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Bridging policy and practice: a review of school leadership in differentiation from a system perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a literature review exploring how school leaders conceptualize and implement differentiation at the system level, with a focus on fostering inclusion in complex educational settings. Fifteen articles ($n = 15$) were thematically analyzed, resulting in two overarching themes: system and leadership practices, with sub-themes such as students' rights, principals' system mindset, and links between leadership and differentiated instruction (DI). A key finding is the connection between distributed leadership and DI, where shared responsibilities promote collaborative cultures that support inclusive teaching. The review highlights principals' central role in advancing DI and inclusion, requiring systemic understanding and responsive leadership. Challenges such as administrative constraints and teacher resistance underline the need for collaboration, professional learning and policy alignment. Methodologically, the review was inspired by Gough and Thomas's approach. The study addresses a research gap on system-level differentiation and emphasizes the importance of school leadership in bridging policy and practice to promote educational equity.

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Introduction

Through a comprehensive literature review, this study examines how differentiation strategies are conceptualized and implemented at the system level, focusing on the role of school leadership in managing inclusion within complex educational systems. The limited attention to system-level differentiation in previous research, particularly concerning the role of school leadership, serves as the point of departure for this study. It is therefore guided by the following overarching research question: How do school leaders conceptualize and implement differentiation within systemic constraints, and what practices foster inclusivity? Drawing on Scheer's (2021) integrated framework model of inclusive leadership, the study understands principals' leadership as shaped by the interaction between their orientation toward inclusion, the institutional context, and how they interpret and enact policy. This framework supports a systemic analysis of school leadership as both situated and influential in shaping inclusive practices.

Differentiation is frequently conceptualized as a means of promoting inclusion, as noted by Eikeland and Ohna (2022). In line with this, Wermke et al. (2024) explain how differentiation signifies a transition from homogeneity to heterogeneity in education, encompassing processes that delineate and define boundaries between educational content and educability. These processes are fundamental to stabilizing social systems and individuals. According to Wermke et al. (2024), differentiation has evolved over time through the curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation mechanisms, adapting to diverse sociocultural and economic contexts. They emphasize that differentiation is central to the development of 'one school for *all*' and mandatory schooling, which aims to provide equitable opportunities for all students. Differentiation has been applied to both inclusion and exclusion, as noted by Lindner and Schwab

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(2020), with the expansion of education at the national level prompting debates on the advantages and disadvantages of various differentiation practices, such as grouping students by ability or interest. Wermke et al. (2024) raise significant questions regarding the influence of external social inequalities on internal school differentiation. Despite efforts to achieve equity, schools often function as mechanisms for sorting students into different futures, thus shaping their lives and career opportunities. Building on these insights, this study aims to address the gap identified by Eikeland and Ohna (2022) regarding the limited research on differentiation from a systems perspective, particularly at the organizational level. While a substantial body of existing research focuses on differentiation in the classroom, there is a paucity of understanding how school principals navigate the complexities of implementing differentiation within the constraints of administrative policies, diverse student populations and other external factors. This lack of attention to system-level differentiation, particularly the role of school leadership, motivated this study.

Dahle and Wermke (2024) further emphasize the crucial role of school principals in implementing inclusive practices, although they posit that school leaders alone cannot address these challenges. This study explores how differentiation strategies are conceptualized and implemented at the systemic level, with a particular focus on school leadership. It aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating how principals manage the challenges of differentiation and inclusivity in complex educational systems. By reviewing and analyzing the relevant literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how educational leaders can effectively promote differentiation and create more equitable educational environments. This system-level approach seeks to offer insights that are critical to the ongoing development of inclusive practices and equity in education.

Differentiation in a system perspective

A system employs organizational differentiation based on categorizing students into groups or classes according to their assessed abilities and capacity to assimilate instructions (Persson, 2010). Consequently, organizational differentiation is predicated on the assumption that students are instructed in groups based on their similarities. In this context, grouping students based on similarities, such as abilities, talents, specific characteristics, or limitations, is hypothesized to enhance teachers' capacity to adapt instruction to students' learning opportunities (Bachmann & Haug, 2006; Dale, 2008; Persson, 2010; Persson & Persson, 2012; Skaalvik & Fossen, 1995). However, the fundamental principle of pedagogical differentiation is the perspective of how diversity and variation in teaching and learning manifest in a heterogeneous classroom. It encompasses all strategies that teachers implement to provide variation for different students in terms of teaching, content, workload, pace, tasks and assessments (Persson, 2010; Skaalvik & Fossen, 1995).

