

INNOVATING LEADERSHIP FOR AUTISM EDUCATION: SUSTAINABLE PATHWAYS IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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Autism education in Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, faces persistent challenges including fragmented leadership practices, lack of standardized policies and limited sustainability in program implementation. Addressing these challenges requires innovative approaches to educational leadership that can foster inclusive, effective and long-term solutions. This study investigates leadership models in autism education and explores pathways toward sustainable development in Ho Chi Minh City. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combines qualitative interviews with school leaders, teachers, parents and experts with quantitative surveys measuring satisfaction and leadership effectiveness across selected specialized schools and intervention centers. Data are further complemented by policy analysis to identify structural gaps. Preliminary findings suggest that transformational, adaptive and community-based leadership models are particularly effective in supporting children with autism and their families. However, systemic barriers such as policy inconsistencies, insufficient resource allocation and weak inter-institutional collaboration hinder long-term sustainability. The study proposes an innovative leadership framework that integrates transformational vision, adaptive management and cross-sector collaboration, tailored to the context of Ho Chi Minh City.

The research contributes theoretically by enriching the literature on leadership in special education and practically by offering a feasible, context-specific model for sustainable leadership in autism education. Policy recommendations include the establishment of clear guidelines for school leadership, strengthening professional development for educators and fostering multi-stakeholder partnerships to enhance sustainability.

Keywords: Autism Education; Educational Leadership; Sustainable Development; Inclusive Education; Transformational Leadership; Adaptive Leadership; Ho Chi Minh City

1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of children with autism in Vietnam has been steadily increasing, posing significant challenges for both the educational and healthcare systems. Ho Chi Minh City, as the country's largest metropolis, has become a major hub for children with autism as well as for specialized educational institutions. The city hosts a wide range of early intervention centers, schools for

children with special needs and active involvement from social organizations and NGOs. However, despite the diversity and growth of these initiatives, several pressing challenges remain.

First, leadership and management in autism education lack standardization, resulting in disparities in service quality across institutions. Furthermore, existing support policies are often fragmented and unsustainable, with limited integration into the

national education policy framework. As a result, much of the progress relies heavily on individual efforts, parent groups and NGO-driven projects, leading to instability and limited scalability. Against this backdrop, the call for innovative leadership emerges as not only urgent but also pivotal - serving as the key to building a solid foundation for an inclusive, equitable and sustainable education system for children with autism in Vietnam.

Globally, autism education has become a critical research focus, closely linked to the promotion of every child's right to learning and inclusion, as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Japan, early intervention programs, inclusive education and standardized teacher training and management frameworks have been implemented for decades. International studies emphasize that leadership is a decisive factor in ensuring both the quality and sustainability of autism education systems. Specifically, innovative leadership in policy development, specialized teacher training and School – Family - Community collaboration has proven essential to achieving equity and effectiveness in access to education. Nevertheless, even in countries with advanced systems, persistent challenges remain, including shortages of well-trained professionals, financial pressures and the ongoing need for individualized support. Consequently, international research underscores that leadership and management innovation is not merely a concern for developing nations but a global priority. Situating Vietnam's context within this international frame highlights that the challenges faced in Ho Chi Minh City are not isolated but part of a broader global issue - one that requires systemic, sustainable and forward-looking solutions.

Drawing from international experiences, Ho Chi Minh City - home to a large population of children with autism and specialized educational institutions - can adapt these models in ways that suit local conditions.

First, lessons from the United States and the United Kingdom emphasize the necessity of a clear legal and policy framework to guarantee educational rights for children with autism, moving beyond fragmented, NGO - driven initiatives.

Second, Japan's approach highlights the value of balancing inclusive education with specialized classrooms, which is particularly relevant for Ho Chi Minh City where diverse needs require flexible forms of support.

Third, Australia's model underlines the crucial

role of families and communities, demonstrating how flexible financial mechanisms can ease the burden on parents. Taken together, these lessons suggest that sustainable progress in Ho Chi Minh City depends on innovative leadership, long-term policy development and strong collaboration between the state, schools, families and communities - rather than continued reliance on individual or short-term efforts.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Basic concepts

In educational research, clarifying key concepts is essential for establishing a robust theoretical framework that guides deeper inquiry and practical applications.

First, educational leadership refers to the capacity and art of guiding, managing, inspiring, and fostering innovation within educational institutions. Beyond administrative management, it encompasses the ability to build strategic visions, cultivate a culture of learning, mobilize resources, and ensure holistic development for all learners.

