



Article

Framing Good Inclusion: School Awards and Leadership Expectations in Norway and Germany

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Abstract

This comparative study explores how the idea of *good inclusion* is framed in Norway and Germany, and how these framings shape expectations for school leaders. The analysis draws on two sources: the criteria of national school awards for inclusive education and the ways in which leadership magazines construct expectations for school leaders. Recognizing both the importance and ambiguity of inclusion—and the uncertainties it poses for educational leadership—the study uses qualitative content analysis to examine how inclusion is defined and communicated across contexts. Award websites and leadership magazine articles were analyzed through a structured process of paraphrasing to define inductive categories. The findings show that while national framings of inclusion differ, emphasizing diagnostic and structural aspects in Germany and well-being and equity in Norway, expectations for school leaders converge. In both contexts, leadership magazines highlight the importance of systematic school development, stakeholder collaboration, and personal traits such as courage and empathy. This suggests that inclusion is increasingly embedded in general leadership ideals, positioning it as a core element of what defines a good school. This study contributes to comparative and international education research by illuminating how national framings of inclusion shape leadership expectations across contexts, offering insights into the interplay between Nordic and non-Nordic perspectives.

Keywords: school awards, school leadership, inclusive education, frame analysis



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Introduction

The exploration of successful practices in schools represents a significant endeavor in educational research (e.g., Abrahamsen & Gunnulfsen, 2024; Moos et al., 2008; Møller et al., 2005). A notable example of such research can be found in Norway, where, in the early 2000s, a group of so-called “demonstration” schools was designated. Based on specific criteria (Hagen & Nyen, 2005; Riksaasen, 2005), schools with “good practices” (Hagen & Nyen, 2005) were identified¹ and required to demonstrate strong results in four core areas: pedagogical creativity and innovation; systematic follow-up of student learning outcomes; systematic efforts to create a safe school climate; and clear, effective school leadership (Hagen & Nyen, 2005). Between 2002 and 2008, the Ministry of Education and Research selected schools that met these standards. These schools were then visited by other schools and studied by researchers (e.g., Fuglestad & Møller, 2006; Riksaasen, 2005).

While these initiatives produced numerous depictions of what a “good school” might look like, they also revealed an “overall dilemma of educational evaluation”: “What constitutes success or failure?” (Møller et al., 2005, p. 589). One such possible representation of success is addressed in this study, namely Norway’s Dronning Sonjas skolepris (the Queen Sonja School Award). Initiated by Queen Sonja, this award is granted to schools that “have distinguished themselves by practicing equity and inclusion in a full-fledged way” (SL 9/07).² The administration of the award follows a process similar to that of the demonstration schools, with the executive agency for the Ministry of Education and Research, the Directorate for Education and Training, overseeing the selection process. However, the award does more than simply honor successful schools; it highlights schools that serve as examples of good inclusion,³ such as by fostering safe and participatory learning environments. This focus on inclusion makes it especially compelling to examine how success is constructed through such awards, as the overarching political goal of inclusive education—often described as a *fuzzy concept* (Artiles & Dyson, 2005)—is diffuse and difficult to articulate (Haug, 2017; Moser, 2017). Höstfält and Johansson (2023) even note that the divergence between inclusive policy and practice tends to widen as one move closer to practical implementation. Although inclusion is a somewhat nebulous concept, the school award must nonetheless define and measure *successful inclusion* to recognize and distinguish good inclusive schools.

The demonstration schools also highlighted effective school leadership as a key selection criterion (Hagen & Nyen, 2005). Research on these schools indicates that school leaders are important actors in driving change within schools (Møller et al., 2005; Riksaasen, 2005). Additional studies suggest that school leaders play a

¹ Quotes originally in another language have been translated into English by the author.

² *SL* refers to the Norwegian school leadership magazine *Skolelederen*, and *PF* refers to the German school leadership magazine *Pädagogische Führung* (see Appendix 1).

