A Qualitative Study on Dubai's Inclusive Education Policy from School Leaders' Perspectives

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Abstract: Inclusive education recognizes the diverse needs of students and ensures that each student has equal opportunities to learn and succeed. The Dubai government has implemented an inclusive education policy aimed at promoting equity and inclusivity in schools. This study aimed to investigate school leaders' understanding, implementation, and perspectives of the Dubai Inclusive Education Policy Framework (DIEPF). To gather data, a qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with ten school leaders from private schools located in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). The findings show that school leaders have a strong understanding of the policy and deem it significant. This study also found evidence of effective strategies implemented by school leaders to promote inclusive education. However, challenges in the UAE resonate with those worldwide, such as inadequate funding, high student–teacher ratios, a shortage of specialized staff, and limited training opportunities for teachers. These findings emphasize the significance of ongoing professional development and training of educators involved in inclusive education. Implications for practice and suggestions for future research are provided.

Keywords: inclusive education; policy practice; school leaders; Dubai

1. Introduction

In recent years, inclusive education has gained significant attention among educators and policymakers worldwide [1,2]. Moreover, the philosophy of inclusive education acknowledges the significance of granting every student access to high-quality education irrespective of their abilities, race, gender, religion, or social status. At its core, inclusive education provides equal opportunities for every student to learn and succeed in the school environment [3,4]. However, inclusive education is not only about placing learners with disabilities in ordinary public schools [5]. Inclusive education involves considering key aspects of education, including assessment practices, equitable access pathways, comprehensive support mechanisms, adequate resource allocation, effective leadership approaches, and clear policies.

Furthermore, the implementation of inclusive education continues to present challenges, particularly in terms of developing an appropriate curriculum and environment based on policies for learners with special educational needs (SEN). School leaders play a crucial role in the successful implementation of inclusive educational policies. Furthermore, school leaders play a key role in promoting collaboration and communication among teachers, parents, and other stakeholders to ensure the cohesive implementation of inclusive education policies in schools.

Inclusive education requires schools to welcome diversity and offer individualized assistance to students to help them reach their maximum potential [6,7]. Inclusive education

is founded on the fundamentals of equity, diversity, and personalized support. To achieve this, schools must adopt a student-centered approach that recognizes and caters to the diverse needs of students [8]. In addition, a recent study highlighted the significance of comprehending and executing inclusive education policies [9]. Policymakers must consider the viewpoints of school leaders and educators when developing effective policies.

The importance of inclusive education has been recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because of its crucial role in promoting social and economic development [10,11]. Many countries, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have pledged to support the integration of individuals with disabilities into society by implementing inclusive education policies. This global initiative ensures that everyone has equal access to education. The UAE has taken steps to fulfill this commitment by implementing policies and mechanisms that promote inclusive education practices and enhance equal access [12,13]. In this regard, the UAE committed to people with disabilities in 2010 by ratifying and adopting the UNCRPD [13].

This study highlights the significant role of sustainability in the adoption of inclusive leadership, especially when considering the challenges faced by schools in the UAE and globally. Effective strategies used by school leaders to promote inclusive education are essential to creating sustainable and equitable learning environments for all students. However, identified challenges such as inadequate funding, high student–teacher ratios, shortage of specialized staff, and limited training opportunities emphasize the need for sustained efforts from governing bodies to address these issues within the UAE's education system.

Ongoing inclusion-oriented professional development and training for both teachers and leaders are essential to ensure the long-term success of inclusive education in Dubai private schools. Therefore, sustainable inclusive education practices would involve a commitment from Dubai's private school leaders to overcome obstacles while continuously refining their leadership approaches to foster a supportive learning experience for all learners [14,15]. Emphasizing investment in resources, focusing on innovative solutions that support inclusion, and fostering a culture of inclusivity within educational institutions is crucial. These sustainable strategies not only help with immediate hurdles but also contribute to establishing frameworks that can adapt to evolving challenges.

Recognizing the importance of ongoing professional development and inclusion training, leaders in Dubai's private schools can foster an environment in which inclusivity is ingrained in the educational institution's ethos. This will ensure sustainable practices that benefit students with diverse needs.

1.1. Research Context

The UAE's education system expects schools to provide inclusive education, ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to participate, achieve, and be valued. In 2006, the UAE government launched the "School for All" Program under Federal Law No. 29. This program was introduced to promote inclusive education and ensure that learners with disabilities, referred to as "students of determination", have equal access to educational opportunities in all public, private, and other educational institutions in the UAE [16]. The UAE is dedicated to establishing an inclusive education system that welcomes all students, including those with disabilities, to ensure equal access to high-quality education [13,17].

Inclusive education is an ongoing process that involves the evaluation, planning, and implementation of actions while monitoring and reviewing their effectiveness. This process is facilitated by forming partnerships and collective efforts to create self-sufficient, productive, and fulfilling individuals and harmonious societies [13]. The UAE has made significant progress in promoting inclusion, especially among students with SEN. This was accomplished by implementing legislation and policies aimed at providing equal learning opportunities. In Dubai, students with learning disorders or impairments that affect their ability to learn receive special attention under the Dubai Inclusive Education Policy Framework (DIEPF) issued by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA).

The DIEPF policy promotes inclusivity and equity in schools by offering guidelines and strategies to establish an inclusive learning environment that caters to the needs of all students. However, the successful implementation of the policy relies on the support of all stakeholders, including school leaders, teachers, families, therapists, and medical professionals. Therefore, the primary research question of this study is to investigate how school leaders comprehend and execute DIEPF, as well as their viewpoints on its efficacy in fostering inclusivity and equity in schools. This study aimed to investigate school leaders' understanding, utilization, and perspectives regarding DIEPF. By examining the perspectives of school leaders, this study seeks to make a valuable contribution to continuous efforts to enhance inclusive education practices in the UAE and other regions.

