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Educational Leadership for Inclusive Education and the Achievement of SDG 4 in Resource-Constrained Secondary Schools: Evidence from Masunzwa Secondary School, UMP Zvataida District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *Inclusive education is increasingly understood as the systemic removal of barriers to learners' access, participation and achievement, making educational leadership central to translating Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) from policy aspiration into school-level practice. Yet evidence remains limited on how leadership operates under severe resource constraints in rural Zimbabwean secondary schools. Guided by an interpretivist perspective and informed by transformational, instructional, distributed and inclusive leadership theories, this qualitative single-case study examined Masunzwa Secondary School in UMP Zvataida District, Mashonaland East Province. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, a learner focus-group discussion, classroom observations and document analysis, and analysed thematically. Findings indicated that school leadership demonstrated adaptive resource mobilisation, instructional monitoring and emerging distributed practices, but inclusive provision remained constrained by teacher shortages, inadequate learning materials, limited professional development and infrastructural deficiencies. Learners' experiences further revealed a gap between physical access and meaningful participation, with teacher-centred pedagogy and limited differentiation producing forms of hidden exclusion. The findings suggest that leadership can mediate, but cannot independently overcome, structural resource inequalities. Advancing SDG 4 therefore requires context-responsive and distributed leadership supported by equitable financing, teacher development, accessible infrastructure and community partnerships. The study contributes contextual evidence that sustainable inclusion depends on the interaction between leadership agency and system-level support.*

Keywords: *Educational Leadership, Inclusive Education, SDG 4, Resource Constraints, Rural Secondary Schools, Distributed Leadership, Educational Equity, Zimbabwe.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education has evolved from a narrow concern with integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream schools to a broader commitment to identifying and removing the multiple barriers that prevent learners from accessing, participating in and benefiting from quality education (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). This conceptual shift is particularly important for the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which requires countries to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). SDG 4 is therefore concerned not simply with school enrolment, but with equitable participation, meaningful learning, completion, appropriate learning environments and the reduction of disparities associated with disability, poverty, gender, geographical location and other forms of disadvantage (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2025). UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report argues that inclusion must be understood as a systemic process rather than as a programme for a particular category of learners, because exclusion is frequently produced by educational structures, policies, attitudes, curricula and resource inequalities (UNESCO, 2020). Current evidence indicates that the global education community remains substantially off track: although completion rates have improved, 272 million children and young people were still out of school in 2023, while inequalities associated with wealth and geographical location remain persistent (United Nations, 2025). Consequently, the realization of SDG 4 increasingly requires educational systems to move beyond access-oriented approaches towards leadership, financing and pedagogical strategies that deliberately address inequity (UNESCO, 2025; United Nations, 2025).

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This challenge is especially pronounced in resource-constrained contexts, where schools are expected to implement ambitious inclusion agendas despite shortages of qualified teachers, learning materials, accessible infrastructure, digital technologies and financial resources (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2024). Inclusive education in such circumstances is therefore not merely a technical matter of providing additional resources; it is also a question of leadership, institutional priorities, ethical decision-making and the capacity of school leaders to mobilise available resources around the needs of diverse learners (Leithwood, 2021; UNESCO, 2024).

Educational leadership is consequently central to understanding why similar schools operating under comparable resource constraints may experience different levels of inclusion and educational quality. School leaders influence the vision, culture, expectations, allocation of resources, professional collaboration and instructional practices through which inclusive education is translated from policy into everyday practice (Leithwood, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). The 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report identifies leadership as a critical determinant of educational quality and highlights four particularly important dimensions of effective leadership: setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration and developing people (UNESCO, 2024). Importantly, however, leadership should not be conceptualised as the individual authority of the school head alone. In resource-constrained schools, inclusive leadership can involve distributing responsibilities among deputies, heads of departments, teachers, school development committees, parents and community actors to mobilise locally available knowledge and resources (Tejeiro, 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Such distributed and collaborative approaches are particularly significant where formal institutional resources are inadequate. The leadership challenge is therefore to reconcile competing demands: maintaining academic standards while responding to learner diversity; implementing national policies while adapting them to local circumstances; and pursuing innovation without exacerbating inequalities between better-resourced and disadvantaged learners (Ainscow, 2020; Leithwood, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). Recent evidence from Zimbabwe illustrates the importance of school-level leadership and resource mobilisation. UNICEF reports that School Improvement Grants have enabled disadvantaged schools to address basic infrastructure, furniture, teaching materials and accessibility requirements, including ramps for learners with disabilities (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026a). Similarly, evidence from rural schools demonstrates that improvements in classrooms, furniture and teacher accommodation can influence the functionality and attractiveness of schools in disadvantaged communities (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025a, 2025b). These developments suggest that leadership under scarcity should not be reduced to managing shortages; rather, it involves prioritising needs, building partnerships, promoting teacher motivation, identifying innovative solutions and ensuring that scarce resources are distributed equitably (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026a).

