

## Article

## Academic Leaders' Experiences of Inclusive Education through the Lens of Positive Psychology

Jason V. Chavez <sup>1,\*</sup> , Rolly G. Salvaleon <sup>2</sup> , Maria Lady Sol A. Suazo <sup>3</sup> , Abundio C. Miralles <sup>4</sup> , Maria Cristina S. Dela Cerna <sup>5,6</sup> , Sitti Khadija M. Dammang <sup>7</sup> , Nuryneil M. Joe <sup>8</sup> , Cindy May P. Tacbobo <sup>9</sup>  and Kier P. Dela Calzada <sup>9</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> School of Business Administration, Zamboanga Peninsula Polytechnic State University, Zamboanga City 7000, Philippines

<sup>2</sup> Office of the Vice President for Research and Extension, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag City 8300, Philippines

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag City 8300, Philippines

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Vice President for Administration and Finance, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag City 8300, Philippines

<sup>5</sup> Graduate School, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag City 8300, Philippines

<sup>6</sup> College of Teacher Education, North Eastern Mindanao State University, Tandag City 8300, Philippines

<sup>7</sup> College of Education, Mindanao State University-Sulu, Jolo 7400, Philippines

<sup>8</sup> College of Arts and Science, Mindanao State University-Sulu, Jolo 7400, Philippines

<sup>9</sup> Extension Program Delivering Unit, Zamboanga Peninsula Polytechnic State University, Zamboanga City 7000, Philippines

\* Correspondence: [jasonchavez615@gmail.com](mailto:jasonchavez615@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** This study explored how academic leaders applied principles of positive psychology in fostering inclusive educational environments and examined how positive psychological traits shaped their leadership experiences, challenges, and strategies. Anchored in an exploratory qualitative research design, the study sought to capture the lived experiences and leadership practices of academic leaders within diverse institutional contexts. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen (18) academic leaders, allowing for in-depth insights into how inclusion was enacted beyond formal policies. The collected data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings across participants' narratives. Findings revealed that academic leaders operationalized positive psychology through hope-oriented practices, well-being initiatives, strengths-based leadership approaches, and the intentional cultivation of belongingness within their institutions. These practices played a significant role in nurturing inclusive cultures by promoting psychological safety, collaboration, mutual respect, and active engagement among both students and staff. Moreover, the results highlighted that positive psychological traits, particularly resilience, optimism, empathy, and gratitude, served as essential leadership resources. These traits enabled leaders to navigate institutional constraints, sustain inclusive initiatives over time, and respond adaptively to resistance, change, and learner diversity. The study concluded that inclusive education was strengthened not solely through policies, frameworks, or structural mechanisms, but through everyday leadership practices grounded in positive psychological principles. Embodying and modeling these traits, academic

leaders translated inclusive ideals into meaningful institutional practice. The study concluded that inclusive education was strengthened not only through policies and structural mechanisms but through leadership practices grounded in positive psychological principles, underscoring the central role of academic leaders in translating inclusion from policy intent into institutional practice.

**Keywords:** Academic Leadership; Inclusive Education; Positive Psychology; Inclusive Leadership; Positive School Leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Inclusive education is increasingly recognized across the world as a component of equitable and quality learning. As such, to be recognized as a school institution, you must practice inclusive education. Positive psychology highlights how positive education supports student well-being by cultivating individual strengths, encouraging resilience, and helping create more inclusive and supportive learning spaces [1]. Education systems in countries like Bhutan that embed well-being into their curriculum have experienced improvements in academic outcomes and student well-being over time compared to their past curricula [2]. Moreover, positive education interventions based on Seligman's PERMAH framework (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment, and Health) have shown promising effects by fostering growth mindsets and resilience among students in China [3]. This suggests a very grounded logic. When institutions actively cultivate positive psychological traits, these qualities can serve as a foundation for inclusive practices [4].

On the other hand, applying positive education effectively across schools remains challenging, as many institutions continue to face limitations such as insufficient teacher preparation, limited organizational support, and the absence of well-defined implementation policies [5]. Educators tend to resist the shift away from conventional, test-focused models toward well-being centered approaches especially when under institutional pressure and limited time, as seen through recent findings [6]. Without coherent strategic frameworks, schools struggle to embed positive principles sustainably. In addition, turning to inclusive education more broadly indicates that inclusive classrooms where diverse learners engage together yield positive academic and social outcomes without disadvantaging students [7,8]. Moreover, reviews show that positive education within inclusive school contexts can empower marginalized learners [9]. These positive frameworks contribute to collaboration, inclusion, resilience, and belonging, which are crucial in inclusive settings. This study extends existing literature by shifting analytical focus from classroom-level inclusion to leadership-mediated inclusion, demonstrating how academic leaders operationalize positive psychology at the institutional level [10]. In the Asian region, scholars emphasize that Western-derived positive psychology models may overlook cultural values such as collectivism, modesty, and interdependence [11]. This suggests that applying positive psychology in Asia must attend to local cultural nuances rather than relying on imported models.