In recent years, the Dubai government has enacted several laws to promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the private education sector [18,19]. Dubai Law No. 2 of 2014 and Executive Council Resolution No. 2 of 2017 were enacted to safeguard the rights of individuals with disabilities and guarantee equal access to education. To comply with local laws and regulations, the DIEPF was introduced in 2017 [13]. Furthermore, the principles of inclusion and equity are at the core of a legislative framework. It mandates that education providers guarantee equitable access to quality-inclusive education for students with SEN, alongside their peers.

1.2. The Policy Framework

This DIEPF defines inclusive education as the development of attitudes, behaviors, systems, and beliefs that promote inclusivity as a norm underlying school culture and is reflected in the daily lives of the school community [13]. The document outlines ten standards and corresponding actions that educational institutions must take to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities. Dubai's educational institutions are expected to enhance their inclusive education programs and services by following DIEPF standards [13]. These standards cover various areas, including leadership, support systems, fostering a culture of inclusion, and allocating resources for inclusive education. To ensure successful implementation, the DIEPF recommends that institutions establish monitoring mechanisms to assess the quality and effectiveness of their efforts [13]. This present study focuses on the eight standards of the DIEPF that cover areas such as leadership, support systems, fostering a culture of inclusion, and resourcing for inclusive education [13]. This study aims to contribute to the enhancement of inclusive education programs and services in Dubai's education system.

KHDA emphasizes the importance of serving students with SEN in inclusive learning environments [13]. These environments are inclusive educational settings in which students with diverse backgrounds and abilities learn together. By prioritizing the implementation of DIEPF standards and serving students with disabilities in community learning centers (CLEs), educational institutions in Dubai can create an inclusive environment that promotes equal access to education for all learners. Overall, DIEPF provides a comprehensive framework for inclusive education in Dubai. By examining the perspectives and experiences of school leaders in implementing DIEPF standards, this study provides insights that could inform policy and decision-making regarding inclusive education practices in Dubai's education system. To achieve this aim, this study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) How do school leaders understand DIEPF, and why do they consider it important? (2) What strategies have school leaders implemented to promote inclusive education, and how effective have these strategies proven to be? (3) What challenges do school leaders face in implementing DIEPF and how can these challenges be addressed to improve policy implementation?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. The literature review establishes existing research on inclusive education practices and highlights the gap in understanding school leaders' perspectives on DIEPF. The scope and motivation section clarifies the focus of this study on school leaders' experiences and the potential impact of the findings. Section 4 details the research design and data-collection processes. Section 5 presents the

key findings of the data analysis. Section 6 interprets the findings and their implications for inclusive education policies and practices. Finally, the conclusions summarize the main findings and suggest directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

The inclusive education movement is a global guide for advancing educational policies and practices [20]. Despite being a global champion in advancing education policy and practice, the inclusive education movement faces unique challenges. For example, in South African schools, the enactment of inclusive education policies is complex because of long-held beliefs that have directed exclusionary practices for years [21]. Similarly, a study in Serbia identified inadequate teaching and learning conditions, along with poor professional competencies, as major reasons for the ineffective implementation of inclusive policies [22]. Moreover, in Korea, there is a strong focus on academic achievement because of high parental expectations, which creates challenges for inclusive education. School leaders must show flexibility and understanding in supporting struggling learners to implement such policies effectively [23].

However, Mbua's research in Cameroon underscores the role of principal administration in fostering positive attitudes toward diversity and building strong school–community connections [24]. Mbua emphasized the key role of the principal administration in promoting positive attitudes toward diversity and building relationships between schools and communities. Challenges include negative attitudes, inadequate resources, untrained teachers, and poor family school participation. The top practices for principal leadership include setting high expectations for all students, developing a shared vision for inclusive schools, involving parents in decision-making, and redesigning schools for inclusive education.

The diverse landscape of inclusive education policy implementation worldwide has revealed both promising progress and persistent challenges. Although inclusion policies exist in Ireland, their integration into practice varies greatly, relying on individual actors within schools [25]. This drives students with special education needs in Ireland to move from mainstream schools to SEN-specific schools because of inadequate leadership and exclusionary environments. Overcoming obstacles such as a lack of teacher training and effective leadership, an irrelevant curriculum structure, and limited resources are crucial for the enactment of inclusive education in Ireland [25]. This reflects similar concerns in Hong Kong, where a lack of teacher autonomy, limited experience with inclusive practices, inflexible curriculum structures, and high job demands hinder effective implementation [8].

Overcoming obstacles, such as inadequate training, ineffective leadership, rigid curriculum design, and resource constraints, is crucial for achieving true progress. Sexton et al.'s study in Australia highlights the complex interplay of factors influencing how school leaders interpret and apply policies such as restraint and seclusion for children with disabilities [9]. Their findings emphasize the importance of school ethos, educators' understanding of behavior, and even the physical environment in shaping policy implementation. Leadership has emerged as a critical link in driving inclusive education. Ainscow and Sandill underscored this point by highlighting how leadership fosters inclusive values and cultures within educational systems [26]. Waitoller and Artiles further emphasized the need for strong leadership, a blend of inclusive values with targeted interventions, and a robust knowledge base for educators to implement inclusive policies effectively [27].

This leadership imperative extends beyond adherence to policy. Inclusive leaders must effectively create schools that prioritize equity and nurture the academic achievement of all learners and their families within the community [28–30]. This requires setting a clear strategic vision, focusing on human and organizational development, and embracing a culture of inclusion at every level [28]. However, the challenges faced by these leaders should not be underestimated. Lindqvist and Nilholm's research revealed that limited resources, inadequate training and support, and resistance to change can hinder the implementation of inclusive practices [31]. Overall, the literature indicates that school leaders play a vital role in promoting inclusive educational practices.

Several quantitative studies have investigated inclusive education practices from teachers' perspectives in the UAE [16,31–36]. However, only two qualitative studies have examined school principals' perceptions of inclusive education [14,17]. However, to date, no study has explored school leaders' understanding, usage, or perspectives of DIEPF. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in existing evidence and provide guidance for future inclusive education policy implementation.

