



Principles of Inclusive School Practice

Dr Lindy Abawi



The research context

A number of schools in a major regional Queensland city have been identified as effectively meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds. Two such schools were identified by Regional Education Queensland schools and both were approached to participate in this research, in part this research was to feed into similar research in the secondary context.

Schools capable of adjusting to the pressures of vastly diverse student populations do exist and yet it is often difficult to pinpoint exactly what the point of difference is between such schools and ones with less complexity who find it difficult to thrive. This research was undertaken to answer the following Research Question:

What are the key principles that underpin inclusive school practices that support all students including those with special needs or from diverse cultural backgrounds?

In order to answer the question it is important to clarify the parameters of what is meant by inclusive school practices.

Inclusive School Practices

In recent years there has been much debate about just what it means to be an ‘inclusive school’. UNESCO’s definition states:

Inclusion is ... seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth and adults through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education. It involves changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies with a common vision that covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children (2009, p. 8).

Shaddock, Giorcelli and Smith describe inclusive practice as “any and all efforts made by a school and its community to make students and their parents feel welcome” (2007, p. 4). Queensland’s Inclusive Education Statement (2005) is a particularly insightful one and raises issues and approaches to education that require an immediate and ongoing response from school communities. The statement talked about:

- 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”
- 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 talks about 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 (Queensland Government, 2015).

Rouse and Florian (2012, p. 7) “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”. However, a goal such as this is not easily achievable by teachers operating alone within the four walls of their classroom. Although teachers are certainly a key to improving all student outcomes, if the word ‘teachers’ is changed to that of ‘school communities’ then it more accurately captures the fundamental changes to the way schools must support and work with their students, staff, parents and communities to ensure that inclusive school practices become embedded and sustainable school-wide. Thus inclusive schools are characterised by the processes which support students, staff, families and community on a daily basis and which can be expanded on to increase support at significant moments within a student’s learning journey.

There are a number of key factors in these statements that need highlighting.

Inclusive school practice:

1. is a process;
2. aligns to a common vision;
3. promotes locally negotiated responses;
4. involves changes and modifications;
5. increases participation and maximises outcomes eliminating exclusion within and from education;
6. lies at the heart of a learning community that questions and challenges current practice;
7. ensures that all students understand and value diversity;
8. values difference as a resource;
9. engenders feelings of safety and belonging;
10. means supporting and working with students, staff, parents and communities.

Working together these factors indicate the types of school-wide strategies and ways of working that have enabled students to transition successfully from the primary to the secondary context within a number of the case study schools. These factors work in synergy with one another and support the establishment of an inclusive school culture capable of supporting all students, families and staff, and in particular those students with special learning needs, including social, emotional and intellectual.

The research approach

A case study approach was adopted to answer the research question. Data analysis and interpretation was based upon identifying themes and then grouping these according to the ten inclusive factors outlined previously and by consideration of how these show evidence of basic norms and assumptions indicative of school culture as aligned to Schein’s Model of Organisational Culture (Figure 1).

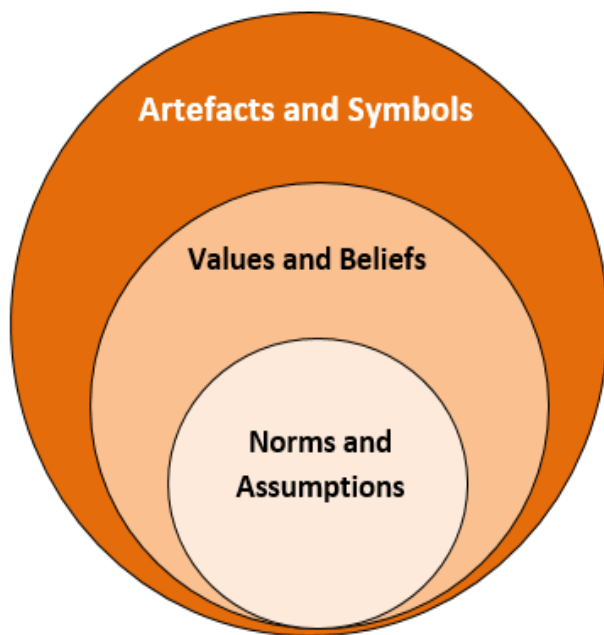


Figure 1: A Model of Organisational Culture indicators (Schein, 2001)

In Schein's (2001) Theory of Organisational Culture, three main areas are indicative of an organisation's culture: the artefacts layer which is clearly visible by others but not necessarily well understood; the espoused beliefs and values layer where strategies, goals and shared perceptions are articulated and reinforced; and, the norms and assumptions level where deeply embedded, unconscious norms and assumptions lie. Therefore school culture is visually manifested as artefacts such as a vision or/ and 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. It is the 'way we do things around here' that is indicative of deeply embedded practices and the principles that inform these practices.