³ This article follows the wording of “the good” of the school awards (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024).

pivotal role in improving teaching facilities (Augustinsson et al., 2018; Ballangrud & Paulsen, 2018), particularly regarding inclusion (Knutsen & Emstad, 2021; Scheer, 2020). Although the positioning of school leaders has changed over time, their role in education policy remains somewhat ambiguously defined (Dahle & Wermke, 2024; Valle & Lillejord, 2023). As a result, school leaders face significant pressure to navigate various dilemmas while operating in a “messy world” (Møller et al., 2005, p. 587). However, despite this broad recognition of school leaders’ importance, few studies have examined how external mechanisms—such as national school awards—construct expectations for school leaders across different policy contexts. This study seeks to address that gap. Specifically, it aims to explore not only how ‘good inclusion’ is defined but also to shed light on the possible actions and behaviors school leaders can adopt to meet the politically mandated goal of inclusion. To achieve this, the study explores the following research question:

How do school leadership magazines construct expectations for school leaders regarding good inclusion, and how are these expectations informed by the ways good inclusion is framed in national school awards?

To address this question, articles from two national school leadership magazines (the German magazine *Pädagogische Führung* and the Norwegian magazine *Skolelederen*) were analyzed. Both magazines are published in cooperation with their respective national school leadership associations and serve as platforms for articulating and shaping contemporary discourses in school leadership (Sundberg, 2024). They also provide advice from award-winning schools to other leaders, thereby articulating professional expectations and norms. These features make them valuable sources for understanding how the framing of good inclusion can help construct expectations for school leadership. In addition, the official websites of the respective school awards were consulted to provide background information and contextual analysis.

In this study, the Norwegian case is compared and contrasted with the German case. Germany adheres to the same international declarations on the implementation of inclusion and confers awards for good inclusion, yet it has developed its school system around other traditions. Whereas Norway has a long tradition of comprehensive schooling (Aasen et al., 2012) and closed its special schools in the 1990s (Faldet et al., 2022), Germany’s educational system continues to operate within a tracked structure (Steinmetz et al., 2021). By examining both the similarities and differences between the Norwegian and German school awards and the associated expectations for school leaders, this study highlights how good inclusion is framed in each country, while also contrasting country-specific characteristics (Landman, 2003). The aim is to understand the equivalence of the concept under comparison (Landman, 2003, p. 43) and to identify possible differences that may point to country-specific particularities. In doing so, the analysis contributes to the field of school leadership by framing the complex yet increasingly significant issue of inclusion within its broader policy context—an area of growing importance for educational institutions (Lindensjö &

Lundgren, 2014) and, by extension, for school leaders.

Contextual description of the awards

Until recently, Germany had two distinct school awards: the Jakob Muth-Preis and the Deutscher Schulpreis. The Jakob Muth-Preis, awarded annually from 2009 to 2019, recognized exceptional achievements in school inclusion. In 2020, it merged with the Deutscher Schulpreis, reflecting the assumption that good schools are inherently inclusive (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023). Administered by a foundation, the award not only recognizes excellence but also performs a regulatory function (Racherbäumer & Boltz, 2012). Foundations play an important role in Germany, with more than 25,000 foundations “complement[ing] ... the actions of the state” (Bundesverband Deutscher Stiftungen, 2024) and increasingly assuming roles previously held by state institutions, particularly in education (Kolleck et al., 2015). The Jakob Muth-Preis sought to improve teaching quality by recognizing exemplary schools, referred to as *lighthouses*, and sharing their best practices (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024a). Following its integration into the Deutscher Schulpreis, schools can participate in a support program requiring school leader involvement. Observation of award-winning schools across federal states facilitates professional dialogue and provides opportunities for development (Strunck, 2011). The German awards are widely recognized, which helps disseminate effective practices and influence educational discourse. This high visibility is relevant for the subsequent analysis because it enables examples of inclusive leadership and good inclusion to reach a broader audience, thereby framing professional norms and constructing expectations across schools.

The Norwegian award, Dronning Sonjas skolepris (Queen Sonja’s School Award), was established in 2005 by Queen Sonja to recognize and encourage schools that make significant efforts to create inclusive and safe environments (Det norske kongehus, 2023). The award is administered by the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, with county governors nominating candidates for what has been called “Norway’s most prestigious school award” (SL 10/17). The jury includes representatives from major teacher and school leader unions, the national student union, local authorities, the national parents’ committee, and an adviser from the Sámi Parliament (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). The award highlights exemplary practices and aims to inspire other schools by sharing experiences and approaches. According to the Crown and Directorate for Education and Training (Det norske kongehus, 2023; Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2023a), it enhances motivation and pride among pupils and staff, fostering a sense of belonging and cohesion. It also seeks to make exemplary schools more visible and to provide recognition for their work (Lund, 2024). Although the Norwegian award enjoys lower public visibility than its German counterpart, its influence is nonetheless considerable due to the participation of key educational organizations and unions. This relatively limited visibility is significant for the subsequent analysis, as practices and leadership expectations

circulate primarily within professional networks. Consequently, the framing of good inclusion and the associated expectations for school leaders are shaped within a more internally oriented professional discourse.

