

Leading reading improvements through professional learning

Author

Townsend, Tony, Bayetto, Anne

Published

2022

Journal Title

International Journal of Leadership in Education

Version

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

DOI

[10.1080/13603124.2019.1708474](https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1708474)

Rights statement

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in the International Journal of Leadership in Education, 07 Jan 2020, copyright Taylor & Francis, available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2019.1708474>

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/400348>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

Leading Reading Improvements through Professional Learning

Journal: International Journal for Leadership in Education

9014 words (including references)

Tony Townsend, Griffith Institute for Educational Research, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia (Corresponding Author, email: t.townsend@griffith.edu.au)

and

Anne Bayetto, College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia

Abstract

This article discusses the impact of a professional learning activity called the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program on the strategies used by primary school leaders to support teacher professional learning with the view of assisting students to become more able readers. It uses data collected from participants in the PALL program, together with case study data collected from school leaders and teachers in seven schools, to analyse the actions taken by school leaders to improve teaching practices through professional learning. The study showed that school leaders felt more capable in their ability to lead their schools after completing the PALL program and that strategic professional learning activity led to improved teaching practices and higher levels of student engagement and achievement in reading. It showed that leaders used elements of the Leadership for Learning approach as key activities for supporting professional learning.

KEYWORDS: Principals as Literacy Leaders, professional learning, learning to read, teacher practices, teacher leadership, case study research

Leading Reading Improvements through Professional Learningⁱ

Tony Townsend and Anne Bayetto

Introduction

For the past four decades, the school effectiveness research has attempted to find reasons why some schools do better than others in terms of student learning, after taking into account social and economic differences. Underlying this research is a search for school characteristics that lead to higher levels of student learning and, having found them, for how these can be used in all schools as a means of improving student learning. Many factors have been identified, but one consistent finding has been the important role of school leadership in the process (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). A second factor found to make a major impact on student learning, through more than two decades of research, is the specific classroom, and the teacher, that a student might have (Gess-Newsome et al, 2019; Hattie, 2012; Hill, 1998). Together, these two factors are powerful predictors of student learning, as Barber, Whelan, and Clark (2010, p. 5) concluded: ‘nearly 60 per cent of a school’s impact on student achievement is attributable to principal and teacher effectiveness’.

This connection, between school leadership, teaching quality and student learning, is the focus of the current paper. It documents changes brought about after principals and other school leaders undertook the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program, designed to build the capacity of school leaders to lead their schools in ways that would improve student learning of reading. Data were collected on how school leaders used professional learning as a means of improving teacher quality and student learning. The current paper addresses the

question, ‘How have school leaders used professional learning in their schools to improve teacher effectiveness and student engagement, learning and achievement in reading?’

Review of the Literature

For four decades, researchers have been trying to establish why some schools were able to support student learning at higher levels than similar schools and what specific characteristics seemed to make a difference (school effectiveness), and then how these characteristics might be systematically applied so that other schools can become better (school improvement).

Some research has consistently argued that leadership by the principal is the critical factor for supporting student learning and achievement, from the early school effectiveness research of Edmonds (1979) and Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, and Ouston (1979), to more current research (Hallinger, 2011, 2018). Following this research, there has been other research (e.g., Day et al., 2010; Jacobson, 2011; Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009) that documents how the impact of leadership can be maximised.

Other research suggests what happens in classrooms is more important for student achievement than what happens at the school or system level. It is teacher agency, their professional influence and professional learning that are critical elements in school improvement (Campbell, et al., 2018; Harris, Jones, and Huffman, 2017). Darling-Hammond (2010) argued that teacher effectiveness is a crucial element in school improvement, Wurtzel (2007) argued that improvement of practice can only be done by teachers, and Barber and Mourshed (2007) argued the only way to improve teaching and learning outcomes is through instructional improvement. Much research directed towards school improvement has focused on how to change teachers (Hubers & Portman, 2017). Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, and Fung (2007) and Guskey (2009) argue that to improve instructional practices, teachers should

spend quality time learning new knowledge and skills for application in their classrooms to improve learning outcomes.

Harris and Jones (2018, p. 1) claim that what forms of professional learning provide most impact remains contested, but that 'effective professional learning needs to be: sustained, collaborative, subject-specific, practice-based and inquiry orientated'. Traditionally, teacher skills were developed by off-site professional development (usually self-selected) and teachers returning to school with this new knowledge. Such forms of professional learning have been identified as ineffective (Balan, Manko, & Phillips, 2011), with perhaps only 10% of those skills and strategies learned being implemented in the classroom (Cassidy et al., 2009). In recent years, there have been moves towards a range of school-based professional learning, including professional collaboration or engagement with other teachers to improve instructional practices (Harris & Muijs, 2005; Knight, 2007), and peer observation and modelling (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). They argue that such modelling should be done within the context of the classroom, as up to 80% of skill transfer occurs when the classroom is the site for improvement, compared to less than 15% when it is not (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Bean and Swan Dagen (2012) suggested instructional coaches, working directly with teachers, to foster best practices. Ingvarson, Meiers, and Beavis (2005) found coaching, mentoring and peer observation, paired with follow up, improved teacher knowledge and led to better teaching practices. Cilliers, et al. (2019) found that in-classroom coaching was more effective than centralised training for improving teaching practice.