For the purpose of this initial report, data collected from Principal interviews were not included in this analysis. The reasoning behind this decision was that 'the rhetoric' that a school leader might use to present their school in the best possible light could detract from the reality of the 'the way we do things around here', as seen by those operating at the classroom level. Therefore the first 'take' on the data draws on the perceptions and stories of students, teachers, teacher aides and parents. Leadership data will be used within a later stage of analysis.

The participants

Permission was gained from Education Queensland and the school principals, and university Ethics Approval 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 a focus group discussion at both primary schools. Generally staff and parents engaged in individual conversations with the researchers. Conversations were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

Both Primary schools had been identified by regional office staff as having quality outcomes and inclusive environments. They had similar numbers of students. Primary School 1 (PS 1) had above average levels of students with special needs (12% of total enrolment). Primary School 2 (PS 2) had an average sized special needs program (9%) but around 50% of students came from backgrounds where English was an additional language or dialect with over 27 languages being spoken in the home.

Whilst the guiding questions ensured that varied perspectives were collected regarding the key understandings being sought, the semi-structured interview approach taken allowed conversations with each participant or focus group to take tangents as interesting points emerged. Questions covered topics such as communication between schools and home; strategies to prepare students for transition; schedules of school visits; information sharing; safe spaces and timeout; feelings of acceptance; student apprehensions; parent apprehensions; levels of support currently; and the support discussed and offered within the new context.

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.

The findings

Excerpts of interview data illustrating findings are woven throughout this report. Schools have been numbered and participants identified by a coding system:

Participant Codes

- T1 – Teacher 1
- SEdT1 – Special Education Teacher 1
- TA1 – Teacher Aide 1
- P1 – Parent 1
- S1 – Student
- HOSE - Head of the Special Education Program

The data indicated a number of inclusive strategies that appeared to be effective.

Staff/Teacher focus

- Developing staff capacity to support student/s with a particular need and then refresher sessions as needed
- Collaborating across the school to ensure planning is comprehensive and meets all parties needs e.g. special support staff, teachers, teacher aides and the leadership team
- Providing multiple opportunities within the classroom for students to build metacognitive skills through mental processing tasks and ‘talk alouds’ so students learn how to express their learning and emotional needs

Parent/Community focus

- Communicating with parents/caregivers/family prior to school entry

- Providing multiple and varied opportunities for parents to express their concerns and be ‘heard’ and reassured
- Regular consultation with medical practitioners and support personnel

Student focus

- Developing peer relationships and support groups - building student leadership capacity and supporting those with special needs
- Orienting students to new campuses e.g. peer mentors to guide and inform
- Providing multiple opportunities within the primary classroom for students to share their passions and hobbies in order to find ‘triggers’ and ‘hooks’ into learning
- Promoting independent learning skills within the classroom through supporting students to set their own learning goals and by planning how to attain these through small achievable steps

Whole school/System focus

- Detailing school adjustments to process, environment and resources well in advance to fully inform planning but be flexible enough to make adjustments ‘on the run’
- Liaising with District Support staff indicating the probability of requiring extra resources or equipment

Themes collated from initial data interpretations

It was obvious as the data was filtered down to themes and principles that underpinning cultural assumptions and beliefs impacted the choices made within each organisation. These choices influenced how each school engaged with their partner schools, students and parents. Both primary schools had surprisingly similar ways of working and there were definite synergies in initial themes, therefore themes have been collated as being applicable to both schools. Extracts from the data that illustrate a theme are taken from either one or perhaps both schools.