In the Philippines, the dynamics of inclusive education and leadership through a positive psychology lens remain understudied. While some Philippine studies have explored how teacher well-being relates to inclusive attitudes, the role of leaders is rarely examined [12]. Drawing on local leadership research around managing diversity and inclusive school communities in the Philippines. According to Kilag et al. [13], a contextual inquiry into leaders' lived experiences can illuminate and expound how they adapt global positive psychology principles to local realities. This study was primarily informed by Seligman's positive psychology framework, particularly the PERMA model, alongside complementary constructs from Positive Organizational Behavior (PsyCap) and Positive School Leadership, which collectively guided the interpretation of leadership practices, well-being initiatives, and strengths-based strategies within inclusive education. This study seeks to bridge these gaps by examining the lived experiences of academic leaders as they navigate inclusive education through the lens of positive psychology. It explores how leaders integrate principles such as hope, well-being, and strengths-based approaches into their leadership, while also highlighting the ways resilience, optimism, and gratitude influence their responses to challenges.

## 2. Literature Review

The global movement toward inclusive education emphasizes equity, accessibility, and meaningful participation for diverse learners. Drawing on international perspectives highlighted by Ainscow (2020) [14], UNESCO frames inclusive education as a comprehensive reform process that reshapes school cultures, policies, and everyday practices to address barriers to participation and learning, rather than simply integrating learners with disabilities into mainstream settings. This shift requires leadership that reorients institutional values and broadens definitions of success beyond traditional academic performance. Framing inclusion as a systems-level transformation highlights the central role of academic leaders, whose beliefs, decisions, and practices influence how inclusion is conceptualized and implemented across educational institutions. Within the Philippine context, Joyno [15] developed a reliable instrument capturing locally grounded dimensions of inclusive education, including parent-school partnerships, instructional leadership, and inclusive environments. These findings suggest that inclusion is deeply embedded in relational and collaborative processes, requiring leaders to adapt strategies that align with community contexts and institutional norms rather than relying solely on generic inclusion models.

Positive psychology provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how leadership can support inclusive education through strengths-based approaches. A positive psychology's core aim is the cultivation of human strengths, well-being, and optimal functioning rather than the exclusive remediation of deficits. Applied to education, this perspective implies that inclusive environments flourish when hope, optimism, and psychological well-being are actively nurtured among educators and learners. This framework helps explain why inclusion is more sustainable when leaders model psychological flourishing and view inclusion as a developmental and relational process rather than a compliance-driven obligation [16]. Cherkowski et al. [17] describe positive school leadership as a strengths-based approach grounded in values such as purpose, presence, passion, and play that support leaders' well-being and professional flourishing. Their qualitative study of school administrators highlights how leadership practices centered on meaning, relationships, and positive engagement help cultivate supportive school cultures and foster inclusive environments that benefit both educators and learners.

Positive Organizational Behavior (POB) extends these ideas by linking individual psychological strengths to organizational outcomes. Goel et al. [18] emphasized psychological capital (PsyCap), comprising hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, as a key leadership resource. PsyCap aligns with positive psychology by offering a practical framework through which leaders can sustain motivation, adaptability, and collective well-being in complex institutional environments. Academic leaders equipped with strong PsyCap are better positioned to navigate systemic challenges and maintain inclusive and resilient school systems [19]. At the local level, Edara et al. [20] demonstrated that religiosity among Filipino teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic was positively associated with resilience, optimism, well-being, and contentment. Their findings revealed that optimism partially mediated the relationship between religiosity and well-being, while well-being fully mediated contentment, underscoring faith-rooted optimism as a culturally grounded psychological resource that supports educators' persistence during periods of crisis.

International literature further supports the integration of positive psychology into inclusive education leadership by emphasizing well-being, relational trust, and organizational coherence [21]. Studies from Western and Asian educational systems indicate that leaders who prioritize emotional intelligence, relational trust, and staff well-being are more effective in sustaining inclusive practices over time [22]. Inclusive reform efforts often fail when leadership focuses solely on structural compliance without attending to the psychological and relational dimensions of change. Culdaz [23] argues that inclusion requires leaders to create emotionally safe environments where educators feel valued, supported, and empowered to innovate. This perspective aligns with systems thinking, which recognizes that individual well-being, organizational culture, and institutional outcomes are interdependent. Moreover, cross-national studies suggest that leadership practices rooted in compassion, ethical purpose, and collective responsibility enhance teachers' commitment to inclusive goals [24]. These findings reinforce the argument that positive psychological traits should be viewed not merely as personal dispositions but as strategic leadership resources. When leaders intentionally cultivate optimism, resilience, and shared meaning, inclusive education becomes embedded within the everyday practices of institutions rather than remaining a peripheral initiative.

Community-based initiatives in the Philippines further illustrate how inclusive leadership is enacted in prac-

tice. The Tinatangi Project emphasized by Sese and Guillermo [25], a community-based initiative for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, exemplifies inclusive leadership through the creation of safe and nurturing spaces that empower families and promote belonging. Leveraging creative platforms such as art and social media, project leaders amplified community narratives and visibility, demonstrating how culturally responsive and strengths-based leadership can advance inclusion beyond formal school settings [26]. Similarly, Gelizon [27] employed Anti-Bias Education (ABE) to examine how Filipino elementary teachers mainstream inclusivity in classroom practices. ABE emphasizes critical reflection on bias, recognition of diversity, and the intentional cultivation of belonging, principles that are closely aligned with positive psychology. Leaders who encourage ABE-based practices institutionalize inclusion by reframing diversity as a pedagogical and social resource rather than a constraint [28].