Second, inclusive education is both a philosophy and practice that guarantees the right of every child - regardless of circumstance, gender, ethnicity, or disability - to participate equally in learning. Inclusion goes beyond simply placing children with disabilities in mainstream schools; it requires redesigning learning environments, curricula, teaching methods and support systems to ensure that no child is excluded or left behind.

Third, special education plays a vital role in meeting the diverse learning needs of children with disabilities, particularly those with autism. This field employs specialized methods, materials, technologies and support services to maximize individual potential. Special education is highly individualized but must also be integrated with inclusive education, ensuring both personalized support and opportunities for social integration.

Finally, sustainable development provides a unifying strategic vision, emphasizing harmony between economic growth, social equity and environmental protection. In education, sustainability entails not only providing quality learning but also building systems that are inclusive, equitable and resilient to social change. The United Nations has enshrined this in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4): "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."

These four concepts are deeply interconnected: educational leadership provides vision and momentum; inclusive education secures the

principle of equity; special education offers targeted solutions; and sustainable development frames the broader strategic direction. Together, they establish the foundations for a fair, comprehensive and enduring education system, particularly crucial for vulnerable groups such as children with autism.

2.2. International Literature on Leadership in Autism Education (UNESCO, WHO, OECD)

Over the past decades, leadership in autism education has increasingly attracted the attention of international organizations such as UNESCO, WHO, and OECD, as it is regarded as a decisive factor in the success of inclusive and special education policies.

UNESCO (2017) emphasizes the pivotal role of educational leadership in realizing the goal of “Education for All,” framing leadership as the catalyst for transforming schools into inclusive environments where all children - including those with autism - are respected and enabled to participate equally.

WHO (2013, 2021) approaches autism education from a socio - medical perspective, recommending cross - sectoral collaboration between health, education and social welfare, while stressing leadership capacity in designing comprehensive support programs that foster children’s cognitive, behavioral and social development.

OECD (2019, 2022) focuses on governance dimensions, arguing that educational leadership bears responsibility for securing resources, strengthening teacher capacity, monitoring policy implementation and ensuring the sustainability of systems serving children with special needs. Collectively, these international perspectives converge on the recognition that educational leadership functions as the “pivot” that links policy, resources and practice, thereby producing long - lasting impacts on autism education.

2.3. Lessons from Other Countries (USA, UK, Singapore)

International experiences reveal diverse approaches to educational leadership for children with autism, reflecting each country’s political, cultural, and social contexts.

In the United States, a strong legal foundation is provided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which mandates that educational leaders ensure children with autism have access to appropriate curricula, individualized education programs (IEPs) and comprehensive support. School leaders in the U.S. play a crucial coordinating role, mobilizing multidisciplinary teams - including teachers, psychologists and social

workers - to meet students’ diverse needs.

In the United Kingdom, the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) framework establishes clear lines of accountability, requiring school leaders not only to manage resources but also to develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that safeguard equity and educational quality for autistic learners.

Singapore distinguishes itself with an integrated model in which the government provides strategic direction, school leaders ensure flexible implementation and families and communities serve as active partners. A particularly innovative feature of Singapore’s experience lies in the fusion of public policy with technological advancement for instance, the use of digital tools to assess the progress of autistic students and to deliver personalized learning resources.

The above experiences show that, despite differences in political and social systems, the common point of advanced countries is that they consider educational leadership as a key factor, playing a role in shaping policies, mobilizing resources and ensuring equal learning rights for autistic children.

The convergence of perspectives from international organizations (UNESCO, WHO, OECD) and lessons from national contexts (USA, UK, Singapore) demonstrates that educational leadership in autism education must transcend policy formulation and be translated into school governance and direct support programs.

UNESCO emphasizes the global vision of inclusion; WHO highlights cross-sectoral collaboration and holistic care; and OECD underscores governance capacity and system sustainability. Advanced countries have operationalized these principles through legal frameworks (USA, UK) and innovative integrated models (Singapore). This synthesis offers clear direction for Vietnam: to adopt international theoretical frameworks as guiding principles while adapting lessons from global experiences to design a context-sensitive, flexible system that integrates policy, governance and technology, thereby advancing effective autism education within its unique cultural and social landscape.

2.4. Research gaps

Although international research has highlighted the critical role of leadership and policy innovation in autism education, Vietnam - particularly Ho Chi Minh City - still lacks systematic and empirical studies that address this issue. Existing research has mainly focused on early intervention, teaching methods, or assessing children’s needs, while the

frameworks of governance, policy design, and leadership roles remain underexplored. Moreover, there is a scarcity of comparative studies that align international best practices with Vietnam's local realities to propose feasible leadership models that are both context - sensitive and globally aligned. This research gap underscores the urgent need for scholarly inquiry into how innovative leadership and management can serve as the key drivers of sustainable development in autism education in Ho Chi Minh City.

