

# Inclusive School Communities Project

# Final Evaluation Report



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## Research in Inclusive & Specialised Education (RISE)

<https://sites.flinders.edu.au/rise/>

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## Final Evaluation Report

The *Inclusive School Communities Project* was developed and administered by Julia Farr Association – Purple Orange, and funded through an Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) for a two-year period, from 1 July 2018–30 June 2020. The project website can be accessed at: <https://inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au/>

The project evaluation was conducted by researchers representing the *Research in Inclusive and Specialised Education (RISE)* team from the College of Education, Psychology & Social Work, Flinders University. <https://sites.flinders.edu.au/rise/>

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## Executive Summary

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The Inclusive School Communities (ISC) project was a multi-faceted set of activities and resources with the ambitious aim of increasing the capacity of at least 12 SA schools to operate inclusively. It was administered over a two-year period from mid 2018-mid 2020 by Julia Farr Association Purple Orange (JFA-PO), and funded through an Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

Inclusive schools are critical to providing a strong foundation for young people with disabilities to access, participate in and contribute to their communities and lead fulfilling lives. Inclusive schooling also represents a key condition for the development of thriving, inclusive communities for all citizens. Yet, traditional educational structures and practices often run counter to inclusive goals (Slee, 2013), teachers consistently report feeling inadequately prepared to teach students with disabilities and special educational needs (Jarvis, 2019; OECD, 2019), and many students living with disability (and their families) continue to report negative experiences of mainstream education (Parliament of South Australia, 2017; Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2019; Walker, 2017).

Despite legislation and policy imperatives related to inclusive educational practices, and Australia's status as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), there remains a lack of consensus in the field of education about the definition of inclusion and associated models of practice (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Kinsella, 2020). In addition, inconsistencies frequently arise between inclusive education as articulated by theory and policy, and the implementation of principles and practices in schools (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Graham & Spandagou, 2011).

Against this backdrop, the ISC project represented an innovative response to a significant area of need in education.

### Project Goals and Overview

Consistent with the ILC program goals, the ISC project aimed to address the following outcomes:

*Primary ILC Outcome:*

**People with disability use and benefit from the same mainstream services as everyone else.**

*Activity Outcomes - Primary*

- a) Positive change in attitudes and culture within mainstream services
- b) Increased knowledge and capability within mainstream services

*Secondary ILC Outcome:*

**People with disability actively contribute to leading, shaping and influencing their community.**

*Activity Outcomes - Secondary*

- a) Increased connections between all key stakeholders (including mainstream, community and NDIA registered providers of supports)
- b) Increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community

The ISC project sought to achieve these program goals through a series of core components, including:

1. A ‘cascading’ Community of Practice (CoP) professional learning model involving nominated leaders from two groups of schools; this model allowed for an initial group of practitioners from schools more experienced with inclusion to support leaders from a second group of less experienced schools as they joined the CoP.
2. Involvement of youth mentors with lived experience of education as young people living with disability, to provide advice and feedback to educators and school students, to engage with the CoP sessions, and to contribute to the website tools and resources.
3. The development of an inclusive education ‘toolkit’ consisting of a website with a series of resources (e.g., documents, videos, advice sheets), co-produced by JFA-PO project staff, participating school leaders, and youth mentors.

Whilst the Community of Practice, the youth mentors and the development of website resources were core project activities, the ISC project design was intentionally flexible. Through a co-design model, project leaders negotiated additional activities in response to participants’ developing needs and goals. For example, activities that were not part of the initial project plan included a ‘field trip’ to visit inclusive schools in North Queensland (partially funded by JFA-PO), a series of professional development webinars on topics related to inclusive practice, and multiple opportunities for participants to access expert consultation and support services. Some of these activities were designed as alternatives to planned activities that were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or assumed greater importance as the project developed.

A key element of the ISC project was the Steering Group comprising representatives from JFA-PO, government and non-government education sectors, independent consultants on inclusive education, disability advocates and members of professional associations, parents of young people with disability, and people living with disability. This group of local and national stakeholders met regularly and provided governance and feedback throughout the project.

## Project Evaluation

The evaluation of the ISC project was conducted by a team of researchers representing the [Research in Inclusive and Specialised Education \(RISE\)](#) group within the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University. RISE was commissioned by JFA-PO in mid-2019 to conduct an independent evaluation of the ISC project, following several months of preliminary discussion and gathering of background information.

As agreed through the negotiated proposal, the evaluation specifically addressed the following questions, which map directly onto the ISC project goals (and by implication the goals of the ILC program):

1. To what extent has the ISC project achieved **positive change in attitudes and culture** within mainstream services (schools), related to the inclusion of students with disability?
2. To what extent has the ISC project achieved **increased knowledge and capability** within mainstream services (schools), related to inclusive practice?
3. How has the project contributed to **changes in practices and/or policies** at participating schools?
4. How has the project contributed to **increased connections and potential sustained partnerships** between all key stakeholders?
5. How has the project contributed to **increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community** for various stakeholders, including individuals living with disability?

The project evaluation employed a mixed-methods research design, with data collection and analysis occurring continuously from August 2019—September 2020. Data were collected in multiple ways, which enabled the triangulation of findings across data sources, participants and researchers. Together with prolonged time in the field, this approach strengthened the credibility of evaluation findings. Data sources included:

- Ongoing consultation with Letitia Rose (JFA-PO Project Leader).
- Analysis of project documents and resources (document analysis).
- Observation field notes from face-to-face and online Community of Practice meetings and webinars.
- Semi-structured interviews with school leaders early in the project (11) and at project completion (8). These included interviews with individual school leaders, but also two leaders involved in the project at some schools.
- Focus groups with teachers at 2 schools
- Semi-structured interviews with youth mentors (4)
- Responses to an online survey at the completion of the project (22)
- Internal data provided by JFA-PO leaders, including CoP feedback surveys, mentor feedback surveys and initial interviews with mentors.
- Internal feedback documents provided by the JFA-PO Project Leader (including feedback surveys from 4 CoP meetings, and feedback data from youth mentors)
- Transcripts from internal initial interviews with youth mentors (provided by JFA-PO)

The mixed-methods research design enabled rich description of core project activities, opportunities for participants to provide feedback in multiple ways (including confidentially through the survey), comparison of perspectives from across participant groups, and the gathering of varied evidence in relation to each of the five evaluation questions.

The primary purpose of the program evaluation was to understand the nature and scope of any changes in attitudes, knowledge, capability, practices, policies, connections and partnerships related

to inclusive practices that occurred as an outcome of the ISC project. In keeping with this purpose, the evaluation did not seek to document every project activity or to capture extensive feedback on each individual aspect of the project. Rather, the evaluation examined a substantial cross-section of activities and included a representative sample of participants. Findings are based on analysis of data in relation to the stated project goals and discussed in terms of the research literature on inclusive education, and emphasise those themes and examples that commonly emerged from the analysis.

## Summary of Evaluation Findings

**Overall, the evaluation found evidence of positive change in relation to all five program goals.**

The extent to which these changes were substantial and likely to be sustainable varied across outcomes and school sites.

The strongest evidence reflected an increase in school participants' own awareness and knowledge of issues related to inclusion, and renewed commitment to advocate for and drive inclusive practices at their schools. There was evidence of changes in practice and policy, but the extent to which these changes were beginning to emerge, as opposed to embedded across the school (and therefore associated with cultural change), varied among sites; most were at the emergent stages. There was greater attention to student voice in multiple schools, with some introducing new structures to increase opportunities for meaningful participation, including by students with disability. There was evidence of mutual benefits arising from the participation of youth mentors, but this resource appears to have been under-utilised and represented a missed opportunity for schools.

The ISC project made a significant contribution to inclusive education by engaging diverse stakeholders and providing a valued forum for important professional conversations among school participants as they deepened and refined their understanding of inclusive school cultures. Of note, participants highly valued those experiences that provided them with applied examples of inclusive practice (e.g., examples shared by CoP peers; visits to other schools; particular webinars) and enabled them to discuss and plan for practices at their own sites (e.g., CoP work with peers; opportunities to discuss site planning with external consultant). Some participants indicated that they commenced the project believing their school was inclusive, but engaging in the project prompted them to re-examine their understandings and acknowledge specific areas for improvement. Some schools indicated that participating in the project helped them to identify specific gaps in their school's approach to ensuring a comprehensive school-wide culture of inclusion.



Key findings in relation to the evaluation questions are summarised below.

1. To what extent has the ISC project achieved positive change in attitudes and culture within mainstream services (schools), related to the inclusion of students with disability?

- Engagement with the ISC project was associated with increased awareness of issues related to inclusion for participating school leaders. Of note, there was evidence of strengthened recognition of the role of attitudes as an important starting point for generating change in practices, and of renewed commitment to inclusive education.
- The school participants entered the ISC project by choice and were motivated by an existing commitment to the effective inclusion of students with disability in mainstream schools. Therefore, only modest changes in attitudes towards inclusion would be expected for this group. Nevertheless, 60% of survey respondents agreed that engagement in the project had resulted in a change in attitudes. Perhaps more importantly, there was evidence from the interviews and CoP observations that the project gave participants a forum for shared problem solving and practical ideas about changing attitudes among all staff in their schools. Based on the low level of involvement of teachers at most schools, the evaluation was unable to measure changes in attitudes more broadly, but the findings are promising in terms of the likelihood of effecting broader attitudinal change in the future.
- School participants recognised cultural change as essential for the introduction and sustainability of inclusive school practices. Through the project, there was evidence that participants deepened and refined their understanding of inclusive school cultures. At the end of the project, half of the respondents to the online survey agreed or strongly agreed that their participation had resulted in a more inclusive culture at their school, which is promising. As an example of cultural changes that began to emerge, one participant noted:

*...one of the things... I think we've managed this year that the project has supported has been ... making it everybody's business to support our kids, and everyone's business to think about the ways we include all of our students in all of our learning.*

- School participants commonly expressed frustration about seeking to effect school-wide change without the genuine support of principals or key leaders, and without a sense of shared ownership among all teachers. This is consistent with the research literature, which emphasises that achieving cultural change in schools is a multi-level, long-term prospect involving the coordination of resources and people working towards a clear, shared vision, sustained by common values, and conceptualised in relation to local contextual factors (Carrington & Elkins, 2003; Dyson et al., 2004; McMaster, 2013; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015). Clearly, enacting broad cultural change was beyond the scope of the ISC project, which included individual leaders rather than being embedded in broader school communities. However, there was evidence of emergent positive change in this direction, in terms of laying foundational knowledge and motivation, and providing a 'roadmap' and set of tools for action.



The strength of this evidence varied across schools. The extent to which cultural change is developed from these foundations will depend upon a range of site-specific factors.

- In the interviews with school leaders, some participants discussed the difference between schools who had the principal and/or senior leaders attending the CoP meetings, and those represented by teachers or other staff with limited leadership responsibility, in terms of opportunities to drive changes in policy or practice. For example, one observed:

*I don't know that there was enough leadership in the network group. And – that's probably one thing I'd change, that – that there were a few schools that had their principal and that there. But if you're just sending two staff members, or a teacher, and teaching assistant. They don't have the voice they need in order to take that back to the school. And so, it must be extraordinarily frustrating.*

The pivotal role of strong, distributed leadership for school-wide change, which requires both support and accountability for teachers, is well-documented in the research (e.g., Harris, 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2008). The extent to which principals and other senior leaders have a sense of ownership over the drive towards more inclusive cultures is likely to be strongly associated with outcomes at each school. This is an example of a factor that was beyond the scope of the ISC project.

## 2. To what extent has the ISC project achieved increased knowledge and capability within mainstream services (schools), related to inclusive practice?

- Participating in the ISC project was associated with increased knowledge of inclusion and inclusive practices, and a reported sense of increased capability for the school leaders directly involved in the project to support other educators and implement inclusive practices. 90% of respondents to the online survey agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the ISC project had raised their awareness of issues related to inclusion, while almost three quarters agreed that the project supported them to increase their knowledge and skills relevant to inclusion. The CoP feedback surveys from 2019 similarly reflected participants' agreement that engagement in the meetings had increased their knowledge and confidence related to inclusive practice.
- Throughout the data, there was evidence of leaders rethinking their existing understandings of inclusion, noting that as they learned more, they recognised the limits of their previous interpretations. For example:

*I thought that I had a lot of knowledge, but I have learnt so much through the project, through people's tool kits, through the discussions with other schools and getting to see other schools. It's just been – like it's a great project and every time I meet someone, I usually say you need to go on this project.*

- In the CoP observation notes, knowledge and capability was the most prevalent theme, which is consistent with the focus on knowledge development and professional learning in the CoP workshops. The webinars in 2020 provided additional opportunities, beyond the CoP meetings, for professional learning related to inclusive education. Participants shared examples of how these resources had supported growth in their own knowledge, but also enabled them to work more effectively with other staff. For example:

*Making good use of the webinar recordings with small groups of teachers - working through the curriculum adjustment process that Loren [external consultant] modelled in the webinars with teachers, building their confidence and capacity.*

- Participants strongly endorsed the CoP model as effective in their professional learning, and particularly valued the ongoing opportunities for networking and ‘thinking together’ with leaders from other schools across sectors (Government, Independent and Catholic). However, most attributed their professional growth to the combination of multiple project activities. These included the visits to other schools, opportunities to engage with the mentors, access to more personalised consultation with Loren Swancutt (consultant), and work on the toolkit resources. One participant, from a school more advanced with inclusive practices, described how the CoP was beneficial in terms of networking, but went on to explain how the opportunity to work individually with the consultant and visit other schools helped them to plan their own next steps:

*When we started talking to Loren, we realised that some of the things she had done... they were further down the track. That’s where we wanted to get to. So, she worked with us... sort of did a mud map for a strategic plan with us. So, it was I suppose the nuts and the bolts that sit behind what we do, rather than looking at... what they were doing. So yeah, she was a great support in that sense. And then going to the school to see how that worked, and also didn’t work... because there’s no such thing as a perfect model.*

- There was some, albeit limited, evidence that participants’ increased knowledge and capacity had broadly translated to teachers, leaders and students not directly involved with the ISC project. There were examples of leaders sharing resources and leading discussions with staff at their schools or changing reporting practices. There were some instances reported of youth mentors visiting schools and speaking with staff or student groups, which raised awareness of issues related to inclusive education. For the most part, participants acknowledged plans to ‘roll out’ key ideas to broader staff in the future, but the strongest evidence at this stage was for professional learning gains concentrated within the group of participating leaders.

### 3. How has the project contributed to changes in practices and/or policies at participating schools?

- Analysis of survey data indicated statistically significant changes over the course of the project in *policy and inclusive principles, collaborative planning and support, family engagement,*

*learning environment and inclusive classroom practices*, based on respondents' self-assessments. 68% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that engagement with the project led to changes in their practice.

- The evaluation documented evidence for a range of practice changes specifically relevant to the inclusion of students living with disability. Examples varied between schools, but included a decreased reliance on withdrawing students with disabilities from the regular classroom, greater attention to student voice, exploration of co-teaching models, and changes to information included in Individualised Education Plans (e.g., *"I thought I was pretty pleased with our IEPs and then I thought, actually, we don't even make mention of the children's strengths and interests in their IEP, so we really need to add that in"*). Youth mentors also mentioned several instances in which they had observed or been involved in changes in practice at schools, such as the development of student voice forums.
- Involvement in the ISC project supported participating schools to review and evaluate their school policies associated with inclusive education. Some schools updated existing policies or developed new policies, while others identified policy as an area for future attention as part of their progress towards inclusion.
- The extent to which changes in practice were emergent as opposed to embedded varied across schools, and were most strongly evident in schools who entered the project with existing foundations of inclusive practice already in place, and a clearer sense of their inclusive goals and priorities as part of a shared vision. On the survey, respondents reported changes in practice, but few of these were rated as "Fully in Place" across the school by the end of the project. Data from the interviews with school leaders indicated considerable evidence for Guskey's (2000) first three evaluation levels of *satisfaction with the project, increased learning and awareness, and changes in school-level support and organisation*. However, outcomes at Levels 4 (*application of new knowledge*) and 5 (*student level outcomes*) were less evident.
- The findings of limited transfer of new knowledge into embedded practice is consistent with the literature on schoolwide change and effective professional learning. That is, increased awareness and knowledge among staff leading the change process is a critical first step, but for each site it will take a shared vision embraced by the whole school (McMaster, 2013; Sailor, 2015; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015); strong distributed leadership (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; McMaster, 2015; Miškolci, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2016); targeted, ongoing professional learning for all teachers that is directly linked to their daily work and to student learning (Desimone, 2009; Timperley, Ell, Le Fevre & Twyford, 2020; Van den Bergh, Ros & Beijaard, 2014); and coordinated attention to aspects of school culture (Dybvik, 2004; McMaster, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014) over time to effect lasting change. Clearly, most of the aspects noted above were well beyond the scope of the ISC project, but it was promising to note the evidence of changes in practice and policy that did occur at multiple sites.

#### 4. How has the project contributed to increased connections and potential sustained partnerships between key stakeholders?

- It was clear throughout the data that participants found the CoP model particularly valuable in linking them with a strong network of like-minded educators. Participants identified the connections with other schools at a similar point in their journey towards inclusion as a valuable component of the project and reported high levels of satisfaction related to networking with leaders from other schools, and visiting other sites. This finding is reflected in a summative comment about the project provided on the online survey:

*The project has provided fantastic opportunities to experience how other schools 'do' Inclusive Education, to hear from students with disability how education has (and hasn't) met their needs, as well as introducing pedagogical approaches, demonstrating them in action etc. Above all, being able to meet with like-minded educators who are passionate about inclusion has provided me with the support and ongoing motivation to ensure this becomes more of a reality in my own site.*

- There are some signs that engagement of participating schools with aspects of the project may continue following completion of the formal activities. The inclusion 'book club'—whereby a group of educators is reading and discussing together a recent text on inclusive education—is one example that speaks to potential sustained partnerships. Leaders varied in the extent to which they saw these networks with other schools as ongoing and sustainable.
- Participation in the ISC project increased participants' awareness of resources and information related to inclusive education, including the programs offered by Julia Farr Association and the services and support available through external consultants. This served to broaden the professional networks of the educators involved, beyond those they would typically access within their own schooling sector or existing networks.
- The website provides the potential for ongoing engagement with the project group, should participants continue to contribute resources as they continue work at their schools.
- The opportunity to connect with youth mentors was a unique element of the ISC project. Currently, there is increased attention in the health and disability research literature to co-designing projects and valuing the perspectives of those with lived experience of disability. There are recent examples of this approach being applied in inclusive education (e.g., Hyett et al., 2020), but these remain relatively rare. The ISC project provides a clear example of meaningful engagement of young people living with disability, which enabled important new connections for participating schools. Participants reported valuing the contribution of the youth mentors and what they could offer, and there were multiple examples of mentors contributing to the development of resources, and to conversations and planning in schools. However, the evidence from project leaders, school participants and the mentors themselves suggests that this was an under-utilised resource in the project. A number of schools described

future plans to engage the youth mentors, which suggests some potential for these connections to continue.

- Beyond engagement with the schools, a number of youth mentors described the opportunity to network with peers within the mentor group, who were similarly passionate about inclusive education, as a catalyst for further collaboration and advocacy. These connections, formed through the ISC project, have significant potential for sustainability. As one mentor explained:

*Actually, three of us mentors now are working on another project and we just found each other through this one, and so we have been able to continue some advocacy work outside of the project so that's been a strength. Like working with other – not just the schools collaborating, but also us being able to create other change in the inclusive education space.*

- The project steering committee, while not a specific focus of the evaluation, represented a clear example of a new, cross-disciplinary and cross-sector partnership. The JFA-PO leaders drew together a group of educators, administrators, advocates, parents, and young people with lived experience of disability, which enabled a governance structure representing multiple perspectives and types of expertise. This element of the program offers an important model for similar projects.

#### 5. How has the project contributed to increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community for various stakeholders, including individuals living with disability?

- The strongest examples of this goal being met by the project came from (1) the experiences of the youth mentors, and (2) the increased attention to student voice on matters of inclusive practice in schools.
- The ISC project included young people with lived experience of disability in meaningful and sustainable ways. This group brought their own experiences of living with disability, but many also had expertise, professional experience and emerging leadership skills in the field which were potentially very beneficial for schools. It is unfortunate that the mentors' expertise was not engaged to the extent it could have been. While the opportunity and support structure was offered by JFA-PO through the project, only a small number of schools took advantage of this. It is acknowledged that interruptions and pressure on schools due to COVID-19 played a role in this outcome. Schools also varied in the extent to which they developed clear plans related to inclusive education, which meant that some did not have specific goals for engaging the mentors.
- Despite the limited engagement, there were multiple examples of active participation by the mentors, with mutual benefits for schools and the mentors themselves. In particular, where mentors had the opportunity to attend schools and speak with staff and students, there were

clear benefits for both parties. This outcome was ably facilitated by Letitia's commitment to shaping the project activities around the needs and goals of all parties, including through the varying levels and types of support she provided to individual mentors, and the tailored opportunities to contribute. As noted in the previous section, there is evidence that these young people benefited from the chance to network and connect, including with each other, to build their own confidence, knowledge and skills, and to contribute their considerable expertise to supporting inclusion in schools.

- Increased attention to student voice is a key principle of inclusive schools, and the ISC project explicitly focused on this area of practice. A number of schools had either developed plans or had begun to implement practices in this space by the end of the project. For example, student leaders at one school produced a video in which they captured their peers' opinions and ideas about being inclusive. A participant from another school described a process of seeking feedback from students and parents on inclusive practices. At several schools, the establishment of a Student Diversity and Inclusion Committee was underway, supported by a \$500 grant offered by JFA-PO for this purpose, and through guidance from JFA project leaders and mentors. While schools were in various stages of implementation with this component, and most were at the early planning stages, there was certainly evidence of increased opportunities for active participation, connection to community, and leadership for students living with disability in participating schools.
- As described in the previous section, the project steering committee represented an important and genuine opportunity for multiple stakeholders to actively participate in discussion and governance, and to provide leadership in the area of inclusive education, and this includes committee members living with disability.

## Recommendations

1. The Community of Practice model was endorsed as an effective means of professional learning for educators in this project. Combined with other project activities, this forum enabled participants to access, share, and develop resources and solve problems related to their daily work. It is recommended that future projects in this space have a similarly applied, collaborative focus.
2. The ISC project provided a promising example of a model for genuinely engaging young people with lived experience of disability, leading to a range of mutual benefits. A similar approach could be replicated in future projects, with attention to structuring the role of mentors to ensure maximum 'take up' by participants.
3. The ISC project enabled school participants to strengthen and expand their own knowledge of inclusive education. For future projects involving school leaders, a strong focus on topics related to working with other teachers is likely to be beneficial to ensure the transfer of new learning.

4. A more structured approach to differentiation within the professional learning opportunities is recommended for future projects, taking into account participants' different levels of experience and expertise.
5. Future projects might consider requiring a principal or senior leader to attend as part of a school team, to attend selected sessions, or to engage in other targeted opportunities related to the project. This is likely to support the application of new learning, genuine commitment to resourcing (e.g., staff time and professional learning) and the shift towards inclusive culture at the school level.
6. Future projects in this space could be considered at the school level, focusing on a small number of sites which could become case studies of inclusive education for others to emulate. Approaches such as Design Thinking (Panke, 2019), which emphasises co-design and local contextual factors, may be particularly relevant, while concepts of Implementation Science (Askell-Williams & Koh, 2020) would be important to guide sustainability of outcomes.



# Chapter 1

## Background and Project Description

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### 1.1 Introduction

Following consultation with JFA Purple Orange project leaders in December 2018, a team of researchers representing the **Research in Inclusive and Specialised Education (RISE)** group in the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University agreed to independently evaluate the Inclusive School Communities Project<sup>1</sup>. Based on discussions with JFA PO staff, the RISE team designed an independent evaluation of program outcomes, with reference to the stated program goals. This plan included provision of in-kind support by the RISE team and Flinders University in addition to the funding from JFA-PO<sup>2</sup>. Evaluation activities commenced in 2019. An interim report was presented to the project leaders in March 2020 (following a draft submitted at the end of January). Additional data collection and analyses were completed throughout 2020. This report presents summative evaluation findings which expand upon and complement the interim findings.

It is acknowledged that some elements of the Inclusive School Communities project are ongoing, as a result of both amendments to original plans due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and continuing interest from project participants and leaders. However, this report addresses evaluation findings relevant to the original project period, ending on June 30, 2020, which covers the duration funded by the Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA).

This chapter presents a brief review of literature related to inclusive education, which highlights key concepts that helped to frame the project evaluation. This is followed by a description of major program elements and adjustments due to circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic that affected program delivery and the evaluation.

Details of the evaluation research design, including methods for data collection and analysis, are provided in Chapter 2.

Chapters 3-6 present the evaluation findings from various data sources. These include interviews and focus group discussions with participating school leaders (Chapter 3); internal surveys and researcher observation notes related to the Community of Practice meetings, and analysis of the website resources (Chapter 4); responses to the online survey (Chapter 5); and internal initial interviews, survey feedback, and semi-structured final interviews with the youth mentors (Chapter 6).

Chapter 7 summarises the evaluation findings in relation to the five program evaluation questions, which map onto the ISC project goals, and also includes conclusions and recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> *Project Evaluation Contract*, 8/19

<sup>2</sup> *RISE Evaluation Proposal*, 5/19

## 1.2 Inclusive Education: Review of Literature

Inclusive education has featured prominently in worldwide educational discourse and reform efforts over the past 30 years (Berlach & Chambers, 2011; Forlin, 2006). Inclusive schools are critical to providing a strong foundation for young people with disabilities to access, participate in and contribute to their communities and lead fulfilling lives. Schools also represent a key condition for the development of thriving, inclusive communities for all citizens. Yet, as reflected in submissions to the current Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, and consistent with recent South Australian reports (Parliament of South Australia, 2017; Walker, 2017), many students living with disability (and their families) continue to report negative experiences of education. While progress has been made, traditional educational structures and practices often run counter to inclusive goals (Slee, 2013), and inconsistencies occur between theory and policy and the implementation of inclusive principles and practices in schools (Carrington & Elkins, 2002; Graham & Spandagou, 2011). In addition, both preservice and practicing teachers consistently report feeling underprepared to teach students with disabilities and special educational needs (Jarvis, 2019; OECD, 2019).

