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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Leadership, Inclusion, and Quality Education for All*

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The purpose of this research was to investigate leadership facilitating effective inclusive school practices. Data were collected from leaders at a complex multicultural school perceived by the system and local community as an inclusive school with a focus on quality education. A qualitative case study was used and data were collected over a 6-month period of immersion at the research site. Data included semistructured interviews with the head of special education and the school principal, observations of dialogical and behavioural data described within the lead researcher's reflective journal, and the documented operational structure of the school. The findings include insights into what the principal and head of special education believed inclusion to be, and how these leaders worked with staff to embed inclusive practices. The conclusion drawn from the study is that school leadership for inclusion involves making hard decisions. It is a complex and multifaceted act requiring consciously targeted effort, advocacy, and particular ways of leading. Inclusive practices need reinforcing by frequently articulated expectations, support, and acknowledgement that for all stakeholders inclusion is a constant journey toward a shared vision.

Keywords: inclusion, complexity, multicultural, leadership, quality education

There exists a kaleidoscope of cultural complexity and socio-economic demographics in Australian schools, mirroring similar complexities in other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Banks, 2006; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Catering for the diversity of all learners has become crucial in preparing students for participation in a global society (Owen & Davis, 2011). Schools and teacher education institutions struggle to know how to best cater for varied learner abilities and background experiences impacting learning, behavioural, linguistic, religious, and cultural needs within communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Davies, 2012; McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2013).

There is an expectation that schools will engage students through inclusive practices, and yet the term 'inclusion' has fashioned an ideological rift, mainly related to special education, where some theorists advocate for full inclusion and others for a more needs-based approach (Florian, 2015). Both ideologies have merit. These research findings indicate that a blended approach can work effectively as evidenced in the case study school's complexity and notable high-performance outcomes in nationally benchmarked data.

For the purpose of this study, inclusion is defined as successfully meeting student learning needs regardless of culture, language, cognition, gender, gifts and talents, ability, or background. Within the literature, definitions are blurred and 'special needs' are often referred to when exploring inclusion. Special needs has been linked to disadvantage and disability, but in this paper we define special needs more broadly as the individual requirements of a person and the provision for these specific differences can be considered as catering for 'special needs' (Florian, 2015; Maclean, 2017). The literature review seeks to position this research within the broader research in this field and within the Australian context.

Literature Review

Inclusive education is an 'increasingly contentious term that challenges educators and education systems' (Maclean, 2017, p. 528), which may contribute to its misconception and confused practice. Although international human rights agreements, legislation, and covenants offer explanations of inclusion that feature equity, opportunity, access, and rights, in practice these features are generally viewed in two ways: (a) based on key features, and/or (b) the removal of factors that exclude and marginalise (Forlin, Chambers, Loreman, Deppeler, & Sharma, 2013).

The term *full inclusion* was first applied in the area of special education to describe how all students with disabilities should be included in general classrooms for the entire

school day (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). There has been rigorous debate about whether this approach achieves the most positive learning and social outcomes or whether a more specialised, targeted program implemented in other settings, such as a special education unit or in a special school, is more effective (Maclean, 2017). Similar discussion has occurred regarding students with English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) and whether full immersion in English-only classrooms or specifically targeted instruction and gradual integration is best practice (Courcy, Dooley, Jackson, Miller, & Rushton, 2012). Research suggests that students with special learning needs are frequently snubbed in mainstream classrooms and schools, or teased and bullied, negatively impacting their self-image; reportedly, 70% of children from diverse cultures experience some form of racism in schools, particularly when English is not the home language (Mansouri & Jenkins, 2010).

Boutot and Bryant (2005) suggest that social integration is visible to other students (social impact); it involves being someone with whom other students desire to pass time (social preference) and being a part of a group of friends that devote time together (social network affiliation). Encouragingly, in Australia and internationally, much debate has centred on inclusion being about what is in the best interests of each individual student based on key features of participation, integration, and inclusion, as well as the removal of factors that exclude and marginalise (Queensland Government, 2016). Australian state education departments have extended this inclusion focus to encompass meeting the diverse needs of the individual student whether that student has a disability, a learning difficulty, a behavioural issue, or other broader learning needs such as second language learning. Koster, Nakken, Pijl, and van Houten (2009) assert that an analysis of literature exposes four key themes essential to inclusion, these being 'friendships/ relationships, interactions/contacts, perception of the student … and acceptance' (p. 118), all of which provide insight into what

inclusion should look like, feel like, and sound like within classrooms and school communities.