Zepeda (2007) found teachers preferred seeking assistance from their colleagues, rather than their superiors, so professional learning communities (Pang & Wang, 2018) became a valuable strategy to foster interactions, enhancing knowledge and skills related to teaching and learning (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) identified five characteristics of effective professional learning communities:

shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration, and group as well as individual learning. Parker, Patton, and Tannehill (2012) found that professional learning communities encouraged teachers to be more confident in sharing their practices. Cornett and Knight (2009) further found that teacher leadership fostered collaboration, partnership and networking among teachers in ways that contributed to school improvement (Killion et al., 2016). In a recent meta-analysis (Cordingley, et al., 2015) found that the most effective professional learning is aligned with the participants' aspirations for their students' learning.

However, Barber et al. (2010, p. 5) suggested that research that focuses solely on classrooms and teachers 'may even understate the potential impact of effective school leadership, because leadership is itself one of the main drivers of the quality of teaching'. This position underlies PALL, a program funded initially in 2010 by the Australian Government as part of its 'Closing the Gap' strategy. Of 43 programs funded under the scheme, the PALL program was 'the only project with a focus on the role that principals of primary schools play in improving literacy' (Dempster et al., 2017, p. xv); that is, the only one that was not specifically directed at teachers or classrooms. It recognised the close connection between what teachers do in their classrooms and the important role of school leaders' actions and support if these improvement efforts are to be successful. Teachers might make a difference, but they can make so much more difference if leaders are actively involved. Since that time more than 1500 school leaders, from every Australian state, have undertaken the program.

Townsend and Bogotch (2008) argued that outstanding school leadership only occurs when knowing what to do – content knowledge – is balanced by how the school leader acts in leading the school community, to meet rapid social change, increasing expectations and increasing accountability that schools now face (Townsend, 2016). Stein and Nelson (2003,

p. 445), extending Shulman's (1986) concept of content knowledge to principals, argued that appropriate content knowledge for school leaders included 'that knowledge of subjects and how students learn them ... [that could be] used by administrators when they function as instructional leaders'. For PALL, content knowledge included knowledge of how students learn to read and how teachers might teach and assess reading effectively. In PALL, this was directed towards the BIG 6 of reading (Dempster et al., 2017; Konza, 2011), namely, oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics (letter-sound knowledge), vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency, considering explicit teaching and appropriate assessment of learning, using a Response to Intervention (RTI) approach (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2002) where tiers of intervention build on one another for students who were falling behind.

The second element of PALL was that leadership style, and recognising school context, were as important as content knowledge. There have been many leadership theories that focused attention on the *how* of school improvement. Those widely accepted included 'instructional' (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985), 'transformational' (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Dart, 1990) and 'distributed' (Spillane, 2006) leadership, but in recent years, 'leadership for learning' (Swaffield & MacBeath, 2008; Townsend & MacBeath, 2011) has gained support, to the point where writers such as Hallinger (2011) now use the term. The *Carpe Vitam* project (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009) identified five leadership for learning practices: Focusing on learning as an activity; Creating a learning dialogue; Fostering an environment for learning; Sharing accountability; and Sharing leadership, which can 'be seen as underpinning and sustaining the other four' (MacBeath, 2019). Underlying these practices were changing understandings of leadership, where it is seen as activity, rather than associated with a position; as being implemented collectively, rather than being the responsibility of an individual; and as being context dependent and purpose driven, rather

than one form of leadership being appropriate in all circumstances (Dempster et al., 2017, p. 2).

A recent international publication (Townsend, 2019) contains a collection of chapters that interrogate the question “Are instructional leadership and leadership for learning two sides of the same coin?” The chapters, from seven countries, Australia, the USA, Scotland, Portugal, South Africa, Singapore, and Japan, consider the two theories of leadership from a number of perspectives: their theoretical approach, the impact they have had in various countries, how various countries have responded to one or both theories when developing school leaders, and how the theories have supported leadership practices in various ways, with chapters looking at curriculum development, teacher development, and school-community development within the framework of a single school, with additional chapters that consider cases where collectives of schools work in partnership and where schools work with other agencies in the community to foster activity that supports all the needs that students might have. In the chapter that analyses what has been learned from those preceding it, Dempster (2019, p. 418) suggests that the chapters “highlight the need for networked leadership by people tightly connected in their commitment to the purpose of education, people who know and understand the needs, hopes and aspirations they and their communities have”. He concludes that leadership for learning is much more than instructional leadership because it “relies less on positional power and more on principals, teachers, students and community agents exercising autonomy in collective actions committed to making a difference in the life journey of learners”. As PALL adopted a leadership for learning approach, the study could also shed light on the effectiveness of such an approach for improving student learning through teacher professional learning.

The Leadership for Learning Blueprint (LfLB) was the model used by PALL for leading school improvement (see Dempster et al., 2017, p. 9). The starting point for

improvement is the leader's commitment to an underlying moral purpose informed by a disciplined approach to analysing school data (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009). Subsequent improvements are fostered through active professional learning which empowers teachers 'to stay close to [their] moral purpose for teaching and learning' (King, 2019, p. 169) and shared leadership (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009), aimed at developing a well-planned reading curriculum (Konza, 2011) with focused and monitored teaching and learning (Hattie, 2009). Conditions to support student learning are fostered by strategic resourcing (time, people, materials) and through connecting with families and communities (Emerson, Fear, Fox, & Sanders, 2012). The current study focused on one of those elements, that of professional learning.

The Study

This study investigated how the PALL professional learning program impacted on participants' abilities to lead professional learning in ways that would improve student engagement, learning and achievement in reading. It sought to establish whether participants' *perception of their leadership capability* changed over the course of the program and also used case study methodology to establish *what school leaders actually did* to improve professional learning in their schools. As part of PALL, participants had developed a plan for implementing reading interventions in the following year. Case study data were collected during this year of implementation. The data reported in this study are part of a larger collection of data looking at a number of leadership actions taken to support reading improvements.