Despite legislation and policy imperatives related to inclusive education, there remains a lack of consensus in the field about the definition of inclusion and associated models of inclusive practice (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Kinsella, 2020). Multiple conceptualisations of inclusion and theoretical approaches to fostering inclusion in schools may contribute to confusion and uncertainty for educators and policy-makers. With schools facing growing accountability and teachers expected to educate an increasingly diverse student population (Anderson & Boyle, 2015), it is vital that the concept of inclusive education is demystified for practitioners. Against this backdrop, initiatives such as the Inclusive School Communities (ISC) project that aim to deepen understandings of inclusion and increase the capacity of school communities to provide an inclusive education, are particularly important.

### Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is based on a philosophy that stems from principles of social justice, and is primarily concerned with mitigating educational inequalities, exclusion, and discrimination (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Booth, 2012; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). Although inclusion was originally concerned with ‘disability’ and ‘special educational needs’ (Ainscow et al., 2006; Van Miegheem et al., 2020), the term has evolved to embody valuing diversity among *all* students, regardless of their circumstances (e.g., Carter & Abawi, 2018; Thomas, 2013). Among interpretations of inclusion, common themes include fairness, equality, respect, diversity, participation, community, leadership, commitment, shared vision, and collaboration (Booth, 2012; McMaster, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), to which Australia is a signatory, defines inclusive education as:

. . . a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers with a vision serving to provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory

learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences. (United Nations, 2016, para 11)

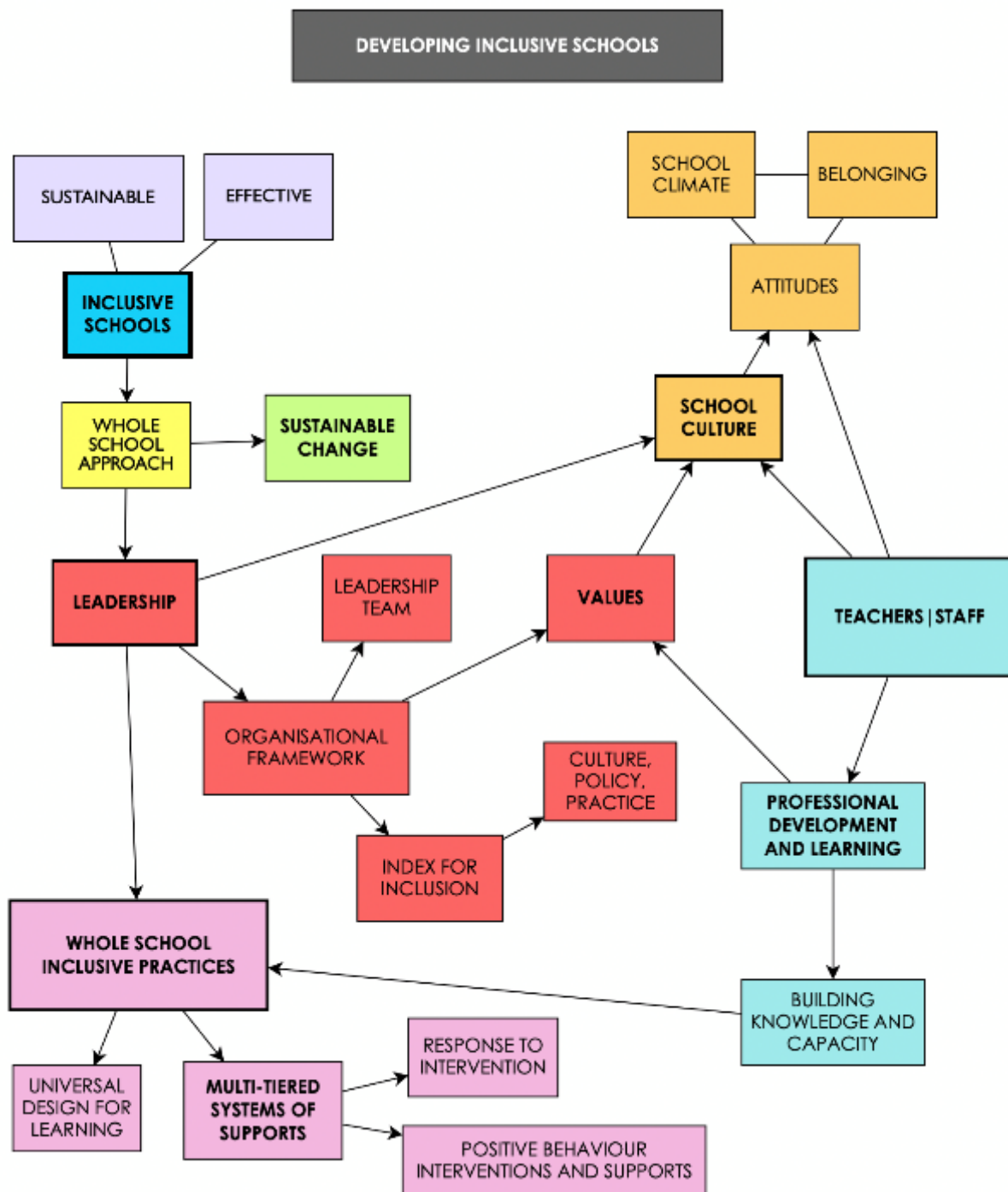
Consistent with this definition, inclusive education now generally refers to the process of addressing the learning needs of all students, through ensuring participation, achievement growth, and a sense of belonging, enabling all students to reach their full potential (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Booth, 2012; Stegemann & Jaciw, 2018). Inclusion is concerned with identifying and removing potential barriers to presence (attendance, access), meaningful participation, growth from an individual starting point, and feelings of connectedness and belonging for all students and community members, with a focus on those at particular risk of marginalisation or exclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006; Forlin, Chambers et al., 2013).

Critically, the view of inclusion described above moves beyond considerations of the physical *placement* of a student in a particular setting or grouping configuration. That is, while physical access to a mainstream school environment is essential to maintain the rights of students living with disabilities to access education “on the same basis” as their peers (consistent with legislation and human rights principles), it is not *sufficient* to ensure inclusion. Rather, inclusion can be considered a multi-faceted approach involving processes, practices, policies and cultures at all levels of a school and system (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Inclusive education is responsive to each child and promotes flexibility, rather than expecting the child to change in order to ‘fit’ rigid schooling structures. The latter approach reflects *integration*, and inclusion is also inconsistent with *segregation*, in which children with disabilities are educated separately from others.

Considerable research has focused on the implementation of inclusive school processes, practices and cultures that are sustainable over time. Although a number frameworks to achieve sustainable inclusive practice have been proposed, key elements are consistent across approaches and well-supported by research (Booth & Ainscow 2011; Azorín & Ainscow, 2020). These interconnected elements are summarised in Figure 1, and considered fundamental to the process of achieving whole-school (and systemic) cultural change towards more inclusive ways of working. Of particular relevance to the Inclusive School Communities project are the concepts of a whole school approach, leadership, school values and culture, building staff capacity, and multi-tiered models of inclusive practice.

### Inclusion as a Whole School Approach

Adopting a whole of school approach to inclusive education is fundamental to ensure efficacy and sustainability (Read et al., 2015). The process of developing inclusive schools is complex and multi-faceted, requiring time, commitment, ongoing reflection, and sustained effort. For inclusion to truly take root in schools, changes must be made from the inside out; a strong foundation must be built from inclusive school values, committed leadership, and shared vision amongst staff to support whole school structural reforms to policy, pedagogy, and practice (Ekins & Grimes, 2009). Whilst challenging, “it is necessary to unsettle default modes of operation” in schools (Johnston & Hayes, 2007, p.376), as inclusive education requires new, more efficient and effective ways of supporting student participation and achievement. This is made possible by implementing flexible, planned whole school support structures, such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), where teachers work collaboratively with specialist staff to identify, monitor, and support students



**Figure 1.** Interconnected elements in sustainable inclusive education, derived from research.

requiring varying levels and types of intervention at different times, and for different purposes (Sailor, 2017; Witzel & Clarke, 2015). This contrasts to the more traditional, ‘categorical’ and segregated approach of general educators referring identified students with additional needs to special educators, to devise and administer further education in isolation from the regular classroom (Sailor, 2017).

Even at the classroom level, inclusive planning and teaching practices must be supported by school policies, practices, and culture in order to be sustainable (Sailor, 2017). Barriers to inclusive classroom practice can include lack of effective professional learning and support for teachers; teachers' lack of willingness to include students with particular needs; attitudes that are inconsistent with inclusive practices; teacher education that fails to address concerns about inclusion; and, a lack of accountability for the implementation of inclusive teaching practices (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Forlin et al., 2008; van Kraayenoord et al., 2014). Addressing each of these relies on targeted, coordinated support. The complexity of embedding inclusive practices such as differentiated instruction or Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into classroom work is often underestimated, and these practices have the greatest chance of becoming embedded when they are reinforced by a shared vision and collaborative effort (McMaster, 2013; Sailor, 2015; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2017).

Sustainable, whole school change cannot be achieved via focus on a single element of inclusion in isolation, as components do not function in isolation. Rather, the core elements of inclusion including leadership, school culture, building staff capacity, and inclusive practices are parts of an interdependent system. Hence, key elements of inclusion must be considered collectively and accounted for in advanced planning to ensure they function harmoniously and are integrated into the developing inclusive fabric of the school (Alborno & Gaad, 2014).

### Leadership for Inclusion

The importance of leadership for determining the success of school reforms or changes to practice is well established in the literature (McMaster & Elliot, 2014; Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013). Becoming a more inclusive school often requires significant shifts in school values, culture, practices, and organisational systems; thus, leadership is critical to ensuring sustainable inclusive change in schools (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; McMaster, 2015; Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013). School leaders are highly influential figures whose values, beliefs, and actions directly affect the culture of the school, expectations of staff, and school operations (Slater, 2012; Wong & Cheung, 2009). It is critical that school leaders are committed to embodying inclusive principles, establishing and modelling a standard of behaviour that promotes the development of inclusion within the school community.

Organisational change on the scale often required for inclusion requires leadership across multiple levels (Jarvis et al., 2016; Tomlinson et al., 2008). It is likely to be most effective when facilitated through models of distributed leadership across roles and levels within a school, and when the case for change is underpinned by a broader, shared vision specifically related to student outcomes (Harris, 2013). Research has established the relationship between distributed leadership practices and the implementation of effective, inclusive school practices (Miškolci et al., 2016; Mullick et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2008; Sharp et al., 2020). Leaders should consider utilising inclusive styles of management, replacing hierarchical structures with leadership teams (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; McMaster, 2015). Effective school leadership enables shared responsibility, vision, and consistency within the school community, which is vital for the successful implementation of inclusion (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013).

## Fostering Inclusive School Cultures

Developing an inclusive school culture is a fundamental component of developing sustainable inclusion in schools (Dyson et al., 2004; McMaster, 2013). The culture of a school is made up of the shared values, attitudes, and beliefs of the school community (Booth, 2012). Transitioning to a truly inclusive culture requires close attention to attitudes and general support of the inclusive values being adopted, particularly by staff, but also by students and the broader school community (Dyson et al., 2004; Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

A whole school approach to inclusion prompts a school to reflect on and embrace values based on inclusive principles, such as equality, diversity, and respect. This process cannot be imposed, but should be a collaborative exercise with school leaders and staff, to ensure any pedagogical philosophies or practices based on outdated ideas or past assumptions are not operating by default (Johnston & Hayes, 2007; Schein, 2004). Evaluating and redefining existing school values also requires professional learning, to facilitate a collective re-conceptualisation of inclusion specific to the unique context of the school; the meaning, aims, and expectations of inclusion must be clarified for the school community, to encourage a shared understanding, vision, and responsibility for supporting the inclusive changes unfolding within the school (Horrocks et al., 2008; Symes & Humphrey, 2011). Finally, it is vital that school policies and practices are regularly revised, to ensure that they reinforce the inclusive values and culture of the school; otherwise, they can act as a potential barrier to the development of sustainable whole school inclusion (Dybvik, 2004; McMaster, 2013).

## Building Teachers' Capacity for Inclusive Practice

Building the knowledge and capacity of teachers and other school staff is crucial to developing sustainable inclusion in schools. The evolution of an inclusive school culture depends on aligning the attitudes and behaviour of staff (McMaster, 2015). Teachers must be knowledgeable about how inclusive education has progressed over time, particularly how the meaning of inclusion has changed and what it means in their school context. Understanding the concepts and values behind inclusion can help teachers appreciate its significance, prompting reflection of their own practice and how they see their students (Anderson & Boyle, 2015; Skidmore, 2004). This can allow any unhelpful assumptions or beliefs that may have been unconsciously informing their teaching practice, particularly in relation to students living with disability, to be challenged and revised (Ashby, 2012; Ashton & Arlington, 2019).

While attention to attitudes, values, and broad understandings is fundamental, the goals of inclusion will only be achieved when principles are consistently enacted in daily classroom practice. At the classroom level, inclusion relies on teachers' willingness and capacity to apply evidence-informed inclusive practices, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Differentiated Instruction (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). UDL is a planning framework for learning activities designed to maximise curriculum accessibility for all students by offering multiple opportunities for engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2018; Sailor, 2015). Differentiated Instruction (DI) is a holistic framework of interdependent principles and practices that enables teachers to design learning experiences to address variation in students' readiness, interests and learning preferences

(Tomlinson, 2014). UDL is primarily focused on inclusive task design, although the model has been expanded in recent years to include greater attention to pedagogy. Differentiation encompasses elements of planning (clear, concept-based learning objectives; formative assessment to inform proactive decision-making for diverse students), teaching (strategies to differentiate by readiness, interest and learning preference; ensuring respectful tasks and ‘teaching up’), and learning environment (flexible grouping, classroom management, establishing an inclusive culture) (Jarvis, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014).

The application of UDL and DI principles and practices by skilled teachers enables diverse students to access curriculum content in multiple ways (Kozik et al., 2009; McMaster, 2013), at appropriate levels of challenge and support to ensure learning growth, and in ways that support motivation, engagement, and feelings of connection and belonging (Beecher & Sweeney, 2008; Callahan et al., 2015; van Kraayenoord, 2007; Stegemann & Jaciw, 2018). These complementary frameworks apply to all students and define general, flexible classroom practices that also reduce the need for individualised adjustments for students with identified disabilities and specialised learning needs. However, in inclusive classrooms, teachers must also develop the knowledge and skills to make and implement reasonable adjustments and accommodations that enable students with identified disabilities and more complex needs to engage with curriculum and assessment ‘on the same basis’ as their peers, as defined within the *Disability Standards for Education* (Davies, Elliott & Cumming, 2016).

While inclusive teaching and classroom practices are non-negotiable, the challenge for some teachers to master the necessary skills and achieve the significant shift away from traditional teaching practices is often underestimated (Dixon et al., 2014; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015). It is well-documented that teachers often find it difficult to apprehend both the conceptual and practical tools of DI and to embed differentiated practices into their daily work (Dack, 2019), particularly when they are not adequately resourced or supported to do so (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012; Brigandi et al., 2019; Fuchs et al., 2010; Mills et al., 2014). Perhaps related to teachers’ perceived lack of competence and confidence, the past 5-10 years have seen an enormous increase in the employment of teacher aides to work alongside students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, despite limited evidence for its effectiveness and often in the context of inadequate planning and oversight (e.g., Sharma & Salend, 2016).

Engagement in targeted professional learning (PL) is fundamental to supporting the shift towards inclusive teaching. Yet, traditional approaches to PL have been criticised for a lack of systematic evaluation and inadequate adherence to principles of effectiveness (Avalos, 2011; Merchie et al., 2018). Research on effective professional learning for teachers has established common principles and practices that are associated with changes in practice, and these also align with teachers’ stated preferences (Walker et al., 2018). These include:

- professional learning is embedded in teachers’ own work contexts, and requires teachers to engage with content that is highly relevant to their daily practice, and closely linked to student learning (Desimone, 2009; Easton, 2008; Spencer, 2016; Van den Bergh et al., 2014);
- professional learning enables teachers to learn together with colleagues, such as in communities of practice (Gore et al., 2017; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017);



- professional learning activities are supported by robust school leadership and linked to broader school values and goals (Carpenter, 2015; Frankling et al., 2017; Sharp et al., 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2008; Whitworth & Chiu, 2015);
- professional learning is provided over extended periods, is led by facilitators with expert knowledge, and includes timely follow up activities such as mentoring and coaching to embed changes in practice (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Grierson & Woloshyn, 2013; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015).

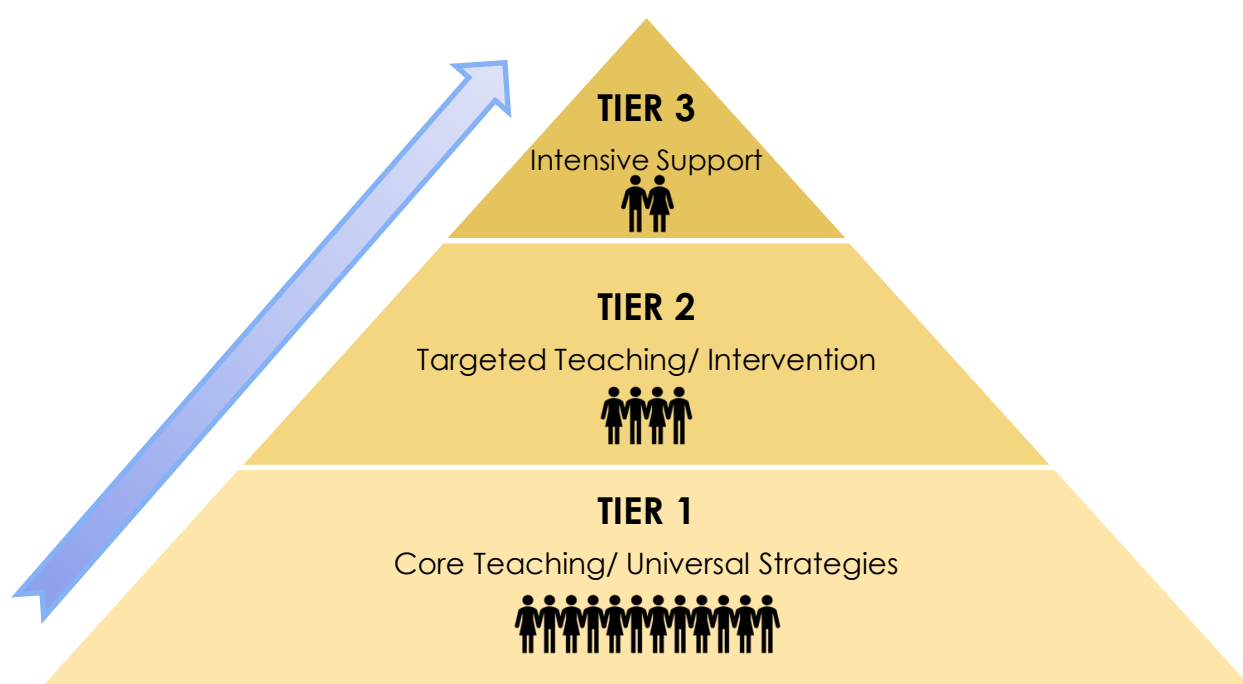
## Multi-tiered Approaches to Whole School Inclusive Practice

Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is an overarching term for a whole school inclusive framework that can be used to structure the flexible, timely distribution of resources to support students depending on their level of need (Sailor, 2017). As reflected in the generic depiction of MTSS in Figure 2, models generally utilise three tiers of intervention and teaching, where the intensity of the support is increased with each level or tier (McLeskey et al, 2014; Witzel & Clarke, 2015). Tier 1 includes core differentiated instruction and universal, evidence-based strategies for support that all students in the class receive. Tier 2 provides additional, targeted support to certain students for a specified purpose and period of time, usually in a small group format, while Tier 3 represents the most intensive and individualised support (Webster, 2016). The MTSS approach requires assessing all students regularly to assist in the early identification of needs requiring additional support, to enable prompt delivery of targeted interventions (McLeskey et al., 2014). MTSS is concerned with supporting the holistic development of students, by targeting their academic progress, behaviour, and socio-emotional well-being (McMillan & Jarvis, 2017).

When implemented with fidelity, MTSS is an effective whole school inclusive framework as teachers, therapists, and other support staff work collaboratively to assess, monitor, and plan interventions to support students (Sailor, 2017). Student progress is frequently monitored and data are evaluated by the support team to determine whether alternative interventions are required. MTSS additionally encourages the use of evidence-based practices to be implemented across the tiers of support. Some common examples of MTSS include Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behaviour Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Webster, 2016). RTI is focused on supporting students academically, while PBIS is concerned with emphasising behavioural expectations in a positive manner, naturally supporting the social and emotional development of students. MTSS models have also been applied in whole-school mental health promotion, prevention and intervention (McMillan & Jarvis, 2017) and inclusive approaches to academic talent development for more advanced students (Jarvis, 2017).

MTSS approaches to contemporary inclusive practice stand in contrast to traditional, categorical models whereby students were either 'in' or 'out' of special education services. The focus is on determining and responding to what students need when they need it, as opposed to focusing on a specific diagnosis or inflexible program options. In the MTSS framework, the tiers do not represent *students* or their placement, but the flexible suite of supports and interventions that may be provided. The implementation of MTSS approaches fundamentally reconceptualises the role of the classroom teacher, who must work collaboratively with specialist staff and other professionals to define and

address individual student needs in ongoing ways, rather than relying on a specialist teacher or even a teacher aide to take responsibility for the education of students with identified special needs. While MTSS requires substantial changes to school operations (and must therefore be supported by leadership and culture in deliberate, coordinated ways), the general framework provides an organisation and structure to support the development of sustainable, contemporary inclusive schools (McLeskey et al., 2014).



**Figure 2. MTSS Framework**

## Conclusion

Ultimately, developing sustainable and effective inclusion in schools is a challenging but worthwhile undertaking, requiring shared vision, commitment, ongoing reflection, and patience. Changes in practice, particularly in teachers' daily planning and pedagogy, take time and will be supported by ongoing, well-designed and embedded professional learning in the context of strong leadership and an inclusive school culture. By utilising a whole school approach, key areas including leadership, school values and culture, building staff capacity, and coordinated frameworks for inclusive practice, can be considered collectively and planned for in advance. In considering the structure, focus and duration of the ISC project, it is noted that some of the critical drivers of inclusive education are not directly within its scope to address. This is taken into account in the evaluation, and discussed with reference to the literature in framing the key findings.

### 1.3 ISC Project Goals

As stated in the initial proposal provided to the evaluation team<sup>3</sup> and preliminary discussions with project leaders, the Inclusive School Communities Project aims to “increase the capacity of at least 12 schools, primary and secondary, across metropolitan and greater Adelaide, to advance inclusion practices in their schools”.

#### *Primary ILC Outcome*

People with disability use and benefit from the same mainstream services as everyone else

#### *Activity Outcomes - Primary*

- c) Positive change in attitudes and culture within mainstream services
- d) Increased knowledge and capability within mainstream services

#### *Secondary ILC Outcome*

People with disability actively contribute to leading, shaping and influencing their community

#### *Activity Outcomes - Secondary*

- c) Increased connections between all key stakeholders (including mainstream, community and NDIA registered providers of supports)
- d) Increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community

### 1.4 Major Project Activities

To advance the objectives listed in 1.3, the Inclusive School Communities project incorporated the following major activities:

- Facilitating a Community of Practice (CoP) model whereby representatives (nominated leaders) from each participating school gathered for discussion and information sharing on topics related to inclusive practice in schools. JFA-PO project leaders facilitated the agenda for CoP meetings, but sought ongoing feedback and encouraged school leaders to drive the focus, based on their perceived needs and interests. Meetings were hosted at participating schools, on a rotating basis. This was a ‘cascading’ CoP design, whereby an initial group of schools seen to have greater experience and expertise with inclusion entered the program first, and were later (towards the end of year 1) joined by a second round of school leaders who could benefit from mentoring by more experienced peers. In early 2020, the CoP meetings were moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Development of an inclusive school communities ‘toolkit’ consisting of a website with a series of resources (e.g., documents, videos, advice sheets), co-produced by JFA-PO staff, project school participants, and mentors. This website is active and publicly accessible.

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<sup>3</sup> Julia Farr Group *Project Plan*, provided 4/19

- Involvement of youth mentors, who are individuals living with disability. The mentors were available to schools to provide advice and feedback, to engage with the CoP sessions, to work with staff and/or students, and to contribute to the website tools. The specific involvement of the mentors was shaped by each school's goals and requests for support. The mentors also met as a group on a bimonthly/monthly basis, and engaged in team building and professional development activities to build their capacity to work with schools.
- Involvement of student representatives from each school was included in the initial project design, but due to logistical difficulties, this aspect of the project did not proceed. Multiple schools indicated an interest in establishing a Student Diversity and Inclusion Committee, which JFA-PO project staff supported financially through one-off grants, and also through consultation. Several schools made progress towards this goal. However, student representative activities occurred within the schools themselves rather than across schools.
- Support was available in a range of ways for participating schools to identify needs, set context-specific goals, form relationships across schools and within the disability sector, and access resources in order to improve inclusive practices related to students with disability. This included ongoing communication and support from JFA-PO leaders, who offered consultation, organised guest speakers and provided information about services and supports of potential interest to schools. Arising from engagement with Loren Swancutt (member of steering committee and inclusion consultant) as a presenter at the Communities of Practice meetings, project participants from 10 schools visited Thuringowa State High School, Bowen State High School and St. Benedict's Catholic College in Northern Queensland over three days to observe and discuss whole-school inclusive practices. This trip was coordinated by JFA-PO, who also provided partial funding for participants.
- The original project plan included provision for a conference event towards the end of the project, to enable broader sharing of ideas and project outcomes and to involve participating schools and mentors in presenting inclusive practices. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this element of the project was cancelled. However, JFA-PO project leaders redirected their resources to a series of webinars addressing multiple aspects of inclusive practice. These were available to staff from participating schools, but also a wider local, interstate and international audience, which enabled a broader audience for promoting the ISC project and disseminating information relevant to inclusive education.

