

OMANARP INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ART AND SOCIAL SCIENCES.



<https://acadrespub.com/index.php/oijass>

Vol. 4, Issue I, Pp. 55-69 March, 2026

LEADERSHIP PRACTICES AND GENDER INCLUSION AS CORRELATES OF STUDENT OUTCOMES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN EDO STATE, NIGERIA

IMHANOBE, Habsat Joyce PhD & EBIERE, Erebu Catherine

Department of Mass communication. College of Arts and Social Sciences. Igbinedion University Okada. Edo State. Nigeria

Email: imhanobe.habsat@iuokada.edu.ng & erebu.catherine@iuokada.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

ARTICLE INFO

Received Date: 5th Feb. 2026

Date Revised Received: 9th Feb; 2026

Accepted Date: 29th April; 2026

Published Date: 8th June. 2026

Citation: Imhanobe, H.J. & Ebiere, E.C (2026) Leadership Practices and Gender Inclusion as Correlates of Student Outcomes in Secondary Schools in Edo State, Nig: OMANARP INTER. J. Art & Social Sciences Vol.4, Issue I, Pp. 55-69, March,,2026.

This study examined the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria. Despite policy efforts to promote gender equity, disparities in leadership representation and inclusive practices persist, with implications for students' academic performance, engagement, and psychosocial development. The study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender Equality Theory, and Social Learning Theory, which provide a framework for understanding how leadership behaviours and inclusive practices relate to student outcomes. A descriptive survey design was adopted. The sample comprised 450 students selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire validated by experts, with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis were used for data analysis. The findings revealed significant positive relationships between leadership practices and student outcomes ($r = 0.72, p < 0.01$), and between gender inclusion and student outcomes ($r = 0.70, p < 0.01$). These results indicate that participatory leadership and gender-inclusive practices are associated with improved student outcomes. However, moderate female representation in leadership positions suggests persistent gender imbalance. The study concludes that leadership which prioritizes fairness, participation, and gender inclusion contributes significantly to improved student outcomes. It highlights the need for stronger institutional commitment to gender-balanced leadership and consistent implementation of inclusive policies to enhance educational development.

Keywords: Leadership, Gender Inclusion, Student Outcomes, Academic Achievement, Educational Development, School Governance, Nigeria.

Introduction

Educational institutions function not only as centres of learning but also as social systems shaped by leadership practices and institutional culture. School leadership plays a critical role in shaping decision-making processes, resource allocation, and the overall learning environment, thereby influencing students' academic performance, participation, and psychosocial development. Empirical evidence suggests that effective leadership significantly affects teaching quality, staff engagement, school climate, and student outcomes (Richardson & Khawaja, 2025).

Within this context, gender inclusion has emerged as a key dimension of equitable educational practice. Gender inclusion refers to the fair and equitable participation of all genders in leadership roles and decision-making processes (Lin, 2025). In schools, inclusive practices influence access to opportunities, representation in leadership, and the overall quality of educational experiences for both students and staff (Olanrewaju, Bello, & Adeyemi, 2026). Studies indicate that gender-inclusive leadership contributes to supportive school cultures and more equitable learning environments that respond to diverse student needs (Zúñiga, Cerda & Navarrete, 2025).

Despite these global insights, the Nigerian educational context presents persistent challenges. Gender disparities in school leadership and participation remain evident, reflecting broader socio-cultural and institutional constraints (Mboto, Ekpang & Asuquo, 2023; Okonta & Nkedishu, 2024). Although policies promoting gender equity exist, their implementation is often inconsistent, limiting the effectiveness of inclusive leadership practices within schools. While existing studies have highlighted the importance of leadership and gender inclusion separately, there is limited empirical research examining their combined relationship with student outcomes in Nigeria, particularly within specific subnational contexts such as Edo State. This gap constrains the development of context-sensitive policies and leadership strategies aimed at improving educational quality and equity.

This article examines how school leadership and gender inclusion influence student outcomes in Nigeria. It focuses on the relationship between leadership practices and gender inclusion, and how inclusive leadership affects students' academic achievement and engagement. The study also analyses leadership practices that promote or limit gender inclusion and their effects on student outcomes. Through this approach, the research seeks to explain how leadership structures and inclusion policies shape learning environments and student performance in Nigerian schools.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, gender equality and inclusion have become central priorities in educational development in Nigeria, with schools expected to ensure equitable participation of both males and females in leadership, decision-making, and learning processes. However, despite these policy expectations, evidence suggests that leadership structures in many Nigerian schools remain male-dominated, with women significantly underrepresented in key administrative positions such as principals and heads of departments (Omotoso, 2020; Adebayo, Oseji, & Kalejaiye, 2023).

This persistent imbalance raises concerns about the extent to which school leadership reflects inclusive principles. Scholars argue that non-inclusive leadership structures may limit the representation of diverse perspectives in decision-making processes, thereby affecting institutional responsiveness to the needs of all stakeholders (Igiebor, 2020). Within such contexts, gender inequality may continue to manifest in leadership opportunities and participation in school governance.

Beyond representation, leadership practices are widely recognized as influential in shaping school climate and student experiences. Inclusive leadership has been associated with improved student motivation, engagement, and academic participation (Sunmola, 2025). Similarly, the absence of diverse leadership representation may reduce access to role models, particularly for female students, potentially limiting their aspirations and sense of belonging within the school environment (Eborka & Ikwunze, 2025).

Although existing studies have examined gender disparities in leadership and, separately, leadership effectiveness in schools, there is limited empirical evidence integrating leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes within a single analytical framework in the Nigerian context. In particular, few studies have focused on how these variables interact to influence students' academic performance, engagement, and participation at the secondary school level in specific subnational contexts such as Edo State.