Methods

From 2016-2018, PALL professional learning was conducted in Victoria and Tasmania and subsequently, case study research was conducted in seven primary schools, four in Tasmania and three in Victoria. The research questions for the current paper were:

- How did being involved in the Principals as Literacy Leaders program change school leaders' perceptions about their ability to lead professional learning in their schools?
- How did school leaders support teacher professional learning in ways that would improve reading in their schools?

The study used a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to enable data collected from program participants through the use of the Personal Leadership Profile (PLP) to be enriched by data collected from case study interviews (Yin, 1994) over the course of a school year (Brooks & Normore, 2015, p. 799).

Participants and Data Collection

Data collected included a self-assessment of participants' level of skill to lead reading improvements, taken in the first and the final modules of the PALL program (10 months apart), using a 4-point scale. The PLP contained 36 statements related to categories identified in the LfLB. Respondents also indicated their schools' level of comparative advantage as identified by the school's Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score. The average ICSEA score of 1000 was calculated by the proportions of families in the school community that could be placed in the bottom, middle and upper quartiles of community and socio-economic advantage. Those schools that had families predominantly in the lower two quartiles scored less than 1000 and those with families predominantly in the two higher quartiles scored above 1000.

The Case Studies

Three primary schools in Victoria and four in Tasmania volunteered to be visited in the year following the completion of the PALL program. This enabled the researchers to identify interconnected themes for comparison across cases (Simons, 2015). Semi-structured interviews with school leaders and focus groups of teachers (Gower, 1994) identified stakeholder experiences as they related to professional learning.

Two case studies were suburban schools, three were in smaller country towns, one was semi-rural, and one was in a rural region with no immediate identifiable community. Four schools had between 70% and 85% of their families in the two lower quartiles of advantage and only one Victorian school could be considered well-off, having more than 50% of its students in the top quartile of advantage. Students with Indigenous backgrounds or those from a language background other than English (LBOTE) made up only small percentages of school populations. For many of the schools, there were inherent issues with their school communities; for instance, *Mobility is high which causes instability in terms of learning...*, and *... a lot of our students across our schools have a trauma background. And it's really relevant in terms of their engagement and they are kids who are probably more disengaged than other students.*

In Australia, individual schools are measured through the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and data from Grade 3 and Grade 5 students are compared with mean scores for all Australian schools, but also against schools that are demographically similar to them ('like' schools). An analysis of the NAPLAN scores from 2012-2018 suggests that no clear patterns emerge for assessment of reading at either Grade 3 or Grade 5. From 2012-2018 all schools had fluctuating results. Two schools with more than 80%, and one other with 55%, of families worse off than the average Australian family, consistently performed better than like schools. When the gains that students made

between Grade 3 and Grade 5 were analysed, results for students in the rural school were consistently higher than like schools and were sometimes similar to or even better than the national average, but the other schools all showed positive trends, having their students progressing at least as well as schools similar to them. PALL asked schools to consider other criteria that can be associated with learning, such as student motivation and engagement, stamina (the time they spend on reading), and ability to talk about their learning and what they need to do next, all of which might contribute to eventual achievement, and data on these were collected during the case studies.

Data Analysis

The data from the Personal Leadership Profiles were entered into the SPSS statistical package, and t-tests and repeated measures MANOVAs were conducted to explore whether respondents demonstrated improvement over time and whether the specific group they attended influenced the result. In case study schools there were 39 interviews with school leaders and teachers with 30 hours of responses transcribed. The data aimed to explore participants' experiences (Palinkas et al., 2011) and used an action research approach (Herr & Anderson, 2015) where 'problems of practice' could be identified and considered. The case study data were analysed using NVivo 12. An independent exploratory constant comparison analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was conducted to code the data (Creswell, 2013). Nodes and sub-nodes were created to focus attention on specific issues associated with professional learning. Sections of text were drawn into the NVivo program and sub-nodes related to professional development, collaboration, professional learning teams/communities, teacher leadership, coaching and mentoring practices, and student learning were used for the current discussion.

Results and Discussion

How did being involved in the Principals as Literacy Leaders program change school leaders' perceptions about their ability to lead professional learning in their schools?

When the PLP data were compared, only those who had provided responses to both administrations of the survey (a total of 248) were included. Table 1 shows a comparison of the four groups and the percentage increases for elements of the LfLB. The data show increases of around 20% or more, for each of the dimensions, with an overall increase of approximately 21% (see Table 1).

Table 1: Increases in self-perception from Time 1 to Time 2 (2016-2018 cohorts)

Comparison of different groups for matched pairs Time 1/Time 2	Victoria		Tasmania		Overall (N = 248)
	2016 (55)	2017 (65)	2017 (80)	2018 (48)	
Mean score Shared Moral Purpose	28.75%	21.17%	18.94%	17.23%	21.01%
Mean score Strong Evidence Base	29.11%	20.38%	20.87%	21.09%	21.86%
Mean score Conditions for Learning	27.42%	19.25%	14.18%	15.03%	17.87%
Mean score Curriculum and Teaching	21.84%	20.38%	16.04%	18.35%	19.39%
Mean score Parent and Community Support	30.58%	27.09%	24.77%	28.79%	27.96%
Mean score Shared Leadership	29.58%	23.59%	17.80%	18.98%	22.13%
Mean score Professional Learning	29.44%	27.11%	22.40%	24.40%	25.52%
Overall	26.94%	22.00%	19.09%	20.22%	21.12%

Investigation of the overall data, and for each of the groups, demonstrated similarities in mean scores, range (e.g., minimum, maximum, standard deviation), skew and kurtosis.