The focus on inclusion in Australia is both at the whole-school and in-class support level (Forlin et al., 2013). Operationally, at the whole-school level this involves adjustments to policies and practices, funding support, the utilisation of supportive structures, and access to equitable learning opportunities. The in-class support level of inclusion involves understanding individual learning needs and developing a suitable individual learning plan. This level of support usually involves differentiating curricula, at times providing alternative curricula, utilising appropriate pedagogy for student engagement such as universal design, and providing appropriate access to alternative resources (Forlin et al., 2013).

In this paper we take the stance that for a school to be truly inclusive, inclusion must be a way of thinking, a philosophy of how educators remove barriers to learning and value all members of a school community (McLeskey et al., 2013). The authors suggest that to remove barriers to education and deliver high-quality outcomes, schools require inclusive practices that embrace all students as valued affiliates of the school community, with inclusion as a vision, operationalised at the school-community, whole-school, and individual level. Inclusion refers to the right of an individual to actively participate and attain equity through engagement in all facets of daily life (Hyde, Carpenter, & Conway, 2013). The concept is founded in human rights principles and is evident in international literature, policies, and documents (Hyde et al., 2013)). It is this broad concept of inclusion that was embraced by the school community in which this study took place.

The question raised was, *how do school leaders at a large complex multicultural school promote and embed inclusive school-wide practices that provide high-quality education?* To help answer this question we sought to determine whether the action of embedding inclusive educational practices requires a different way of leading.

A school culture that prioritises the building and maintaining of positive relationships is fundamental to the establishment of an inclusive school (Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 2017). With this in mind, leadership style and practice facilitate the creation of an inclusive school culture. Both help to create the basic norms and assumptions taken for granted by all those within the school community (Schein, 1992). The strong correlation between leadership, in its various guises, and school culture is well documented (Abawi & Oliver, 2015; Fullan, 2014; Piotrowsky, 2016; Spicer, 2016; Turan & Bektaş, 2013). Further to this, the link between distributed leadership practices (Spillane, 2005) and the effective implementation of inclusive school practices has also been established (Miškolci, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2016; Mullick, 2013). It is also recognised that positional school leaders must have a philosophy and mindset that seeks to build distributed leadership capacity across their school, empowering others to lead (Morgan, 2008; Ross, Lutfi, & Hope, 2016). This study therefore concentrates on the role of the designated leaders in establishing a culture of inclusion, rather than exploring all aspects of leadership practice emergent from the data.

Social justice leadership can be seen to be based on forming meaningful relationships that encourage socially just teaching practices and policies, promoting inclusion, and seeking equity for all students (Shields, 2004). The term has its foundation in theology (Hudson, 1981) and social work (Koerin, 2003). Researchers contend that social justice has become a major concern for educational practitioners of the 21st century due to the spotlight shone on the achievement and economic disparity of underserved populations (Berkovich, 2014; Furman, 2012; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks 2009; Shields, 2004). At its heart, social justice leadership embraces responsibility for fashioning improved schools and well-educated students while concurrently aiding the public good (Jean-Marie et al., 2009).

There is a strong emotional dimension to social justice leadership (Zembylas, 2012). Jansen (2006) explains this in terms of heightened emotional tensions that leaders experience

in the struggle for equity and justice and the importance of having a strong philosophy or moral imperative (Hargreaves, 1998). This concept of promoting and embedding inclusive practices through social justice leadership, where teachers are involved in exploring their classroom practices, emerges strongly in the context of this study.