School leaders play a critical role in decision-making for students with SEN. However, their decisions may not always align with research-based practices or educational policies, leading to potential inequities in educational opportunities for these students [37–42]. To ensure that school leaders are well informed about research-based practices and educational policies, it is essential to investigate their understanding, utilization, and perspectives of policies such as the DIEPF [37,39,40,42]. Creating an inclusive learning environment that supports the needs of all students is critical, and the role of school leaders is pivotal to achieving this goal [43]. School leaders play a central role in creating a school culture that supports inclusive education by developing a shared vision, which is a critical factor for successful implementation [44,45]. Enlightened, creative, inspiring, and skilled school leaders are essential for successful inclusion [46].

Transformational leaders who possess specific skills and traits, such as the ability to simplify complex concepts, motivate others for collaboration, demonstrate determination, and foster innovation, are essential for promoting inclusive education and co-teaching practices [46,47]. A recent study was conducted on how teachers' perceptions of leadership styles in the UAE differed according to school type (special education vs. general education) and personal characteristics [48]. Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study revealed that teacher education levels influenced perceptions of transformational and transactional leadership styles, while years of experience with the school leader affected perceptions of passive-avoidant styles. These findings shed light on the complex interplay between teacher demographics, leadership perceptions, and potential implications for school policy development.

In the UAE, previous research has examined different aspects of inclusion, including inclusive practices in schools and various issues related to inclusion [33,35,49]. However, the role of school principals in creating and promoting inclusive schools has been under-researched. To address this gap, researchers in the UAE conducted a study investigating the role of school principals in promoting inclusive schools [17]. Their findings emphasized the crucial role of principals in creating effective inclusive practices and promoting awareness of inclusive education. The study recommends implementing systematic professional development programs to increase principals' awareness of inclusive education and its implementation in schools. Similarly, a recent study explored the leadership practices associated with implementing DIEPF in schools [14]. The study's findings offer valuable insights into effective leadership practices for implementing inclusive education policies. This includes recognizing the importance of organizational and administrative dimensions, addressing practical problems faced by parents and schools, and expanding community partnerships and engagement.

3. Scope and Motivation

Overall, it is essential to investigate school leaders' understanding, utilization, and perspectives on inclusive education policies, such as the DIEPF, to ensure effective implementation. By examining the perspectives and experiences of school leaders in implementing DIEPF standards, this present study will contribute to ongoing efforts to enhance inclusive education practices in Dubai's education system. Moreover, it will provide insights that could inform policies and decision-making to improve inclusive education practices within Dubai's education system.

4. Methods for Investigating School Leaders' Perceptions of the Dubai Inclusive Education Policy

4.1. Research Design

A qualitative research methodology, which is fundamentally concerned with understanding human experiences from a humanistic and interpretive perspective, was employed in this study [50]. This approach is characterized by the collection and interpretive analysis of rich narrative data, which enables researchers to delve into the complexities and subtleties of participants' perspectives and lived experiences. A qualitative approach was chosen, as it allows for in-depth exploration of individual viewpoints and a nuanced understanding of how school leaders interpret and enact the policy in their contexts [50]. Through individual interviews, detailed narratives were elicited, which were then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify and examine recurring themes and patterns in school leaders' perceptions, experiences, and practices concerning the comprehension, execution, and utilization of the DIEPF [51]. To ensure rigorous reporting of findings, this study adhered to the consolidated criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines [52]. The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of the First Author approved this study.

4.2. Participant Recruitment

School leaders who held recognized leadership positions, such as principal or assistant principal, and who were responsible for managing and administering the DIEPF at their respective private inclusive or mainstream schools in Dubai, were eligible to participate in this study. To participate in this study, participating schools had to enroll primary-aged students with disabilities. In compliance with the KHDA, the authors identified a pool of eligible schools (more than what was required for the final sample) to minimize selection bias.

The first author contacted potential study participants via email, provided them with study details in the participant information letter and consent form, and confirmed that the research had been approved by their university affiliation. Participants were recruited between September and November 2022 using non-probabilistic purposive sampling to select individuals with relevant experiences to obtain rich and in-depth qualitative information [53,54]. Interested individuals were invited to participate in the study by directly contacting researchers. Fifteen private schools in Dubai that promote inclusivity were invited to participate in the study. Eleven schools agreed to participate; however, one school declined because of the unavailability of participants during the study.

4.3. Participants

Interviews lasting between 60 and 90 min were conducted individually with seven principals and three assistant principals from ten private schools. Of the ten interviewees, seven were female and three were male. Three of the interviewees held a Ph.D., four had a master's degree, and the remaining three had a bachelor's degree. All interviewees had between 11 and 15 years of experience and had been in their current roles for a period ranging from 11 months to 13 years. They represented private schools with American ($n = 5$), British ($n = 3$), and International Baccalaureate (IB) curricula ($n = 2$). These schools enrolled 550–1000 students. Table 1 presents the participants' general characteristics.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees (*n* = 10).

Characteristic	N (%)
Position	
- Principals.	7 (70%)
- Assistant principals.	3 (30%)
Gender	
- Female.	7 (70%)
- Male.	3 (30%)
Level of education	
- Ph.D.	3 (30%)
- Master's.	4 (40%)
- Bachelor's.	3 (30%)
Years of experience	
- 11–12 years.	3 (30%)
- 13–14 years.	4 (40%)
- 15 years.	3 (30%)
Years in current role	
- 11 months to 1 year.	2 (20%)
- 2 years.	3 (30%)
- 3 years.	3 (30%)
- 13 years.	2 (20%)
School curriculum	
- American.	5 (50%)
- British.	3 (30%)
- International Baccalaureate (IB).	2 (20%)
School size (student enrolment)	
- 550–600.	2 (20%)
- 600–700.	2 (20%)
- 700–800.	3 (30%)
- 800–900.	2 (20%)
- 900–1000.	1 (10%)

4.4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather comprehensive data on participants' relevant experiences and perceptions. These interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and facilitated by a second researcher under the supervision of an experienced qualitative researcher. Prior to each interview, the participants were given both written and verbal information about their right to withdraw from the study. They were also asked to provide consent to participate. Before the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to provide demographic information about their school and experiences through self-report surveys.