Comparative international and regional studies also highlight the importance of narrative, culture, and context in shaping inclusive education leadership. Research across diverse educational systems demonstrates that inclusive cultures are sustained through shared meanings, collective storytelling, and culturally responsive leadership practices [29]. Narrative-based approaches allow educators and leaders to make sense of inclusion through lived experiences rather than abstract policy mandates. Leaders who facilitate dialogue and reflective practice are more successful in embedding inclusion within institutional identity. In non-Western contexts, scholars emphasize the need to adapt global inclusion frameworks to local values and social realities [30]. This aligns with the argument that inclusive leadership cannot be universally standardized but must be culturally mediated. Such insights resonate strongly with Philippine contexts, where relationality, empathy, and collective responsibility play central roles in educational practice. International literature therefore supports a culturally adaptive model of positive psychology-informed leadership, reinforcing the importance of contextualized approaches to inclusive education.

Narrative evidence from Philippine inclusive education programs further strengthens this position. Valentos and Junsay [31] documented teacher narratives from inclusive initiatives such as SPED, IPED, 4Ps, ALS, and ALIVE in Mindanao, revealing that inclusive practices emerge through differentiated instruction, cultural responsiveness, and shared meaning-making. These narratives highlight that inclusive cultures are built through ongoing dialogue and relational engagement, processes that academic leaders can actively foster [32]. The findings reflect Filipino cultural values such as *kapwa* (relationality), empathy, faith-rooted optimism, and collective responsibility, which can be understood through *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* as culturally grounded expressions of positive psychology [33]. Applying this indigenous psychological lens suggests that academic leaders should adapt global positive psychology principles in culturally congruent ways, embedding inclusion within both institutional structures and relational practices.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate how academic leaders applied principles of positive psychology in fostering inclusive education. A purposive sample of eighteen ( $n = 18$ ) academic leaders was selected, ensuring participants held relevant leadership roles that provided direct experience with inclusive practices. The researchers occupy professional roles within higher education and acknowledge that prior experiences in academic leadership and inclusive education may shape interpretive lenses. To address this, reflexive journaling and analytic memoing were maintained throughout data collection and analysis to critically examine assumptions, bracket prior experiences, and ensure that themes were grounded in participants' accounts rather than researcher expectations. Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share detailed narratives while giving the researcher flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. The data were then examined using reflexive thematic analysis.

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design and qualitative approach to investigate how academic leaders applied principles of positive psychology in fostering inclusive education. Exploratory research is particularly suited for examining under-researched areas such as the intersection of leadership, positive psychology, and inclusive practices, as it allows for flexibility and open-ended inquiry into emerging perspectives and

experiences [34].

### 3.2. Sampling and Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to ensure that participants possess relevant, firsthand expertise. For the purpose of this study, academic leaders are defined as individuals occupying formal academic or administrative roles (e.g., program coordinators, department chairpersons, deans, research directors, curriculum heads, and registrars) with institutional responsibility for decision-making, policy implementation, or program coordination related to teaching, learning, and inclusion. They are chosen based on their direct experiences in implementing or promoting inclusive initiatives, as well as their capacity to articulate how principles of positive psychology inform their leadership approaches. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique used when researchers aim to gain detailed insights from a specific group of individuals with rich knowledge of the subject matter [35].

### 3.3. Research Instruments

This study employed qualitative data collection instruments designed to capture the experiences and perspectives of academic leaders on the integration of positive psychology within inclusive education. The primary tool was a semi-structured interview guide, carefully constructed to balance consistency across participants with flexibility to probe deeper into unique insights. The interviews emphasized open-ended prompts that encouraged participants to connect personal values, institutional roles, and broader educational contexts. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in **Table 1**. The collected narratives were then systematically analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, which provided a structured yet flexible framework to identify, refine, and interpret recurring patterns of meaning.

**Table 1.** Demographics.

No. of Participants	Gender	Age	Age Group Participants	Position
Participants 1-3	Female	22-28	Young Adult	Program Coordinators
Participants 4-5	Male	30-35	Early Middle Age	Department Chairpersons
Participants 6-8	Female	27-29	Young Adult	Faculty Representatives
Participants 9-11	Male	24-28	Young Adult	Academic Deans
Participants 12-13	Female	31-34	Early Middle Age	Research Directors
Participants 14-15	Female	30-35	Early Middle Age	Organizational Coordinators
Participants 16	Male	31	Early Middle Age	Curriculum Head
Participants 17	Female	37	Late Middle Age	College Registrar
Participants 18	Female	34	Early Middle Age	Graduate School Coordinator

**Table 2** presents the study objectives alongside the corresponding semi-structured interview questions used to guide data collection. The alignment between the objectives and interview questions ensured that the data gathered were directly relevant to the aims of the study. This structure also supported consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives.

**Table 2.** Instrument of the study.

Research Objectives	Research Questions
To explore how academic leaders apply principles of positive psychology in building inclusive education environments.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you incorporate positive psychology principles, such as encouraging hope or promoting well-being, in your approach to inclusive education?</li> <li>2. Can you share an example of how strengths-based leadership has helped you promote inclusion within your institution?</li> <li>3. In what ways do you encourage a positive and inclusive culture among your staff and students?</li> </ol>
To understand how the use of positive psychological traits shapes academic leaders' experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing inclusive education practices.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How have traits like resilience, optimism, or gratitude helped you navigate challenges in promoting inclusive education?</li> <li>2. Can you describe a time when a positive psychological trait influenced how you responded to a difficult situation related to inclusion?</li> <li>3. What personal strengths or attitudes do you draw upon when developing or implementing inclusive education strategies?</li> </ol>

### 3.4. Data Gathering Procedure

This study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 18 academic leaders from various institutions. The interviews sought to capture their perspectives, experiences, and challenges. Participants were purposely selected to ensure they met the criteria of holding academic leadership positions, and interviews were scheduled at times and locations convenient for them. Each session lasted between 30 and 50 min, and was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee. Participants provided written informed consent prior to participation and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reporting [36].

