

Independent Evaluation of Inclusive School Communities Project

Summary of Interim Report



This is a summary of the interim report on the independent evaluation of the Inclusive School Communities Project by the Research in Inclusive and Specialised Education (RISE) group in the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University. The Inclusive School Communities Project, delivered by JFA Purple Orange (JFA-PO), is funded through an Information Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant from the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA). For more information about the project, visit the website inclusiveschoolcommunities.org.au or contact the Project Leader letitiar@purpleorange.org.au

Evaluation Details

The primary focus of the evaluation is 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.

The evaluation is based on a mixed-methods research design drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data across multiple phases of data collection. The interim report is based on data from the following sources:

- Ongoing consultation with JFA-PO project staff
- Initial project documents
- Observation of Communities of Practice (CoP) meetings
- Initial interviews with school leaders from Round 1 participating schools
- Feedback surveys from CoP meetings, provided by JFA-PO staff

Summary of Interim Findings

It should be noted that this is a brief summary of initial evaluation findings, presented as broad emerging themes, as appropriate to an interim report. A number of key themes have emerged from the initial data analysis, and these will be explored further by the RISE group as the evaluation progresses:

1. Positive engagement with the project

There is a clear general sense that participating school delegates are positively engaged with the project and its key themes around inclusive practices and policies. This could reflect a positive change in attitudes or a reorienting of priorities to focus on the area of inclusion.

2. Enhanced awareness and understanding of inclusion in education

School delegates' key learnings from the project to date are strongly connected to the broad concept of inclusion. There is evidence of questioning and reconceptualising their initial understandings of inclusive education, deepening their engagement with the concept of inclusion and its importance, and reflecting in a targeted way on specific practices and policies in their own settings in relation to this developing understanding of inclusion. For example:

"I think it's actually the awareness building that's been important. Going into the project we probably thought... 'we're a really inclusive school. We do all these things'. But actually, going through the process we're realising some of our practices are not inclusive at all. So, it's being open to saying, 'these are the areas we need to improve in'... I think that was important for us—that shift in mindset between, 'we're really inclusive', to 'actually, let's deeply examine what we're doing'. And there's definite room for improvement".

"I thought that I had a lot of knowledge but I have learnt so much through the project, through people's toolkits, through the discussions with other schools and getting to see other schools. It's just been...a great project".



3. High level of satisfaction with CoP component

Overall, there is evidence of a high level of satisfaction and positive feedback in relation to the CoP component of the project. The participating school delegates clearly value the opportunity to develop connections and share experiences with staff from other schools, including across sectors (government, independent, Catholic):

“Our involvement with the project has taught us you need to have that collaboration, and that’s why it’s worked so well. We’re getting together, we’re sharing stories, there’s no judgement. It’s about ‘this is where we currently are. And these are the next steps for us”.

This format appears to be particularly beneficial in regard to improving knowledge about inclusive practices, helping school delegates maintain motivation and momentum during the project, and providing the opportunity to engage with leaders from other schools in a supportive way:

“The communities of practice, and the access to research, and the conversations with the other schools has been fantastic. Being able to collaborate with schools in [other sectors] has been a highlight, because we just don’t get a chance to do that often”.

Against a backdrop of overall positive feedback, there is some variation in satisfaction across meetings (depending on speakers and topics) and a strong preference for more time for open discussion and opportunities to more deeply engage with some topics through a pared back agenda. Some leaders have also expressed interest in a stronger focus on how to enact change in culture and practice in specific education contexts, which is consistent with their goals.

4. Emerging examples of changes in practice

To date, the impact of the project is most evident in participating school delegates developing understandings and engagement with the concept of inclusion and sincere motivation to encourage and enhance inclusive practice. There is a clear intention among school delegates to influence policy and practice at their schools, including to engage other staff in the project and enhance educators’ capacity for inclusive practices, while considering more structural changes to practice. For example, school leaders explained that:

“[we] have done a lot of reflecting on things that we do... probably we’re at the stage of doing a lot of reviewing, reflecting just between us and then we’ll go on to policy”.

“This year has been a lot of gathering information. We’ve done a few staff PDs about inclusion and feeding back a little bit about what we have talked about at the community of practice meetings, but [we] have been doing a lot of work between the two of us... really trying to develop an action plan, trying to work out, where do we go next? What is it we want to see at our school?”



At this stage of the project, the extent to which leaders' motivation and renewed understanding of inclusion will ultimately result in sustained changes to policy and practice, build educators' capacity to enact inclusive practices, and benefit students, including those with disabilities, is still emerging. There is some promising evidence of changes to policy and practice in some settings, including through alterations to teaching and learning plans, reconsideration of policies, changes to student leadership focus, increased focus on engaging parents and specialists, and increased discussion of inclusion. This will be a focus of further evaluation.

5. Contextual opportunities for engagement

Whilst there are similarities between goals and areas of focus for each school, it is evident that the nature of the project allows for a highly contextualised approach for participating schools, which takes into account local conditions, opportunities and challenges. Areas of focus for participating schools include reviewing, evaluating, and improving school inclusion policies; increasing teachers' knowledge of inclusion; improving specific inclusive classroom practices; reconceptualising teaching/learning plans to facilitate a focus on differentiation and individualised support; and improving documentation and recording practices, including to monitor progress.

6. Engagement of mentors

There is limited evidence from our initial evaluation data that participating schools are actively engaging project mentors to facilitate their project goals. This can be explained by the lead-in time required for each school to shape and solidify plans for the project, so that they can be more targeted in their engagement with mentors. However, most school leaders discussed this as a priority for the coming year, and it will be an area of focus for further evaluation.

7. Student voice

Several schools have identified increasing student voice and engagement with the project as a priority for the coming year. This aspect of the project is at an early stage for most schools and will be a focus for the next phase of the evaluation.

Key finding: Schools are engaged and satisfied with the project

Overall, the interim evaluation data suggest that members from participating schools are actively engaged in the Inclusive School Communities Project. There is evidence that this engagement has encouraged leaders to re-examine their current understandings and practices of inclusion and consider ways to introduce and embed more inclusive practices at their own sites. School leaders have clearly appreciated the time and space to meet with leaders from other schools in a collegial atmosphere, to gain access to resources and expertise related to inclusion, and to develop considered, site-specific plans.