To ensure consistency and establish a connection with the participants, we created an interview guide (Supplementary Materials) based on the current literature. The guide was refined after pilot testing and received feedback from four experienced master's degree students enrolled in an educational leadership program. Their input helped to enhance the clarity of the questions. The final protocol covered several topics, including participants' interpretation and understanding of the policy, their adherence to policy standards, the practices employed. during policy implementation, and the enablers and barriers to successful implementation All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed word-for-word, and de-identified to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

4.5. Interview Analysis

In this study, a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of the qualitative data obtained from interviews was conducted using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) [51]. RTA is a flexible approach that allows for the exploration of patterns of meaning across a dataset, with themes as the output derived from the coding process. The selection of the RTA was based on its theoretical flexibility, which aligned well with the study design. The RTA

process involved six systematic phases: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Two researchers were involved in the analysis process, with one researcher leading the main analysis and the other assisting in the initial step, participating in discussions, and contributing to the progress of the subsequent five steps. Figure 1 illustrates the RTA process.

Phase 1 - Data Familiarization

- Researchers listen to interview recordings and conduct multiple readings of transcripts.
- Preliminary ideas and notes are made to capture initial impressions.

Phase 2 - Initial Coding

- Independent coding using Microsoft Word to highlight and label relevant passages with descriptive codes.
- Extracts with similar codes are compiled.

Phase 3 - Semantic and Latent Coding

- A systematic coding process is conducted, distinguishing between semantic and latent coding.
- Detailed notes are taken during this process.

Phase 4 - Theme Development

- Initial themes are generated and iteratively developed into main themes and sub-themes.
- Themes are refined and named for clarity and specificity.

Phase 5 - Mapping Themes

- Clustering of codes to identify patterns.
- Iterative mapping of themes to capture nuanced meanings.
- Overarching themes are identified.

Phase 6 - End/Report Production

- The process concludes with the production of a final report summarizing the findings

Figure 1. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) process.

The analysis process commenced with an extensive reading of the interview transcripts to familiarize the researchers with the data and engage them critically. Sections of transcripts that appeared intriguing or posed challenges were revisited, and additional comments were added to enhance comprehension. Subsequently, a systematic coding process was conducted by incorporating both semantic and latent coding. Throughout this process, meticulous notes were taken to support the identification and generation of initial themes. The codes were iteratively developed into themes and main themes to ensure a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of this study's objectives. Codes were clustered to identify patterns in the data, and these clusters were then mapped repeatedly to capture the meanings of the codes and combine them into coherent themes and sub-themes. Ultimately, three overarching main themes emerged from this analysis.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the analysis, the first and second authors, who served as analysts, devoted extensive time to immersing themselves in the data. They carefully listened to the recorded interviews, conducted multiple readings of the transcripts, and recorded their initial ideas. The coding process was executed independently using Microsoft Word, where relevant passages were highlighted and labeled with descriptive codes. To identify patterns of meaning, extracts sharing similar codes were compiled into a table accompanied by a detailed description of each code. This meticulous data analysis approach contributed to the robustness of this study's findings and adhered to the established best practices in qualitative research methodologies.

To further enhance credibility and facilitate interpretation of the data, two researchers were involved in the analysis process rather than simply seeking consensus. An audit trail, field notes, and reflective journals were utilized to ensure reliable and transparent decision-

making throughout the analysis process. To ensure confirmability, member checking was conducted by sending participants' transcripts via email and by requesting feedback. This approach allowed participants to review their transcripts and provide insights into the analysis, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. An example of the analytic process with its phases in this current study is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Example of the analytic process.

Transcript Extracts Abbreviated (Ex.)	Codes (Examples)	(1) Sub-Themes	(2) Themes	(3) Main Themes
"Policy is great, but implementation lacks resources…"	Funding limitations	Insufficient funding	a. Challenges faced in implementing the policy	Theme 1: understanding the importance of the policy
"Teachers need more training on diverse needs…"	Limited training opportunities	Inadequate training for SEN teachers	d. Accommodating diverse needs	Theme 3: challenges faced in implementing the policy
"Parents feel they aren't included in decisions…"	Lack of parent involvement	Collaboration with stakeholders	d. Management and organizational dynamics in policy implementation	Theme 1: understanding the importance of the policy
"Early identification helps us tailor support…"	Effective early support strategies	Admission and progress monitoring	b. Early support through admission and progress monitoring	Theme 2: strategies implemented to promote inclusive education
"Differentiated instruction makes learning meaningful for all…"	Strategies for diverse learners	Differentiated instruction and assessment	a. Guidelines and strategies for inclusive education	Theme 1: understanding the importance of the policy
"We celebrate cultural differences in our classrooms…"	Embracing diversity	Encouraging an inclusive culture	c. Equal opportunities for all students to succeed	Theme 1: understanding the importance of the policy
"Inclusion head plays a crucial role in coordinating efforts…"	Inclusion head's role	Leading and coordinating policy implementation	d. Management and organizational dynamics in policy implementation	Theme 1: understanding the importance of the policy

Notes: Three theme levels are presented: (1) sub-themes = report detailed meaning to central organizing concepts, (2) themes = captures central organizing concepts of the sub-themes, (3) overarching main themes (three in total) = captures central ideas underpinning number of themes identified. The three identified overarching main themes are: (1) understanding the importance of the policy, (2) strategies implemented to promote inclusive education, and (3) challenges faced in implementing the policy.

5. Results

Following a careful review of this study's findings, three central organizing themes emerged: (1) understanding the importance of the policy, (2) strategies implemented to promote inclusive education, and (3) the challenges faced in implementing the policy.