School and Researcher Context

The study took place over a period of 3 years (2015–2017) in an Australian primary school with an enrolment of approximately 650 students. About 2% of students were in Care of State, 8% identified as being Aboriginal and/or Torres-Strait Islander, 9% had a disability, and 46% of the student population were new arrivals (within the last 2 years) to the country with English as a second language or dialect (many of whom were refugees). Within this 46% (approximately 300 students) are diverse and culturally rich backgrounds with 25 different languages being spoken. Approximately 50% of the student cohort changed every second year as families either returned to their country of origin when visas expired or they relocated elsewhere.

Few schools in regional Australia have such a large proportion of their students as refugees with English as a second language, and yet regardless of this complexity, the national systemic data (e.g., My School website; National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN] data) indicated that the school was performing well with good progression for individual students in relation to national benchmarks. In 2016, NAPLAN data taken from the Australian My School website, shows how this school performed against like schools (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.). Figure 1 shows the 'student gain' data on student improvements in reading and numeracy achievement from Year 3 to Year 5.

<<PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

As researchers, we were involved with a large research team engaged in a multisite project into inclusive school practices for which ethics approval from the University of Southern Queensland (HREC H14REA020 and H16REA258) and the Queensland Government Education Training and Employment (Trim Reference 14/191186) was gained. This school was part of that larger research project, but further research was conducted at this site because the authors wanted to know how this school had managed to embed inclusive school practices and obtain high-quality education with this complex clientele. This paper captures specifically the leadership partnership of the school principal who had been at the school for 10 years, and the head of special education (HOSE) who had been at the school for 3. Both provided their written consent for the research to take place and reviewed their transcript data, helping us to validate that we had accurately captured each leader's voice.

In conducting this study, the lead author based herself in the school for a 6-month period (2015), working with the teaching staff in the embedding of their school-wide pedagogical framework (Conway & Abawi, 2013) adds an in situ perspective documented as weekly journal entries. Both researchers facilitated semistructured participant interviews and then explored the case study data seeking indicators of themes that would help answer the following question: *How — within this school context — do school leaders promote and embed inclusive practices that provide high-quality education?*

Method and Design

Given the nature of the research question, an explanatory qualitative case study was selected as the research method because a phenomenon, in this case inclusive practices, was occurring in the bounded context of one school (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and the intent was to develop a better understanding of the case (Stake, 1995). This case study, based on a constructivist paradigm, 'recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of

meaning but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity' (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 10).

Maxwell's interactive model of research design (2012) provided the basis for understanding the interrelated elements that shaped the case study: methods, goals, conceptual framework, research questions, and validity. Validity was pursued by aligning methodology, tools, and techniques with the research question and data validity by participant confirmation of data interpretations.

Firsthand observation and participation over a 6-month period enabled the lead researcher to document 'human perception and experiences, consciously using own perceptions in the process' (Mabry, 2008, p. 215). The lead researcher attended all of the leadership team, pedagogical, staff, year level, and school-wide positive behaviour meetings that occurred during the 6 months.

The analysis process consisted of the four specific steps referred to by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2007):

1. generating units of meaning;

2. classifying, categorising, and ordering these units of meaning;

3. structuring narratives to describe the interview contents; and

4. interpreting the interview and observational data.

Observations and transcript analysis of the recorded interviews identified salient points that were grouped together into three themes. As described by Baxter and Jack (2008), each data source was a piece of the 'puzzle', with each piece contributing to our understanding of the whole phenomenon and thus to the answering of the research question. To complete the puzzle, an explanatory model was developed from the data to provide insight into how inclusion can be practised and promoted in a way that ensures high-quality education for all students.

The Findings

The three key themes identified from the data are illustrated with extracts detailing the 'practice' component of each. The first theme captured the philosophy of inclusion and how the principal enrolled others as leaders of an inclusive school vision, specifically the HOSE. The second theme outlined the specific leadership structures developed to foster inclusion with a clear focus on high-quality education. The third theme captured deliberate ways of working and the enactment of social justice leadership.