## 1.5 Program Participants and Stakeholders

The Inclusive School Communities project aimed to increase capacity for inclusive practices in at least 12 schools. Participating schools in the initial round of the project included those purported to have an existing foundation of positive inclusive practices. Participating schools included:

### **Government Schools**

Glencoe Central Primary School\*

Parafield Gardens High School\*

Australian Science and Mathematics School

Springbank Secondary College  
Gawler and District College B-12  
Avenues College B-12

### **Catholic Schools**

Antonio Catholic School\*  
St. John the Apostle Parish School  
St. Paul's College

### **Independent Schools**

Horizon Christian School\*  
Pulteney Grammar School\*  
Tyndale Christian Schools group (Salisbury East, Strathalbyn and Murray Bridge)  
Concordia College

\*Round 1 participating schools

In addition to participating schools, the ISC project included youth mentors (<https://inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au/contributors/mentors>), and was guided by a steering group comprising representatives from JFA-PO, government and non-government education sectors, independent consultants on inclusive education, disability advocates and members of professional associations, parents of young people with disability, and people living with disability. This group of local and national stakeholders met regularly and provided governance and feedback throughout the project (<https://inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au/contributors/steering-group>).

The project was administered and facilitated by JFA-PO staff, and the Project Leader, Letitia Rose.

## Chapter 2

### Evaluation Design and Methods

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#### 2.1 Evaluation Questions

The primary focus of the program evaluation was to understand the nature and scope of any changes in attitudes, capacity, practices and/or policies related to inclusive practices in participating schools, and to identify the impact of these changes on staff, students, and other community members. As agreed through the negotiated proposal, the evaluation specifically addressed the following questions, which map directly onto the ISC project goals (and by implication the goals of the ILC program):

1. To what extent has the ISC project achieved positive change in attitudes and culture within mainstream services (schools), related to the inclusion of students with disability?
2. To what extent has the ISC project achieved increased knowledge and capability within mainstream services (schools), related to inclusive practice?
3. How has the project contributed to changes in practices and/or policies at participating schools?
4. How has the project contributed to increased connections and potential sustained partnerships between all key stakeholders?
5. How has the project contributed to increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community for various stakeholders, including individuals living with disability?

#### 2.2 Evaluation Research Design

The evaluation employed a mixed-methods research design drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data across multiple phases of data collection. Mixed-methods research designs involve the integration of both qualitative and quantitative approaches into a single study. They are particularly well-suited to evaluation of complex, multi-levelled phenomena and lend themselves to investigation by a team of researchers, whereby “each member contributes specific expertise to the process of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods” (Palinkas et al., 2019, p.423). Employing both quantitative and qualitative methods enables researchers to “[transcend] the conclusions warranted by either a qualitative or quantitative approach alone” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). While different mixed-methods designs are appropriate to different purposes, the goal of multiple methods in this evaluation was related to convergence of different data sources and methods in a way that could provide a more holistic picture of the ISC project outcomes.

In keeping with the purpose of the evaluation, researchers did not seek to document every project activity or to capture extensive feedback on each individual aspect of the project. Rather, the evaluation examined a substantial cross-section of activities and included a representative sample of participants.

The evaluation report is based on data from the following sources:

- Ongoing consultation with Letitia Rose, JFA-PO Project Leader.
- Project documentation (including initial project plan, ISC project website and materials provided through CoP meetings and webinars).
- Observation field notes from CoP meetings (face-to-face and online).
- Observation field notes from online webinars.
- 11 initial semi-structured interviews with participating school leaders (5 Round 1 schools; 6 Round 2 schools). Interviews were sometimes with a single school leader, but sometimes with two participating leaders from the same school. These were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Interview questions are in Appendix A.
- 7 final interviews with participating school leaders (4 Round 1 schools; 3 Round 2 schools). These were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.
- 4 interviews with youth mentors at project completion. These were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.
- Transcripts from internal initial interviews with youth mentors (provided by JFA-PO).
- Feedback from mentors on mid-point internal survey (provided by JFA-PO).
- Internal feedback surveys from Communities of Practice (CoP) meetings (provided by JFA-PO).
- 22 Responses from school participants to an online survey at the completion of the project. The survey was constructed from an initial pool of items generated from key themes in the literature and multiple existing tools (see Appendix B). From this large initial pool, items were reduced, refined and reorganised through multiple rounds of feedback and discussion, and then piloted for suitability and timing (see survey items in Appendix C).

The comprehensive nature of the data collected and analysed enabled rich and varied information through which to answer the evaluation questions. Data collection and analysis occurred in iterative cycles over the course of the project, supported by regular meetings of the research team to discuss emerging findings and plan further data collection. In particular, the research design embodied the following strengths related to the credibility of findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000):

- Multiple data sources and team members allowed for triangulation of results across data sources, participants and researchers.
- Prolonged engagement in the field (data collection continued for more than a year) enabled researchers to establish relationships of trust and collaboration with participants, explore 'hunches' and compare observations across multiple sources. A point of saturation was also reached in the data analysis.
- The nature of the research team enabled for peer review among multiple researchers involved in different aspects of the project.
- The literature review and the specific expertise of team members allowed us to consider and align findings in relation to research-informed elements of inclusive education.



## 2.3 Limitations

The data from interviews, observations and document analysis enabled a deep and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and outcomes related to the project within each school. To complement these qualitative data, we developed an online survey which enabled participants to respond anonymously to a series of items linked to the project aims and based on the research literature on key indicators of inclusive education. Ideally, a pre-post survey design would have enabled the analysis of changes in reported practices from the beginning to the end of the ISC project. However, the RISE team was engaged to conduct the evaluation after the commencement of the project, which meant that we were unable to collect baseline survey data. Therefore, we designed survey items that invited participants to respond to items with two ratings, one representing their retrospective judgement about where their school had started out prior to the project, and the second a current judgement of where their school stood at this point in time, following engagement with the project. While this approach does enable some sense of perceived progress over time, it should not be misinterpreted as a true pre-post comparison.

Based on the original evaluation design, we planned to include a series of 'case studies', whereby we would gather more focused, comprehensive data on a number of schools, including from leaders, classroom teachers and students, and consisting of observations and interviews. However, with interruptions due to COVID-19, we were unable to complete classroom observations or interviews with students. In addition, both the Project Leader and multiple school participants suggested that COVID-19 resulted in schools redirecting their resources, and some schools becoming less engaged in the CoP meetings and subsequent follow up ISC project activities. For this reason and because of the level of progress made in most schools, few had 'rolled out' new initiatives or changes in practice beyond the leadership team to all teaching staff. For the evaluation, this meant that we were unable to conduct focus group interviews comprised of teachers at most schools. It is also likely to have limited the number of responses to the online survey. That is, with fewer school-based staff involved in project-related activities, there was a smaller pool of potential respondents. There were a smaller number of participants responding to the survey than we had hoped for, and this limited some of the analyses we were able to perform on that data, which also affects the interpretations that can be drawn.

Despite the limitations of the evaluation, we were able to collect a considerable amount of data, and we noted a high degree of consistency in our findings from multiple data sources. Therefore, we have a high level of confidence in the trustworthiness of our findings and conclusions.



coded according to each of these five levels, and through this process, themes emerged within each level (presented as sub-headings in this chapter).

The interview data represented considerable evidence for outcomes at the first three evaluation levels (Guskey, 2000). This included high levels of satisfaction with the project, many examples of increased learning and awareness, and changes in school-level support and organisation. However, outcomes at levels 4 (application of new knowledge) and 5 (student-level outcomes) were less evident. This is not unusual or surprising, as the research literature related to school change consistently identifies the challenges associated with translating a high-quality professional learning program into improved outcomes for students (Desimone, 2009; Timperley, Ell, Le Fevre & Twyford, 2020).

A range of school- and student-level factors are associated with limiting the translation of professional learning to embedded practices in schools and improved outcomes for students. These include factors that are beyond the direct control of designers of professional learning programs. For example, Timperley et.al. (2020) highlight the importance of understanding and working with a school's local culture and organisational structures, and the challenges presented by multiple and often competing agendas. Schools are complex organisations and, as Timperley et.al. (2020) note, “cause and effect are not closely linked—things spiral in a complex system, rather than proceed in straight lines” (p. 2).

The data suggest that high levels of satisfaction with the ISC project, and valuable learning outcomes for participating staff, did not readily translate to changes in classroom level practices, at least by the end of the project period. This is consistent with the relatively short duration of the program (in terms of complex organisational change), the inclusion of a small number of participants per school (not all of whom were at the highest tier of school leadership), and the primary focus on building and sharing knowledge about inclusion. However, this is not to downplay the project outcomes that were evident in leaders' responses. These outcomes are fundamental to ensuring strong foundations for future progress towards inclusive practice. The complexity of inclusion and inclusive practices, combined with the varied contexts of the schools involved, underscores the challenges presented to the project leaders. Furthermore, the unanticipated impact of COVID-19, including restrictions or interruptions to some planned project activities in the latter stages, was noted by participants as impeding their achievement of some school-level outcomes.

The following sections focus on outcomes at the five levels of Guskey's framework (2000). This is followed by a summary of leaders' general reflections on the project design and the impact of COVID-19.

## 3.2 Level 1: School Leaders' Satisfaction with the Project Experience

Throughout the interviews, participants reported high levels of satisfaction with their engagement with the ISC project, noting in particular the value of networking with other schools. Selected feedback from participants is provided under thematic sub-headings as representative evidence against the ISC project goal of **increased (and potentially sustained) connections between key stakeholders**.

## Positive Engagement with the Project

*...in terms of inclusion, I do think [the ISC project] brought people together. And it made us feel really good about what we were doing, in that everyone was really on that path. So, I think [JFA-PO] were definitely successful in that.*

*Letitia [project leader] has been excellent with keeping us informed, emails, answering any questions we might have...and when we went to Queensland, Letitia was so organised and such a great leader.*

*...to have that professional dialogue I think is extraordinarily important.*

*Robbie [JFA-PO CEO]...is clearly such a – a passionate advocate. And he's – and he's political, and he comes from a place of understanding what – what it's like living with...and also advocating for people with disabilities. So that probably to me added a lot more to my understanding about what is needed, and how hard it is to get the message out politically.*

*I think it was valuable and insightful to see what other states are doing, because I think we tend to in education just work in our little 'silos'. So, I'm quite aware of what's happening in South Australian schools. And it was really eye opening to go to Queensland, see what they've done, where they've come from, their journey. Also, I think it was when Bob Jackson came and did a presentation on Western Australian schools. It was just really good, because it's increased my knowledge and understanding of what other states are doing. Where they – how they've made change occur. And that it is possible. And I think we've still got a bit of a way to go in South Australia, but it was a great opportunity being a part of this project to be able to see that. And increase my knowledge and awareness around inclusion.*

*...it was also very valuable to travel to other sites to see other people's take... you can feel a little bit isolated and remote.*

*...it was wonderful to look at other schools and see what they were doing. We've visited other schools, a couple of other schools in – as part of it. We've gone along to some [other meetings] – some of the people from Purple Orange ... student mentors...were there.*

*...that part of the Inclusive Schools Project was really great, just to see what's happening in other states, particularly with Aboriginal students.*

*I just think it's really good to visit other schools, that openness. So, the few seminars even here in Adelaide that I was involved with, just hearing other schools talk about their programs, what they're doing right and what they're learning from was very helpful. But obviously just actual, physical trips to visit were the most helpful for me, as a teacher, coming back to my school. I put together a Power Point for just my school and walked our whole staff through the trip last year just so they could see what was happening at other places and go we're actually not off track with what we're doing here.*

## Networking with Other Schools

*...the inclusion of both public and private schools in the project, has been a really successful model, and I think the potential there – and you know, some of the schools that I have connected*

*with within the project have been not schools that I think we would traditionally have connected with.*

*I think there's been some really good relationships, just hearing from other people and the issues that they have and the way things work in their schools and seeing other schools.*

*...we'd started the journey before the project started. But I saw it as a really good way to network...because I thought what – what we're really trying to build here is about building capacity, and also about sustainability. So, if I cease to be here, who – who then keeps driving it? So, [colleague] has come to the meetings, which has been great, and building that network.*

*And just [hosting the Community of Practice meeting onsite] itself, of having other people in the school and people asking questions was really good.*

*Networking number one. Building common – I suppose common language and understanding amongst schools across sector really, really important. I suppose helping each other to develop policy, because that's always a tricky one. And so, having people that are really invested in inclusive education to have input into that policy – really important.*

*...we've got the inclusive schools book club, I can't remember the name of it, but we're sort of going through the chapters of that all together, which is really quite a wonderful, professional conversation around that with different schools. And, you know, yeah, that's a delight really, to be able to talk... with like-minded people, you know, all struggling with very similar things... and just learning that, you know, we're not alone.*

*[Other school participants] don't see it as a – some sort of chore that has to be done or an imposition. It's – 'this is tricky, this is hard but we're up for it, we want to do it and we want to do it well for our students'. So, it was good to talk to people with that kind of mindset because it's not always so. So, that was, that was really good. You know, because it was, it was more about troubleshooting rather than complaining. Or how do we get out of this or not?*

## Engagement with the Mentors

*We actually haven't had the mentor in the school yet, but we have started that relationship, which is really great, we're really excited about it.*

*...it was of value to talk to [the mentors] and lots of them who were past their schooling... to ask, 'what do you wish someone had done?' ...so it was actually really interesting to find out what worked for them and what didn't work and what they would change if they could so that we don't repeat those mistakes with the students that we see.*

*And the mentors were great. If anything, I would have loved to have had Angus come in. But that didn't happen for a variety of reasons.*

*...we had Angus [mentor] come to our school and tell his story just to, actually I think it was just [colleague] and I, and we were thinking, well, he could have ... spoken probably in our, in our senior school...but that ... didn't happen.*

While there was limited engagement with the mentors, particularly in the school context, it was apparent that the opportunity for school leaders to meet with the mentors and hear their stories was significant. Leaders not only increased their own learning but could see much potential for engaging with the mentors at the school level in ongoing ways. This appeared to be developing toward the end of the project, but Covid-19 clearly impacted on the capacity of the mentors to travel to schools and engage in person with students. However, a network has been established and this has the potential to provide ongoing opportunities for mentors and schools to sustain and enhance their engagement.

### 3.3 Level 2: School Leaders' Learning Outcomes

Responses from participants provided considerable evidence in support of the goal to **increase knowledge and capability related to inclusive practice**. The interview comments from school leaders were collated under two sub-headings (themes). Of note, leaders frequently reported that, through engagement in the project, they were prompted to question their previous understandings of inclusion. Some recognised that what they had thought was good evidence of being an inclusive school was limited in scope and insight. Many school leaders identified the trip to Queensland as an authentic experience that served as a driver of their learning and capacity to consider how to lead change in their own sites.

#### Enhanced Awareness and Understanding of Inclusion

*I feel like just that attitude in the staff room has changed. Yes, they're still debriefing about kids that might need support and how we can do it, but it has been a change of you know that conversation in the staffroom.*

*I can see that's starting to change and there's been a change in people's attitudes – a change in the way we talk about students – a change in the way we have been planning. So, I feel like it's a lot more collaboration and asking for help almost – like it's okay to ask for help.*

*I feel like my knowledge has changed about what inclusivity really means and that's really good, intentional, targeted teaching is inclusive. That's what the project has done for me.*

*In some ways, the Inclusive Schools Project kind of freed – it gave me a freedom and a check to go actually we're doing really well. We're doing this in a thoughtful way. It gave me that tick, if that makes sense.*

#### School Leaders' Professional Learning

*I thought that I had a lot of knowledge, but I have learnt so much through the project, through people's tool kits, through the discussions with other schools and getting to see other schools. It's just been – like it's a great project and every time I meet someone, I usually say you need to go on this project.*

*Sometimes it feels like we've actually gone backwards because the more you see, the more you go, 'Actually, we need to improve that.' We need to improve so many things.*



*When we went on the study tour to Queensland and actually saw some things in motion, it was very eye-opening and sort of challenging to us, just thinking, oh, there was a lot of things that we could improve, and then, yeah, I think that that was probably the main thing, and listening to other schools and the way they're set up made us think, 'Oh, we could be doing that better'.*

*...it's really interesting one of the young people living with a disability was in a wheelchair and couldn't get through the front door because all our doors open out and we have never realised that because we have never had anyone here, so even little things like that have been quite eye opening.*

*I think what I've come away with it is a lot more practical knowledge...I even follow on Facebook the Queensland school pages and stuff like that that we went and visited, and you kind of go, 'Oh, look, they're doing that', and so it's kind of an ongoing way of going, 'Oh, we could do something like that', or 'How good is it that they've started that?'*

*...so, I don't know that we took much away from it in – in terms of how we could do things differently. It was certainly great to be a part of conversations around say...Universal Design for Learning. And – and all of those sorts of things which are – they're strategies... which is great. And we certainly used a lot of those types of things. And there's no one-size-fits-all. But I don't think – I don't think it actually changed our direction in – in terms of – in terms of the path that we were on. We were really confident in where we were going. But it was just really lovely to be able to tap into what other people were doing.*

*...there is a website that – that [JFA-PO has] produced now. So, you can always look onto that for anything. And I'd come back and sometimes discuss with teachers what was discussed. Or different ways that things are being done in different schools. So just a good conversation starter sometimes.*

*I think we certainly were upskilled in what other schools were doing. I really liked the, the tools, the online tools that they were offering. I guess [it] broadened our focus on what was actually out there for our students. What, they could do... and their - and, you know, advocacy for our students and ... just being really aware of including our students and making our environment even more inclusive than what, you know, [than] we – thought we were.*

### 3.4 Level 3: Organisation Support and Change

Participants' responses to questions on the impact of the ISC project on their schools generated a range of response which connected with the project's goals of **supporting changes in practices and/or policies at the school level**. The project certainly raised participants' awareness that constant attention to staff attitudes and practices is an ongoing requirement and explicit plans must be in place to review these in a consistent and sustained way. In particular, there is a need to ensure any new staff are provided with professional learning to ensure clarity of the vision for an inclusive school and associated attitudes and practices. The project also highlighted areas in which schools recognised they were not being truly inclusive. For example, some noted that withdrawal of students and small classes for children with additional learning needs were not inclusive, but as some of these practices are entrenched and also believed to achieve positive outcomes for students, they acknowledged that change would take some time. This is an example of the challenge of achieving change in complex



systems where multiple perspectives including leaders, teachers and parents often serve to reinforce existing practices. Responses also provided a sense of anxiety about whether capacity and resources were in place to achieve truly inclusive schools. While some aspects of participants' responses may be viewed as disappointing in their capacity to achieve changes in organisational structures and practices, the project certainly succeeded in raising participants' awareness about the challenge of moving towards more inclusive school communities. One participant, who indicated the school was commencing a small class in 2021, recognised this was in conflict with the concept of inclusive schools. For this participant, the message about inclusion from the project was clear, but the challenge of change at the school level was complex. However, a major outcome of the project was a renewed and sustained focus on what it means to be an inclusive school, and as indicated by responses under theme 3.3, participants in the project moved beyond thinking about inclusion of students living with disability and extended their consideration to other marginalised groups. There was also evidence of a strong commitment to prioritising the shift towards more inclusive practices in participating schools.

### Recognition of Ongoing Challenge to Achieve Inclusive Schools

*I thought we were doing inclusive education really well here at school, and of course the more you dig deeper, there is little things that I have realised that we need to do better. I think my initial thought was making sure that all our staff are on the same page, because every now and then you hear little comments or things that you know are almost gut wrenching...*

*Inclusion needs to be in every conversation that we have, even if it's not verbally, it needs to be in our minds ... thinking, 'How can we allow all children to participate and access curriculum, socially? All of those kind of things, and when there's a problem that comes up, can we overcome that? And ... we should overcome it. ... there should be nothing in our brains that says, 'It's just too hard for those kids, they can't do it.' ... what are the obstacles, how are we going to do it?*

*...hopefully in the next 12 months again we can just build capacity, so that regardless of what happens here at our lovely school, that teachers will go, 'Do you know what? I've got this ... in my room. I've met with the family. We've had a discussion. How can I help them?' And as long as they're having those conversations, and they're willing to try. I'm – I'll be really grateful for that. They're – they're using initiative. And they're feeling more confident. But they're – yeah there's still some that we need to put in some PD to continue ... that in other staff.*

*...we were concerned that it, it seemed to be quite a push to go one way, but sort of the complete elimination of some of the options that we have for our students ... and our board and Head of School and our Principals thought that that wasn't something that we wanted to, to do, because we had invested so much into creating an extra option for some of their students, with our small classes. So, yeah, they were wanting to step back a little from that – that sort of focus or energy putting – being put into that. But we certainly were wanting to make sure our students were well looked after and thinking about what they were going to be doing as they leave us. ... that we would have prepared them really well, and their families really well, to have things to look forward to and to pursue.*

*We really do need to think about how we support our teachers and the energy level, the – all that extra planning that you do. And just – as far as not burning staff out with it.*

*I guess keeping on top of inclusive language, like really listening to the voices of our, our students, their families and groups... You know, because if you're not aware of it, you can't change it. So, I guess keeping abreast of the latest on that sort of thing. So, that – you know, we're not inadvertently doing something that's harmful when we don't want to be doing that. We want to be... making sure that they're absolutely part of our school ... our culture. That it's just normalised and they're part of who we are.*

## Policy Development and Change in Support Structures

*This year has been a lot of gathering of information. We've done a few staff PDs about inclusion and feeding back a little bit about what we have talked about at Community of Practice, but mainly we have just been doing a lot of work between the two of us to try and develop an action plan...what is it we want to see at our school?*

*I think there was more withdrawal and now I think we still have it with the stuff like the MultiLit [literacy program] and things like that that can't be run in class, but I think generally there's – we try and aim much more support to be in class.*

*I think that sustainability, and the building of teacher capacity is going to be continually ongoing, and potentially we could be divided into those sub-schools and involved in all meetings. So that we can keep promoting inclusive practices and consider all of our students that are currently in our dynamic classrooms. And get teachers – if they're constantly thinking about inclusion, differentiation, how can they best meet the needs of all the students? And that's going to just filter through the whole school.*

*Well it's always going to be about building teacher capacity, because we've got a lot more enrolments of students that have moderate – what I would call moderate needs. But our teachers see them as significant, because they don't actually have experience outside of what they've always had at this school. And so, there's a lot more training that needs to be put into teachers here at school. So, it's probably around professional development now going forward. And – and just having I suppose lead teachers, rather than just inclusive ed. So that they can – the lead teachers... can then have a sort of a speciality where they can support, and mentoring for other teachers in that role.*

*We have such a strong reputation out in the community for supporting students with needs. And so yeah, a lot of recommendations. And again, I suppose the thing for me is it's probably – I've built stronger partnerships with stakeholders in a child's life. And I think that is really what – what the key is now. So, if you're – you're having the conversations with the psychologist, and the [speech therapists] and the OTs, and you're really doing it from that case management approach, then those people who are coming into the schools, they're doing their observations, they're working with the students. And they go, 'Wow...we don't withdraw students from classes. We work in classes.' To me that's what inclusion is.*

## Renewed and Sustained Focus on Inclusion

*The whole team in general has been built, so that their capacity will work way beyond there actually being a department or being a Head of Department. That everyone is sort of skilled*

*enough now that – that they can still run with it, and take it... and they're working really, really hard with our classroom teachers now, and our Heads of Houses. So even all our individual learning plans, and differentiation. People across the school are starting to think a lot more about that, even before they have input from us. It's not perfect. But, Boy, it's a long way from where it – where it was.*

*One of the things... I think we've managed this year that the project has supported has been ... making it everybody's business to support our kids, and everyone's business to think about the ways we include all of our students in all of our learning.*

*We're now planning to start some professional learning teams around 'How do you include kids who come with English as an additional language or dialect into the mainstream, and how do we recognise the wealth of language that they bring in other languages that may make it difficult for them in English?' But actually, there's a whole perspective there that we don't have around, particularly Aboriginal people.*

*[Inclusive Education] is our life. That's just what we try and do all day every day. It's been – when we went to Bowen State School in Queensland, they gave us a lot of resources for middle school and that's been really handy ... have a look at this, have a look at this, because I think we try and reinvent the wheel quite a lot so, but we don't have to. Let's just have a look at other people and what they've been doing. I think we just keep going forward all the time.*

*...when we went to Townsville in those inclusive schools that we visited there and had as a focus for thinking about with our teachers, ... so that's where we've started with teachers now. They'll be doing some peer observations over the next cycle of their development where they're looking at success criteria and how the kids are perceiving that success criteria, and learning intention.*

*We thought we were an inclusive school...but every now and again we would get feedback which indicated that other people don't think – you know...sometimes you get that feedback. So, we wanted to have thinking around that, and how do we have that perception of other people that we are an inclusive school? And I suppose, in terms of that, our thinking has come along a fair way to what an inclusive school really looks like. You know, because we're accepting of everybody doesn't necessarily mean that we're being inclusive of everybody. That's still a little bit of a challenge of practice, if you like, for us, as a group, as a staff.*

*I always had a sense that it was to do with how we design the learning and that being inclusive doesn't just mean having a whole lot of different people in the class and catering for everybody, somehow, it's actually deliberately planning for individuals. And along the way, we've got a lot of sort of converging into one another, you know, how the Department would like us to look at one plan for individualising learning for certain students, how the Department would like us to be using our planning, the sorts of things the Department would like us to be doing for developing pedagogies with our teachers. All of those, sort of, for me, I can see how they all come together in inclusive education, and I suppose my journey now is with staff, so we have that understanding.*

*I think we've got key people who can talk the language, can understand inclusion and differentiation and that will work its way – that has worked its way through teaching staff and that sort of thing. And it is included in our, I guess, induction of new - new staff. It's all normalised*

*through that. Through staff meetings and it's just part of our routine, during the year, to be, you know... being expected to be supporting the students. Knowing exactly who those students are and monitoring that and reviewing it. Having review meetings with parents and it's, you know, it's absolutely part of the – there's nothing a surprise.*

### 3.5 Level 4: Participants' Application of New Knowledge and Skills

As mentioned previously, changes at this level were limited or not easily identified through interviews with the participants. The key leaders from each school who participated in the project were mostly in mid-level management positions (e.g. inclusive education coordinators, assistant principals or specialised school support officers). The focus of their participation prioritised updating policies and levels of support, with a more limited focus on specific classroom practices. While participants certainly developed new knowledge, and applied this in updating policies, translation of inclusive teaching practices was not a major focus of the project; hence, there were limited outcomes reported at this level. There were some emerging examples and, with time, this level of change may become a stronger focus for participating schools. The following comments identify working towards a specific focus on classroom practices, including clarifying learning intentions, more effectively and consistently applying a differentiated approach to planning and teaching, and working more collaboratively with parents.