Applying numerical and visual rules of thumb suggested that the data were typically normally distributed at the univariate level and thus suitable for statistical tests applying assumptions of normality. Paired sample t-tests indicated statistical differences across the whole dataset (all groups) between Time 1 and Time 2. Even when a Bonferroni adjustment for multiple test error is applied, the results remain statistically significant. The results suggest that a time-

based difference is found across the four groups. The largest t-value was noted for the Overall Score.

Results from a Repeated Measures MANOVA confirmed and extended the t-test results. As cell sizes are different across the four groups, Pillai’s Trace was used in this analysis. The results from Pillai’s Trace were largely identical except for an interaction between Time and Group. The multivariate effects are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Multivariate effects on all groups

Time x Group	non-significant difference	P = 0.295
Group	trend but non-significant	P = 0.075
Time	significant difference	P < 0.000

The results for each of the scales demonstrated the strongest effect size was Time for the Overall Score (partial eta square 0.60) and ranged from 0.46 to 0.58 across the eight subscales. Time emerged as a significant effect but the group attended was not significant. A finding from the data is that undertaking PALL can be associated with increased self-perceptions of around 20% for school leaders’ abilities to lead reading. The data also show that the impact of PALL on participants’ self-perception of their ability to lead professional learning in their schools was one of the highest measures in all four groups, with an average increase of approximately 25% over the course of the program.

The data from the case study schools confirmed the value of PALL to the participants. For some, *it was a light bulb moment* and for others, a confirmation of what they were already doing: *The PALL program helped the school to identify that it was on the right track rather than it being the start of the focus.* Content knowledge provided in PALL, particularly as it related to the BIG 6, was used by schools: *Conversations about the BIG 6 ... helped the staff to join the dots about what needed to be done to improve reading, and PALL and the BIG 6*

were part of the language used by principals and teachers. One school argued the centrality of PALL and the BIG 6 to their changes in approach: *PALL has provided a realistic framework for planning literacy improvement across the school, based around the BIG 6. Teachers understand how the elements fit together.*

We now turn our attention to the way in which school leaders supported professional learning in their schools.

How did school leaders support teacher professional learning in ways that would improve reading in their schools?

A key element underpinning professional learning to improve reading is the development of a shared moral purpose. Fullan (2001, p. 1) argued, ‘Moral purpose is about both ends and means. In education, an important end is to make a difference in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial.’ Teachers and leaders in the case study schools articulated their shared moral purpose, with similar underlying positions for each of the schools. For one school leader: *I think it’s everybody, like everybody can be a reader ... everybody is capable of being a reader... and for another, I think the belief that every child can achieve and it’s up to us to make the difference.* Teachers were also able to identify the purpose: *...to provide kids with those life skills that they need when they leave school.*

Moral purpose was developed through an analysis of the schools’ reading data: *School based data is used as the starting point.* This led to deeper staff discussions about the nature of teaching and learning: *...we talked about our values – what did we believe about learning and what did we think was important for our kids* which in turn led to a set of common expectations, sometimes called non-negotiables *... we worked around our non-negotiables as a staff.* This identified a common purpose: *... we worked back from the things we want to achieve, what’s that picture now and what are the things that have to change* and then professional learning supported school change.

Professional Learning

As referred to above, there are a number of ways of thinking about professional learning: formal activity through professional development, the learning that occurs when groups of teachers work together to solve common problems, having knowledgeable staff coaching or mentoring others, bringing staff together through teams or professional learning communities and fostering teacher leadership. There was evidence that all of these were happening in the case study schools.

Professional Development

The data indicated that off-site formal activity had a positive impact on teaching practice. However, even if it was seen to be useful for individuals, professional development was now expected to be more than just for personal benefit. Non-negotiables supported decisions being made for professional learning, as a principal explained: *How does it [PL] fit within the non-negotiables and how does it meet the needs of your kids? ... and if it doesn't, that's great PL but we're not picking it up.* Teachers were now expected to share what they had learned: *Teachers go to a professional development day and then share the knowledge from the workshop with others, with positive outcomes: I think that's definitely contributed to my teaching; ... the PL that we have had, especially this year, has definitely changed my way of teaching.*

Whole-school professional learning was seen as critical to the successful implementation of reading interventions: *... we deliberately created our professional learning so that it was whole-school ... we were very mindful that we needed to have whole-staff things with focused school-based development: There's been a series of presentations around the BIG 6 ... we looked at the PALL BIG 6 in our professional learning community meeting, our whole staff meeting.* In some cases, professional development was teacher led:

Teachers develop and share their own activities and resources. A whole-school focus supported the shared moral purpose: ... we are now collectively on the same page and we are focused as a whole school... and generated teamwork: we work in teams but we also work collectively as a school, and I think that has added to that commitment that our school is a school that focuses on reading. For the school leaders, getting the whole-school focus was important: We went off as a whole school and investigated these things and came back and did the discussions so we had buy-in from everybody right from the start. It was recognition that ... the most effective way of getting lasting change is when the teachers see something in it for them ... That's the way we work here.