Previous research

A literature search was conducted to identify relevant studies on school awards for inclusion and their impact on school leaders. The search covered multiple databases: Scopus and ERIC for English-language literature, peDOCS for German literature, and Oria and Google Scholar for Norwegian literature. Broad search terms related to inclusion (e.g., *inclusion*, *integration*, *differentiated instruction*) and leadership, as well as the names of the school awards in the respective languages (English, German, Norwegian), were applied. The terms were also adjusted to reflect cultural and linguistic variations in the discourse on inclusive education. Due to the limited results from the initial search, additional relevant literature was identified by reviewing the reference lists of the retrieved studies, thereby following a snowball sampling method (Randolph, 2009). The inclusion criteria focused on publications that addressed school awards in general or specifically in relation to inclusive education and/or school leadership. Only peer-reviewed studies were considered, while sources lacking empirical or conceptual relevance to school awards or inclusion were excluded.

Research on school awards for inclusive education

Publications from Germany place a particularly heavy emphasis on the role-model status of award-winning schools. For example, a book series introducing pioneers of inclusion highlights award-winning schools as best practice examples (Schöler & Müller, 2018; Schumann, 2023) while also acknowledging the challenges of inclusive education and the fact that receiving awards does not necessarily lead to systemic improvement in the German school system. Scholars also argue that award-winning schools are merely isolated examples (Knigge, 2020).

However, Pfisterer (2019) highlights schools that have received the Jakob Muth-Preis as best practice schools and exemplars of successful inclusion. The recognition of award-winning schools as best practice examples is further corroborated by school case studies (Döttinger & Hollenbach-Biele, 2015). For instance, Bender and Rennebach (2021) examine the disparity between inclusive pedagogical norms and inclusive practices at several award-winning schools. The examined schools all share a comprehensive understanding of inclusion, addressing individual needs through an equitable approach. Additionally, Arndt and Werning (2016) analyze the foundations of effective inclusive schools, highlighting exemplary schools as valuable resources for others. They highlight two characteristics particularly relevant to this study: close collaboration among school staff and leaders, and a strong, shared commitment to inclusive education. In

their view, school leaders are crucial in initiating and inspiring change without succumbing to excessive external demands.

Research on school awards and inclusive education in Norway is limited, but three peer-reviewed studies were identified. Nes (2013) analyzes whether the inclusiveness of the Norwegian school system exists solely in policy documents or is realized in practice, using the Norwegian award and its jury as a point of departure. The study concludes by speculating about when the Norwegian stance on inclusion began to weaken, arguing that tendencies are increasingly moving in the opposite direction. Lefdal (2016) discusses the Dronning Sonjas skolepris, noting that a separate award for school buildings was integrated into the inclusion award, possibly reflecting an emphasis on universal design in inclusive schools. Finally, Nes (2017) classifies schools that have received the Dronning Sonjas skolepris as exemplary models, concluding that Norwegian policy documents lack a clear definition of inclusion, even though UNESCO's definition aligns closely with the categories used in the Norwegian award.

Research on school awards and leadership

The snowball sampling process identified additional German studies on the relationship between school awards and leadership, but no Norwegian peer-reviewed studies could be found. One German study asserts that awards inherently motivate school improvement (Racherbäumer & Boltz, 2012). Depending on the format of awards, they either influence individuals (e.g., pupils or school leaders) on a micro level, or produce positive macro-level effects by promoting competition between schools. Another study, funded by the foundation sponsoring the German award, investigated the actions of school leaders in award-winning schools (Schratz et al., 2019). The research group identified being close to various actors and activities within schools as a key element of successful school leadership. This study has been further developed by Ammann and Schratz (2023), leading to a “facet model for successful school leadership” (p. 1) that highlights the challenges that school leaders face in taking actions. Another study examining award-winning schools emphasizes the leadership team's central role in driving and implementing innovative initiatives, both within the regular curriculum and through supplementary programs (Gregorzewski, 2018).