#### Emerging Examples of Changes in Practice

*We've never actually got to a point – we talk to the kids a lot about inclusion and what it means for them, and we started to have them observe, not formal observations, but think about in the classroom what does learning inclusion mean for the students? And that was just – that's just a beginning focus at the moment. But at the same time, we're working with teachers through our other improvement journey around success criteria, and learning intentions and success criteria, which I mean, fits together so nicely with our inclusion work.*

*One of our next, with planning for learning intentions and success criteria, is to have a common template that we're all using, because we asked people to bring their planning for a unit and talk about how wellbeing is intentional. And it just – they were so – you know, across those three or four classes, so different, the method. But then they were also different subject areas, and so, it can look very different for different subject areas. So, bringing some consistency to what we all do in terms of planning, and talking about those key things, will start us on that journey as well.*

*We did a survey, at Letitia's prompting, of our students in our learning support classes. We did a survey of our parents that were in our learning support classes and it was very affirming. That they felt really very included and were happy with their education and what was happening. And I guess the next step for us is probably that student voice or, you know, the – mainstream sort of students, seeing how they see inclusion and what that means to them.*

*We've tried to make it easy for teachers to record what they're doing to help their students and then it is an absolute expectation that they're doing that. And not just recording it, doing it.*

*We've talked about strengths and interests and, and normalisation of differentiation in classrooms and that, you know it should be happening from day one...and just be something expected. So, yeah, [the ISC project's] caused us to do that. And we did change some of our language. One thing we did in our [Individual Education Plan (IEP)], which I, I thought I was pretty pleased with our IEPs and then I thought, actually, we don't even make mention of the children's strengths and interests in their IEP- so we really need to add that in.*

### 3.6 Level 5: Student Outcomes

The major link to student learning outcomes reported by participants in the project focused on ensuring greater attention to student voice. Student voice is a principle of effective inclusive schools and the ISC project explicitly focused on this area. The project included youth mentors who were able to share their authentic experiences of schooling with the participants, and this resulted in many schools taking action. In addition, JFA-PO offered one-off grants and ongoing consultancy to support to establish Student Diversity and Inclusion Committees at their sites. However, with limited engagement with mentors, limited implementation of plans related to student engagement, and few examples of involving classroom teachers, the minimal evidence of improved student outcomes was expected. Interview responses did indicate an awareness that more needs to be done to ensure student voice is prioritised in schools as an important foundation of creating more inclusive schools.

#### Student Voice

*One of the things that we have done is make sure that we feed back to the kids at the end of the [staff meetings to which student leaders were invited], because it became very obvious that it wasn't appropriate for our students to attend, really. But that's been useful for me to just ask, keep asking that question, 'How do we involve them and how do they feel within our community?'*

*"I don't necessarily know that we have [strong student voice] or that there's that level of inclusion for children or that their opinions are valued ... quite so much. I think we're a long way off with that in that area.*

*We pick up kids' [needs] a lot quicker than we used to.*

### 3.7 School Leaders' Feedback on the Project Design

In addition to the findings relevant to specific project goals, the school leaders also provided feedback on the project as a model of professional development. Some offered recommendations for future iterations or similar projects. These recommendations align with research on professional learning that supports whole school change. Consistent with the research, participants also highlighted the importance of leadership and accountability to support the translation of professional learning to schools' priorities and practices. Although the ISC project was designed to support the whole-school translation of new ideas and practices, this was not always possible where participating leaders had limited influence over school priorities and resources. Timperly et al. (2020) highlight that, "There will

be times when the underpinning ideas are presented and discussed but, ultimately, the new learning needs to be supported in situ if it is to be enacted in the complexity of the practice context” (p.6).

Leaders from some schools noted differences in progress—in terms of implementing specific actions within schools—when senior leaders and/or school principals were involved in the project. As one participant stated, “Schools that sent their principal [to the CoP sessions], you could see the impact was a lot greater.” Another participant supported this observation:

*I don't know that there was enough leadership in the network group. And – that's probably one thing I'd change, that – that there were a few schools that had their principal and that there. But if you're just sending two staff members, or a teacher, and teaching assistant. They don't have the voice they need in order to take that back to the school. And so, it must be extraordinarily frustrating.*

The ISC project was designed for school leaders, recognising the difference they could make at the school level. Participating schools ultimately selected the people they thought were best suited to attend. However, it is fundamental to have someone from a senior leadership position highly engaged and with a sense of ownership over professional learning, to ensure that outcomes are prioritised amongst the competing demands inherent in school life. This observation from school participants was highly consistent with the research on school-wide change, which consistently highlights the importance of active engagement from the school principal in leading a shared vision and serving as a pedagogical leader in a multi-faceted, carefully planned change process (e.g., Robinson et al., 2017; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015).

Additional recommendations from the school leaders concerned the inclusion of Round 2 schools with Round 1 schools. The bringing together of the two groups resulted in a much larger CoP group comprising educators at different stages and with different needs. When invited to recommend improvements to the project, a number of participants focused on this issue and suggested that professional learning could be differentiated. As the Project Leader, Letitia recognised that this transition was challenging, and offered suggestions such as breaking the group into two smaller CoPs or considering smaller ‘break out groups’ to explore topics of interest; however, this decision was left up to schools, and they chose to stay together<sup>4</sup>. Comments from participants included:

*...I think the inclusion of new schools into the project has probably been a bit problematic for, particularly for the beginning schools. Because it has felt that every time we go to a meeting there are new people that need to be introduced. So, I think in some ways that's a really inclusive model, and in other ways, I suspect that it has held back the finishing of things, like I think we keep going over stuff.*

*...being mindful of your size of group, because initially when I joined with [my colleague], I think it was the second or third meeting. And there was only about six schools involved. And it was really productive, engaging conversations. And we kind of kept to the timeline. But as soon as we invited more groups in, I think we lost momentum... we began to repeat things. And everyone*

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<sup>4</sup> Closing Interview with Letitia Rose, 24/9/2020



*– some people had too much to say. And then we got off task. And it wasn't as productive. So, I think really streaming the size of the group, and guiding the conversations would be really a better use of time.*

*...the intent was that the first six schools would then be a mentor school for another school coming in. And so, you would work more closely together. You could share what the project had already done. And build on. But yeah, the group just became too big.... And they'd go, oh well let's – let's talk about policy. And we're going, well, we've actually done the policy. We've talked about it, inclusive language, and what it looks like. So yeah, you sort of – and you thought, oh I don't want to sit here for the next 3 hours rehashing the same thing.*

*...every time a new school came in, you kind of went back to being that little bit reserved and holding back a bit...and I think our commitment dropped, because we didn't feel like we were letting people down, because there was going to be 15 other people there now.*

This is valuable feedback for the project leaders for future iterations or similar projects. The observations align with the research on the value of developing cohesive groups with a shared focus, that moves forward in a coherent way (Desimone, 2009). Effective Communities of Practice rely on thinking together in the context of mutual trust, so some attention to the fact that an established group essentially became a new group again after the transition, and also that some differentiated professional learning experiences could be considered to meet participants' diverse needs, may have been helpful. It is acknowledged that this process became unexpectedly complicated with transition to online engagement and other interruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Final Reflections

In reflecting on their engagement with the ISC project, participants alluded to the importance of system-level action in supporting schools as high-quality inclusive communities. They identified a series of ongoing challenges in their daily work, which became salient as they deepened their understanding of the complexity and importance of fostering inclusive school communities. For example, one reflected on the challenge of prioritising an inclusion policy, along with the changing nature of staffing in schools:

*We are trying to develop the inclusion policy but using the [framework required by school sector] so just working on that – how it's going to fit into our school and how we work with staff. You know, we've been wanting to do a lot more this year, but school has just been a little bit crazy. and now we are about to have another turnover of staff, so we are thinking that we're going to start day 1 next year with a lot of the things that we want to do.*

Other school leaders highlighted that staff attitudes and lack of efficacy in educating students living with disability continues to be a barrier to truly inclusive schooling. The project was of significant value in alerting leaders to this ongoing issue, as they were able to identify some of these concerns in their own schools:

*I think part of [the barrier to inclusion] is a fear, that they're not perhaps equipped, and so there's this fear of, 'I will look like a failure if it doesn't work out or if problems occur', rather*



*than looking at the skills they've got and trying to build upon those skills. it's more looking at, perhaps, how they're going to come across if it doesn't turn out well, or if it doesn't go right, or if the students don't quite fit in the box... That flexibility, that willingness to learn, to perhaps make a mistake and then at the end of the lesson reflect and go, 'Right, what went wrong? How could I have done that better?' And I don't – I think for those teachers who struggle with that a little bit, that's probably a barrier for them.*

*[Teachers say] ...I don't want [students] back until they are compliant. And – and so there's still a fear around not being able to do the right thing by all the students in the classroom. And we certainly get that... so it really is probably a professional development cycle now going forward to build people's confidence. Not their capacity, because they're good teachers. But they just don't have any confidence. And – and I mean every school hears this: 'I wasn't trained to work with kids with special needs'. Well, yes you were trained to work with students, and all students have needs. So – that's where we're probably at now. And what that's going to look like. We've got a massive change of leadership as well here. So, 5 new leadership positions are changing. So, we don't really know what that's going to look like for us going forward...*

Through their engagement in the project, school leaders recognised that fostering truly inclusive schools was a national political responsibility, and that it is challenging for schools to achieve desired outcomes in isolation. The quality of university graduates, ongoing professional learning opportunities (such as the ISC project), and funding considerations were all at the forefront of participants' reflections:

*How do we make it, from a government point of view, that this is really, really important, because we get so many students in mainstream schools? That's what their families want. And that's – they should have the right to be able to do that.... and they all need, you know, is to have a fair and wonderful education. But that it's a hard gig.*

*...schools should be sourcing more people with specialist skills to be able to support, not only the students, and their families, but the staff.*

*I don't think we're in a – any better position than we were 10 years ago in terms of inclusive education. We might all believe in it... and have a really good philosophy around it. But our practice, we still can't support [all students]. Uni training, we need all of those sorts of things. So yeah, it's much a bigger picture...*

Specific attention was paid to comments made by participants that linked to COVID-19 and its impact on the final stages of the project. The demands on schools to move to online teaching became a major priority, and in some cases, diverted their attention away from the ISC project. With the increased focus on online learning, some participants also raised questions about the need to have a more explicit focus on students living with disability during online education. For example, comments about students being away from the school for months and now struggling to re-engage with school were of concern. The ISC project provided an important forum for participants to discuss these issues.

Some participants alluded to the importance of a face-to-face component in professional learning, noting that this project provided high-quality engagement through CoP meetings and school visits,

both in South Australia and Queensland. When this routine was interrupted and some learning opportunities and conversations shifted to online, some participants noted a decrease in their own feelings of engagement. They were also disappointed about missed opportunities such as the planned conference:

*When we had Loren [external consultant] and we had phone time with her, we had some other teachers that came in then and that was really good, but then the second one got cancelled because of COVID so ... and those sorts of things, that I think that that was probably a barrier. But [engaging teachers through the webinars] was a good thing to do.*

*The two-day conference, and it was going to be free and we were going to strongly encourage staff to go, and that would have been a great opportunity to have done that, but then that, of course it got cancelled, because I think that would have perhaps brought other staff into it.*

*And then I don't know, COVID hit, and it all kind of fell apart a bit on our part... I know they're only Zoom meetings and things like that. But because we went to a full delivery of [online learning] ... That was, like, week and months of work prep. And then we were spending all of our time contacting families. So, we were sort of in this communication loop; everything else went out the window. And that's what we were told to do. Just drop everything else, and make sure our families are feeling really supported during that time. So, we probably didn't connect as – we certainly didn't connect with the mentors as much as we probably should have, because I think there would have been real value in that.*

*Something happened and the mentors weren't able to travel. And then, of course, this year that also happened again, so we really didn't get it up and running. We talked about having a conference connect up, but that hasn't happened yet either. It doesn't mean it – I don't – I think that I'd still love it if it could, but yeah, unfortunately it's just the stars have not aligned for us to have a mentor visit or video link-up at this stage.*

*You know, in terms of communication, like I heard a lot from – all that communication, keeping in contact, this is what's happening and what have you been through this year, but I guess once those regular meetings weren't happening, that was a little bit more difficult to keep on top of that.*

Overall, it is clear from the extended interviews with leaders across multiple schools that, although aspects of the project and their school's engagement did not go to plan, they certainly valued the opportunity provided for networking and professional learning. Leaders' responses reflected particularly strong evidence of increased awareness and knowledge related to inclusive education, and of positive experiences of networking with other schools and seeing quality examples of inclusion in practice. The following chapter focuses on additional sources of data related to the Community of Practice (CoP) aspect of the ISC project.

## Chapter 4

### Community of Practice



## 4.1 Introduction

A defining feature of the ISC project design was the Community of Practice (CoP) model, which enabled school-based participants to learn together with youth mentors and project leaders in the context of shared goals for cultivating inclusive school practices. The project was designed around a ‘cascading’ CoP model, whereby an initial “cohort of school leaders (Principals/ Deputies) and student representatives) with an established track record of inclusion practices and young people living with disability who carry rich experiences of their own education journey” would form a CoP to “capture good inclusion practices and develop resources applicable to other schools”<sup>5</sup> and would subsequently be joined by a second round of schools at a more emergent stage of their inclusion journey.

The Community of Practice (CoP) concept is well established in the professional learning literature and is widely employed in education and other professional settings. CoPs involve members coming together to learn about shared, ‘real-life’ problems that they care about, and are defined by the conditions of shared repertoire, mutual engagement and joint enterprise (Wenger, 1999). The active process of sustained “thinking together” in fundamentally self-governed CoPs is especially important for enabling social learning and the development of tacit knowledge (Pyrko, Dörfler & Eden, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Julia Farr Group *Project Plan*, provided 4/19

In the ISC project, the CoP was facilitated by JFA-PO project leaders, who organised the agendas, invited guest speakers and presentations from members, led discussions and sought feedback from members. As explained by Letitia (Project Leader)<sup>6</sup>, the intention was for CoP members, rather than project leaders, to gradually assume responsibility for the meetings and take ownership of the agenda. This goal was especially pertinent as the second round of members joined the CoP, at which point it was hoped that original members would determine new ways of working and decide whether new grouping configurations were now required.

The findings in this chapter are derived from three data sources relevant to the CoP model:

1. A summary of internal participant feedback on surveys given by JFA leaders at face-to-face CoP meetings from August 2019 to March 2020 (i.e., prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, which resulted in a shift to online meetings for the remainder of 2020);
2. Direct observations of CoP meetings (online and face-to-face) and webinars by members of the RISE evaluation team, and analysis of materials provided during CoP meetings.
3. Analysis of the website 'toolkit' resources, many of which were developed and discussed during CoP meetings.

There is some crossover between this set of findings, the themes emerging from interview responses reported in the previous chapter, and the survey responses reported in Chapter 5; these data are intended to complement the findings presented in those chapters. It should be noted that the original CoP model was predicated on face-to-face meetings located at participating schools. As with other aspects of the ISC project, the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic interrupted this model and led to a revised structure involving online meetings from March 2020. In addition, it became more difficult for mentors to attend schools in person, and students were unable to be included as originally planned. The findings in this section should be interpreted in the light of those contextual factors.

## 4.2 CoP Feedback Surveys

From August 2019 to March 2020, JFA project leaders collected 33 participant responses to the CoP Event Feedback Survey. The Survey evaluated participants' experiences of:

1. **CoP structure** with regards to relevance, delivery, opportunity to discuss and share perspectives, and whether participants would recommend the CoP to others;
2. **CoP learning** with respect to confidence, new knowledge and social connectedness with others in regards to inclusive school policies and practices; and
3. **CoP actions** to be implemented following the event.

Participants were also invited to indicate whether they would do anything differently following participation in the CoP event, and to describe what that would entail. Participants were also offered the opportunity to comment on what could make the CoP meetings more successful.

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<sup>6</sup> Final evaluation interview, 09/20

The CoP Event Feedback Survey consisted of a mixture of Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Table 1 profiles quantitative data from the Feedback Survey, followed by a review of open comments provided by participants.

**Table 1. Percentage of Agreement on CoP Event Survey Statements**

|                        | AGREE (%)  | DISAGREE (%) |
|------------------------|------------|--------------|
| <b>CoP Structure</b>   |            |              |
| Relevance              | 97         | 3            |
| Delivery               | 97         | 3            |
| Opportunity to discuss | 97         | 3            |
| Recommend to others    | 97         | 3            |
| <b>CoP Learning</b>    |            |              |
| Confidence             | 85         | 6            |
| Knowledge              | 88         | 6            |
| Social Connection      | 97         | 3            |
| <b>CoP Actions</b>     | <b>YES</b> | <b>NO</b>    |
| <b>Actions</b>         | 91         | 3            |

*Note:* Non-responses are present in the data where responses do not add up to a total of 100%. Agreement with survey statements reflects positive feedback about that aspect of the CoP experience.

**Actions** that participants indicated they would take following the CoP event were primarily related to:

**Reviewing policies related to inclusion:**

- *Review our enrolment policy/inclusion policy. Get 'cracking' on completing our tool. Review the Principles of Inclusion.*
- *I will look at our current school inclusion policy to see how it has been written and if it falls in line with what was discussed today.*

**Increasing collaboration between staff:**

- *Would like to focus on strong, high expectations between staff and students.*
- *Gather group of willing and interested staff to create CoP at school.*
- *I'm going to start the process of reimagining the role of support staff.*
- *Will create/form a CoP - inclusive education at school.*
- *Educate and equip other staff in my team to embrace inclusive education and its importance.*

**Evaluating the IEP process:**

- *Explore teacher-led IEPs/building teacher capacity. Exploring ways to intentionally draw students into social inclusion- 'Finding the thing'. Look at measuring 'adjustment'.*
- *Looking at SSP (IEP), Making goals achievable, Building/tracking progress.*

Participants offered recommendations centred around two key areas related to improving the **CoP experience**. The first group of comments offered recommendations regarding the **duration** of the CoPs. For example:

- *Agenda is always too full - it would be great to include an hour in each meeting to network/chat - work together across sectors.*

- *We always cover so much in such a short time. I am not sure how to improve this - always go away with lots to reflect on.*
- *The agenda is too packed. Everything was very rushed and not enough time to explore some really interesting topics. Less covered in meeting so more in-depth conversations can occur.*

The second group of comments offered recommendations regarding **increasing the challenge level and depth of content** given experienced educators/teachers were the target audience. These comments related to some sessions more than others, but are consistent with other data related to a small number of more experienced schools who came to the project with strong inclusive foundations in place. For example:

- *I would recommend to young teachers and parents only. We are all very experienced educators of students living with disability.*
- *I think we started from a premise that this is new work for us; [the presenter] could have challenged us to think more deeply.*
- *It was just too basic. I think the event could have been much shorter. Make the presentations more relevant and recognise the experience in the room.*

Overall, both the Likert-scale and open-ended survey responses indicated a high level of satisfaction with the learning and networking experiences offered by the CoP model. Participants appeared to highly value the opportunity to talk with colleagues from other schools, and some felt pressure on this aspect of the sessions in cases where the set agenda was perceived as very full. Participants indicated a range of practical actions they intended to take in their schools as a result of participation in the CoP meetings. Again, it is acknowledged that these comments were provided in response to early CoP sessions, and since surveys were not collected from the later online meetings, it is not known whether the feedback on issues such as the level of challenge or size of the agenda led to changes.

### 4.3 CoP Observations

Members of the evaluation team observed and took field notes at all but two CoP meetings, including those meetings and webinars held online in 2020. While webinars were available to CoP participants, attendance was variable, and these sessions were also available to a broader audience of educators (and some parents). In addition to the researcher field notes, we also analysed materials provided during the workshops, 'chats' in online sessions, and the (Queensland) field trip report from JFA-PO. A total of 18 CoP artefacts were analysed.

Qualitative data were analysed (a) deductively, based upon the project objectives and evaluation questions as the framework for analysis, and (b) inductively, to identify themes that may have emerged from the data beyond the initial framework. The CoP observation field notes were coded according to the evaluation framework, which generated understandings of the extent to which ISC project objectives were addressed within the CoP meetings. Additional artefacts were analysed and coded using the NVivo 12 software, according to the project objectives. Key findings from these analyses are presented in relation to the following deductive framework:

1. Active participation and belonging of people with disability in the community
2. Attitudes and culture
3. Practices and policies

4. Inclusive practice, knowledge and capability
5. Increased connections and partnerships

## Active Participation and Belonging

**Changes in active participation and belonging of people with disability in the community** generated the fewest coding references (12%), indicating this objective was not as strongly expressed through the CoP data. The major theme identified within this category centred on encouraging student voice and student leadership in schools. This was expressed in different ways. For example, one school developed a student leadership team who assessed inclusive practices in classrooms. Another formed a student inclusion committee, who developed a survey for all students in the school. A third included students with disabilities in selected staff meetings. The data suggested that student voice and leadership was largely implemented through committee and student council membership. This finding could partly be attributed to the financial and consultancy support provided by JFA-PO for schools to focus on this area of inclusive practice, and the fact that youth mentors were also available to support student voice in schools.

## Attitude and Culture

**Changes in attitude and culture** generated 17% of coding references within the CoP data. The major theme identified within this category/objective related to the perceived challenge of achieving cultural change, which was recognised as essential for the introduction and sustainability of inclusive school practices. Through the ISC project, participants reinforced their understanding that inclusive attitudes towards students living with disability are paramount, and continued to develop and refine their beliefs in the importance of school culture. While recognising the importance of a strong, inclusive whole-school culture, participants frequently discussed the difficulties inherent in working towards organisational change at their own sites. This was reflected in the following participant comments during CoP meetings (from observation notes):

*...had a discussion with governing council, and they still feel that inclusion is about taking kids with disabilities 'out', having lots of specialised help, programs etc., but in a different place from other students.*

*...some attitudes from staff are not helpful, e.g. comments like, "Why are they (that student) at our school? How is it fair for all the other students?" which are horrifying, or "Why isn't there more ESO support for that student?". They have done a lot of thinking about what to do and where to go with staff attitudes.*

*...leadership team needs strong commitment, and from there we have zero tolerance. Must be non-negotiables, that all teachers will follow. Then staff get opportunity to ask for help. [A colleague] is thinking about how he can do better about that. But it (staff resistance or negativity) does need to be addressed.*



## Practices and Policies

**Changes in practices and policies** accounted for 20% of the coded references within the CoP data. It was evident that a number of leaders targeted policy change as a priority. One school suggested that time during the CoP workshops could be dedicated to policy development. Examples of references to policy in the observer notes included:

*We think we are inclusive, but having a policy might be really useful. Need to address comments like, "It's all very well having inclusion, but what about that behaviour?" (from a governing council member).*

*...it (policy) creates the commitment to action – they are all our kids, and students then have the same approach.*

Inclusive practices mentioned by participants included moving to a co-teaching model in all classrooms at one school, no longer removing students from classes (i.e., pull-out programs) in another school, and paraprofessionals (ESOs and SSOs) working with teachers and all students in the classroom rather than separately with individual students.

## Knowledge and Capability

**Inclusive practice, knowledge and capability** was identified as the objective capturing the greatest proportion of activity (37% of coded references). This is not surprising given the focus on knowledge development and professional learning for the project participants throughout the CoP workshops. In particular, workshops in 2020 focussed on professional learning through online webinars due to the COVID-19 restrictions (and especially once the planned conference had to be cancelled). The two main themes articulated within this category were improving staff capacity through professional learning and improving pedagogy.

Participants discussed the desire to improve inclusive practices through classroom profiling, teacher professional learning, co-teaching and through an inclusive education coach. For some participants, these ideas stemmed from visits to inclusive schools in Queensland where they observed these practices. Some school leaders consulted with an external inclusive education consultant, Loren Swancutt (funded through the project), who served as a coach related to inclusive practices. Throughout the CoP meetings and workshops, there were instances of discussions, questions and sharing of ideas related to building teachers' capacity and implementing inclusive practices. Some examples (from researcher observation notes) are as follows:

*Making good use of the webinar recordings with small groups of teachers - working through the curriculum adjustment process [the external consultant] modelled in the webinars with teachers, building their confidence and capacity.*

*Held an ESO staff meeting and revisited theory/concepts including the differences between inclusion, integration, segregation and exclusion.*

*Starting to think about building teachers' capacity around quality differentiation and curriculum adjustments.*

## Connections and Partnerships

**Increased connections and partnerships** accounted for 14% of coding references within the CoP meeting and workshop data. Although this project objective had fewer coded references, participants identified the connections with other schools at a similar point in their journey towards inclusion as a valuable component of the project. They clearly valued the time to engage in shared problem solving, and to discuss relevant issues and practices that other schools were considering or trialling, as reflected in the following field notes:

*[Leaders from 2 schools] working so well together already. Working on PPL (personal plan for learning), getting the two schools together.*

*Evaluating each other's work is very positive and appreciate the feedback and support we get from the other schools.*

*Peer network idea of supporting each other is very important. CoP experience is an energising one.*

## 4.4 Toolkit and Website

A key feature of the ISC project was the development of a publicly accessible project website, with resources and materials related to inclusive education. The resource 'toolkit' was gradually developed over the course of the project, with the website designed as a vehicle through which project participants (including school leaders and mentors) could share the practical advice and materials they collaboratively designed. Many of these tools were instigated, discussed, and shared during the CoP meetings. The website is accessible at: <https://inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au/>.

