Growing a culture of inclusion: understandings from the research

Schools operate within a cauldron of continuous change. **Alison Ekins** describes a two year research project which indicates that if teachers are to cope successfully with all the changing demands made of them they needed to be supported through professional development opportunities and also through a deep understanding of professional identity.

I n my previous article which appeared in Professional Development Today 17.4, the complexity of the concepts inclusion, culture and identity was identified. These terms are all ones that continue to be used in the discourse about effective schools and educational systems, yet, as we found, there is little actual information and evidence about exactly what is meant by the terms. Such terms are used both in policy and wider literature with little real definition. This clearly has implications for practice moving forward, particularly in times of change. Without real definition, there is a danger that these fundamental concepts will become buried under a range of other more procedural practices - with focus moving away from the establishment and understanding of strong inclusive school cultures, and instead only concentrating upon curricular reform and the continuing accountability drive.

ethnographic case study approach was developed and led to the building of 3 distinct research phases, with the case study schools used to 'capture cases in their uniqueness' (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000, p. 3) rather than to present generalizations. The 'ordinariness' (Stake, 2003, p. 136) of the case school is seen to be the key strength: the schools were not chosen to represent 'best practice' in developing inclusive practice. The purpose was not to judge or evaluate how they were effectively achieving inclusive practice, or to compare the approaches taken by each school. Rather, the focus throughout was on exploring the accounts of staff in ordinary schools coping with common tensions and issues.

Both schools were located in South East England, both serving multi-cultural and socio-economically deprived communities. Both schools were primary schools, with School 1 being a separate junior school, taking children from age seven to eleven (231 pupils on roll), and School 2 taking children from age three to eleven (440 pupils on roll). During the period of the research, School 1 identified 37.2% of pupils on the school SEN Register, with 23% of pupils having English as an Additional Language and 19.5% receiving Free School Meals. In School 2, 47% of pupils were identified as having SEN; 4.7% as having English as an Additional Language and 35% received Free School Meals.

■■■ Gathering the information

The research focused on understanding the lived experience and reality of developing inclusive practices in schools, through the eyes of staff members. A decision was therefore purposefully made to only concentrate on gathering data from staff members. In total, 3 members of the senior leadership team, 11 class teachers and 5 teaching assistants were involved from School1; and 2 members of the senior leadership team, 18 class teachers and 1 teaching assistant were involved from School 2. The nature of the involvement by staff members was voluntary, therefore some chose to be involved in detailed classroom visits, learning conversations and focus group discussion; whilst others simply participated in whole-staff staff meetings.

Data was collected using a three phase approach (see Figure 1).

This article, therefore, builds on the discussions presented in the first article, to now present research relating to these crucial concepts of inclusion, culture, identity and professional development.

■■■ Introducing the research "Ordinary" schools

The discussions in this article are drawn from a larger piece of research which looked more broadly at the concept of 'developing inclusive practices in schools'. Two case study schools in South East England engaged in a qualitative mixed methods research study over a two year period . An

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Figure 1: The Three Phase data collection