Summary

The reviewed literature shows that German studies tend to present award-winning schools as best practice models, while also acknowledging the limitations in transferring such examples systemically. Norwegian research, meanwhile, points to ambiguous policy definitions of inclusion and a lack of clarity in translating inclusion into practice. Across both contexts, school leaders are identified as key actors in promoting inclusion, yet little research has explored how awards shape expectations of school leadership, particularly in cross-national comparison. Exploring this relationship is essential, as the framing of policy areas such as

inclusion can subtly define responsibilities and guide implementation processes (Coburn, 2006). This study addresses this gap by examining how school leadership magazines construct expectations for school leaders, and how these expectations are informed by the ways in which good inclusion is framed in national school awards.

Analytical concepts

In this analysis, the bestowing of school awards for good inclusion is understood as a mechanism for framing the important policy area of inclusion. Building on this premise, the definition of what constitutes *good inclusion* is itself regarded as a form of framing. Framing provides a processual space and serves as a mechanism for goal control in education (Coburn, 2006). In developing such framing, specific aspects of a policy issue can be examined and defined in relation to local practice, leading to the formulation of additional procedures (Coburn, 2006). In this study, the concept of inclusion is framed through the categories for good inclusion established by school awards.

This framing, in turn, shapes the work of school leaders, aligning with Coburn's notion of sense-making: "Existing cultural ideas and norms function as categories of structures, thought, and action that individuals and groups draw upon as they construct understandings of the problem at hand and potential solutions" (Coburn, 2006, p. 345). Accordingly, this study also examines the sense-making processes of school leaders, recognizing that framing not only influences policy implementation but that "local interpretation shapes the direction of policy implementation" (Coburn, 2006, p. 344). The analysis therefore focuses on how school leadership magazines represent the sense-making of good inclusion, highlighting the practical understandings and responsibilities they construct as expectations for school leaders.

Method and material

To address the overarching research question, the question is divided into subcomponents, as different types of data were used to examine each part.

The first component serves as contextual background by exploring how the concept of good inclusion is framed within national school awards. To gather data on the official categories of school awards (i.e., the framing of good inclusion), the websites of the Jakob Muth-Preis (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023), the Deutscher Schulpreis (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024a), and the Dronning Sonjas skolepris (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024) were analyzed. Given that the award categories were already clearly presented on these websites, the analysis began directly with a comparative examination of their contents.

The second and main component of the research question explores how school leadership magazines

construct expectations for school leaders regarding good inclusion. Two magazines were selected: the German *Pädagogische Führung* (PF) and the Norwegian *Skolelederen – fagblad for skoleledelsen* (SL). Both magazines were selected due to their consistent publication over several years and the fact that their target audience consists primarily of school leaders. In addition, they regularly feature contributions from award-winning schools, offering advice and reflections from practitioners. These contributions document how school leaders make sense of inclusion, pointing to practical conditions they consider crucial for successful implementation. While the details vary, these publications reveal recurring themes that illustrate which leadership strategies are regarded as hallmarks of good inclusion.

Magazines published from 2006–2023 were selected for analysis as 2006 marks the inaugural year of the Norwegian award, followed by the German award in 2009. Relevant articles were identified by searching for the award names within the magazines using Adobe Acrobat Reader. Articles reporting on schools that had received either the German or Norwegian school award were included in the analysis. This resulted in the selection of 18 German and 20 Norwegian articles (see Appendix 1). The articles were analyzed using qualitative content analysis as this method provides a structured and comprehensible approach for comparing and contrasting the same phenomenon across two different national contexts. Following Mayring's (2022) approach, the analysis involved six steps: (1) an initial reading of the selected articles; (2) close rereading to more thoroughly extract statements pertinent to the research question; (3) organization of these statements into tables sorted by case (magazine issue number), followed by paraphrasing and generalization; (4) reduction of generalized information to form inductive categories (an approach justified by Mannheim's (1985) assertion that comparative analysis should originate from the discourse presented within the research data); (5) application of these inductively derived categories to the full dataset; and (6) comparative analysis of the contents across both national cases.

Taken together, the material from the award websites and leadership magazines provides a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how good inclusion is framed, how expectations are constructed, and how the political implementations of inclusive education become integrated into the professional daily practices of school leaders (Prøitz, 2015).

Results

The presentation of the results is organized into two parts. The first examines how good inclusion is framed in the categories of the school awards. The second addresses the expectations for school leaders, derived from how the sense-making of good inclusion is represented in the analysed magazines.