A qualitative content analysis of the ISC website was conducted, examining the degree to which the website (and its developed resources) aligned with the project's outcomes.

The analysis showed that the website broadly provided material focussed on **increasing teachers' knowledge and capability**. This occurred through the provision of multiple toolkit items, slides, information from events, reports, and remote learning resources in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak (and subsequent shift to home-delivered learning).

One clarifying resource ('About Inclusive Education') defined inclusive education, linking it with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities definition, and the evidence base supporting inclusion (e.g., Hehir, 2016). A report on the Queensland Inclusive Schools Field Trip ('2019 Queensland Inclusive Schools Field Trip') incorporated tips and strategies shared by each of the visited schools. These included the importance of starting with a shared vision, collaborating broadly, and investing in professional learning for all staff. Passionate leadership was also identified as important.

All schools who participated in the field trip indicated they would be taking action, both short and long term, following what they had observed and learned during the trip.

Two online toolkits ('Q&A: Making Curriculum Adjustments'; 'Q&A: Curriculum Adjustments Practical') were created following webinars delivered by Loren Swancutt (independent consultant). Both pages build on the knowledge base of educators regarding making adjustments to curriculum. This was achieved through direct responses to educators' questions. Other pages on the Response to Intervention approach ('Response to Intervention: A Model for Change to Build Teacher Capacity') and Assistive Technologies ('Assistive Technologies in Schools') provided introductory information to assist general educators who might be unfamiliar with such terms.

Within the website materials, advice for schools related to shifting attitudes and cultures towards greater inclusivity was broadly addressed. For example, these aims were reflected within embedded videos ('A moment of me – Kaila'; 'Young People Tell Us About Inclusive Education') which highlighted that change in schools could occur through listening to the lived experiences and voices of students with disabilities, developing greater understanding, and setting high expectations.

There was some representation on the website of the aims regarding **how people with disabilities can shape and influence their community**. Within several pages ('Inclusive School Mentors'; 'Report on School Student Consultation'), it was young people with disabilities, who were involved as mentors in the ISC project, who demonstrated such agency.

**Connections between key stakeholders** was represented on numerous webpages (e.g., 'Training Providers'; 'Maximizing the Success of Service Providers working with Students in School'). These webpages included links to providers identified as having shared values with the ISC project, though endorsement for specific organisations/training was not provided. Tools for parents ('Parent Perspective Tools 1-3') provided information on what to look for in an inclusive school, and tips for how to communicate with the school. One of the participating schools supplied a toolkit illustrating how they positively engaged with service providers ('Maximizing the Success of Service Providers working with Students in School'). The toolkit captured the benefits of collaborating with service providers (e.g., therapists), and the conditions/resources that were needed to facilitate smooth collaboration. Appendices showed examples of formal communication, clarifying the school's expectations, and establishing timeframes for service provider visits to take place.

The project area that was least represented within the website materials concerned **increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community**. This was largely absent from the developed toolkits. One report ('Report - School Student Consultation') that was developed as part of the ISC project, indicated that school students felt that more needed to be done regarding consultation, as current approaches remained insufficient. Those strategies put forward included utilising students with disabilities to lead strategic policy development in areas related to inclusion.

It is acknowledged that stakeholders may continue to develop and include toolkits and resources on the website after the formal completion of the project.

## Chapter 5

### Survey Responses from School Participants

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An online survey was developed to complement the qualitative data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. The survey enabled participants to respond anonymously to a series of items linked to the project aims and based on key indicators of inclusive education (see Appendix C). Ideally, a pre-post survey design would have enabled the analysis of changes in participants' reported practices as a result of engaging with the ISC project, through a comparison of responses at two points in time. However, the RISE team was engaged to conduct the evaluation after the project had commenced, which meant that we were unable to collect baseline survey data. Therefore, the second part of the survey was designed to enable participants to respond to items with two ratings, one reflecting where they believed they had started out prior to the commencement of the project, and the second representing where they had ended up after participating in the project.

The survey was administered using the Qualtrics software and distributed via electronic link in an email to all participating schools in August, 2020. A number of reminders were sent to encourage completion of the survey, which remained open until the end of September, 2020.

Full details of data analysis for the survey are included in Appendix D, including missing data and tests of assumptions.

#### 5.1 Sample Characteristics

The survey was initiated by a convenience sample of 23 participants. One case was excluded because the participant did not respond to any of the survey items. Our initial design assumed a larger sample, including leaders and teachers from each participating school. However, ISC project work for most participating schools was concentrated within a small leadership group. This meant that project-related activities leading to changes in practice had not yet involved all teachers. Therefore, the survey results can best be interpreted as feedback from project leaders or those closely involved with the project at their schools, rather than from teachers or school staff more generally. This is reflected in Table 2, which shows survey participants' self-reported involvement in the project at their schools. It is also acknowledged that since the survey was anonymous and completion was voluntary, the results might not be representative of the entire cohort of project participants.

More than half (59.1%,  $N = 13$ ) of the survey respondents worked in R-12 schools, while 27.3 % ( $N = 6$ ) worked in primary schools, and the remainder (13.6%,  $N = 3$ ) worked in secondary schools. 31.8% ( $N = 7$ ) of the participants were Special Education Coordinator or the equivalent (e.g. Inclusive Education Coordinator; Learning Support Coordinator) in their schools, and 22.7% ( $N = 5$ ) were non-teaching staff, such as teacher aides (including Education Support Officer [ESO]; School Support Officer [SSO]). A further 18.2% ( $N = 4$ ) of survey respondents indicated that they held a leadership role at their school (e.g., Principal/ Head of School; Deputy Head). 18.2% ( $N = 4$ ) indicated their role as general education teacher (primary), while 9.1% ( $N = 2$ ) included a special/inclusive education teacher and a student wellbeing leader.

**Table 2.** Extent of Survey Participants' Involvement with ISC Project at their School

| Participants' role in the Inclusive School Communities Project                                                                          | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| I am on the project leadership team and I have been involved with most or all aspects of the Inclusive School Communities project       | 10        | 45.5       |
| I have attended compulsory whole-staff meetings, workshops or information sessions related to the Inclusive School Communities project. | 6         | 27.3       |
| I have received information and resources related to the Inclusive School Communities project                                           | 8         | 36.4       |
| I am unsure of my involvement with the Inclusive School Communities project                                                             | 3         | 13.6       |
| Others:<br>*I sat in on a phone link with Loren Swancutt<br>*Was absent                                                                 | 2         | 9.1        |

\*Multiple response

## 5.2 Overall Perception of ISC Project Outcomes

Table 3 illustrates the outcomes of participating in the ISC project, according to survey respondents. Overall, participants endorsed the statement (either agreed or strongly agreed) that engagement in the ISC project increased their **awareness** of issues (90.9 %,  $N = 20$ ) and changed their **attitudes** (59.1%,  $N = 13$ ) related to inclusive education. 72.7% ( $N = 16$ ) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that participating in the ISC project had increased their **knowledge** about providing an inclusive education, while the percentage was the same for increased **skills** for providing an inclusive education (72.7%,  $N = 16$ ). 68% ( $N = 15$ ) agreed or strongly agreed that project participation had resulted in changes to their **practice**, while half (50%,  $N = 11$ ) supported the statement that participation had led to a more inclusive **culture** at their school.

Nine participants provided additional comments about the extent to which their participation in the Inclusive School Communities project had changed the way they approach their role as an educator, and these are presented in Table 3.1. These comments ranged from participants feeling generally supported and appreciating the chance to hear from other educators and develop professional networks, to some reporting larger-scale rethinking of the way inclusive education is understood and implemented.

**Table 3.** Participants' Perception of Project Outcomes at their School

| Results                                                                | Strongly Disagree |   | Disagree |      | Neither Agree nor Disagree |      | Agree |      | Strongly Agree |      | Total |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---|----------|------|----------------------------|------|-------|------|----------------|------|-------|-----|
|                                                                        | Freq              | % | Freq     | %    | Freq                       | %    | Freq  | %    | Freq           | %    | Freq  | %   |
| Participating in the ISC project...                                    |                   |   |          |      |                            |      |       |      |                |      |       |     |
| increased my <b>awareness</b> of issues related to inclusive education | 0                 | 0 | 0        | 0    | 2                          | 9.1  | 13    | 59.1 | 7              | 31.8 | 22    | 100 |
| changed my <b>attitudes</b> related to inclusive education             | 0                 | 0 | 3        | 13.6 | 6                          | 27.3 | 9     | 40.9 | 4              | 18.2 | 22    | 100 |
| increased my <b>knowledge</b> about providing an inclusive education   | 0                 | 0 | 0        | 0    | 6                          | 27.3 | 8     | 36.4 | 8              | 36.4 | 22    | 100 |
| increased my <b>skills</b> in providing an inclusive education         | 0                 | 0 | 1        | 4.5  | 5                          | 22.7 | 10    | 45.5 | 6              | 27.3 | 22    | 100 |
| resulted in changes to my <b>practice</b> as an educator               | 0                 | 0 | 1        | 4.5  | 6                          | 27.3 | 11    | 50   | 4              | 18.2 | 22    | 100 |
| led to a more inclusive <b>culture</b> at my school                    | 0                 | 0 | 5        | 22.7 | 6                          | 27.3 | 7     | 31.8 | 4              | 18.2 | 22    | 100 |

**Table 3.1.** Additional Comments about Change in Approach Following Project Engagement

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| It has made me think about inclusive strategies that I suggest for supporting students. Also, needing to give examples of what an A standard is and what a C standard is.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| To be able to work with other schools on the project will full support of the Project Leaders from Purple Orange was extremely insightful and helpful to hear and use what other schools had in place and how to extend on what we were already doing.                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| The opportunity to participate with this community has caused us to completely rethink our pedagogy, practices and structures.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| It has given me the opportunity to have a fresh look at our practice as a school.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| The project has raised many questions for us as a school, about the ways in which we support families and students.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| In my role as Inclusive Education Coordinator, the project has supported me to provide relevant professional development for staff. Sharing the knowledge and skills gained from CoP meetings and using research shared to ensure staff have a clear understanding of inclusion.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Visiting new schools who are experts in inclusive education has broadened my understanding of inclusive education. Listening and learning from experts such as Loren and staff who live inclusive education such as those in Bowen State School has increased my knowledge and desire to reach an inclusive education model.                                                                                                                                              |
| As a result of the project I now incorporate into my approach discussing inclusive practices with teachers and remind them what this looks like.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| The project has provided fantastic opportunities to experience how other schools 'do' Inclusive Education, to hear from SWD how education has (and hasn't met) their needs, as well as introducing pedagogical approaches, demonstrating them in action etc. Above all, being able to meet with like-minded educators who are passionate about inclusion has provided me with the support and ongoing motivation to ensure this becomes more of a reality in my own site. |

### 5.3 Inclusive Policy and Guiding Principles for Inclusive Education

A series of four survey items asked participants to rate the extent to which staff at their school implement inclusive policy and guiding principles. Participants were asked to provide two ratings for each item, reflecting a judgement of the school's practices *prior to* engaging with the ISC project, and *after* engaging with the project (or close to project completion). Ratings were on a 5-point scale from *Not in Place/ No Evidence* to *Fully in Place*. These responses are presented as frequencies in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Response Frequencies for Items Related to Inclusive Policy and Principles

| Items                                                                                                                                                              |       | Do not know/ NA |     | Not in Place/ No Evidence |      | Emerging |      | Partially in place |      | In Place |      | Fully in place |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|-----|---------------------------|------|----------|------|--------------------|------|----------|------|----------------|------|
|                                                                                                                                                                    |       | Freq            | %   | Freq                      | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq               | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq           | %    |
| The leadership team at our school is actively involved in developing, promoting and supporting inclusive policy and practice at this school.                       | Prior | 0               | 0   | 6                         | 30   | 6        | 30   | 4                  | 20   | 3        | 15   | 1              | 5    |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 0               | 0   | 0                         | 0    | 6        | 30   | 5                  | 25   | 6        | 30   | 3              | 15   |
| This school has formal published guiding principles for inclusive policy and practice.                                                                             | Prior | 0               | 0   | 7                         | 35   | 7        | 35   | 1                  | 5    | 4        | 20   | 1              | 5    |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 0               | 0   | 0                         | 0    | 7        | 35   | 7                  | 35   | 3        | 15   | 3              | 15   |
| The guiding inclusive principles are integrated into our school culture.                                                                                           | Prior | 1               | 5.3 | 11                        | 57.9 | 3        | 15.8 | 0                  | 0    | 3        | 15.3 | 1              | 5.3  |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1               | 1   | 4                         | 21.1 | 5        | 26.3 | 4                  | 21.1 | 1        | 5.3  | 4              | 21.1 |
| The guiding inclusive education principles are reflected in evidence-based practices that are implemented across activities to support students with disabilities. | Prior | 0               | 0   | 5                         | 26.3 | 6        | 31.6 | 4                  | 21.1 | 3        | 15.8 | 1              | 5.3  |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 0               | 0   | 3                         | 15.8 | 4        | 21.1 | 4                  | 21.1 | 6        | 31.6 | 2              | 10.5 |

N = 22.

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare the median 'prior' and 'after' ratings. This is a non-parametric test used to compare two sets of scores from the same sample of participants, and is appropriate where the assumption of normality in the test data is violated. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test indicated a significant difference between the prior and after ratings on the survey items related to inclusive policy and guiding principles ( $Z = -3.632$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), with a large effect size ( $r = 0.58$ ). The median rating for inclusive policy and guiding principles prior to starting the ISC project was 6 (not in place) and increased to 12 (emerging) after completing the ISC project. These findings suggest that participating in the ISC project was associated with increased focus on or implementation of policy



and guiding principles for inclusive education, but that by the end of the project, many participants were still at the early stages of their journey. This interpretation was supported by participants' additional comments related to this area of practice (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1.** Additional Comments about Inclusive Policy and Principles

|                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I think that is definitely more awareness of why inclusion is integral to our school community. Although there are still staff that require support on inclusion and why it is important. |
| We continue to develop our understandings and commitment to inclusive practices.                                                                                                          |
| We are just beginning to write our own inclusive education document that is specific to our site.                                                                                         |
| This is still an area in which we are exploring how to lead change.                                                                                                                       |

## 5.4 Inclusive Learning Environment

Ten survey items related to the extent to which participants judged elements of an inclusive learning environment (including physical, social and pedagogical aspects of the environment) to be in place at their school. Participants were asked to provide two ratings for each item, relating to the school's practices *prior to* engaging with the ISC project, and *after* engaging with the project (or close to project completion). Ratings were on a 5-point scale from *Not in Place/ No Evidence* to *Fully in Place*. These responses are presented as frequencies in Table 5.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare mean 'prior' and 'after' ratings for items related to inclusive learning environment. There was a significant difference in the mean ratings for learning environment items ( $t(18) = -2.405, p = 0.027$ ) prior to engagement in the ISC project ( $M = 32.63, SD = 8.46$ ) and after the project ( $M = 36.57, SD = 9.15$ ). These findings suggest that participating in the ISC project was associated with a perceived increase in the extent to which educators were providing elements of an inclusive learning environment.

**Table 5.** Response Frequencies for Items Related to Inclusive Learning Environment

| Results                                                                                                                                                            |       | Do not know/NA |      | Not in Place/ No evidence |      | Emerging |      | Partially in place |      | In Place |      | Fully in place |   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------|------|---------------------------|------|----------|------|--------------------|------|----------|------|----------------|---|
| Items                                                                                                                                                              |       | Freq           | %    | Freq                      | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq               | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq           | % |
| Teachers at my school establish mutually respectful relationships with all students.                                                                               | Prior | 0              | 0    | 1                         | 5.3  | 8        | 42.1 | 5                  | 26.3 | 5        | 26.3 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 0              | 0    | 1                         | 5.3  | 1        | 5.3  | 11                 | 57.9 | 6        | 31.6 | 0              | 0 |
| Teachers establish inclusive environments where diversity is explicitly valued.                                                                                    | Prior | 0              | 0    | 8                         | 42.1 | 5        | 26.3 | 4                  | 21.1 | 2        | 10.5 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 0              | 0    | 3                         | 15.8 | 6        | 31.6 | 5                  | 26.3 | 5        | 26.3 | 0              | 0 |
| Learning environments are designed so that all students are able to independently access spaces and materials.                                                     | Prior | 1              | 5.3  | 8                         | 42.1 | 3        | 15.8 | 4                  | 21.1 | 3        | 15.8 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 2              | 10.5 | 3                         | 15.8 | 6        | 31.6 | 1                  | 5.3  | 7        | 36.8 | 0              | 0 |
| Other non-classroom environments are designed so that all students are able to access materials and activities                                                     | Prior | 1              | 5.3  | 5                         | 26.3 | 2        | 10.5 | 6                  | 31.6 | 5        | 26.3 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1              | 5.3  | 4                         | 21.1 | 2        | 10.5 | 6                  | 31.6 | 6        | 31.6 | 0              | 0 |
| Staff use proactive strategies to prevent the occurrence of interfering behaviours.                                                                                | Prior | 0              | 0    | 7                         | 36.8 | 4        | 21.1 | 4                  | 21.1 | 4        | 21.1 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 0              | 0    | 5                         | 26.3 | 4        | 21.1 | 5                  | 26.3 | 5        | 26.3 | 0              | 0 |
| Staff acknowledge students' efforts and positive behaviours informally (e.g. verbal praise) AND formally                                                           | Prior | 0              | 0    | 2                         | 10.5 | 5        | 26.3 | 5                  | 26.3 | 7        | 36.8 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1              | 0    | 0                         | 0    | 4        | 21.1 | 6                  | 31.6 | 8        | 42.1 | 0              | 0 |
| Formal peer social networks are part of the school's core curriculum, e.g. school provides instruction to typically developing peers about how to be peer buddies. | Prior | 2              | 10.5 | 4                         | 21.1 | 10       | 52.6 | 2                  | 10.5 | 1        | 5.3  | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1              | 5.3  | 3                         | 15.8 | 6        | 31.6 | 5                  | 26.3 | 4        | 21.1 | 0              | 0 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |       |   |      |   |      |   |      |   |      |   |      |   |   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---|------|---|------|---|------|---|------|---|------|---|---|
| Multiple typically developing peers are identified to be peer supports for students with disabilities across classroom and school settings and activities, for example lunch and recess times, library, PE, etc. | Prior | 4 | 21.1 | 5 | 26.3 | 6 | 31.6 | 3 | 15.8 | 1 | 5.3  | 0 | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 4 | 21.1 | 1 | 5.3  | 6 | 31.6 | 6 | 31.6 | 2 | 10.5 | 0 | 0 |
| Teachers prepare students for transitions or disruptions, expected and unexpected (e.g. changes in routine).                                                                                                     | Prior | 0 | 0    | 4 | 21.1 | 7 | 36.8 | 5 | 26.3 | 3 | 15.8 | 0 | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 1 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 7 | 36.8 | 6 | 31.6 | 5 | 26.3 | 0 | 0 |
| Teacher aides (SSO or ESO) work in a variety of ways and with different groups of students rather than always working one-on-one with a student with an identified disability or with the same small group.      | Prior | 2 | 10.5 | 3 | 15.8 | 3 | 15.8 | 5 | 26.3 | 6 | 31.6 | 0 | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0 | 0    | 1 | 5.3  | 6 | 31.6 | 5 | 26.3 | 7 | 36.8 | 0 | 0 |

N = 19.

Table 5.1 includes additional comments made by survey participants about their school's progress related to establishing inclusive learning environments, and these suggest that while some progress has been made, there is potential for growth. This interpretation is consistent with the frequency data reported in Table 5.4, in that no participant rated the inclusive learning environment elements as being "fully in place."

**Table 5.1. Additional Comments about Inclusive Policy and Principles**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I feel that if the Project was to be continued, we would only progress more and gain even more knowledge.                                                                                                                   |
| We have always encouraged ESO's to work in the classroom with students. At times this was still challenged by some ESO's and teachers but participating in the project has moved attitudes and practices across the school. |
| Redesigning facilities and building use and spaces as a result of our learning in this program.                                                                                                                             |
| We have made some improvements and changes due to the knowledge we have gained through the project.                                                                                                                         |

## 5.5 School Inclusive Education Team

Five survey items related to the presence and functioning of a whole-school inclusive education team. Table 6 summarises participants' responses to these items, represented as frequencies. Participants were asked to provide two ratings for each item, relating to the school's practices *prior to* engaging with the ISC project, and *after* engaging with the project (or close to project completion). Ratings were on a 5-point scale from *Not in Place/ No Evidence* to *Fully in Place*.

**Table 6.** Response Frequencies for Items Related to School Inclusive Education Team

| Items                                                                                                                                                              |       | Do not know/ NA |      | Not in Place/ No Evidence |      | Emerging |      | Partially in place |      | In Place |      | Fully in place |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|------|---------------------------|------|----------|------|--------------------|------|----------|------|----------------|------|
|                                                                                                                                                                    |       | Freq            | %    | Freq                      | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq               | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq           | %    |
| This school has a dedicated team with responsibility for supporting teachers and students in addressing classroom and school issues related to inclusive practice. | Prior | 1               | 5.9  | 0                         | 0    | 9        | 52.9 | 1                  | 5.9  | 4        | 23.5 | 2              | 11.8 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1               | 5.9  | 0                         | 0    | 1        | 5.9  | 6                  | 35.3 | 5        | 29.4 | 4              | 23.5 |
| The support team includes staff who have training and experience in selecting and implementing evidence-based practices for students with disabilities.            | Prior | 1               | 6.3  | 0                         | 0    | 5        | 31.3 | 7                  | 43.8 | 1        | 6.3  | 2              | 12.5 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1               | 6.3  | 0                         | 0    | 2        | 12.5 | 5                  | 31.3 | 4        | 25   | 4              | 25   |
| Team roles and responsibilities in the inclusive support team are clearly defined to ensure accountability and collaboration.                                      | Prior | 1               | 6.3  | 1                         | 6.3  | 6        | 37.5 | 3                  | 18.8 | 3        | 18.8 | 2              | 12.5 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1               | 6.3  | 0                         | 0    | 2        | 12.5 | 6                  | 37.5 | 3        | 18.8 | 4              | 25   |
| A data-driven problem-solving process is used during "inclusive support" team meetings as needed.                                                                  | Prior | 2               | 12.5 | 6                         | 37.5 | 3        | 18.8 | 1                  | 6.3  | 2        | 12.5 | 2              | 12.5 |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 2               | 12.5 | 1                         | 6.3  | 4        | 25   | 2                  | 12.5 | 4        | 25   | 3              | 18.8 |
| Team meetings result in written action plans and consistent follow-through to address issues related to inclusive education.                                       | Prior | 3               | 18.8 | 5                         | 31.3 | 3        | 18.8 | 1                  | 6.3  | 3        | 18.8 | 1              | 6.3  |
|                                                                                                                                                                    | After | 1               | 6.3  | 0                         | 0    | 5        | 31.3 | 3                  | 18.8 | 4        | 25   | 3              | 13.6 |

N = 17 for item 1; N = 16 for items 2-5

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed a significant difference in participants' ratings of items related to a whole-school inclusive education team prior to and following participation in the ISC project ( $Z = -3.113$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), with a large effect size ( $r = 0.55$ ). The median rating for this set of items was 15.5 (emerging) prior to starting the ISC project, and increased to 21.5 (partially in place) after completing the ISC project. These findings suggest that participating in the ISC project was associated with perceived improvements in the extent to which the school had effective team processes and problem solving procedures within a collaborative, inclusive education team.

## 5.6 Individual Student Support Teams

Eleven survey items related to the presence and functioning of a whole-school inclusive education team. Table 7 summarises participants' responses to these items, represented as frequencies. Participants were asked to provide two ratings for each item, relating to the school's practices *prior* to engaging with the ISC project, and *after* engaging with the project (or close to project completion). Ratings were on a 5-point scale from *Not in Place/ No Evidence* to *Fully in Place*.