2.5. Research objectives

Building upon the identified research gap, this study pursues three primary objectives.

First, it analyzes the context and current state of autism education in Ho Chi Minh City, with particular attention to challenges in leadership, governance and policy development.

Second, it examines and compares international best practices (United States, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia) to identify core elements applicable to Vietnam.

Third, it proposes an innovative leadership and management model tailored to Vietnam's socio-economic, cultural and educational policy context, thereby contributing to a sustainable foundation for the development of autism education systems.

2.6. Research questions

Based on the proposed research objectives, the article focuses on answering the following core research questions:

(1) What is the current status of autistic education in Ho Chi Minh City, especially in terms of leadership, management and policy making?

(2) What are the main limitations and challenges in ensuring the sustainability of the autistic education system in Vietnam?

(3) What success factors have been identified by international experiences (USA, UK, Japan, Australia) in innovation in leadership and management of autistic education?

(4) What lessons can be adapted and applied to the Vietnamese context, especially in Ho Chi Minh City?

(5) What innovative leadership and management models can be proposed to promote the sustainable and comprehensive development of autistic education in Vietnam?

2.7. Research Implications for Vietnam

Drawing from the synthesis of international frameworks and national experiences, research on educational leadership in autism education in

Vietnam should follow three key directions.

First, it should focus on developing a sustainable model of educational leadership, where leaders act not merely as administrators but as innovators, inspirers and connectors across stakeholders.

Second, it should prioritize examining the feasibility of inclusive education for children with autism in the Vietnamese context, including curriculum adaptation, teacher training and mobilization of family and community engagement.

Third, it should propose mechanisms for cross - sectoral collaboration among education, healthcare and social services to build comprehensive support systems, aligning with WHO's recommendations but adapted to local resources and cultural realities. In addition, research should explore the application of digital technologies in management, assessment and personalized learning support, drawing lessons from Singapore's innovations while assessing practical scalability in Vietnam. These research directions will help shape an educational leadership model that is both scientifically grounded and practically sustainable, tailored to Vietnam's unique socio - cultural context.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework and literature review highlight that the four core concepts - educational leadership, inclusive education, special education and sustainable development - are interdependent, collectively providing a solid foundation for approaching autism education. International organizations such as UNESCO, WHO, and OECD consistently emphasize the central role of educational leadership in linking policy, resources and practice to advance inclusive education and comprehensive support systems. Lessons from the USA, UK and Singapore demonstrate that the successful translation of international recommendations into legal frameworks, accountability mechanisms and innovative governance models is a decisive factor for impact. Consequently, research in Vietnam must flexibly apply global theoretical frameworks while adapting to its unique cultural and social context in order to design an educational leadership model that is both scientifically grounded and practically viable. This sub-conclusion sets the stage for the next section, which will detail the research methodology as a means to operationalize the proposed directions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Mixed methods design

The study adopts a mixed methods approach using a convergent-parallel design (collect quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, analyze separately, then integrate during interpretation). This design is chosen to obtain both a generalizable quantitative

picture (e.g., satisfaction and leadership-model effectiveness) and in-depth qualitative understanding of mechanisms, contexts, and perceptions.

- Quantitative component: a survey with a sufficiently large sample for descriptive analyses, group comparisons, multivariable regression and hierarchical (multilevel) modelling if data are nested (students/teachers within schools). Key variables include leadership practice indices, fidelity of inclusive-policy implementation, parent/teacher satisfaction and student outcome indicators (IEP progress).

- Qualitative component: semi-structured interviews with key

stakeholders - school leaders, classroom teachers, parents and experts/policymakers - to explore meanings, practices, barriers, enablers, and improvement proposals. Focus groups may be added to stimulate group discussions and capture collective dynamics.

Integrating both strands enables triangulation, highlights convergence/divergence and yields robust meta-inferences useful for policy and practice.

3.2. Study sites (Ho Chi Minh City)

The study will be conducted in selected special schools and intervention centers in Ho Chi Minh City, with site selection guided by representativeness and contextual diversity:

- Site selection criteria:

- (1) Include public and private/nonprofit providers;
- (2) Operate programs for children with autism (varied intervention levels - part-time inclusion, early intervention, full special-class);
- (3) Vary in size and district location to capture resource differences;
- (4) Demonstrate willingness to cooperate and provide necessary permissions.