The framing of good inclusion in school award categories

For the German Jakob Muth-Preis, good inclusion is defined according to five criteria: 1) inclusion and performance, 2) quality management with an inclusive set of guidelines, 3) inclusive teaching and learning culture, 4) inclusion through participation, and 5) inclusion through cooperation (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023). Following the merger of the German awards in 2020, the categories now include criteria such as *quality of teaching, performance, the handling of diversity, and evaluation data* (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023). In addition, there are several indicators of what constitutes good practice, which are largely consistent across the two awards. However, the Jakob Muth-Preis primarily focused on performance and quality management within inclusive frameworks, whereas the Deutscher Schulpreis emphasizes the quality of lessons and overall performance (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024a). According to the foundation administering the award, good inclusion is characterized by a “comprehensive, high-quality all-day program”, a “heterogeneous body of pupils and teachers”, the use of “pedagogical diagnostics as a basis for further work”, and environments that “effectively contribute to mitigating disadvantages and actively combat all forms of discrimination” (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024a). Moreover, schools identified as good are those that adopt “innovative approaches to retain all pupils, particularly in challenging circumstances”. Finally, “inclusion is systematically embedded at the school leadership level and is actively promoted by the school leader” (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2023). In other words, among various stakeholders, the foundation considers school leaders to be responsible for driving the implementation of inclusive education.

Criteria for winning the Dronning Sonjas skolepris in Norway, meanwhile, include “long-term, systematic, and evidence-based efforts to enhance pupils’ learning environments” and the “promotion of equity and inclusion” so that “each pupil feels valued in a participatory, safe, and communal setting”. Award-winning schools are also characterized by “positive relationships between pupils and staff” as well as “between pupils themselves”, and by strong cooperation between *the school and home* (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). Furthermore, the award honors schools that have “distinguished themselves by practicing equity and inclusion” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2024). According to the Directorate for Education and Training, good practices are indicated by fulfilling pupils’ rights to “an inclusive, safe, and supportive school environment, where each pupil feels seen and recognized” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2023b), thereby fostering a sense of belonging. Within the award application framework, schools are also required to elucidate the mechanisms by which they safeguard pupils’ rights to “real participation and co-determination” (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2023b).

In summary, the categories of good inclusion identified in the German and Norwegian awards reveal some differences in how inclusion is framed. The German award emphasizes pedagogical diagnostics and performance, whereas the Norwegian award focuses on well-being and participatory environments.

However, both awards share a common emphasis on fostering a sense of belonging. In the German case, belonging is framed primarily as a means to prevent exclusion and discrimination, while in the Norwegian case, it is embedded within a holistic understanding of pupils' well-being and recognition, aligning closely with the principles and terminology of the Norwegian Education Act.

Expectations for school leaders

Given that school leaders are pivotal in school development processes and overall school functioning, it is pertinent to investigate how the framing of good inclusion translates into expectations for school leadership through the sense-making processes observed in schools. The content analysis of the selected magazine articles reveals that the framing of what constitutes 'good' is accompanied by specific expectations directed toward school leaders, as delineated in Table 1. Despite differences in frequency, these expectations converge around shared principles of leadership for good inclusion.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of expectations for school leaders

	Collaboration	Systematic Developmental Work	Character Traits	Visibility
Total	79	38	34	21
Germany	27	26	22	3
Norway	52	12	12	18

In the German school leadership magazine, expectations are articulated explicitly, with frequent discussions of what school leaders should do or are advised to do, as evident in articles such as "Successfully Leading in Times of Crisis" (PF 2/21) and "Change Agents in School Development: Insights into the Role of School Leadership" (PF 3/23). Similarly, in the Norwegian magazine, good inclusion is framed as directly shaping leadership practice, as seen in "measures for development" (SL 1/12) or a recommendation box titled "10 tips for leaders" (SL 7/21).

In the German magazine, school leaders are advised to engage in *collaboration* with a diverse array of stakeholders, including teachers, legal guardians, and external partners. For instance, school leaders should actively recruit teachers "who achieve amazing things even under the most difficult circumstances" (PF 5/19). The magazine also suggests that through close cooperation, school leaders should be able to assess employees' stress levels and have "the courage to decide against a school development project that seems to be pedagogically meaningful and important" (PF 7/16). The expectation of collaboration also extends to

interactions with pupils, emphasizing that school leaders should communicate at an accessible level (PF 2/21) and actively participate in pupil councils (PF 6a/21). Leaders from award-winning schools further highlight *systematic developmental work* as a central aspect of their role (PF 2/21). School leaders are encouraged to pursue continuous professional development to lead schools with vision and act as enablers (PF 6b/21). Additionally, the German magazine underscores essential *character traits*, emphasizing that school leaders of exemplary schools are engaged, courageous, and genuinely committed to pupils' success, operating in a non-hierarchical manner:

Even the most generous decrees and school development initiatives of the federal states will not bear fruit if one does not find competent and committed school leaders who are willing to take the not always easy path and change schools (PF 2/23).

