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# **Inclusive Schoolwide Pedagogical Principles: Cultural Indicators in Action**

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Additional information is available at the end of the chapter

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## **Abstract**

“Inclusion!” is the catch cry heard across both educational and community contexts and yet the reality is often less than ideal. The diversity and complexity of student needs within regular classrooms are both an asset and a challenge for schools and classroom teachers. We believe, with Nelson Mandela, that “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” and in order for such a dream to be achieved, it is essential that the pedagogical practices that support the needs of diverse learners are clearly understood and supported by both teachers and school leaders. Most existing research emphasises the need to improve the skill sets of both teacher graduates and practising teachers as a means of enhancing student support. We suggest that it cannot stop at the individual classroom practice level. To maximise student outcomes, inclusive pedagogical practices must be school wide, and well understood, thus resulting in a culture of inclusion becoming embedded in school wide practices and maintained over the long term. Inclusive schoolwide pedagogical (SWP) frameworks and shared practices lie at the heart of the two case study examples used to illustrate the key messages from our research.

**Keywords:** schoolwide pedagogy, inclusion, student special needs, social justice, school culture, school improvement

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## **1. Introduction**

Australia’s Disability Discrimination Act of 1992 [1] and the Disability Standards for Education [2] support the inclusion of all students into, what is often termed as, ‘mainstream’ classrooms. There is a philosophical acceptance that all students have the right of access to equitable learning experiences. It is this ‘students with special needs’ understanding of inclusion

that is often thought of when the term ‘inclusive school practices’ is used. However, inclusion is far more than this. There is an increasing emphasis, in schools, on understanding and catering for the diversity of all learners in our classrooms, and rightly so. Australian demographics have been changing dramatically with increasing evidence of a richly diverse nation. According to statistics from the 2011 National Census, 26% (5.3 million) of Australians were born overseas and a further 4.1 million Australians have one parent who was born overseas. In 2011, 82% of the overseas-born population lived in capital cities [3].

As teachers, we are privileged to have the opportunity to work in diverse contexts and with diverse groups and individuals. The richness and opportunities within today’s classrooms, to learn from and with our students, parents, community and colleagues by sharing perspectives and histories that may be unfamiliar to us, and to others, is an opportunity that must be embraced in order to break down the many social injustices that still exist. Such injustices limit the opportunities of students to fulfil their full potential. As educators, we have a moral and legal obligation to ensure that teaching and learning practices demonstrate respect and understanding of diversity [4]. So what types of school practices promote social justice? What sort of school culture encourages the embracing and valuing of diversity? How do school leaders and teachers advocate for each child in their care? Teaching should and can be an activist profession [5] because education is acknowledged as being fundamental to shaping our future. It involves “the formation of each new generation into the citizens of tomorrow...In this age of ‘super-diversity’, it is difficult to categorise or place people into neat boxes. It is therefore all the more important for us to sharpen up our thinking and practice by developing a critical understanding of issues of difference” [6].

The data underpinning the illustrations within our chapter were collected from two state primary (elementary) schools in a large regional city in Queensland, Australia. Queensland’s 2005 Inclusive Education Statement [7] is a particularly insightful one and raises issues and approaches to education that require an immediate and ongoing response from school communities more broadly. The statement focused on:

- fostering a “learning community that questions disadvantage and challenges social injustice”;
- maximising “the educational and social outcomes of all students through the identification and reduction of barriers to learning, especially for those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion”; and
- ensuring “all students understand and value diversity so that they have the knowledge and skills for positive participation in a just, equitable and democratic global society”.

The current statement [8] outlines inclusive school practices as: responding constructively to the needs of all students; viewing difference as a resource; ensuring all school members feel safe and free from discrimination; and, promoting locally negotiated responses to student, family and community needs.

Over the years, there has been much discussion about just what ‘inclusion’ looks like in the classroom but less on what this looks like across a whole school community. So what does responding constructively look like – at a school level? How do the identification and

reduction of barriers take place – at a school level? How can all students and staff be brought to an understanding and a valuing of diversity? Answers to questions such as these can lever pedagogical change and ways of working across a school enhancing school culture and outcomes for all students.

## 2. The literature

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [9] states that education providers must ensure “persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education”. This statement is true not only in relation to students with different types of impairment, the more commonly interpreted understanding of the words ‘special needs’, but resonates with culturally diverse needs, unique learning needs, socio-economic diversity and indeed the full spectrum of individual student needs within classroom settings. Australia’s Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals of Young Australians [10] requires that education systems “provide all students with access to high-quality schooling that is free from discrimination based on gender, language, sexual orientation, pregnancy, culture, ethnicity, religion, health or disability, socioeconomic background or geographic location”.

Such statements are indeed inspiring but perhaps practice is more in the ‘aspiring’ phase. Educational policy translation into practice continues to be problematic and never more so than in the rhetoric that exists around concepts of inclusion. Florian suggests “Special education’s policy framework, which is intended to ensure the right to education for those who would otherwise be excluded from schooling, has paradoxically created problems of inequality within education” [11]. She goes on to say that if the discourse within schools is deficit by nature – what the students are not capable of rather than what they are – then “it cannot help to resolve the dilemmas of difference” [11].

Research suggests that it is not possible to stimulate sustainable changes in practice without collaborative conversations based on activities, issues, solutions and epiphanies related directly to the act of teaching [12]. Key factors driving improvements in classroom practice can be seen as:

- a. additional skill development on a needs level basis, and
- b. exploring and unpacking current practices at a collective level, thus developing a “common language” for pedagogical action and reflection [13, 14].

As a result, colleagues and individuals can more easily reflect in-action and on-action [15], about what worked, and why, as well as what did not work, and why. This includes developing a shared understanding of what inclusion should ‘look like’, ‘sound like’ and ‘feel like’ within the specific school context.

In recent years, there has been much debate about just what it means to be an ‘inclusive school’. UNESCO’s [16] definition indicates inclusion should be seen as:

a process of addressing and responding [emphasis added] to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion [emphasis added] within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies with a common vision [emphasis added] that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system [emphasis added] to educate all children.