Eikeland and Ohna (2022) present a categorization of differentiation in education comprising three main areas: differentiated teaching, differentiated students and differentiated content. Teaching differentiation involves modifying instructional methods to address diverse student needs, encompassing various elements such as goals, content, pacing, progression and methodologies. The objective of this differentiation is to enable students to achieve full academic potential. Student differentiation involves organizing students within and between schools based on their abilities, often resulting in grouping or class placement based on assessment outcomes. According to the authors, content differentiation, found within both teaching and student differentiation, refers to the utilization of different curricula for various student groups (Eikeland and Ohna, 2022). Furthermore, Eikeland and Ohna (2022) identified four stances in research regarding the concept of differentiation in relation to education: A) differentiation as individualization, B) differentiation as adaptation to specific groups, C) differentiation as adaptations within diverse classrooms and D) differentiation from a system perspective. According to Eikeland and Ohna (2022), the first stance, A, differentiation as individualization, emphasizes the uniqueness of each student's learning process as essential to teaching. They utilize Kyriakides and Creemers (2008) to describe how differentiation in this context entails 'teaching according to the learning needs of individual students' (Kyriakides & Creemers, 2008, p. 187), which involves adapting the curriculum, tasks, and teaching to each student's individual abilities (Dalland & Klette, 2014). In stance B, Eikeland and Ohna (2022) characterized the concept of differentiation as an adaptation to specific groups, involving the identification of specific groups of students taught in different classrooms, often categorized in terms of ability,

language skills, or gender. Stance C, differentiation as an adaptation within diverse classrooms, emphasizes the teaching context, which encompasses heterogeneous classrooms. Differentiation is a necessary tool for adapting instruction to address the needs of students in diverse classrooms.

In stance D, Eikeland and Ohna (2022) emphasize that differentiation extends beyond the classroom, focusing on systemic factors that shape differentiation practices in schools. This stance is central to the current study, as it highlights the influence of leadership and other organizational elements, such as school culture, pedagogical systems and educational policies, which are all crucial for effective differentiation. By shifting the focus from individual teachers and classrooms to a broader context, stance D brings attention to the role of principals in organizing schools and cultivating a supportive school culture. Within this framework, differentiated instruction (DI) is a student-centered approach that aims to meet the diverse academic and cultural needs of all students (Goddard et al., 2010). Research has shown that principals' instructional leadership significantly affects how widely DI is practiced in schools, as teachers are more likely to adopt a common approach to differentiation when principals actively lead in this area (Goddard et al., 2010; Eikeland & Ohna, 2022). Given the limited research on stance D, as noted by Eikeland and Ohna (2022), this study aims to expand knowledge in this area, particularly regarding the role of school leadership. As school leadership and principals are key to this perspective, their influence on differentiation practices is explored in depth in this study.

Method

Research reviews can be categorized into various typologies, one of which focuses on complex or contentious topics within a field (Wiley et al., 2011). These reviews play a crucial role in identifying, explicating and presenting persuasive perspectives on issues affecting students and education professionals. Typically, they provide a historical context, evaluate various research approaches and their implications, and conclude with recommendations for policy and practice, according to Wiley et al. (2011). The first step involved identifying the research question. Second, it is essential to identify relevant studies. Subsequently, the process moves on to study the selection in the third step. Following this selection, in step four, the studies were charted. The last and fifth steps involved collating, summarizing and reporting the findings. This form of surveying is efficacious when summarizing and disseminating research findings, as well as identifying research gaps in the existing literature, as it provides an effective means of mapping fields of study, where it is challenging to visualize the range of available material (Anderson et al., 2008; Levac et al., 2010). The overall selection and analysis process in the present study is illustrated in Figure 1, inspired by Gough et al. (2017).

After recognizing the research gap and the objective of the current study in the first step, the following search string was used in the second step of the search of relevant databases: differentiation OR 'differentiated instruction*' OR DI AND 'school management*' OR 'school leadership*' AND 'system perspective*'. Table 1 presents the database and search results.

In the third step, the selection process involved manual sorting, in addition to the automated removal of duplicates by EndNote. The titles and abstracts were read, and the first selection of articles was based on specified exclusion and inclusion criteria, as presented in Table 2.

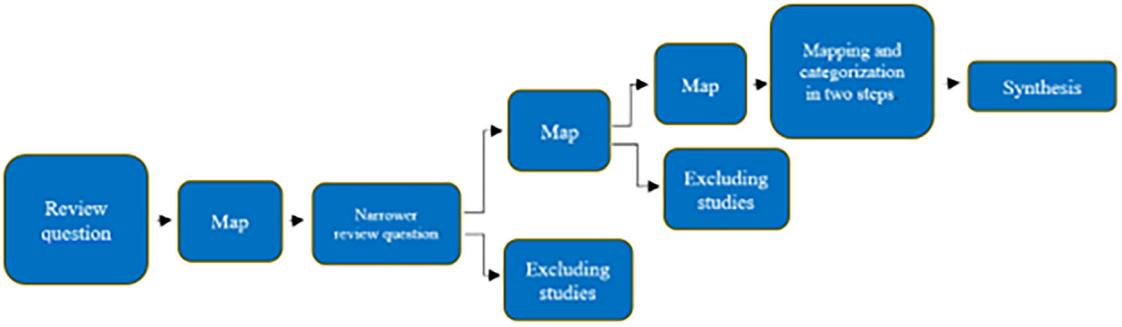

Figure 1. Research design inspired by Gough et al. (2017).

Table 1. Databases and hits.

Data base	Result	Limitations
Eric	548	Postsecondary Education, Higher Education, Early Childhood Education, Preschool Education, Kindergarten, Adult Education, Two-Year Colleges, Adult Basic Education, Scholarly Journals, Time frame: 01-01-2019 - 03-15-2024, Language English
Web of Science (WoS)	981	Research field: education-educational research, Language English, research articles, Time frame: 01-01-2019 - 03-15-2024
Total number of articles before duplicate scanning (EndNote and manually)	1,529	
Total number of articles after duplicate scanning (EndNote and manually)	**1,326**	

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the first selection process.