This study therefore addresses this gap by examining the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria. The aim is to provide context-specific evidence that can inform leadership strategies and policy interventions for improving inclusive education and student success.

Objectives of the Study

The main of this study is to examine the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Find out students' perceptions of leadership practices in secondary schools in Edo State.
2. Evaluate the level of gender inclusion in school leadership and decision-making in secondary schools in Edo State.
3. Examine students' perceived academic, social, and psychosocial outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State.
4. Determine the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State.

Research Questions

1. What are students' perceptions of leadership practices in secondary schools in Edo State?
2. What is the level of gender inclusion in school leadership and decision-making in secondary schools in Edo State?
3. What are students' perceived academic, social, and psychosocial outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State?
4. What is the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State?

Hypotheses

H₁: There is a significant relationship between leadership practices and student outcomes in Nigerian schools.

H₂: There is a significant relationship between gender-inclusive leadership and student outcomes.

Literature Review

Concept of Leadership in Education

Leadership is widely recognized as a fundamental determinant of effectiveness in educational institutions because it shapes decision-making processes, resource allocation, and the overall learning environment. In schools, leadership is not limited to administrative control but extends to the coordination of teachers, students, and other stakeholders toward the achievement of academic and institutional goals. As Adebayo, Oseji, and Kalejaiye (2023) note, educational leadership involves coordinating school activities to enhance cooperation, accountability, and shared responsibility, while Igiebor (2020)

emphasizes its role in influencing institutional policies and learning conditions that shape teaching and student outcomes.

Across the literature, there is broad agreement that leadership quality significantly influences school culture and student experiences. However, scholars differ in emphasis regarding how this influence is achieved. While some focus on structural and administrative efficiency, others highlight leadership as a relational and motivational process that fosters engagement and participation. This shift in perspective positions leadership as a dynamic process that shapes both instructional quality and student development rather than merely administrative authority.

Leadership styles further clarify how this influence operates within schools. Transformational leadership, for instance, is widely associated with improved institutional performance due to its emphasis on motivation, shared vision, and innovation. Sunmola (2025) observes that transformational leadership enhances teacher commitment and creates supportive learning environments that benefit students. Similarly, democratic leadership promotes participation and shared decision-making, strengthening transparency and collective responsibility. In contrast, authoritarian leadership, although sometimes effective for maintaining discipline, is often criticized for limiting creativity and reducing stakeholder participation.

Recent studies suggest that participatory and inclusive leadership approaches are more effective in fostering positive educational outcomes. Eborka and Ikwunze (2025), for example, argue that inclusive leadership improves institutional decision-making and promotes equity within schools. This is consistent with findings that leadership practices significantly shape academic environments by influencing teaching quality, student motivation, and access to learning resources. Omotoso (2020) further emphasizes that effective leadership contributes to positive school culture, discipline, and student well-being, all of which are essential for improved academic performance.

Despite these insights, the literature largely treats leadership effectiveness in isolation from other social dimensions of schooling, particularly gender inclusion. This creates a conceptual gap in understanding how leadership practices interact with inclusivity structures to shape student outcomes. Therefore, leadership in education should be understood not only as an administrative or motivational function but also as a social process that influences equity, participation, and student development within schools.

Gender Inclusion in Educational Institutions

Gender inclusion has gained significant attention in educational discourse globally and within Nigeria, as education systems increasingly emphasize equitable participation and representation of all genders in academic and administrative structures. In this context, gender inclusion refers to the deliberate process of ensuring that individuals, regardless of gender, have equal access to educational opportunities, leadership positions, and decision-making processes. It is therefore closely linked to fairness, diversity, and institutional sustainability in education systems.

Scholarly discussions consistently highlight that gender-inclusive educational environments are characterized by equal participation of male and female students and staff in academic and administrative activities. Sunmola (2025) argues that such environments promote fairness, social justice, and improved learning outcomes by removing discriminatory barriers to participation. Similarly, Igiebor (2020) emphasizes that gender inclusion requires addressing structural and cultural constraints that limit women's participation in leadership and institutional decision-making. These perspectives collectively suggest that gender inclusion is not merely representational but structural, requiring active removal of barriers to participation.

In practice, however, gender inequality remains evident in many educational institutions, particularly in leadership structures where men continue to dominate key positions such as principals and heads of departments. This imbalance has been attributed to socio-cultural norms, institutional practices, and limited access to advancement opportunities for women (Omotoso, 2020). Such disparities not only affect leadership representation but also influence institutional decision-making processes and the visibility of female role models within schools. Eborka and Ikwunze (2025) further note that limited female representation in leadership may reduce students' exposure to diverse role models, potentially affecting aspirations and perceptions of leadership possibilities.

At the policy level, efforts to promote gender inclusion have been introduced through national frameworks such as the Nigerian National Gender Policy, which advocates equal opportunities for men and women in education and leadership. Adebayo, Oseji, and Kalejaiye (2023) observe that such policies are intended to improve recruitment practices, expand female participation in leadership, and create more equitable school environments. In addition, international frameworks such as UNESCO initiatives and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 4 and SDG 5) reinforce the global commitment to gender equality and inclusive education.

Despite these policy efforts, implementation gaps remain a major challenge in many educational settings. The persistence of gender disparities suggests that policy presence alone is insufficient without effective leadership practices that actively translate inclusion principles into institutional reality. This highlights the importance of examining how leadership structures interact with gender inclusion practices to shape educational experiences and outcomes within schools.