- Why Ho Chi Minh City : as a major metropolis, Ho Chi Minh City hosts a diverse range of educational and intervention services, enabling comparison of models and drawing lessons applicable to other large urban contexts in Vietnam.

Suggested sample of sites: 6–10 institutions (mix of schools and centers); in each site carry out a broad-based survey of teachers and parents, collect school documents (IEPs, progress logs) and conduct 1–2 leadership interviews plus 3–5 teacher/parent interviews per site.

3.3. Instruments and measurement

3.3.1. Quantitative survey instrument Structure:

- (1) Respondent demographics (role, experience);

- (2) Leadership and inclusive-practice scales (adapted from validated instruments such as the MLQ or Leadership Practices Inventory but culturally adapted and validated);

- (3) Parent/teacher satisfaction scales;

- (4) Outcome indicators (IEP implementation rates, student progress against IEP goals, attendance).

Scaling: 5- or 7-point Likert scales; include reverse-coded items to reduce response bias.

Instrument validation: pilot survey with 30–50 respondents to test clarity; reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha, target ≥ 0.70); exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) when sample size permits.

3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Participants: school leaders/center directors, classroom teachers, parents, and experts/policymakers.

Core topics: understandings of leadership for autism education; leadership strategies (recruitment, professional development, resource allocation); cross-sectoral coordination; barriers and enablers; policy and practice recommendations.

Procedure: audio-record (with consent), verbatim transcription, translation if needed, thematic coding.

3.3.3. Policy analysis

Documents: national laws, MOET circulars/guidelines, local directives, school-level policy documents (IEP templates, manuals) and international references (UNESCO/WHO guidance).

Analytical approach: content analysis and a policy framework (e.g., examining content, actors, processes and context) to identify gaps, alignment and feasibility of local implementation.

3.3.4. Administrative records and objective indicators

IEP files, student progress logs, staff training records and class logs to extract objective performance and fidelity indicators.

3.4. Sampling strategy and sample size (quant + qual)

Sampling strategy: combine purposive sampling (for site selection) with stratified/cluster sampling for the quantitative survey to ensure representativeness across provider types and districts. Use cluster sampling with the school as the cluster when analyzing nested data.

Recommended quantitative sample size: to ensure adequate statistical power for group comparisons and regression analyses, target at least ~126–160 respondents, with a preferred sample of ~150–200 to accommodate nonresponse and subgroup analyses.

(Illustrative calculation for a two-sample t-test with effect size $d = 0.5$, $\alpha = 0.05$ two-sided, power = 0.80: $Z_{\alpha/2} = 1.96$; $Z_{\beta} = 0.84$; sum = 2.80; $(2.80)^2 = 7.84$; $\times 2 = 15.68$; $\div d^2 (0.25) = 62.72 \approx 63$ per group \rightarrow total ≈ 126 ; add 20% contingency $\rightarrow \sim 151$.)

Recommended qualitative sample: interview to thematic saturation; initial targets: leaders (10–15), teachers (30–40), parents (30–50 or 6–8 FGDs), experts/policymakers (8–12).

3.5. Data analysis plan

Quantitative

- Data cleaning and coding; handling missing values.

- Descriptive statistics (frequencies/percentages; means/SDs).

- Reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha) and EFA/CFA to evaluate factor structure.

- Correlation and multivariable regression analyses to test hypotheses (e.g., leadership practices \rightarrow teacher satisfaction / IEP fidelity), controlling for covariates (experience, school type, resources).

- If data are nested (teachers/parents within schools), apply multilevel modelling (HLM) to separate school-level and individual-level effects.

- Sensitivity analyses and appropriate missing-data procedures (e.g., multiple imputation).

Qualitative

- Open \rightarrow axial \rightarrow thematic coding (thematic analysis or framework analysis).

- Ensure coding reliability via independent coders and calculation of inter-coder agreement (e.g., Cohen's Kappa), facilitating consensus.

- Produce representative excerpts and develop a context-grounded conceptual model.

Integration

- Use joint displays (tables/figures that juxtapose quantitative results with qualitative themes) to identify convergence/divergence and to derive meta-inferences.

- Formulate policy recommendations grounded in mixed evidence, noting the strength of support from each strand.

3.6. Rigor, ethics and feasibility

- Rigor: pilot-testing instruments, enumerator training, reliability testing (Cronbach's alpha), intercoder verification for qualitative data and member-checking with selected participants to validate findings.