Not all points within themes have been illustrated with examples but the data clearly supports the theme with snippets of conversation and synthesised interpretations. The schools in which a theme is strong are indicated in brackets, as are the theme correlations to the 10 key inclusive factors outlined previously.

Case Study Primary Schools (PS1 & PS2)

Key Theme 1: School organisation and structures are strongly student centred and inclusive (Factors 1, 2, 3 & 5)

- The strategic foundations within the school are linked to the school’s vision, and values. (PS1 & 2)
- Everybody works together to ensure every student has their needs met (PS1 & 2).

I think that the teachers here make a huge effort to include all kids. The difference between now and three years ago is huge... There were kids fighting to be included because of where they came from and things like that... Where now, they seem to just come and everyone’s happy. We make things work!”
(T1 PS2)

Key Theme 2: Explicit teaching of social skills and the valuing of diversity (Factors 7, 8 & 9).

- Tolerance, acceptance, empathy, active listening and clear high expectations are explicitly taught as are school values. (PS1 & 2)
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. (T2 PS2)
- Difference is celebrated. (PS1&2)
I think the kids come now and they're taught... that everyone's the same, everyone has the right to speak, everyone has the right to say what they need to say and no-one is different." (T3 PS2)
I think 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)

Key Theme 3: Clear communication, shared language and shared expectations (Factors 1, 2, 6 & 8).

- Clear communication strategies. (PS1 & 2)
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&2)
You need to understand that sometimes certain behaviours are driven by things beyond their control. (T2 PS1)
Once their stories are told, then the respect comes in, then if anyone goes outside we can say "remember we have to respect them because they don't like that. (T1 PS2)
- Well defined behaviour management procedures. (PS1&2)
We are all on the same page as far as behaviour expectations go. (T2 PS1)
A lot of the kids who come understand rules and they like rules and 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)

Key Theme 4: It's all about positive relationships between staff, students, parents and community (Factors 3, 7, & 10).

- 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.

We keep in contact from the beginning – just say hi – how’s it going? - therefore when harder conversations may be required we already have a relationship with the parent. (T4 PS1)

- Strong supportive parent committee seeks to strengthen relationships with teachers and back up 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)

Key Theme 5: Strong sense of safety, family and ‘wrap around’ support for all students (and not just verified students). (Factor 9, 10).

- 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 six weeks for that to go away and realise they’re in a safe place, there is no danger. (T1 PS2)

Key theme 6: Best fit choices - students, teachers, teacher aides, resources and environment (Factors 3, 4, & 6)

- Timetables are developed as ‘**best fit**’ choices – student to class, teacher to class, aide to teacher, and aide to student – staff strengths and environmental aspects are also considered. (PS1&2)

All kids that come into the school, we want to do our best for them and we’re going to try and tailor programs (whether they’ve got a disability or not) to suit that child ... even down to changing Human Resources and fiddling current structures and processes around. (HOSE PS1)

Key Theme 7: Communication between schools starts early to assist transition (1, 10)

- Both primary schools worked closely with secondary schools facilitating class visits
- Teachers actively taught and promoted independent responsibility for actions, possessions and organisation in preparation for secondary school

We take the kids to Master classes at the high school and other activities we are invited to like musicals (T2 PS1)

We try and teach independence – the metacognitive stuff – it’s important as they get older (T3 PS2)

Key Theme 8: Teachers use information and data to make adjustments and engage learners (Factors 4, 5, 6 & 8)

- 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 all that data out and put it all on this big spreadsheet and then we colour code... work out where our kids are and then over on the side we start to 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...some may need fiddle toys in their desk. 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)

Key Theme 9: Differentiated learning is implemented to varying degrees of success (Factors 5, 7 & 8)

- Some teachers are more confident in relation to differentiation than others – a strange mix of differentiation and inclusion is applied to all students

Sometimes 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 of our 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 vice-versa and I also liaise with the speech language pathologist. (T4 PS2)

Key Theme 10: Professional learning and sharing between staff (Factors 4 & 6)

- Much time and money is spent on building the capacity of all staff to meet the needs of students

[Our support teacher] has been doing lots of PD with our casual aides and that has made a big difference to our results...and teacher aides have really taken ownership of it. We call them para-professionals and they are fantastic. (T 5 PS1)

We look at what needs the students have and where the challenges are for staff and then tailor professional development or intervention to support them.. (HOSE PS1)