The Zimbabwean context provides a particularly important setting for examining the relationship between educational leadership, inclusion and SDG 4 because the country has historically made substantial progress in expanding educational access while continuing to experience significant inequalities in educational provision and outcomes. Contemporary evidence points to persistent pressures on the education system, including inadequate resources, teacher attrition, long distances to schools, infrastructure deficits and unequal access to digital learning, with rural communities particularly affected (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025c, 2026b). UNICEF reports that the transition from Grade 7 to Form 1 declined from 82% in 2023 to 79.5% in 2024, while survival from Form 1 to Form 4, although improving, remained below the national target (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026b). Such indicators are important because inclusion at secondary level cannot be assessed solely through physical admission to school; it must also be considered in relation to retention, progression, learning opportunities and the capacity of schools to accommodate differences among learners (UNESCO, 2020; United Nations, 2025). Zimbabwe's current education agenda is also increasingly connected to digitalisation, curriculum transformation and equitable access to learning. Yet digital inequalities can reinforce existing geographical inequalities when rural learners have limited electricity, internet connectivity or access to devices. Evidence from remote Zimbabwean schools shows that digital platforms such as the Zimbabwe Learning Passport can expand learning opportunities, including for some learners with disabilities, but their effectiveness depends on the availability of school-based technological infrastructure and connectivity (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025d). Moreover, Zimbabwe allocated approximately 15% of its national budget to education in 2024, below the 20% benchmark advocated within the Education 2030 financing framework, illustrating the broader fiscal pressures within which schools operate (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2024). These circumstances make educational leadership particularly consequential because school leaders must interpret policy expectations and make decisions within environments where resources cannot satisfy every identified need (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2024).

It is within this global, regional and national context that Masunzwa Secondary School in UMP Zvataida District, Mashonaland East Province, provides a valuable case for examining how educational leadership can advance inclusive education and SDG 4 in a resource-constrained secondary school. The significance of the case lies not in assuming that Masunzwa represents all rural schools, but in using the school as an analytically bounded setting through which the relationship between policy aspirations and local implementation can be critically examined. A central issue is whether national commitments to inclusion and SDG 4 are translated into leadership practices that improve participation, equity,

learning opportunities and support for learners experiencing disability, poverty, geographical disadvantage or other barriers. The study consequently moves beyond the assumption that resource scarcity automatically determines educational failure. Instead, it investigates how leadership agency, collaboration, contextual adaptation and resource prioritisation may mediate the effects of scarcity (Ainscow, 2020; Leithwood, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). This perspective is supported by recent evidence from Zimbabwe showing that targeted school-level interventions can produce improvements even in disadvantaged environments; for example, UNICEF documents cases where School Improvement Grants have supported infrastructure, learning materials and disability-sensitive facilities in rural schools (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026a). Nevertheless, such interventions also demonstrate that sustainable inclusion cannot depend exclusively on externally funded projects. It requires leadership capacity to identify priorities, coordinate stakeholders, sustain inclusive practices and align school-level action with broader SDG 4 commitments (UNESCO, 2024; Government of Zimbabwe, 2021). The central research concern, therefore, is the extent to which educational leadership at Masunzwa Secondary School enables or constrains inclusive education under conditions of limited resources. By examining leadership practices, implementation challenges and locally relevant strategies, the study seeks to contribute evidence to an under-examined dimension of Zimbabwean education: how school-level leadership can convert the normative promise of "leaving no one behind" into practical educational opportunities for learners in marginalised rural secondary schools.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Conceptualisation of Educational Leadership

Educational leadership refers to the process through which individuals and groups influence the direction, organisation, teaching and learning of educational institutions (GEM Report Team, 2024). Contemporary approaches have moved beyond traditional leader-centred and bureaucratic conceptions towards relational, collaborative and context-responsive perspectives (GEM Report Team, 2024; OECD, 2025). UNESCO (2024) argues that leadership involves mobilising people towards shared educational goals, with effective leaders combining vision-setting, instructional attention, collaboration and staff development. This conceptualisation is particularly applicable to under-resourced schools, where principals may need to mobilise teachers, parents, school development committees and external partners to compensate for inadequate institutional resources (GEM Report Team, 2024; OECD, 2025; DeMatthews et al., 2026). However, the assumption that effective leadership can overcome structural deprivation requires caution. UNESCO (2024) emphasises that leaders' opportunities for action differ substantially between urban and rural, well-resourced and under-resourced institutions. Educational leadership in this study is therefore conceptualised as context-responsive influence that mobilises people, resources and organisational processes to promote inclusive, equitable and quality learning (GEM Report Team, 2024; OECD, 2025; DeMatthews et al., 2026).

B. Theoretical Perspectives on Educational Leadership

Four complementary perspectives such as transformational, instructional, distributed and inclusive leadership provide a suitable theoretical foundation for analysing leadership at Masunzwa Secondary School. Transformational leadership highlights vision, motivation and organisational change, whereas instructional leadership directs attention towards curriculum implementation, classroom practice, assessment and learner achievement (Li & Karanxha, 2024; GEM Report Team, 2024). Distributed leadership challenges the assumption that leadership resides exclusively with the principal by recognising teachers and other stakeholders as sources of leadership. Recent evidence identifies shared decision-making, collaborative professional learning and clearly defined responsibilities as important mechanisms through which distributed leadership can contribute to school improvement, although role ambiguity and weak trust can undermine implementation (Mifsud, 2024; White et al., 2025). Inclusive leadership extends these perspectives by placing diversity, participation, belonging and educational justice at the centre of leadership practice (Améstica-Abarca, 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2026). Consequently, the study does not treat these theories as competing explanations; rather, it synthesises them to examine how vision, instructional improvement, distributed participation and equity-oriented practices interact under resource constraints (Bao, 2024; GEM Report Team, 2024).