5.1. Theme 1: Understanding the Importance of the Policy

The DIEPF aims to ensure that all schools are inclusive and provides guidelines and standards for improving inclusive education provision [13,55]. Understanding the participants' knowledge and comprehension of the procedures and standards required for enhancing inclusive education provision is crucial for comprehending how the policy was executed (Figure 2).
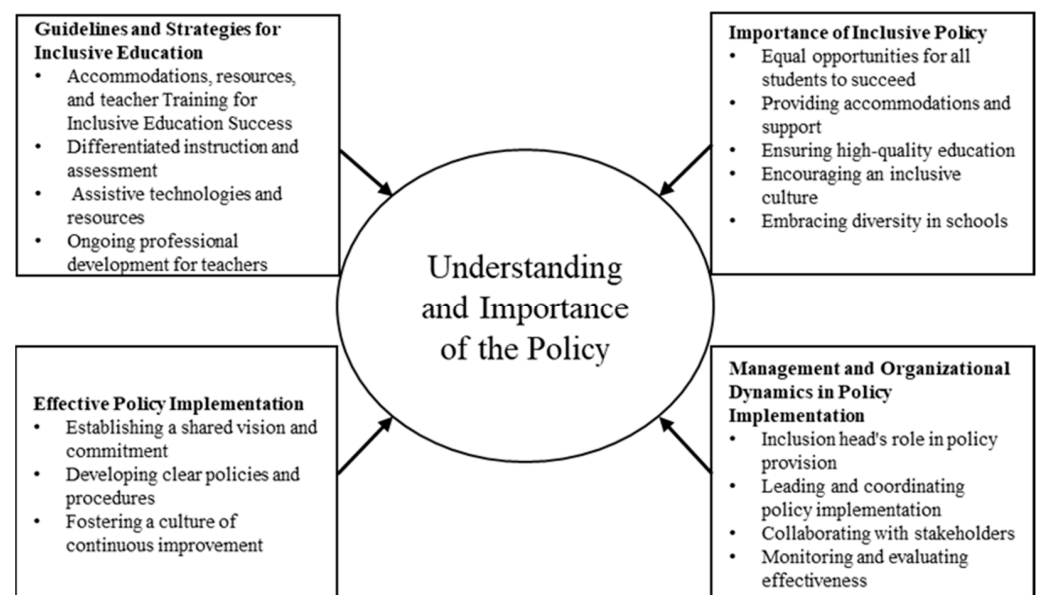
Figure 2. Understanding the importance of the policy.

The study participants shared their understanding and perspectives on the significance of DIEPF. According to the interviewees, the policy was viewed as a positive measure towards establishing an inclusive education system that accommodated the requirements of all students, including those with SEN. Participants agreed that the policy provided guidelines and strategies for creating an inclusive learning environment. This includes providing appropriate accommodation, resources, and teacher training, which are crucial to the success of inclusive education. One interviewee reported:

> "*Our school follows a continuous cycle of identifying, assessing, planning, teaching, and making provisions that take into account the individual needs of students*".

All participants believed in the importance of the policy and its potential to enhance the educational outcomes for all students. They emphasized the importance of schools embracing diversity and ensuring that all students are provided with equal opportunities to learn and succeed by implementing inclusive processes. One interviewee reported:

> "*We follow specific steps to ensure inclusion, including the following: 1. Identification 2. Referral 3. Observation 4. Team Meeting 5. Support 6. Review*".

This theme emphasizes the significance of management and organizational dynamics in the successful implementation of policies. Participants highlighted the crucial role of inclusion coordinators in the school's policy provisions. The coordinator works with the principal and heads of the school to determine the strategic development of the policy and oversees the daily implementation of the school's special education needs policy. One participant indicated that he or she frequently reviewed the DIEPF in consultation with senior management and the leadership team. Additionally, school practices were characterized by promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion among both students and staff. The schools offered a range of resources, such as training programs, technological tools, and materials, to enhance and support diversity and inclusion initiatives throughout their campuses. Participants emphasized the importance of leadership, planning, organization, and control in effectively implementing the policy to ensure that every student is given equal opportunities to succeed in both school and life.

5.2. Theme 2: Strategies Implemented to Promote Inclusive Education

The participants discussed various strategies for promoting inclusive education in their schools. These strategies include identification and referral, staff training, and curriculum

modification. Participants also emphasized the importance of involving parents and students in the process of creating an inclusive school environment (Figure 3).
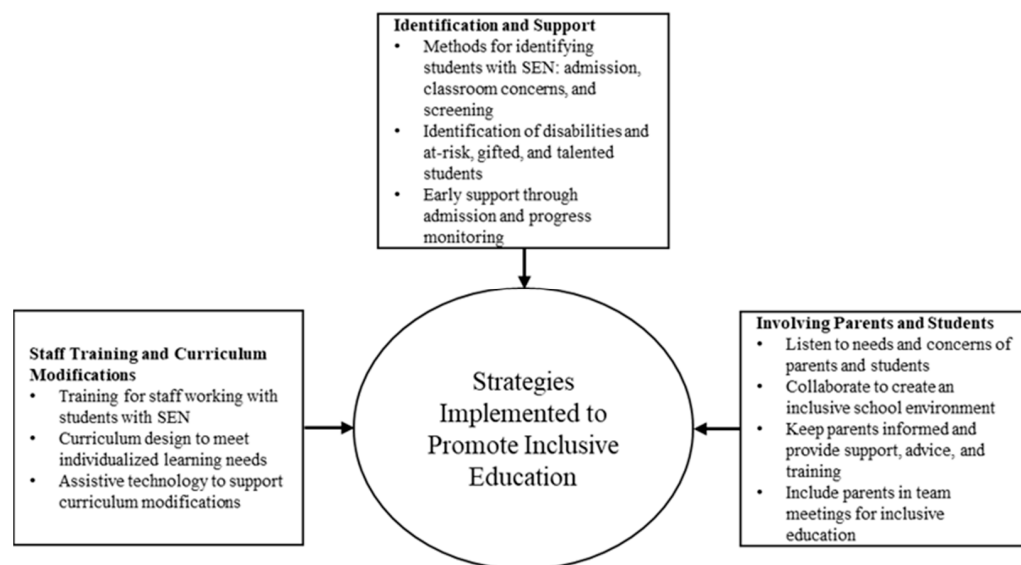
Figure 3. Strategies implemented to promote inclusive education.