### 3.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's [37] reflexive thematic analysis. Initial coding was conducted inductively through repeated transcript readings, generating meaning units closely linked to participants' narratives. Codes were then iteratively clustered into candidate themes, which were reviewed, refined, and defined through constant comparison until conceptual coherence and alignment with the research objectives were achieved. The process began with careful familiarization, where the interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the responses. From there, initial codes were generated manually, highlighting recurring concepts, significant insights, and statements closely aligned with the objectives. Each theme was reviewed and refined to ensure it authentically represented the participants' views while maintaining alignment with the study's objectives. Member checking was conducted with participants, who reviewed preliminary themes and interpretations. Their feedback affirmed thematic accuracy and led to minor clarifications in theme descriptions without altering the core findings. This process allowed academic leaders to confirm or clarify the interpretations, ensuring that the meanings of their responses were accurately captured [38]. Reflexive journaling and analytic memos were used to bracket prior experiences in educational leadership, ensuring that themes emerged from participant accounts rather than researcher expectations.

## 4. Results

This section probes into the direct interpretation of the data gathering procedure. Clarifications with the participants are made to ensure that quotation statements are reliable and have not undergone changes or falsifications of any sort. In addition, translation to English was made to fit the medium of this study. Legends are as follows: blue for justification, green for statements.

**Research Objectives 1.** To explore how academic leaders apply principles of positive psychology in building inclusive education environments.

**Question 1. How do you incorporate positive psychology principles, such as encouraging hope or promoting well-being, in your approach to inclusive education?**

(1) Hope-Oriented Leadership as Future Framing

Participants' narratives revealed that fostering hope reflects an interpretive pattern of future-oriented meaning-making, wherein academic leaders frame inclusion as a sustained developmental process rather than a fixed institutional outcome. They described that they intentionally create an environment where learners feel motivated to overcome academic and personal challenges. Academic leaders reported encouraging students to view setbacks as temporary and solvable, often using affirmations and positive reinforcement. For instance, program coordinators shared that they use reflective exercises and motivational dialogues to remind students that "every small progress matters." Department chairpersons, on the other hand, focus on modeling resilience themselves, demonstrating how challenges can be reframed as opportunities.

*"In my experience, instilling hope helps struggling students realize that their failures don't define them. I always tell them that learning is not about who's faster but about persistence. Not everyone has the same pace and capacity to learn, that's why competency-based activities are now more reliable because it makes it enhances student engagement and meaningful learning."*

## (2) Well-being as Institutional Infrastructure

Participants highlighted the importance of well-being, not only for students but also for faculty members. These practices collectively illustrate how leaders operationalize well-being as an institutional strategy, positioning psychological support not as an auxiliary service but as a structural component of inclusive leadership. Some research directors discussed how they implement flexible policies to reduce academic stress, while faculty representatives shared that they regularly encourage mindfulness exercises in class. Leaders noted that by prioritizing well-being, they create an inclusive atmosphere where individuals feel valued and supported.

*“We encourage our teachers to check in on students beyond academics because life is more than just going to school sometimes, it’s just asking, ‘How are you doing today?’ That simple question makes them feel seen. And regardless of how simple a question is, the act of asking is already caring in its intention.”*

## (3) Strengthening Belongingness and Community

Participants stressed that fostering a sense of belonging is vital in advancing inclusive education through positive psychology. Academic leaders described strategies such as creating peer-support groups, celebrating diverse achievements, and intentionally using inclusive language in school activities. They emphasized that when students and faculty feel they are part of a community, they become more engaged, confident, and resilient in facing challenges. Program heads explained that simple practices like involving students in decision-making or recognizing their contributions during assemblies build a stronger sense of ownership and inclusivity. Leaders also pointed out that cultivating belongingness minimizes feelings of isolation, especially for learners from marginalized backgrounds.

*“When students feel they belong, they become more active and expressive. I always remind my team that inclusion is not only about providing access, but also about making every student feel that they are truly part of the school community. Belongingness is what transforms access into genuine participation.”*

## **Question 2. Can you share an example of how strengths-based leadership has helped you promote inclusion within your institution?**

### (1) Recognizing and Harnessing Individual Strengths

Participants shared that actively identifying the strengths of faculty and students has been instrumental in promoting inclusion. Leaders highlighted that when individuals feel their unique talents are acknowledged, they become more engaged and confident in contributing. Identifying individual strengths allows you to stray from that one size fits all mentality and culture here in the educational system of the Philippines which in turn helps students, faculty, and staff to learn more and be more available towards opportunities. Some department heads described conducting informal strengths-mapping activities, while others mentioned assigning roles based on observed competencies. Leaders were able to ensure that each member felt valued, regardless of academic performance or background.

*“When I discovered that one of our quietest students had a gift for graphic design like using Canva, I invited him to help with our school’s learning materials and recommended him to the SSLG moderator as their publicator. His confidence grew, and it encouraged other students to recognize that everyone has something important to contribute.”*

### (2) Building Collaborative Teams

Participants emphasized that strengths-based leadership fosters stronger collaboration among staff and students. Pairing individuals with complementary strengths, leaders were able to create teams that worked more harmoniously and productively. Some major successes in research projects, while others mentioned extracurricular programs that flourished due to diverse talents being harnessed together like the SSLG. This highlights the theme of Strengths-Based Collaboration, where inclusive leadership is not only about addressing when leaders focus on strengths rather than deficiencies, they maximize collective potential and foster workplace engagement.