Theme One: A Philosophy Focused on Inclusion

The principal was explicit about the need for the whole community to understand and support inclusion. He explained that the school, as an organisation, had deepened its capacity to understand inclusion, moving from automatically including every student into a mainstream class upon enrolment, to in-depth consideration and discourse about what context could best met the student's specific needs. He stated,

> *Students were all, at one point, fully included in classes [i.e., placed in mainstream classes], but we have now moved to inclusion in the form that best meets students' needs and achieves the best outcome for every child.*

The HOSE supported this explaining that the process for class placement of students considered each student's individual needs while expecting teachers to be tolerant of student diversity. For some students, needs could best be catered for in a small group environment (e.g., language intensive classroom, special education unit) so they did not feel overwhelmed and additional supports could be implemented. Such placements were fluid with students then transitioning into mainstream classes when they understood how to interact with teachers, peers, and follow school routines like eating lunch at the appropriate time. He espoused that

> *a strength of the school is tolerance for diversity, which bodes well for inclusion. If you are tolerant you will include people and try to cater for their difference.*

The principal articulated that his philosophy of inclusion clearly linked to Koster et al.'s (2009) four key essentials:

> *Inclusion is a journey. It is about valuing and accepting individuals and their uniqueness and providing equitable access to all areas of school life.*

> *Difference is an everyday part of life … Once people see it is okay to have students with disabilities in the classroom, students who don't speak English yet, it is just part of what we do, they don't stress over it, they just accept it and get on with the core job of educating every child. Acceptance and tolerance grow. (Principal)*

The principal went on to explain that inclusion was about what best met the student's needs:

> *Some of our children can't function in a big classroom and they prefer the smaller group where they are better catered for, but this is a balance, about the needs of specific children.*

Relationships with people were highlighted as a focus area for employing energy and effort. The principal outlined how forming trusting relationships was dependant on caring:

> *You have to double loop with everyone, don't back them into a corner, try and walk beside them, be in the learning journey with them. Try and link in different ways, not just the most obvious (first loop); you need to link back in with the person and their interests (the second loop). They need to know you care.*

The principal expected staff to invest energy into forming positive relations with the school community to achieve quality outcomes:

> *The stories that our children bring of hardships and crisis from being in refugee camps are horrific. Here we want to provide a safe and supportive place where students and staff want to come. When people want to be here then they will learn. We focus on clear and common goals as shown in our school-wide positive behaviour goals and rules, and this fits everyone.*

The principal proactively worked with the people who shared in his philosophy and modelled inclusive practices. He empowered key staff members with decision-making responsibilities, developing distributive leadership capacity (Mullick, 2013; Spicer, 2016; Spillane, 2005) while ensuring they either had or acquired expert knowledge enabling them to scaffold the principles of inclusion for others:

> *If you have the right people in place, and empower them, they will have the practices to handle the challenges. Practices include teamwork, and collaboration … Our focus is on the teaching, the learning, and the journey.*

The HOSE also spoke about inclusion in terms that highlighted a focus on students with special educational needs:

> *My philosophy is around supporting all children who need it. If we can manage the space and the supports, then it is done. It is not cut and dried about who fits what category of government funding or disability verification, it is about what kids need.*

The HOSE explained how this philosophy was embedded and reinforced through daily practices:

> *There is a huge focus on tolerating differing cultures and respecting different religions. The school is very specific about our school values and what we expect of our community members as people in an Australian culture. Teachers talk about this every day and it links in with our embedded school-wide positive behaviour supports.*

The shared philosophy of these leaders emerged: every child had a right to learn and every child is capable of learning and should be given the opportunity to actively participate in all facets of school life. This description links to what the literature terms as social justice leadership, a preparedness of leaders to follow their moral compass through instigating and facilitating moral dialogue. It includes a focus on 'high academic achievement and affirming relationships with students from all background and ability levels as well as keeping one's epistemological awareness, value orientation, and practice toward social justice' (Turhan, 2010, pp. 1359–1360). This focus became what Schein (1992) would see as the underpinning layer of an organisation's culture, the basic norms and assumptions embedded within the school.