This kind of dialogical leadership style also includes the expectation of *visibility*. Indeed, although not frequently mentioned in the German magazine, award-winning school leaders are described as having open office doors to facilitate communication within the school community (PF 7/16).

Regarding the *collaboration* criterion as depicted in the Norwegian magazine, school leaders are advised to work closely with teachers and to ensure a supportive working environment. School leaders should organize social activities for their staff to foster a sense of community (SL 5/12) and to collaborate with both pupils and local education agencies (LEA). Collaboration with pupils involves maintaining a low threshold for interaction—illustrated, for example, by a principal who engages pupils in a conversation over a table tennis match in the office (SL 7/21)—while “working with the LEA is a fundamental requirement for successful work” (SL 8/12). In terms of *systematic developmental work*, Norwegian school leaders from award-winning schools recommend focusing on developing the school environment, a task explicitly described as the “duty of the school leader” (SL 10/17). Although specific *character traits* are not as frequently discussed as in the German material, the Norwegian magazine similarly underscores a non-hierarchical mindset combined with courageous and engaged leadership (SL 1/07; SL 1/12). School leaders should make demands, collaboratively resolve crises, and guide school improvement with a “sharp eye and warm heart” (SL 7/21), implying that school leaders should have control over school processes and provide direction as necessary, while always demonstrating kindness and empathy. School leaders are also advised to practice *visibility*, which involves not only attending appointments and meetings with teachers but also being physically and socially present in the school environment so that they are known to pupils: “It is important to be out there where it happens” (SL 1/07). Such behavior is exemplified by school leaders who personally welcome all pupils at the school entrance each morning (SL 1/19; SL 7/21), or who continue teaching to maintain a connection with the realities of the classroom (SL 1/19).

In summary, both the German and Norwegian awards highlight the importance of school leaders being present and engaged with staff and pupils, suggesting that visibility is not merely symbolic but also a

practical leadership strategy for good inclusive schools. Further shared themes—as well as distinctions—are discussed in the next section.

Discussion

As outlined in the theoretical framework of this study, the categories established by school awards function as mechanisms for framing good inclusive education. Building on this premise, the analysis demonstrated how these framings inform the *sense-making* processes of school leaders, thereby shaping the expectations placed upon them in their daily work. To synthesize and compare these findings—and to address the overarching research question of how school leadership magazines construct expectations for school leaders regarding good inclusion, and how these expectations are informed by the framing of good inclusion in national school awards—the key results are summarized in Table 2. The subsequent discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing research and theoretical perspectives, highlighting their implications for school leadership practice and policy.

Table 2. Shared themes and distinctions across lenses of school leadership and inclusion

Lens	Shared Themes	Distinctions
Framing of good inclusion	Belonging as central to inclusion	Germany: preventing exclusion within tracked system Norway: holistic well-being and participation
Systematic development	Structured, long-term school development	Germany: linked to performance and diagnostics Norway: linked to results and environment
Leadership traits	Courage, empathy, and professional visibility	Germany: strategic, top-down orientation Norway: relational and community-based

Drawing on Coburn’s (2006) theory of framing, the analysis reveals both context-specific contrasts and cross-national convergences, as presented in Table 2. Starting with national differences, the German award criteria emphasize diagnostic classification of disabilities and measurable learning outcomes, reflecting the long-standing stratified school structure and performance orientation of the German system (Scheer, 2020;

Moser, 2017). By contrast, the Norwegian award foregrounds pupils' well-being, belonging, and rights, consistent with the comprehensive school tradition and policy discourse on a school-for-all (Faldet et al., 2022; Haug, 2017). These distinctions illustrate how national school systems and policy histories shape what counts as good inclusion, supporting Coburn's (2006) argument that cultural norms influence how issues are framed.