The participants emphasized the significance of identifying students with SEN in promoting inclusive education and providing the necessary support. They unanimously agreed on three primary methods for identifying students with SEN: (1) during admission through parent referral or identification by a teacher, (2) identification in class based on academic or behavioral concerns, and (3) identification through screening, such as the Cognitive Abilities Test: Fourth Edition (CAT4), Group Learning Assessment (GLA), and screening checklists.

According to one participant:

"Our school uses a learning support flowchart for identification purposes".

In other words, support for students begins early in the admission process, with monitoring of their progress in the classroom and assistance provided through academic and student support networks. Additionally, it became clear from the participants that identification is not only necessary for students with disabilities or those at risk but also for gifted and talented students. One participant emphasized the significance of identifying students with disabilities and those who were gifted and talented as they required comprehensive support in the classroom. The participants confirmed that when teachers noticed concerns regarding a student's academic performance or behavior, they provided differentiated activities and monitored the situation for two to three weeks, depending on the child's needs. If this concern persists, the teacher may consult with a special education professional to confirm or clarify the issue before approaching parents. If the problem is severe, the teacher will promptly arrange meetings with their parents. The teacher will fill out a referral form and the Inclusive Education Department will obtain parental consent to work with their child by having them sign a consent form. Once a referral is submitted, the special educator observes the student to determine appropriate intervention.

The participants emphasized the significance of offering training to all personnel who worked with students with SEN. This training would enable them to effectively support the unique needs of students with disabilities. One participant stated:

"The school provides staff training and encourages teachers to attend conferences. I remember that last year, we had training for our staff on how to differentiate instruction and create a more inclusive classroom".

Participants adopted curriculum access and modifications as inclusive educational practices and strategies. Students with SEN are provided with support to ensure that they have full access to the curriculum and equal learning experience. This is achieved through high-quality curriculum design that meets the individualized learning needs of each student. One participant added:

> *"I believe that we have invested in assistive technology, such as text-to-speech software and magnification, to support curriculum modifications for students with SEN".*

Participants emphasized the importance of involving parents and students in the process of creating an inclusive school environment. They emphasized the importance of actively listening to the needs and concerns of both parents and students and working collaboratively with them to establish an inclusive school environment. Participants suggested that parents should be fully informed about their child's progress and attainment, as well as when special educational provision is required for a student. They also recommended providing support, advice, and training to parents and including them in team meetings for individualized education (IE). In this regard, one participant stated:

> *"I believe that involving parents is key to the success of inclusiveness. . . Continuous parental engagement through workshops and meetings is also important".*

5.3. Theme 3: Challenges Faced in Implementing the Policy

The participants identified various challenges in implementing DIEPF in their schools. These challenges include insufficient funding; high student–teacher ratios; perceptions of inclusive education, assessment, and evaluation; and a lack of inclusive social networks (Figure 4).
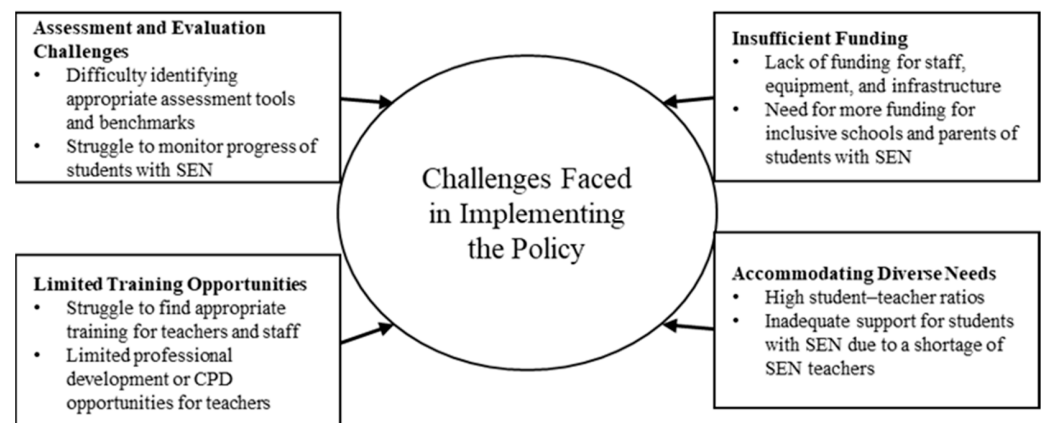
Figure 4. Challenges in implementing Dubai's inclusive education policy.

One significant challenge highlighted by participants was the lack of adequate funding for inclusive education. Private schools may face challenges in allocating budgets and resources to provide inclusive education because of the high costs associated with hiring specialized staff, purchasing equipment, and modifying infrastructure to meet the needs of students with SEN. Participants emphasized the need for increased funding for inclusive schools and support for parents of students with SEN. One interviewee stated:

> *"The biggest obstacle to implementing inclusive education is insufficient funding. . . We require more funding for inclusive schools and to support parents of students with SEN".*

Another challenge identified by the participants was the difficulty teachers faced in accommodating the diverse needs of their students in the classroom. Due to their large class sizes, teachers are unable to offer individualized support to students with SEN. Furthermore, there is an insufficient number of teachers trained in special education to meet the needs of all students with disabilities, making it difficult to provide the necessary support. One participant stated:

"*In every classroom, there are approximately 30 diverse students, making it difficult for teachers to provide one-on-one support to students with SEN while attending to the needs of other students*".

Participants also reported limited training opportunities as a challenge to implementing the policy. Private schools may face challenges in providing adequate training opportunities for their teachers and staff to support inclusive education, which could lead teachers to feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of students with SEN. According to one participant:

"*a lack of professional development or insufficient continuous professional development (CPD) may leave teachers feeling unprepared to cater to the needs of students with SEN*".