**Table 7. Response Frequencies for Items Related to Individual Student Support Teams**

| Items                                                                                                                                                                            |       | Do not know/ NA |      | Not in Place/ No Evidence |      | Emerging |      | Partially in place |      | In Place |      | Fully in place |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|------|---------------------------|------|----------|------|--------------------|------|----------|------|----------------|------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                  |       | Freq            | %    | Freq                      | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq               | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq           | %    |
| Decisions about the education of students with identified disabilities are made by a multidisciplinary team that consists of all practitioners who provide services to students. | Prior | 1               | 6.3  | 4                         | 25   | 1        | 6.3  | 3                  | 18.8 | 4        | 25   | 3              | 18.8 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0    | 2        | 12.5 | 1                  | 6.3  | 6        | 37.5 | 7              | 43.8 |
| All team members, families & students are invited to meetings regarding important programming decisions, such as IEPs.                                                           | Prior | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0    | 3        | 18.8 | 4                  | 25   | 6        | 37.5 | 3              | 18.8 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0    | 0        | 0    | 1                  | 6.3  | 7        | 43.8 | 8              | 50   |
| All team members, families and students are invited to contribute to important decisions and actions.                                                                            | Prior | 0               | 0    | 1                         | 6.3  | 3        | 18.8 | 2                  | 12.5 | 8        | 50   | 2              | 12.5 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0    | 0        | 0    | 2                  | 12.5 | 7        | 43.8 | 7              | 43.8 |
| The roles and responsibilities of all individual support team                                                                                                                    | Prior | 2               | 12.5 | 3                         | 18.8 | 3        | 18.8 | 3                  | 18.8 | 2        | 12.5 | 3              | 18.8 |

|                                                                                                                                                                            |       |   |      |   |      |   |      |   |      |   |      |    |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---|------|---|------|---|------|---|------|---|------|----|------|
| members are clearly defined and understood by all members of the team.                                                                                                     | After | 2 | 12.5 | 0 | 0    | 2 | 12.5 | 3 | 18.8 | 5 | 31.3 | 4  | 25   |
| Teacher aides (SSO or ESO) are considered integral members of the teaching team.                                                                                           | Prior | 0 | 0    | 1 | 6.3  | 4 | 25   | 4 | 25   | 4 | 25   | 3  | 18.8 |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 2 | 12.5 | 2 | 12.5 | 7 | 43.8 | 5  | 31.3 |
| Teachers and teacher aides (SSO or ESO) have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in supporting SWD in the classroom. This is reviewed regularly.     | Prior | 0 | 0    | 1 | 6.3  | 2 | 12.5 | 6 | 37.5 | 5 | 31.3 | 2  | 12.5 |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 5 | 31.3 | 4 | 25   | 7  | 43.8 |
| Teachers work closely with the special education coordinator and other specialist staff to design and monitor learning experiences for SWD.                                | Prior | 0 | 0    | 2 | 13.3 | 3 | 20   | 2 | 13.3 | 7 | 46.7 | 1  | 6.7  |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 3 | 20   | 2 | 13.3 | 6 | 40   | 4  | 26.7 |
| Team members have easy access to the written goals and objectives on the IEP for each student (classroom and/or online).                                                   | Prior | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 3 | 20   | 2 | 13.3 | 4 | 26.7 | 6  | 40   |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 0 | 0    | 1 | 6.7  | 4 | 26.7 | 10 | 66.7 |
| Team members have access to information from the most current assessments.                                                                                                 | Prior | 1 | 7.1  | 2 | 14.3 | 1 | 7.1  | 2 | 14.3 | 4 | 28.6 | 4  | 28.6 |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 1 | 7.1  | 0 | 0    | 1 | 7.1  | 1 | 7.1  | 6 | 42.9 | 5  | 35.7 |
| A team-based review system exists to identify students requiring individualised strategies/behaviour support plans.                                                        | Prior | 1 | 7.1  | 1 | 7.1  | 2 | 14.3 | 4 | 28.6 | 4 | 28.6 | 2  | 14.3 |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 1 | 7.1  | 1 | 7.1  | 0 | 0    | 1 | 7.1  | 5 | 35.7 | 6  | 42.9 |
| Staff from student's next educational program are invited to contribute to assessment and transition planning & assessment results are shared with student's next program. | Prior | 1 | 7.1  | 2 | 14.3 | 1 | 7.1  | 5 | 35.7 | 4 | 28.6 | 1  | 7.1  |
|                                                                                                                                                                            | After | 1 | 7.1  | 0 | 0    | 3 | 21.4 | 1 | 7.1  | 6 | 42.9 | 3  | 21.4 |

N = 16 for items 1-6; N = 15 for items 7-8; N = 14 for items 9-11

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare mean ratings for items related to individual student support teams judged prior to ( $M = 46.93$ ,  $SD = 11.82$ ) and after ( $M = 55.36$ ,  $SD = 7.23$ ) completing the ISC project. There was a significant difference in these ratings ( $t(13) = -4.04$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), suggesting a perceived improvement in the extent to which schools had effectively functioning individual student support teams for students with disabilities.

## 5.7 Family Engagement and Support

Five survey items related to participants' ratings of family engagement and support as part of an inclusive approach to supporting students living with disability at their schools. Table 8 illustrates participants' responses to these items, represented as frequencies. Participants were asked to provide two ratings for each item, relating to the school's practices *prior to* engaging with the ISC project, and *after* engaging with the project (or close to project completion). Ratings were on a 5-point scale from *Not in Place/ No Evidence* to *Fully in Place*.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare participants' mean ratings for their school's approach on items related to family engagement and support prior to and after completing the ISC project. There was a significant difference in the mean ratings by participants prior to ( $M = 17.24$ ,  $SD = 5.61$ ) and following ( $M = 19.86$ ,  $SD = 4.09$ ) the ISC project ( $t(13) = -3.16$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ). These findings suggest that participating in the ISC project was perceived to improve elements of family engagement and support as part of a whole school approach to inclusion.

## 5.8 Inclusive Classroom Teaching

Seven survey items related to elements of inclusive classroom teaching, and participants rated the extent to which they perceive teachers at their school to apply various inclusive teaching practices. Table 9 illustrates participants' responses to these items, represented as frequencies. Participants were asked to provide two ratings for each item, relating to the school's practices *prior to* engaging with the ISC project, and *after* engaging with the project (or close to project completion). Ratings were on a 5-point scale from *Not in Place/ No Evidence* to *Fully in Place*.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare participants' ratings of teachers' inclusive classroom practices prior to and after completing the ISC project. There was a significant difference in mean ratings related to inclusive classroom teaching prior to ( $M = 43.14$ ,  $SD = 10.44$ ) and by the end of ( $M = 49.00$ ,  $SD = 6.92$ ) the ISC project ( $t(13) = -3.59$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). These findings suggest that participating in the ISC project was perceived to improve the extent to which teachers employed inclusive classroom practices.



**Table 8.** Response Frequencies for Items Related to Family Engagement and Support

| Items                                                                                                                                                |       | Do not know/ NA |      | Not in Place/ No Evidence |      | Emerging |      | Partially in place |      | In Place |      | Fully in place |   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|------|---------------------------|------|----------|------|--------------------|------|----------|------|----------------|---|
|                                                                                                                                                      |       | Freq            | %    | Freq                      | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq               | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq           | % |
| Family members are active, supported and collaborative participants in their child's education at my school.                                         | Prior | 3               | 21.4 | 1                         | 7.1  | 3        | 21.4 | 3                  | 21.4 | 4        | 28.6 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                      | After | 0               | 0    | 3                         | 21.4 | 1        | 7.1  | 5                  | 35.7 | 5        | 35.7 | 0              | 0 |
| Frequent meetings are scheduled with families to support students who have more extensive needs, including students with identified disabilities.    | Prior | 1               | 7.1  | 3                         | 21.4 | 3        | 21.4 | 3                  | 21.4 | 4        | 28.6 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                      | After | 1               | 7.1  | 0                         | 0    | 4        | 28.6 | 3                  | 21.4 | 6        | 42.9 | 0              | 0 |
| A variety of current and relevant resources and services is available to families through the school...                                              | Prior | 2               | 14.3 | 3                         | 21.4 | 3        | 21.4 | 5                  | 35.7 | 1        | 7.1  | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                      | After | 1               | 7.1  | 2                         | 14.3 | 3        | 21.4 | 6                  | 42.9 | 2        | 14.3 | 0              | 0 |
| School staff provide a welcoming, inviting and non-judgemental culture to families in which family input and engagement are valued...                | Prior | 1               | 7.1  | 1                         | 7.1  | 2        | 14.3 | 4                  | 28.6 | 6        | 42.9 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                      | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0    | 2        | 14.3 | 4                  | 28.6 | 8        | 57.1 | 0              | 0 |
| Teachers regularly communicate with parents of student with disabilities, including to share 'good news' or positive reports about student progress. | Prior | 2               | 14.3 | 1                         | 7.1  | 2        | 14.3 | 5                  | 35.7 | 4        | 28.6 | 0              | 0 |
|                                                                                                                                                      | After | 0               | 0    | 1                         | 7.1  | 1        | 7.1  | 6                  | 42.9 | 6        | 42.9 | 0              | 0 |

N = 14

**Table 9.** Response Frequencies for Items Related to Inclusive Classroom Teaching

| Items                                                                                                                                                                            |       | Do not know/ NA |      | Not in Place/ No Evidence |     | Emerging |      | Partially in place |      | In Place |      | Fully in place |      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------------|------|---------------------------|-----|----------|------|--------------------|------|----------|------|----------------|------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                  |       | Freq            | %    | Freq                      | %   | Freq     | %    | Freq               | %    | Freq     | %    | Freq           | %    |
| Teachers at my school regularly differentiate learning experiences to address a diverse range of students in the classroom.                                                      | Prior | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0   | 2        | 14.3 | 6                  | 42.9 | 2        | 14.3 | 4              | 28.6 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0   | 0        | 0    | 1                  | 7.1  | 8        | 57.1 | 5              | 35.7 |
| Teachers regularly use pre-assessment to determine student readiness prior to teaching a unit of work.                                                                           | Prior | 2               | 14.3 | 1                         | 7.1 | 4        | 28.6 | 3                  | 21.4 | 3        | 21.4 | 1              | 7.1  |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 2               | 14.3 | 0                         | 0   | 2        | 14.3 | 5                  | 35.7 | 3        | 21.4 | 2              | 14.3 |
| Teachers incorporate a range of teaching strategies to capitalise on all students' strengths and interests.                                                                      | Prior | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0   | 2        | 14.3 | 5                  | 35.7 | 4        | 28.6 | 3              | 21.4 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0   | 0        | 0    | 0                  | 0    | 10       | 71.4 | 4              | 28.6 |
| Teachers regularly use formative assessment data to design differentiated learning experiences...                                                                                | Prior | 1               | 7.1  | 0                         | 0   | 5        | 35.7 | 3                  | 21.4 | 3        | 21.4 | 2              | 14.3 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 1               | 7.1  | 0                         | 0   | 2        | 14.3 | 2                  | 14.3 | 7        | 50   | 2              | 14.3 |
| Teachers measure and report on student progress (and not only achievement at a point in time) for all students.                                                                  | Prior | 2               | 14.3 | 0                         | 0   | 2        | 14.3 | 1                  | 7.1  | 6        | 42.9 | 3              | 21.4 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 2               | 14.3 | 0                         | 0   | 0        | 0    | 0                  | 0    | 8        | 57.1 | 4              | 28.6 |
| Appropriate accommodations or modifications are made across activities and tasks that maximise the student's ability to complete them with minimal prompting from adults...      | Prior | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0   | 3        | 21.4 | 5                  | 35.7 | 4        | 28.6 | 2              | 14.3 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 0               | 0    | 0                         | 0   | 0        | 0    | 1                  | 7.1  | 9        | 64.3 | 4              | 28.6 |
| Teachers create opportunities within classroom activities for students to respond to or initiate communication & to communicate with multiple partners across multiple settings. | Prior | 1               | 7.1  | 1                         | 7.1 | 2        | 14.3 | 3                  | 21.4 | 4        | 28.6 | 3              | 21.4 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                  | After | 1               | 7.1  | 0                         | 0   | 0        | 0    | 3                  | 21.4 | 6        | 42.9 | 4              | 28.6 |

N = 14

## 5.9 Conclusion and Limitations

Overall, analysis of the survey responses suggested that participating in the ISC project had a statistically significant effect on reported practices across the areas of inclusive policy and guiding principles for inclusive education, learning environment, whole school inclusive education teams, individual student support teams, family engagement and support, and inclusive classroom teaching. In addition, participants agreed that engagement with the project supported increases in their awareness, knowledge, skills, and practices related to inclusive education. However, the small sample size and the nature of the survey, which does not represent a true pre-post design, means that caution is required when interpreting the data. In addition, it is likely that participants who took the time to complete the survey may have been those already positively predisposed to the project. The findings should not be over-interpreted on their own, but viewed as one element to be considered in the context of findings from multiple data sources in the evaluation.

## Chapter 6

### Feedback from Youth Mentors

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#### 6.1 Introduction

A significant element of the *Inclusive School Communities* project concerned the engagement of youth mentors, a group of “young people living with disability who carry rich experiences of their own education journey.”<sup>7</sup> Consistent with the co-design methodology of the ISC project, the involvement of the mentors was intended to (1) support the co-production of information products and other ‘toolkit’ resources and, (2) through relationships between mentors and participating schools, provide ‘lived experience’ perspectives to support the design and implementation of inclusive school practices. The intention was for mentors to be available as a resource for students as well as staff. Most of these young people had current or previous involvement with JFA youth programs.

As noted by the JFA-PO Project Leader, Letitia Rose, the initial plan was for each mentor to be matched to a participating school, and subsequently supported by JFA-PO project staff to work alongside that school for the duration of the project, creating opportunities to build relationships with staff and students<sup>8</sup>. However, according to Letitia (and some school leaders), it proved difficult to enact this plan at each site, especially as some schools took considerable time to develop their goals and plans (including how they saw the potential role of mentors). In 2020, mentors’ engagement with schools was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools revised their policies, and site access for external visitors became limited.

Eight youth mentors were initially engaged by JFA-PO for the project, but two withdrew after the project commenced. The remaining six mentors included three males and three females. It should be acknowledged that a number of the mentors had tertiary qualifications related to disability, inclusion and/or education or were currently engaged in relevant tertiary study. All brought a range of professional, volunteer and advocacy experiences in the field. Some were familiar with research and current policy and political developments in the fields of disability and inclusive education. Two were members of the project steering committee. All saw themselves as possessing some leadership qualities or described instances of leadership behaviour. In this way, the mentors contributed not only their own lived experience of education as young people living with disability, but also genuine expertise and professional experience as educators, advocates, and community leaders.

The participating schools each took responsibility for determining how youth mentors could support local project goals related to inclusion, and for engaging individual mentors. Feedback from school leaders, project leaders and the mentors themselves all suggest a missed opportunity by schools to capitalise on the inherent potential of this group.

Despite the challenges, the youth mentors participated in multiple aspects of the ISC project. They presented at Community of Practice meetings and at a number of school meetings to share their

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<sup>7</sup> Julia Farr Group *Project Plan*, provided 4/19

<sup>8</sup> Closing Interview with Letitia Rose, 24/9/2020

personal educational experiences, contributed to the development and review of toolkit resources for dissemination via the project website, and provided support to participants (through the 'chat' function) during webinars.

To evaluate mentors' experiences of the ISC project, all six participants were invited to engage in an individual, semi-structured interview with a member of the evaluation team at the completion of the project (July-September 2020). Invitations and reminders were sent to each mentor, and three chose to participate in an extended interview (see Appendix A for interview questions), while a fourth sent email responses to the interview questions. Letitia also provided data collected through initial interviews with mentors as they commenced in the project, and survey feedback gathered at the project mid-point (January, 2020). The findings presented below are based on qualitative analysis of data from these three sources. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data inductively, with a focus on:

1. Mentors' goals and expectations
2. Experiences of engagement
3. Perceived project outcomes

## 6.2 Mentors' Goals and Expectations

The youth mentors came to the project with broad goals and diverse prior experiences. At least one articulated a very defined sense of their role and what they could offer (*"My role is all about communication"*). Others were initially unsure of what to expect. This lack of clarity was associated with low initial confidence by some:

*Well my confidence at the moment is not great for this particular project because we haven't done the first meeting yet. Because I don't really know what to expect, I'm not confident in whatever I will be doing.*

In the initial interviews and the survey, mentors nominated a range of goals for their involvement with the project, including *"Help schools to become more inclusive to everyone"* and *"Meet with more schools in their student-led committees"*. Some identified goals related to their own skill development in areas of teamwork, leadership, communication skills, media skills and speaking to groups. Others identified specific areas in which they felt they were well-placed to contribute, or experiences they could share with young students living with disability:

*I think I'm quite good at understanding... like the needs of a range of different disabilities. So, I guess that makes me in quite a good position to be a leader in the disability space.*

*I see myself as someone to promote bridging the gap between students with a disability and students without – one of the ones that can help bridge the gap.*

*I can see that I've ended up in a situation that I didn't think I was going to end up in and it's a very positive one. When you're that age and you're looking up at other people, you can see*

*they've been in a similar situation... I hope that impacts at least one or two people to push through the hard times because you know you're going to get out of it and you're going to be able to see the end result... Hopefully they can look at me and go, 'If he can do it, I can do it!'*

## 6.3 Experiences of Engagement

Through the mid-project survey and the final interviews, mentors were able to identify a range of different ways in which they had engaged in the ISC project. Examples included:

- Attendance and presentations at CoP meetings (especially early in the project)
- Attendance at school meetings with JFA-PO staff
- Participation in mentor team-building, professional development and planning meetings
- Developing various resources for the web-based 'toolkit', including videos about their lived experiences
- Developing and facilitating a professional learning webinar
- Making media appearances related to the project
- Advising staff and meeting with students in relation to 'student voice' committees and groups at participating schools

Mentors spoke positively about their level of engagement in the project, particularly in the early stages. However, several noted that interruptions due to COVID-19, subsequent changes to the project structure, and the fact that some schools advanced more slowly than others in developing their project plans, limited the extent to which they participated as the project went on. Their involvement became less about direct engagement with the schools and more about meeting with each other and developing tools:

*The idea that we had from the get go of the project I guess was that we would go and join their CoP sessions that the schools were having, and we would be part of that and then we would also go to certain schools... It didn't really work out that way though. What we found was that there was really nowhere for us to really interact at that [CoP] session, and ... so the decision was made for us not to attend the sessions unless there was a reason for being there. So, we did go to a few and just network with the schools and just introduce ourselves and say what we could – like how we could help the schools should they want it, and I did attend one very late like just recently because it was online...so there was room I guess for us mentors if we wanted to attend and actually communicate so I did do that. But our main role has been writing documents or giving feedback on documents.*

*It's been, I think, very fractured in that they are still having a regular mentor meeting throughout as well, so we have been discussing different ideas there, but of course we haven't seen what the schools are doing because the schools are often in the CoP. So, it's kind of fractured into two projects really from my perspective.*

Despite the challenges, mentors gave multiple positive examples of their engagement with the project, including the various tools they have contributed to:

*...the toolkit was one way that everyone was able to exchange the knowledge and to help increase capacity. For instance, like I guess not many have experienced working with someone who is legally blind. So, I am currently developing a toolkit to help provide ideas in order to help facilitate that inclusion or those who were visually impaired or blind.*

*I have actually written a tool myself ... you know a lot of people on the autism spectrum are not the best at socialising I guess, and so the schools when I did go and attend the networking sessions wanted some assistance on that. So, I wrote a tool about using their special interest or just using interest that they might have or other school students might have to create a club at lunch time to build social interaction that way because that can be helpful.*

*Me and one of the other school mentors we went and conducted two focus group sessions at one of the schools involved in the project, and then Letitia wrote up the transcript of the answers I guess from the focus groups. I turned that into a report with recommendations for schools of what they can do. Now, whether ... people actually read the report and whether people read the tools, I can't say... but that's kind of what I have been doing.*

## 6.4 Perceived Project Outcomes

In describing what they perceived to be key project outcomes, mentors' responses reflected a level of optimism about the progress they had observed for some staff and some schools. All three mentors interviewed for the evaluation offered examples of statements from school leaders, conversations with students and staff, or changes in practice that led them to feel hopeful about the shift towards more inclusive approaches to education. They noted promising examples of cross-sector collaboration between schools and sharing of knowledge and ideas. For example:

*In terms of connections and the knowledge sharing, the project has provided a platform to do that and, as I said, it all starts with those electric conversations to get the mind thinking, what it means for you and your organisation, and it's through having that first conversation and that exposure to a range of people that you learn these things. And, as I said, these conversations will stimulate reflection and eventually change practices that are more inclusive within the education system and the community.*

One found the most satisfying aspect of the project actually being able to see a particular school change its practices related to students with special educational needs:

*I am really excited about one of the schools in particular because ... (Inaudible) shut down their special education unit completely and merging all of those students into the mainstream so that's really exciting, because that's then progress that you can see... maybe other schools can follow their lead and I know for a fact that some people within the education department have gone down and viewed what that school is actually doing, so that gives me a lot of hope for future progress on that area. So that has to be like the highlight I think for me.*



Others commented on the increased awareness among schools of issues related to inclusion:

*I think we have broadened the project schools' understanding about inclusive education and raised the conversation with them about why it is important and how they can begin to increase their inclusivity.*

*I'm not sure how many of our discussions resulted in actual changes in practices and/or policies at the participating schools, but I know within the CoP meeting there were a lot of exciting discussions about ways educators could improve inclusive practices back at their schools so I am hoping some of these were implemented.*

These responses are representative of mentors' comments suggesting that they appreciated being part of a project designed to encourage changes in understanding and school practices. In fact, when asked about project outcomes, mentors more commonly mentioned outcomes for schools rather than benefits they had personally gained through participation. Several mentioned being able to talk directly with staff and school students about their own lived experiences as an important element of their perceived impact, and something they would have liked to do more:

*I went out and talked to staff and I've heard that made a bit of a difference, and I have heard that from the person that organised it emailing me some feedback at the end... I don't always do it, but I did include some experiences of, you know, not being included and the impact that that had on me ... that can be really powerful. I was telling them pretty dark stuff, and you know I think it resonated with them so that was good. The other one, the other school that we did the focus groups at and working directly with the students... I can't say for all the students at the school, but some of those students that attended the focus group were part of – like a school student inclusion group... trying to get other school students more included in the school – the ones that felt like that they're not included in that particular school at the moment, and ... funnily enough was social clubs at lunch time .... Well that works out well for my tool then, hopefully ... that tool will be of some use.*

Given the level of education and expertise some mentors brought to their role, and the commitment to encouraging inclusive school practices, it may not be surprising that they focused their responses on outcomes for schools rather than themselves.

Despite not engaging with schools to the extent they would have liked, the mentors were perceptive in identifying some of the key outcomes and challenges associated with the project. Their observations were consistent with other sources of data we collected. For example, one discussed issues of accountability and sustainability in considering schools' outcomes and next steps, while several noted the uneven levels of commitment and engagement between schools:

*From what I understand from other people and unfortunately again, I haven't communicated much with the schools, apparently, half the schools have been really active in the project and the other half are not. For it to be sustainable it's going to need the schools to actually be accountable to themselves and making sure that they are pushing forward.*

*I felt like at times, probably due to lack of time and commitment from schools, the project felt a bit disorganized with a lot of last-minute meetings with schools and last-minute cancellations. Similarly, I attended one meeting at a school where no students turned up, which was disappointing but came down to poor timing and insufficient advertising.*

Reflected strongly in mentors' responses was the sense that both school participants and the mentors had gained mutual benefits from engagement with each other through the ISC project:

*I think the strengths of the project were that it provides a platform for everyone to share their expertise and knowledge and even experiences. For example, some were not – haven't had any experience including those with a visual disability for example. It allows members of the disability community, through the mentor role, to increase their confidence and capacity to interact with school leaders, helping to shift their understanding of inclusion not only within yourself but others.*

*I think the CoP meetings provided an amazing opportunity for the project schools to meet other like-minded, passionate educators and feel a sense of active participation and belonging in the community. It is so important that these educators have the opportunity to discuss what is and isn't working with themselves and with people like the peer mentors who have direct experiences of disability and inclusion so that they can share what is and isn't working, get ideas and inspiration, and have a support network. I'm hoping that this in turn translated to better inclusion and feelings of belonging for students with disability at these schools.*

One mentor discussed the way that participating in meaningful conversations about inclusive policy and practice (such as through a school's inclusion committee) demonstrated the value of giving a young person with a disability a voice and a forum for contributing their ideas:

*[the project has] highlighted that people in the disability community not only should be heard, but they should also be given that opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts on matters. It also just helps showcase their capabilities in terms of the disability community's capability to contribute to projects and things.*

The value of participation was not only about raising awareness and increasing knowledge for school participants. One mentor noted that engagement in the project had expanded their own understanding of inclusion in education:

*[The project] created more clarity in what inclusion entails and can look like which enabled schools to make a more inclusive vision. The project also provided an opportunity to reflect on what inclusion means personally... for me having not studied Education... I was never exposed to the inclusive model that we used. For example, I would describe my school experiences as fairly inclusive, but really, most of the schools are like stuck at the integration stage which is in the right direction, but not for inclusion if that makes sense.*

While the mentors highlighted a series of outcomes for school-based participants, all four interview participants did refer to personal outcomes that were not directly linked to the program goals, but arose through the opportunity for them to spend time with other mentors. That is, the project clearly provided a forum for them to connect with like-minded young people who were also passionate about inclusive education:

*Actually, three of us mentors now are working on another project and we just found each other through this one, and so we have been able to continue some advocacy work outside of the project so that's been a strength. Like working with other – not just the schools collaborating, but also us being able to create other change in the inclusive education space.*

*From my perspective as a mentor, so again like the first thing is the connections to the other mentors and the fact that we have been able to use our combined knowledge and experiences I guess to help in other ways in the inclusive community space.*

*We as peer mentors have gained a lot of personal development from the project.*

One mentor described the benefit of working with other mentors as bolstering confidence and drive to be an advocate for young people living with disability, beyond the ISC project:

*Among us, the mentor team, everyone was able to bounce ideas off each other. It also provided the drive to take the lead in some ways outside of the project ... It was also through this project that some of us were able to pluck up the courage and advocate as disability advocates to go ahead and discuss the issue of inclusion and the understanding to an advisor of the Education minister.*

Overall, the feedback from mentors was positive in terms of their own engagement with the ISC project and the outcomes they had seen among school participants. There were multiple examples of the positive impact mentors had on school participants and the personal benefits they gained through participation. However, it was noted that, although partly due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, the mentors did not have the opportunity to engage as fully as planned in all aspects of the ISC project.

## Chapter 7

### Summary of Findings and Recommendations

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#### 7.1 Summary of Findings

The Inclusive School Communities (ISC) project was a multi-faceted set of activities and resources with the aim of increasing SA schools' capacity to operate more inclusively. There is a widely recognised need for teachers and schools to shift towards more inclusive ways of working, but achieving the necessary cultural, policy and practice changes represents a significant challenge for many schools. The ISC project represented an innovative opportunity for schools to increase their capacity for inclusive practice. In particular, the combination of the cross-sector participant group, extended networking and professional learning opportunities, involvement of youth mentors, access to a broad range of expertise, and flexible co-design approach were innovative program elements.

The primary focus of the program evaluation was to understand the nature and scope of any changes in attitudes, capacity, practices and/or policies related to inclusive practices in participating schools, and to identify the impact of these changes on staff, students, and other community members.