To encourage the school community to promote inclusion and equity, staff were expected to model appropriate inclusive behaviour (e.g., greeting people in a welcoming manner such as a smile or a hello) and recognise and reward students demonstrating such behaviour:

> *The behaviour that is rewarded on a daily basis and on a weekly school-wide basis is often linked to our values around inclusion. (HOSE)*

Journal Extract — Section on Inclusive Behaviour:

> *There is such a strong inclusive feeling with almost all parents, teachers and students that I have seen today, smiling, saying hello, or stopping to chat. It feels nice.*

Both the principal and the HOSE clearly outlined their shared philosophy of inclusion referring to school posters, displays, and documents providing insight into how they grew a shared inclusive philosophy in their school.

Journal Extract — Section on Philosophy:

> *The inclusion philosophy is visible in a multitude of school-wide documents (e.g., School Vision; School-Wide Pedagogical Framework; School Improvement Plan; School Operational Plan; and School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support Document) where values of tolerance, forming positive relationships with care for others, and a focus on individual student needs are forefronted along with an expectation of high quality education.*

> *The school uses the symbol of a tree where the trunk is diversity and the main branches are community, achievement, learning, and relationships, all leading to many futures, shown as leaves of varying colours. This symbol was sighted on all formal documents, in all classrooms, on the staff table, in the administration foyer, along with the vision – 'Grow with knowledge, many paths, many futures'. The definitions of guiding principles were on display. For example:*

> *'**Diversity** is the differences between individuals or groups of people in age, cultural background, ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, physical and intellectual abilities, socio economic background and life experience. For our community, diversity is central, like the trunk of our tree from which branches community, achievement, learning and relationships'.*

Theme Two: Deliberate Distributed Leadership Structures That Encourage Both Inclusivity and High-Quality Education

With a clear vision for inclusion the principal led and empowered others to lead, establishing structures (i.e., processes and procedures) that encouraged inclusivity. These were developed, monitored, critically reviewed, and changed according to data-based identification of both need and high-quality descriptors:

> *People need to understand what we do here and what their role is … The key is to empower the right people and listen to their input when they suggest changes (including hard ones) … Also it involves the tough decisions of 'shutting down or moving on' those that do not share an inclusive philosophy. (Principal)*

> *Our leadership team has come at the concept of inclusion with different ideas and thoughts, so we often use feedback as a form of informing our practice. (HOSE)*

Journal Extract — Section on Shared Leadership:

> *The Principal and HOSE both spoke about fluid leadership team that extended to people who either wanted to buy into the leadership of an aspect that they felt they had both knowledge and skills in and/or were invited in by the more formal designated leaders.*

The principal had a clear understanding of how to build capacity within the school community forming specific meeting structures to assist (e.g., Special Needs Committee, Leadership team, School-Wide Positive Behaviour Support Committee, English as a Second

Language or Dialect group). The purpose of each meeting was explicitly articulated, and

known, and the composition of the committees or groups was deliberate, with participation a

key expectation.

Journal Extract — Section on Capturing Viewpoints:

> *Everyone was encouraged to provide input, not just teachers but teacher aides and others, in meetings. This was modelled extensively. Targeted turn-taking to speak was practised in meetings.*

> *Questions followed a pattern:*

> - *What do you think? Talk me through how that will look for you?*

> - *How will that look for the student?*

Leaders of the various groups and committees were deliberately chosen (sometimes

through subtle encouragement or persuasion) based upon their high level of competency,

communication skillset, and passion for inclusion:

> *My job as a principal is to make sure everyone is working towards the same direction.... It is often about having the right people in the right places. (Principal)*

The principal also explained the importance of empowering these stakeholders with the skills

necessary to deliver socially just and inclusive practice:

> *You need to know your people — who you can empower that has the same value for human life, the right for inclusion and justice. Provide these people with the skills, capabilities, and support to nurture and grow what is needed. That is real leadership.*

As a key stakeholder, the HOSE indicated that defined roles facilitated the translation

of the shared vision through the advocacy of experts. The school community work on the

development of the big picture for the school ensured that all stakeholder groups had input.