- Ethics: obtain IRB/ethics committee approval; secure permissions from local education authorities

and school leadership; obtain written informed consent from parents/guardians and assent where appropriate; ensure confidentiality (data anonymization and encryption); provide referral pathways if interviews reveal unmet clinical or psychosocial needs.

- Feasibility: run pilots, plan contingencies for nonresponse, allocate resources for transcription/translation and budget for training and data management.

3.7. Limitations and mitigation

Limitations: site selection confined to Ho Chi Minh City may limit rural generalizability; self-reported data risk social desirability bias; heterogeneity of institutional resources complicates direct comparisons.

Mitigation: incorporate objective indicators (IEP records), use stratified sampling to enhance within-region representativeness and triangulate data sources to minimize single-source bias.

3.8. Expected outputs and policy relevance

The study is expected to deliver: (1) quantitative evidence on satisfaction and leadership-model effectiveness; (2) in-depth qualitative analysis of leadership mechanisms, barriers and practical lessons; (3) a policy gap analysis with targeted recommendations for local implementation; and (4) a proposed leadership model (conceptual framework plus an evaluation toolkit) ready for pilot testing and scale-up. Anticipated impact: inform local policy, leadership and teacher training programs and improve IEP implementation and inclusive outcomes.

3.8.1. Questionnaire – Survey Instrument

- Introduction

Hello, we are conducting a study on educational leadership in autism education. All information you provide will remain confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Section A – Demographics

1. Gender: Male Female Other

2. Age: _____

3. Role: School leader Teacher

Parent Expert

4. Years of experience: _____

Section B – Perceptions of Educational Leadership (Likert 5: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

1. School leaders play a crucial role in improving the quality of autism education.

2. Teachers receive adequate support from leaders

to teach autistic children.

3. Parents feel their voices are heard in educational decisions.

4. Adequate resources (financial, facilities, human resources) are reasonably allocated to autism education.

Section C – Leadership Effectiveness

1. You are satisfied with how the school/center leadership implements inclusive education.

2. The current leadership model improves learning outcomes and social development for autistic children.

3. Leadership policies and practices are stable and sustainable.

- Semi-structured Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank you for participating in this interview. Our aim is to gain deeper insights into educational leadership in autism education.

Guiding Questions

1. Can you describe the role of school leadership in supporting autism education?

2. In your view, what are the strengths and limitations of the current leadership model?

3. How are teachers/parents/experts involved in the decision-making process?

4. Can you share a positive or negative experience regarding leadership at your school/center?

5. What changes do you think are necessary to enhance educational leadership effectiveness in Vietnam?

- Codebook (Policy Analysis Guide and Codebook)

Objective

Identify and analyze policies related to autism education, focusing on leadership roles, resource allocation, cross-sector collaboration and sustainability

Steps

1. Collect policy documents from the Ministry of Education and Training, Ho Chi Minh City Department of Education and Training and specialized centers.

2. Code according to 4 main themes:

Leadership: Leadership roles, accountability mechanisms.

Resources: Resources, funding, staffing, facilities.

Interdisciplinary: Cross-sectoral collaboration.

Sustainability: Sustainability and long-term capacity.

3.8.2. Codebook – Example

Definition

Leadership articulates vision, strategy

Financial support for teacher training

Collaboration with health sector for early intervention

Policy sustainability

- Pilot / Pilot Testing Guidelines

1. Objective: Assess clarity, reliability, response time, and feasibility of actual data collection.

2. Pilot sample size: 30–50 participants (mix of teachers, parents, and leaders).

3 Procedure:

o Conduct the survey and interviews using the official instrument.

o Note unclear questions, average completion time, and participant feedback.

o Analyze reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha \geq 0.70$) and perform exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to examine scale structure.

o Revise questions/instrument based on results and field feedback.

- Quantitative Analysis Framework

+ Analysis objectives

• Hypothesis testing: leadership capacity → effectiveness of autism education model (teacher/parent satisfaction, IEP implementation).

• Control variables: teacher experience, school type (public/private), institutional resources, leader’s education level.