Collaboration

Collaboration between teachers was now built into schools' programs: ... planning is a lot more collaborative now. A year ago, teachers would have planned more on their own, now it is a team effort. It is also happening on a consistent basis: Once a fortnight, twice a fortnight probably, and ... there are two hours every fortnight for planning and it is bringing everyone together. Substantial professional learning came from teachers working together in much more disciplined ways. They ... planned together and then they observed each other delivering that lesson and then they were able to come back ... and share with each other what they had observed. This was supported by providing time for feedback: the conversations are what are important, so there's always time to talk about things. We try not to do too much stand and deliver. Collaboration supported more consistent approaches: ... sharing practice, examining specific data, planning for teaching and reviewing outcomes is becoming a powerful tool to create consistency, which had a positive impact on teachers: I'm seeing a lot of passion from teachers that wasn't there at the start of last year, a lot more understanding, a lot more confidence. Teachers also saw the value of increased collaborative planning: ... in our team, we've become a lot more focused and efficient with our planning

time and it's a lot more evidence based. For one teacher, this form of professional learning brought personal benefits: 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. This focus resulted in more explicit teaching practices: ... it's that ten or fifteen minutes of explicit teaching and modelling, and sharing with them.

Coaching and Mentoring

Although coaching and mentoring is one area of professional learning identified in the literature, data on the use of 'coaching' was only collected in two schools, where, in one, teacher capacity had developed to the point where external support was no longer required: *we were early days employing a literacy coach to come in and do things but ... because the capacity of their staff has built to such a level ... I can release two people that day and they can do the same work within our school now, so, very obvious increased capacity. In the other school, literacy support teachers ... are all shifting to being more literary experts and coaches to support teachers ... putting the kids into tiers, and what is it that those particular groups need. This was done using ... coaching proformas around reflecting on learning intentions and success criteria. This was seen as a work in progress for improving teaching practice: ... we need to consolidate, but keep building on collaborative expertise, the coaching and explicit teaching, building people's confidence in that delivery.*

In other schools, mentoring was the term used: *... we're in the process of mentoring our new teachers, a couple of younger, beginning teachers. We've got teachers who are very experienced. The purpose of this was to ensure a continuity of the moral purpose and focus: New teachers to the school are mentored by experienced teachers to ensure that the school culture and knowledge of how to implement it is passed on. Although this was undertaken by individuals, it was an activity shared by many: V. is very knowledgeable and she shares her*

knowledge all the time. We have a very supportive staff – lots of mentoring. In some schools, this extended to mentoring teachers into leadership activity: ... we know that they're on the right track to helping build the leadership profile and manage mentoring and coaching people to be able to fulfil the role that they need to do.

Professional Learning Communities

The first thing to be noted is that the terms 'professional learning community' and 'professional learning teams' were both used, sometimes interchangeably, but one school leader identified a key change in school organisation: ... *we don't have staff meetings anymore. We have professional learning community and professional learning teams. And our focus has been on reading and the PALL BIG 6.* Professional learning teams are usually very student-focused: *PLTs are teams of three people that look closely at and track a student. They track three students over a time ... but once every fortnight they just, they intensely look at how that student is going in comparison to curriculum.* Such team activity was characterised by connecting resources to practice. There was ... *team planning time on how they can implement in the classroom* followed up by ... *peer observation and feedback sessions.* This had led to ... *Professional Learning Teams reporting they are using a range of strategies including more explicit one-on-one instruction to move students from Wave Two to Wave One,* results that were seen as positive by teachers: ... *we had time for our PLTs to meet, for our grade teams to meet as well, and do some collaborative planning, have those conversations.*

Teacher Leadership

There were references to ways in which teachers had responded to taking on more responsibility for the learning process: ... *we've had a number of staff take on different roles, leadership roles ... it really has been a shared leadership approach.* In one school, this was a

deliberate strategy to improve professional conversations: ... *we were doing a lot of work on that distributive leadership ... we've actually set up a middle leadership group. We're running PLs with six of them this year to talk about how we run collaborative teams.* For another school it was a focus on building leadership at the classroom level: ... *we've used distributed leadership, from our classroom teachers across the grades – so early childhood, 3 and 4 – are coming off class and leading some of the teaching and learning.*

Although the idea of shared leadership did not come naturally to all teachers, most schools established leadership teams and provided opportunities for teachers to become involved: ... *prior to recently, I would have thought getting our teachers to take collective responsibility for our group of kids was a challenge... and I think there was a culture of, the leadership was very much top down, so you know, if the leadership wanted you to do it, you would do it ... we're much more collaborative and people I think, use their voice more now. We're releasing them to build their leadership and foster that sense of we're all leaders.*

Changes in Teaching Practices

School-wide approaches resulted in more organised approaches to teaching and learning: Collaboration had improved and literacy planning was '*quite effortless now*' because teams knew how to operate and what they needed to do. School-wide approaches included common teaching practices, supported by a consistent language across the school: *It's a common language and it's a common method of doing things. So, you're getting that rich layering through the school because it's a whole school approach.* Teachers were ... *much more aware of what they are saying and how they are explaining things to children.*

This enabled teachers to have renewed enthusiasm for the work they were doing: ... *teachers are on board ... and far more engaged with how and what they're teaching than they were.* Teaching was different: ... *Whereas two or three years ago you might see children*

doing quiet reading where children are just sitting around reading any old book, not probably carefully selected, maybe not even engaged in the reading activity.