*"I realized that inclusive education isn't just about students, it's also about how we manage our teams. Teams like our staff, faculty, and the parents's inclusion themselves are necessary. When we put people where they shine, collaboration becomes natural. Thus, it becomes easier to work and act upon ideals we set."*

### (3) Empowering Leadership in Others

Participants shared that giving staff and students leadership opportunities based on their strengths promoted a sense of ownership and inclusion. This is because being directly involved with efforts, incentivizes the mind. Leaders observed that students who were usually shy became more participative when entrusted with tasks aligned with their capabilities and performed well on them. Faculty members also felt empowered when their expertise was recognized like being given an entrusted role, leading to higher morale and stronger collegial relationships. This reflects that through strength recognition, we help individuals feel empowered in themselves. Which in a way works like inclusion by definition, which emphasizes that inclusive leadership involves not only accommodating diversity but also providing avenues for individuals to lead in ways that amplify their unique talents. Such practices resonate with the principles of strengths-based leadership, which suggest that people are more engaged, motivated, and collaborative when trusted with roles aligned to their strengths.

*"When teachers are trusted with responsibilities aligned to their strengths, they no longer feel like they are just following directives, they feel like true leaders. I realized this when I was assigning a curriculum chair and I allowed my faculty to appropriately select who they find good for the position. Instead of me basically relying on a track record, I find it more rewarding to ask them based on their observations. And on the latter, I heard through whispers that they felt appreciated and heard which, for me, is empowerment working at its peak."*

## **Question 3. In what ways do you encourage a positive and inclusive culture among your staff and students?**

### (1) Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces

Participants underscored that psychological safety is foundational to inclusive education. This is justified through the mechanism that when individuals perceive a low risk of negative judgment, they are more willing to share honest feedback, raise concerns, and propose ideas. Notice that when an educator separates his work and personal life and tries to meet his students halfway, they are more prone to participate and run to him for guidance. This is what we call a comfort mechanism in which we practice throughout circumstances. Practices like open-door policies and freedom walls institutionalize this safety by signaling that dissenting or critical voices are not punished but valued as part of collaborative growth. Such environments promote mutual trust, reduce power-distance anxieties, and encourage participation from those who might otherwise remain silent. As a result, both students and faculty experience heightened engagement and belonging, translating inclusive rhetoric into daily practice and reinforcing the leader's role as a facilitator of community dialogue rather than merely an authority figure.

*"We tell our students and teachers: your voice matters here. Even if you disagree with us, your input helps us grow. That's why I allow pages like the school freedom wall to operate. Although some teachers have raised their concerns that I should release a memo banning that page and to try to find ways to take it down, I never did. Because if students are too afraid to talk in-person and approach them then we will give them the platform they feel more comfortable in sharing their concerns."*

### (2) Celebrating Diversity and Achievements

Participants emphasized that celebrating achievements in diverse forms be it academic, athletic, artistic, or even personal virtues directly fosters inclusion by validating each individual's unique contributions. This illustrates how recognition practices go beyond formal ceremonies to include simple yet meaningful gestures such as bulletin board features, school page highlights, or verbal acknowledgments in meetings. Institutionalizing recognition across different domains, leaders effectively broaden the concept of success, ensuring that no group feels excluded or overlooked. Such mechanisms elevate morale, affirm individual worth, and strengthen the collective identity of the school community as one where every effort is seen as valuable.

*"We celebrate not just the top performers but also those who show effort and dedication. This way, everyone sees that their contribution matters. When we highlight different types of achievements, it sends a message that excellence comes in many forms, not just academics. That's why our school journalist page is required to post when a student does something for the school either artistic, debate, Boy Scouts, or any to bring morale to the institution."*

### (3) Modeling Positivity and Respect

Participants highlighted that their personal conduct as leaders directly shapes the school culture. Consistently demonstrating positivity, fairness, and inclusivity, leaders set behavioral standards for staff and students to emulate. Actions such as greeting students by name, acknowledging teachers' efforts, and resolving conflicts respectfully serve as living examples of the values they wish to instill. This modeling fosters an environment where respectful interactions and positive attitudes are normalized, creating a ripple effect that strengthens the institution's inclusive climate and encourages all community members to internalize and practice these principles in their daily engagements.

*"Students learn more from what we model than what we say. If they see us treating everyone with respect, they follow. The same applies to teacher performance, when you teach with love and not just follow what's written in the lesson plan, you echo excellence and not rigidity. This, in turn, becomes a tool for teachers to follow the same route. Like a growing trend in a way."*

**Research Objectives 2.** To understand how the use of positive psychological traits shapes academic leaders' experiences, challenges, and strategies in implementing inclusive education practices.

**Question 1. How have traits like resilience, optimism, or gratitude helped you navigate challenges in promoting inclusive education?**

#### (1) Resilience in Facing Institutional Challenges

Participants emphasized that resilience was a cornerstone in navigating the complex challenges of promoting inclusive education. They explained that setbacks regardless of whether they are limited resources, faculty reluctance, or lack of immediate support from higher administration, were inevitable, but viewing these as barriers would only hinder progress since it already is. Instead, they treated each challenge as an opportunity to reflect, adapt, and improve their strategies, demonstrating persistence in refining proposals, adjusting initiatives, and seeking alternative solutions. While aspirational, this approach enabled leaders to avoid counterproductive disengagement and maintain strategic momentum. This approach illustrates how resilience functioned as a strategic leadership mechanism, enabling leaders to reframe institutional resistance as a site for iterative negotiation and adaptive planning. Resilience, therefore, operated both as an individual trait, a strategic tool and naturally surfaced, enabling leaders to sustain inclusive practices while modeling determination and adaptability to their communities.