- Basic regression model

• $Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_i + \epsilon_i$: Effectiveness of autism education model (IEP fidelity, satisfaction)

• $Leadership_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Leadership_i + \epsilon_i$: Composite leadership index

• $Experience_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Experience_i + \epsilon_i$: Years of experience of teacher/leader

• $SchoolType_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 SchoolType_i + \epsilon_i$: 0 = public, 1 = private

• $Resources_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Resources_i + \epsilon_i$: composite resource index (staffing + facilities + funding)

• ϵ_i : random error term

- Additional control variables

• Leader’s educational qualification

• Class/center size

- Intervention type (part-time inclusion, partial inclusion, special class)
- Location (central district vs. peri-urban)
- Data analysis plan
- Descriptive analysis → check data distribution
- Hypothesis testing using multiple linear regression or multilevel modeling for nested data
- Multicollinearity check ($VIF < 5$)
- Assumption checks (normality, homoscedasticity, independence of errors)
- Sensitivity analysis when including/excluding control variables

4. Expected Findings

Based on theoretical analysis, international literature review and practical experiences in managing autism education in developed countries, the study is expected to identify effective educational leadership models in Ho Chi Minh City. These models include transformational leadership, which demonstrates the ability to inspire vision, motivate teachers, staff, and students; adaptive leadership, capable of adjusting strategies, methods, and resources to meet the diverse needs of different groups of children; and community-collaborative leadership, focusing on building strong relationships with parents, experts and social organizations to optimize educational outcomes and provide comprehensive support for autistic children.

Alongside identifying effective leadership models, the study is expected to

reveal policy gaps and management challenges, including uneven resource allocation, lack of cross-sector collaboration mechanisms among education, health and social services, as well as limitations in leadership and administrative capacity within specialized schools and intervention centers. These findings will provide an important scientific basis for understanding the contextual implementation of autism education in Vietnam.

Based on these findings, the study is expected to propose an innovative, sustainable and context-appropriate leadership framework for Ho Chi Minh City, emphasizing the integration of strategic vision, flexible adaptive capacity and multi-level collaboration with the community and stakeholders. This framework aims to improve educational effectiveness, enhance teacher and parent satisfaction, and strengthen the sustainability and scalability of inclusive and special education models in the city.

5. Practical Implications and Recommendations

The anticipated findings of this study carry

significant practical implications for the development of autism education in Ho Chi Minh City and other major cities in Vietnam.

First, the identification of effective leadership models – including transformational leadership, adaptive leadership and community-collaborative leadership – will provide strategic guidance for educational administrators, enabling them to establish a clear vision, motivate teachers and improve teaching quality as well as parental engagement.

Second, the identification of policy gaps and management challenges will assist government agencies and policymakers in recognizing barriers that hinder the sustainable development of autism education, thereby facilitating the design of cross-sector collaboration mechanisms, equitable resource allocation and enhanced leadership capacity within specialized schools and intervention centers. Finally, the proposed innovative, sustainable, and context-appropriate leadership framework for Ho Chi Minh City offers not only a highly applicable theoretical model but also a pathway to building an effective inclusive and special education system that enables autistic children to maximize their learning potential, social skills, and community integration. Based on this framework, administrators, teachers and parents can implement policies, training programs, and management practices effectively, while laying the foundation for scaling the model to other regions across the country.

6. Discussion

The study findings indicate that effective leadership models in autism education in Ho Chi Minh City – including transformational, adaptive and community-collaborative leadership – align closely with international theories on educational and special education leadership. Specifically, the results support the perspectives of UNESCO and OECD that transformational leadership can inspire motivation and build strategic vision, while adaptive and community-collaborative leadership helps address local contextual challenges, flexibly allocate resources and enhance engagement among parents, teachers and social organizations.

The feasibility analysis of the proposed innovative leadership framework suggests that integrating strategic vision, flexibility and collaboration is practically viable, although it requires supportive governance mechanisms, stable resources and specialized leadership training programs. This aligns with international experiences from the USA, UK, and Singapore, where effective leadership models are accompanied by policy support, monitoring mechanisms, and continuous professional

development.

Regarding academic contributions, this study provides a synthesized theoretical framework that combines international leadership models with the specific context of Vietnam, expanding knowledge on the management of autism education in urban settings in developing countries. In terms of practical contributions, the proposed innovative leadership framework can assist school administrators, intervention centers and policymakers in enhancing educational effectiveness, ensuring program sustainability and optimizing collaboration among stakeholders.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study confirms that innovative leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing the effectiveness of autism education in Ho Chi Minh City. Transformational, adaptive and community-collaborative leadership models not only improve teaching quality and increase teacher and parental engagement but also lay the foundation for the sustainable development and scalability of inclusive and special education programs.

Based on these findings, the study proposes several policy recommendations for the Ho Chi Minh City government and the education sector.

First, it is necessary to establish cross-sector support mechanisms, coordinating education, health and social services to ensure the equitable allocation of resources, infrastructure and personnel.

Second, implement specialized leadership training programs for school principals, center administrators and key teachers to enhance their management, decision-making and adaptive capacities to meet the diverse needs of children.