Phase:	Research Tools Used
Phase 1 **Data gathering focused on interviews with senior leaders:**	***Semi structured interviews*** with senior leaders: (School 1: 2 interviews; School 2: 2 interviews ■ Could you describe the context of your school? ■ How would you define the culture/ ethos of the school? ■ Describe key factors which impact upon the context and culture of your school (positive and negative factors) ***Observation of assemblies and school*** (School 1: 3 observations; School 2: 2 observations) ***Gathering documentary information:*** relevant school policies as identified by the senior leaders (e.g. SEN policy; school prospectus; School Development Plan; School Self Evaluation Form)
Phase 2 **Meaning making and developing shared understandings of the context through a broader research approach:**	***Classroom visits (observation) and learning conversations with class teachers (interviews)*** (School 1: 4 visits and conversations; School 2: 4 visits and conversations) ■ Tell me about working at this school, and the class of children that you were teaching. ■ Do you think that the lesson that I saw was a 'typical' lesson? ■ If no- what was different? ■ Do you think that any of the children face barriers to learning? ■ How do you think that the staff as a whole within this school, support each other to develop inclusive practice?- e.g. do you use any particular strategies/ have you had particular training/ is there a school based system of support? ***Strategic focus group meetings with senior leaders*** (School 1: 2 focus group meetings; School 2; 1 focus group meeting) ■ What key incidents/ initiatives do you think have had an impact upon the development of the school? When did this happen? ■ Would you say that at the time this was a positive or a negative experience? Why? ■ How did it affect you/ other pupils? ■ When we consider all of the key incidents/ initiatives that we have mapped- are there any key themes which stand out? ■ What seems to have had the most impact upon the development of inclusive practices? ■ Why do you think this is? ■ Are there any key themes/ areas that seem to be missing at the moment? ■ Why do you think that these have been missed?- e.g. have they happened, but were forgotten? Or did they not happen? Why? ***Observation of staff meetings*** (School 1: 1 staff meeting led by headteacher; School 2: 1 staff meeting led by Special Educational Needs Coordinator)
Phase 3 **Interpretation and meaning making:**	***Learning conversations*** (School 1: 5 learning conversations; School 2: 1 learning conversation) ■ The emerging key themes were presented to teachers to discuss and reflect upon through open, unstructured conversation: ■ Leadership ■ Team approach ■ Ability setting ■ Views on inclusion ■ Learning environment/ professional discourse and reflective practice ***Strategic focus group meetings*** (School 1: 2; School 2: 2) ■ As above: the key themes were presented to senior leaders to interpret. ***Staff meeting input led by me as researcher:*** (School 1: 1 input; School 2: 1 input) ■ Exploring individual understandings of the term 'Inclusion'- individual 'questionnaires' ■ Discussing and agreeing a general vision of Inclusion for the whole school. ■ Discussing and sharing factors that support and factors that hinder the general vision of Inclusion for the school. ***Extension and updating of documentary information***

■■■ What the research tells us

For this article, the specific data that emerged around inclusive school culture has now been re-analysed and represented within a new analytical framework. This shows the dynamic interaction of individual and collective identities on the shape and definition of the particular school culture, and the implications of this for professional development in schools (see Figure 2).
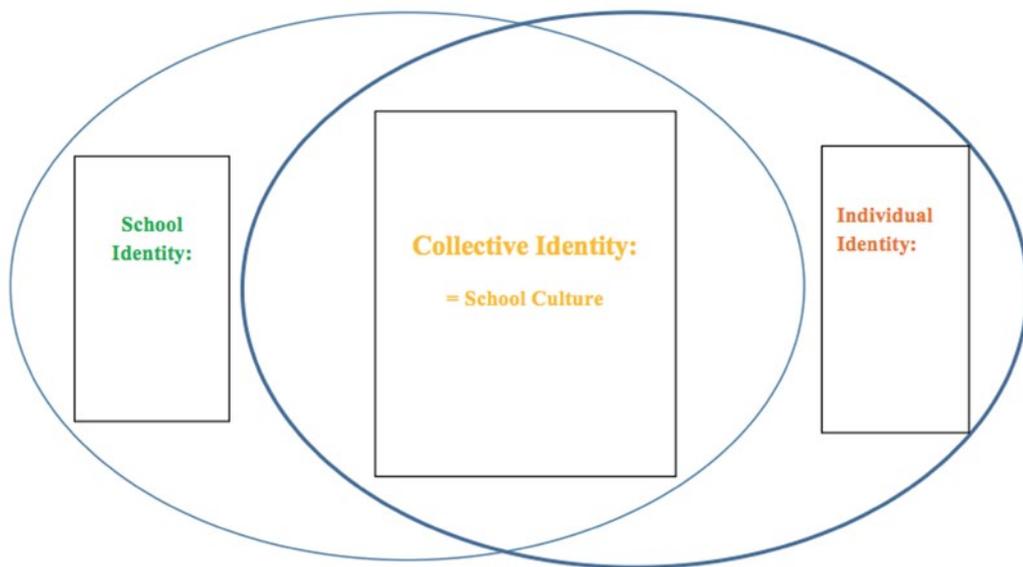
Figure 2: Dynamic interaction of identities

The data shows how the identity of the school and individual identities of staff members come together to uniquely form a collective identity. It is this collective identity which defines and shapes the school culture.

■■■ School Identity

For both schools, being situated in an area with high levels of social deprivation was a key feature of their identity, and this is reflected both in internal and externally produced accounts of the school: "*there are significant pockets of deprivation in the schools catchment area*" (School 1 OFSTED Inspection Report); "*The school serves children from acutely deprived backgrounds*" (School 2, Self-Evaluation Form (SEF)).

The identity of both schools was articulated in school documentation in terms of a focus on teamwork and a focus on recognising and celebrating the broad achievements of all:

"*We work as a team- children, parents, staff and the community; to motivate, encourage and celebrate the development and achievements of everyone.*" (School 1, Vision Statement)

"*We take pride in being a highly inclusive school. Through an almost tangible ethos we are an emotionally aware school where pupils have a strong self-image and aspirations*" (School 2, SEF)

School identity is therefore seen to be a combination of the particular community affects balanced with the inclusive values of staff working with the needs of their pupils and the communities that they serve. It can be seen, therefore, that the catchment area and community of the school is a key factor in the identity of the school itself.

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Against this background of what, for both schools, were agreed to be challenging catchment areas, was the development of the staff group. Professional development was therefore seen to be a significant factor impacting on the identity of the school as a whole. The identity of School 1 was therefore considered, in the early stages of the research period to be turbulent with high levels of staff turnover: "*We have lost a lot of valuable teachers over the years- other than J, the longest standing teacher has been here for 2 years- so that shows the kind of turnover that we have had.*" [School 1 headteacher]

In School 2, staffing was stable, with staff members commonly staying at the school for more than five years, "*tending to stay unless career opportunities move them on*" [School 2 SENCO].

The recruitment of new staff in both schools was seen to be vital and, as is seen below, was crucial in the development of a collective identity and shared inclusive school culture. External factors, particularly external judgements and inspections, also had a direct impact on the school identity and on the individual identities of staff members within the setting. Thus, whilst School 1 staff noted "*the outcome of OFSTED has actually given people a bit of confidence*" (School 1 SENCO), in School 2 it was noted that the identity and confidence of the staff group as a whole was negatively affected by OFSTED judgements under a new inspection framework which prioritised academic attainment over nurture and care.

School identity is therefore seen to be made up of a delicate balance between external and internal factors affecting how the school is viewed both externally by the larger community, and internally, by the staff working there.

■■□ Individual identity

Although not originally a focus for the research, the issue of the personal identities of individual staff members, and how these impacted on the development of inclusive cultures which supported inclusive practices, emerged as significant in the data. At the start of the research process, the impact of the challenging context of the school was felt in different ways by staff in each school. In School 1, due to the high staff mobility, lack of an established staff team and the recent

arrival of a new headteacher, the impact of emotional and challenging experiences in the classroom on their own individual identities and how they felt about and talked about themselves as teachers was clear:

- "*horrendous*" [School 1 class teacher]
- "*I lost the will to live*" [School 1 class teacher]
- "*catastrophic destruction of a lesson*" [School 1 class teacher]
- "*like a living nightmare*" [School 1 class teacher]
- "*unable to cope*" [School 1 class teacher]
- "*soul destroying*" [School 1 headteacher]

Without the initial support of a collective identity and staff group, teachers were left feeling "*unsupported*" and "*a failure*". The school at this time was caught in a vicious cycle: high staff turnover made it difficult to build and establish a shared professional identity: a critical mass of staff all believing in the same professional purposes. Even at this time, however, the impact on individual identity was not always negative. Indeed it was surprisingly complex, often with staff recognising and articulating the mixed emotions that they experience: "*it's been horrendous* [but] *it's been a huge, huge learning curve, I wouldn't change it for the world*" [class teacher]; whilst "*I initially dreaded coming into school…. I've found it immensely satisfying*" [class teacher]. As the research period progressed, however, individual staff identities were supported and strengthened once they perceived themselves to be part of a collective identity.

Here, there are clear implications for a strong focus on responsive professional development opportunities within the school context, professional development opportunities which can be individualised to meet the needs of staff by recognising and valuing individual identities and ways that they can be supported to become part of a larger collective identity.

For School 2, fewer 'individual' issues were expressed. Generally the data showed that the staff perceived themselves as part of a collective identity. Individual identities from the start were therefore seen to be shared identities- "*I can't think of anybody, any teacher, who has not got that attitude at this school*" (School 2, teacher). Generally, the language used to describe working in the

school was positive and enthusiastic: staff members shared the warmth of their feelings towards the school:

- "*I fell in love with the school automatically… the people she picks are just lovely people… it's exciting*" [School 2 class teacher]
- *It's extraordinary, it's phenomenal….It's certainly fantastic… it inspires me*" [School 2 class teacher]
- *That's what I enjoy… It's great actually when you're teaching… Wow!! …they loved it….This is fantastic*" [School 2 class teacher]

The fact that there is a "*sense of all working together for that common aim*" [School 2 SENCO and senior teaching assistant], was emphasized, and was a very explicit articulation of the embedded inclusive school culture and collective identity.

Even within this close collective identity, however, staff did indicate that there were times when they '*felt like a failure*' [teacher] or struggled to meet the diverse and complex learning, behavioural and emotional needs of the pupils, and the impact again on individual identity is clear. Again, this, and the impact of it on the school setting, needs to be understood more deeply. It actually does not take much for a school with a strong collective identity to start to unravel if and when individual identities are challenged too strongly by changing school practices or policies. School staff, particularly senior leaders, therefore need to guard against potential complacency, ensuring that they are always mindful and aware of ways that the identity and collective identity of the school are experienced by all.

■■■ Collective identity and school culture

Moral duty
One of the bonds that seemed to connect the teachers within both schools, is an emotional and moral sense of wanting to make a difference to the lives of the pupils that they teach. This is seen as: "*the bonus of the job that you do have a feeling, a sense, however intangible it is at the time, that you are making small, even if it is just a minute, impact which is pleasing*" [School 1 class teacher].

Staff members talked with sensitivity about the backgrounds that pupils came from: wanting to help to 'make a difference' to the pupils: "*I expect them to work, but I feel for them and their situations, and I feel that I want to try and make a difference for them.*" [School 1 class teacher]

"*All the time that you are teaching you like to think you can change people's lives*" (School 2 teacher)

"*In a way we are not just their teachers, we are their aunts and their uncles and that's exactly how I view these children*" (School 2 class teacher

Leadership
Leadership approaches which supported the development of a collective identity were also recognised. In School 1 this was emphasised through notions of distributed leadership, involving the "*giving out of responsibilities, and the sharing of leadership*" [School 1 headteacher] to establish and embed a collective identity.

In School 2, senior leaders similarly defined the culture and approach in the school as a 'flat hierarchy'. They note that "*everyone is equal but we have a different job to do*" [School 2 headteacher] and that "*although we know who's at the top and how the system works down, there's not that aloofness. We all work together and, if a job is needed to be done, anyone of us will pick up and do it, even if it's scraping plates in the canteen*" [School 2 SENCO].

Leaders in both schools were also seen as central in ensuring that all staff shared similar inclusive values-strongly reinforced through the leadership approach in this school. In School 2, the headteacher therefore acknowledged that she "*won't allow that type of talk*" (e.g. about what to do about pupils with high levels of SEN or no English) "*and so gradually we change people's views. And as new members of staff come in, it's very difficult for them to try and challenge that ethos and shared view*" (School 2 headteacher).

Team
An effective team approach was key to the evolving professional identities of staff, and supported the development of an inclusive culture in both schools. Staff identified two important elements in this. The first element relates to the need for staff to feel supported, and to be able to support each other when facing challenges within the school: "*in this particular environment

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it's more of a sort of hunkering down to, you know, sort of like, together we'll, we can sort of get through it approach" [School 1 class teacher].

Staff identified that the team approach was non-judgmental: staff were at ease with asking for support, or admitting that they did not have a ready answer or solution to meeting the needs of particular pupils: "*the environment is genuinely non-critical*". [class teacher] The importance of acknowledging that you did not always have the right idea or solution, and of feeling comfortable with working collaboratively with others to consider new ways forward was emphasized and seen to be a key feature of the embedded school culture. The need to "*talk through the challenges and come up with a new idea*" [class teacher] was therefore encouraged, with many staff members talking openly about '*changing strategies'*, '*new approaches*' and '*different ways forward'*. As the headteacher commented: "*I think the fact that there's professional dialogue and support between the adults in school is key because we never write off anybody as well you're not managing or you're not good enough at that, if someone asks the question then we always develop them*." [headteacher].

Professional identity in this school therefore moved beyond just emotional responses to the challenges that they faced, but also into professional dialogue to reflect more deeply, and often philosophically about aspects impacting upon their work. This was also reflected within the range and scope of professional development opportunities. Staff meeting times were valued as a supportive and collaborative problem solving time: a time for staff to come together to build and reinforce their professional identity through professional discourse based on shared values and shared experiences, rather than the hierarchical delivery of new policy or initiatives through a traditional top-down approach. Staff meetings therefore provided opportunities to engage in shared reflection and seemed to strengthen and build both individual and collective identities.

The second key element in developing an effective team approach related to the need for the staff to bond and develop personal and social relationships with each other: "*what's really good is that they all go out and socialise together. I think it's really good that they do that, they've bonded*

together, and in the staffroom the atmosphere is really light and everyone is laughing and joking. You have got to have that." [School 1 SENCO]

In School 2 staff talked about each other with affection and respect; that "*everybody looks after each other… and [has] got time for each other*" [School 2 class teacher]. Within the staffroom the atmosphere was relaxed, inviting and welcoming. Staff talked to each other about social events, and there was an emphasis upon shared staff social events. Staff of both genders, different age groups and different roles within the school (senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants) mixed comfortably with each other with no evidence of particular cliques. Many members of staff therefore expressed that the friendliness of the staff and the welcoming team approach had been a key factor that had attracted them to the school. These shared and relaxed relationships between staff could be seen to support the professional identities of individual members of staff. They felt part of a '*family*' [class teacher] or "*community*" [SENCO] and felt stronger because of this and the fact that they were supported by colleagues who shared the same values and beliefs as themselves.

Feelings about the importance and value of the team approach were further reinforced during the staff meeting activity; when identifying factors which support the school in developing inclusive practices, 'the team' was overwhelmingly identified by staff, with an emphasis upon responses such as:

School 1:

- Colleagues who are always supportive- listen and advise
- Support network in school
- Positive attitudes in the working environment
- All staff working together- single focus

School 2:

- good support from staff
- working well as a team in year groups and as a group
- a caring environment

Recruitment

Maintaining a collective identity through the recruitment of 'like-minded' new staff members also emerged as crucial for both schools, and supported the establishment and strengthening of both a collective professional identity and a strong inclusive school culture.

In School 2, new staff were therefore said to be: *"School 2 people or not"* [School 2 headteacher] although it was acknowledged that *"it would be very difficult to define what those people are, very difficult."* [School 2 headteacher]. Ensuring the recruitment of people who already had inclusive values and attitudes which reflected those embedded in the school was seen, in both schools, as central:

"If they expressed at interview that their vision is different, they wouldn't be appointed anyway" (School 2 headteacher)

"the new members of staff have come in with the right attitude as well haven't they" (School 1 SLT).

The model below (see Figure 3) draws together some of the broad principles and themes from the data to show how the separate individual identities of 'The School' and the individual teachers come together to form the collective identity: the school culture.

Implications for practice

Developing school cultures that are able to inclusively meet the diverse needs of all pupils within the 21st Century remains a challenge. What is clear from this research, however, is that this will be achieved, not through a focus on individual strategies and approaches, but instead through an understanding of professional development and identity and its impact on the development of school cultures, and the inter-relationships between school culture and professional identities. Understanding school culture is complex: it is not a narrow checklist of key characteristics. Rather it is a messy recipe which will include, in varying measures according to the school and their particular phase of school development: leadership; teamwork; emotional responses; professional identities. These, and other individual factors, react with each other in different and unique ways depending upon the individual context of the school, and its' particular stage of development at any given time.

In finding ways to support the development of increasingly inclusive schools and inclusive practices, it is therefore essential to remember that inclusive school cultures have their own 'unique rhythm, colour and pace' (Harris, 2007, p. 42) and that they are not fixed and static. So, the development of inclusive school cultures is not

Figure 4: School Culture: principles and themes related to identity

School Identity:
- immediate catchment area
- stability
- external judgements

Collective Identity:
- caring for each other
- respect for each other
- shared values/ mission
- staff collaboration/ teamwork
- joint problem solving
- recruitment of like-minded new staff
- distributed leadership

= School Culture

Individual Identity:
- emotions
- feelings
- own values
- moral duty
- role model
- open minded
- personal circumstances

simply an issue of implementing strategies; it is seen to concern 'deeper, cultural transformation' (Howes et al, 2009, p. 29) involving deep emotional engagement and investment in the issue. In this, understanding the importance and impact of individual and collective identities is key.

Schools are not clinical, sterilised environments: the data shows how complex and deeply emotional the experience of working in inclusive schools is. In considering ways to better support and build inclusive schools for the future, the impact of the emotional turbulence of continually moving between extremes of emotional states, and the threat that this poses for individual and collective professional identities must therefore not be underestimated. Indeed, the cost of it could be evidenced within the recent high levels of staff turnover and mobility within School 1, where the expression of these shifts in emotional state by the same teacher from "*horrendous*" and "*catastrophic destruction*" to "*rewarding*" could most clearly be seen. The research demonstrates the fact that

'Teachers need support…. if they are to grapple with the immense emotional, intellectual and social demands and as they work towards building the internal and external relationships demanded by on-going government reforms and social movements.' (Day et al 2006, 614)

This is even more so in the world of political and educational reform that we currently live and work in. Attention must be paid to the support that can and should be provided to staff, through professional development opportunities as well as through a deep understanding of the importance of individual and collective identities on how effectively the profession as a whole will be able to respond to change and development.

This support could and should be developed through a focus on the overarching inclusive culture of the school: in the ways that staff work for and with each other, and the ways that they then work for and with pupils and their families. Staff members in this research therefore generally identified times of greatest stress and difficulty not by significant changes or challenges, but when there was a feeling of lack of connectivity between individual values, and communication and shared negotiation of them within the school setting.

School culture is a messy, complex, and ever-changing 'beast'. By the end of the research period both schools were in very different places in relation to their school cultures, as a result of the impact of both internal and external forces upon the schools and the individual and collective identities of staff members. Developing inclusive practices and cultures therefore can never be seen as a final destination, a state that can be fully achieved. We must acknowledge more explicitly the forces that contribute to and impact upon individual and collective identities, and the impact of those on the potential to sustain a shared collective school culture.

Moving forward, we therefore need to stop trying to define and re-create a polished vision of inclusion (Hodkinson, 2012). Instead need to reflect upon and give time to the development of school culture and staff identity and emotional and social relationships as the foundation upon which inclusive values and principles can be understood, modelled and developed.

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