmental education. Such training should focus on equipping educators with the skills to connect ecological contexts with inclusive pedagogical strategies, ensuring that environmental diversity and student diversity are addressed simultaneously. Miao and Nduneseokwu (2025) add that training focused on diversity and environmental awareness is especially important in areas with unique ecosystems such as wetlands. This training will assist teachers in designing inclusive curricula and managing student and environmental diversity, while strengthening their ability to respond to ecological challenges. As a result, educators can implement inclusive and environment based learning more effectively in the context of wetland education.

Sidik et al. (2024) emphasized that teacher training also needs to include strategies to integrate environmental issues into daily learning, so that teachers not only play the role of classroom managers, but also facilitators of environmental conservation values. Through such integration, environmental values can be internalized naturally through learning activities and classroom interactions. Hnatyuk et al. (2024) concluded that school leaders who are inclusive and responsive to social diversity and ecosystems are able to create a learning environment that supports the development of students' character, fosters concern for the environment, and strengthens a sense of responsibility and social awareness in the learning community.

4. Conclusion

This research shows that inclusive leadership has a very important role in creating child friendly schools and instilling student character, especially in wetland areas. The findings of the study indicate that the implementation of inclusive leadership that integrates social diversity and local ecosystems is able to increase students'

understanding of diversity and strengthen character values, such as social responsibility and environmental awareness. The integration of wetland ecosystems into the curriculum also provides a contextual learning experience, which not only enriches academic knowledge, but also instills the character of caring for the environment that is important for students' futures. However, the implementation of inclusive leadership in primary schools in wetland areas still faces various challenges. Limited facilities, infrastructure, and teacher training are the main obstacles in realizing effective ecology based education. Therefore, a comprehensive strategy is needed, including through the development of an ecosystem based curriculum, capacity building of teachers and principals through training, and strengthening collaboration with local communities to support environment based learning.

Overall, inclusive leadership based on the context of wetland ecology has proven to be important in creating a child friendly learning environment while strengthening student character development. Through the integration of social inclusion and ecological awareness, inclusive leadership is able to provide meaningful learning experiences and foster responsibility, environmental awareness, and social sensitivity in elementary school students. However, challenges related to limited infrastructure, resources, and teacher capacity still need to be systematically addressed. Therefore, strengthening leadership training, contextual curriculum integration, and collaboration with the community are strategic steps to ensure the successful implementation of child friendly schools in wetland areas.

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