Despite these contextual differences, leadership expectations converge across countries. As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, both the German and Norwegian magazines highlight the importance of systematic school development, collaboration with stakeholders, key character traits, and active presence in the school community. These shared expectations—also identified in the reviewed literature (e.g., Ammann & Schratz, 2023; Leithwood et al., 2019)—suggest that leadership for good inclusion transcends national boundaries and reflects broader principles of school leadership. The “leadership traits” dimension in Table 2 further clarifies how magazines construct the professional role of school leaders. In Germany, expectations are more strategic and top-down: leaders are portrayed as drivers of inclusive education who set direction, secure resources, and ensure diagnostic precision. In Norway, while similar qualities such as courage, empathy, and visibility are valued, these traits are framed as tools for participatory collaboration and community building. In other words, the same leadership attributes are positioned differently: as instruments of strategic control in Germany and as means of relational empowerment in Norway.

Further insight emerges when comparing the two data sources within each country. The “systematic development” lens in Table 2 captures these internal contrasts. In the German context, while the awards emphasize measurable outcomes and diagnostic precision, the magazines shift attention toward relationships and developmental leadership, highlighting the importance of inclusive cultures over test scores. In the Norwegian context, the award promotes a holistic understanding of inclusion and well-being, yet the magazines highlight school leaders' responsibility for improving learning outcomes. This divergence demonstrates how professional discourse can expand or redirect policy frames, requiring school leaders to mediate between policy mandates and professional ideals.

Overall, these findings support Coburn's (2006) theoretical propositions in two ways. First, they confirm that policy framing reflects national culture, as seen in the award criteria. Second, they show that professional communities (the contributors and readers of the leadership magazines) can generate a transnational sense-making of inclusion, producing a common set of leadership expectations even when policy contexts diverge. This combination of differences and similarities underscores that school leaders operate within environments where policy framing and professional expectations may diverge, which in turn highlights the complexity of school leadership, where balancing policy-driven metrics with relational leadership is essential.

Finally, the convergence between inclusion-oriented leadership and general school leadership deserves special attention. The finding that leadership expectations for good inclusion mirror those of school leadership more generally is evident in Germany's merger of the Jakob Muth-Preis into the broader Deutscher Schulpreis and in Norway's alignment with the Education Act. Both developments suggest an underlying assumption that inclusive schools are good schools, and good schools are inclusive. This is not inherently problematic as inclusive schools should no longer be considered exceptional in contemporary society. Yet, this convergence also highlights the increasing demands placed on school leaders, who must embody both the universal qualities associated with effective leadership and the context-specific competencies required for inclusion.

This convergence invites further reflection. Why, for instance, does inclusion remain a contested issue in both countries? In Germany, some schools still offer limited or no inclusive education. Does this suggest that such schools are inherently not "good"? Conversely, should special schools that exclusively serve pupils with special educational needs be considered less good simply because they do not meet inclusion criteria? This tension becomes especially evident considering the 2024 German School Award, which was granted to a special needs school (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2024b). Such examples challenge the simplistic belief that "good" is synonymous with "inclusive" and highlight the need for leadership that can navigate competing understandings of what constitutes a good school and what inclusion truly means.

Conclusion

This study explored how school awards from two different national contexts frame good inclusion and how these framings shape expectations for school leaders as constructed in school leadership magazines. The findings reveal that while expectations for school leaders are influenced by national framings of inclusion, they also reflect a shared professional discourse that transcends national boundaries. In Germany, inclusion is primarily framed through diagnostic, performance-oriented, and structural dimensions, whereas in Norway it is grounded in notions of well-being, participation, and equity. These national framings influence how school leadership is constructed: either as strategic and top-down, or as relational and community-based. However, despite these contextual differences, expectations for school leaders converge across both countries. Magazines from both contexts emphasize the importance of systematic school development, collaboration with stakeholders, and personal traits such as courage, empathy, and visibility. This convergence suggests that leadership for good inclusion is increasingly aligned with the general principles of good school leadership. As such, inclusion is no longer treated as a separate or exceptional domain but as a core element of what constitutes a good school.