**Overall, the evaluation found evidence of positive outcomes in relation to all five program goals.** That is, there was evidence that engagement in the ISC project was associated with positive change in attitudes and culture, knowledge and capability, and policy and practice related to inclusive education. In addition, the project supported feelings of connection and belonging to community, including for individuals living with disability, and fostered potentially sustainable partnerships across stakeholder groups. The extent to which these outcomes were substantial and likely to be sustainable varied across outcomes and school sites.

The strongest evidence reflected an increase in school participants' own awareness and knowledge of issues related to inclusion, and renewed commitment to advocate for and drive inclusive practices at their schools. There was evidence of changes in practice and policy, but the extent to which these changes were beginning to emerge, as opposed to more embedded across the school (and therefore associated with cultural change), varied among sites; most were at the emergent stages. There was greater attention to student voice in multiple schools, with some introducing new structures to increase opportunities for meaningful participation, including by students with disability. There was evidence of mutual benefits arising from the participation of youth mentors, but this resource appears to have been under-utilised by schools and represented a missed opportunity for deeper engagement.

The ISC project made a significant contribution to inclusive education by engaging diverse stakeholders and providing a valued forum for professional conversations among school participants as they deepened, refined and questioned their understanding of inclusive school cultures. Across multiple sources of data, it was evident that the Community of Practice model of professional learning was effective in equipping participants with key knowledge related to inclusion, enabling participants to share ideas and engage in collaborative problem-solving with peers from other sites, and fostering potentially sustainable relationships. Some of the original participants, who entered the project at a

more advanced point in their journey towards inclusion, felt that the CoP meetings were of less benefit after the second round of schools joined—they felt that the group became too large and the content remained too introductory. For these participants, the opportunity to work with the external consultant and with other, more advanced schools became more relevant as the project progressed. JFA-PO leaders provided options for the CoP group to break into smaller sub-groups, but this offer was declined by participants. Then COVID-19 interrupted the face-to-face meetings and created significant challenges for schools, who were forced to redirect their attention towards preparing for online learning and supporting students and families. Several school participants noted that this resulted in decreased engagement and momentum related to the ISC project. For example:

*...the COVID situation just set us back by a term, and just in terms of what we wanted to achieve, and getting the work done. In our project in particular, we have a very, a small student leadership group that we called our inclusion group, and just starting from about the middle of term one would have been, normally when we're starting to work with those kids, as leaders and develop them. Then of course, we missed those last four weeks of term one. And term two for us, was just getting it, getting back on our feet after the shock we'd all been through, and we just put most of our focus into student learning at that time, and I guess we just took our eye off that leadership ball in that sense.*

These issues notwithstanding, it was clear that the CoP model was strongly endorsed by participating schools. It is also acknowledged that the JFA project leaders found creative ways to respond to unanticipated events such as COVID-19, including through the establishment of Zoom meetings and professional learning webinars.

Of note, participants highly valued those project experiences that provided them with applied examples of inclusive practice (e.g., examples shared by CoP peers; visits to other schools; particular webinars) and enabled them to discuss and plan for practices at their own sites (e.g., CoP work with peers; opportunities to discuss site planning with external consultant). Some participants indicated that they commenced the project believing their school was inclusive, but engaging in the project, and particularly accessing 'real world' examples, prompted them to re-examine their understandings and acknowledge specific areas for improvement. Some schools indicated that participating in the project helped them to identify specific gaps in their school's approach to ensuring a comprehensive school-wide culture of inclusion.

In the following sections, findings from Chapters 3-6 are synthesised and summarised in relation to the five evaluation questions.

## 7.2 Findings in Relation to Evaluation Questions

1. To what extent has the ISC project achieved positive change in attitudes and culture within mainstream services (schools), related to the inclusion of students with disability?

It should be noted that most of the school-based participants entered the ISC project by choice and were motivated by an existing commitment to the effective inclusion of students with disability in mainstream schools. Therefore, it might be expected that changes in attitudes towards inclusion for this group might be modest. Nevertheless, 60% of survey respondents agreed that engagement in the project had resulted in a change in attitudes. Perhaps more significantly, there was evidence from the interviews and CoP observations that participants strengthened their recognition of the role of attitudes in generating change in practices among teachers and leaders at their schools. Engagement in the project also enabled some leaders to renew and expand their commitment to inclusive education. These findings are promising in terms of the likelihood of effecting broader attitudinal change in schools.

In terms of inclusive culture, participants recognised cultural change as essential for the introduction and sustainability of inclusive school practices. At the same time, the imperative to encourage more inclusive cultures at their sites was perceived as a major challenge. Half of the respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that their participation had resulted in a more inclusive culture at their sites, which is promising, albeit the lowest level of agreement across the outcome items.

It is well documented in the literature that achieving cultural change in schools is a multi-faceted, long-term prospect involving the coordination of resources and people working towards a clear, shared vision and sustained by common values (Dyson, Farrell, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallanaugh, 2004; McMaster, 2013). Some of the frustration felt by participants in this project came from their experiences of trying to effect change without the genuine support of principals or key leaders in their schools and without a sense of shared ownership among teachers. Clearly, effecting fully inclusive school cultures was beyond the scope of the ISC project. However, there was promising evidence of positive change in this direction. The ISC project contributed to significant professional conversations among school participants as they deepened and refined their understanding of inclusive school culture. The project certainly raised participants' awareness that constant attention to staff attitudes and practices is an ongoing requirement and explicit plans must be in place to review these in a consistent and sustained way. Some schools indicated that participating in the project, and in particular having the opportunity to visit other schools, helped them to identify specific gaps in their school's approach to ensuring a comprehensive school-wide culture of inclusion. These experiences left participants in a stronger position to advocate for specific changes that would impact inclusive culture.

## 2. To what extent has the ISC project achieved increased knowledge and capability within mainstream services (schools), related to inclusive practice?

The evaluation data suggested that participating in the ISC project was associated with increased knowledge of inclusion and inclusive practices, and increased capability for the school leaders directly involved in the project. There was strong evidence in support of this outcome. Responses to the online survey indicated that 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the ISC project had raised their awareness of issues related to inclusion, while almost three quarters agreed that the project supported them to increase their knowledge and skills relevant to inclusion. The CoP

feedback surveys from 2019 similarly reflected participants' agreement that engagement in the CoP meetings had increased their knowledge and confidence related to inclusive practice.

Throughout the data, there was evidence of leaders rethinking their existing understandings of inclusion, noting that as they learned more, they recognised the limits of their previous interpretations of inclusive education. For example:

*I thought that I had a lot of knowledge, but I have learnt so much through the project, through people's tool kits, through the discussions with other schools and getting to see other schools. It's just been – like it's a great project and every time I meet someone, I usually say you need to go on this project.*

In the CoP observation data, knowledge and capability was the most prevalent theme, which is consistent with the focus on knowledge development and professional learning for the project participants throughout the CoP workshops. The webinars in 2020 provided additional opportunities, beyond the CoP meetings, for professional learning related to inclusive education. Participants shared examples of how these resources had supported growth in their own knowledge, but also enabled them to work more effectively with other staff. For example:

*Making good use of the webinar recordings with small groups of teachers - working through the curriculum adjustment process that Loren [external consultant] modelled in the webinars with teachers, building their confidence and capacity.*

A strength of the project in relation to professional learning was the openness and flexibility of the JFA-PO project leaders, and particularly Letitia as Project Leader. Experiences such as the interstate field trip were not pre-planned, but developed as a response to participants' emerging needs and priorities from the CoP discussions, and this proved to be among the most powerful learning experiences for many participants. The shift to online webinars once the planned conference was cancelled due to COVID-19 is another example of responsiveness to participants' developing professional learning needs and a willingness to be flexible in the delivery of the ISC project.

Participants strongly endorsed the CoP model as effective in their professional learning, and particularly valued the ongoing opportunities for networking and 'thinking together' with leaders from other schools across sectors (Government, Independent and Catholic). However, most attributed their professional growth to the combination of multiple project activities. These included the visits to other schools, opportunities to engage with the mentors, access to more personalised consultation with Loren Swancutt (consultant), and work on the toolkit resources. One participant, from a school more advanced with inclusive practices, described how the CoP was beneficial in terms of networking, but went on to explain how the opportunity to work individually with the consultant and visit other schools helped them to plan their own next steps:

*When we started talking to Loren, we realised that some of the things she had done... they were further down the track. That's where we wanted to get to. So, she worked with us... sort of did a mud map for a strategic plan with us. So, it was I suppose the nuts and the bolts that sit behind what we do, rather than looking at... what they were doing. So yeah, she was a great support in*



*that sense. And then going to the school to see how that worked, and also didn't work... because there's no such thing as a perfect model.*

The value of the combination of learning opportunities was further reflected in a participants' comment on the online survey:

*The project has provided fantastic opportunities to experience how other schools 'do' Inclusive Education, to hear from students with disability how education has (and hasn't met) their needs, as well as introducing pedagogical approaches, demonstrating them in action etc. Above all, being able to meet with like-minded educators who are passionate about inclusion has provided me with the support and ongoing motivation to ensure this becomes more of a reality in my own site.*

In addition to increasing their own knowledge, there was evidence that participants also increased their capability and confidence to support other educators in their understanding and implementation of inclusive education. Throughout the CoP meetings, online workshops, and interviews, there were instances of discussions, questions and sharing of ideas related to building teachers' capacity for implementing inclusive practices. Given the widely-recognised challenge of changing teachers' attitudes and practices related to inclusion, and particularly teaching students with disabilities, it makes sense that this would be a strong focus of leaders' discussions.

There was some, albeit limited, evidence that participants' increased knowledge and capacity had broadly translated to teachers, leaders and students not directly involved with the ISC project. There were examples of leaders sharing resources and leading discussions with staff at their schools or changing reporting practices. There were some instances reported of youth mentors visiting schools and speaking with staff or student groups, which raised awareness of issues related to inclusive education. For the most part, participants acknowledged plans to 'roll out' key ideas to broader staff in the future, but the strongest evidence at this stage was for professional learning gains concentrated within the group of participating leaders.

### 3. How has the project contributed to changes in practices and/or policies at participating schools?

Analysis of survey data indicated statistically significant changes over the course of the project in *policy and inclusive principles, collaborative planning and support, family engagement, learning environment and inclusive classroom practices*, based on respondents' self-assessments. 68% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that engagement with the project led to changes in their practice.

Participating school leaders reported a range of practice changes specifically relevant to the inclusion of students living with disability. Examples varied between schools, but included a decreased reliance on withdrawing students with disabilities from the regular classroom; greater attention to student voice, including through establishing student inclusion committees; examining the role of teacher aide staff in supporting students with disabilities; exploring models of co-teaching; and reviewing processes surrounding Individual Education Plans (e.g., *"I thought I was pretty pleased with our IEPs and then I thought, actually, we don't even make mention of the children's strengths and interests in their IEP, so*

*we really need to add that in*"). Involvement in the ISC project supported participating schools to review and evaluate their school policies associated with inclusive education. This effort was reflected in discussions during CoP meetings, feedback on CoP surveys highlighting policy revision as a focus of follow-up action, data from interviews with leaders, and work on developing tools for the project website. Some schools updated existing policies or developed new policies, while others identified policy as an area for future attention as part of their progress towards inclusion.

The extent to which these changes in practice were *emergent* as opposed to *embedded* varied across schools, and were most strongly evident in schools who entered the project with strong foundations of inclusive practice already in place, and a clearer sense of their inclusive goals and priorities. That is, a smaller number of schools discussed their involvement of the project as a chance to supplement and enhance the journey towards inclusion they had already begun, such that they were working from an established base of knowledge and a clear, shared vision related to inclusion. In other schools, there was evidence of identifying priorities and making some progress towards inclusive practices.

On the survey, respondents reported changes in practice, but few of these were rated as "Fully in Place" across the school by the end of the project. Data from the interviews with school leaders indicated considerable evidence for Guskey's (2000) first three evaluation levels of *satisfaction with the project, increased learning and awareness, and changes in school-level support and organisation*. However, outcomes at Levels 4 (*application of new knowledge*) and 5 (*student level outcomes*) were less evident. A participants' description of their progress related to developing an inclusive policy was indicative of this increased knowledge and awareness that had not yet translated into practice:

*We had a go at writing a policy, and at that point, it seemed all very straightforward to just go, well we'll have an inclusion... policy. But we haven't really, in hindsight, done enough learning about what we should have in it. I grabbed a few things from some examples that I could find. And so, that really is still – I still don't know that we're ready to perhaps formulate, as a staff, a policy. But it's certainly useful thinking, a starting point for us.*

The findings of limited transfer of new knowledge into embedded practice is consistent with the literature on schoolwide change and effective professional learning. That is, increased awareness and knowledge among staff leading the change process is a critical first step, but for each site it will take a shared vision embraced by the whole school (McMaster, 2013; Sailor, 2015; Tomlinson & Murphy, 2015); strong distributed leadership (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; McMaster, 2015; Miškolci, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2016); targeted, ongoing professional learning for all teachers that is directly linked to their daily work and to student learning (Desimone, 2009; Timperley, Ell, Le Fevre & Twyford, 2020; Van den Bergh, Ros & Beijaard, 2014); and coordinated attention to aspects of school culture (Dybvik, 2004; McMaster, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014) over time to effect lasting change. Each of these components of the change process must be carefully planned and evaluated in its local context.

Most of the aspects noted above were well beyond the scope of the ISC project. However, given the timeframe and the fact that the CoP meetings were attended by only a small number of staff from each participating school, it was promising to note the evidence of changes in practice and policy that did occur at multiple sites. The evidence suggests that the ISC project was most effective in raising awareness about inclusion, encouraging motivation and commitment, providing knowledge and

access to resources, and helping leaders set priorities and lay solid foundations for changes in practice to occur. Whether the emerging changes in practice become embedded and associated with cultural change in the future will depend upon the follow up actions that are embraced and enacted by individual schools.

#### 4. How has the project contributed to increased connections and potential sustained partnerships between all key stakeholders?

It was clear throughout the data that participants found the CoP model particularly valuable in linking them with a strong network of like-minded educators. Participants identified the connections with other schools at a similar point in their journey towards inclusion as a valuable component of the project and reported high levels of satisfaction related to networking with other schools. It was notable that participants highly valued the opportunity to network across schooling sectors (Government, Independent, Catholic), which some have had few opportunities to do, and which helped some participants to understand the constraints and possibilities afforded by different systems. Consistent throughout the data was the sense that participants appreciated time to engage in shared problem solving, and to discuss relevant issues and practices that other schools were considering or trialling. As one leader explained:

*I think from my perspective... being involved in the project, it was more about realising that everyone is on a journey. I think the networking part of it is – was probably the most important part of project to be quite honest, because it gave you the opportunity to tap into like schools. Or to work with schools that might have been working on something similar... But certainly, being able to tap into other people, and just run things past them. Or to work together on things, I think was certainly good.*

There are some signs that engagement of participating schools with aspects of the project may continue following completion of the formal activities. The inclusion ‘book club’—whereby a group of educators is reading and discussing together a recent text on inclusive education—is one example that speaks to potential sustained partnerships. Leaders varied in the extent to which they saw these networks with other schools as ongoing and sustainable. Some schools, particularly those in rural areas, sensed it may be more challenging to maintain networks given time limitations and competing demands, while some more experienced participants suggested that they may be less likely to continue their engagement outside the ISC project. The impact of COVID-19 on schools and the restriction on face-to-face meetings was reported as a challenge for some schools, both in terms of maintaining ongoing engagement with other stakeholders in the project and sustaining motivation.

Participation in the ISC project increased participants’ awareness of resources and information related to inclusive education, including the programs offered by Julia Farr Association and the services and support available through external consultants. This served to broaden the professional networks of the educators involved, beyond those they would typically access within their own schooling sector or existing networks. The website provides the potential for ongoing engagement with the project group, should participants continue to contribute resources as they continue work at their schools.

The opportunity to connect with youth mentors was a unique element of the ISC project. Currently, there is increased attention in the health and disability research literature to co-designing projects and valuing the perspectives of those with lived experience of disability. There are recent examples of this approach being applied in inclusive education (e.g., Hyett et al., 2020), but these remain relatively rare. The ISC project provides a clear example of meaningful engagement of young people living with disability, which enabled important new connections for participating schools. Participants reported valuing the contribution of the youth mentors and what they could offer, and there were multiple examples of mentors contributing to the development of resources, and to conversations and planning in schools. However, the evidence from project leaders, school participants and the mentors themselves suggests that this was an under-utilised resource in the project. A number of schools described future plans to engage the youth mentors, which suggests some potential for these connections to continue.

Beyond engagement with the schools, a number of youth mentors described the opportunity to network with peers within the mentor group, who were similarly passionate about inclusive education, as a catalyst for further collaboration and advocacy. Some indicated that this networking experience had increased their knowledge of inclusive education, exposed them to peer role models, and improved their confidence and skills to be an advocate in the disability and inclusion education space. These connections, formed through the ISC project, have significant potential for sustainability. As one mentor explained:

*Actually, three of us mentors now are working on another project and we just found each other through this one, and so we have been able to continue some advocacy work outside of the project so that's been a strength. Like working with other – not just the schools collaborating, but also us being able to create other change in the inclusive education space.*

The project steering committee, while not a specific focus of the evaluation, represented a clear example of a new, cross-disciplinary and cross-sector partnership. The JFA-PO leaders drew together a group of educators, administrators, advocates, parents, and young people with lived experience of disability, which enabled a governance structure representing multiple perspectives and types of expertise. This element of the program offers an important model for similar projects.

## 5. How has the project contributed to increased opportunities for active participation and feelings of belonging in community for various stakeholders, including individuals living with disability?

The strongest examples related to this outcome came from the experiences of the youth mentors, and the increased attention to student voice on matters of inclusive practice in schools.

The ISC project included young people with lived experience of disability in meaningful and sustainable ways. This group brought their own experiences of living with disability, but many also had expertise, professional experience and emerging leadership skills in the field which were potentially very beneficial for schools. It is unfortunate that the mentors' expertise was not engaged to the extent it could have been. While the opportunity and support structure was offered by JFA-PO through the

project, only a small number of schools took advantage of this. It is acknowledged that interruptions and pressure on schools due to COVID-19 played a role in this outcome. Schools also varied in the extent to which they developed clear plans related to inclusive education, which meant that some did not reach a point where they had specific goals for engaging the mentors. Despite this, there were multiple examples of active participation and meaningful engagement with the mentors, with mutual benefits for schools and the mentors themselves. In particular, where mentors had the opportunity to attend schools and speak with staff and students, there were clear benefits for both parties. This outcome was ably facilitated by Letitia's commitment to shaping the project activities around the needs and goals of all parties, including through the varying levels and types of support she provided to individual mentors, and the tailored opportunities to contribute.

As noted in the previous section, there is evidence that these young people benefited from the chance to network and connect, including with each other, to build their own knowledge and skills, and to contribute their considerable expertise to supporting inclusion in schools.

Student voice is a principle of effective inclusive schools and the ISC project explicitly focused on this area. A number of schools had either developed plans or had begun to implement practices related to increasing student voice in matters of inclusion, and this included providing opportunities for students with identified disabilities to participate more fully in discussions and decision making about inclusive practices. At one school, student leaders led the development of a video in which they captured their peers' opinions and ideas about being inclusive. A participant from another school described a process of seeking feedback from students and parents on inclusive practices. At several schools, the establishment of a Student Diversity and Inclusion Committee was underway, supported by a \$500 grant offered by JFA-PO for this purpose, and through guidance from JFA project leaders and mentors. While schools were in various stages of implementation with this component, and most were at the early planning stages, there was certainly evidence of increased opportunities for active participation, connection to community, and leadership for dozens of students living with disability in participating schools. Although it could be said that, given the resources available to them through the project, participants did not develop this area of practice to the extent they could have, there was still evidence that the outcomes of the ISC project addressed this set of goals.

As described in the previous section, the project steering committee represented an important and genuine opportunity for multiple stakeholders to actively participate in discussion and governance, and to provide leadership in the area of inclusive education, and this includes committee members living with disability.

## 7.3 Recommendations

As highlighted in the previous sections, there is evidence that the ISC project addressed key goals and made a significant contribution to inclusive education in South Australian schools. Based on the evaluation findings and the relevant research literature, the following recommendations are offered in relation to (1) promoting the sustainability and extension of project outcomes in schools, and (2) designing similar or related projects in the future.

1. Consistent with previous research, outcomes of the ISC project lent support to the Community of Practice model as an effective means of professional learning for educators (Desimone, 2009), including across sites. Combined with other project activities, this forum enabled participants to access, share, and develop resources and solve problems related to their daily work. It is recommended that future projects in this space have a similarly applied focus.
2. The ISC project provided a promising example of a model for genuinely engaging young people with lived experience of disability, leading to a range of mutual benefits. A similar approach could be replicated in future projects, with attention to structuring the role of mentors to ensure maximum 'take up' by participants.
3. The ISC project enabled school participants to strengthen and expand their own knowledge of inclusive education. The extent to which this results in increased knowledge and capability among other teachers at the participating schools, with ultimate benefit to students, will depend on leaders' next steps. For future projects involving school leaders, a strong focus on topics related to working with other teachers is likely to be beneficial. Examples could include (but are not limited to):
  - Assessing school inclusivity and identifying priorities.
  - Designing and leading professional learning workshops.
  - Models of effective professional learning for teachers (including coaching, mentoring and establishing effective communities of practice).
  - Addressing teachers' specific concerns related to inclusion of students with disabilities (which can persist even when teachers increase their knowledge and skills related to inclusion (Forlin & Chambers, 2011)).
  - Managing resistance or negative attitudes among staff (or parents).
  - Systematically evaluating teachers' learning and progress related to inclusive practices over time.
4. Learning experiences in school classrooms must be differentiated to address varied readiness levels (current knowledge and skill in relation to task demands), interests and preferences to ensure appropriate challenge and support for individual students to promote learning growth and engagement (Tomlinson, 2014). The same principle applies to groups of teachers and leaders. The ISC project highlighted the need to consider more explicitly differentiated learning opportunities, particularly within the CoP structure, for participants at different levels of experience and expertise. JFA-PO leaders provided scope for participants to take ownership of the project and to drive the agenda of CoP sessions, but this was not always taken up. A more structured approach to differentiation within the professional learning opportunities is likely to be beneficial.
5. The ISC project included participants representing a range of specific roles, and only some of these were school principals or senior leaders. The importance of strong, informed leadership for inclusive education is highlighted throughout the literature (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; McMaster, 2015; Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013). Future projects might consider requiring a senior leader to attend as part of a school team, to attend selected sessions, or to engage in

other targeted opportunities related to the project. Programs such as Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL; <https://www.pall.asn.au>) and the more recent Principals as STEM Leaders provide examples of effective professional learning aimed to promote student outcomes by increasing principals' capacity for instructional leadership.

6. The ISC project was most effective in addressing knowledge and awareness among leaders. For inclusive education to become fully embedded in schools, multiple aspects of school culture, policy and practice must be addressed across different levels and in the context of a whole-school approach guided by a shared vision (Ekins & Grimes, 2009; Read et al., 2015). Future projects in this space could be considered at the school level, focusing on a small number of sites which could become case studies of inclusive education for others to emulate. Approaches such as Design Thinking (Panke, 2019), which emphasise co-design and local contextual factors, may be particularly relevant to this kind of project. Attention to concepts of Implementation Science (Askill-Williams & Koh, 2020) to ensure sustainability of outcomes would also be important.



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## Appendix A

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

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#### Interview Questions: Initial Interview with School Project Leaders

##### Introduction and Background

- Tell me about your school's involvement in the ISC project. How did this come about?
- What are the goals you have for the project, in terms of your school's approach to inclusive education? What are you hoping will be achieved, in the short and longer term?
- What has happened so far with the project at your school? Who has been involved and what has been done?
- How have you worked with the JFA staff and mentors so far?
- Tell me about the resource/s your school is developing for the project website.
- What are the next steps for your involvement in the project?

##### ISC Project Outcome Questions:

1. A goal of the ISC project is to change attitudes and culture within mainstream schools, related to the inclusion of students with disability. Can you tell me about any progress in this area at your school so far? What do you put this down to?
2. Another goal of the ISC project is to help increase knowledge and capacity within mainstream services (schools) regarding inclusive practices. Can you describe any progress in this area for your school so far? What do you think has contributed to this?
3. The ISC project aims to support change in practices and/or policies for participating schools. Can you tell us about your school's progress or opportunities in this area?
4. The ISC project aims to increase connections and potential sustained partnerships between key stakeholders. Can you describe any progress or activities related to this at your school so far?
5. Can you tell us so far how the ISC project has influenced active participation and feelings of belonging in the community for various stakeholders, including individuals living with a disability?

**Is there anything else you would like to share?**

## Interview Questions: Final Interview with School Project Leaders

### Introduction and Background

- Tell me about your school's involvement in the ISC project. How has it developed over the course of the project?
- What goals do you think your school was able to achieve through the project?
- To what extent do you think that the outcomes or progress achieved by your school through this project are sustainable? Why do you think so?
- Are there any gains that you think will be less likely to be sustained over time? Why do you think so?
- How were you able to engage with the JFA staff and mentors through the project?
- Overall, what do you see as the strengths of the project?
- What suggestions do you have for organisations who might develop similar projects in the future, with the goal of improving inclusive practices in schools?
- What are the next steps for your school in terms of continuing to develop inclusive practices?

### The following questions specifically relate to the ISC Project goals:

1. A goal of the ISC project was to change attitudes and culture within mainstream schools, related to the inclusion of students with disability. Can you tell me about any progress in this area at your school? What do you put this down to?
2. Another goal of the ISC project is to help increase knowledge and capacity within mainstream services (schools) regarding inclusive practices. Can you describe any progress in this area for your school? What do you think has contributed to this?
3. The ISC project aims to support change in practices and/or policies for participating schools. Can you tell us about your school's progress or opportunities in this area?
4. The ISC project aims to increase connections and potential sustained partnerships between key stakeholders. Can you describe any progress or activities related to this at your school? Which of these are likely to be sustained after the project ends?
5. Can you tell us how the ISC project may have influenced active participation and feelings of belonging in the community for various stakeholders, including individuals living with a disability?