Inclusion criteria	DI, school leadership/management, system perspective as focus in the studies (minimum two words search hits in abstract), time span 01-01-2019 to 03-15-2014, education, articles in English, compulsory school and secondary school, original/peer reviewed research.
Exclusion criteria	Book chapter, books, review articles, conference materials, higher education, adult education, other research areas than education, Kindergarten/preschool, grey literature.

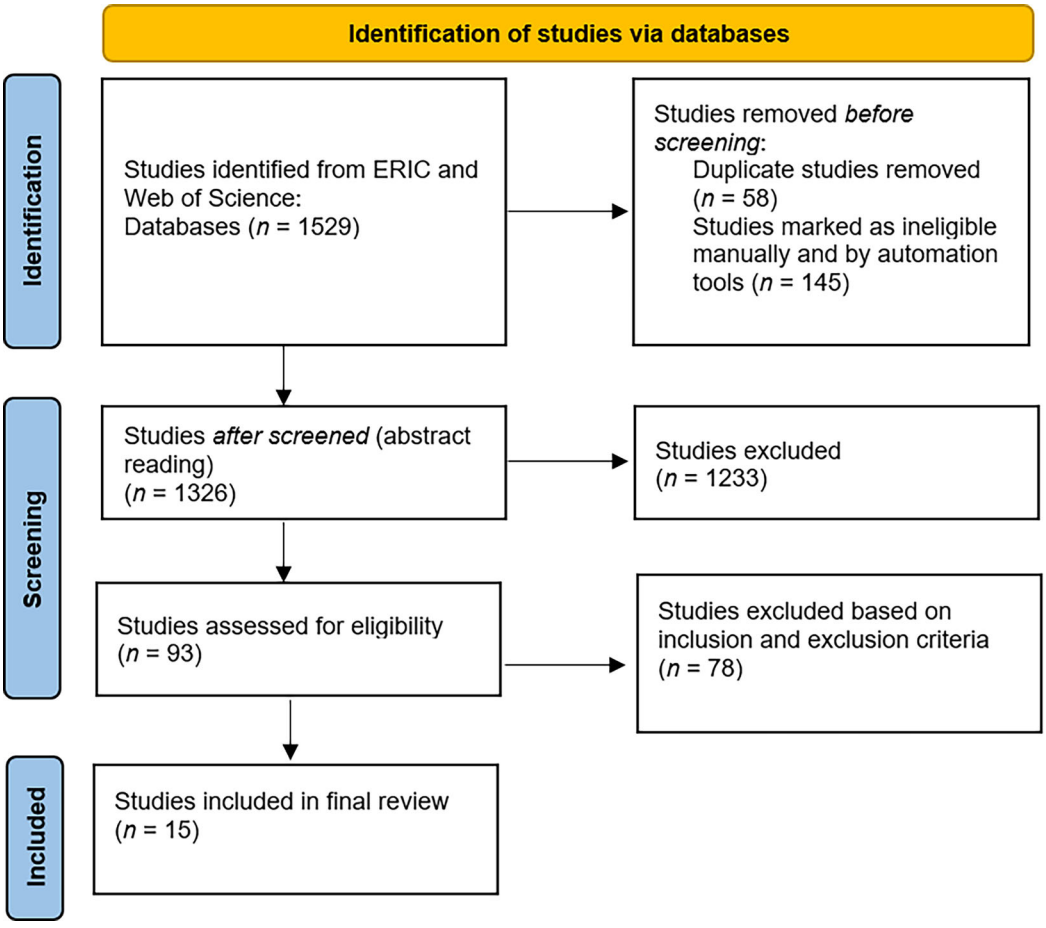

Figure 2. The selection process inspired by the PRISMA flowchart (Moher et al., 2007; Page et al., 2021).

After the titles and abstracts were read, $n = 93$ articles were identified as being of further interest in accordance with the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In the third step, all 93 articles were scanned, and $n = 15$ articles were selected for final mapping and synthesis. The selection process is illustrated in Figure 2 in the flowchart inspired by PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). The preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses (PRISMA) flowchart is a key tool used in systematic

Table 3. The articles reviewed, along with the identified main and sub-themes, as well as their country of origin.

Article	Article reference	Main theme	Sub theme	Origin/ context
1	Bergh and Forsberg (2024)	1. The system	A: Students' rights	Sweden
2	DeMatthews (2020)	1. The system	B: Principals' system mindset	USA
3	DeMatthews and Mueller (2022)	2. Leadership practice	A: Principal's role in students' development	USA
4	Garner and Forbes (2013)	1. The system	C: Principal 'caught' and influenced by the system	Australia
5	Gibbs (2023a)	2. Leadership practice	B: Principal's role in implementation and conditions creation	Australia
6	Gibbs (2023b)	2. Leadership practice	C: Principal's role in teachers' learning	Australia
7	Gibbs and Beamish (2021)	2. Leadership practice	B: Principal's role in implementation and conditions creation	Australia
8	Handa (2019)	2. Leadership practice	C: Principal's role in teachers' learning	Australia
9	Ninkovic et al. (2022)	2. Leadership practice	D: Link between principal's leadership and differentiated instruction (DI)	Serbia
10	Norqvist and Ärlestig (2020)	1: The system	B: Principals' system mindset	Sweden
11	Scheer (2021)	2. Leadership practice	F: Inclusive school leadership perspective	Germany
12	Shaked and Schechter (2014)	1. The system	B: Principals' system mindset	Israel
13	Sharp et al. (2020)	2. Leadership practice	C Principal's role in leading teachers' learning	Australia
14	Wang and Tian (2023)	2. Leadership practice	D: Link between principal's leadership and differentiated instruction (DI)	China
15	Whitley et al. (2021)	2. Leadership practice	B: Principal's role in implementation and conditions creation	Canada