This convergence of inclusion-oriented and general school leadership raises important questions for future

research. If school leadership for good inclusion is equated with good leadership, why does inclusion remain a contested and unevenly implemented goal in both countries? To answer this question, further studies should explore how school leaders navigate competing definitions of inclusion in practice and determine whose needs are ultimately addressed through inclusive education. Such research could provide deeper insight into the tensions between policy ideals, professional expectations, and everyday school realities.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Overview of selected articles included in the study

Volume	Original title [translated title]
SL 1/07	Dronning Sonjas skolepris [Queen Sonja's School Award]
SL 9/07	Dronning Sonjas skolepris 2007 delt ut [Queen Sonja's School Award 2007 awarded]
SL 1/09	Et tilpasset og likeverdig læringsmiljø [An adapted and equitable learning environment]
SL 1/10	Uliketer en berikelse [Diversity is an enrichment]
SL 2/10	Forbundslederen [The union leader]
SL 1/11	Dronning Sonja:—Skoleprisen går til verdens vakreste sted [Queen Sonja:—The school award goes to the world's most beautiful place]
SL 1/12	Dronning Sonjas skolepris: Mangeårig mangfoldsarbeid sikret [Queen Sonja's School Award: Long-term diversity work secured]
SL 5/12	Sverger til aldersblanding og tillit [Swears by age mixing and trust]
SL 8/12	Kveler resultatjaget skolens samfunnsoppdrag? [Does the pursuit of results stifle the school's social mission?]
SL 1/13	Feirer mangfoldet [Celebrates diversity]
SL 8/13	Leder [Leader]
SL 10/13	Mangfold er en berikelse [Diversity is an enrichment]
SL 1/15	Thor Heyerdahl VGS fikk Dronning Sonjas skolepris [Thor Heyerdahl High School received Queen Sonja's School Award]
SL 8/15	Leder [Leader]
SL 10/15	Gjøvik videregående fikk Dronningens skolepris [Gjøvik High School received the Queen's School Award]
SL 10/16	Helhetlig og systematisk verditenkning [Holistic and systematic value thinking]
SL 10/17	Dronning Sonjas skolepris: Firda vidaregåande skule—meir enn ein skule [Queen Sonja's School Award: Firda High School—more than a school]
SL 1/19	Sammen om skaperglede, kunnskap og likeverd [Together for the joy of creation, knowledge, and equity]
SL 1/20	Mer enn en skole [More than a school]
SL 7/21	Gode relasjoner har alt å si [Good relationships mean everything]
PF 4/08	Demokratie von Anfang an—Das Schülerparlament an der Erika-Mann-Grundschule [Democracy from the Beginning—The pupils' parliament at Erika Mann elementary school]

PF 1/11	Inklusive Schule Jakob Muth-Preis verliehen [Inclusive school Jakob Muth Award awarded]
PF 1/12	Pioniere des gemeinsamen Lernens [Pioneers of collaborative learning]
PF 2/12	Inklusive Schule Jakob Muth-Preis verliehen [Inclusive school Jakob Muth Award awarded]
PF 2/13	Herausforderung Vielfalt: Schulen brauchen praxisnahe Unterstützung [Challenge of diversity: schools need practical support]
PF 7/16	Lehrkräfte für Schulentwicklung gewinnen [Recruiting teachers for school development]
PF 5/19	Die Transformationslücke—vom Scheitern zum Gelingen [The transformation gap—from failure to success]
PF 2/21	Erfolgreich leiten in Krisenzeiten [Successfully leading in times of crisis]
PF 4/21	Datengestützte Schulentwicklung oder Von Daten zu Taten [Data-driven school development or from data to action]
PF 6a/21	Be part! Professionalität auf vielen Schultern [Be part! Professionalism on many shoulders]
PF 6b/21	Nähe trotz Distanz: Gelingende Beziehungsgestaltung [Closeness despite distance: successful relationship building]
PF 5/22	Auf den Spuren von Exzellenz: Deutscher Schulpreis [In the footsteps of excellence: German school award]
PF 1a/23	Zukunftsfähige Schule—Exzellente Schulleitung: Thesen zu einer Strategie der Professionalisierung [Future-proof school—excellent school leadership: theses on a strategy for professionalization]
PF 1b/23	Gestaltung schulischer Personalentwicklung an Schulpreisschulen [Designing school staff development at award-winning schools]
PF 2/23	Schulentwicklung in einer Kultur der Digitalität—der Blick aus der Praxis [School development in a culture of digitality—a practical perspective]
PF 3/23	Change Agents in Schulentwicklung: Einblicke in die Rolle der Schulleitung [Change agents in school development: insights into the role of school leadership]
PF 4/23	Die Transferleistung bei Fortbildungen steigern [Increasing transfer performance in training]
PF 5/23	Potenziale freisetzen—Schule kreativ gestalten ohne Unterricht [Unleashing potential—designing schools creatively without lessons]