Student Outcomes in Educational Institutions

Student outcomes are widely recognized as a key indicator of the effectiveness of educational systems, reflecting the extent to which schools achieve their instructional and developmental goals. In general terms, student outcomes refer to the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competencies acquired by learners as a result of their educational experiences. These outcomes provide a basis for assessing the effectiveness of school practices, leadership structures, and institutional support systems in promoting meaningful learning. Scholars have consistently noted that student outcomes are shaped by a combination of factors, including leadership practices, teaching quality, and the overall learning environment (Adebayo, Oseji, & Kalejaiye, 2023).

Within this context, student outcomes are not limited to academic achievement alone but also include broader dimensions such as engagement, participation, and psychosocial development. Omotoso (2020) conceptualizes student outcomes as measurable indicators of learning effectiveness that reflect how well educational objectives are being achieved, while Igiebor (2020) emphasizes their role in capturing both academic and social dimensions of student development within school environments. This broader understanding highlights the importance of examining not only academic performance but also the extent to which students are actively engaged and supported within the learning process. Empirical literature further suggests that student outcomes are strongly influenced by the quality of leadership and the inclusiveness of school environments. Supportive and participatory leadership practices have been associated with improved academic performance and enhanced student motivation (Sunmola, 2025). In such environments, students are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward learning and demonstrate higher levels of achievement.

Beyond academic performance, student engagement and participation are also critical indicators of educational success. Engagement reflects the degree of students' involvement, interest, and motivation in learning activities, while participation refers to their active involvement in academic and co-curricular activities. Research indicates that students who are actively engaged in school

activities tend to achieve better academic outcomes and develop stronger learning competencies (Adebayo, Oseji, & Kalejaiye, 2023). Similarly, inclusive school environments that encourage participation contribute to students' sense of belonging and confidence in learning processes (Eborka & Ikwunze, 2025). Overall, the literature suggests that student outcomes are multidimensional and closely linked to leadership practices and institutional inclusiveness. This underscores the importance of examining how leadership and gender inclusion jointly influence students' academic, social, and developmental outcomes within school settings.

Leadership and Gender Inclusion

Leadership plays a central role in shaping gender inclusion within educational institutions by influencing policies, institutional culture, and daily school practices. School leaders, including principals, administrators, and department heads, are responsible for translating gender equity policies into actionable practices that promote fairness, participation, and equal opportunity for both students and staff. When leadership is inclusive, schools are more likely to foster environments where all learners feel valued and supported, thereby reducing discrimination and enhancing participation in learning activities. Adebayo, Oseji, and Kalejaiye (2023) emphasize that inclusive leadership is essential for promoting equal opportunities and ensuring that gender equality policies are effectively implemented within schools.

Beyond policy implementation, leadership significantly shapes the learning environment by influencing teacher attitudes and classroom practices. Inclusive leadership encourages educators to adopt teaching strategies that support equal participation and challenge gender stereotypes, thereby promoting balanced engagement among male and female students. Sunmola (2025) notes that leadership practices that prioritize inclusion contribute to the development of fair learning environments where students have equal access to academic and co-curricular opportunities. Similarly, Igiebor (2020) argues that participatory leadership fosters collaboration and respect within school communities, which in turn enhances student engagement and academic performance.

In this context, gender-sensitive leadership has emerged as a critical dimension of inclusive educational management. It refers to leadership practices that consciously address gender disparities by ensuring that institutional decisions and opportunities reflect fairness and equity. In Nigerian schools, where gender imbalance in leadership structures persists, such leadership is particularly important for promoting balanced

representation and equal participation. Omotoso (2020) observes that gender-aware leadership practices encourage female participation in academic and leadership activities, while also contributing to the creation of positive role models within schools.

Empirical evidence further suggests that gender-sensitive and inclusive leadership enhances institutional effectiveness by improving decision-making processes and fostering fairness in school governance (Eborka & Ikwunze, 2025). By promoting equitable participation and representation, school leaders help create environments that not only support learning but also strengthen students' confidence, motivation, and aspirations. Overall, the literature indicates that leadership and gender inclusion are closely interconnected and jointly contribute to the creation of supportive school environments that enhance student development and outcomes.

Empirical Studies

Empirical studies on educational leadership and gender inclusion have increasingly examined how leadership practices influence student outcomes in schools. Many researchers have investigated the relationship between leadership representation, inclusive policies, and students' academic and social development. Evidence from previous studies indicates that gender-inclusive leadership contributes to improved learning environments, increased student participation, and better academic performance. Okonta and Nkedishu (2024) examined gender representation in school leadership (independent variable) and institutional decision-making processes (dependent variable) using a descriptive survey design. Their findings revealed persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, which limits diversity in decision-making and reinforces structural inequality. While the study strongly contributes to understanding governance imbalances, its focus remains at the institutional level and does not extend to how leadership gender composition affects student-level outcomes such as academic performance or engagement. This limits its explanatory scope regarding educational effectiveness.

In contrast, Mboto, Ekpang, and Asuquo (2023) adopted a mixed-methods approach to investigate gender inclusion policies, leadership training, and mentorship structures (independent variables) and women's participation in educational governance (dependent variable). The study found that institutional interventions such as mentorship and gender-sensitive policies improve female participation in leadership. However, the study also highlights implementation inconsistencies, particularly where policy frameworks exist but are weakly enforced in practice. Methodologically, the reliance on self-reported data and qualitative interviews introduces

potential bias and limits generalizability, particularly regarding actual classroom or student outcomes.