*"There were times when proposals for inclusion were rejected because of budget concerns and simply because higher ups never wanted it. Resilience kept me from giving up because I needed to continue for the sake of SPED inclusion. I revised, adapted, and resubmitted until it was finally approved."*

#### (2) Optimism as a Motivating Force

Participants highlighted that optimism served as a driving force in sustaining both motivation and morale in the pursuit of inclusive education. Of course, genuine optimism is not mirage optimism to cover setbacks. They explained that changes in policy, community engagement, or institutional support often take longer than anticipated, which can be discouraging. And we're talking about months to years. Maintaining an optimistic mindset, these leaders not only preserved their own enthusiasm but also positively influenced their colleagues and students, creating a ripple effect of hope and persistence across the school community. Optimism enabled them to frame setbacks as temporary and manageable, encouraging others to remain committed to long-term goals and inclusive practices. In this way, optimism functioned both as a personal coping mechanism and as a strategic leadership approach to reinforce dedication, collaboration, and a shared vision for an inclusive educational culture.

*"I remain optimistic even if change is slow. Because as a philosophy teacher, change can be the scariest thing in certain routes. So I stay hopeful and when my team sees me hopeful, it encourages them not to lose faith in the bigger vision of creating an inclusive culture."*

### (3) Gratitude as a Sustaining Trait

Participants noted that practicing gratitude played a crucial role in sustaining their energy and commitment to inclusive education initiatives. They explained that regularly acknowledging the efforts of colleagues, students, and even minor achievements helped prevent burnout and maintain a positive atmosphere within the institution. This works like reverse psychology in that by expressing appreciation for small successes, leaders reinforce a sense of value and recognition, which in turn motivates staff and students to continue contributing meaningfully. Gratitude also fostered stronger relationships and a collaborative culture, where individuals felt supported and acknowledged for their contributions. This practice functioned not only as a personal coping strategy but also as a deliberate leadership approach to cultivate engagement, morale, and a sustained focus on inclusivity.

*"I practice gratitude by acknowledging my staff's effort in small initiatives. Even if it's just a minor improvement, I thank them. Because thanking someone is easy, I'm even saying thank you to you for selecting me as a participant. And that remark already can make you and me feel happy, a simple gratitude can indeed come a long way. This can ultimately create a culture where people feel valued and motivated to contribute more."*

## **Question 2. Can you describe a time when a positive psychological trait influenced how you responded to a difficult situation related to inclusion?**

### (1) Optimism in Conflict Resolution

Participants highlighted that optimism significantly influenced how they approached and resolved conflicts within their institutions. If optimism can work as a motivating force, it can also function as a solvable factor when conflict arises. They described that maintaining a hopeful and solution-focused mindset enabled them to navigate faculty disagreements, parental concerns, and other challenges related to inclusive policies more effectively. Rather than getting caught up in blame or negativity, optimism allowed leaders to frame situations in terms of possibilities and potential positive outcomes. Because conflict is necessary for improvements, as they stress. This approach encouraged collaborative problem-solving, helped stakeholders remain open-minded, and maintained constructive dialogue.

*"There was once a situation during enrollment wherein a parent resisted the admission of a differently-abled student because it was a 'disease' according to her. Optimism helped me frame the discussion around possibilities. What could be achieved if we gave the student a chance, instead of focusing on limitations and creating an open dialogue for understanding and empathy?"*

### (2) Resilience in Policy Implementation

Participants stated that resilience was crucial in sustaining their efforts to implement inclusive education, particularly when facing initial resistance from faculty or administrative staff. They described how setbacks such as concerns about increased workload or unfamiliarity with inclusive practices did not deter them from their goals. Instead, resilience motivated them to continue advocating, offering additional training, and providing clear explanations to gradually build understanding and support. This persistent approach allowed leaders to slowly shift mindsets, turning skepticism into cooperation and fostering a more inclusive school culture.

*"During the early days of implementing inclusive policies, many teachers thought it would increase their workload because this is a public school so that reaction is to be expected. My resilience helped me meet them halfway, provide extra training, and show them that inclusion benefits all learners."*

### (3) Empathy in Addressing Student Needs

Participants emphasized that empathy played a central role in their leadership when addressing challenges related to inclusive education. Leaders noted that putting themselves in the position of students, particularly those with learning difficulties or marginalized backgrounds, enabled them to respond with compassion and fairness. Empathy, patience, and adaptability were interpreted as operational leadership expressions of positive psychology rather than standalone psychological traits, directly supporting the study's objective of understanding how leaders translate positive psychological principles into inclusive practices. This understanding guided them in implementing supportive interventions, such as personalized learning plans, peer mentorship, or simple acts of listening. Leading with empathy, they created an environment where students felt understood and respected, which encouraged participation and reduced barriers to learning.

