

From Policy to Practice: Transformative Leadership for Inclusive Education of Children with Disabilities in Moroccan Schools

Oussama Boukhari

Doctoral Student, Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, English Department, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

Yousra Lahmiyed

PhD Holder, Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts, English Department, Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a critical review of a Moroccan national guide on the implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities in schools. Based on the broad structure that the Moroccan Ministry of Education has created (Direction des Curricula, 2019), the philosophical underpinnings, managerial skills, and organizational solutions needed to implement inclusive education are evaluated in this paper. The guide is an important policy tool that operationalizes international human-rights frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) within the Moroccan educational setting. This article examines the methodology of inclusive education as adopted in the guide, with special attention to the paradigm shift from segregation and integration to actual inclusion. The main conclusions point to the importance of changing the representations and attitudes of school directors and building professional competencies in participatory management and multi-stakeholder partnerships. The discussion shows that effective inclusive education involves planning, reorganizing, adapting to time constraints, and continuous evaluation. The paper contributes to the international literature on educational leadership for inclusion by offering Morocco's contextualized approach to implementing Article 24 of the CRPD.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive education, children with disabilities, school leadership, educational management, Morocco, human rights-based approach

1. INTRODUCTION

The right to inclusive education for children with disabilities is a fundamental human rights imperative, internationally recognized through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006), especially Article 24, which requires States Parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels (United Nations, 2006). Morocco ratified this convention in 2009 and undertook to reform its education system in order to eliminate discrimination and provide equal access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their abilities and impairments (Direction des Curricula, 2019).

However, the implementation of inclusive education still faces challenges related to historical exclusionary practices, insufficient infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and deeply embedded social perceptions of disability (UNESCO, 2017). In view of these challenges, the Moroccan Ministry of Education developed the "Guide for School Directors on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities" (2019), a strategic tool for operationalizing inclusive education at the institutional level.

This article is an academic review of this guide¹, exploring its theoretical basis, practical management models, and consequences for educational leadership. The key premise is that the success of the transformation toward inclusive education is crucially dependent on the capacity of school directors to reconceptualize their leadership positions, transform negative representations, and organize collaborative partnerships among diverse stakeholders.

This article is one of three related studies examining Morocco's 2019 national inclusive-education guide package. A companion paper analyzes the parallel guide addressed to classroom teachers, focusing on pedagogical differentiation, individual educational planning, and classroom-level practice (Boukhari & Lahmiyed, 2026-a); the present paper instead focuses on the school-level leadership, organizational, and partnership dimensions of inclusion addressed to school directors. A third companion paper analyzes the constitutional and legislative architecture that both guides operationalize (Boukhari & Lahmiyed, 2026-b).

¹Analyzing the official administrative guide: 'L'ÉDUCATION INCLUSIVE AU PROFIT DES ENFANTS EN SITUATION DE HANDICAP GUIDE POUR LES DIRECTEURS DES ÉTABLISSEMENTS SCOLAIRES'.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Paradigm Shift: From Segregation to Inclusion

The guide delineates four educational paradigms emblematic of the historical development of approaches to learner diversity (Direction des Curricula, 2019). The standard model of education assumes homogeneity among learners and so fails to educate children with disabilities. The special education model-maintained separation, placing students with disabilities in specialized facilities with adapted programming, but increasing marginalization. The integration model allowed children with disabilities to attend mainstream schools but required them to adjust to existing systems without structural or pedagogical change. The inclusive education approach, by contrast, represents an important shift toward schools that meet the requirements of all learners.

This typology is consistent with international classifications (UNESCO, 2009; Ainscow, 2005) and underscores that inclusion is about systemic transformation, rather than simply placing children with disabilities into unmodified contexts. The guide adopts UNESCO's (2017) definition of inclusive education as a process of strengthening the capacity of the education system to reach all learners.

2.2 Socio-Constructivist and Human Rights Foundations

The guide identifies four interrelated pillars of inclusive education: social and legal, socio-economic, philosophical, and scientific-pedagogical (Direction des Curricula, 2019). The social and legal pillar rests on international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the CRPD (2006); the socio-economic pillar recognizes that inclusive education promotes social cohesion and economic development; the philosophical pillar grounds inclusion in equity, social justice, and human dignity while rejecting stigmatization; and the scientific-pedagogical pillar draws on Vygotsky's (1978) socio-constructivist theory, in which learning occurs through social interaction and mediation moves children from their actual to their proximal level of development. A fuller discussion of these pillars, and of the shared legal and philosophical grounding of the guide package as a whole, is developed in the companion analyses of the teacher-facing guide and of Morocco's disability-rights legislation (Boukhari & Lahmiyed, 2026-a, 2026-b); the present paper draws on these foundations primarily insofar as they shape the director competencies discussed in Section 4.3.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

The methodology used in this work is document analysis (Bowen, 2009) applied to the Moroccan inclusive education guide, which was prepared cooperatively by the Curriculum Directorate, UNESCO, Handicap International, and national stakeholders. The analysis is organized around three dimensions: (1) conceptual foundations of inclusive education and disability, (2) management methods of inclusive schools, and (3) evaluation metrics for inclusion outcomes.

Analysis proceeded through the stages summarized in Figure 1: locating and collecting the source document, sense-making and data synthesis, highlighting key passages and excerpts through content analysis, and identifying themes, case examples, and categories. Coding was conducted in two passes: an initial open-coding pass across the guide's chapters to surface recurring concepts (e.g., paradigm shift, director competencies, partnership mechanisms, evaluation indicators), followed by a second pass in which codes were consolidated into the three analytic dimensions listed above. Trustworthiness was supported through triangulation of the guide's text against the ministerial notes it operationalizes (No. 125/2011, 159/2014, and 3-2274/2013) and through peer debriefing between the two authors on category definitions and borderline cases.

The guide refers to school directors as key agents of change because the director, as supervisor of administrative, material, financial, organizational, and educational dimensions, is obliged to operationalize the requirements of official instructions (Direction des Curricula, 2019, p. 5).

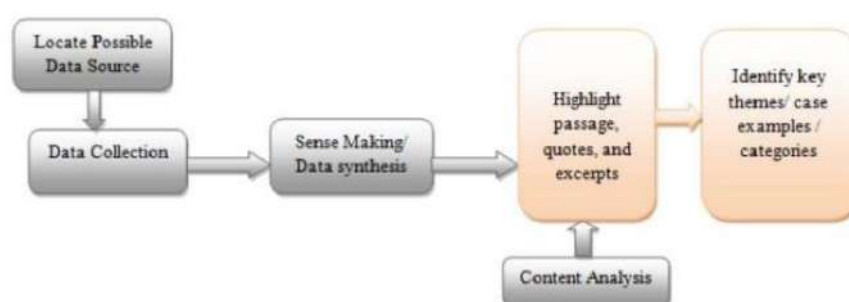


Figure 1. Document Analysis (adapted from Bowen, 2009).

4. KEY FINDINGS

4.1 Reconceptualizing Disability and Social Representations

One of the guide's most significant contributions is its systematic treatment of societal representations of disability. Drawing on Moscovici's (1988) theory of social representations, the guide identifies negative conceptions—such as associating disability with divine punishment, possession, or moral failure—as key obstacles to inclusive education (Direction des Curricula, 2019). Rooted in historical fallacies, such representations foster discriminatory practices that treat the child as defined by impairment rather than by environmental barriers.

The guide proposes a shift from the medical model, which locates the problem within the disability itself, to the social model, which identifies environmental and attitudinal barriers as the primary sources of disablement (Oliver, 1996). This paradigmatic change requires school directors to proactively address negative representations among teachers, parents, and students through awareness campaigns and professional development.

4.2 Typology of Disabilities and Educational Implications

The guide gives detailed descriptions of six disability categories and their educational implications: autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, vision impairment, and learning impairments (Direction des Curricula, 2019). For each category, the guide outlines sensory-motor, cognitive, and emotional characteristics, strengths, and learning needs.

This classification has practical pedagogical value, allowing teachers to design individual pedagogical projects (Projets Pédagogiques Individuels) tailored to each child's needs. The guide stresses, however, that classification should not be used for deterministic labeling, but to guide differentiated instruction and reasonable accommodation.

4.3 The Inclusive School Director: Competencies and Leadership

The guide emphasizes competencies required for inclusive school leadership that go beyond typical administrative duties, namely (Direction des Curricula, 2019, pp. 39-40):

Competency 1: Mastery of the design, development, and preparation of the inclusive school project according to the principles of inclusive education and Moroccan legal-administrative frameworks.

Competency 2: Knowledge of the administrative, organizational, and educational management of inclusive school project initiatives, including the roles of school councils, educational teams, and partners.

Competency 3: Ability to apply supervision, monitoring, and evaluation methods for inclusive school project activities, including measuring target achievement and overall impact.

Competency 4: Mastery of planning for awareness-raising and mobilization for inclusive education, and of establishing relationships with supervisory sectors and NGOs.

These competencies correspond to international criteria for inclusion leadership (Riehl, 2000; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013), which emphasize transformative leadership that confronts exclusionary practice and nurtures collaborative workplaces.

4.4 Planning and Organizing the Inclusive School Project

The guide frames the "projet d'établissement" (school project) as the methodological approach for implementing inclusive education. Building on ministerial notes (No. 125/2011, 159/2014), the guide defines the inclusive school project as an operational mechanism for organizing and implementing educational and managerial processes to enhance the quality of learning for all learners (Direction des Curricula, 2019, p. 42).

It requires a diagnostic assessment of the school's existing state of inclusion, identification of obstacles and enablers, prioritization of goals, programming of activities with defined responsibilities and schedules, and development of monitoring and evaluation processes (Direction des Curricula, 2019). This systematic approach echoes the principles of results-based management increasingly used in educational reform (Fullan, 2015).

4.5 Organizing Space, Time, and School Life

The guide sets out three organizational dimensions crucial for inclusiveness. Spatial organization requires that all school facilities—classrooms, sanitary blocks, sports grounds, libraries, and administrative offices—be made physically accessible through ramps, adapted furniture, and accessible paths. Temporal organization refers to adjusting school hours to accommodate varied learning cycles, recognizing that children with autism, intellectual disabilities, or cerebral palsy may need shorter hours, alternating attendance with paramedical support, or more time to complete tasks.

A particularly notable dimension is the organization of school life, which frames inclusion as extending beyond classroom learning to encompass all school activities: athletics, arts, cultural events, recess, flag-raising ceremonies, and educational excursions (Direction des Curricula, 2019). The guide promotes participation in school life as a form of social inclusion, resisting the historical tendency to exclude children with disabilities from these formative experiences.

4.6 Partnership and Coordination Mechanisms

The guide is grounded in a participatory management approach, recognizing that no single actor can achieve inclusive education alone. Key partners include: provincial directorates of education (legislative and administrative guidance), inspectors (pedagogical supervision), medical and paramedical services (health monitoring and therapy), teachers (designing individualized projects), and parent associations and NGOs (material support and training) (Direction des Curricula, 2019, pp. 51-52).

The director's coordinating function includes convening multi-disciplinary teams, establishing consultation frameworks, harmonizing contributions from varied stakeholders, and maintaining administrative correspondence with all partners. This horizontal, shared-leadership paradigm differs from the traditional, top-down, hierarchical management approaches common in many educational systems (Spillane, 2006).

4.7 Evaluation of Inclusion Processes and Outcomes

The guide identifies two dimensions of assessment. The first, assessment of children's learning outcomes, requires adapted assessment procedures consistent with ministerial note No. 2274/2013, which calls for reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities during continuous assessment and certification testing (Direction des Curricula, 2019). Accommodations may include additional time, alternative response formats, assistive technology, or modified content.

The second dimension, evaluation of inclusion processes, examines their impact on the attitudes and practices of teachers and partners. This dimension emphasizes that changing mindsets is both a precondition for, and an outcome of, successful inclusion. Indicators include the degree of acceptance of children with disabilities in classrooms, positive engagement with impairment, advocacy for inclusion rights, and adoption of professional practices that serve inclusion's aims (Direction des Curricula, 2019, p. 77).

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Contributions to Inclusive Education Scholarship

This examination of the Moroccan guide makes several contributions to the international literature on inclusive education. First, it presents an example of how a middle-income country operationalizes Article 24 of the CRPD within specific cultural, legal, and institutional constraints. While much of the inclusive education literature originates from Western contexts (Artiles et al., 2006), this guide illustrates how inclusive education principles can be adapted to varied national circumstances.