C. Conceptualisation of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has evolved from a narrow emphasis on integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream classrooms towards a broader transformation of education systems so that diversity does not become a basis for exclusion (UNESCO, 2020). UNESCO (2020) argues that gender, disability, poverty, location, language and other learner characteristics can interact to create educational disadvantage and that learner diversity should be regarded as a strength rather than a deficit (GEM Report Team, 2024). This perspective is particularly important in rural Zimbabwe, where poverty, geographical distance, inadequate facilities and disability may intersect to affect learners' access, participation and achievement (GoZ, 2021; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025). Zimbabwe has demonstrated policy progress in recognising the educational rights of learners with disabilities, including recognition of sign language in schools (MoPSE & UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2020; Persons with Disabilities Act, 2025). Nevertheless, policy inclusion does not automatically translate into

inclusive practice (MoPSE & UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2020). Inclusive schooling requires capable teachers, appropriate learning materials, accessible infrastructure, effective learner-support mechanisms and leadership that actively challenges exclusionary practices (MoPSE & UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2020). Thus, inclusion in this study encompasses access, participation, belonging, support and meaningful learning outcomes for diverse learners (MoPSE & UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2020).

D. SDG 4 and Educational Leadership

SDG 4 commits countries to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, making educational leadership an important mechanism for translating international commitments into school-level action (United Nations, 2015). UNESCO's monitoring framework emphasises that inclusion and equity are central rather than peripheral dimensions of SDG 4, because circumstances such as poverty, gender and geographical location continue to shape educational opportunities (UNESCO, 2024). The challenge is particularly acute in Africa: the 2025 SDG 4 Scorecard estimates that approximately 118 million children, adolescents and young people remain out of school on the continent (UIS & GEM Report Team, 2025). These inequalities demonstrate that SDG 4 cannot be achieved through policy declarations alone. School leaders must establish equity-oriented priorities, monitor learner participation and achievement, strengthen teaching, coordinate stakeholders and allocate scarce resources strategically (UIS & GEM Report Team, 2025). Leadership consequently functions as a mediating mechanism between SDG 4 policy aspirations and the everyday realities of schooling, although its influence remains dependent upon wider government financing, accountability and support systems (UNESCO, 2024; UIS & GEM Report Team, 2025).

E. Educational Leadership for Inclusive Education in Resource-Constrained Secondary Schools

Resource constraints substantially reshape school leadership because leaders must simultaneously maintain basic school operations, support teachers and respond to diverse learner needs (UNESCO, 2024). Zimbabwe's education sector continues to experience insufficient resources for inclusive education, shortages of textbooks, long distances travelled by rural learners and teacher attrition (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). UNICEF reports that the Form 1-to-Form 4 survival rate increased to 80.6% in 2024 but remained below the national target of 85%, illustrating continuing challenges in educational progression (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2022; UNESCO, 2024). Leadership practices such as collaborative planning, teacher mentoring, community mobilisation, evidence-informed decision-making and strategic resource allocation are therefore especially important (UNESCO, 2024; UIS & GEM Report Team, 2025). Evidence from Zimbabwe's School Improvement Grant (SIG) programme illustrates how targeted resources can strengthen disadvantaged schools: in 2024, 2,799 schools received grants benefiting 893,784 learners, while resources supported infrastructure, accessibility and learning materials (MoPSE & UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2020; UNESCO, 2024; UIS & GEM Report Team, 2025). Nevertheless, such evidence also reinforces the limits of school-level agency. Effective principals cannot independently eliminate poverty, teacher shortages or inadequate public financing (MoPSE & UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2020; UNESCO, 2024; UIS & GEM Report Team, 2025). Inclusive leadership must therefore be understood as a partnership between school-level initiative and system-level support.

F. Empirical Studies on Leadership and Inclusive Education

Empirical research generally indicates that leadership can contribute to more inclusive organisational cultures, stronger collaboration and improved learner support, but the evidence remains contextually uneven (Valdés et al, 2026). A recent systematic review by Valdés et al. (2026) identified five broad dimensions of inclusive leadership: commitment to inclusion and care, inclusive organisational development, adaptive leadership, school-community connections, and resource management and pedagogical responses to diversity. Similarly, DeMatthews et al. (2026), reviewing research on inclusive principal leadership, identified shared commitment to inclusion, inclusive organisational conditions, and the development of instructional and leadership capacity as central practices. These findings suggest that inclusive leadership is broader than administrative compliance because it involves transforming school culture, pedagogy and relationships (DeMatthews et al, 2026). However, much of the empirical literature originates outside rural African contexts, limiting its direct transferability to Zimbabwean schools. The contextual gap is therefore significant: there is insufficient empirical evidence explaining how school leaders enact inclusion where teachers, infrastructure, finances and specialist services are limited. The Masunzwa case therefore provides an opportunity to address this under-researched dimension.