*"I had a student who was constantly absent, and instead of immediately sanctioning him, I tried to understand why. When I listened, I found out he was taking care of a sick parent. That moment reminded me that empathy is essential in leadership. I adjusted his requirements and gave flexible options, and he was able to finish the course."*

### **Question 3. What personal strengths or attitudes do you draw upon when developing or implementing inclusive education strategies?**

#### **(1) Empathy as a Foundation for Leadership**

Participants emphasized that empathy serves as a foundational trait in their leadership, guiding how they develop and implement inclusive education strategies. They explained that actively listening to students' experiences, especially those from marginalized or underrepresented groups, helps them fit programs and policies to meet real needs rather than relying solely on standardized and rigid procedures. Understanding the challenges and perspectives of their learners, leaders can create interventions that are both meaningful and effective, fostering trust and engagement. Empathy also supports stronger relationships with faculty, encouraging collaboration and shared commitment to inclusion. This core ensures that inclusive education is responsive, equitable, and grounded in the lived experiences of all stakeholders.

*"There was a time when a Muslim student approached my office to raise a concern regarding the ignored policy of allowing them to exit during class to attend to their religious practices especially during Ramadan. Empathy helped me listen to her concern and thus, I had to call a meeting with faculty members to talk about this issue and concern. And it was resolved. Empathy is what made me act upon it instantly."*

#### **(2) Patience in Driving Change**

Participants said that patience is a crucial trait in driving inclusive education initiatives, especially given that systemic change often encounters resistance or proceeds gradually. They emphasized that maintaining persistence without frustration allows leaders to navigate setbacks and sustain long-term efforts effectively. Patience enables them to focus on incremental progress, celebrating small achievements that collectively advance inclusion. Modeling steady commitment, leaders also encourage faculty and students to adopt a similarly enduring approach.

*"Inclusion is not an overnight achievement. Even over the course of a year, progress remains limited due to systemic underrepresentation and competing institutional priorities. I've learned that patience allows me to keep going even if progress feels slow. It's about small steps that add up over time."*

#### **(3) Adaptability in Strategy Development**

Participants emphasized adaptability as an essential leadership strength in promoting inclusive education. They explained that flexibility in plans, teaching approaches, and leadership strategies enabled them to respond effectively to unforeseen challenges and the unique needs of diverse learners. By adjusting programs rather than rigidly enforcing them, leaders could optimize engagement and outcomes for both students and staff. This adaptability also fostered a culture of continuous improvement, where feedback and situational demands informed ongoing decision-making. Ultimately, such responsiveness helped ensure that inclusive practices remained relevant, practical, and effective across different contexts.

*"I used to think one program could fit all contexts. But adaptability taught me to adjust depending on the needs of the students and faculty. I tweak the plan instead of forcing it. And this is what I said to the teacher, the lesson plan of section A may not effectively work for section F. Thus, necessary changes for adaptability are a must."*

## 5. Discussion

**Research Objectives 1.** To explore how academic leaders apply principles of positive psychology in building inclusive education environments.

The findings revealed that academic leaders actively integrate positive psychology principles such as hope, well-being, strengths-based leadership, and inclusivity in their leadership practices. These results highlight how fostering optimism and well-being translates into practical strategies that make schools more inclusive.

One central theme was the cultivation of hope and optimism. Leaders emphasized the value of reframing challenges as opportunities, motivating both students and staff to persist despite difficulties. While consistent with established theories of optimism, self-efficacy, and growth mindset, this study extends the literature by demonstrating how academic leaders uniquely translate positive psychological traits into institutional-level inclusive practices, a dimension underrepresented in existing research. Encouraging faculty and learners to see setbacks as temporary, academic leaders create environments where persistence and growth are normalized. Such practices echo Dweck's [39] notion of the growth mindset, where failure is not a limitation but a foundation for improvement.

Another prominent theme was the strengthening of belongingness and community. Leaders stressed that inclusivity is deepened when students and faculty feel they are part of a supportive academic family. Establishing peer-support groups, celebrating diverse achievements, and using inclusive language, leaders created spaces where marginalized learners felt genuinely accepted. This finding resonates with Baumeister and Leary's in 1995 as supported by Pillow et al. [40] belongingness theory, which posits that human beings have an intrinsic need for close, positive relationships. Fostering community not only enhanced student engagement but also promoted institutional cohesion, ensuring that access to education translated into meaningful participation [41]. Equally significant was the emphasis on well-being and supportive practices. Leaders implemented wellness programs, flexible policies, and even simple relational gestures to foster belongingness. This reflects the idea of psychological safety, where individuals feel valued and supported. The prioritization of well-being highlights that inclusivity is not just about academic accessibility but about cultivating a culture where mental health and emotional safety are embedded in institutional practices. The results also highlighted strengths-based leadership as a catalyst for inclusion. Leaders noted that recognizing both students' and staff's unique strengths enabled greater engagement, collaboration, and ownership. Focusing on strengths builds confidence and maximizes performance. That creates opportunities for individuals to showcase their talents, whether through teaching, teamwork, or leadership, academic leaders fostered a sense of belonging and empowerment, particularly for those who might otherwise feel marginalized [42].