The principal diagrammatically represented this 'big picture' and this then provided the

conceptual map of collective intent. The HOSE identified the importance of this for creating

expectations regarding inclusivity and in adopting a team approach that valued tolerance:

> *Basically, the big picture is developed by the principal [visual diagram] and we all work to that. Our leadership team meet, and each person has a specific role and tasks they are expected to perform.*

The HOSE also explained how broader networks could be drawn on to support students while also working to engage families as key stakeholders:

> *The English as a second language team focuses on targeted support for students and also engagement of the families in the school and broader community. (HOSE)*

These networks of stakeholders were drawn together in both structured and flexible ways targeted at supporting both the team and the students:

> *We offer high levels of scaffolded support that is both structured and flexible depending upon the needs of each individual student and their teacher. It is a team that is implementing the support for children, not just a classroom teacher by themselves. (HOSE)*

A significant aspect of creating socially just and inclusive leadership structures was the building of relationships that fostered ongoing communication:

> *Our focus is on building relationships and communicating in a way that builds understanding. We understand what our purpose is here and we all use our skills to contribute to this, to ensure our culture is accepting, inclusive. (Principal)*

The HOSE agreed: '[T]here are good relationships between teachers and administration [Leadership team] and between teachers and parents and students. There is a focus on the core needs of every child'. The principal described how this worked to support teachers in their day-to-day practice:

> *Teachers know that we care and that we are interested in what is happening in classrooms, and how we help them to professionally develop. We invest in expertise.*

This ongoing investment in staff also meant that values could be embedded and sustained.

Theme Three: Deliberate Ways of Working: Social Justice Leadership and the Expectations of Leaders

The third theme captured deliberate ways of working and the enactment of social justice leadership incorporating functional pathways (e.g., governance, strategic planning, formal and informal meeting structures) and quality cycles (e.g., regular planned review of teaching and learning) through which socially just leadership was enacted.

Both the principal and the HOSE outlined how staff needed to bring a willingness and a commitment to embed inclusive practices:

> *We are about working together to best support our students. How can we engage them in a meaningful learning journey that makes a difference to their life outcomes?... My job is to make sure that they [the teachers] have the skills and resources to do it. (Principal)*

> *It is a 'we can do this attitude' that teachers have had to adapt to because of the huge cultural diversity. There is a shared language throughout the school — an expectation that we are a team. (HOSE)*

The principal and the HOSE actively used feedback (e.g., from teachers, parents, and students) and enquiry to deal with the challenges often associated with inclusion (e.g., disruptive behaviour) and develop shared commitment. Both the principal and the HOSE espoused that 'We are all in this together, how are we going to make it work?'. The principal employed both functional pathways (governance, strategic planning, policies and procedures, programs, professional development, and an inclusive school environment) and quality cycles (reviewing, planning and resources, and integration and support) as a means of what he termed as cultural comprehension. The quality cycles were part of formal system reviews (e.g., school annual report) and internal review processes where specific questions (e.g., How does this link to our school vision and values?) formed part of the dialogue in committee meetings (e.g., year level, staff, parent and community, student council, and student support meetings):

> *Every group in our school has some background that we need to understand and learn to live with, whether they be Middle Eastern groups, refugee groups … Our focus is on belonging, on weaving new experiences into their present time to make experiences better. This is cultural comprehension and this relates to everyone, not just one particular group … It is about competency, capacity, and awareness and this is for everybody, for any group whether it be a disability group, racial, or cultural.*

A clear process for capacity building was in place. The leadership team, led by the principal, worked with external facilitators to collaboratively develop the school's vision and school-wide pedagogical framework (Conway & Abawi, 2013) based on the context-specific delivery of a curriculum planned to improve student and teacher learning.

Teachers used multiple datasets (e.g., report from another school or specialist, national systemic testing data) or acquired data over time (e.g., classroom testing,

observations) to inform their practice, as part of the school's quality review cycle. The data were used to inform teaching practice, and teachers were taught how to mine and analyse data to determine targeted, student-specific, pedagogical planning.