Similarly, Lin (2025) focused on gender-inclusive leadership practices (independent variable) and student engagement (dependent variable) using a survey-based quantitative design. Findings indicated that perceived fairness and representation in leadership significantly enhance student engagement in academic and extracurricular activities. However, the study is limited in two key respects: first, it focuses narrowly on engagement without considering broader student outcomes such as academic performance or psychosocial development; second, it does not fully address contextual differences within developing educational systems, particularly in subnational Nigerian settings.

In another study, Zúñiga, Cerda, and Navarrete (2025) examined inclusive leadership practices and student development in secondary schools. Their findings indicated that schools with inclusive leadership approaches recorded higher levels of student motivation, confidence, and participation. The researchers emphasized that leadership practices that promote diversity and equality help students develop leadership skills, social responsibility, and teamwork abilities, which contribute to both academic and psychosocial development.

Furthermore, Richardson and Khawaja (2025) investigated the relationship between school leadership and student outcomes in contemporary education systems. Their findings showed that leadership practices that promote fairness, transparency, and inclusive decision-making positively influence students' academic performance and retention rates. The study highlighted that school leaders play a crucial role in shaping institutional culture and ensuring that learning opportunities are accessible to all students regardless of gender.

Another empirical study by Olanrewaju, Bello, and Adeyemi (2026) explored gender inclusion and school governance in developing contexts. The study found that schools that adopt gender-sensitive leadership policies experience improvements in student outcomes, particularly in terms of academic performance, participation, and leadership development. The researchers concluded that gender-inclusive governance encourages collaborative decision-making and reduces gender-based inequalities within educational environments.

In addition, Adebayo, Oseji, and Kalejaiye (2023) examined leadership practices and institutional development in Nigerian educational institutions. Their

findings showed that effective leadership practices contribute significantly to the development of inclusive institutional cultures that support students' academic success. The study highlighted that school leaders who adopt participatory and inclusive leadership approaches create environments that encourage collaboration, innovation, and student engagement.

Similarly, Eborka and Ikwunze (2025) studied gender representation and leadership participation in Nigerian educational institutions. The research revealed that gender imbalance in leadership positions affects policy decisions and institutional priorities. The authors argued that increasing female representation in leadership roles can improve governance structures and support inclusive policies that enhance educational development and student outcomes. Earlier empirical work has consistently highlighted the persistence of gender inequality in leadership structures within Nigerian educational institutions, although the studies differ in emphasis and analytical depth.

Igiebor (2020) examined gender inequality and leadership structures (independent variables) in Nigerian schools using a qualitative-descriptive approach. The study identified socio-cultural norms and institutional constraints as key factors limiting women's access to leadership positions. While the findings strongly emphasize structural barriers to inclusion, the study primarily focuses on macro-level institutional explanations and does not empirically assess how such leadership inequalities translate into student-level outcomes or learning experiences. This limits its contribution to understanding educational effectiveness beyond governance structures.

Similarly, Omotoso (2020) investigated barriers to female leadership participation (independent variable) and leadership representation outcomes (dependent variable) in Nigerian educational institutions. The study identified cultural expectations, limited institutional support, and unequal career advancement opportunities as major constraints to women's leadership progression. Although the study provides valuable insight into systemic barriers, it largely adopts a descriptive explanatory approach and does not explore how improved gender balance in leadership might influence teaching processes or student outcomes. This creates a gap between structural analysis and educational impact assessment.

In contrast, Sunmola (2025) examined gender equity policies and inclusive leadership practices (independent variables) and their influence on educational inclusiveness and learning environment quality (dependent variables) using a survey-based approach. The study found that gender-inclusive leadership structures promote fairness, reduce discrimination, and enhance institutional inclusiveness. However, while the

study advances understanding of inclusive education, it remains largely policy and environment-focused, with limited empirical measurement of student-level academic or psychosocial outcomes.

A comparative analysis of these studies reveals a consistent agreement that gender inequality remains a significant challenge in Nigerian educational leadership systems, driven by socio-cultural and institutional barriers. However, there is variation in methodological focus, with most studies relying on descriptive or qualitative approaches and limited use of analytical models that link leadership and gender inclusion directly to student outcomes. Importantly, none of the studies integrate gender inequality, leadership practices, and multiple dimensions of student outcomes (academic, engagement, and psychosocial development) within a unified empirical framework. This represents a significant gap in the literature, particularly within the Nigerian secondary school context, and provides the justification for the present study.

Summary of Literature Review and Research Gap

The literature reviewed in this study demonstrates that leadership plays a central role in shaping educational processes, institutional culture, and student outcomes. Across studies, educational leadership is conceptualized not only as administrative coordination but also as a mechanism for fostering fairness, participation, and effective learning environments. Empirical evidence suggests that leadership practices significantly influence teacher motivation, school climate, and students' academic engagement, which collectively contribute to improved educational outcomes (Adebayo, Oseji, & Kalejaiye, 2023; Richardson & Khawaja, 2025).

In addition, the review highlights gender inclusion as a critical dimension of effective educational leadership. Gender inclusion is consistently associated with equitable access to opportunities, participation in decision-making, and representation within school systems. Studies indicate that gender-inclusive policies and leadership practices contribute to reducing structural inequalities and promoting fairness in educational institutions (Sunmola, 2025; Mboto, Ekpang, & Asuquo, 2023). However, the literature also shows that the effectiveness of such policies largely depends on leadership commitment and institutional enforcement mechanisms.

Empirical findings further suggest that inclusive leadership is associated with positive student outcomes, including improved academic achievement, higher engagement levels, and enhanced psychosocial development (Lin, 2025; Zúñiga, Cerda, & Navarrete, 2025). These outcomes are often linked to supportive

school environments that encourage participation, confidence, and active involvement in learning activities.