G. Conceptual Framework and Research Gap

The reviewed literature supports a conceptual framework in which educational leadership is the principal explanatory construct, inclusive education is the immediate school-level outcome, and SDG 4 achievement represents the broader educational and policy outcome. Leadership practices including transformational vision, instructional supervision, distributed decision-making, teacher development, inclusive school culture, stakeholder engagement and resource mobilisation are expected to influence learner access, participation, support and achievement (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025). However, these relationships are moderated by teacher capacity, infrastructure, poverty, resource

availability, community conditions and government policy (UNICEF & WFP, 2024). UNESCO (2024) explicitly stresses that leadership effectiveness depends on context and that autonomy without adequate resources and support is insufficient. The major research gap is therefore not simply whether leadership matters, but how school leaders enact inclusive leadership under severe resource constraints and how those practices contribute to SDG 4 outcomes at individual-school level. Zimbabwean evidence confirms continuing challenges in rural access, retention and inclusive provision, while recent interventions demonstrate the potential of targeted school-level support. Evidence specifically centred on a rural secondary school such as Masunzwa in UMP Zvataida District can consequently make a valuable contextual and empirical contribution.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative methodology situated within an interpretivist paradigm to examine how educational leadership contributed to inclusive education and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) in a resource-constrained rural secondary school (Creswell & Poth, 2018; UNESCO, 2024). A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, meanings, perceptions and interpretations rather than reduce leadership and inclusion to measurable variables. Creswell and Poth (2018) argued that qualitative inquiry was particularly appropriate for examining complex social phenomena within their natural contexts, while UNESCO (2020) conceptualised inclusion as a contextual process of identifying and removing barriers to participation and learning. The study therefore recognised that leadership practices at Masunzwa Secondary School were embedded within rural poverty, resource limitations, staffing constraints and infrastructural challenges.

A bounded single-case study design was employed, with Masunzwa Secondary School in Uzumba Maramba Pfungwe (UMP) District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe, constituting the case. The case study methodology enabled an intensive and contextually grounded investigation of leadership practices, inclusive teaching and learning, learner participation, institutional responses to SDG 4 and constraints that affected implementation. Yin (2018) maintained that case study research was appropriate when a contemporary phenomenon was investigated within its real-life context, particularly where contextual conditions were integral to understanding the phenomenon. The design consequently prioritised depth, contextual richness and analytical insight rather than statistical generalisation.

The study population comprised school leadership, teachers and learners who were directly involved in teaching, learning and inclusion at Masunzwa Secondary School. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants who possessed direct knowledge of educational leadership and inclusive practices (Colonna et al., 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2024). The sample comprised 12 participants, namely the School Head, two Heads of Departments and eight learners, reflecting the small staffing structure of the school. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, a learner focus-group discussion, non-participant classroom observations and document analysis (Colonna et al., 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2024). The interviews explored leadership practices, support for teachers and perceptions of SDG 4. The focus-group discussion elicited collective learner experiences of participation and exclusion. Classroom observations examined classroom interaction, learner engagement, differentiation and the utilisation of available resources, while document analysis provided evidence from school plans, attendance records, lesson plans and learner-support records. The use of multiple data sources strengthened contextual interpretation and methodological triangulation.

The data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2021, 2022) principles of familiarisation, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining and reporting themes. Reflexive thematic analysis was appropriate because it recognises the active and interpretive role of the researcher in constructing patterns of meaning rather than treating themes as objectively "discovered" in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). The analysis involved repeated engagement with the transcripts, systematic coding, development and refinement of candidate themes, and interpretation of themes in relation to the research questions and study context (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation of evidence, sustained reflexive engagement, careful documentation of analytical decisions, participant clarification/member checking and provision of sufficiently rich contextual description (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2024; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were treated as interconnected dimensions of qualitative quality, supported by transparent documentation of the research and analytical processes (Nowell et al., 2017). In addition, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge how the researcher's assumptions, positionality and interactions with participants could influence the generation and interpretation of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). Reporting of the interview component was informed by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ), a 32-item framework designed to promote comprehensive reporting of qualitative interviews and focus groups (Tong et al., 2007).

Ethical approval and institutional permission were obtained before fieldwork commenced. Participants were provided with adequate information about the purpose and procedures of the study, participation was voluntary, informed consent

was obtained, and participants were informed of their right to decline or withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality and privacy were protected through anonymisation and the use of pseudonyms in reporting (BERA, 2024). These procedures were particularly important given the potential power differentials between educational leaders, teachers and learners in a school-based research setting. The ethical approach therefore sought to minimise coercion, protect participants from potential harm and ensure that participation was based on informed and voluntary decision-making (BERA, 2024).

For learner participants who were below the applicable age of legal consent, appropriate parental or guardian consent and learner assent were obtained. Information concerning participation was communicated in an age- and comprehension-appropriate manner, with learners' willingness to participate treated as distinct from parental or guardian permission (BERA, 2024). The methodology therefore positioned participants as knowledgeable contributors while critically acknowledging the power relations inherent in researching educational leadership and inclusive education within a resource-constrained rural school. This reflexive and ethically attentive position recognised that participants' accounts were shaped by their institutional roles, relationships and contextual circumstances and that the researcher was also an active participant in the production and interpretation of qualitative knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2024).