Second, the guide's attention to changing social representations addresses a facet of inclusion that is often neglected. Attitudes have been identified as a major barrier to inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002), even though policy tends to focus on infrastructure and resources. The guide's explicit focus on shifting mindsets through awareness-raising and professional development is a notable strength.

Third, the guide's articulation of director competencies offers a model for professional development programs. Leadership for inclusion requires specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013), including knowledge of disability, the ability to organize multi-disciplinary teams, a commitment to equity, and the capacity to challenge exclusionary practices.

5.2 Implementation Challenges and Tensions

Although the guide provides a comprehensive framework, several implementation challenges warrant rigorous investigation. First, as in many countries (Fullan, 2015), the gap between policy and practice remains large in Morocco. The guide acknowledges that most schools lack adequate infrastructure and accessibility facilities, which require significant investment that may not be immediately feasible.

Second, teacher training for inclusive education remains insufficient. While the guide describes teachers' roles in designing individual projects and using inclusive pedagogies, initial teacher education programs do not consistently cover inclusive education competencies. The 2015-2030 Strategic Vision calls for inclusive education to be integrated into ongoing training, but execution remains uneven.

Third, resource constraints—financial, material, and human—limit the guide's operationalization. Inclusive education requires assistive technology, adapted learning materials, sign-language interpreters, Braille materials, and reduced class sizes, all of which demand consistent financing. While partnerships with NGOs are valuable, they may not ensure equitable resource distribution across all regions.

Fourth, although the guide's disability classifications are pedagogically useful, they risk reinforcing deficit thinking if not applied with caution. International research warns that labeling can lead to lowered expectations or segregation within mainstream settings (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The guide's explicit focus on strengths and potential mitigates this risk to some degree, but requires vigilant application.

5.3 Implications for Policy and Practice

Several implications follow for educational policy and practice. At the policy level, Morocco needs continued investment in infrastructure adaptation, assistive technology provision, and teacher education. The fourth lever of the 2015-2030 Strategic Vision, addressing the right to education for persons with disabilities, must be effectively resourced and monitored.

At the school leadership level, systematic professional development for directors should include understanding of disability and inclusion; participatory planning; multi-disciplinary team coordination; adaptation of assessment processes; and evaluation of inclusion outcomes. Peer learning networks could improve experience-sharing among inclusive school leaders.

At the classroom level, teachers need support in implementing differentiated instruction, designing individualized educational projects, and collaborating with teaching assistants and paramedical staff. The guide's focus on adapting learning rather than adapting the learner (Direction des Curricula, 2019, p. 17) is a foundational pedagogical principle that warrants continual reinforcement.

6. CONCLUSION

The Moroccan guide for school directors on inclusive education for children with disabilities is an important policy tool that helps translate international human rights obligations into management frameworks. The guide provides a detailed roadmap for transforming schools into inclusive settings by addressing philosophical foundations, disability types, leadership competencies, planning systems, organizational systems, collaboration mechanisms, and assessment procedures.

The guide's strengths lie in its systematic treatment of social representations, its clear articulation of director competencies, its participatory management strategy, and its inclusive conception of school life. Political will and sustained investment are needed to address persistent implementation challenges, including resource limitations, insufficient teacher training, and attitudinal barriers.

For the broader global inclusive education community, the Moroccan experience offers insight into how international legal, cultural, and institutional frameworks can be contextualized at the national level. The guide shows that shifting the culture of inclusiveness in education requires not only policy commitment but also operational guidance at the school level—particularly from school directors, who function as gatekeepers and agents of change.

Further research is needed to examine the guide's application across different regions of Morocco and to identify factors that facilitate or hinder its operationalization. Longitudinal research on the academic and social outcomes of children with disabilities in inclusive schools would provide evidence of the guide's effect. Comparative research across the Middle East and North Africa may reveal region-specific limitations and effective strategies.

In sum, inclusive education is not only a technical adaptation of the education system, but an ethical obligation grounded in human dignity, equity, and social justice. As the guide states, to live together is to do together (Direction des Curricula, 2019, p. 16). School directors, as leaders of this change, bear responsibility for building schools in which every child, with and without disabilities, belongs, engages, and learns.

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