Despite these contributions, several limitations are evident in the existing literature. First, many studies have examined leadership effectiveness and gender inclusion separately, with limited integration of both constructs within a single analytical framework. Second, most empirical investigations have focused on leadership representation, policy implementation, or institutional outcomes, with insufficient attention to direct student-level outcomes such as academic performance, engagement, and participation. Third, available studies are largely concentrated in higher education or broad national contexts, with limited focus on secondary school settings in specific subnational regions such as Edo State, Nigeria (Igiebor, 2020; Omotoso, 2020). Furthermore, there is a notable lack of empirical studies that simultaneously examine the interplay between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and multiple dimensions of student outcomes within Nigerian secondary schools. This fragmented approach limits a comprehensive understanding of how inclusive leadership structures translate into measurable student experiences and achievements.

Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria. It provides an integrated empirical analysis of how inclusive leadership contributes to academic performance, engagement, and psychosocial development, thereby extending existing knowledge on educational leadership and gender equity in school systems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theories: Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender Equality Theory, and Social Learning Theory. These frameworks provide a conceptual basis for understanding how leadership and gender inclusion influence student outcomes in schools.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994) serves as the primary framework because it explains how school leaders influence institutional culture, teacher behavior, and student development through inspiration, vision, and intellectual stimulation. In the context of this study, transformational leadership represents school leadership practices (independent variable). Leaders who adopt transformational and inclusive approaches are more likely to foster collaboration, promote fairness, and encourage

participation among staff and students. Such leadership behaviors create enabling environments where gender-inclusive practices can thrive and where students experience improved academic and psychosocial development. Empirical studies in Nigerian educational contexts confirm that transformational leadership enhances institutional effectiveness and student engagement (Okonta & Nkedishu, 2024; Adebayo, Oseji, & Kalejaiye, 2023).

Gender Equality Theory

Gender Equality Theory provides a complementary explanatory lens for gender inclusion (independent variable) by focusing on fairness, equal access, and removal of structural barriers that limit participation. Within this framework, gender-inclusive leadership is understood as leadership that actively promotes equal representation and participation of all genders in school governance and learning processes. This theory explains how institutional policies and leadership decisions shape equitable access to opportunities, which in turn influences students' perceptions of fairness, engagement, and academic motivation. Studies in Nigeria show that persistent gender disparities in leadership structures reflect broader socio-cultural and institutional constraints, highlighting the need for intentional inclusion strategies (Mboto, Ekpang, & Asuquo, 2023; Dodo, 2024).

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides the behavioral mechanism linking leadership and inclusion practices to student outcomes (dependent variable). The theory posits that individuals learn through observation and modeling. In school environments, students observe leadership behaviors, institutional norms, and gender dynamics, which shape their attitudes and actions. When students are exposed to inclusive leadership practices, they are more likely to internalize values of fairness, cooperation, and participation, which enhances their academic engagement, psychosocial development, and school participation. Empirical evidence supports that perceived inclusiveness in school leadership positively influences student engagement and development outcomes (Lin, 2025; Zúñiga, Cerda, & Navarrete, 2025).

Collectively, these theories form an integrated framework in which transformational leadership (leadership practices) shapes the implementation of gender equality principles (gender inclusion), while social learning processes explain how these institutional practices translate into observable student outcomes. This interconnected model provides the conceptual basis for examining the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to investigate the relationship between leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria. The design enabled the collection of data on respondents' perceptions and experiences without manipulating any variables. The study population consisted of approximately 796 registered public and private secondary schools in Edo State. Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a minimum sample size of 260 respondents was recommended; however, the sample was increased to 450 students to improve statistical power, reliability, and representativeness. A stratified random sampling technique was adopted, with respondents grouped according to school type (public or private) and gender to ensure proportional representation. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled Leadership, Gender Inclusion, and Student Outcomes Questionnaire (LGISQ). The instrument measured leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student academic and psychosocial outcomes through Likert-scale items and a few open-ended questions. To ensure quality, the questionnaire underwent face and content validation by experts in Educational Management and Measurement and Evaluation. A pilot study was conducted, and the instrument achieved a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. Questionnaires were administered by trained research assistants in selected schools. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. For data analysis, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to summarize responses, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to examine relationships among leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes. Responses from open-ended questions were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and provide qualitative support for the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and permission were obtained from relevant school authorities prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Respondents were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Result and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the 450 respondents. Of the participants, 210 (46.7%) were male, and 240 (53.3%) were female. Regarding school

level, 200 respondents (44.4%) were enrolled in secondary schools, while 250 respondents (55.6%) were university students. The majority of respondents were aged between 15 and 25 years: 180 (40.0%) were aged 15–20 years, 220 (48.9%) were aged 21–25 years, and 50 (11.1%) were aged 26 years and above.

The sample demonstrates a balanced distribution across gender and school level, with most participants within the younger age brackets.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographics	Frequency (n=450)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	210	46.7
Female	240	53.3
School Level		
Private Secondary School	200	44.4
Public Secondary School	250	55.6
Age Group		
12–15years	180	40.0
16 - 19years	220	48.9
20 + years	50	11.1

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2: Students' Perception of Leadership Practices

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Leaders are fair and transparent in decision-making	4.25	High
Leaders involve students in school governance	4.10	High
Leadership promotes equitable access to academic resources	4.05	High
Leadership addresses student concerns promptly	4.00	High

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 presents the mean scores of students' perceptions of leadership practices in secondary schools. All items recorded high mean values ranging from 4.00 to 4.25, indicating a generally strong positive perception of leadership practices among respondents. The highest-rated item was "Leaders are fair and transparent in decision-making" (M = 4.25), suggesting that fairness and transparency are the most strongly perceived leadership attributes within the sampled schools. This implies that students generally view decision-making processes as equitable and open. The lowest mean score was recorded for "Leadership addresses student concerns promptly" (M = 4.00), although still within the high range, indicating comparatively weaker responsiveness in

handling student concerns. The narrow range of mean scores (4.00–4.25) suggests a relatively consistent perception of leadership practices across all measured dimensions, with minimal variation between items. However, slight differences indicate that while structural fairness and participation are strongly perceived, administrative responsiveness may require improvement.