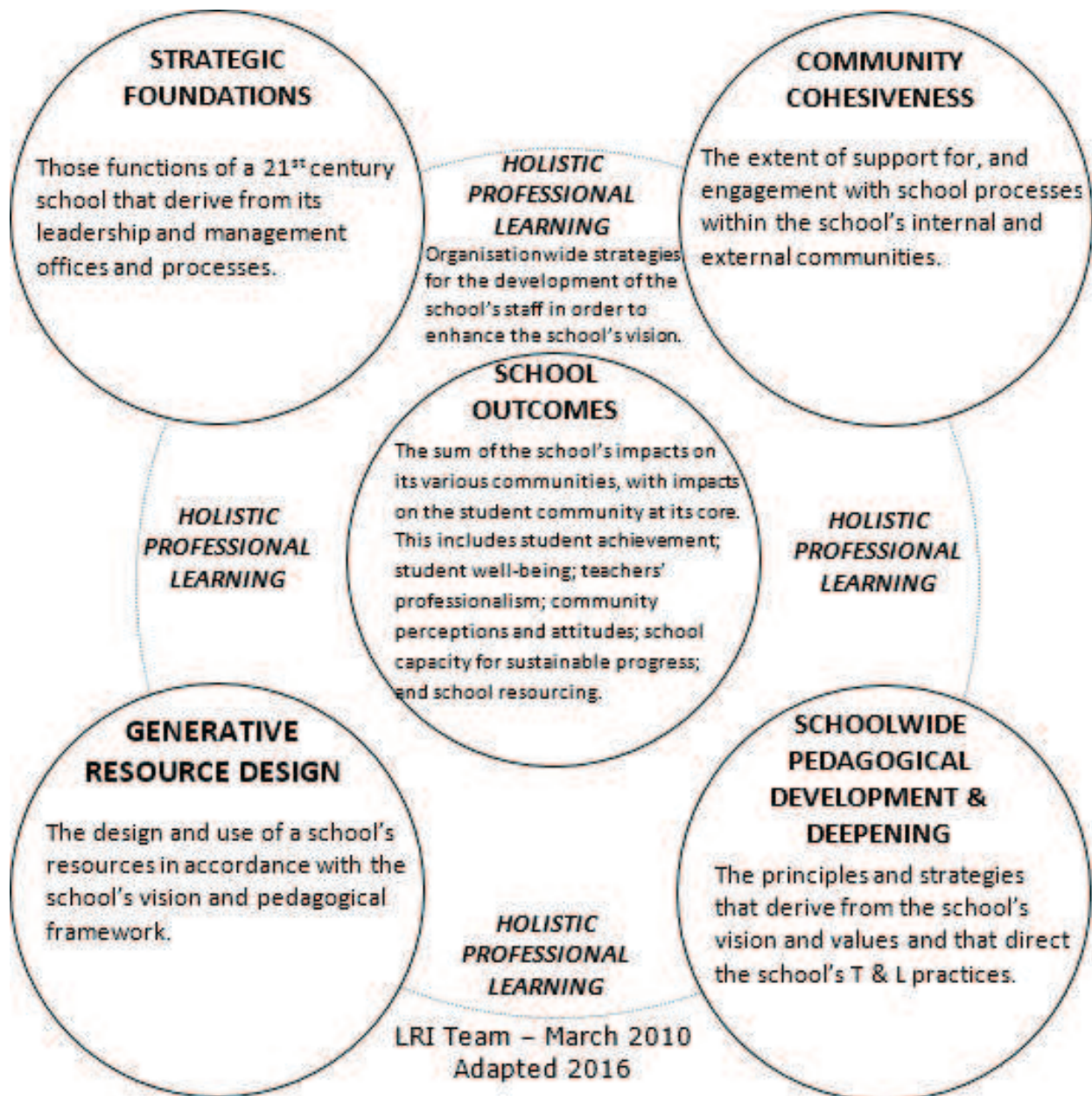
The phrases emphasised within the UNESCO definition are integral to what the authors believe are key to the establishment of sustainable inclusive school wide pedagogical practices which can be seen as “any and all efforts made by a school and its community to make students and their parents feel welcome” [17]. For such ideals to be achieved it is necessary to “consider how it might be possible for teachers to develop new ways of believing that all children can learn, that they have the knowledge and skill to make a difference to children’s lives and that such work is their responsibility” [18].

For over a decade, research conducted by our research team, the Leadership Research International (LRI) Group based at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, into school improvement in diverse Australian school settings, suggests that a goal such as this is not achievable by teachers operating alone within the four walls of their classroom [19–21]. The research-based framework for organisational alignment [22] (see **Figure 1**) illustrates the interrelationship between a school’s vision, leadership practices, strategic foundations, community, shared pedagogical understandings and resource leveraging that must be considered in order to improve outcomes for students. It is the way in which these various components align, that influence the ways of working on a daily basis and are indicative of the school’s culture. Fundamental to these interrelationships is the key element of holistic professional learning, which values teachers as leaders in partnership with formalised leadership personnel, working as informed collaborative individuals focussing their talents and abilities to target student need.

Schein suggests in Theory of Organisational Culture [23] three main areas (layers) which are indicative of an organisation’s culture. The most visible layer is the *artefacts layer* which while clearly visible by others may not necessarily be well understood. The next deeper layer is the *espoused beliefs and values layer* where strategies, goals and shared perceptions are articulated and reinforced. The deepest layer is the *norms and assumptions layer* where deeply embedded, unconscious norms and assumptions lie. Therefore, school culture is visually manifested as artefacts such as a vision, a mission statement, a pedagogical framework, newsletters, and websites. Values and beliefs are explicitly articulated by leaders focused on drawing a school community together to work on shared goals. Over time, this becomes an agreed way of working – ‘the way we do things around here’ – the basic norms and assumptions of a shared and contextualised meaning system.

Although teachers are certainly a major contributor to improving student outcomes, if the word ‘teachers’ in the previous Rouse and Florian [18] quote is changed to that of ‘school communities’ to read ‘consider how it might be possible for school communities to develop new ways of believing that all children can learn, that they have the knowledge and skill to make a difference to children’s lives and that such work is their responsibility’ then it more





**Figure 1.** Research-based framework for organisational alignment.

accurately captures our view of the fundamental changes needing to be made. School communities must align their practices to support and work with students, staff, parents and communities to ensure that inclusive ways of working become embedded and sustainable across a school. We believe that inclusive schools are characterised by their processes, which support students, staff, families, and community on a daily basis, and which can be expanded upon to increase support at significant moments within a student's learning journey.

These factors work in synergy and support the establishment of inclusive schoolwide pedagogical practices and development of a school culture capable of supporting all students, families and staff, and in particular, those students with special learning needs, including social, emotional and intellectual. Although the underpinnings of school culture are nebulous

and difficult to pinpoint, an inclusive culture lies at the heart of quality school practices. It is the 'way we do things around here' that is indicative of deeply embedded practice and the principles that inform such practice. For the astute observer these surface in everyday discourse and in the general acceptance of school processes and structures. So the language of inclusion should be clearly heard across a school, in staff meetings, parent meetings, the playground and classrooms. Therefore, in our research, the collection of data from students, teachers, teacher aides and school leaders allowed for the identification of themes indicative of ways of working, which was the core of our quest to identify pedagogical principles that support the needs of diverse student cohorts.

We started our research by acknowledging that there were a number of already existing indicators (EIs) of inclusion from the current literature that needed to be considered. These included the understanding that inclusion is:

- a process;
- aligned to a vision;
- promoting locally negotiated responses; and
- involving changes and modifications; which
- increase participation and maximise outcomes;

thereby eliminating exclusion within and from education. Additional existing indicators detail inclusion lies at the heart of a learning community that:

- questions and challenges current practice; and
- ensures that all students understand and value diversity; that
- adults value difference as a resource; and
- practices engender feelings of safety and belonging; this means
- supporting and working with students, staff, parents and communities.

In the context of our research we were conscious that the above 10 existing indicators should be apparent somewhere within the school artefacts of an inclusive vision, as well as in the clear articulation of values and beliefs about the need to celebrate diversity, difference and inclusion, and ultimately in the norms and assumptions underpinning a school's 'ways of working'. Such evidence would particularly be reflected in a school's everyday language-in-use [24] and epitomize the school's organisational culture [23].

### 3. The methodology

A phenomenological case study approach was adopted where the phenomenon was 'inclusive practices supporting students with special learning needs'. This approach answers the question:

In two inclusive school settings, what key school wide pedagogical principles and actions underpin the support of all students especially those with special learning needs?

Data collection focused on the lived experiences of stakeholders working within an inclusive school context combined with observations by researchers and their interpretation of artefacts.

Phenomenological research seeks to “study how human phenomenon are experienced in consciousness, in cognitive and perceptual acts” [25]. Phenomenology, a qualitative research approach, seeks to “locate the observer in the world” [26]. Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and others, believed that understanding a phenomenon involves collating the views, stories and perspectives of those experiencing it, with the researcher seeking to construct meaning from the messages shared [27].

Case study enabled the exploration of the phenomenon within its natural setting [26]. Two sites were purposively selected as these sites had been identified by the education system as offering effective examples of inclusion. Therefore, a variety of data sources should provide evidence of various aspects of the phenomenon to be exposed, interpreted and understood. VanWynsberghe and Khan [28] suggest that the interpretivist paradigm assumes that there are numerous points of entry into any reality, therefore participant perspectives and lived experiences within each context must be viewed both separately and as a whole, allowing the researcher to fully explore a particular reality relevant to the case study phenomenon. The research questions were developed collaboratively to focus on collating the lived experiences of a wide range of school leaders, staff, parents and students. The overarching research question fore-fronted the necessity to take into account the context within which inclusion occurred in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon. The case was in its simplest terms inclusion in two school settings and the overarching research question was explored through two sub-questions:

1. How are all students, especially those with special learning needs, supported within an inclusive school setting?
2. What specific actions, structures, and school wide pedagogical practices (the school’s “ways of working”) contribute to the inclusion of all students?

We define ‘special learning needs’ as: disabilities; enhanced abilities, diverse cultural backgrounds; first language diversity; learning difficulties or disorders; and/or emotional, behavioural, physical, and spiritual special needs.

Two authors spent several months, collecting data – one in one school and one in the other. Triangulation of data sources (verbatim transcripts from semi-structured interview questions, observations as noted in researcher journals, and artefacts collected on site) enabled the researchers to view and investigate the phenomena from multiple perspectives and provide an understanding of school culture at each level [23]. In this study researchers independently coded a set of data and then met together to reach consensus on the emerging codes and categories. Researcher interpretations of practices and understandings were checked with participants and an initial report sent to each school principal for comment to ensure credibility and cross check that the interviewee’s intent had been appropriately captured.



4. The research design

Maxwell’s [29] interactive model of research design was taken into account and consideration given to the reciprocal relationship between the research questions, goals, methods, validity and conceptual framework. **Figure 2**, illustrates the conceptual framework used in this study which draws together Schein’s Theory of Organisational Culture [23] with the existing indicators (EIs) of inclusive school culture (**Table 1**).

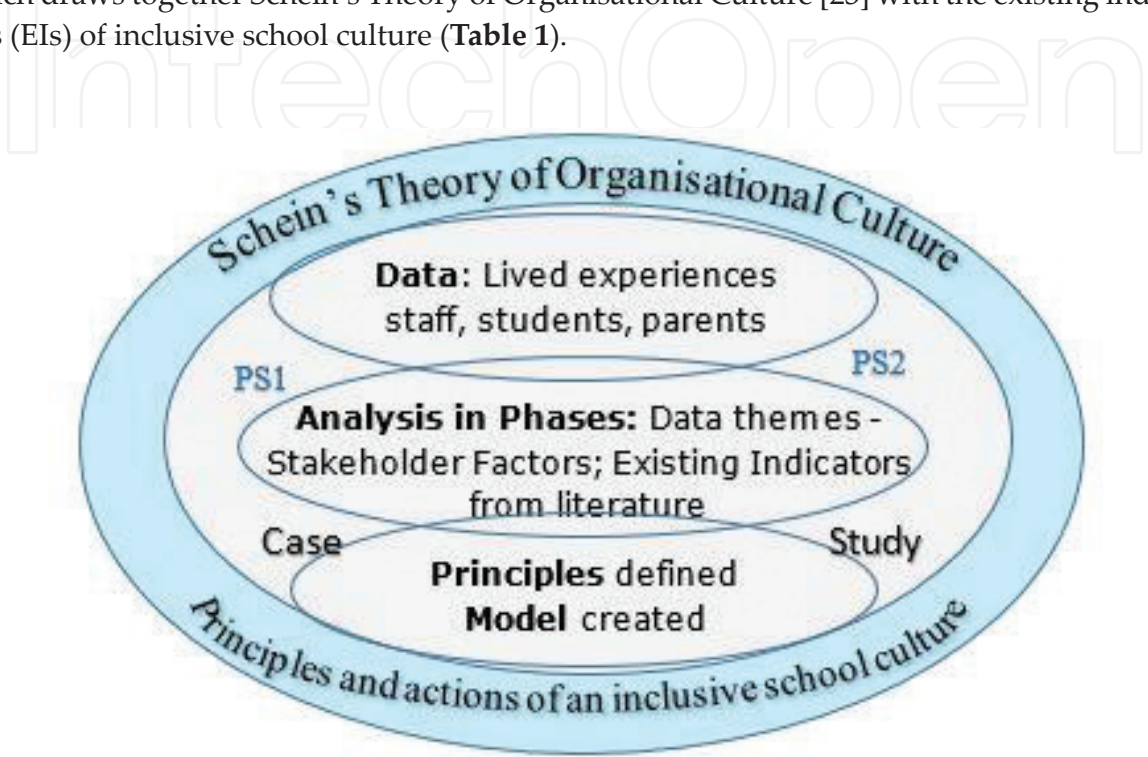


Figure 2. Conceptual framework of research design.

Inclusion ...	
EI1	is a process
EI2	is aligned to a vision
EI3	requires promotion of locally negotiated responses
EI4	involves changes and modifications
EI5	involves increased participation to maximise outcomes
EI6	needs a learning community that questions and challenges current practice
EI7	needs all students to understand and value diversity
EI8	needs adults to value difference as a resource
EI9	requires practices that engender feelings of safety and belonging, and
E20	requires <i>supporting and working with students, staff, parents and communities</i>

Table 1. Existing indicators (EIs) of inclusive school practice.

Three phases of analysis were undertaken:

- Phase 1 sought understandings related to stakeholder factors (SF);
- Phase 2 collated broader emergent themes and linked these to SFs and existing indicators (EIs); and,
- Phase 3 involved seeking deeper understanding by identifying new knowledge and revealing the principles sought as the answer to the research question.

The two Primary School case study sites are referred to as PS1 and PS2.

## 5. The context

The two Primary School case study sites are referred to as PS1 and PS2. Both schools had been identified by regional office staff as having quality outcomes and inclusive environments, and each had a strong sense of identity (**Figure 3**).

They had similar numbers of students but different demographics. PS1 had above average levels of students with special needs (12% of total enrolment). Primary School 2 (PS2) had an average sized special needs program (9%) but around 50% of students came from backgrounds where English was an additional language or dialect. Both schools had demonstrated strong gains identified by the National Assessment Program.

Both schools had undertaken a school capacity building process, in partnership with LRI team members, over a number of years. Each school community had collaboratively developed a strong school vision, well understood and explicitly taught values, and a schoolwide pedagogical

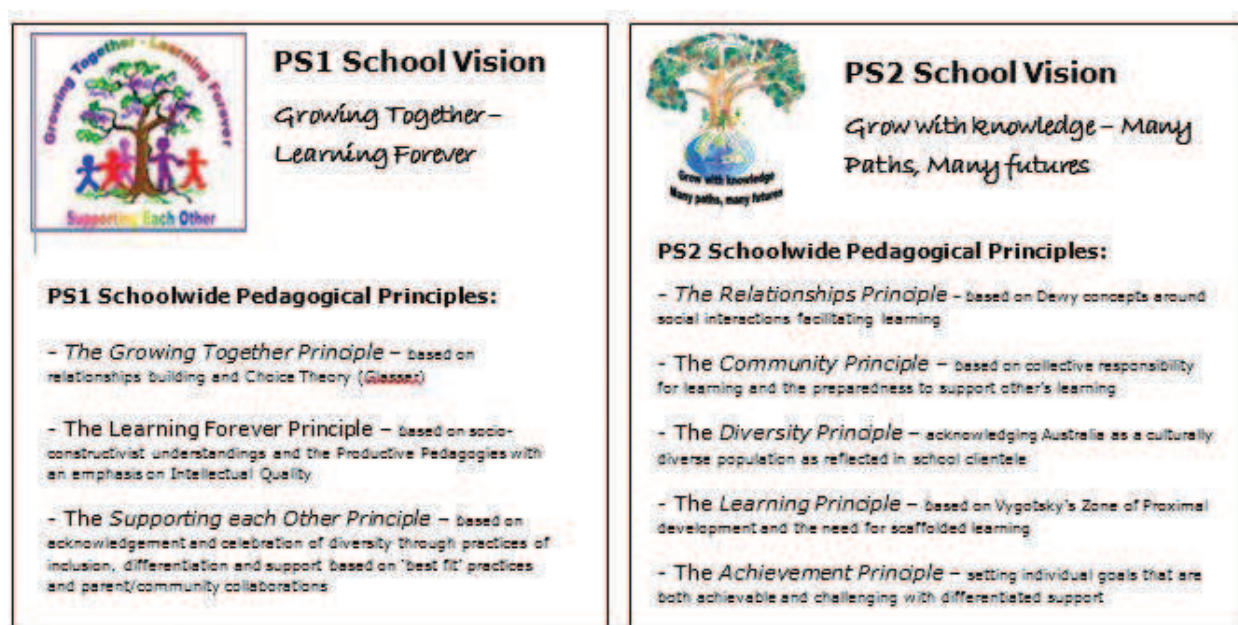


Figure 3. PS1's and PS2's vision and SWP.

(SWP) framework [30, 31]. Each of these artefacts emerged as a result of the school engaging with the Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools (IDEAS) Project [22]. Interestingly both school communities adopted the image of a tree as a metaphor for their vision, even though each vision was distinctly different. Each vision and SWP is captured in **Figure 3**.

## 6. Research participation

Permission had been gained from Education Queensland, school principals, and university Ethics Approval had been received. Principals indicated that staff could volunteer to be involved and suggested a number of parents and students who would be interested in this research because of its relevancy for them. Students took part in focus group discussions at each school. Staff and parents engaged in individual conversations with the researchers. Conversations were digitally recorded and then transcribed by the researchers themselves.

Purposive sampling was utilised in alignment with what Cohen et al. [32] advised researchers to consider: sample size, representativeness, access to the sample; and the sampling, where too large a sample might become unwieldy and too small a sample might be unrepresentative. In total 25 teaching staff were involved in the data collation exercise – 15 (10% of fractional and full-time teaching staff) from PS1 and 10 (7.5% of fractional and full-time teaching staff) from PS2. Eight students were interviewed in a focus group from each school. In addition, several teacher aides and parents were interviewed. Collectively the data represents the viewpoints of approximately 45 participants.

The first interpretation of the data drew on the perceptions and stories of students, teachers, and teacher aides. For the purpose of capturing the initial picture of pedagogical and cultural 'reality', data collected from principal interviews were not included in this chapter although these findings will be reported in the near future [33]. The reasoning behind this decision was to ensure that we captured the voice of the people who experienced the reality of the 'the way we do things around here' and therefore seen by those operating at the classroom level. It is through the day to day operations that norms and assumptions underlying school culture are illuminated. Some participants referred to actions by the principal or other members of the leadership team. The collation of these perceptions infers a number of leadership characteristics integral to each school's 'ways of working'.

The semi-structured interview approach allowed participant discussions to illustrate additional related ideas as interesting points emerged. Excerpts of interview data illustrating findings have been woven throughout this chapter. Schools have been numbered (PS1 and PS2) and participants identified by a coding system: Teacher 1 – T1; Teacher Aide 1 – TA1; Parent 1 – P1; Student – S1; and, Head of the Special Education Program – HOSE.

## 7. The analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three phases.

- PHASE 1: Stakeholder focussed themes (SF)

- PHASE 2: Themes linked to stakeholder factors (SF) and existing indicators (EI)
- PHASE 3: Theme differences identified, principles articulated and a model created

**PHASE 1:** The Stakeholder focused phase acknowledged that a school is a community of individuals working together. Factors relating to the key stakeholders were summarised according to staff, parent, student, and leadership with management related factors. Although there were context specific nuances, a number of inclusive strategies appeared to be in operation across both schools. These operated as integrated pieces of a whole school approach embracing staff, parents, students, leaders and system interactions.

In both contexts, it had been reported that the principal had placed priority on developing staff capacity to support students with a particular need, and then followed up with additional sessions as required. Collaboration across the school ensured that planning was comprehensive and manageable by all parties inclusive of special support staff, teachers, teacher aides, students, parents and the leadership team. Professional development and time for professional conversations were a priority. Multiple opportunities were provided within the classroom for students to build metacognitive skills through mental processing tasks and 'talk alouds', so students could learn how to express their learning and emotional needs. This was particularly important for PS2 due to their high numbers of students with English as another language.

***Staff focused factors:** targeted professional development; professional collaboration; intentional development of metacognitive skills; clear consciousness of varied needs; shared understanding of successful pedagogies for context*

Teachers indicated that considerable time was spent by the principal and other members of the leadership team, such as the Head of the Special Education Program, on contacting parents prior to a student's entry into school. Parents confirmed this. PS2 found this challenging as many parents did not speak English but translators were brought into the process. Multiple and varied opportunities were provided for parents to express their concerns and be 'heard'. Sometimes all that was needed was for parents to be reassured that support measures were in place for their child. Where regular consultations with medical practitioners and support personnel were needed, these were arranged and the school assisted parents to understand and respond to any concerns raised.

***Parent focused factors:** prior contact with parents; multiple opportunities for parents to engage; supported interactions with medical or other support services; empathy and understanding of diverse family contexts*

Students were encouraged to be leaders of inclusive practice within their classrooms and whilst in the playground. Social skills and values education programs were in place to assist students develop peer relationships and support groups. Student leaders were actively encouraged to be the voice for their peers and were fully engaged in orienting students new to the school and becoming mentors in their initial transition to campus. Teachers were encouraged to provide multiple opportunities within each classroom for students to share their experiences, passions and hobbies in order to find 'triggers' and 'hooks' into learning. At both schools, students were encouraged to build independent learning skills within the classroom. Older students set their own learning goals and planned how to attain these through small achievable steps.



***Student focused factors:** student leadership development; social skills/values explicitly taught; peer support; personal learning goals; interests taken into account*

Where information was received from parents, or another avenue, that a student with particularly complex issues would be enrolling at the school, then at a managerial level, teams of people would meet to detail required school adjustments to process, environment and resources. This was undertaken well in advance to fully inform planning at the classroom level but was flexible enough to make adjustments 'on the run' when direct individual evaluations could be made. This pre-planning would often involve liaising with District Support staff to flag the probability of requiring extra resources or equipment. The leadership team interviewed parents, with their children, and the school's vision and expectations were clearly articulated. Leadership was not considered the domain of the principal alone, or of the leadership team as a whole. Individual staff members were encouraged and supported to make contributions to and lead working groups and planning sessions.

***Leadership and management (L&M) factors:** address complex issues prior to enrolment; accept that context makes a difference; work with outside support avenues*

**Reflection:** With these various factors in mind, the research-based framework's (**Figure 1**) element of Cohesive Community becomes apparent. The principal made it very clear that respect for all stakeholders was expected. Leaders believed in supporting families throughout their entire contact with the school, prior to student enrolment and through to moving to a different location. Basically student need drives planning, timetabling, communication conduits, professional development, and relationships with parents and the wider community. In both schools, it was noted that staff had moved on when their expectations did not meet the expectations of the principal. The leadership team emphasised the need to maintain whole school commitment to the integrity of the school Vision, which was seen as a dynamic entity providing ongoing direction and actioned through school wide practices. This shared commitment could be seen and was reflected in each context specific language of inclusion.

**PHASE 2:** The themes linked to stakeholder factors (*SF*) and existing indicators (*EI*) phase sought to more fully understand the character of the inclusive school practices in place. Emergent themes were examined in detail for the recurring principles that underpinned the cultural assumptions and beliefs, which impacted on decisions made within each school. These choices influenced how each school engaged with their stakeholders. Both schools had surprisingly similar ways of working overlayed with contextual differences and there were definite synergies in initial themes, therefore school themes have been combined and nuances identified where synergies did not directly align. Extracts from the data that illustrate a theme are then taken from either one or perhaps both schools.

Not all points within themes are illustrated with examples but the data clearly supports the theme with snippets of conversation and synthesised interpretations. **Table 2** captures the themes and indicates the schools where a theme is particularly strong. Where one particular element within a linked theme came to the fore as being of major importance, apart from other related factors, the sub-theme to the theme above is indicated by a (b). It also correlates themes to the stakeholder factors (*SF*) and the 10 existing indicators (*EIs*) outlined previously.

Key theme	Evidence	SFs/EIs
Theme 1: Organisation & structures are strongly student centred & inclusive	School strategic foundations are linked to the vision, values and SWP (PS1 & PS2). Everybody works together to ensure every student has their needs met (PS1 & PS2). The principal ensures all teachers are inducted into who we are (T3 PS1). Teachers make a huge effort to include all kids. The difference between now and 3 years ago is huge. There were kids fighting to be included ... now, they seem to just come and everyone's happy. We make things work! (T1 PS2).	L&M SFEIs 1, 2, 3, & 5
Theme 1(b): Best fit choices: students, teachers, teacher aides, resources & environment	Timetables are developed as 'best fit' choices – student to class, teacher to class, aide to teacher, aide to student – staff strengths and environmental aspects are considered (PS1 & PS2). All kids that come into the school, we want to do our best for them. We try and tailor programs (whether they've got a disability or not) to suit that child ... down to changing Human Resources and fiddling current structures and processes around (HOSE PS1).	Staff & L&M SFEIs 3, 4, & 6
Theme 2: Explicit teaching of social skills & the valuing of diversity	Tolerance, acceptance, empathy, active listening and clear high expectations are explicitly taught as are school values (PS1 & PS2). I usually get parents in, because parents then feel like they're part of the classroom as well... We talk about everyone's religion because religion is such a big thing in the cultures at the school... Then I find after that the kids value our values more (T2 PS2). Difference is celebrated (PS1 & PS2). The kids come and they're taught everyone has the right to speak, everyone has the right to say what they need to say, no-one is different (T3 PS2). The greatest strength of this school is the fact that we have so many children from diverse nationalities, cultures and these children do fit in (TA1 PS2).	Student SFEIs 7, 8 & 9
Theme 3: Clear communication, shared language & shared expectations	Clear communication strategies (PS1 & PS2). We communicate really clearly here. The expectations in my class are the same as everywhere else with just a little flexibility – some days more than others but they still have to adhere to the school values – it comes under that umbrella, our vision (T2 PS1). Well defined understandings of specific students by teachers and peers (PS1 & PS2). We understand that some behaviours can be driven by things beyond their control (T2 PS1). Once their stories are told, then the respect comes in, then if anyone goes outside of that we can say "remember we have to respect them because they don't like that" (T1 PS2). Well defined behaviour management procedures (PS1 & PS2). We are all on the same page as far as behaviour expectations go (T2 PS1). A lot of the kids who come understand rules ... they like to know what they have to do. Because we've got [behaviour walls and sets of rules]... it's seen and it's shown and everyone says the same thing, the kids understand that it's the same thing throughout the school (T1 PS2).	Staff SFEIs 1, 2, 6 & 8
Theme 4: Positive relationship building between staff, students, parents & community	Strong relationships abound within and beyond the school gates and parents are involved in supportive, student-centred learning partnerships. Lots of meetings... You've just got to persist... Let's try to get specialist appointments, let's do this testing, the evidence is saying this (T2 PS1). Initiating positive communications with parents from early in the year onwards. P... [The principal] insists that we keep in contact from the beginning – just say hi how's it going? – then when harder conversations may be required we already have a relationship with the parent (T4 PS1). Supportive parent group seeks to strengthen relationships with teachers and back up school initiatives. They're valuing diversity, they're valuing difference and they're enjoying and valuing the Visions program that we do on a Monday and they feel like it is very important for their children so that gives us the basis to keep going with this (T1 PS1).	Parent & Staff SFEIs 3, 7, & 10

Key theme	Evidence	SFs/EIs
Theme 5: Strong sense of safety, family & 'wrap around' student support	Creating spaces and places where staff, students and parents feel safe and accepted is important in an inclusive culture. I think that it is the safety that the children feel – and the fact that parents are really partners in their child's education (HOSE PS1). I've seen a lot of young kids come with a lot of anger and a lot of hate towards different people... different races and colours. It takes probably around 6 weeks for that to go away and realise they're in a safe place, there is no danger (T1 PS2).	Parent Staff & Student SFEIs 9 & 10
Theme 6: Transitions into & out of school prioritised	Schools work closely with parents and other schools to enable students to accept change (PS1 & PS2). We take the kids to Master classes at the high school and other activities we are invited to – like musicals (T2 PS1). Teachers actively teach and promote independent student responsibility for actions, possessions and organisation in preparation for secondary school. We teach independence – metacognitive stuff – it's important as they get older (T3 PS2). From the time it is known that a child is coming to the school, or moving on to another, school leaders contact past schools, future schools and parents to put in transition plans where needed, to ensure success (PS1 & PS2). Sometimes [HOSE] works to admit students gradually to the school environment so overload doesn't occur for them or their parents (T3 PS1).	Students & Parent SFEIs 1 & 10
Theme 7: Teachers use information & data to plan adjustments and engage learners	Collated data is regularly used to level activities and to plan for support and differentiation to ensure all learners are able to engage. We pull the data out and put it all on this big spreadsheet. We colour code, work out where our kids are, and then plan our differentiation (T5 PS1). I've found that from the data one child shouldn't be following the general programme for the year level, I will need to do a separate plan written for them (T3 PS2). Understandings of the fact that some students require different strategies to enable them to focus and learn. They let kids have what they need. Some may need MP3 players in their ears to listen to while they are doing their work, and some may need fiddle toys. Some may need a break time, so they take a break card and they go and have five minutes and then they come back (P1 PS1).	Staff & Students SFEIs 4, 5, 6 & 8
Theme 8: Differentiation & inclusive pedagogies articulated, negotiated & actioned	Some teachers are more confident in relation to differentiation and inclusion than others. A mix of differentiation pedagogies (e.g. content modification) and inclusive pedagogies (e.g. using different forms of communication) are utilised and shared.... not gifted just better at it. Then our support teacher goes away and he writes enrichment programs for those children to help the teachers (T6 PS1). We look at every child individually. We have differentiation in place for many children – other kids are great helping new ones come on board too (T2 PS2). Mary (pseudonym) is my little selected mute. I think of ways to non-verbally communicate with her and the rest of the kids in my classroom (T4 PS2).	Staff & Students SFEIs 5, 7 & 8
Theme 9: Professional learning & sharing between staff	Much time and money is spent on building staff capacity to meet student needs. [Our support teacher] has been doing lots of PD with casual aides and that has made a big difference to results... teacher aides have really taken ownership of it. We call them para-professionals and they are fantastic (T5 PS1). We look at what needs the students have and where the challenges are for staff, then tailor PD or intervention to support them... (HOSE PS1).	Staff SFEIs 4 & 6
Theme 10: Strong ethical and moral principal leadership	Strong moral leadership from the principal (PS1 & PS2). I came from a school where there was not the support that you get here. The kids are tough sometimes – because of multiple needs – but the leadership team will do what they can for teachers and they really care about the kids (T4 PS2). There is a clear vision and direction for the school (PS1 & PS2). Expectations are communicated clearly, consistently and regularly (PS1 & PS2). Decision making is solutions focussed, and as a result this approach permeates down to all staff within the school (PS1 & PS2). Principals articulate expectations that all staff will contribute to, establish and model high expectations for students (PS1 & PS2).	L&M SF