reviews and meta-analyses to visually represent the flow of information throughout the review process. It enhances transparency and reproducibility by illustrating stages such as record identification, screening, eligibility assessment and final inclusion of studies and has become a standard for reporting systematic reviews (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021).

In the fourth step, the remaining $n = 15$ articles underwent comprehensive review and were analyzed and categorized using a thematic analysis process (Bryman, 2018). Differences and similarities among the articles were meticulously documented in Excel, facilitating a visual overview of their content. Various research findings within each study were carefully noted, sorted and color-coded before categorization. Subsequently, the articles were organized into eight distinct themes. These were 1 A: Students' rights, 1B: Principals' system mindset, 1 C: Principal 'caught' and influenced by the system, 2 A: Principal's role in students' development, 2B: Principal's role in implementation and conditions creation, 2 C: Principal's role in teachers' learning, 2D: The link between the principal's practice of transformative or differentiated instruction – DI, and 2E: Inclusive school leadership perspective. Following a thorough reading of the articles and another round of comparison in Excel, the themes were further condensed into two main overarching themes: 1. The system, and 2. The practice of leadership. The articles included in the final review are listed in Table 3.

Two articles (numbers 4 and 12) were not identified within the search results, despite the databases being constrained to articles published between 2019 and 2024. Notwithstanding this limitation, the decision to include them was made because of their apparent relevance to this study. Article 12, authored by Shaked and Schechter (2014), produced an updated version that was released in 2020. Although this updated version was not encompassed within the initial search parameters, it was included to enhance comprehension of the subject matter. The analysis of the selected articles revealed two primary themes along with several subthemes that are central to understanding the role of school leadership in differentiation. These findings emphasize the significance of leadership practices and organizational contexts in effectively promoting inclusion through differentiation strategies in educational settings.

Results

In this section, the two main themes and their eight sub-themes are presented in more detail.

Main theme 1: the system

The system theme focuses on how school structures, policies and practices shape the educational environment of all stakeholders. It explores how rules, regulations and organizational frameworks affect

students, teachers and administrators, impacting the overall functioning and outcomes of the educational process.

Sub theme 1 A: students' rights

In Article 1, the article by Bergh and Forsberg (2024), a complex relationship between juridification and differentiation was observed, characterized by increased complexity and contingency. Their study investigated juridification within education, an area they assert has not been directly explored. In this context, jurisdiction refers to the transfer of power to individual student rights over public institutions and authorities with a growing emphasis on students' individual enforceable rights (Carlbaum, 2016). Bergh and Forsberg (2024) note an intensification of legal processes in politics and various social domains in Nordic countries and elsewhere. This article examines how the concept of differentiation in education is linked to the concept of juridification. These heightened juridification processes can disrupt the connection between differentiation and education, as well as other social areas, leading to tensions that both facilitate and hinder educational efforts (Bergh & Arneback, 2019). Changes in school policy in Sweden reflect a shift in the implementation of differentiation within education policy, captured in the slogan change from '*one school* for all' to 'one school for *all*' (Bergh & Forsberg, 2024). Increased freedom of choice through tax-funded private schools (Wiborg, 2015) and emphasis on individualization and diversity have increased the importance of both parents' and children's rights (Bergh & Forsberg, 2024; Quennerstedt & Moody, 2020).

As the relationship between duty-based law and rights-based law shifts, the current provisions specify the rights that individuals can claim, such as those related to school principals (Novak, 2018). All of this reflects a captured shift in the slogan: from '*one school* for all' to 'one school for *all*' (Francia, 2014), influencing how differentiation is perceived and implemented (Paulsrud, 2022). The concept of '*one school* for all' primarily emphasizes equal access, common placement, diversity pedagogy, student interests, equal opportunities and the political struggle for socio-economic redistribution. By contrast, the concept of 'one school for *all*' or for every child is more responsive to advocating the same pedagogy, freedom of choice, individualization and cultural recognition as remedies for social injustice (Wahlström, 2014).

An examination of Swedish political approaches to differentiation (Paulsrud, 2022) revealed a significantly reduced focus on educational differentiation within the current context of the curriculum (Lgr 11) and School Act (SFS, 2010:800). Concurrently, organizational differentiation has undergone legalization. Bergh and Forsberg (2024) argued that students' interests and influence have been relegated to a secondary position.