Key Theme 11: Strong leadership structure and direction

- Strong moral leadership from the principal (PS1&2)

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)

- Has a clear vision and direction for the school (PS1&2)
- Clearly articulates expectations consistently and regularly (PS1&2)
- Is solutions focussed, and as a result this approach permeates down to all staff within the school (PS1&2)
- Expects that that all staff will contribute and establish high expectations for students (PS1&2)

Key Theme 12: Empowered parallel leadership evident at all levels of the school

- Parallel leadership with a strong teacher leadership team is very strong in Primary School 1 but less obvious in Primary School 2 though the student leadership team seems strong
- The leadership team as a whole is aware of and fully support Principal direction and intent (PS1&2)
- The leadership style of the Principal harmonises and complements that of the Head of the Special Education Program and echoed by those in supporting leadership roles (PS1&2) *We're the Ying and Yang* (HOSE PS1)
- The leadership team builds capacity in others – teachers, teacher aides and student leaders. Student leadership is promoted. Older students have a clear understanding of the role they play in setting an example for younger students (PS1 &2).

Theme topics	PS1	PS2	Key Factors
1. School organisation and structures are strongly student centred and inclusive	✓	✓	1, 2, 3,
2. Explicit teaching of social skills and the valuing of diversity	✓	✓	5, 7, 8
3. Clear communication, shared language and shared expectations	✓	✓	2, 6
4. It's all about positive relationships between staff, students, parents and community	✓	✓	3, 10
5. Strong sense of safety, family and 'wrap around' support for all students	✓	✓	9, 10
6. Best fit choices - students, teachers, teacher aides, resources and environment	✓	✓	4, 6
7. Transitions are a priority - communication between schools starts early.	✓	✓	1, 10
8. Teachers use information and data to make adjustments and engage learners	✓	✓	6, 4, 5, 8
9. Differentiated learning is implemented to varying degrees of success.	✓	✓	5, 7, 8
10. Professional learning and sharing between staff	✓	✓	4, 6
11. Strong moral leadership structure and direction	✓	✓	
12. Empowered parallel leadership evident at all levels of the school	✓		

Table 1: Themes across schools and matched to key factors

A Model of Inclusive School factors

As can be seen from the combined themes from all four schools, many align with the 10 factors pertaining to an inclusive school environment. However, there are significant leadership themes in addition to the factors previously identified. These are the themes of *strong moral leadership structures and direction*, and the interrelated theme of *empowered parallel leadership at multiple levels*.

The inter-relationship of all factors are at the heart of the Model of Key Inclusive School Factors (Figure 2).