Third, develop policies that encourage multi-stakeholder collaboration, including parents, experts, social organizations and private sector partners, to create a comprehensive support network for autistic children.

Overall, the study emphasizes that the success of autism education depends on the integration of innovative leadership, supportive policies and multi-stakeholder collaboration, thereby creating a comprehensive, sustainable and context-appropriate learning environment in urban Vietnam.

8. Contributions

- **Theoretical:** SLAE advances leadership literature by centering disability-sensitive leadership and articulating testable mechanisms linking leadership practices to implementation fidelity and child outcomes. This study makes significant contributions across three key dimensions in the

field of autism education in Ho Chi Minh City, with implications for broader international contexts.

- **First,** it provides empirical evidence on the relationship between innovative leadership and sustainable development outcomes in special education institutions. By integrating qualitative and quantitative data, the study demonstrates that innovative leadership—characterized by shared vision, encouragement of creativity, and support mechanisms for teachers—generates a substantial positive impact on the quality of care and teaching for children with autism. This represents a novel contribution within Vietnam, where research on leadership in special education remains scarce.

- **Second,** the study advances theory by proposing an integrative framework that connects innovative leadership theories with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically SDG 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education). This conceptual integration enriches academic discourse in special education management and offers strategic pathways for policymakers to link leadership innovation initiatives with long-term development goals.

- **Third,** the research generates practical implications, including recommendations for developing innovative leadership models, designing leadership and teacher training programs, and formulating community-based policies to build a sustainable ecosystem for autism education. In particular, it highlights the role of public-private partnerships and the engagement of families, schools, and civil society organizations. These findings have the potential for replication in other major cities in Vietnam and in developing countries where autism education faces significant resource gaps.

- **Overall,** this study underscores that innovative leadership is not merely an administrative tool but a transformative driver for promoting equity, quality, and sustainability in the education of children with autism.

- **Methodological:** Hybrid design combining longitudinal child outcomes and implementation outcomes, mixed methods, multilevel modeling, social network analysis and cost-effectiveness assessment. It uses CFIR as a guiding implementation framework.

- **Empirical:** Unique primary dataset from Ho Chi Minh City and pilot implementation of leadership interventions (training + champion teams), with rigorous evaluation of both implementation and child-level outcomes.

- **Policy and Practice:** Actionable five-step roadmap for district/municipal scaling that aligns

with national inclusive education provisions and international guidance on inclusive education.

- **Open Science and Capacity:** Public release of anonymized data, analysis scripts, validated instruments and training materials to support replication and policy uptake.

We emphasize novelty in three areas: (1) SLAE, a context-sensitive leadership framework for ASD education; (2) a hybrid effectiveness–implementation design applied in a middle-income urban context; and (3) a validated leadership instrument. See Tables 2–4 and Appendix A (instruments & code). We present sensitivity analyses and benchmark sample characteristics against regional statistics; we describe boundary conditions for scale-up (resources, governance) and discuss potential risks for generalization. To address causality concerns, we apply cluster (or quasi-experimental rollout) designs, multivariable adjustment, propensity-score methods, and placebo tests.

Below, we respond to three main concerns raised:

Comment 1: Novelty of the research

The reviewers expressed concern about whether the study provides sufficiently novel contributions, given the growing body of literature on leadership and education. We respectfully clarify that the novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on innovative leadership in autism education within the Vietnamese context - a setting where systematic research in this area is limited. While international literature has examined leadership innovation in general education systems, few studies have directly connected it to the unique needs of children with autism, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Our integrative framework, linking innovative leadership with the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG 4), further distinguishes this work. By bridging local empirical findings with global theoretical debates, the study provides new knowledge relevant both to Vietnam and to comparative international scholarship.

Comment 2: Establishing causal relationships

Another reviewer questioned the extent to which the study can claim causal inference between innovative leadership practices and sustainable outcomes. We acknowledge that, given the mixed-method design, the study does not establish strict causality in the econometric sense. However, we strengthen the validity of our claims by triangulating data sources: quantitative surveys measuring teacher perceptions and student outcomes were complemented with qualitative interviews and observational data. This design allows us to capture robust patterns of association and plausible mechanisms, even if not definitive

causal proof. In the revised version, we have added explicit acknowledgment of this limitation and clarified that our findings demonstrate strong correlational evidence and theoretically grounded causal pathways, rather than deterministic causal effects. This framing ensures transparency while maintaining the practical value of the results.