Subtheme 1 B: principals' system mindset

Three of the reviewed articles (article 12, 2 and 10) address issues aligned with principals' perspectives on the system (DeMatthews, 2020; Norqvist and Ärlestig, 2020; Shaked & Schechter, 2014). Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition of systems thinking, Shaked and Schechter (2014) observed that it encompasses two primary complementary meanings. These pertain to transcending individual components to perceive the entire system, and considering each discrete component as an integral part of the entire system. They aimed to present a systematic school leadership (SSL) approach and identified four characteristics of SSL. First, leading wholes involve viewing school life as a cohesive system, where changes consider interactions among various aspects rather than isolated solutions. Second, the multidimensional view entails balancing multiple aspects of an issue simultaneously and recognizing the reasons, consequences and future possibilities. Third, indirect influence acknowledges the mutual influence among school elements by utilizing indirect approaches to address challenges. Finally, evaluating significance involves assessing the elements based on their impact on the entire system, discerning important issues from trivial ones, and identifying patterns.

DeMatthews (2020) identified leadership practices critical to establishing effective inclusive schools, including creating a culture of change-oriented collaboration, planning and evaluating, building capacity, and developing/revising plans. The principals in this study perceived these practices as enabling inclusion to take root despite the challenges and complex nature of school environments. Three additional themes emerged, related to how principals understood the challenges and change processes associated

with inclusion: collaborative inquiry, information flow and crises/distractions/fatigue. These findings have significant implications for how systems thinking is applied in practice in inclusive reform efforts.

In Norqvist and Ärlestig (2020), two topics are addressed. First, regarding content, the content domain explores the understanding of the essence of the system, encompassing its internal and external components. The three key skills in this domain are recognizing systems, maintaining boundaries and differentiating the elements. Examples indicate a tendency to view groups or positions in isolation rather than as part of a larger system. Strategies for addressing systemic issues vary, including a shift toward focusing on learning processes and tailored solutions. Instances of systems thinking involve recognizing systemic problems and adapting organizational structures accordingly. Second, Norqvist and Ärlestig (2020) identify the topic of structure: The structure domain examines how various aspects of an organization interact, including routines, task organization and actor relations. The visibility of organizational structures varies, posing challenges in the assessment and future planning of organizations with multiple actors and goals. Interactions between actors, past behaviors and external pressures influence operational dynamics. Assigned tasks, routines and meeting schedules provide a visible framework within the organizational structure. Subtheme 1 C: Principal 'caught' and influenced by the system, in which Article 4 by Garner and Forbes (2013) presents a small-scale study that provides evidence that while some school leaders effectively navigate the challenges and opportunities of inclusive education, others find it significantly stressful. This reflects a global trend, where school leaders worldwide struggle to balance inclusion with student achievement, particularly in an era dominated by public comparison of school performance and international assessments. Under such circumstances, school leaders often find themselves caught in conflicting demands, as noted by Lunt and Norwich (1999). While some principals strive to offer quality curriculum experiences to students with special needs, others perceive this task as daunting. According to this article, these principals tend to view students with special needs negatively, perceiving them as potential disruptors to the smooth delivery of a standard curriculum. This perception is partly fueled by a sense of inadequate support, especially in terms of professional development, to enhance students' understanding and skills in catering to students with special needs. Nonetheless, school leadership remains pivotal in developing appropriate teaching and learning opportunities for marginalized students (Garner & Forbes, 2013).

Main theme 2: leadership practice

The second main theme of this study was leadership practice. Here, a variety of perspectives and aspects concerning the principal's role are explored.

Subtheme 2 A: principal's role in students' development

Article 3 (DeMatthews, 2020) asserts that principals play a crucial role in fostering the development of a disability identity within their schools. It is necessary to prioritize the examination of existing relationships and visibility of disabilities within school communities. Effective principals promote awareness of equity issues and collaborate with teachers and communities to create inclusive learning environments for students with disabilities. They also need to ensure that disabilities are adequately represented in the school curriculum, progressing from tokenism to meaningful inclusion. Principals can guide this process by posing critical questions about the representation of disability in texts and history courses, ensuring intersectional perspectives are considered, DeMatthews (2020) suggests. Moreover, principals should consider how teacher pedagogy and values toward inclusion shape school culture. They should work with staff to foster a culture of professional inquiry and improvement, informed by a positive understanding of disability identity. This may necessitate a philosophical and pedagogical shift as many preparation programs do not adequately equip principals with inclusive practices. In this regard, professional development led by individuals with disabilities can be particularly effective. Principals should also ensure that diverse voices are included in decision-making processes within the school community, reflecting a commitment to leveraging resources to eliminate marginalization. Ultimately, this shift in perspective is not solely the responsibility of special educators; it requires collective effort from all members of the school community. By prioritizing disability identity development, principals can create more

inclusive environments that benefit every student and contribute to a more equitable educational experience (DeMatthews, 2020).

Subtheme 2 B: principal's role in implementation and conditions creation

In Article 5, Gibbs (2023b) elucidates that from the perspective of school leaders, there exists a cohort of teachers within the institution who exhibit reluctance to embrace DI in their classrooms, despite the presence of ongoing internal professional development opportunities accessible to all staff. It has become evident that school leaders grapple with numerous administrative duties that impede their capacity to further cultivate DI within the school environment. Certain barriers to the effective implementation of DI are universally acknowledged among educators, such as time constraints for lesson planning and instruction and managing challenging student behavior; other impediments specific to this school context have been identified. These include administrative and time constraints for school leaders, challenges associated with developing teaching materials to effectively address diverse student needs, and the necessity for a flexible classroom environment (Gibbs, 2023b). Nevertheless, within this landscape, there are noteworthy instances where a small subset of teachers and school leaders exhibits proactive and positive engagement with DI. Their efforts are fostered through mentoring, coaching and regular workshops that are made available to staff, enabling them to enhance their capacity to effectively address the diverse needs of students, Gibbs (2023) concludes.

In article 7, however, Gibbs et al. (2021) emphasize how school leaders in their collective responses in a study by Hertberg-Davis and Brighton (2006) underscore the significance of being 'knowledgeable leaders', which entails comprehending the multifaceted complexities inherent in implementing DI and being fully committed to it. This commitment is crucial for fostering an environment in which students with conditions such as ADHD can realize their academic potential, provided the classroom is conducive to learning, offers a sense of safety and security, and promotes a sense of belonging. However, Gibbs et al. (2021) emphasized that, in their study, school leaders tended to possess a broader understanding of DI than teachers. The principals acknowledged the importance of integrating DI into every classroom, but leaders appeared uncertain about how teachers differentiated assessments. The principals perceived that teachers seemed to regard this as the responsibility of the support teachers and other support staff.

The principals in Article 15 (Whitley et al., 2019) demonstrated a strong commitment to Differentiated Instruction (DI), which was not merely a priority, but also a fundamental belief in inclusive teaching and learning for all students. Some expressed frustration regarding the slow dissemination of DI within the educational system, particularly at the high-school level. Their commitment to DI implementation was intrinsically motivated, viewing their leadership roles as advocates of DI and facilitators of teachers' professional development. Whitley et al. (2019), supported by previous research alongside their own findings, demonstrate that organizational barriers and an emphasis on subject expertise often impede inclusive education and the implementation of DI in high schools. At the upper secondary school level, the perspective that 'the curriculum fights against the students has been noted as an obstacle to inclusion and DI implementation in previous research (De Vroey et al., 2016; Pearce et al., 2010; Whitley et al., 2019). Subject-based structures in upper secondary schools often constrain teachers' ability to adapt instruction to meet students' individual needs. Whitley et al. (2019).

Subtheme 2 C: principal's role in teachers' learning

Article 6 (Gibbs, 2023a) emphasizes the significance of principals possessing comprehensive knowledge regarding the various complexities involved in the implementation of Differentiated Instruction (DI) as well as the importance of their full engagement in DI during its implementation. However, the results indicated that principals conceptualized DI from a broader perspective than teachers, recognizing the necessity for DI to be implemented in every classroom. Nonetheless, the principals were unable to clearly articulate how teachers differentiated assessments, believing this responsibility to fall under the purview of the support staff and other personnel. Conversely, Article 8 (Handa, 2019) underscores the importance of establishing a leadership group comprising staff and principals to implement a shared vision of differentiation for education in schools. This highlights the necessity for principals to collaborate with and through staff members to construct a professional learning community that focuses on continuous improvement of learning and teaching (Fullan, 2013). Handa (2019) asserted that principals

empowered staff for differentiation throughout the school, in line with previous research (Tomlinson et al., 2008; Tomlinson & Allan, 2000; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

The principals of Article 8 valued the integration of students' perspectives into the entire school's learning and teaching processes. However, they observed that students were primarily consulted to share ideas and opinions, typically at the conclusion of a teaching unit. While initial efforts have been made to engage students as partners in learning, the intended goals have not yet been fully realized. Nevertheless, principals remained committed to continuing their efforts to incorporate gifted students' voices to enhance their learning and teaching practices.

Article 13 (Sharp et al., 2020) emphasizes the importance of focusing on teacher recruitment efforts on criteria specifically targeting differentiation. The results indicate that 'Differentiate the curriculum/method to meet all students' needs' became a standard component in new teacher job descriptions. This study highlights the central role of the head teacher or principal in leading professional learning (Sharp et al., 2020) while also noting a clear theme of contributions from leaders at multiple levels. This multilevel approach was crucial to ensure that teachers engaged with a consistent message through their interactions with various leaders, had access to external and internal expertise, were supported by systems that facilitated the application of learned principles and methods (e.g. schedules supporting collaborative planning), received targeted information and support (e.g. meetings led by leaders), and were subject to appropriate accountability mechanisms (e.g. performance review process). The literature acknowledges the importance and potential pitfalls of distributed leadership. Overall, school changes, such as a cultural shift toward more inclusive educational practices, rely on various types and levels of leadership. Harris (2013) posits that the challenge for formal leaders striving to improve organizational performance and outcomes is to create conditions in which professional knowledge and skills are enhanced, effective leadership exists at all levels in the system, and the entire organization collaborates to achieve improved results.

Subtheme 2 D: link between principal's leadership and differentiated instruction (DI)

In Article 14, Wang and Tian (2023) observed that principals' implementation of distributed leadership significantly promoted and enhanced teachers' leadership for inclusion. Furthermore, it can be noted that educators' professional competencies for inclusive education are positively correlated with their implementation of distributed leadership. The results indicate that distributed leadership, wherein the principal shares responsibility and leadership among several individuals within the school, indirectly influences the frequency and extent to which teachers utilize differentiated instruction (DI). Specifically, the results demonstrated that, as teacher leadership for inclusion and teachers' competencies in inclusive education improved, teachers exhibited a higher frequency of DI implementation (Wang & Tian, 2023). Previous research has shown that when leadership is shared and teacher leadership for inclusion is developed, it can contribute to improving teachers' abilities through the exchange of knowledge and expertise, which subsequently leads to improvements in their daily pedagogical practices and the use of differentiated instruction, as argued by Wang and Tian (2023).