Changes in assessment practices were evident: *Teachers were becoming more confident about using the data. ... They are now thinking about the data, analysing it month by month, as was the way student progress was assessed: the core focus of getting consistency ... the focus is not on whether you read the word, but it's whether you understand what you're reading and can retell what you're reading.* The use of running records (Clay, 2017) assisted teachers to identify next steps: *I know what each individual child needs, but as a group that they're all focusing on their fluency or they're all focusing on chunking the bigger words.* Record keeping was also much more structured: *... we now have a databank of reading levels from prep to grade 2 ... teachers regularly go in and update that so we can see ... which students are at or above benchmark, which students are not.*

The focus on professional learning had resulted in changed practices: *Our staff now engage in collegial dialogue re literacy practices ... when a few years ago there was a clear obstacle based on ignorance, self-doubt and lack of shared responsibility for literacy, but there was also recognition that more was needed: ... we've only just started dipping our toes into things like the peer observations. ... They were a bit nervous about it at first but in the end, they appreciated the opportunity and learned lots from each other.*

Changes in Student Learning

If engagement is the first step towards achievement, then this was a positive and common occurrence: *Some of our hard to reach boys were just super engaged; the children are all immersed in learning, they're engaged.* Teachers saw this happening: *a few of my students have been saying to me over the last few weeks that they're really enjoying reading this year.* This engagement enabled students to read for much longer: *more teachers are reporting that*

students are reading for a sustained length of time. Teachers agreed: we have a read-to-self stamina chart ... I think the first one was about three minutes and then they managed to get it up to 20 minutes where they were reading the whole time; I can see improvements in our classroom and in their reading stamina and their engagement.

Other elements of learning were also improved. This included confidence: *the difference in the preparation of the child and the confidence of the child is amazing, and the ability to talk about their learning as well. Students are now using the language of the BIG 6 in ways they were not a couple of years ago, and ... they are better able to choose their books and kids are talking more about the kinds of books they are reading. This comes about because teachers ... are explaining things to children and ... they now understand better what is happening.*

The focus on building student learning led to improvements in student achievement as measured by NAPLAN results. For one school: *The school is the third highest school in the state for gains in the NAPLAN scores over the last four years. For another, we're seeing positive trends ... our main score for grade 5 reading and grade 3 reading are both above the Tasmanian and national reading scores. Some principals referred to specific data: in 2016 we had a whopping 38% of students show below average gain. That has reduced down to 19% ... On the flipside we have increased from only 20% of students last year showing above average gain that has increased to 29%.*

Summary of Findings

Finding 1: School leaders saw themselves as being more able to lead their schools in the improvement of reading at the end of the PALL program than they did at the beginning

The first finding is that undertaking the PALL program was accompanied by an approximate 25% increase in the self-perceptions of school leaders as it relates to their ability to lead their

schools towards improvements in reading through professional learning. Data from interviews indicated that PALL helped school leaders to build their content knowledge (Stein & Nelson, 2003) and to have a better understanding of interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2002), and created the environment in which they adopted a collaborative leadership approach to build improvements in the reading program.

Finding 2: School leaders developed a shared moral purpose using school data as a starting point

The data from the case studies showed that the school leaders had actively promoted a shared moral purpose (Fullan, 2003) and this had been developed collaboratively with teachers (Spillane et al., 2006), using their school's reading data as a starting point for discussions about changing teaching practices in ways that supported student learning (MacBeath & Dempster, 2009). Professional learning of various kinds was used to ensure the focus was maintained.

Finding 3: School leaders used a range of strategies to support professional learning aimed at improving reading

Leaders were able to translate the moral purpose and vision of the school into effective teaching and learning practices, through professional learning. This encouraged teachers to become better teachers of reading, to build relationships with each other, and with students and parents, to engage them in the process. There was evidence that teachers were taking more responsibility for the teaching of reading and were actively involved in collaborative practices (Harris & Muijs, 2005; Knight, 2007) and professional learning communities (Pang & Wang., 2018) where reading was a focus. In addition, schools looked to coaching or mentoring as strategies to focus on continuous improvement (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008) and there was evidence that school leaders were trying to share leadership (MacBeath &

Dempster, 2009) with some evidence of teachers accepting this to move the agenda forward. However, some schools were doing better than others and, in some cases, teachers were happy for leaders to be making the decisions.

Finding 4: Schools involved in the case study research had a positive impact on students' learning of reading

There was evidence that engagement, time-on-task and learning were being accomplished in the schools. Professional learning had focused attention on these issues in a range of ways, and teachers were showing more leadership of the activity. There was some evidence that this focus had impacted on trends towards higher student achievement. A clear aspiration for all of the schools is that the results on NAPLAN will reward the work that has been put into getting the conditions for learning right.

Discussion

The data suggest that school leaders in the case study schools had used the Leadership for Learning approach, highlighted within the PALL program, as a means of creating and sustaining professional learning activities within their schools. As highlighted by MacBeath (2019), sharing leadership was the overarching approach that would encourage professional learning at all levels in schools. The data suggests that teacher leadership was encouraged, both through individual efforts, professional learning teams and from the viewpoint that the school itself could become a professional learning community. It also became clear that this leadership was fostered by the second element of Leadership for Learning, namely, creating a learning dialogue. The evidence showed that teachers were talking to each other much more and that school leaders became facilitators of these conversations by enabling the time needed for them to happen and to encourage both coaching and mentoring activities within the schools. This approach to dialogue, both within and cross grades enabled the development

of a 'common language' for reading in a way that ensured consistency of approaches across the school.

The desire to improve professional learning, for both teachers and leaders alike, enabled improvements in the third Leadership for Learning element, that of focusing on learning as an activity. This focus was facilitated by the developing recognition that learning must happen before achievement can occur, and that learning can only be accomplished through motivation (interest in learning), engagement (focusing on the specifics of what needs to be learned) and time on task (getting better at what you have learned). This understanding led to conversations about how each of these factors was linked to others and what might be done to improve student ability for each of them. These conversations, with both leaders and teachers involved, led to numerous approaches to the fourth of the Leadership for Learning elements, fostering an environment for learning. To improve reading, resources were found (time for teachers to talk about students, their learning, and what needed to be done next, and the addition of substantial numbers of new books, selected based on identified student interest areas, with a range of reading levels and using a variety of developmental strategies, with them now available in both the library and classrooms); the classroom and school environments were more focused (such as reading corners in classrooms and photographs of teachers and community members with their favourite books around the school); and efforts were made to encourage families and the wider community to play an active role in students learning to read (including sending home items that would support family involvement in reading activity at home and a wide variety of activities designed to encourage the perception in the community that they, too, can play a role in supporting their local students).

The final Leadership for Learning element, sharing accountability, came about through skilled leadership approaches to developing a shared moral purpose across the

school. The common understanding in the schools was that every student had the capacity to learn and deserved every effort of the school to enable them to do so. But there was also the developing understanding that to do this, there needed to be all-hands-on-deck. Leaders, teachers, families, and communities all had a role to play in the activity of focusing attention on the importance of being able to read and on what was needed to enable students to learn to read well. This was translated by using the research to establish the best possible professional learning for teachers, not only in terms of improving teaching practices, but also enabling them to reach out, to other teachers, to other schools and to families and communities, in ways that could maximise potential improvements in reading performance.

Conclusion

The convergence of the content knowledge of the BIG 6 and the Leadership for Learning Blueprint in the PALL professional learning program provided school leaders with both content knowledge about how reading might best be supported and a leadership style that addressed the specific context of their school, what might be considered as the what and the how of leading reading (Townsend & Bogotch, 2008). Professional learning was one of the key elements that enabled schools to move towards higher levels of student learning. The study showed that many professional learning strategies identified in the literature had in fact been adopted in the schools, and that the school leaders themselves felt that they were more capable of leading their schools in this area at the end of PALL than they were at the beginning.

The findings of the current study may have wider implications for approaches to leadership internationally. A review of the language being used by many education systems around the world would suggest that instructional leadership is still seen by system administrators as being THE appropriate leadership approach. But conclusions made by Dempster (2019) suggest that the five characteristics associated with leadership for learning,

highlighted by the data collected from these case study schools, may be a theory whose time is rapidly approaching. Its focus on the moral purpose of schools, on shared leadership that over-rides past hierarchies, on listening to those that schools were designed to serve, and using dialogue to identify and implement “actions committed to making a difference in the life journey of learners” (p. 418) may well be something worthy of discussion in education systems where the hierarchical approach is not currently succeeding.

References

- Balan, R. M., Manko, T. P., & Phillips, K. F. (2011). Instructional improvement through professional development: Transformative dialogues. *Teaching and Learning Journal*, 5(2), 1–18.
- Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). *How the world's best performing schools come out on top*. London: McKinsey and Company.
- Barber, M., Whelan, F., & Clark, M. (2010). *Capturing the leadership premium: How the world's top school systems are building leadership capacity for the future*. Boston, MA: McKinsey and Company.
- Bean, R. M., & Swan-Dagen, A. (2012). *Best practices of literacy leaders: Keys to school improvement*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Brooks, J. S., & Normore, A. H. (2015). Qualitative research and educational leadership: Essential dynamics to consider when designing and conducting studies. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 29(7), 798–806.
- Campbell, C., A. Lieberman, A. Yashkina, with S. Alexander, & J. Rodway. (2018). *Teacher Learning and Leadership Program: Research Report 2017–18*. Toronto, Canada: Ontario Teachers' Federation.
- Cassidy, J., Garrett, S., Maxfield, P., & Patchett, C. (2009). Literacy coaching: Yesterday, today, and tomorrow. *CEDER Yearbook*, 15–27.
- Cilliers, J., Fleisch, B., Prinsloo, C., & Taylor, S. (2019). How to improve teaching practice? An experimental comparison of centralized training and in-classroom coaching. *Journal of Human Resources* (online) doi:10.3368/jhr.55.3.0618-9538R1
- Clay, M.M. (2017). *Running records for classroom teachers* (2nd ed.). USA: Heinemann

- Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., & Coe, R. (2015). *Developing great teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*. London: Teacher Development Trust.
- Cornett, J., & Knight, J. (2008). Research on coaching. In J. Knight (Ed.), *Coaching: Approaches and perspectives* (pp. 192–216). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Sage.
- Creswell J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Day, C., Sammons, P., Hopkins, D., Harris, A., Leithwood, K., Gu, Q., & Brown, E. (2010). *10 strong claims about effective school leadership*. Nottingham, UK: National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services.
- Dempster, N. (2019). Leadership for learning: Embracing purpose, people, pedagogy and place. In T. Townsend (Ed.), *Instructional leadership and leadership for learning: Understanding theories of leading* (pp. 402-421). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dempster, N., Townsend, T., Johnson, G., Bayetto, A., Lovett, S., & Stevens, E. (2017). *Leadership and literacy: Principals, partnerships and pathways to improvement*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- DiPaola, M. F., & Hoy, W. K. (2008). *Principals improving instruction: Supervision, evaluation, and professional development*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Edmonds, R. R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37, 15–27.
- Emerson, L., Fear, J., Fox, S., & Sanders, E. (2012). *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from the research. A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau*. Canberra: Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau.
- Fuchs, L., & Fuchs, D. (2002). *Progress monitoring, accountability and LD identification*. Testimony to the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education. Retrieved from http://www.aimsweb.com/_lib/pdfs/Lynn%20F%20Commission.pdf.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Moral purpose*. Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/cm-mc-ssl-resource-moral-purpose.pdf>.
- Fullan, M. (2003). *The moral imperative of school leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

- Gess-Newsome, J., Taylor, J. A., Carlson, J., Gardner, A. L., Wilson, C., & Stuhlsatz, M. (2019). Teacher pedagogical content knowledge, practice, and student achievement. *International Journal of Science Education, 41*(7), 994-963.
- Gower, A. R. (1994). Questionnaire design for business surveys. *Survey Methodology, 20*, 125–136.
- Guskey, T.R. (2009). Closing the knowledge gap on effective professional development. *Educational Horizons, 87*(4), 224-233.
- Hallinger, P. (2011). Leadership for learning: Lessons from 40 years of empirical research. *Journal of Educational Administration, 49*(2), 125–142.
- Hallinger, P. (2018). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Journal of Educational Management, Administration and Leadership, 46*(1), 5–24.
- Hallinger, P., & Murphy, J. (1985). Assessing the instructional management behaviour of principals. *Elementary School Journal, 86*, 217–247.
- Harris, A., & Muijs, D. (2005). *Improving schools through teacher leadership*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- Harris, A., Jones, M., & Huffman, J. (2017). *Teachers leading educational reform: The power of professional learning communities*. London: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. (2012). Know thy impact. *Educational Leadership, 70*(1), 18-23.
- Herr, K. G., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hill, P. (1998). Shaking the foundations: Research driven school reform. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 9*(4), 419–436.
- Hubers, M. D., & Poortman, C.L. (2017). Establishing sustainable school improvement through professional learning networks. In C. Brown, & C. Poortman (Eds.), *Networks for learning: Effective collaboration for teacher, school and system improvement* (pp. 194–204). London, UK: Routledge.
- Ingvanson, L., Meiers, M., & Beavis, A. (2005). *Factors affecting the impact of professional development programs on teachers' knowledge, practice, student outcomes and efficacy*. Retrieved from http://research.acer.edu.au/professional_dev/1.
- Jacobson, S. (2011). Leadership effects on student achievement and sustained school success. *International Journal of Educational Management 25*(1), 33-44.

- Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Killion, J., Harrison, C., Colton, A., Bryan, C., Delehant, A., & Cooke, D. (2016). *A systemic approach to elevating teacher leadership*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.
- King, F. (2019). Professional learning: empowering teachers? *Professional Development in Education*, 45(2), 169–172.
- Knight, J. (2009). Coaching: The key to translating research into practice lies in continuous, job-embedded learning with ongoing support. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30(1), 18-22.
- Konza, D. (2011). *Understanding the reading process*. Research into Practice Series. Retrieved from http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/literacy/files/links/link_157541.pdf.
- Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2006). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership.
- Leithwood, K., Jantzi, D., & Dart, B. (1990). Transformational leadership: How principals can help reform school cultures. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 1(4), 249–280.
- MacBeath, J. (2019). Leadership for learning. In T. Townsend (Ed.), *Leading learning in schools: Instructional leadership and leadership for learning* (pp. 49-73). London: Palgrave Macmillan,.
- MacBeath, J., & Dempster, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Connecting leadership and learning: Principles for practice*. London: Routledge.
- Palinkas, L. A., Aarons, G. A., Horwitz, S., Chamberlain, P., Hurlburt, M., & Landsverk, J. (2011). Mixed methods designs in implementation research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 38(1), 44–53.
- Pang, N. S-K., & Wang, T. (2018). *Global perspectives on developing professional learning communities*. London: Routledge.
- Parker, M., Patton, K., & Tannehill, D. (2012). Mapping the landscape of Irish physical education professional development. *Irish Educational Studies*, 31(3), 311–327.
- Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School leadership and student outcomes: Identifying what works and why. Best evidence synthesis iteration [BES]*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.
- Rutter, M., Maughan, B., Mortimore, P., & Ouston, J. (1979). *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and effects on children*. Boston, USA: Harvard University Press.

- Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*, 15, 4–14.
- Simons, H. (2015). Interpret in context: Generalizing from the single case in evaluation. *Evaluation*, 21(2), 173–188.
- Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Stein, M. K., & Nelson, B. S. (2003). Leadership content knowledge. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(4), 423–448.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Swaffield, S., & MacBeath, J. (2008). Leadership for learning. In J. MacBeath and N. Dempster (Eds.), *Connecting leadership and learning: Principles for practice* (pp. 32–52). London: Routledge.
- Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007). *Teacher professional learning and development. Best evidence synthesis iteration (BES.)*, New Zealand, Ministry of Education. Retrieved from <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/goto/BES>.
- Townsend, T. (2016). Leading schools in the 21st century: Careful driving in the fast lane. In G. Johnson and N. Dempster (Eds.), *Leadership in diverse learning contexts* (pp. 411–430). AG Switzerland: Springer.
- Townsend, T. (Ed.). (2019). *Instructional leadership and leadership for learning: Understanding theories of leading*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Townsend, T., & Bogotch, I. (Eds.). (2008). *The elusive what and the problematic how: The essential leadership questions for school leaders and educational researcher*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Townsend, T., & MacBeath, J. (Eds.). (2011). *The international handbook of leadership for learning*. New York: Springer..
- Wurtzel, J. (2007). The professional, personified: Districts find results by combining a vision of professionalism with common tasks and goals. *Journal of Staff Development*, 28(4), 30–35.
- Zepeda, S. J. (2007). *The principal as instructional leader: Handbook for supervisors* (2nd ed.). Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

ⁱ The data discussed in this article are from a larger research project funded by the Tasmanian Department of Education and managed by the Griffith Institute for Educational Research at Griffith University. The authors thank both organisations for their support.