Additionally, participants underscored the importance of modeling and showing positivity and inclusivity in leadership behaviors. Leaders who deliberately demonstrated fairness, gratitude, and respect observed a ripple effect across their institutions. As supported by Tadayon et al. [43] that social learning theory explains, individuals learn behaviors by observing role models. Beyond affirming established theoretical frameworks, this study offers a distinct contribution by foregrounding the unique and active role of academic leaders in translating positive psychology from an abstract psychological framework into concrete, institution-wide inclusive practices. Unlike prior studies that primarily center on teachers' or students' well-being, the findings demonstrate that academic leaders function as cultural architects, shaping inclusive environments through policy interpretation, relational leadership, and strengths-based decision-making. Mobilizing traits such as resilience, optimism, empathy, and gratitude at the organizational level, leaders were able to influence not only classroom practices but also institutional norms, collaborative cultures, and long-term inclusion strategies [44]. This leadership-centered perspective advances existing scholarship by illustrating that inclusive education is not sustained solely through individual dispositions but through strategic leadership actions that embed positive psychological principles into the structural and relational fabric of educational institutions.

**Research Objectives 2.** To understand how the use of positive psychological traits shapes academic leaders' expe-

riences, challenges, and strategies in implementing inclusive education practices.

The findings revealed that positive psychological traits significantly influence how academic leaders navigate inclusive education. These traits shaped not only their experiences in promoting equity but also the challenges they encountered and the strategies they employed to address these issues effectively.

Resilience was highlighted as a key trait in leaders' experiences with inclusive education. Despite institutional barriers such as limited resources and systemic resistance, resilient leaders persisted in advocating for inclusion, framing obstacles as opportunities for growth. This finding reflects Masten's concept [45] of resilience as "ordinary magic," showing how consistent perseverance supports long-term educational goals. Additionally, Optimism shaped leaders' strategies by fostering motivation and confidence among their communities. Leaders who maintained a hopeful outlook inspired both faculty and students to embrace inclusive practices, even in contexts where outcomes were uncertain. Another vital trait emphasized was empathy [46,47]. Leaders described how practicing empathy enabled them to better understand the struggles of students and faculty, particularly those from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds. Taking time to listen and adapt policies or practices to individual needs, leaders ensured that inclusion was not merely structural but also humane. This finding resonates with Goleman's framework in 1995 of emotional intelligence, where empathy is considered a core competency of effective leadership supported by Manke et al. [48]. Through empathetic actions, such as offering flexible academic arrangements or simply validating students' experiences, leaders built trust and reinforced a sense of dignity and respect in their institutions [49]. Gratitude also emerged as an influential trait in leaders' experiences. Recognizing the contributions of their colleagues and communities, leaders reinforced positive relationships and a sense of shared purpose. This observation resonates with Emmons and McCullough's [50] findings in 2003 that gratitude enhances relational bonds and promotes collective resilience in organizations. However, challenges persisted despite these positive traits. Leaders reported difficulties such as resource shortages, systemic biases, and resistance to change. Resilience functioned as a capacity for persistence under constraint, optimism as a future-oriented cognitive frame that sustained motivation, and empathy as a relational mechanism guiding humane decision-making in inclusive contexts [51,52]. Theoretically, the study positions academic leadership as a mediating domain between positive psychology and inclusive education. Practically, it underscores the importance of leadership development programs that embed psychological well-being, relational competence, and strengths-based governance.

## 6. Conclusion

This study underscores the critical role of positive psychological traits in shaping how academic leaders design, sustain, and institutionalize inclusive education. Findings demonstrate that resilience, optimism, empathy, and gratitude are not merely personal dispositions but function as leadership resources that enable academic leaders to navigate systemic constraints, mobilize collaboration, and foster environments where diversity is recognized as a collective strength. Through strengths-based leadership, relational engagement, and well-being-oriented practices, academic leaders emerged as central agents in transforming inclusion from policy intent into lived institutional practice. From a policy perspective, the results suggest that inclusive education initiatives should move beyond compliance-driven frameworks and deliberately invest in leadership development programs that integrate positive psychology principles. Embedding these traits into leadership training, institutional guidelines, and performance frameworks may enhance leaders' capacity to respond adaptively to diversity, resistance, and resource limitations. Such an approach reinforces the idea that sustainable inclusion is achieved not only through structural reforms but through leadership mindsets that prioritize human flourishing, psychological safety, and shared purpose. Future research may build on these findings by examining the long-term institutional outcomes of positive psychology-informed leadership across varied educational systems and cultural settings. Comparative and longitudinal studies could further explore how leadership-centered positive psychological practices influence organizational culture, policy implementation, and inclusive outcomes over time. By centering academic leaders in inclusion discourse, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how inclusive education can be meaningfully advanced through psychologically grounded and context-responsive leadership.

## Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.V.C., R.G.S., and M.L.S.A.S.; methodology, J.V.C.; investigation, J.V.C., A.C.M., and S.K.M.D.; formal analysis, J.V.C.; data curation, J.V.C.; writing—original draft preparation, J.V.C.; writing—review and editing, J.V.C., R.G.S., M.L.S.A.S., A.C.M., M.C.S.D.C., S.K.M.D., N.M.J., C.M.P.T., and K.P.D.C.; supervision, R.G.S. and M.L.S.A.S.; project administration, J.V.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards and the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Although formal ethics clearance from an institutional review board was not obtained, the study posed minimal risk as it did not involve vulnerable populations.

## Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were strictly maintained throughout the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The qualitative data presented in this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions and the need to protect participant confidentiality. Anonymized excerpts may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AI Use Statement

The authors affirm that all research content, including the study design, data collection, thematic analysis, interpretation of findings, and conclusions, was entirely conceptualized and produced by the authors. Artificial intelligence–assisted tools were used solely for grammar checking, language refinement, and consistency enhancement to improve clarity and readability. No AI system was used to generate data, themes, interpretations, or scholarly arguments. The intellectual ownership of all content remains fully with the authors.

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