There were also a variety of supports available to teachers including expert collaborations with the HOSE, school support staff, and other specialists (e.g., English as a second language or dialect; visiting advisory teacher for hearing). Both leaders spoke about how they used and shared data to drive their own and the performance of the school, staff, and students. The HOSE commented that

> *data is anything we have that helps us understand the child. This includes classroom data of observation and tests, NAPLAN data [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy], behaviour records, information that parents or specialists may have supplied, and the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data [NCCD] for disability.*

The principal included the feel of the school environment as important data that signified successful application of social justice principles:

> *You can see if people are happy, a smile on their face, classroom open and welcoming, students engaged in activities. This is data, it tells you about the culture of the place, and that is an important story.*

These data also informed leadership planning and practice in this complex environment:

> *There are loads of individualised student plans across the school, evidence-based plans, and support plans tied together with data. As head of special education, I focus on the needs of all the children and the data informs me of those needs. (HOSE)*

The HOSE also explained how the information gleaned from the data worked across all levels of the school to create functional pathways and quality cycles:

> *The focus is on the whole school, on classes and on individuals. We look at the three levels. Specifically, the administration team look at the data of the whole school, then of the classes, then identified groups of students and their needs, including their social emotional needs.*

The collection of data was key to informing the quality cycles through which individualised and holistic programs for students were created:

> *Firstly, the holistic needs of the students as a whole group are considered, then, together with the relevant staff, the needs are catered for at the individual level. I then meet with the class teachers so that we can discuss the child and negotiate what plan best links to each child within the constraints that are imposed (e.g., budget and human resources). (HOSE)*

Other quality cycles included provision for reviewing teaching performance. The leadership team worked regularly with teachers to provide them with feedback to reflect on their practice and identity. The review also provided feedforward supports.

> *All members of our leadership team are regularly in classrooms, providing explicit feedback to teachers about school key focus items such as literacy teaching. Teachers voice their professional learning needs — the process is learning focused where we also give positive recognition for a job well done. We try and use current credible research to inform our practice, not just the favoured research pushed down our throats by a controlling system but research with relevance to our context. Then we ask lots of questions like 'why', 'what', 'when', and 'how' questions. We think about how and why program/strategy or innovation could work in our context. What are the possibilities, the enablers, or blockers? (Principal)*

This process resonates with what Crowther (2011) termed as 'pedagogical deepening' where 'the facilitators of the schools' developmental work are themselves committed, practice orientated, contextually sensitive, and highly professional' (Crowther, 2011, p. 105).

Providing meaningful resources for students was an additional quality cycle that the school employed to engage students and to promote the culture of inclusion. The HOSE drew on an example of a resource used for students with autism spectrum disorder:

> *The school had a long history of working with students with autism spectrum disorder. The utilisation of visual supports such as visual timetables is embedded practice because we know this is effectual for engaging students.*

Both the principal and HOSE had a clear shared vision, and although each led in their own way and in their own spaces, together they emphasised that an ongoing dialogue and process of negotiation needed to occur to ensure that resources were best placed to support the individual needs of students:

> *I meet with the individual teachers and suggest possible types of plans I think we need, and I invite their input into what they think is needed. (HOSE)*

The principal explained that

> *we all have elements of inclusion that are core to our job with each person doing this in their own way. As long as what they are doing fits in with the overall vision of this school, then people are encouraged to lead in their own way to achieve the goal.*

> *For us to have the flexibility around funding is important as we need to support children in need at their time of need and currently this is what we do. (Principal)*

Discussion

One key methodological finding that emerged was the depth of additional understanding and interpretations that enhanced the study because the lead author was able to ask more specific questions as a result of her lived 6-month experience in the school at the time the study took place. Observations made during the lead author's time in the school enabled her to ask the 'how and why' questions that surfaced tacit knowledge for the participants. The second author specifically noted that the lead researcher could observe and then ask for explanations around these practices if participants had not initially spoken of them.

Several key leadership and school improvement findings emerged, primarily the synergy between the way in which personal leadership philosophy, carefully constructed distributed leadership structures (Spillane, 2005), organisational ways of working, and clarity of vision were enacted. Social justice practice rather than rhetoric was the key, and leaders made conscious explicit choices when endeavouring to create a socially just school. The leadership team envisaged, modelled, embedded, and reflected upon how they, as an educational community, were meeting and could further meet the needs of their diverse student cohort using evidence to drive decision-making. This approach echoed the types of social justice leadership attributes and intent suggested in the literature (Berkovich, 2014; Theoharis, 2007).