IV. FINDINGS

A. Conceptualisations of Inclusive Education and SDG 4

The findings indicated that participants generally understood inclusive education as ensuring that learners gained physical access to school, but showed less consistent understanding of participation, differentiated instruction, reasonable accommodation and equitable learning outcomes.

The school head emphasised inclusion as "making sure all learners are in school regardless of their background," while teachers similarly prioritised enrolment and attendance.

This suggested that inclusion was predominantly understood as physical presence or placement rather than meaningful participation, belonging and achievement (Kolleck, 2025; Hay et al., 2025). Such a conceptualisation represents an important policy-practice gap because SDG 4 concerns inclusive, equitable and quality education, with explicit attention to effective learning outcomes and equitable opportunities for vulnerable groups, including learners with disabilities (United Nations, 2024). Recent scholarship similarly argues that inclusive education requires movement beyond formal placement towards the systematic identification and removal of structural, relational and institutional barriers that restrict learners' participation, belonging and educational outcomes (Hay et al., 2025; Kolleck, 2025). This is particularly important for learners with disabilities, who may be physically present in mainstream schools while continuing to experience inadequate support, inaccessible learning environments and limited opportunities to participate fully in teaching and learning (Chitiyo et al., 2025; Hay & Beamish, 2025). In the Zimbabwean context, recent evidence indicates that although teachers generally support inclusive education, many remain insufficiently prepared to implement inclusive practices effectively, highlighting the continuing gap between policy aspirations and school-level practice (Chitiyo et al., 2025). Awareness of SDG 4 was also uneven: school leadership demonstrated greater familiarity with the language of quality education, whereas some teachers and learners had limited knowledge of the goal. This indicated that global education commitments had not been fully translated into a shared school-level improvement agenda (UNESCO, 2024; GEM Report Team, 2024). The finding is significant because effective educational leadership involves establishing shared expectations, maintaining a strong focus on learning, fostering collaboration and developing the capacities of teachers and other members of the school community (GEM Report Team, 2024). The 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report emphasises that school leadership is most effective when leaders work collaboratively with teachers, learners, parents and other stakeholders towards common educational goals rather than treating leadership as a purely administrative responsibility (UNESCO, 2024; GEM Report Team, 2024). Consequently, strengthening awareness of SDG 4 at school level should involve translating the global goal into concrete, collectively understood priorities for inclusion, participation, learning achievement and learner support.

B. Leadership Practices for Inclusive Education

Educational leadership at Masunzwa was characterised by instructional monitoring, administrative compliance and pragmatic resource mobilisation. The school head monitored syllabus coverage, teacher attendance and learners' academic progress, demonstrating concern for curriculum delivery; however, less systematic attention was given to differentiated pedagogy, inclusive assessment and specialised support for learners with disabilities. This pattern suggests that leadership was oriented more strongly towards administration and curriculum implementation than towards the broader pedagogical and inclusion agenda. The 2024/5 GEM Report similarly notes that school leadership has increasingly moved beyond administration towards focusing on learning, fostering collaboration and developing people, although leaders frequently face competing administrative demands that restrict the time available for instructional leadership (GEM Report Team, 2024).

Teachers reported limited opportunities for professional development specifically addressing inclusive teaching, including strategies for learners with hearing and visual impairments.

This limitation is important because effective inclusive education requires teachers to possess appropriate knowledge, pedagogical strategies and institutional support for responding to learner diversity. Recent scholarship indicates that inadequate teacher preparation and insufficient resources continue to constrain the implementation of inclusive education, particularly for learners with special educational needs (Hay et al., 2025; Hay & Beamish, 2025).

At the same time, school leaders encouraged teachers to improvise teaching and learning materials using locally available resources.

Such improvisation represented an important adaptive leadership response to material constraints. Evidence from rural Zimbabwe similarly demonstrates that school leaders and teachers have developed locally responsive solutions to severe shortages of textbooks, furniture and other learning resources, although such strategies cannot substitute for sustained system-level investment (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Leadership was therefore best characterised as adaptive but constrained, rather than either ineffective or fully transformative. This interpretation reinforces the argument that leadership effectiveness should be understood in relation to context. The 2024/5 GEM Report identifies setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration and developing people as four central dimensions of effective educational leadership, while emphasising that leaders require appropriate authority, preparation and resources to enact these functions effectively (GEM Report Team, 2024). Similarly, Ghamrawi (2023) argues that school leadership is an important mechanism for translating the SDG 4 agenda into school improvement and quality education practices.

C. Learners' Lived Experiences of Inclusion

Learner accounts and classroom observations revealed a discrepancy between formal inclusion and actual classroom participation. Although some learners described teachers as supportive, others indicated that lessons frequently progressed without sufficient opportunities to establish whether all learners had understood the content. Observations showed predominantly teacher-centred practices, limited differentiation, insufficient formative feedback and relatively few opportunities for learners to participate actively in constructing knowledge. These findings suggest that physical presence in the classroom did not necessarily translate into meaningful pedagogical participation.

One Form 1 learner stated, "Even if you don't understand anything, the lesson just continues," illustrating hidden exclusion, whereby learners remain physically present but pedagogically marginalised.