It is important to note that these results reflect students' perceptions rather than objective measurements of leadership performance, and therefore should be interpreted within the limits of a descriptive survey design. These findings provide preliminary evidence that leadership practices in the sampled schools are

perceived positively, which may have implications for student engagement and school climate, as supported in

related studies (Lin, 2025; Okonta & Nkedishu, 2024).

Table 3: Gender Inclusion in Schools

Statement	Mean	Interpretation
Female leaders are well represented in school decision-making	3.80	Moderate
School policies support equal participation for all genders	4.05	High
Gender equity initiatives are implemented effectively	3.90	Moderate
Leadership actively challenges gender biases	3.85	Moderate

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 presents students' perceptions of gender inclusion practices in secondary schools. The results indicate a mixed level of gender inclusion, with mean scores ranging from 3.80 to 4.05, suggesting moderate to high perceptions across the measured indicators. The highest-rated item was "School policies support equal participation for all genders" (M = 4.05), indicating that respondents generally perceive the existence of formal institutional frameworks that promote gender equality. However, lower mean scores were recorded for "Female leaders are well represented in school decision-making" (M = 3.80), "Leadership actively challenges gender biases" (M = 3.85), and "Gender equity initiatives are implemented effectively" (M = 3.90). These results suggest that while policy-level commitment to gender inclusion is relatively strong, practical implementation and

representation in leadership structures remain comparatively weaker. The pattern of responses indicates a possible gap between policy formulation and actual implementation of gender-inclusive practices within schools. This implies that gender inclusion may exist more at the structural or policy level than in everyday leadership representation and decision-making processes. Overall, the findings suggest that gender inclusion in the sampled schools is moderate, with stronger institutional policy support than visible leadership representation or active bias reduction practices. These results align with previous studies which report persistent gender disparities in school leadership and challenges in translating gender equity policies into practice in Nigerian educational institutions (Mboto, Ekpang, & Asuquo, 2023; Igiebor, 2020).

Table 4: Impact of Leadership and Gender Inclusion on Student Outcomes

Student Outcome	Mean	Interpretation
Academic performance improvement	4.10	High
Engagement in classroom activities	4.05	High
Participation in extracurriculars	4.00	High
Psychosocial development (confidence, leadership skills)	4.15	High
Retention and persistence	3.95	Moderate-High

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 presents students' perceived outcomes associated with leadership practices and gender inclusion in secondary schools. The results indicate generally high mean scores across all indicators, ranging from 3.95 to 4.15, suggesting that respondents perceive positive outcomes in relation to their school experiences. The highest-rated outcome was psychosocial development (confidence and leadership skills) (M = 4.15), indicating

that students strongly associate their school environment with the development of personal and leadership-related competencies. This is followed closely by academic performance improvement (M = 4.10) and engagement in classroom activities (M = 4.05), suggesting that students perceive strong academic and participatory benefits within their school environment. The lowest mean score was recorded for retention and persistence (M = 3.95),

although still within the moderate-to-high range. This indicates that while students generally report positive school experiences, continuity and sustained engagement may be comparatively less strong than other outcome dimensions. Overall, the narrow range of mean scores suggests a relatively consistent perception of positive student outcomes across academic, social, and behavioural domains. However, the slight variation indicates that psychosocial development is perceived more strongly than retention-related outcomes. It is important to emphasize that these findings are based on students' self-reported perceptions, and therefore reflect perceived rather than objectively measured outcomes, consistent with the descriptive survey design of the study. Overall, these results suggest that inclusive leadership

positively influences student engagement, performance, and personal development. This aligns with previous research emphasizing the importance of participatory and gender-sensitive leadership in enhancing student outcomes (Lin, 2025; Zúñiga, Cerda, & Navarrete, 2025).

Students' Perspectives on Leadership and Gender Inclusion

The open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded and grouped into recurring themes reflecting students' perceptions of leadership practices, gender inclusion, and their effects on learning experiences.

Themes	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Leadership influence on student engagement and development	Students emphasized fairness, transparency, participation, and leadership support as drivers of academic motivation and engagement	172	38.2
Strategies for improving gender inclusion	Responses focused on increasing female leadership representation, mentorship programmes, and gender equity policies	148	32.9
Barriers to gender equality in schools	Students identified cultural norms, male dominance in leadership, and weak policy implementation as challenges	130	28.9

Total responses coded (N = 450)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Theme 1: Leadership Influence on Student Engagement and Development

Students consistently reported that effective leadership positively shapes their academic and personal development. Fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness were identified as key leadership qualities that enhance student participation in classroom activities and extracurricular programmes. Respondents emphasized that participatory leadership fosters a sense of belonging and motivates them to pursue academic goals more actively. However, some students noted challenges such as delayed responses to complaints and limited student involvement in decision-making processes. These leadership gaps were perceived to reduce motivation and weaken engagement. This indicates that while leadership is generally viewed positively, responsiveness and participatory decision-making remain areas requiring improvement.

