



teach  
learn  
share

## Principals as Literacy Leaders Project

- > [Summary](#)
- > [Target student group](#)
- > [Method](#)
- > [Results](#)
- > [Lessons learned](#)
- > [Next steps](#)
- > [Research base](#)
- > [Further reading and links](#)
- > [Contacts](#)





teach  
learn  
share

## Summary

'... no turnaround in the achievement trajectory of students has occurred without the dedicated action of school leaders.' (Leithwood, Day, Sammons Harris & Hopkins, 2006)

With this in mind, the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) Project used two questions in designing this pilot project:

- What capabilities do principals need in literacy?
- What capabilities do principals need in leadership?

For key references see Dempster, N (Neil) et al 2012, *Principals as Literacy Leaders: Confident, Credible and Connected*.

The PALL targeted improvement in the reading abilities of students in low-SES and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the aim of reducing the number of students performing below the national benchmark.

It was an action-research project designed to build the capabilities of principals to:

- lead the design and implementation of literacy improvement in their schools
- build a professional learning community in their schools
- contribute to literacy development from a system perspective
- assess student learning achievement in ways that inform the realisation of these objectives.

Over a two-year period (2009–2010) principals attended five one-day professional development workshops addressing: instructional leadership; best practice in teaching reading; using data; and planning, implementing and evaluating evidence-based literacy interventions.

Between workshops, principals worked with teachers to assess the needs of their own students and develop a literacy intervention to address those needs.

## Target student group

The PALL modules were delivered to sixty primary school principals, fifteen from each of Western Australia, South Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. A mix of Government, Catholic and Independent principals participated throughout 2009–2010 with fifty-seven completing the two-year project. Schools were selected on the basis of low socio-economic status and low levels of student achievement in reading.



teach  
learn  
share

At the conclusion of the project, 296 classroom teachers who had been directly involved in the literacy interventions responded to an online survey regarding their perceptions of the impact of the PALL project. Assuming each teacher worked with a minimum of twenty students, close to 6000 students were involved in the literacy interventions.

The project was managed by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) and designed by Griffith University, Edith Cowan University and the Australian Catholic University.

## Method

The PALL project was designed to improve the reading abilities of students in low-SES and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by developing the capabilities of principals in the areas of how to lead literacy learning, and how reading develops.

Principals attended five one-day professional development workshops after which they engaged in school-based tasks that consolidated understandings and facilitated the dissemination of knowledge throughout their schools. Each principal was supported by a leadership mentor through face-to-face visits and email contact throughout the two-year project.

## Professional development modules

### Module One – Instructional leadership

This module focused on how principals can facilitate shared instructional leadership. It outlined dimensions of leadership for learning, including the establishment of moral purpose and shared beliefs, the building of data systems, and associated planning and monitoring in literacy. The notion of 'disciplined dialogue' was introduced to support the building of professional conversations with teachers about effective classroom teaching.

### Module Two – Best practice

This module presented research evidence regarding best practice in the teaching of reading and addressed the 'Big Six' of:

- oral language
- phonemic awareness
- letter/sound relationships
- vocabulary development
- fluency
- comprehension.



These were presented as the core elements of reading development, each of which requires explicit teaching. This input was designed to provide principals with the capacity to have informed professional conversations with their staff.

A *Literacy Practices Guide* (LPG) was introduced as a support tool to enable principals to observe practices more astutely and to engage more directly in their leadership for literacy learning role. The LPG provided checklists of what effective reading instruction 'looks like' in practice. It covered the five dimensions of:

- the classroom environment
- student work samples
- planning documentation
- reading instruction
- reading across the curriculum.

### **Module Three – Using data**

This module examined the role of both qualitative and quantitative data in informing planning and measuring success. Specific assessments for each of the 'Big Six' were discussed including both whole class screeners of some skills and fine-grained individual assessments for individual students. Principals were provided with a framework for gathering data on student achievement and classroom practice and strategies for engaging staff in analysis of data and planning subsequent interventions.

### **Module Four – Intervention waves**

This module reinforced the essential concept of intervention waves, or tiers, to assist principals to support their teachers in developing, implementing and monitoring a literacy intervention. The need for teachers to have a large repertoire of strategies to teach students according to their learning needs was highlighted. Suggested strategies for supporting students at the whole class, small group and individual level in the junior, middle and upper primary years were included.

### **Module Five – Evaluating interventions**

This module provided principals with the skills to evaluate their literacy interventions. It aimed to ensure a sustainable approach that could lead to on-going success in school-wide planning and implementation of successful literacy instruction and intervention.



teach  
learn  
share

## Project tasks

Between professional development modules, principals:

- constructed a School Profile to represent important elements of the context for and organisation of literacy in their schools, with the initial profile serving as a baseline for measuring changes over the period of the project
- collected school-level qualitative data using the observational tool – the LPG – to inform decisions about resetting literacy priorities
- designed with teachers, using both system quantitative achievement data and school-level diagnostic data, literacy interventions for their schools and evaluations of those interventions, with short reports on the impact of the interventions.

## Individual schools

Each school developed an intervention(s) designed to:

- take specific steps to allow access to a particularised curriculum for students who were experiencing difficulties
- result in deliberate and direct actions by teachers and support staff in the interests of nominated children
- make adaptations and modifications to teaching strategies, resources and classroom learning environments to ensure that students could participate in the regular classroom curriculum.

Schools targeted different year levels and different elements of the reading process, depending on what their school assessment data revealed. Some schools aimed to improve whole class, or first wave, teaching by building teachers' understanding of the need for more explicit teaching of all the component skills of reading.

Other schools focused on interventions to support students who were struggling to acquire these skills, and who needed more frequent and/or more intensive support; these students would be classified as requiring second wave teaching. A small number of schools also included third wave interventions for students who were two years or more behind their peers.



## Results

A key premise in the project was the understanding that it is only through a focus on learning that student achievement is improved. Therefore what was happening in teaching and learning was as much a focus for the evaluation as was the student's achievement.

### Student literacy achievement

NAPLAN results for 2008–2010 were aggregated to record the progression of PALL schools during that time. Analysis of this data shows that in Year 3 the improvement for students was in the lower achievement bands. This is partly explained by the fact that many PALL Project schools initiated intervention action to improve reading strategies for students in the early years. Similar improvements in student achievement were evident in Year 5. In Year 7 there was discernible improvement, but not as much as for Years 3 and 5. It is expected that student achievement will be higher for Year 7 students in the pilot schools in 2011 because these children were involved in PALL Pilot-initiated interventions in 2010. Note: Northern Territory schools have no Year 7 students.

'Improvement rates are higher in most aspects of NAPLAN, higher than the national improvement rate. NAPLAN also showed that for Year 3 all areas lifted; for Year 5 two of four areas improved and the others maintained; and for Year 7 three of four areas lifted.'

'Spelling and reading have improved. The mean band in NAPLAN literacy levels has risen one level in Years 3, 5 and 7.' (Principal)

'For students who are in Year 5 in 2010, there was movement by all but one student by two Bands in NAPLAN from their Year 3 (2008) to Year 5 (2010) achievement. This was significant improvement given our students' needs in literacy.' (Principal)

Improvements were also noted based on school-based literacy assessments, such as the Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading (PAT-R), running records and teacher observations.

Moderate improvements in students' attitudes to learning and achievement in literacy were reported by teachers and a small, though noticeable, number of teachers and principals reported the positive effects of improved literacy skills on behaviour and self-esteem.



teach  
learn  
share

## Professional development

Overwhelmingly, principals expressed the view that their involvement in PALL resulted in professional development in their schools becoming more focused. They reported that PD staff meetings were characterised by specific discussions about literacy, with data analysis becoming commonly accepted and valued as the starting point for change.

'Data is the first thing we look at when we plan.' (Principal)

Greater staff collaboration was also reported. One principal used the term 'open-ness' to describe the way teachers engaged in the discussion of data, and went on to say:

'We are learning more from each other – de-privatising teaching. Teachers are more responsible for their own learning and initiating it.' (Principal)

Principals also took a far greater and more active leadership role in professional development with their teachers than they had in the past. They attributed this to increased confidence in their leadership and literacy knowledge. They engaged teachers in professional discussions using evidence of students' learning; this heightened involvement enhanced principals' curriculum credibility across the school.

'I am more upfront as an instructional leader. There is more team responsibility and staff are leading some of these activities. We have a common focus in professional learning.' (Principal)

Teachers also felt that their principals' use and delivery of PD on the 'Big Six' supported the development of a common language, common understandings, and common approaches to the teaching of literacy, which strengthened staff collaboration and increased their capacity to engage in professional discussions.

'Everyone seems to be on the same page and can talk to colleagues about literacy aspects.' (Teacher)

Another significant outcome of the PALL Pilot was the improvement in teachers' ability to diagnose needs and to use evidence to plan and implement specific reading intervention programs in their schools. More than 83% of the 296 surveyed teachers agreed that they had an enhanced capacity to target specific students on the basis of assessment and monitoring of progress. This was reflected in the use of new assessment instruments and enhanced data analysis skills.



teach  
learn  
share

'[Our school's] Literacy intervention focus is now informed by identified individual needs.' (Principal)

'Requests for teaching resources to support learning are now evidence based and specifically targeted to areas of need.' (Principal)

More than 88% of teachers agreed that their school's involvement in the PALL Project had enhanced their professional capacity to teach literacy with more than 83% reporting an enhanced knowledge of how to teach reading using elements of the 'Big Six'.

### Allocation of resources

Principals referred to making changes to the allocation of human and physical resources to support the implementation of literacy interventions in their schools.

'The whole school has embraced a literacy block and made use of tools such as the Literacy Practices Guide to engage in self and administrative evaluation of their literacy practices.' (Principal)

Our Education Assistants (EAs) have become vital to the success of the literacy intervention. All EAs are inducted into the program and trained to deliver instruction that is explicit and developmentally appropriate for the students they are working with. (Principal)

### Lessons learned

The main factors contributing to the success of the PALL project revolved around the design and implementation of the project. This was the first time a professional association (APPA), a group of universities and a large number of jurisdictions in different states and territory were linked together in a single project.

The project was based on the latest research and used evidence as the basis for all decision making. This resonated with the principals who were involved; they appreciated working with the universities and using the latest knowledge to drive change.

The ongoing support of a credible mentor has also been an integral component of the project, providing the support necessary for principals to maintain their focus on instructional leadership amid many competing demands. The impact of the initiative would be greatly affected if this component were removed, or if the mentors were not accepted by principals as credible and non-threatening.





Other factors that contributed to the success of the project were:

- No direct funding going to the schools. The designers of the project were conscious that many pilots are successful because they provide resourcing for the duration of the project; when the resourcing is withdrawn there is no sustainability. This project focused on building the capabilities of the leaders and using available resources.
- The use of an action-research approach. The ongoing work between each module enabled principals to connect their learning with their community and build shared leadership.

## Next steps

As a result of the original PALL Pilot, and the extension programs and materials being shared on the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) website, a number of other state and territory jurisdictions contacted APPA seeking information about the feasibility of PALL being conducted for their principals.

In discussion with the universities, it was decided that a *Train the Trainer* program was the preferred strategy to bring knowledge of the PALL Pilot program, its aims, processes and materials to jurisdictions that would be in a position to consider its expansion.

In 2012, two *Train the Trainer* sessions were organised with funding available for fifty participants. The sessions were over-subscribed (thirty-nine participants in Adelaide and forty-nine participants in Sydney) and attended by principals from all jurisdictions.

The Tasmanian and Victorian Government jurisdictions and the Independent Schools Association of Western Australia are introducing PALL during 2013.

Online support was provided throughout 2012 and will be provided throughout 2013.

## Research base

The emphasis on professional development for school leaders to develop their capabilities has emerged as a priority over recent years because the pressure of managing schools in risk adverse policy environments has tended to divert principals' attention from the central purpose of their work: student learning and achievement (McBeath & Dempster, 2009).

While it is well documented in the literature that classroom teachers have the greatest effect on student learning outcomes, and that the influence of school principals is second to this, no turnaround in the achievement trajectory of students has occurred without the dedicated action of school leaders (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris & Hopkins, 2006).

The design of the PALL project focused on the professional learning needs of school leaders to lead learning. This was done with the understanding that it would provide sustainable improvement in learning outcomes for students.




The PALL Project synthesised knowledge about:

- school leadership
- literacy teaching and learning
- effective professional learning
- school improvement
- change management.

And it applied that knowledge to the problem of raising the literacy achievement of students in low-SES school communities.

## Further reading and links

Australian Primary Principals Association 2012, *Principals as Literacy Leaders: Train the Trainer Project*.

Dempster, N (Neil) et al 2012, [\*Principals as Literacy Leaders: Confident, Credible and Connected\*](#) , Bowden Group, Australia.

Leithwood, K, Day, C, Sammons, P, Harris, A & Hopkins, D 2006, *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*, Nottingham: National College for School Leadership.

MacBeath, J & Dempster, N 2009, *Connecting leadership and learning: Principles for practice*, The Netherlands: Routledge.

## Contacts

[Australian Primary Principals Association](#) 

Leonie Trimper [ltrimper@senet.com.au](mailto:ltrimper@senet.com.au)

## Partner organisations

Australian Catholic University

Edith Cowan University

Griffith University

The Catholic, independent and government education authorities in South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and Northern Territory and sixty of their principals.