This finding is consistent with recent scholarship which argues that inclusive education requires more than the placement of learners with diverse needs in mainstream classrooms; it requires changes in policy, pedagogy, teacher preparation and institutional practice that enable learners with diverse needs to participate and succeed (Hay et al., 2025). Research further indicates that systemic barriers, inadequate teacher preparation and insufficient support can undermine the implementation of individualised and inclusive approaches, particularly for learners with disabilities (Hay & Beamish, 2025). The findings also highlighted the importance of learner voice in inclusive leadership. UNICEF consultations in Zimbabwe found that more than 80% of participating children expressed a desire to play a role in improving their schools and educational opportunities, while many also reported that schools were insufficiently equipped to provide inclusive education for children with disabilities (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025). More recent UNICEF reporting likewise illustrates the increasing recognition of children as participants in educational decision-making and advocacy for inclusive education, including the participation of rural learners in national education-sector discussions (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). Learner participation should therefore be understood as an element of educational quality and inclusive governance rather than merely an extracurricular activity.

D. Barriers to Inclusive Education and SDG 4

The study identified inadequate teaching and learning resources, teacher shortages, insufficient infrastructure, heavy workloads, limited professional development and broader socio-economic constraints as major barriers to inclusion. With approximately 120 learners and only five teachers, including the school head, teachers were required to teach multiple subjects and, in some cases, outside their areas of specialisation. This reduced opportunities for individualised attention and differentiated instruction. Shortages of textbooks and teaching aids further constrained effective pedagogy, while inadequate infrastructure limited accessibility for learners with diverse physical and educational needs.

Shortages of textbooks and teaching aids further constrained effective pedagogy, while inadequate infrastructure limited accessibility for learners with diverse physical and educational needs. These findings are consistent with evidence from Zimbabwe indicating that schools continue to experience shortages of learning resources, limited textbooks, long distances to school and teacher attrition, with resource constraints continuing to affect the provision of inclusive and quality

education (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). The broader sub-Saharan African context reinforces this interpretation. Zickafoose et al. (2024) identify inadequate educational resources, infrastructure limitations, teacher-related constraints and socio-economic inequalities among the persistent barriers to achieving SDG 4 in the region. These findings suggest that explaining weak inclusion primarily through teacher attitudes or individual competence would be inadequate because many of the constraints identified at Masunzwa were structural and institutional. Recent evidence from Zimbabwe further demonstrates the importance of system-level investment. UNICEF-supported School Improvement Grants have provided disadvantaged schools with textbooks, furniture and infrastructure, while broader programmes have combined teacher development, school financial support and inclusive education interventions (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). Thus, the Masunzwa findings indicate that school-level leadership cannot independently overcome systemic inequalities without predictable external support.

E. Strategies for Strengthening Inclusive Leadership

Participants proposed teacher professional development, improved learning resources, smaller classes, increased government funding, accessible infrastructure, peer support, community fundraising and more interactive learner-centred teaching approaches. Teachers particularly emphasised the need for training in supporting learners with visual and hearing impairments, while learners requested greater teacher assistance and increased opportunities to participate during lessons.

The school head's encouragement of peer support represented an emerging form of distributed leadership, whereby responsibility for inclusion extended beyond the formal school leader to teachers and learners.

The school head's encouragement of peer support represented an emerging form of distributed leadership, whereby responsibility for inclusion extended beyond the formal school leader to teachers and learners. This interpretation is consistent with the 2024/5 GEM Report, which argues that sharing leadership can empower teachers, students, parents and communities and create more collaborative learning environments (GEM Report Team, 2024). Distributed and inclusive leadership may also contribute to stronger teacher wellbeing and commitment. Recent empirical evidence from Türkiye found that inclusive leadership was positively associated with teachers' subjective wellbeing and affective commitment, particularly where leaders demonstrated accessibility, participation, transparency and appreciation of teachers' contributions (Çevik, 2025). Although this evidence comes from a different national context, it provides useful comparative support for the Masunzwa finding that collaborative and participatory leadership can strengthen the organisational conditions necessary for inclusive practice. The proposed strategies are also consistent with recent developments in Zimbabwe's education sector. The TEACH programme combined teacher development, school financial support and inclusive education interventions, illustrating the value of coordinated multi-level interventions rather than relying exclusively on individual school leaders (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). The evidence therefore suggests that strengthening inclusive leadership at Masunzwa requires simultaneous attention to leadership capacity, teacher professional learning, learner participation and material conditions.

F. Cross-Cutting Findings and Summary

Across the five themes, three central findings emerged. First, there was a policy-practice gap, as inclusive education was recognised in principle but was not consistently translated into differentiated and participatory classroom practice. This reflects the wider literature showing that inclusive education policies do not automatically produce inclusive classroom practices and that implementation depends on teacher preparation, resources, institutional support and leadership (Hay et al., 2025). Second, learners' experiences exposed forms of hidden exclusion that were less visible from administrative perspectives, demonstrating that school inclusion should be judged by participation, learning and belonging rather than enrolment alone. The importance of learner participation is particularly relevant in Zimbabwe, where children have explicitly expressed a desire to participate in improving their schools and have identified gaps in schools' capacity to accommodate learners with disabilities (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025).