Consistent with Wang and Tan (2023), Ninkovic et al. (2022) argue in article 9 that there is evidence demonstrating that the implementation of DI in classrooms increases when school leaders support DI as an effective teaching method within the entire school framework and facilitate professional learning opportunities for teachers to build capacity in this area (Jarvis et al., 2017; Jarvis et al., 2016). The results of Article 9 indicate that transformative leadership indirectly promotes DI implementation and practice. Ninkovic et al. (2022) and Geijsel et al. (2009) explained that the main methods of transformative leadership are vision building, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation. As student diversity increases in schools, it is crucial for teachers and leadership teams to view education as a collective responsibility, collaborate to overcome common challenges, and identify common goals for constructing classrooms that meet the needs of diverse students. It is also essential for teacher educators to assume responsibility for ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared for today's diverse classrooms, as argued by Ninkovic et al. (2022).

Subtheme 2 E: inclusive school leadership perspective

Article 11 (Scheer, 2021) examines a theoretically and empirically grounded integrated framework model of the principal's leadership role in inclusive education. According to research on inclusive school development, principals' conceptualization of inclusion is critical. The actions of participants as leaders are influenced by various factors including limitations in their capacity to supervise teachers, substantial teaching responsibilities, and the absence of deputy principals in smaller institutions. Key topics addressed include access to resources, opportunities for capacity building, and management of challenging student behaviors. Participants also reported obstacles such as support issues and conflicts with political and administrative entities. Principals with a 'broader' and more multifaceted leadership approach actively implement more measures to promote inclusion and demonstrate a more positive attitude toward inclusive education, as argued by Scheer (2021). However, the implementation of inclusion is contingent on how principals adapt the official program to their operational frameworks and personal convictions. The results indicate that principals' leadership orientation influences their interpretation of and adaptation to the school's fundamental conditions. Finally, Scheer (2021) delineates that the integrated framework model demonstrates that a principal's perspective on inclusion and goals for implementation results from an interaction between their leadership orientation, which refers to the strategy or perspective a leader has toward their leadership, how they perceive their role and responsibility as leaders, and their fundamental beliefs about inclusion in schools.

Overall, these subthemes and the two main overarching themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of educational leadership in a broader systemic context. They underscored the critical role of principals in fostering inclusive school environments, supporting teacher learning and development, and driving the systemic changes that promote equity and diversity in education.

Discussion

The results show that the role of school principals has become increasingly central. The principals' capacity to manage the complexities of educational reforms and effectively implement Differentiated Instruction (DI) appears crucial. This analysis draws from thematic results that highlight the multifaceted responsibilities and challenges that principals face as they attempt to reconcile historical ideals with contemporary educational demands. As legal frameworks have evolved to support the ideals of inclusion and pedagogical differentiation, principals have found themselves at the forefront of implementing these changes. The pressure of legal mandates often creates tension between providing equal access and catering to individual needs, a balance that is crucial in the day-to-day management of educational institutions (Bergh & Forsberg, 2024). This has led to a scenario in which principals must not only adhere to policies but also interpret them in ways that benefit all students, thereby functioning as a bridge between policy and practice.

Moreover, the leadership role of principals has expanded to include a systems thinking approach, in which decision-making is influenced by the interconnectedness of various school functions (Shaked & Schechter, 2014). This approach is a direct reflection of historical shifts toward a more holistic educational system that values both individual students' needs and systemic efficiency. The ability to view the school as a cohesive system requires principals to manage not only academic outcomes but also foster inclusive school cultures that accommodate diverse student needs. However, this system approach also places principals in challenging positions, often feeling 'caught' between the conflicting demands of administrative expectations and the realities of educational delivery (Garner & Forbes, 2013). The historical evolution of inclusivity has added layers of complexity to their roles, as they must now navigate the increased expectations of individualized education within the constraints of existing resources and sometimes contradictory policies. For example, it is evident that the shift from central to local governance in Sweden during the 1980s and the 1990s, involving decentralization and the transfer of responsibility for organizational differentiation from the state to the local school authorities and school principals, appears to have affected both the roles and workload of principals, as well as the equity within the school. This is because it now largely depends on each principal and the local school authority to interpret and implement policies regarding this matter. The impact of principals on student development has become a critical area of focus in leadership practice. Principals are pivotal in shaping educational environments that support all students, including those with disabilities (DeMatthews, 2020). This not only aligns with the inclusive education policies

that have evolved over the decades but also highlights the principal's role in translating these policies into everyday practice that positively impacts student well-being and academic success.

Furthermore, the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI), a central component of modern inclusive practices, presents a significant challenge for principals. As Gibbs (2023b) described, obstacles such as administrative constraints and teacher reluctance necessitate principals to be proactive in leading change, promoting professional development, and fostering a culture that supports diverse learning strategies. This leadership is not only about adopting new teaching methods but also ensuring that these methods are effectively integrated into the school's operational framework, involving collaboration among all staff members. This underscores the importance of distributed leadership not only as a facilitator of DI but also as a strategic response to the persistent gaps between policy ambitions and everyday school practices.