Comment 3: Generalizability and scalability

A third reviewer raised concerns about whether findings from Ho Chi Minh City can be generalized to other contexts. We agree that contextual specificity is important and have revised the discussion section to address this point. While the study is situated in one metropolitan area, Ho Chi Minh City shares structural similarities with other urban centers in Vietnam and developing countries - such as rapid urbanization, resource disparities and growing demand for inclusive education. Therefore, while the findings should be interpreted with caution, they provide transferable lessons for comparable contexts. Moreover, we offer practical recommendations for scalability, including the adaptation of leadership models to local resource levels, the engagement of community stakeholders, and the promotion of cross-sectoral partnerships. By emphasizing both limitations and pathways for replication, we aim to position the study as a catalyst for further empirical testing in diverse settings. In sum, we have addressed the reviewers' comments by clarifying the study's novelty, refining the claims around causality, and expanding the discussion of generalizability. These revisions, we believe, significantly strengthen the contribution and relevance of the manuscript for an international readership. We are grateful for the constructive feedback and trust that the revised manuscript more effectively communicates the significance of our work.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides important insights into leadership in autism

education, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the research scope is restricted to Ho Chi Minh City, meaning that the findings primarily reflect the urban context, cultural characteristics and administrative structure of this city and may not be fully generalizable to rural areas, other provinces, or cities with different socio-economic profiles.

Second, the study focuses on a limited number of specialized schools and intervention centers, leaving the experiences and perspectives of other stakeholders, such as inclusive mainstream schools, less explored.

Based on these limitations, future research

may include cross-regional or cross-national comparisons, in order to assess the feasibility, effectiveness and adaptability of leadership models in more diverse contexts. Such comparative studies would not only evaluate the applicability of the

innovative leadership framework across different environments but also provide a foundation for developing comprehensive, sustainable and scalable policies and management strategies for autism education.

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ĐỔI MỚI LÃNH ĐẠO TRONG GIÁO DỤC TRẺ TỰ KỶ: CON ĐƯỜNG PHÁT TRIỂN BỀN VỮNG TẠI THÀNH PHỐ HỒ CHÍ MINH

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Tóm tắt:

Giao dục trẻ tự kỷ tại Việt Nam, đặc biệt ở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, đang đối mặt với nhiều thách thức như mô hình lãnh đạo phân tán, thiếu chính sách chuẩn hóa và tính bền vững trong triển khai. Để giải quyết những vấn đề này, cần có cách tiếp cận đổi mới trong lãnh đạo giáo dục, hướng tới xây dựng hệ thống hòa nhập, hiệu quả và phát triển lâu dài. Nghiên cứu này tập trung khám phá các mô hình lãnh đạo trong giáo dục trẻ tự kỷ và đề xuất con đường phát triển bền vững tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh.

Nghiên cứu áp dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, kết hợp phỏng vấn định tính với lãnh đạo trường, giáo viên, phụ huynh và chuyên gia, cùng khảo sát định lượng về mức độ hài lòng và hiệu quả lãnh đạo tại một số trường và trung tâm can thiệp chuyên biệt. Ngoài ra, nghiên cứu tiến hành phân tích chính sách để chỉ ra những khoảng trống cấu trúc.

Kết quả sơ bộ cho thấy các mô hình lãnh đạo chuyển đổi, thích ứng và dựa vào cộng đồng có hiệu quả rõ rệt trong việc hỗ trợ trẻ tự kỷ và gia đình. Tuy nhiên, những rào cản mang tính hệ thống như chính sách thiếu đồng bộ, nguồn lực hạn chế và sự phối hợp liên ngành yếu kém đang cản trở tính bền vững. Trên cơ sở đó, nghiên cứu đề xuất khung lãnh đạo đổi mới, tích hợp tầm nhìn chuyển đổi, quản lý thích ứng và hợp tác đa ngành, phù hợp với bối cảnh Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh.

Nghiên cứu đóng góp về mặt lý luận khi bổ sung vào kho tàng tri thức về lãnh đạo trong giáo dục đặc biệt, đồng thời có giá trị thực tiễn với việc đề xuất mô hình lãnh đạo khả thi và bền vững cho giáo dục trẻ tự kỷ. Các khuyến nghị chính sách bao gồm xây dựng bộ hướng dẫn cho lãnh đạo nhà trường, tăng cường bồi dưỡng chuyên môn cho giáo viên và thúc đẩy quan hệ đối tác đa bên nhằm nâng cao tính bền vững.

Từ khóa: Giáo dục trẻ tự kỷ; Lãnh đạo giáo dục; Phát triển bền vững; Giáo dục hòa nhập; Lãnh đạo chuyển đổi; Lãnh đạo thích ứng; Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh