Principals as Literacy Leaders: Case Studies of Leadership with a Purpose

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Abstract: Data from national and international surveys of student achievement in literacy pointed to a recurring problem in Australian schools. Although the overall outcome of these surveys was positive, with the majority of Australian students achieving high standards, a significant minority did not. While it is well documented that within the school, classroom teachers affect student learning outcomes most, no turnaround in the achievement trajectory of students has occurred without the dedicated action of school leaders (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). The current paper considers the ongoing Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project and a series of case studies in nine primary schools in two Australian states. The results indicate that the PALL project has had a positive impact on the work of Principals in supporting reading initiatives and that this has helped to improve the quality of teaching reading in primary schools, which in turn has had an impact on student reading achievement.

Keywords: Principals as Literacy Leaders, Literacy achievement, action research, professional learning

Background

Data from national and international surveys of student achievement in literacy pointed to a recurring problem in Australian schools. Although the majority of Australian students achieved high standards, a significant minority did not (Hughes & Hughes, 2012). Moreover, evidence from a series of national reports and inquiries into these shortcomings (Louden et al., 2005; Rowe, 2005) indicated that children who fall behind in the early years of schooling tend to fall further behind over the course of their school careers.

In spite of the long-standing and deeply entrenched nature of “the gap,” there is a growing body of research evidence (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hattie, 2012) generating the conviction that the problem, while difficult to overcome, can be addressed in positive ways by schools. In fact, evidence has continued to accrue that factors such as the quality of instruction (Hattie, 2012); the quality of school leadership (particularly sustainable leadership), (Robinson, et al., 2009; Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011) and the impact of well-designed PD and support programs (DEECD, 2014; OECD, 2009;Wei, et al., 2009 ) leads to the conviction that improving the quality of student learning and achievement, in a sustainable way, is feasible.

What Do Principals Need To Know?
It has been suggested there is a research-to-practice gap in reading education with content and instructional practices not reflecting what is widely known about the effective teaching of reading (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013). As credible instructional leaders, principals need to know about evidence-based research and authoritative commentary as it provides direction about what teachers need to teach and students need to learn. If pedagogy is not informed by research it may be that teachers ‘teach nothing in particular’ (Cohen, 2010/2011). While most principals do not have direct classroom teaching roles, their capacity to professionally engage with class and support teachers is strengthened when they can talk informatively about reading research and instruction. Routman (2014, p. 1) makes the point that “teachers must be leaders, and principals must know literacy [because] without a synergy between literacy and leadership and a committed, joint effort by teachers and principals, fragile achievement gains do not hold.” Schmoker (2011, p. 20) refers to the need for “simplicity, clarity, and priority” whereby principals and teachers are well-informed about what should be taught. It is essential for educators to engage in discussions about the ‘why’ of what they do before they move onto ‘how’ it will be done.

What Reading Strategies Should Principals Understand and Teachers Teach?
There has been a convergence of evidence-based research about the essential components to be taught and learned if students are to become independent and successful readers. The National Reading Panel (National Reading Panel, 2000), the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (DEST, 2005) and the Rose Review (Rose, 2006), agreed that secure knowledge and skills in the five components of phonological awareness, letter-sound knowledge (alphabet and phonics), vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency are pivotal for reading acquisition. While the significance and importance of oral language is implicit in these reports, it is the Australian Primary Principals’ Association project, Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) that has added oral language to the five components and identified these as The Big 6 of Reading. Teachers’ deep content knowledge about these six components is essential but it is also about how they design and structure their reading programs that can have significant impact and long-term effect.

The PALL Training Modules
The five PD Modules in the PALL Program were:

Module 1: A Leadership For Literacy Learning Blueprint
The first module explained how a leadership for learning (LfL) framework had been synthesised from recent meta-analytical research reports into the connections between leadership and learning. The synthesis, or Blueprint as it was called in the project, is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Module 2: What leaders need to know about learning to read
Module 2 demonstrated the complexity of the reading process and the importance of the research-based “Big 6,” namely,

(i) Oral Language;
(ii) Phonological awareness;
(iii) Letter/ sound knowledge;
(iv) Vocabulary;
(v) Fluency; and
(vi) Comprehension.

Module 3: Leading literacy data gathering and analysis
The third module picked up the “sound evidence” theme highlighted in the Blueprint by focusing on the importance of evidence-based planning and decision making.

Module 4: Designing, implementing and monitoring literacy interventions
Module 4 defined the term “intervention,” and explored implementation and intervention planning processes so that each school could produce an intervention implementation plan.

Module 5: Intervention evaluation and future planning
Module 5 took principals through necessary steps in planning school based evaluations of the interventions they had implemented – defining the purpose of the evaluation, identifying appropriate data gathering processes and determining how to use the data.

The Case Study Research
The current research was an action research project with a group of case study schools led by principals who had participated in the PALL Program of professional learning in 2013. The action research involved a focused research agenda aimed at documenting and developing a fine-grained understanding of the leadership practices which facilitated the implementation of effective teaching and learning strategies in reading in nine primary or district schools in two Australian states, Tasmania and Victoria.

Research Questions
There are two central questions that guided the case study research:

- Has the PALL project impacted on the leadership of principals when it comes to supporting a focus on literacy in schools?
- Has the focus on literacy guided by the school leaders had any impact on student attitudes towards reading and student achievement?

These led to three specific questions being asked at the case study schools:

Research Question 1: What were the effects of your school’s planned leadership actions on teachers and their teaching?
Research Question 2: What were the effects of your school’s planned leadership actions on students and their learning?
Research Question 3: What were the effects of your school’s planned leadership actions on student achievement?

Data Collection
School visits were conducted to gather data at agreed points in the year (four in Tasmania and three in Victoria). The purpose of these visits was to gather data, from interviews with principals, teachers and parents, from student surveys and from student work, on what actually happened in the light of reading improvement intentions. Consistent with the improvement imperative of action research, the researchers undertook to process and analyse the data gathered from each school after each school visit.

The Case Study Schools
Of the nine case study schools involved in the research project, schools 1 and 2 are district schools (years K-10) in regional cities, school 3 is a primary school in a regional city, school 4 is a small school in a rural area and school 5 is in a metropolitan area in Tasmania. Schools 6 and 7 are in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and schools 8 and 9 are in rural areas in Victoria.

Table 1 below shows that the case study schools are diverse in terms of both size and composition. All but one of the Tasmanian schools have more than 80% of the school population in the lower half of the Index Of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) index, which measures poverty and social advantage, whereas in Victoria, two of the schools have more than 80% of the school population in the top half of the index.

Table 1: Demographic composition of the case study schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Enrolments 2013</th>
<th>FTE</th>
<th>Index Of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Bottom 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 2</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 3</td>
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<td>School 4</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>106</td>
<td>118</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 8</td>
<td>82</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 9</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>133</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Grade 3 and Grade 5 NAPLAN scores, 2011 and 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Grade 3 Reading Score 2011</th>
<th>Grade 5 Reading Score 2011</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Like School</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 1</td>
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<td>School 2</td>
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<td>452</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 7</td>
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<td>471</td>
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<tr>
<td>School 8</td>
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<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School 9</td>
<td>427</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 below provides a comparison of the average student reading scores on the National Literacy test (NAPLAN) in 2011 and 2013 for grades 3 and 5 in each of the case study schools.

What Table 2 demonstrates is that there is no specific pattern of improvement across the case study schools at either level.

This suggests high levels of complexity in running a school and managing student achievement, and the need for principals to be very specific about what they are trying to do and how they plan to do it. The data demonstrated a complex combination of the students and their backgrounds, the teachers they have and what
they do, and how the school supports students, teachers and parents, to focus on reading. It is now that we turn to the data collected from the schools to look at how this was done.

**Case Study Results**

**Research Question 1: What were the effects of your school’s planned leadership actions on teachers and their teaching?**

It was clear in all the schools that the focus on literacy and particular elements within the BIG 6 was now much greater than it had been previously. Both school leaders and teachers within the schools commented on the increase in the knowledge base associated with reading and also the focus on improving reading across the school, as the comments below indicate:

- [There is] greater awareness about the elements, making sure that all the elements are there, seeing the elements in the planning, making sure there’s resources for all of the BIG 6. (School Leader, School 1)
- Teaching of literacy is much more visible, using whole-small-whole strategies, task design, learning intentions expressed, some of it around general pedagogy but especially in the literacy block. (School Leader, School 2)
- Certainly there’s been a lot more structure around our focus around developing our intervention strategies around reading. (School Leader, School 4)
- Planning for each of the six things is now focused and none of the areas are allowed to slide. The BIG 6 are in the curriculum documents which have just been revised at the end of last year, but are also in the term planners and the weekly work programs. (Teacher, School 8)
- …it’s now a consistent approach, where before I think we had some whole school strategies in place, but they weren’t as consistent as they are now that we have PALL.  (School Leader, School 1)

This focus has helped to change the level of discussion about teaching practice as teachers become more collegial and interactive with each other. Discussions about improving professional practice were evident in each of the schools, as the examples below indicate:

- Previously classrooms were places where the teachers did most of the talking. Now there is more articulation of what teachers are doing and why, together with a deliberate and intentional activity to build oral language. Teachers are articulate with children about what they will know and do after each experience. Teaching and learning intentions are identified upfront by teachers. There is a lot more deliberate and intentional attention on the language children use. (School Leader, School 3)
- What we have learned is the importance of teaching strategies, strategies of how to predict and how to teach a class to visualise and all that sort of thing. All those strategies rather than reading and asking questions. And it’s about making those connections that really make a difference. Yeah. It’s making the connections, making them, letting them see what a valuable skill reading is and letting them see that without having that skill life is going to be quite difficult for them. (School Leader, School 4)
- And that's the best professional learning, when you're sitting with your colleagues, someone's delivering it, you're observing that, and then you know you're going to have to, you know, deliver it as well based on the recommendations of the group. It's really powerful, powerful learning.  (Teacher, School 6)
- There is a greater openness for dialogue between the staff in the school. Staff are more likely to come and ask questions and seek support for literacy. (School Leader, School 2)
- [The principal] would pop her head into the classroom, and yes, she's often a very, very busy, person, but she'll make time to pop her head in the classroom, if we're having a discussion about language and words, she will stay and join in for a few minutes and interact with the students about it, and she projects a passion for all learning, but for literacy. A real passion. Every child here in this school, in the primary years, would know full well that she is passionate about these things. (Teacher, School 3)

These conversations in turn produced both different attitudes towards the task of teaching and had also supported teachers to try out new strategies, as the comments below indicate:

- We will now be teaching reading very much as strategies rather than just allowing kids to read. There are some kids who need help with word attack skills and I think that’s where the BIG 6 will come in for us. (Teacher, School 4)
• Teachers are doing pre-excursion checks to find out what students already know about the environment to be visited. After each excursion they do a post-check/debrief about what was noticed and learned (School Leader, School 5)
• I think we’ve built a culture of whole-school approaches here, and it’s very trusting that if we’ve made a decision this is the way we’re going and there’s an expectation that everybody will get involved. (School Leader, School 8)
• My level of questioning’s probably different. I suppose part of our professional conversation we had to have goals and things, I said that I probably wanted to get more levels of questioning in my practice. And I think I've done a bit of that, yeah. So I'm just, yeah extending the children’s thinking rather than just asking for answers straight away. (Teacher, School 1)
• I talk about fluency and inferring and use all of those terminologies with my children, and they’re starting to use it in Prep. (Teacher, School 2)
• Oral language is more purposeful and intentional. Silent reading is no longer 20 minutes of just reading, but part of the time is spent on talking about what they have read, both to the teacher and to other students. (Teacher, School 3)
• …just makes me very aware of what it is that I need to do to improve in this area. It’s given me a what, a how, and a why. And we’re all in it together because this is what we need to be working on, this is what produces the results (Teacher, School 7)

From the above comments we can see that the role of the leader in this instance has been influential. Using the new knowledge provided from the PALL modules the leader has supported school level discussions about reading improvement, which led to both teacher conversations and professional development activity to improve teacher quality, which in turn led to teachers changing their teaching practice.

Research Question 2: What were the effects of your school’s planned leadership actions on students and their learning?
The changed teaching practices identified in research question 1 had an impact on student learning but also their attitude towards reading. As the comments below indicate children were more engaged, confident and excited about reading than they had been previously:
• I notice the difference when I come to one of my original groups from a couple of terms ago… And I was just blown away. I was blown away with their conversation, I was blown away with their strategies. [One student] was quoting me the strategies that she was using, she was talking about chunking and all sorts of things… I’d be in Flying Start, and they’ll go, well we’re activating our prior knowledge. Well I mean you nearly fall off your chair when you have a child say that to you. (Teacher, School 1)
• Children are more engaged, more students are asking to take books home and they look forward to guided reading, which happens every second week. (School Leader, School 2)
• Children are more confident about speaking and they now realise that in these small groups everyone is going to be expected to speak, so they can't sit back and not participate. That's been a change for some of the children who just sat back in a large group. They can't be invisible in their little groups. (Teacher, School 8)
• Children are very engaged and some of this is because teachers are using more engaging activities. There is a lot of oral language developing their comprehension skills. (School Leader, School 9)
• We are noticing more enjoyment and kids are talking more about the kinds of books they are reading, especially the seniors who have been working with our coach where there is a much bigger emphasis on talking about what they read, conferencing the book and that type of thing. (Teacher, School 9)

Not only are students more excited about reading, they were starting to develop a range of strategies that would support their getting better at reading. This was demonstrated in different elements of the BIG 6 in different ways, but the overall impression is that students were now more confident, as the examples below indicate:
• Quite a few of them were reluctant readers, reluctant writers, reluctant speakers, but we don’t see as much as that any more… you walk in there now you wouldn’t know it was the same class. Especially with their level of independence and the way that they do those structured groups in the literacy block. It’s something that needs to go in and just be observed to see how amazing it is. (Teacher, School 1)
• The children are now more engaged in talking and comprehension is improving. Children are becoming more skilled and confident about their own reading levels. (School Leader, School 2)

• Students are now more willing to say “I don’t know what you are talking about, can you explain what you mean?” Students are much more comfortable to challenge teachers and teachers are much more prepared to be challenged and to say I need to find that out. (Teacher, School 2)

• …children know which things they do well and what they have to improve on. They write their goals every morning (Teacher, School 6)

• Students are now using strategies, summarising, taking the roles for deepening the understanding of a text, text-to-text, text-to-self, text-to-world is right through the students’ language. (Teacher, School 2)

• Children are talking more about the connections and explaining their thinking about what they are thinking. (Teacher, School 3)

• We are seeing evidence of students using more sophisticated vocabulary in their speaking and writing. Students are having a go at sounding out these words. Their illustrations are more detailed. (School Leader, School 5)

Part of this progress could be tracked back to the learning environment established by the school leader and then taken up by the teachers. The environment of high expectations led to a consistent use of terminology and teaching strategies, as listed below:

• The students constantly hear the words “Excellent effort” – we don’t have “ok” or “good” here. The kids are so respectful in the classroom – it’s almost as if when they come through the gate they put on a whole new set of ways of being and doing. A lot of our kids stretch up because they know that’s the expectation here. Our common approach here is excellence, high expectations, best outcomes: I tell my class they’re the best Prep class in the whole world. That cultural stuff spreads across the whole school. (Teacher, School 3)

• I think overall confidence in our approach to teaching, which in different ways, that’s been a big improvement for all of us. I know a lot of people sometimes are, well I’m better at teaching literacy or I’m better at teaching numeracy, but I think collectively I think we are all a lot more confident in the ways that we teach. (Teacher, School 7)

One critical finding of the study was that children’s confidence in their ability to read, their enthusiasm to try things and their involvement in the language used by the teachers all had an impact on their motivation and engagement which was supported by their positive responses to the student survey (see Table 3 and 4 below).

Research Question 3: What were the effects of your school’s planned leadership actions on student achievement?

Although the case study schools all received the results of their National Assessment Program in Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing, it was far too early to use this data as a means of measuring student progress as related to this research. In some of the schools, the literacy focus was in the early years of school and the NAPLAN testing only commenced in year 3. In all cases, since the principals had only undertaken the professional development in 2013 and had only implemented what they had learned in 2014, the results of a May 2014 NAPLAN test would have been too early for any real change in student learning, based on the reading intervention, to take place. However, there was evidence of improvement in children’s learning collected by the schools in different ways, such as other tests or teacher observations, but one thing that was noticeable was the emphasis now being placed on data when decisions about teaching, or about individual students, were being made. The comments below indicate the perception that there had been reading improvement:

• Compared to similar schools we’re pretty happy – we’re better in almost every aspect than like schools in Tasmania and Australia. We’re still clawing our way up there and the staff is working so hard at it! (School Leader, School 3)

• So in the last 6-8 weeks we’ve done PAT-R, revisited the Single Word Spelling Test and also NAPLAN data’s come in plus classroom data. And that’s been really pleasing that triangulation of data. In general terms it’s showing that the teaching strategies and the interventions are working, certainly, and the shift in pedagogy as well, the way they’re teaching, there’s been a shift in their approach. (School Leader, School 4)
• There has been a noticeable difference. We got the speech and language assessments back and for one girl she has improved so much she now speaks instead of tapping. PIPS testing scores were amazing with great gains. Some students wouldn’t do PIPS at the start of the year [i.e., test refusal]. One student after the first excursion refused to write, yet after the second excursion, he wrote on his own. He doesn’t speak a lot and is not confident with his drawing. He couldn’t talk about where he had been. Now we see that he has made the most gains. (Teacher, School 5)

• Clearly that’s a better set of numbers than we had last year … that’s not to say last year’s wasn’t good, but it’s better than it was. (School Leader, School 7)

• The Grade 3s, which is our first lot of students that went through the Ready, Set, Go, are above state average. Feeling really comfortable about where the kids are, the Grade 3, excellent results. (School Leader, School 8)

• PAT (Progressive Achievement Test) data show 2013 to 2014 reading comprehension school growth in Grade 1 is 18.88 when expected growth is 11.44, Grade 2 our growth is 14.58 when expected growth is 9.68, Grade 3 our growth is 13.55 when expected growth is 7.61; Grade 4 our growth is 10.36 when expected growth is 5.5; Grade 5 our growth is 12.58 when expected growth is 4.18; even our kids below and kids above has moved substantially. We still have those low kids but there is a significant drop in where we were last year. (School Leader, School 9)

Some examples of how teachers were now collecting and using data are contained in the comments below:

• We’ve certainly got [teachers] thinking about the data, analysing it month by month, how have things moved over the last month and all that. I don’t think they’re confident yet, I wouldn’t say that. But they certainly think that they’re more in control, they’re more aware of it. (School Leader, School 7)

• Reading data is due next week but 95% of it is done already because staff are using it to inform practice. This has changed around the way they’re using it. And that’s a pretty big shift to have this year. (School Leader, School 2)

• There are learning samples kept right through and annotations and so on and their portfolio development. The individual plan for a child that is done in consultation with teacher and family members, right across the school. (School Leader, School 3)

One of the most important outcomes of the study was that data was now shared between teachers and teachers collaborated in their assessment of student learning. It was an acceptance that there is a collective responsibility for teachers to ensure that students were being treated fairly and this led to more appropriate uses of moderation to ensure that learning was occurring for all students.

• Seeing collective responsibility – whose responsibility is it? What literacy support do we need? Who will our target children be? So it’s enabled us to have conversations that are a lot richer. (School Leader, School 2)

• …we’ve used an agreed model and then we’ve moderated that, the outcomes for that, turned around and said “Okay, let’s post-test” and we’ve seen some lifting kids’ understanding because all these three teachers in this team are using agreed strategy and pedagogy and they’ve gone about using similar resources and we’ve got them to try and see the benefits. Teacher, School 2)

• The interrogation of data, making sure we’re data driven, and that was a big one for me, making sure we’re driven by data in what we’ve come from, where we’re at and where we’ve got to go. Anecdotally we knew there were some gaps but we really interrogated our data of the last 3-4 years in spelling and reading and we were able to see those gaps and some of the reasons behind that so that was a good driving force for me. (Teacher, School 4)

• And if you look at this, there’s a whole list of strategies about okay, well, that’s where our data’s moved to now, to see what we need to do now to make the next step. So it’s that, you know, bit by bit we’ve been moving along and this is clearly saying to me, it’s working and we’re achieving what we set out to do. (Teacher, School 7)

• Teachers now use the data pretty well now and they start to question the data and discuss it. (School Leader, School 9)
A more confident approach to assessing the level of performance of individual students led to the possibility of expectations being raised for all students as the comment below indicates.

- In terms of student achievement, from a Prep perspective, our expectations are becoming higher. At the moment we use the level 5 benchmark and I think we could move it to 7 for Preps because of the way we are teaching and because my expectations are higher they are reaching that as well. (Teacher, School 9)

What the study found, overall, is that the involvement of the principal in the PALL program had opened up new possibilities for schools to consider how to improve reading for all their students. Each school was doing things slightly differently, but a number of common issues could be identified:

- Knowledge of and the use of the BIG 6 enabled schools to select an area of reading that they wished to focus on, which both empowered and motivated teachers to adopt new practices;
- The leadership of the school was critical in terms of enabling a focus on and resourcing of new approaches to teaching reading;
- Teacher professional discussions were focused and teaching strategies were evaluated and shared;
- Students became partners with teachers in the reading activity, learning the common language and engaging themselves in reading;
- There was a new approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation, with solid data now being used to make decisions about students and next steps for improvement.

Parent and community support
Similar to previous findings, parent and community support was the area in which principals reported they most struggled. A number of principals noted that parents were not involved to a large degree in programs, an increasing number of mothers were working and the same small number of parents attended special evenings. Where there was parental involvement, it tended to be in junior years and limited to reading and sometimes, the Big 6. Encouraging parental engagement in senior years was particularly problematic. This is where thinking about strategies to encourage parental and community involvement at school level that may feel less threatening (such as suggesting parents ask children what they enjoyed at school and what they, as parents, enjoyed that day; or a family barbeque at the school) is crucial.

Teachers agreed that the greatest challenge was engaging parents in children’s learning. In the early childhood sector, parents are there “because they drop the little ones off and the big ones just run off themselves to the classroom” – the older children do not seem to want parents there. One teacher had two or three grandparents drop kids off. However, it is quite clear that in every case study school, parental involvement in children’s reading was an issue that would need further work. This occurred for various reasons, language issues, parents being employed, parents not feeling comfortable and in some cases teachers preferring it that way. But the case study schools are making strong efforts to reach out to parents in various ways.

Student Surveys
Students at each of the case study schools were given a short survey to establish their attitude towards reading, the extent to which they read for pleasure, either in free time at home or at school, how they felt when they were reading or involved in reading activities and whether their parents helped them in their reading at home. In all, a total of 1221 surveys were returned. Seven of the questions were common to all students and schools were invited to add three questions of their own. Questions were scored for 1 = never; 2 = sometimes and 3 = always. Table 3 shows the mean scores from Tasmania and Table 4 shows the mean scores from Victoria.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 3: Student survey results from Tasmania</th>
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<td>Do you enjoy reading?</td>
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<td>Are you good at</td>
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reading?

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<tr>
<td>Do you enjoy reading?</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you good at reading?</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you read in free time</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you read in free time</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your teacher talk</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.38</td>
<td>2.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your teacher teach</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your family help</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>2.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey scores from both Tasmanian and Victorian schools are fairly well aligned, with only minor differences between the two states and indeed between schools within the states. With scores being in excess of 2.0 for almost all of the factors, it is clear that students enjoy reading, are only marginally less confident that they are good readers and have teachers who focus on improving reading and teach reading in interesting ways. However, the figures indicate that the least supported statements relate to those associated with students reading in their free time and also being supported by their family to read. This mirrors the schools responses about the difficulty of engaging parents in supporting the reading enterprise and also confirms the need for additional resources at both school and home to purchase books for students to read on a wide range of topics and at different reading levels to encourage free reading by allowing students to read within their areas of interest.

Conclusions

The decision to delve more deeply into the impact of PALL methodology for improving student literacy through a focus on leadership for learning has been demonstrated in the cases examined in this paper. Each case adds to other PALL program findings (since 2012) by showing more nuanced ways that principals and
their teams contextualise their professional learning through actions in their schools. Finally we draw together new knowledge understandings in relation to the three research questions.

Research Question 1: Has the PALL project impacted on the leadership of principals when it comes to supporting a focus on literacy in schools?

It is clear that the PALL project has had a positive influence on the principals involved in the case studies. It was also clear that the organising mechanism, “The Big 6” framework was new to most principals when they undertook the PALL activity and to many teachers when principals used it in the schools. Many used the individual elements that make up the Big 6, but none had used the holistic framework previously. All the people interviewed, both the leaders and the teachers, found the framework a helpful one in developing reading skills for students. Each of the schools used the framework in a different way, or focused on some elements more than others, but all the schools were using it on a daily basis.

Clearly being involved in PALL with its focus on the Big 6 had made an impact on the way school leaders worked with their staff and this in turn had made an impact on the way teachers taught and interacted with each other.

Research Question 2: Has the focus on literacy guided by the school leaders had any impact on student attitudes towards reading and student achievement?

At the time of writing, the 2014 NAPLAN reports were just being delivered to schools, meaning there is little hard data to indicate that the new focus on the Big 6 has helped to increase student achievement. It must be remembered that the principals in these case studies were only PALL trained in 2013, so less than a full school year has run since the principals have introduced the terminology to their teachers. However, the interviews with teachers indicate that the terminology of the Big 6 is now understood and used by students and that the foundation has been created for increased achievement as students move through the school.

It is also clear, from both the interviews at schools and from the student survey, that there is still much to do. There are many students who are choosing to do other things than read in their free time, both at home and at school and there is an indication that the involvement of parents in supporting their children’s reading still has some way to go, despite many varied efforts by schools; Ready-Set-Go programs for children not yet in schools, Facebook sites where parents are kept informed of what is happening, information on the Big 6 going home in newsletters, cultural events, mothers’ and fathers’ special events to attract people to the school. The interviews identified how difficult it is in today’s rapidly changing, fast-paced, world for some parents to find the time to spend with their children. Other parents spend a great deal of effort taking their children to organised learning, music programs, sports programs and the like, which means that someone else is spending time with their children. Parents who have both the time and the inclination to spend quality time talking to their children, reading to their children, listening to their children are constantly under pressure from competing demands.

In the end, having all students becoming confident readers is a team activity. What the research shows is that the school team: students, teachers and principals, are starting to move in the one direction and the movement is now becoming focused and successful. If other members of the team, parents and carers, can be encouraged to get involved, forming a strong bridge between schools and homes, the movement will become unstoppable.

References