One strong feature that was noted was overt intolerance by the leadership team towards underperformance if evidenced in teachers' classroom data and pedagogical practice or a visible lack of commitment by any to the school vision. The literature highlights that social justice leadership encourages three specific elements: socially just teaching practices and policies, promoting inclusion, and equity for all students (Marshall, 2004; Shields, 2004). This research builds on these three elements with examples of practice.

The principal was able to clearly articulate a philosophy and a vision to embed inclusion across the school: 'Inclusion is a journey, it is about valuing and accepting individuals and their uniqueness and providing equitable access to all areas of school life through a process of enactment'. He also made clear that inclusion was *not* about tolerating or rationalising poor performance but assertively espousing that it had no place in the school. Research by Goldhaber, Lavery, and Theobald (2015) supports the importance of having quality teachers for already disadvantaged students so that the equity gaps do not broaden and increase disadvantage.

Structures that encouraged inclusion were created that included the formation of specific groups and committees led by skilled educators. Expectations of being inclusive were clearly established and guidelines for behaviour clearly outlined, as were practices to recognise the inclusive behaviour, hard work, and achievement of students and staff.

Deliberate ways of working were used by the school staff to embed inclusive practices and structures in a simultaneous three-pronged manner:

1. the development, modelling, and voicing of the shared school vision with a whole-of-school foci on core commitment to social justice;

2. establishing functional pathways with school structures that enabled a team approach to collaboratively working together to deliver high-quality education; and

3. quality assurance cycles focused on turning data into pedagogy; building knowledge and understanding of inclusion; skill development relevant to the profession; ensuring socially just teaching practices and policies; and engaging staff in critical self-reflection on beliefs, values, expectations, practices and attitudes.

Modelling of expectations by the leadership team was evident, with leaders asking questions like, 'How is inclusion evidenced in our school plans, staff actions, and school community behaviours? What are we doing to grow it?'. These focus questions were modelled in teaching and learning meetings, staff meetings, behaviour management meetings, special needs meetings, and in school planning documents.

Implications

The educators in this study added value to the learning of all students by creating a culture of inclusion, empowering groups of people to interact and cooperate meaningfully as one school community. Figure 2 presents a model showing the interrelationship between the various factors that emerged indicating the contextualised nature of the social justice leadership style evidenced within the case study school.

<<PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>>

The model captures the roles that leadership in partnership with clearly articulated expectations and understandings plays in establishing the foundation of an inclusive school. For this foundation to be solid and sustainable over time, three enablers drive action: articulating an inclusive philosophy linked to a vision of inclusion and a strong sense of moral purpose, enacting the rhetoric and turning it into practice, and developing flexible structures and mindsets allowing the needs of all students to be met. At the next layer, varied voices are actively sought and listened to, expert knowledge is valued, and leaders and staff work in partnership within shared (distributed) leadership structures designed to make inclusion 'work' at every level. The artefacts that support inclusive practices and structures are the well-documented school vision, quality assurance cycles, functional pathways, and context-specific school-wide pedagogical practices.

Conclusion

Findings highlighted how social justice leadership was enacted to both embed inclusive practices and achieve high-quality educational outcomes for all students. The three-pronged enablers of philosophy, flexible structures, and enactment (turning rhetoric into practice) are essential to the effective outcomes that emerged due to the quality of the leadership within this school. The school community embraced diversity and operated as a cohesive school founded on the shared assumption that all students can learn. Is inclusion through contextualised social justice leadership a possible education reform strategy for the future? We believe it is!

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FIGURE CAPTIONS.

Figure 1. Student Gain in Reading (left) and Numeracy (right) in Comparison With Schools Across Australia at the Same Starting Point, With the Case Study School Being the One on top, the Darker of the Two Lines (NAPLAN Data, My School website).

Figure 2. A Model of Contextualised Social Justice Leadership for Embedding Inclusive Practices and Structures.