Theme 2: Strategies for Strengthening Gender Inclusion

Respondents strongly emphasized the need for increased female representation in school leadership positions. Suggested strategies included promoting qualified female staff into administrative roles, implementing mentorship programmes for female students, and enforcing gender-equitable school policies. In addition, students recommended awareness campaigns and gender sensitization workshops aimed at reducing stereotypes and promoting inclusive school cultures. These responses suggest that students view gender inclusion not only as fairness but also as a mechanism for improving learning participation and institutional balance.

Theme 3: Barriers to Gender Equality in Schools

Students identified several barriers to gender inclusion, including cultural norms, societal expectations, and limited opportunities for female leadership advancement. Male dominance in leadership positions was perceived as a major factor discouraging female participation and aspiration toward leadership roles. Respondents also highlighted inconsistencies in the implementation of school policies, particularly in extracurricular participation and decision-making processes. This suggests a gap between formal gender inclusion policies and actual practice within schools.

Summary of Qualitative Findings

Overall, the qualitative responses indicate that students highly value inclusive and participatory leadership and recognize its influence on academic engagement, motivation, and personal development. They also strongly advocate for improved gender representation and consistent implementation of gender equity policies. These findings complement the quantitative results by reinforcing the perception that leadership practices and

gender inclusion are important determinants of student experiences and outcomes in secondary schools.

Hypothesis Testing

The study formulated the following hypotheses to examine the relationships between leadership, gender inclusion, and student outcomes:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between leadership practices and student outcomes in Nigerian schools.
H₂: There is a significant relationship between gender-inclusive leadership and student outcomes.

Analysis and Findings

To test these hypotheses, correlation analysis was conducted using the quantitative data obtained from the structured questionnaire. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Correlation between Leadership, Gender Inclusion, and Student Outcomes

Variables	Leadership	Gender Inclusion	Student Outcomes
Leadership	1	0.68	0.72
Gender Inclusion	0.68	1	0.70
Student Outcomes	0.72	0.70	1

Note: $p < 0.01$ indicates statistical significance.

Interpretation:

H₁: The correlation between leadership practices and student outcomes ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$) indicates a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship. This supports the hypothesis that effective leadership positively influences students' academic performance, engagement, and psychosocial development.

H₂: The correlation between gender-inclusive leadership and student outcomes ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.01$) is also strong and significant, confirming that gender-inclusive leadership practices enhance student engagement, participation, and learning outcomes.

These findings align with previous studies (Lin, 2025; Zúñiga, Cerda, & Navarrete, 2025; Mboto, Ekpang, & Asuquo, 2023), which highlight the positive impact of participatory and gender-sensitive leadership on student achievement and engagement. Hence, both hypotheses

are supported, indicating that leadership and gender inclusion are crucial determinants of student outcomes in Nigerian schools. These results provide empirical evidence that inclusive leadership practices foster equitable learning environments, motivate students, and enhance overall academic and social development.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate a strong positive association between school leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in Nigerian secondary schools. The correlations between leadership practices and student outcomes ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), as well as between gender-inclusive leadership and student outcomes ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.01$), suggest that higher levels of perceived leadership effectiveness and gender inclusion are associated with more favourable student outcomes, including academic performance,

engagement, and psychosocial development. However, these results do not imply causation due to the descriptive survey and correlational design of the study.

Students' perceptions of leadership practices show consistently high ratings for fairness, transparency, and participatory decision-making. These perceptions align with Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994), which emphasizes leadership behaviours that inspire participation and shared vision. The observed associations suggest that when students perceive leadership as inclusive and participatory, they also report higher levels of engagement and positive school experiences. This is consistent with prior studies (Lin, 2025; Okonta & Nkedishu, 2024), which similarly report positive relationships between participatory leadership and student engagement in educational settings.

The findings on gender inclusion further indicate a positive association between perceived gender-inclusive practices and student outcomes. While students reported relatively high agreement that school policies support equal participation, lower mean scores for female representation in leadership suggest that perceived implementation of gender equity remains uneven. This pattern reflects earlier findings by Mbotto, Ekpang, and Asuquo (2023) and Igiebor (2020), which highlight persistent gaps between gender policy frameworks and actual leadership representation in Nigerian schools. Within this context, Gender Equality Theory (Dodo, 2024) helps explain how perceived fairness and representation may be associated with students' sense of inclusion and engagement, while Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that students may internalize behaviours and attitudes observed in school leadership environments.

The results also show that positive student outcomes such as academic performance, engagement, and psychosocial development are associated with perceptions of inclusive leadership environments. Higher mean scores for psychosocial development ($M = 4.15$) and academic improvement ($M = 4.10$) suggest that students who perceive their school environment as supportive also report stronger personal and academic development. However, given the study design, these relationships should be interpreted as co-occurring patterns rather than direct effects.

Qualitative findings further reinforce these associations by showing that students link fairness, transparency, and inclusion with improved motivation and participation. At the same time, they identify barriers such as cultural norms, inconsistent policy implementation, and limited female representation in leadership roles. These factors suggest that while inclusive policies may exist, their

perceived implementation varies across schools, influencing how students experience inclusion.

Overall, the findings suggest that leadership practices and gender inclusion are positively associated with student outcomes, rather than deterministically influencing them. This underscores the importance of considering contextual and perceptual factors in interpreting educational leadership effects. The study therefore highlights the relevance of strengthening inclusive leadership practices and gender equity implementation as part of broader efforts to improve school environments and student experiences in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between school leadership practices, gender inclusion, and student outcomes in selected secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria. The findings suggest that perceived leadership practices and gender inclusion are positively associated with student outcomes, particularly in relation to academic engagement, participation, and psychosocial development. The results indicate that students who perceive their school leadership as fair, transparent, and participatory also tend to report more favourable educational experiences. Similarly, perceptions of gender-inclusive practices are associated with students' sense of belonging, engagement, and willingness to participate in school activities. Within this context, gender-inclusive leadership appears to be linked with increased awareness of fairness and representation in school environments, although the strength of this relationship is based on students' perceptions rather than objective performance measures.