Key theme	Evidence	SFs/EIs
Theme 11: Targeted informed leadership evident at all levels of the school	Strong principal social justice leadership, teacher leadership and student leadership teams work in parallel within PS1 (a slightly different manifestation occurs in PS2). Shared strong social justice leadership between the principal and HOSE is evident. Teachers and students are expected to step up to expectations. The school community as a whole support school direction and intent (PS1 & PS2). The leadership team builds capacity in others – teachers, teacher aides and student leaders. Professional learning is undertaken, shared and woven into justifications for practice. P... [The principal] will often share something he has read or a workshop he has been to and offer others the opportunity to learn more (T5 PS2). Student leadership is promoted. Older students have a clear understanding of the role they play in setting an example for younger students (TA3 PS1).	L&M SF

**Table 2.** Themes correlated to stakeholder factors and existing indicators of inclusion.

**Researchers’ reflection:** At first it seemed surprising that there were such strong common themes emerging, considering the differences within each school and its unique vision, values, SWP and community context. What was apparent from the beginning of the analysis though was a genuine sense that each school community was predominantly and individually ‘on the same page’, wording actually used by a number of participants. This ‘same page’ was entitled ‘inclusive school practices’.

The language of social justice and inclusion ran throughout the transcripts from both schools’ community members evidenced in words such as ‘a huge effort to include all kids’, ‘we make things work’, ‘talk about everyone’s religion’, ‘everyone has the right to speak’, ‘adhere to the school values’, ‘comes under that umbrella, our vision’, ‘remember we have to respect’, ‘valuing diversity’, ‘valuing difference’, ‘the safety that the children feel’, ‘partners in their child’s education’, ‘tailor programs’, ‘admit students gradually to the school environment so overload doesn’t occur’, and ‘plan our differentiation’. Similar messages continued to emerge from the transcripts.

**PHASE 3** saw theme differences identified (**Table 3**), principles articulated and a model created (**Figure 4**) to represent the essence of the findings. Although there was considerable correlation and affirmation of the existing indicators of inclusive school practice (see **Table 3**), additional themes emerged. Remembering that school leader data were not used, it is significant that the two emergent themes both pertain to leadership: strong ethical and moral principal leadership and targeted informed leadership evident at all levels of the school.

These emergent themes show how the principal, in particular, is perceived in each school. A corresponding analysis of the rhetoric embedded within the leaders’ data will ultimately show correlations and additional insights to be woven into these findings.

Through the process of cross-checking with existing indicators (*EIs*) and discussing overlapping theme elements it was agreed that certain characteristics were indicative of the “key school wide pedagogical principles and actions [that] underpin the support of all students”. Inclusive school wide pedagogical principles emerged, cultural indicators in action, reflecting alignment, both structural and cognitive. Such alignment resonates with the elements



Themes (links to other themes have been placed in brackets)	PS1	PS2	EIs
Organisation & structures strongly student centred & inclusive (11, 12)	✓	✓	1, 2, 3
Explicit teaching of social skills & the valuing of diversity (3, 4, 5, 11)	✓	✓	5, 7, 8
Clear communication, shared language & shared expectations (1, 4, 5, 12)	✓	✓	2, 6
Positive relationships: staff, students, parents & community (3, 5, 6)	✓	✓	3, 10
Sense of safety, family and 'wrap around' student support (3, 4, 6)	✓	✓	9, 10
Best fit: students, teachers, aides, resources & environment (1, 4, 8)	✓	✓	4, 6
Transitions in & out prioritised (1, 4, 5, 12)	✓	✓	1, 10
Information & data to make adjustments and engage learners (3, 6, 9)	✓	✓	6, 4, 5, 8
Differentiation & inclusive pedagogies articulated, negotiated, actioned (3, 6, 8)	✓	✓	5, 7, 8
Professional learning & sharing between staff (8, 9)	✓	✓	4, 6
Strong ethical and moral principal leadership (1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 12)	✓	✓	_____
Targeted informed leadership evident at all levels of the school (1, 8, 9, 11)	✓	✓	_____

**Table 3.** Themes across schools and matched to key factors.



**Figure 4.** A conceptual model of the cultural indicators of an inclusive school.

in the organisational model developed by the LRI, the research-based framework for organisational alignment [22]. With these findings in mind a number of inclusive principles and the embedded actions reinforcing these were articulated, as were the key characteristics taken from the analysis. Together they led to the identification of each of the following:

- Principle 1: *Informed shared social justice leadership at multiple levels*

The principal ensures that teacher leaders, teacher aides and student leaders are empowered to plan and act in the best interest of others with a focus on inclusion and support. Leaders (staff and students) challenge the status quo. It began with each principal's firm commitment to social justice leadership. Each principal then placed a major focus on capacity building school wide whilst ensuring that the voices of students, staff and parents could be heard and concerns actioned. Targeted professional learning opportunities were of utmost importance and both principals, over a number of years, dedicated valuable time and resource commitment to engaging in an externally supported process of school renewal. Sergiovanni noted that "Few leaders have the competence, time, and information needed at any given time to get the job done. Wise leaders try and rely on others and build their own knowledge capacity" [33]. Principals epitomise this willingness to learn from and with others which is the essence of the holistic professional learning element so fundamental to the research-based framework [22] and driven by what emerged as Themes 10 and 11.

- Principle 2: *Moral commitment to a vision of inclusion*

The language of inclusion and support is heard from the top down. The message is reinforced by teachers, support staff and the leadership team as a whole. It is a message that never waivers and is never compromised and the Principal ensures that action ensues if this vision is not met. Themes 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 10 in particular reflect the nature of this principle in action. Each school's vision, an integral ingredient of their strategic foundations is clearly articulated and the essence of inclusion is obvious with words such as growing together and many paths, many futures. Each school's SWP even more clearly articulates the expectations of inclusion and the celebration of diversity.

- Principle 3: *Collective commitment to whatever it takes*

Across the school a strong collective commitment to meeting the needs of all students through proactive planning, forward thinking and putting strategies in place to overcome barriers and remove possible obstacles were considered well in advance. Themes 1, 4, 7, 8 and 11 are particularly pertinent. Data investigation, conversations with parents and students, and with advisors and system personnel allowed for identification and collaborative planning to take place across the board. The strong values and social skilling programs were integral to ensuring peers were a part of the collective commitment and student leaders were utilised as mentors and advocates. Teacher aides were a strong link in the chains of support enabling students to succeed. Believing that all students have the right to an education

in their parents' school of choice, each principal was seen to be guiding and supporting teachers to make this work. Each inclusive environment was made richer by the shared understandings of effective ways of working, articulated within each schoolwide pedagogical framework, and the way in which these were enacted, providing consistency and alignment of action to vision.