Additionally, principals' implementation and practice of distributed leadership significantly promotes and strengthens teachers' leadership for inclusion, which has a positive effect on their capacity to adopt DI. By distributing leadership responsibilities across schools, principals can create a supportive environment in which teachers feel empowered to assume leadership roles and develop a deeper sense of ownership over inclusive practices. This shared responsibility encourages collaboration among educators and facilitates the exchange of knowledge and expertise, which in turn enhances teachers' ability to implement DI in their daily pedagogical work. Consequently, schools that adopt distributed leadership tend to observe more consistent and effective use of DI, leading to improved outcomes for students with diverse learning needs. While distributed leadership fosters immediate collaboration and shared responsibility, transformative leadership may play a more long-term role by shaping school culture and professional values toward inclusive education. Together, these leadership styles highlight different but complementary pathways for supporting differentiated instruction under systemic constraints. This interconnectedness reinforces the principal's role in cultivating and sustaining inclusive practices through both immediate collaboration and long-term cultural development.

Upon examination of the interrelationships among the identified themes, it became evident that the principals' systemic mindset (Theme 1 B) significantly influenced their capacity to advocate for students' rights (Theme 1 A) and effectively implement differentiated instruction (Themes 2D and 2E) through the utilization of distributed leadership (Theme 2 C). The multifaceted role of principals (Themes 2 A, 2 B and 2 C) demonstrates a dynamic interaction between leadership practices and systemic conditions, indicating that effective school leadership requires a nuanced comprehension of both individual and systemic factors.

Principals are not merely policy implementers but also play a crucial role in shaping how policies are implemented in educational institutions. Their roles as system thinkers, advocates of inclusive practices, and leaders in educational innovation, including practitioners of distributed leadership, are fundamental to the continuation of progressive educational reforms. As they navigate these multifaceted responsibilities, the success of the educational goals set by the policy depends significantly on their ability to adapt, interpret, and lead within the ever-evolving educational landscape.

Conclusions and practical implications

This study aimed to examine how differentiation strategies are conceptualized and implemented at the system level, focusing on the role of school leadership in managing inclusion within complex educational systems. After analyzing and summarizing the results, the conclusions of this study are as follows:

Central leadership for inclusion: School leaders play a crucial role in implementing differentiation strategies and creating inclusive school environments. Their ability to bridge the gap between policy and practice is essential for fostering a culture of inclusion and adaptation in complex educational systems.

Systemic perspective on differentiation: A systematic approach to differentiation that takes into account both organizational and pedagogical factors is necessary to effectively address the challenges schools face. This includes understanding how external factors such as legal requirements and social inequalities influence the implementation of differentiated methods.

Challenges and need for collaboration: Administrative constraints and teacher resistance are significant obstacles to the implementation of differentiation. Effective leadership that promotes collaboration,

professional development, and policy adaptation is essential for supporting diverse learning needs and creating a more equitable educational environment.

Based on the conclusions of this study, several practical implications for school leaders and educational systems can be identified. First, enhancing the role of school leaders in inclusion is crucial. This could involve developing professional development programs that focus on inclusive leadership and implementing differentiation strategies. Creating forums for experience exchanges among school leaders may facilitate the sharing of successful methods to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Additionally, mentorship opportunities can be established, allowing experienced school leaders to support new leaders in navigating challenges associated with creating inclusive school environments.

Second, it is important to implement a systemic perspective of differentiation. School-wide strategies that consider both organizational and pedagogical factors are necessary to effectively address the challenges faced by schools. Conducting regular system analyses could help to identify how external factors impact a school's ability to implement differentiated methods. Collaborations among schools, authorities, and research institutions should also be fostered to enhance the understanding and management of the complexities within the educational system. Finally, it is essential to promote collaboration and address challenges. Establishing cross-functional teams within schools can help identify and resolve administrative barriers to differentiation. Creating incentives and support systems for teachers who actively engage in implementing differentiated teaching methods may also increase their motivation.

Furthermore, professional development programs focusing on collaboration and adaptable pedagogy should be developed alongside regular dialogue between school management, teachers, and staff to address resistance and find common solutions. By concentrating on these areas, school leaders and educational systems can work toward fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of all students.

Limitations and future research

The study encountered limitations owing to the challenges in identifying optimal keyword combinations that could yield relevant information for the area, as the selection of keywords inherently influences the search results. The conclusions necessitate a contextual understanding for an accurate interpretation, as the studies reviewed in the literature are predominantly conducted in regions of global significance with a notable emphasis on Australia. This aspect warrants further exploration and discussion in future research. Notwithstanding these limitations, the results provide valuable insights into the role of principals within a complex system in which multiple factors and actors contribute to the shaping of schools and the creation and reproduction of policy. Additional research could be beneficial, focusing on the interactions, decision-making processes, and actions of principals, their educational leaders, administrative bodies, policymakers, and politicians, to elucidate how the dynamics at the local school level are influenced by these factors. Future research should also investigate the relationship between school leadership, distributed leadership, and inclusive practices to develop more effective strategies for differentiation, ultimately advancing educational equity and inclusion among learners.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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