In terms of assessment and evaluation, the participants highlighted that teachers encountered difficulties in assessing and evaluating the progress of students with SEN. Teachers may find it challenging to select suitable assessment tools or benchmarks for progress, which can make it difficult to track the progress of students with SEN. One participant elaborated that "teachers in the mentioned school often face challenges in administering exams and tests, particularly when they have students with SEN".

The perception of inclusive education is often viewed as challenging. This could lead to resistance to implementing inclusive education policies in schools. Finally, the participants emphasized the significance of inclusive social networks and community engagement. They stated that schools should serve as community resources and that there should be more inclusive social networks to support students with disabilities. The role of schools in fostering an inclusive community may not be immediately clear, and it is important to involve communities in policy decisions to achieve this goal. One of the interviewees stated:

"*The role that schools play in building an inclusive community is not apparent. We need more inclusive social networks where schools serve as community resources and community involvement is prioritized from a policy perspective*".

Our study identified three central themes related to the implementation of DIEPF in primary schools: understanding its importance, implementing inclusive strategies, and facing challenges during implementation. The participants expressed a positive understanding of the policy's potential and highlighted various strategies for creating an inclusive school environment. However, they also acknowledged challenges, such as insufficient resources and a lack of training.

6. Discussion

6.1. Insight into School Leaders' Perspectives on the DIEPF

This study aims to provide deeper insights into the perceptions of school leaders regarding DIEPF, including their comprehension, implementation, and perspectives. The qualitative approach employed in this study not only provides a nuanced understanding but also delves deep into the implementation of inclusive policies, specifically within private schools in Dubai. Through an exploration of the perspectives of school leaders, this research enriches and expands the existing literature on inclusive education, adding depth and richness to its subject matter.

6.2. Qualitative Depth for Existing Research

The rigorous data analysis in this study provides a valuable context for the current quantitative research on inclusive education. Private schools in Dubai are mandated by the KHDA and the UAE's Ministry of Education to implement inclusive education policies, catering to diverse learning needs. Our study sheds light on the real-world impact of these policies as well as the challenges and opportunities encountered, focusing on private schools in Dubai. This research has broader implications for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in educational settings across various contexts due to Dubai's rapid growth

and increasing diversity. It also delves into the cultural considerations that influence policy implementation.

6.3. Effective Policy Implementation: A Key to Empower Inclusion in Schools

Our study's findings show that the participants demonstrated a strong understanding of DIEPF and acknowledged its significance in promoting an inclusive education system. They view the policy as a positive step forward and recognize the provision of crucial guidelines and strategies for advancing inclusive education. School leaders are committed to embracing diversity and ensuring equal opportunities for all students. The participants' grasp of an inclusive education policy is consistent with previous research on such policies, which emphasizes the critical role of policy implementation in establishing inclusive education systems [56,57]. Previous studies have also emphasized the essential role of school leaders in promoting inclusive education practices [58–60]. These studies highlight the importance of strong leadership, collaboration with various stakeholders, and the creation of inclusive school environments.

According to our findings, previous research has highlighted the importance of inclusive education policies in providing essential guidelines and strategies for inclusive education practices [57,61,62]. These policies can act as frameworks for schools to promote inclusive practices and create more inclusive learning environments. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that school leaders and educators committed to promoting diversity and ensuring equal opportunities for all students can substantially influence the fostering of inclusive education practices [26,58]. Furthermore, research has shown that inclusive education practices can lead to improved academic and social outcomes for all students, not just those with SEN [61,62].

This study uncovered the effective strategies employed by school leaders to promote inclusive education in private schools in Dubai. The identified strategies include identifying and referring students with special educational needs, providing staff training, modifying the curriculum, and involving parents and students in the process. These approaches illustrate a comprehensive and holistic strategy to foster an inclusive school environment. The finding that participants implemented effective strategies to promote inclusive education aligns with previous research emphasizing the significance of such strategies [63,64]. Khaleels' [17] study also highlighted the crucial role of school principals in implementing successful inclusive practices.

Identifying and referring students with SEN is a crucial initial step in providing the necessary support [26]. It is essential to provide training for staff in inclusive education practices to enhance educators' skills and abilities [63]. Modifying the curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners is a crucial strategy for promoting inclusive education [57]. Involving parents, students, and teachers in developing and implementing inclusive education policies and practices can cultivate a positive school culture that esteems and honors all students, regardless of their background or abilities.

Our findings have also highlighted the pressing and ongoing demand for professional development and continuous training regarding policy, curriculum modification, and understanding of how disabilities affect families. This aligns with prior research that emphasizes the necessity of a cultural shift within schools, including practical training programs to improve educators' skills and abilities [63,64]. While some argue for increased professional development and continuous training, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks of this approach [29,30]. This includes concerns about the cost–benefit analysis of such initiatives as well as the practicality and effectiveness of long-term skill improvement among educators in addressing disability-related challenges within schools.

6.4. Complexities of Inclusion Policy Implementation

Our study revealed that the participants encountered challenges when implementing inclusive education policies in private schools in Dubai. These challenges included insufficient funding, high student–teacher ratios, limited availability of specialized staff,

inadequate training opportunities for teachers, difficulties in assessing and evaluating students with SEN, and misconceptions held by parents about inclusive education, as reported by the study participants.

Insufficient funding has consistently been identified as a significant obstacle to the implementation of inclusive education policies, with studies highlighting its impact on various aspects of the educational system. For example, one study emphasized how inadequate financial resources can hinder the inclusion of students with multiple disabilities in augmentative and alternative communication in inclusive education [65]. Additionally, research conducted in Saudi Arabian schools revealed a clear need for further professional development among teachers to manage inclusive classrooms effectively [66]. The participants in this study underlined the necessity for additional training to meet the diverse needs of students and provide essential resources, such as assistive technologies and specialized personnel. Such a lack of funding not only affects teacher training but also impacts student–teacher ratios and access to specialized staff, further exacerbating the challenges associated with offering personalized support in inclusive classrooms.