- Principle 4: *Getting it right from the start*

This principle emerged from the extensive organisation and management focus placed on wrapping students with support. Teachers indicated that the leadership team would negotiate 'slow transitions' or 'supported transitions' when needed. Teachers and teacher aides were consistently supported to improve their knowledge and skills. Documentation, communication and reflection ensured consistency. Themes 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 underpin this principle. The strategic foundations of each school allowed for flexibility and clever resource allocation to support needs from the moment a student entered the school. The well-developed social skills and values program means that older students could induct new students and were constant role models for others moving through their learning journey. Induction was also essential for staff so that clear expectations of inclusion and differentiation were actioned. Each principal ensured that rhetoric was indeed a reality.

- Principle 5: *Professional targeted student-centred learning*

A significant component of actioning each school's SWP was the need to make time and space for professional conversations centred on student need. Those tasked with the responsibility showed a willingness to adapt and be flexible with structures, timetables and human resources. All staff demonstrated commitment to providing and undertaking professional development targeted to meet the needs of the particular students needing support. Planning for student specific needs, where possible, starts well before a student enters the school and continues as they plan for moving on. Information is shared and parents are an integral part of the student-centred knowledge collation. This principle is integrally linked to Themes 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. It again highlights the holistic professional learning element integral to the capacity building for improved student outcomes.

- Principle 6: *Open information and respectful communication*

Themes 1, 3, 6, 7, and 8 indicate the priority placed on really getting to each student and their family. Teachers needed to 'know' students and their needs, aspirations and hooks into learning. There were frequent interactions between school leaders, teachers, students and families, as well as, support staff, medical practitioners, specialists and community elders. The transparency within decision-making processes and the allocation of resources were easily seen to be priorities according to data and availability. The research based framework elements of Community Cohesiveness and Generative Resource design were evidenced through the ongoing efforts to inform and include all stakeholders. Participants indicated that

principals made school expectations clear for all concerned and where necessary would reiterate the essence of the school's inclusive vision.

## 8. A model of cultural indicators in action

A conceptual model of the cultural indicators of an inclusive school was (**Figure 4**) created to capture the inter-related nature of the six principles and how the essence of these align with and help action and strengthen the cultural indicators of an inclusive school culture. These indicators either emerged from this research or were confirmed by this research (the EIs) and provide a point of reference for collegial reflection around current practices within any school context.

Participants from each school, identified regionally for being both inclusive and having consistently improving levels of student academic achievement (according to NAPLAN data), demonstrated a consistency of language use and context specific meaning holding particular significance. Such a pedagogically rich language, when consciously reinforced by the leadership team, becomes embedded in the strategic foundations of the school and serves a number of crucial functions:

- Reinforcement of the school vision
- Reinforcement of pedagogical practices that are effective for students in a particular school context
- Dissemination of the school's culture and expectations of inclusive behaviours aligned to clear values and beliefs
- Induction into the school culture
- Advocacy for the needs of diverse student and family cohorts

These functions are underpinned by a continually evolving process driven by school principals seen to be committed to social justice. Underpinning norms and assumptions related to the expected ways of working are evidenced within the 'language of inclusion' used by teachers, students, parents and teacher aides, and appear indicative of principal commitment to inclusive school practices. The model speaks to aligned practices across a school – the bond between leadership intent, school vision, schoolwide pedagogy, shared understandings and expectations, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to ensure student needs are catered for. Commitment to reflecting on existing practice, tackling inequity and building relationships across the school and broader community, build feelings of safety, respect, belonging and celebration.

## 9. Summary of findings

It is acknowledged that contextual factors make a difference and strategies that may work in one context may be less than effective in another. It is also acknowledged that those interviewed



only represent a small sub-section of possible participants. However, a number of significant links between school culture and ways of working emerge, underpinned by six principles of inclusive school practices answering the research question “what key school wide pedagogical principles and actions underpin the support of all students especially those with special learning needs?”

Leaders were perceived as consciously developing informed shared social justice leadership at multiple levels (Principle 1) including the development of teacher aide and student leadership skills. At the norms and assumptions layer within each school there was strong moral commitment to a vision of inclusion (Principle 1) made by the principal and articulated at every opportunity and visible to others. Those not happy with such a vision ‘moved on’. Staff, students and community united in the desire to support all students, no matter how complex their need. Leaders focused money and time on building collaborative and individual capacity.

Each school community as a whole demonstrated collective commitment to whatever it takes (Principle 3) which meant essentially a commitment to getting it right from the start (Principle 4) by developing strong relationships with students, parents community and system staff to ensure the ‘right fit’ or resources, staff and students. Leaders pursued shared understandings of expectations and developed processes for collecting and disseminating information. As information was collated and discussed with staff, families and perhaps medical advisors, complex student needs requiring additional resourcing, from human resources to physical equipment needs, or additional professional learning (Principle 5) could be planned, thus effectively laying the groundwork for success. Articulation of successes, challenges, needs and ongoing direction enabled shared understanding and language of inclusion to be heard through open and respectful lines of communication (Principle 6) enabled strengths and challenges of both staff and students to be planned for in advance.

The data and findings indicated that pedagogical practices at classroom and school level looked different in the different contexts; however, whilst the minutia of practices differed, they still conformed to similar norms and assumptions related to the principles underpinning pedagogical choice and implementation within each inclusive school culture. The language of inclusion reinforces and sustains the combined focus and also helps to induct those new to the school ensuring that the vision of inclusion remains alive.

## 10. Conclusion

The findings from this research are promising, and when combined with the findings from the leadership data will provide further focus for deep reflection by researchers and educational leaders in schools and school systems. Inclusive school cultures are not easily attained, and even more difficult to sustain over the long term. Government agenda and policies, system leaders, school leaders, teachers, students and parents all come and go, raising questions about how to maintain an uncompromising social justice agenda anchored to the needs of a changing student cohort within a specific school context. This study has provided answers to some of these

questions in its acknowledgement of the central role played by a school's vision, a leadership structure that supports activism, school wide understandings of practice, informed decision making, and induction processes to acquaint newcomers with the school culture and accompanying expectations. Moving forward the six principles of inclusion and the accompanying conceptual model of the cultural indicators of an inclusive school, provide lenses for future research, as does the understanding of the importance of school culture and the significant role the school principal plays in advocating for, promoting and facilitating inclusive school structures and practices.

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