The study also highlights that perceived imbalances in leadership representation, particularly in relation to gender, may be associated with variations in students' engagement and participation experiences. However, these findings are limited to the sampled schools and reflect cross-sectional, self-reported data, which do not allow for causal interpretation or broader generalization beyond similar contexts. Overall, the study contributes to understanding how leadership and gender inclusion coexist as interconnected factors within the school environment. It demonstrates that leadership practices and inclusion are important contextual elements associated with how students experience schooling in terms of motivation, participation, and perceived development.

Finally, the integration of Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender Equality Theory, and Social Learning Theory provides a useful conceptual lens for interpreting how students observe, perceive, and respond to leadership and inclusion practices within their schools.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes significant contributions to existing literature on educational leadership and gender inclusion within the Nigerian context. It provides empirical evidence on the combined effect of leadership practices and gender inclusion on student outcomes, an area that has received limited attention in prior research. While earlier studies have often examined leadership effectiveness or gender disparity separately, this study integrates both variables to demonstrate how they jointly influence students' academic performance, engagement, and psychosocial development. In addition, the study shifts attention from mere leadership representation to leadership practice by examining how inclusive behaviours such as fairness, participation, and transparency directly shape students' learning experiences and outcomes. By adopting this approach, the research moves beyond descriptive accounts of gender imbalance to offer a more functional understanding of how leadership operates in school environments.

Furthermore, the study contributes by presenting student-centred empirical insights through the inclusion of students' perceptions of leadership and gender inclusion, a perspective often overlooked in existing literature that tends to focus on administrators and policy frameworks. The integration of Transformational Leadership Theory, Gender Equality Theory, and Social Learning Theory also strengthens the theoretical foundation of the study, offering a comprehensive explanation of how inclusive leadership influences student motivation, behaviour, and academic success. Finally, the findings provide practical and policy-relevant insights by demonstrating that gender-inclusive leadership is not only essential for equity but also for improving student outcomes and overall educational quality in Nigerian schools.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance student outcomes through inclusive leadership in Nigerian schools. Schools should actively promote gender-inclusive leadership by implementing policies that ensure fair representation of both male and female staff in leadership roles. This may involve encouraging mentorship programs, providing leadership training, and planning for succession that targets underrepresented groups.

In addition, school leaders are encouraged to adopt participatory leadership practices by involving teachers, staff, and students in decision-making processes. Such collaborative approaches foster accountability, shared

responsibility, and higher engagement among all members of the school community, ultimately improving institutional effectiveness. Providing role models and mentorship is also critical, particularly for female students, who benefit from seeing women in leadership positions. Schools can establish mentorship programs that connect students with leaders who exemplify inclusive and equitable practices.

Educational authorities should strengthen leadership training by equipping school leaders with transformational and gender-sensitive strategies that motivate staff, promote fairness, and create supportive learning environments. Regular monitoring and evaluation of leadership practices are also essential; schools can use student feedback and institutional audits to identify gaps and implement targeted interventions. Finally, policymakers should integrate gender inclusion and equitable leadership practices into national and institutional education policies, providing guidance and support for schools to implement these policies effectively.

By embracing these recommendations, Nigerian schools can cultivate leadership cultures that not only promote equity and gender inclusion but also enhance student engagement, motivation, and academic achievement. Ultimately, inclusive and effective leadership contributes to a more just, equitable, and high-performing educational system, benefiting students, teachers, and society as a whole.

References

- Adebayo, O., Oseji, O., & Kalejaiye, T. (2023). Leadership practices and institutional development in Nigerian educational institutions. Lagos: Academic Press.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Social Learning Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bass, B., & Avolio, B. (1994). Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dodo, P. (2024). Gender equality in education: Policies and practices in Nigeria. Abuja: National Educational Research Council.
- Eborka, D., & Ikwunze, E. (2025). Gender representation and leadership participation in Nigerian educational institutions. Port Harcourt: University Press.
- Igiebor, O. (2020). Women, academic leadership and the "constricting" gender equity policies in Nigerian universities: An integrated feminist approach. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 43(4), 338–352.

- Lin, S. (2025). Gender-inclusive leadership and student engagement in educational institutions. New York: Routledge.
- Mboto, P., Ekpang, S., & Asuquo, A. (2023). Gender inclusion and women's participation in governance in Nigerian educational institutions. Calabar: Academic Horizons.
- Okonta, U., & Nkedishu, T. (2024). Leadership representation and gender equity in Nigerian educational institutions. Lagos: African Educational Research Review.
- Olanrewaju, F., Bello, A., & Adeyemi, K. (2026). Gender inclusion and school governance in developing contexts. Lagos: African Journal of Education Development.
- Omotoso, T. (2020). Gender imbalance and barriers to female leadership in Nigerian educational institutions. Ibadan: Education Today Press.
- Richardson, M., & Khawaja, S. (2025). School leadership and student outcomes in contemporary education systems. London: Education Leadership Review.
- Sunmola, K. A. (2025). Citizens' perception on gender equity and inclusion in Nigeria: Evidence from the 2024 National Social Cohesion Survey. *African Journal of Stability and Development*, 17(2), 1433–1450.
- Zúñiga, R., Cerda, S., & Navarrete, P. (2025). Inclusive leadership practices and student development in secondary schools. Santiago: Latin American Journal of Education.