Third, leadership effectiveness was strongly mediated by structural conditions, particularly teacher shortages, inadequate resources, infrastructure limitations and insufficient professional development. This finding is consistent with evidence from sub-Saharan Africa showing that persistent resource, infrastructure and human-capacity constraints remain major barriers to achieving SDG 4 (Zickafoose et al., 2024). Consequently, the Masunzwa case demonstrates that educational leadership in resource-constrained rural schools is fundamentally relational, adaptive and context-dependent. Leadership showed resilience through resource improvisation and peer support, but its transformative potential remained restricted by factors beyond the school's immediate control. The 2024/5 GEM Report similarly cautions against viewing school leaders as individuals capable of transforming education systems independently, emphasising instead the importance of institutional structures, collaboration, autonomy and adequate resources (GEM Report Team, 2024). This finding supports the emerging consensus that achieving SDG 4 requires coordinated leadership across school, district, government and community levels rather than reliance on individual principals alone (Ghamrawi, 2023; GEM Report Team, 2024). Overall, the findings suggest that meaningful progress towards SDG 4 at Masunzwa requires simultaneous investment in leadership development, teacher

capacity, learner participation, accessible infrastructure, teaching resources and sustained system-level support. Recent Zimbabwean evidence supports this systems-oriented approach, showing that school improvement grants, teacher development, inclusive education programming and infrastructure interventions can collectively improve the conditions under which disadvantaged learners access and benefit from education (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026).

V. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Inclusive School Leadership approaches

School leaders at Masunzwa Secondary School and comparable rural, resource-constrained schools should adopt transformational, distributed and inclusive leadership approaches that position inclusion as a whole-school responsibility rather than an additional activity delegated to individual teachers (Mifsud, 2024; Tejeiro, 2023). Headteachers and senior management should establish participatory structures through which teachers, learners, parents and community representatives contribute to decisions concerning resource allocation, learner welfare, teaching strategies and school improvement priorities (GEM Report Team, 2024; Mifsud, 2024). Such leadership is particularly important where financial and material constraints limit the capacity of schools to implement centrally designed interventions (UNESCO, 2020; Tejeiro, 2023; GEM Report Team, 2024). UNESCO (2020) argues that inclusive education requires school systems to recognize learner diversity as a strength and to remove institutional barriers that exclude learners. School leaders should therefore conduct regular inclusion audits, identify learners at risk of exclusion, strengthen referral mechanisms and ensure that school improvement plans contain measurable SDG 4 indicators (UNESCO, 2024; GEM Report Team, 2024). Leadership development programmes should further equip heads and deputies with competencies in inclusive pedagogical leadership, conflict management, gender responsiveness, disability inclusion and evidence-informed decision-making (Mifsud, 2024; Tejeiro, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

B. Teacher-centred approach

Teachers should be supported to move beyond uniform, teacher-centred approaches towards differentiated, learner-centred and inclusive pedagogies that respond to differences in ability, learning pace, language, gender and socio-economic circumstances (Asriadi et al., 2023; Langelaan et al., 2024). This should include flexible grouping, peer learning, formative assessment, scaffolding, multiple representations of content and alternative ways for learners to demonstrate understanding (Asriadi et al., 2023). UNESCO's evidence emphasizes that inclusive teaching must adapt to learners' strengths and needs and that teachers require comprehensive preparation and continuing support to implement inclusion effectively (UNESCO, 2020). At Masunzwa Secondary School, professional learning communities could be established so that teachers jointly plan lessons, share low-cost teaching resources, analyse learner performance and develop locally appropriate interventions (Caena & Redecker, 2019; Sims et al., 2023). Continuous professional development should also incorporate disability-inclusive education, gender-responsive pedagogy and classroom-based assessment (Caena & Redecker, 2019; Sims et al., 2023). Importantly, teacher development should not be conceived merely as attendance at workshops; it should involve sustained coaching, peer observation and reflective practice so that professional learning produces observable changes in classroom practice (Caena & Redecker, 2019; Sims et al., 2023; Langelaan et al, 2024).

C. Policy Makers and Education Authorities

The Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, provincial and district education authorities should introduce equity-sensitive financing mechanisms that provide greater support to schools facing geographical, socio-economic and infrastructural disadvantages. A uniform funding model is unlikely to produce equitable outcomes because rural schools frequently face higher costs associated with infrastructure, learning materials, teacher retention and access to specialist services (UNESCO, 2020; GEM Report Team, 2024a). UNESCO (2020) specifically recommends directing financing towards learners and communities that are most likely to be excluded. Zimbabwe's recent experience provides evidence that targeted school-improvement grants can support disadvantaged schools: UNICEF reports that school improvement grants reached 2,799 disadvantaged primary and secondary schools in 2024, while solarisation and offline digital learning infrastructure were used to strengthen learning conditions (UNESCO, 2020; GEM Report Team, 2024a; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025). Such financing should be expanded and institutionalised, with priority given to classrooms, accessible sanitation, electricity or solar power, textbooks, assistive devices, safe water, menstrual-health facilities and digital resources (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025). Policy makers should also strengthen teacher deployment and professional development for inclusive education and establish district-level monitoring systems that track not merely enrolment but attendance, retention, completion, learning outcomes and participation of disadvantaged learners (UNESCO, 2020; GEM Report Team, 2024a; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025).