### Is there anything else you would like to share?

## Interview Questions: Youth Mentors

### Introduction and Background

- *Tell me about your role in the ISC project. How has it developed over the course of the project? How were you able to engage with the JFA staff and educators through the project?*
- *What goals do you think were able to be achieved through the project?*
- *To what extent do you think that the outcomes or progress achieved through this project are sustainable? Why do you think so?*
- *Overall, what do you see as the strengths of the project?*
- *What suggestions do you have for organisations who might develop similar projects in the future, with the goal of improving inclusive practices in schools?*

### The following questions specifically relate to the ISC Project goals:

1. A goal of the ISC project was to change attitudes and culture within mainstream schools, related to the inclusion of students with disability. Can you tell me about your experiences of this as a mentor? What do you put this down to?
2. Another goal of the ISC project is to help increase knowledge and capacity within mainstream services (schools) regarding inclusive practices. Can you describe any progress in this area from your perspective as a mentor? What do you think has contributed to this?
3. The ISC project aims to support change in practices and/or policies for participating schools. Can you tell us about your experiences in relation to progress or opportunities in this area?
4. The ISC project aims to increase connections and potential sustained partnerships between key stakeholders. Can you describe any progress or activities related to this from your perspective as a mentor?
5. Can you tell us, from your perspective as a mentor, how the ISC project may have influenced active participation and feelings of belonging in the community for various stakeholders, including individuals living with a disability?

**Is there anything else you would like to share?**

## Appendix B: Summary of Literature on Measuring Inclusion

*How is Inclusive Education evaluated? Quality, tools etc.*

| Article                                                                                                                                                                              | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
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| Cushing, Carter, Clark, Wallis & Kennedy. (2009). <i>Evaluating Inclusive Educational Practices for Students with Severe Disabilities Using the Program Quality Measurement Tool</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of the Program Quality Measurement Tool (PQMT).</li> <li>- Most tools for measuring the implementation of Inclusive Education in schools are outdated and lack empirical validity, particularly with current evidence-based practices (need for updated tool – as a response the PQMT has been developed)</li> <li>- Evidence states that Inclusive Education in general educational contexts can be of great benefit to the students in multiple social and academic ways.</li> <li>- This study aims to: assess “inter-observer agreement (IOA), test-retest reliability, internal consistency, congruent validity &amp; discriminative validity of the PQMT”.</li> <li>- Twenty-two schools in Tennessee, USA participated (11 middle schools/11 high schools)</li> <li>- PQMT comprises a questionnaire with 44 items assessing policies and procedures, the environment and educational practices directly relating to the students – lower scores mean evidence-based practices are not implemented adequately, higher scores mean evidence-based practices are implemented effectively. (range: 44-220)</li> <li>- “Results indicate that the PQMT is a reliable and valid tool for assessing the quality of inclusive educational services provided to middle and high school students with severe disabilities.” (p.203)</li> </ul> |
| Bills & Howard (2017). <i>Social inclusion education policy in South Australia: What can we learn?</i>                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Examines policy assumptions behind the ‘Flexible Learning Options’ (FLO) program in South Australia (2006)</li> <li>- FLO program classifies students deemed to be ‘at-risk’ and provides alternative learning options either separate from the school environment or a mixture of school-based/community-based experiences</li> <li>- Removal from school environment cannot always be deemed ‘inclusive’ – removal limits the opportunity to achieve SACE and therefore can also be a form of ‘passive exclusion’</li> <li>- Modifications to the FLO program are needed: to better achieve good/socially just inclusion, retention and attainment should be connected to be used as primary measures of program success (rather than JUST retention – as currently used), school/parent/caregiver partnerships are critical, school re-design should be used as an inclusive strategy</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

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| <p>UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2018). <i>Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education</i>.</p>                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'conceptual framework' for the measurement of equality in education</li> <li>- 5 concepts for measuring 'equity in education': <i>meritocracy, minimum standards, equality of condition, impartiality, re-distribution</i> based on the principles of equal opportunities in education for all, regardless of any social, personal, economic, geographic or academic characteristics</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p>Panerai, Zingale, Trubia, Finocchiaro, Zuccarello, Ferri &amp; Elia. (2009). <i>Special education versus inclusive education: the role of the TEACCH program</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conducted over a 3-year period, this study evaluates the effectiveness of three educational programs targeted towards children with severe ASD or severe 'mental retardation' (the TEACCH program based in a residential care facility, TEACCH at home and in mainstream schools and inclusive education in mainstream schooling (non-specific)).</li> <li>- Two assessment tools used – Psycho-Educational Profile-Revised (PEP-R) + the Vineland Adaptive Behaviour Scale (VABS) survey (administered by Psychologists)</li> <li>- Participants – 34 male students with ASD or severe 'mental retardation'</li> <li>- Assessed twice, once at beginning of three-year period, once at end</li> <li>- <i>Results indicate greater effectiveness (statistically significant differences in assessment tool scores with TEACCH residentially and in mainstream school/home when compared with inclusive education in mainstream schooling e.g. programs non-specific to ASD).</i></li> </ul> |
| <p>Sharma, Loreman, &amp; Simi. (2017). <i>Stakeholder perspectives on barriers and facilitators of inclusive education in the Solomon Islands</i>.</p>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Barriers and facilitators of Inclusive Education (I.E.)</li> <li>- Grounded-theory approach – interviews and focus group discussions</li> <li>- 10 stakeholder group participants and 2 individual key informants including parents of children with disabilities, primary and secondary teachers, service providers, representatives from disabled person's organisations and government officials (from the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development)</li> <li>- Barriers = attitudinal, policy and geographical discrimination, lack of government support; Facilitators = awareness, collaboration, infrastructure and resources, teacher education, differentiated instruction, family support</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |

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| <p>Soukakou. (2012). <i>Measuring quality in inclusive preschool classrooms: Development and validation of the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP)</i>.</p>                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited tools exist for assessing quality of inclusive education in early childhood settings</li> <li>- Study purpose: develop and validate the ICP</li> <li>- ICP = Likert scale (agree/disagree with a statement) with 7 points for each item (1 = lowest quality practices, 7 = highest quality practices). 11 items with behavioural descriptions at the classroom level in relation to quality of inclusive practices.</li> <li>- Scale developed by: conducting a review of inclusive practices in the UK and the current literature, develop key areas of practice, generate individual items/statements, submit the scale to experts for review and pilot test the scale in five inclusive settings (classrooms).</li> <li>- Following development of the scale it was validated in 45 inclusive classrooms in the UK (across three countries) – validity determined by using well-used, well-researched measurement tools in addition to the ICP (including the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R), Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E) and Caregiver Interaction Scale (Arnett, 1989).</li> <li>- <i>Results = normal distribution of composite score, internal consistency for items and good factor structure (structural validity), scores correlated with other measurement tools used to show initial construct validity, good level of inter-rater agreement.</i></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <p>Pelatti Dynia, Logan, Justice &amp; Kaderavek (2016). <i>Examining quality in two preschool settings: Publicly funded early childhood education and inclusive early childhood education classrooms</i>.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Investigating and comparing the ‘quality’ (teacher-child interactions &amp; program characteristics) of two different Early Childhood environments – public early childhood education (children from low-income backgrounds) &amp; inclusive early childhood programs.</li> <li>- Participants: 164 classrooms (85 public, 79 inclusive)</li> <li>- Process (teacher-child interactions) &amp; structural quality (teacher education, training, P.D. and program characteristics) evaluated using the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) (Pianta et al.) and three questionnaires.</li> <li>- Process quality assessed using CLASS – systematic observational tool, 3 areas (domains) – emotional support, classroom organisation, instructional support – each comprising of 3-4 sub-areas. 7-point Likert-type Scale. Administered by trained person.</li> <li>- Structural quality assessed using three teacher questionnaires including questions covering: demographics and program characteristics.</li> <li>- <i>Results = public and inclusive ECE descriptive results for process quality consistent with literature (emotional support, classroom organisation – moderate scores, instructional support – lower scores). For structural quality, results compared with NIEER’s Guidelines (National Institute for Early Education Research – nationally recognised in the USA) – most inclusive ECE classrooms met NIEER’s Guidelines, while public ECE classrooms met the areas of teacher-in-service, class size, teacher-child ratio.</i></li> <li>- <i>For process quality, level of teacher education is a predictor, higher numbers of children from low-income backgrounds was interrelated with lower quality for classroom organisation and instructional support (driven by a lack of resources)</i></li> </ul> |

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| <p>Loreman. (2014). <i>Measuring inclusive education outcomes in Alberta, Canada</i>.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review of academic and public literature on measuring inclusive education of 'large scale school systems' (purpose – to develop indicators).</li> <li>- 38 articles included in the review (from database searches), 5 from reference list examinations, 8 from international experts = 51 in total.</li> <li>- Measurement of I.E. based on 3 areas: inputs (things provided to the system), processes (practices at classroom and school level), outcomes (combined results of inputs and processes).</li> <li>- Sub-areas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Inputs</i>: policy, staff P.D. and teacher education, resources and finances, leadership, curriculum</li> <li>- <i>Processes</i>: climate, school practices, classroom practices, collaboration and shared responsibility, supports for individuals</li> <li>- <i>Outcomes</i>: participation, student achievement, post-school outcomes</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |



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| <p>Soukakou, Winton, West, Sideris &amp; Rucker. (2014). <i>Measuring the quality of inclusive practices: Findings from the inclusive classroom profile pilot.</i></p>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Purpose: reliability and validity of the ICP (Inclusive Classroom Profile) in the U.S.</li> <li>- Pilot tested in 51 inclusive preschools (including at least one child with a confirmed disability).</li> <li>- ICP = 12 items including best practices for inclusive education (7-point Likert Scale). Assessed via direct observations of classroom routines, teacher interview and document analysis. Assessors trained to use the ICP prior to implementation following systematic training procedures.</li> <li>- ECER-R (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised) used as a comparison measure with ICP.</li> <li>- Social validity survey (22 items) developed by the researchers to gain feedback from assessors on use of ICP (re: process, usefulness, training).</li> <li>- <i>Results: Inter-rater agreement maintained throughout assessment process and reliability proficiency achievement after training process (85% agreement), initial evidence for the tools use between varying programs (improving construct validity since initial study (Soukakou, 2012)).</i></li> </ul> |
| <p>Ferrara. (2016). <i>The inclusive quality of the school and the teacher's skills: a survey tool.</i> <b>*published in Italian, translated using google translate</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of a survey tools for Teachers to self-assess their use of inclusive practices/inclusion and quality of inclusion at their school.</li> <li>- Survey administered to 200 teachers working in Sicily, Italy to first determine construct validity, final version administered to 370 teachers.</li> <li>- Tool comprised of 42 items under two areas – 1. The inclusive quality of the school, including inclusive cultures, policies and practices and 2. The inclusive skills/practices of the teacher, including responding and accommodating for diversity, supporting students, collaborating with others and professional development. Likert-type survey with numbers 1-5 (1 = lowest level of agreement, 5 = highest level of agreement)</li> <li>- <i>Survey tool was found to be both reliable and valid after pilot administrations, cultural adaptations may be required for cross-cultural uses.</i></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>Ahmmed. (2013). <i>Measuring perceived school support for inclusive education in Bangladesh: the development of a context-specific scale.</i></p>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development of the 'Perceived School Support for Inclusive Education' (PSSIE) scale.</li> <li>- Items developed by: conducting a literature review (28 journal articles selected for final inclusion) – 14 statements created to measure 'perceptions of school support for I.E.'</li> <li>- Likert-type scale, 1-5 points (1 = least agreement, 5 = most agreement).</li> <li>- Content validity determined through review of scale by an expert panel of 12 people (including academics, school principals, teachers, education officers and policy makers and parents of children with a disability).</li> <li>- Statistical analysis (factor analysis and Cronbach's coefficient alpha) was used to determine reliability.</li> <li>- Administered in 293 public primary schools in Bangladesh, Dhaka. 1387 teachers invited to undertake the survey, final number of surveys returned/included = 708.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                       |

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|                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Results demonstrate that the PSSIE is a useful and valid tool for measuring teacher's perceptions of school support for I.E. when applied in the Bangladesh context, limitation = only administered in one area of Bangladesh and not cross-culturally.</i></li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p>Loreman, Forlin &amp; Sharma (2014).<br/> <i>Measuring indicators of inclusive education: A systematic review of the literature.</i></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>*Builds on the review conducted by Loreman (2014)</b></li> <li>- Review of International literature on indicators for measuring inclusive education (academic and public sector).</li> <li>- Search conducted on databases including ERIC, EBSCO, Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete and PsycINFO – 28 articles/documents included in the review.</li> <li>- European model of measuring I.E. = inputs (provided to the I.E. process/school), processes (practices), outcomes (results).</li> <li>- Themes for measuring I.E. emerging from the literature review: 1. Inputs = policy, P.D. and teacher education, resources and finances, leadership, curriculum 2. Processes = climate, school practices, classroom practices, collaboration and shared responsibility, supports to individuals, role of special schools 3. Outcomes = participation, student achievement, post-school outcomes.</li> </ul> |

**Brief Summary of Findings from Literature Review** → *How is Inclusive Education evaluated? Quality, tools etc.*

Many of the tools developed to measure the quality of inclusive education have been created over the last decade, few of them within most recent years. The majority of these tools are in survey form (usually a Likert-type scale) and rely heavily on personal opinion from key-stakeholders (e.g. parents, teachers, policy makers, students). The development on these tools has often relied on re-examination of past evidence and the adaptation of previously used survey tools across contexts. Contention still exists regarding the definition of 'quality' inclusive education (I.E.), for example what it means and what quality in I.E. looks like. To further improve on the measurement and evaluation of I.E., updated evidence-based practice guidelines and conceptual frameworks for quality appraisal are needed.

## Appendix C

### ISC Project Evaluation Survey

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#### **Description**

This survey is part of an evaluation of the *Inclusive School Communities Project* being conducted by researchers from the Research in Inclusive and Specialised Education (RISE) group in the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University.

This evaluation aims to understand the nature and scope of any changes in attitudes, capacity, practices and/or policies related to inclusive practices in participating schools, and to identify the impact of these changes on staff, students, and other community members.

You are invited to participate in a survey as part of this evaluation. Participation is entirely voluntary. Your responses will remain confidential and you will not be individually identifiable in any reports related to this project. The survey will take 20-30 minutes to complete.

In this survey, you are invited to reflect on a range of inclusive practices at your school, and on the extent to which your participation in the project has led to changes in the way you approach your role as an educator.

#### **Your Information**

School Type

- ☐ Secondary (1)
- ☐ Primary (2)
- ☐ R-12 (3)
- ☐ Other (Describe) (4) \_\_\_\_\_

What is your role at the School? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ School Leader (e.g. Principal/Head of School, Deputy) (1)
- ☐ Special Education Coordinator/Learning Support Coordinator (or equivalent) (2)
- ☐ Special/Inclusive Education Teacher: Special Classroom (3)
- ☐ Special/Inclusive Education Teacher: Other (describe) (4)
- ☐ General Education Teacher: Primary (5)
- ☐ General Education Teacher: Secondary (6)
- ☐ General Education Teacher: Other (describe) (7)
- ☐ Educational support staff (e.g. ESO, SSO, teacher aide) (8)
- ☐ Other (describe) (9) \_\_\_\_\_

### Involvement in ISC Project

To what extent have you been involved with the Inclusive School Communities Project at your school  
(Select all that apply)

- ☐ I am on the project leadership team and I have been involved with most or all aspects of the Inclusive School Communities project (1)
- ☐ I have attended compulsory whole-staff meetings, workshops or information sessions related to the Inclusive School Communities project (2)
- ☐ I have received information and resources related to the Inclusive School Communities project (3)
- ☐ I am unsure of my involvement with the Inclusive School Communities project (4)
- ☐ Other (Please specify): (5)

**Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:**

Participating in the Inclusive School Communities Project has increased my **awareness** of issues related to inclusive education.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - ☐ Disagree (4)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
- 

Participating in the Inclusive School Communities Project has changed my **attitudes** related to inclusive education.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - ☐ Disagree (4)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
- 

Participating in the Inclusive School Communities Project has increased my **knowledge** in providing an inclusive education.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (5)

Participating in the Inclusive School Communities Project has increased my **skills** in providing an inclusive education.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - ☐ Disagree (4)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
- 

Participating in the Inclusive School Communities Project has resulted in changes to my **practice** as an educator.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
  - ☐ Agree (2)
  - ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - ☐ Disagree (4)
  - ☐ Strongly disagree (5)
- 

Participation in the Inclusive School Communities Project has led to a more **inclusive culture** at my school.

- ☐ Strongly agree (1)
- ☐ Agree (2)
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ☐ Disagree (4)
- ☐ Strongly disagree (5)

Please provide any additional comments about the extent to which your participation in the Inclusive School Communities project has changed the way you approach your role as an educator.

For each item in the following section, we ask you to offer two ratings.

The first one reflects the extent to which that aspect of inclusive practice was in place at your school **prior to** your engagement with the ISC project.

The second rating reflects the extent to which that same aspect of inclusive practice is **now** in place, following your school's engagement with the ISC project.

This will provide us with a more specific idea of what has changed at your school as a result of engagement with the project.

**Please respond to each of the following items on a rating scale of 1 to 5.**

5- Fully in place (practices are integrated throughout all classrooms and non-classroom school settings and are likely to be maintained long-term)

4- In place (practices are integrated throughout most classrooms and other school settings although may not be maintained long term)

3- Partially in place (practices are evident in some classrooms and /or components of inclusive practices are evident in some classrooms and in some non-classroom settings)

2- Emerging (some components of practice are evident in few classrooms and/or non-classroom settings, or are just beginning to be implemented across the school)

1 – Not in place/no evidence (no or very limited evidence of practices in the school)

0 – Don't know or NA

### **Inclusive Policy and Guiding Principles for Inclusive Education (response options only shown for first item)**

The leadership team (e.g. Principal/Head of School, Deputy Principal, Curriculum or Department Heads) at our school is actively involved in developing, promoting and supporting inclusive policy and practice at this school.



*Prior to starting the ISC project*

- ☐ 5- Fully in place (practices are integrated throughout all classrooms and non-classroom school settings and are likely to be maintained long-term) (1)
- ☐ 4 – In place (practices are integrated throughout most classrooms and other school settings although may not be maintained long term) (2)
- ☐ 3 – Partially in place (practices are evident in some classrooms and /or components of inclusive practices are evident in some classrooms and in some non-classroom settings) (3)
- ☐ 2- Emerging (some components of practice are evident in few classrooms and/or non-classroom settings, or are just beginning to be implemented across the school) (4)
- ☐ 1- Not in place/no evidence (no or very limited evidence of practices in the school) (5)
- ☐ 0- Don't Know or NA (6)

*After completing the ISC project*

- ☐ 5- Fully in place (practices are integrated throughout all classrooms and non-classroom school settings and are likely to be maintained long-term) (1)
- ☐ 4 – In place (practices are integrated throughout most classrooms and other school settings although may not be maintained long term) (2)
- ☐ 3 – Partially in place (practices are evident in some classrooms and /or components of inclusive practices are evident in some classrooms and in some non-classroom settings) (3)
- ☐ 2- Emerging (some components of practice are evident in few classrooms and/or non-classroom settings, or are just beginning to be implemented across the school) (4)
- ☐ 1- Not in place/no evidence (no or very limited evidence of practices in the school) (5)
- ☐ 0- Don't Know or NA (6)

This school has formal published guiding principles for inclusive policy and practice.

The guiding inclusive principles are integrated into our school culture (for example, they are posted in high traffic areas, are regularly reviewed with staff, and are consistently followed by most staff).

The guiding inclusive education principles are reflected in evidence-based practices that are implemented across activities to support students with disabilities.

Please share anything else that would be helpful for us to know about the inclusive policy and guiding principles at your school.

### **Learning Environments**

Teachers at my school establish mutually respectful relationships with all students.

Teachers establish inclusive learning environments where diversity is explicitly valued.

Learning environments are designed so that all students are able to independently access spaces (desks, different learning areas) and materials (e.g. books, AAC devices, schedules, etc.).

Other non-classroom environments are designed so that all students are able to access materials and activities (e.g. bathrooms, eating areas, play areas/equipment) .

Staff use proactive strategies to prevent the occurrence of interfering behaviours (e.g. visual supports, consistent schedule, positioning and seating changes, opportunities for choice making, room arrangement, etc.).

Staff acknowledge students' efforts and positive behaviours informally (e.g. verbal praise) AND formally (e.g. certificates of acknowledgement, awards).

Formal peer social networks are part of the school's core curriculum, for example the school provides instruction to typically developing peers about how to be peer buddies.

Multiple typically developing peers are identified to be peer supports for students with disabilities across classroom and school settings and activities, for example lunch and recess times, library, PE, etc.

Teachers prepare students for transitions or disruptions, expected and unexpected (e.g. changes in routine).

Teacher aides (SSO or ESO) work in a variety of ways and with different groups of students rather than always working one-on-one with a student with an identified disability or with the same small group.

Please provide any additional information or examples regarding changes to learning environments as a result of your school's engagement with the ISC project.

### **Team Process and Problem Solving**

(Whole School Inclusive Support Teams)

This school has a dedicated team with responsibility for supporting teachers and students in addressing classroom and school issues related to inclusive practice.

The support team includes staff who have training and experience in selecting and implementing evidence-based practices for students with disabilities.

Team roles and responsibilities in the inclusive support team are clearly defined to ensure accountability and collaboration.

A data-driven problem-solving process is used during "inclusive support" team meetings as needed.

Team meetings result in written action plans and consistent follow-through to address issues related to inclusive education.

### **Team Process and Problem Solving**

(Individual student support team)

Decisions about the education of students with identified disabilities are made by a multidisciplinary team that consists of all practitioners who provide services to students (e.g. teacher, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, psychologist, special education coordinator).

All team members, families, and students are invited to meetings regarding important programming decisions, such as Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

All team members, families and students are invited to contribute to important decisions and actions.

The roles and responsibilities of all individual support team members are clearly defined and understood by all members of the team.

Teacher aides (SSO or ESO) are considered integral members of the teaching team.

Teachers and teacher aides (SSO or ESO) have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in supporting students with disabilities in the classroom, and this is reviewed regularly.

Teachers work closely with the special education coordinator (or equivalent) and with other specialist staff (e.g. speech therapist, psychologist) to design and monitor learning experiences for students with disabilities.

Team members have easy access to the written goals and objectives on the IEP for each student (classroom and/or online).

Team members have access to information from the most current assessments.

A team-based review system exists to identify students who require individualised strategies or behaviour support plans.

Staff from student's next educational program are invited to contribute to the assessment and transition planning process and assessment results are shared with the student's next education program.

### **Family Engagement and Support**

Family members are active, supported and collaborative participants in their child's education at my school.

Frequent meetings are scheduled with families to support students who have more extensive needs, including students with identified disabilities.

A variety of current and relevant resources and services is available to families through the school.

Parents and carers are regularly provided with information through newsletters, emails, or training explaining critical practices that support students with disabilities including peer support or other relevant parent groups.

School staff provide a welcoming, inviting and non-judgemental culture to all families in which family input and engagement are valued including parenting style and cultural differences.

Teachers regularly communicate with parents of student with disabilities, including to share 'good news' or positive reports about student progress.

### **Inclusive Classroom Teaching**

Teachers at my school regularly differentiate learning experiences to address a diverse range of students in the classroom.

Teachers regularly use pre-assessment to determine student readiness prior to teaching a unit of work.

Teachers incorporate a range of teaching strategies to capitalise on all students' strengths and interests.

Teachers regularly use formative assessment data to design differentiated learning experiences to meet all students learning needs including IEP goals.

Teachers measure and report on student progress (and not only achievement at a point in time) for all students.

Appropriate accommodations or modifications are made across activities and tasks that maximise the student's ability to complete them with minimal prompting from adults such as extra time for completion, steps provided for task completion, tasks broken down into parts.

Teachers create opportunities within classroom activities for students to respond to or initiate communication and to communicate with multiple partners across multiple settings.

Teachers provide opportunities for students to access and engage with content using a variety of modes, resources and ways of presenting their learning.

During the school day teachers plan and implement instruction that directly targets IEP goals for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities are supported to access all areas of the Australian Curriculum.

Please provide additional information or examples regarding what has changed at your school as a result of participation in the ISC project.

## Appendix D

### Survey Data Analysis

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The survey data from all items within the six variables, namely *inclusive policy and guiding principles for inclusive education*, *learning environment*, *whole school inclusive education teams*, *individual students support teams*, *family engagement and support*, and *inclusive classroom teaching* was analysed using SPSS version 25 and transformed for missing data. The results revealed that missing data ranged between 13.6% and 36.4% across the items in the six variables. A few respondents did not provide information about the *inclusive policy and guiding principles for inclusive education* (13.6%, n=3), and *learning environment* (n=3, 13.6%). Major missing data were found in *whole school inclusive education teams* (n=6, 13.6%), *individual students support teams* (n=8, 36.4%), *family engagement and support* (n=8, 36.4%), and *inclusive classroom teaching* (n=8, 36.4%) variables. Missing data were replaced by 9999. This is a major limitation of the analysis of these data given the small number of respondents.

Using SPSS version 25, descriptive analysis was used to calculate frequency and percentages for categorical data such as type of school, role at school and involvement in the ISC project. Also, descriptive analysis was used to calculate the frequency and percentages for each variable, prior to and after completing the ISC project.

An explore analysis was conducted on all formed command variables, prior to and after completing the ISC project. In which normality tests were requested. The formed computed scores for *inclusive policy and guiding principles for inclusive education* and *whole school inclusive education teams* prior to and after completing the ISC project were not normally distributed. Therefore, to compare two related samples that are not normally distributed, it was required to run a non-parametric test such as the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The assumptions of running the Wilcoxon signed-rank test were met. The normality test for the remaining formed computed scores (*learning environment*, *individual students support teams*, *family engagement and support*, and *inclusive classroom teaching* prior to and after completing the ISC project) were within normal ranges. As a result, the assumptions of using parametric tests such as the paired sample t-test were met.