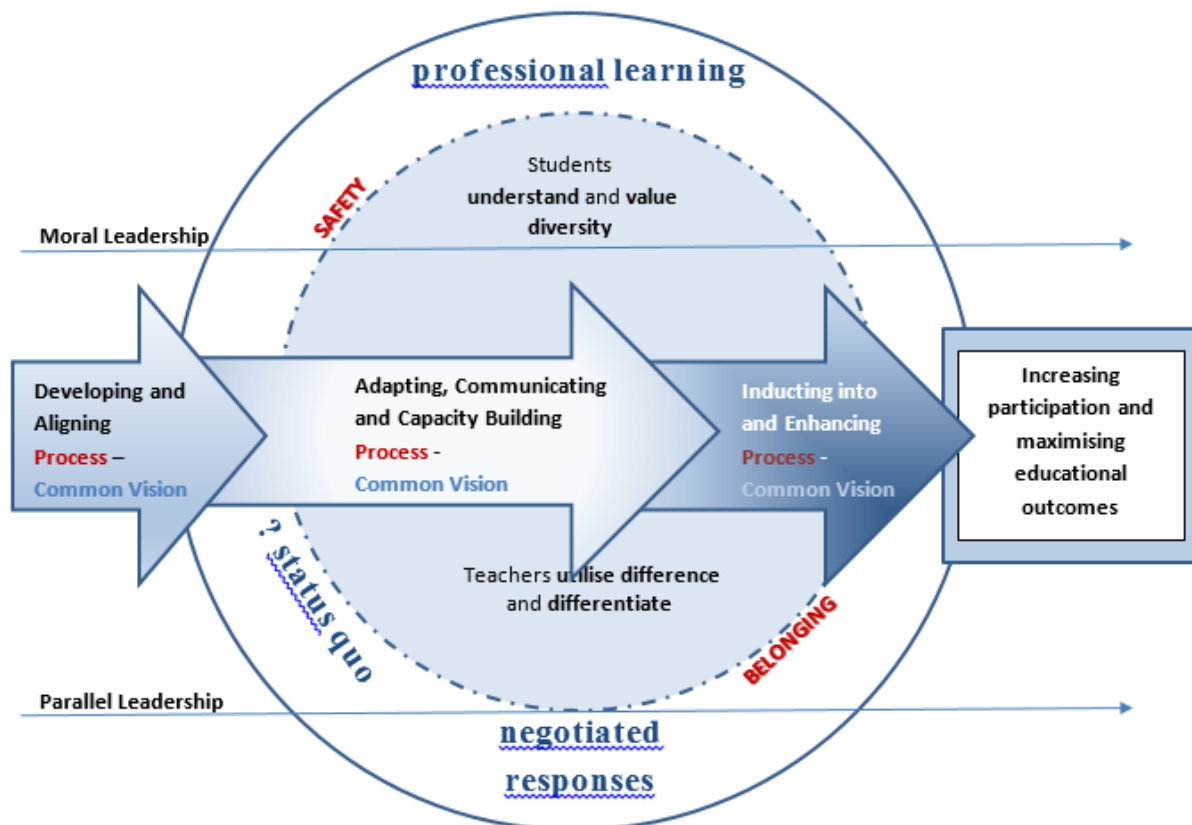


Figure 2. A Conceptual Model of Key Inclusive School Factors

With this model in mind the answer to the research question became clear:

What are the key principles that underpin inclusive school practices that support all students including those with special needs or from diverse cultural backgrounds?

The principles are:

1. The principle of *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; a message that never waivers and is never compromised.
2. The principle of *parallel leadership at multiple levels* – Principal, 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 and leaders are prepared to challenge the status quo when needed.

3. The principle of ***professional student-centred learning*** – making time and space for professional conversations centred on student need; a willingness to adapt and be flexible with structures, timetables and human resources; commitment to providing and undertaking professional development.
4. The principle of ***information and communication*** – the need to ‘know’ students and their needs, aspirations and hooks into learning; frequent interactions between schools, and with students and families.
5. The principle of ***collective commitment to whatever it takes*** – a strong commitment to meeting the needs of all students through proactive planning; forward thinking; dealing with possible obstacles well in advance; believing that all students have the right to an education in their parents’ school of choice; visits and conversations with medical staff; focus on how ‘we’ will make this work.
6. The principle of ***getting it right from the start*** – organisation and management focused on wrapping students with support; teachers supported to improve their knowledge and skills; teacher aides provide consistency; clearly articulated boundaries and a well-developed social skills and values program mean that older students are constant role models for others.

Conclusion

Where there is strong ***moral commitment to a vision of inclusion*** (Principle 1) and that commitment is articulated at every opportunity, then staff, students and community become united in the desire to support all students, no matter how complex their need. Successful inclusive school practices, rely on a number of capacity building processes to work together. The first of these is the sharing of responsibility for action by consciously developing ***parallel leadership at multiple levels*** including the development of teacher aide and student leadership skills (Principle 2). Leaders ensure there are shared understandings of expectations and develop processes for collecting and disseminating ***information***. Through clear lines of ***communication*** (Principle 3) enabling strengths and challenges to be planned for in advance. As information is collated and discussed with staff, families and perhaps medical advisors, complex student needs requiring additional resourcing, from physical and equipment needs through to additional ***professional student-centred learning*** (Principle 4), can be planned for, thus effectively laying the groundwork for success. Finally, the school community as a whole must have ***collective commitment to whatever it takes*** (Principle 5) and this means essentially ***getting it right from the start*** (Principle 6) by developing strong relationships with students, parents, community and system staff and ensuring the ‘right fit’ between staff and students.

Further data analysis:

Ongoing data analysis is being carried out and additional perspectives around school alignment using the Research Based Framework for Organisational Alignment (LRI, 2010) are currently being written. An additional lens on school leadership and structure will also be applied.

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