D. Community participation and Stakeholder Engagement

Community participation should be institutionalised as an essential component of inclusive education rather than treated as occasional fundraising or parental involvement (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024). School leadership

should establish structured partnerships with parents, traditional leaders, local authorities, civil-society organisations, businesses and development partners to mobilise resources and address the socio-economic factors that undermine educational participation (UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). This is particularly relevant in rural Zimbabwe, where poverty, drought, food insecurity and inadequate access to basic services can directly affect children's attendance and learning (UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). UNICEF reports that rural children in Zimbabwe remain disproportionately disadvantaged in access to education, water, sanitation and social protection (UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). Community interventions should therefore include school feeding, provision of sanitary products, learning materials, disability-related assistive devices and support for vulnerable households (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024). Community-based livelihood and financial-literacy programmes could also help households develop sustainable income-generating activities, reducing the pressure to withdraw children from school (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). This is especially important for girls because poverty and social norms remain significant drivers of child marriage and educational exclusion in Zimbabwe (UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026). Schools should consequently work with communities to challenge gender stereotypes, prevent child marriage and promote equal educational opportunities for girls and boys (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2026).

E. Gender Equality, Learner Protection and Retention mechanisms

Inclusive education policies should incorporate gender-responsive retention and protection mechanisms, particularly for adolescent girls vulnerable to poverty, early pregnancy, child marriage and gender-based violence (UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Evidence from Zimbabwe indicates that child marriage remains strongly associated with poverty and school dropout, with poorer girls substantially more likely to enter marriage during childhood (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Schools should therefore establish confidential referral systems, counselling services, menstrual-health support, re-entry mechanisms and early-warning systems for learners demonstrating patterns of prolonged absence or declining participation (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). The experience of UNICEF's Early Warning System in Zimbabwe is instructive: in 103 participating schools, 76% reported improved enrolment and retention (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Similar systems could be adapted to Masunzwa Secondary School using relatively inexpensive attendance registers, teacher referrals and community follow-up. Such interventions would shift policy from reacting to dropout towards preventing exclusion before learners permanently disengage.

F. Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge by demonstrating the importance of context-sensitive educational leadership for inclusive education in resource-constrained rural secondary schools (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Rather than conceptualising inclusion exclusively as a disability intervention, the study situates inclusion within the interconnected realities of poverty, gender, resource scarcity, learner participation, school leadership and community engagement (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). This perspective complements UNESCO's argument that exclusion can be produced by educational systems and their surrounding social and economic contexts (UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). The study consequently contributes localized evidence from rural Zimbabwe to the broader SDG 4 discourse, particularly by illustrating how school-level leadership can mediate between national policy aspirations and the practical realities experienced by teachers and learners (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Its significance lies in showing that progress towards SDG 4 requires not only additional resources but also leadership capacity to use scarce resources equitably, develop inclusive school cultures and build partnerships around the needs of marginalised learners (UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026).

G. Overall recommendations

Overall, the recommendations demonstrate that achieving inclusive education and SDG 4 at Masunzwa Secondary School cannot be accomplished through isolated interventions or the efforts of school leaders alone (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). It requires a multi-level policy response linking transformational school leadership, teacher professional development, equitable financing, inclusive pedagogy, learner protection, gender-responsive interventions, community participation and systematic monitoring (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). The Zimbabwean context reinforces the need for such an integrated approach because rural learners continue to experience overlapping disadvantages associated with poverty, limited resources and unequal access to services (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). Consequently, educational leadership should function as a bridge between national SDG 4 commitments and locally appropriate action, while government and stakeholders provide the institutional, financial and technical conditions necessary for schools to implement those commitments (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026). The central policy implication is therefore that inclusive education should be financed, led, monitored and implemented as a whole-school and whole-community

transformation rather than as a peripheral educational programme (GEM Report Team, 2024; UNESCO IIEP, 2024; UNICEF Zimbabwe, 2025, 2026).

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that educational leadership was a critical but inherently context-dependent mechanism for advancing inclusive education and SDG 4 at Masunzwa Secondary School. The findings demonstrated that leadership contributed through instructional monitoring, pragmatic resource mobilisation, teacher collaboration and emerging forms of distributed decision-making; however, these practices remained constrained by teacher shortages, inadequate learning materials, infrastructure deficits and limited professional development. Theoretically, the findings supported an integrated conception of transformational, instructional, distributed and inclusive leadership, while challenging leader-centric assumptions that school heads could independently overcome structural deprivation. Inclusion was found to extend beyond enrolment towards meaningful participation, differentiated pedagogy, learner voice and equitable learning outcomes, revealing a persistent gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Consistent with UNESCO, the study therefore positioned leadership as a mediating rather than determining force between national education commitments and learner experiences. The case further suggested that progress towards SDG 4 in resource-constrained rural schools depended on the interaction between leadership agency and system-level financing, teacher capacity and community support. Although the single-school design limited generalisability, the study contributed contextually grounded evidence that leaving no learner behind requires both capable, equity-oriented leadership and structural conditions that make inclusive practice feasible.

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