Furthermore, high student–teacher ratios were identified as a significant challenge in implementing inclusive education [67]. Another challenge identified by school leaders in our study was the limited availability of specialized staff. Without sufficient specialized staff, the inclusion of students with SEN becomes more challenging as these students often require additional support and accommodation in the classroom.

The findings indicate that implementing inclusive education policies faces challenges due to a lack of training opportunities for teachers and difficulties in assessing and evaluating students with SEN. Teacher training is crucial for enhancing educators' skills in promoting inclusive education practices [63,68]. The challenges related to assessing and evaluating students with SEN can make it difficult to determine the support required to effectively meet their diverse needs. Insufficient assessment and evaluation may hinder students from receiving the essential tailored support, thereby impacting not only their academic progress but also their social development, which in turn could have long-term implications for their future outcomes.

For example, some parents may be concerned that inclusive education could have a negative impact on their children's academic progress. They worry that the diverse needs of students with SEN may not be fully addressed in a mainstream setting, leading to potential drawbacks for these students [58]. Hence, some may hold the belief that inclusive education is not appropriate for students with SEN, and instead advocate specialized schools or programs dedicated specifically to meet their unique requirements.

6.5. Limitations

Limitations must be taken into account when extrapolating the results of this study to a broader national or international level. Variations in policy, legislation, and school settings can significantly affect the transferability of the findings. This qualitative research was designed to explore the experiences of school leaders regarding inclusive education practices rather than to generalize the results.

It is essential to acknowledge the constraints associated with relying on self-reported data from participants, which may introduce biases such as social desirability or memory recall. Participants' responses may be influenced by societal expectations, and recalling specific details about their practices and experiences may be challenging.

Furthermore, the scope of this study was limited to the perceptions of school leaders without input from teachers or inclusion teams responsible for overseeing inclusive education practices. While diverse experiences were included in this exploratory qualitative study, uncertainties arise due to the relatively small sample size, which leaves the possibility that additional perspectives could have been captured with a larger sample. Focusing solely on school leaders' perspectives also omits insights from other key stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and parents, providing an incomplete picture of policy implementation and impact.

While our study provided an overall comprehensive overview of perceptions at a specific point in time, caution must be exercised when generalizing findings, since interview participants may not fully represent all aspects of addressing nuanced issues over time or in response to policy changes.

6.6. Implications

This study has implications for policymakers, schools, and stakeholders in inclusive education. School leaders expressed positive perceptions of the DIEPF and emphasized that it should be continued and strengthened. However, several challenges need to be addressed, including insufficient funding, high student–teacher ratios, limited availability of specialized staff, and limited training opportunities for teachers. Schools should prioritize effective strategies such as identifying and referring students with SEN, modifying the curriculum, and involving parents and students in the process. All stakeholders should receive education on the benefits of inclusive education to address any misconceptions and to promote support for inclusive practices.

Resource allocation alone is insufficient. Clear guidelines and robust frameworks are necessary to strengthen policy implementation, equipping schools with tools and knowledge to translate DIEPF's principles into practice. This includes establishing effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for tracking progress, identifying areas for improvement, and ensuring continuous refinement of the policy. Promoting collaboration and knowledge exchange through workshops, conferences, and online platforms can empower schools to learn from one another and find innovative solutions.

Strong leadership is crucial in schools. School leaders must champion inclusive practices, create a culture that embraces diversity, and allocate resources effectively to support all students. Investing in professional development for teachers is essential to ensure that they have the skills and confidence to work with diverse learners, develop individualized support plans, and implement effective inclusive strategies. Fostering collaboration between teachers, specialists, and support staff further strengthens this network of support, ensuring that every student receives the necessary assistance and support. To promote the development of policies and procedures and ensure consistency across all emirates in the UAE, school leaders should share experiences and best practices in inclusive education among educational institutions.

Ultimately, creating a truly inclusive education system requires a united effort. While acknowledging its limitations, our study provides a crucial stepping stone and illuminates the road ahead. By embracing these implications, policymakers, schools, and stakeholders can come together to forge a brighter future, where every child could thrive in an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

7. Conclusions

Our study explored the perspectives of school leaders on DIEPF. The study participants viewed the DIEPF positively as a tool to promote an inclusive education system. This policy was viewed as a crucial step in addressing the needs of all students, including those with special educational needs. The school leaders in this study discussed various strategies they had used to promote inclusive education. These included identifying and referring to students with special educational needs, providing staff training, making curriculum adjustments, and involving parents and students.

The study participants emphasized the crucial role of early identification, personalized instruction, and access to specialized staff and resources in supporting students with SEN. They also underscored the significance of teacher-training programs and the creation of an inclusive school environment through collaboration with parents and staff. The study participants also emphasized the challenges in implementing the DIEPF, including inadequate funding for inclusive education, high student–teacher ratios, limited training opportunities, assessment and evaluation difficulties, and a lack of inclusive social networks. They stressed the importance of additional funding, specialized personnel, and teacher

training to fully realize the potential of DIEPF and create a truly inclusive education system for all students, particularly those with SEN.

Future Research

Future research could consider expanding the sample size to encompass a wider range of private schools and governmental institutions. This would allow for a detailed comparison of policy implementations across various school settings. Furthermore, conducting a cross-sectional survey to evaluate the attitudes and comprehension of teachers, inclusion staff, parents, and students could offer valuable insights into future policy development. Additionally, involving students with SEN in surveys, interviews, or focus groups can yield invaluable perspectives on their experiences and requirements within an inclusive education framework.

Understanding the impact of DIEPF over time is crucial. Longitudinal studies can track how perceptions and experiences evolve, revealing the effectiveness of specific interventions and areas of ongoing improvement. Focusing on the specific challenges identified in our study, such as insufficient funding or limited training, can inform targeted research that proposes evidence-based solutions.

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