

Principals as Literacy Leaders: A strategy for improving reading engagement and achievement in Australian schools



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Abstract

By the end of 2017, approximately 1500 school leaders from all states and territories in Australia will have undertaken the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) program. This program was first funded in 2010 for 60 primary principals of disadvantaged schools by an Australian Government grant under the Closing the Gap strategy. Since that time, additional cohorts of school leaders have been funded by state departments of education, professional associations and individual schools. Many of the programs have been associated with research looking at various outcomes of the learning gained from the PALL program. To date, there have been six published studies (including one that considered PALL for principals working in Indigenous communities), numerous conference papers, chapters and journal articles, and a forthcoming book. In 2016, further data was collected from schools that were the subject of case study research in 2014.

This paper provides an overview of PALL and the research into its outcomes. It focuses on the most recent data collection, which was designed to look at the sustainability of the learning from PALL over time and its impact on leadership strategies; teaching practice; and student engagement, learning and achievement in reading.

Background

In the early years of the new millennium, data suggested that student achievement in literacy was a recurring problem in Australian schools (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN], 2008, 2009, 2010; Thomson, De Bortoli, Nicholas, Hillman, & Buckley, 2011). In addition, evidence suggested that students who fall behind in the early years of schooling tend to fall further behind over the course of their school education (Louden et al., 2005; Rowe, 2005). Simultaneously, research findings suggested that factors such as the quality of instruction (Hattie, 2009), the quality of school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2006; Robinson, 2007; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010) and the impact of well-designed professional development and support programs (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Hord, 1997) could have a positive effect on student achievement. With this in mind, the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project was initiated in 2009 by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) for schools in four states of Australia. It was funded by the Australian Government as part of its Literacy and Numeracy Pilots in Low Socio-economic Status Communities initiative. The program was designed to provide principals (and in later versions, other school leaders as well) with knowledge, practice and support for strategies that would enable them to help teachers teach reading more effectively, with the ultimate aim of improving student engagement and learning.

By the end of 2017, around 2000 government, Catholic and independent school leaders will have taken part in different programs that emerged from APPA's initiative, including the pilot PALL program itself, Secondary Principals as Literacy Leaders and Principals as Literacy

Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC). More recently, there has been a middle school program in which people from secondary schools and their feeder primary schools work together to look at reading in the transition years, and a program that focuses on getting parents more engaged and involved in their children's learning. Programs have been offered in every Australian state, and in some cases multiple cohorts of participants have been involved in a single state.

The PALL project

The project was designed on a foundation of the following five research-informed positions:

1. the PALL position on the moral purpose of leadership
2. the PALL position on learning to read
3. the PALL position on reading interventions
4. the PALL position on shared leadership
5. the PALL position on support for leaders' learning on the job.

A more detailed outline of these five positions is provided in Townsend et al. (2015, p. 17).

The professional learning modules of the PALL program were as follows.

Module I: A leadership for learning blueprint

The synthesis of the leadership research culminated in a discussion about the elements of a Leadership for Literacy Learning Blueprint, illustrated in Figure 1 below.

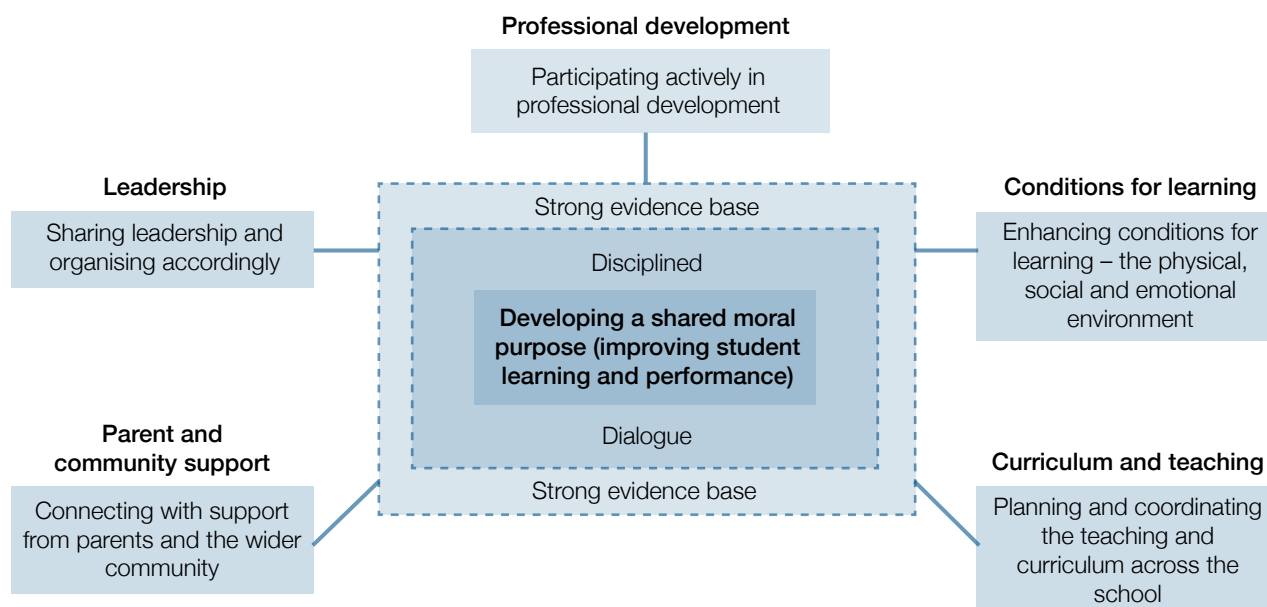


Figure 1 Leadership for Literacy Learning Blueprint

Source: Dempster et al., 2012, p. 7.

Module 2: What leaders need to know about learning to read

Module 2 demonstrated the complexity of the reading process and identified the 'BIG 6' elements of reading:

1. oral language
2. vocabulary
3. phonological awareness
4. letter/sound knowledge (phonics)
5. comprehension
6. fluency.

Module 3: Leading literacy data-gathering and analysis

Module 3 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', reiterating the ultimate purpose of improving children's literacy learning and achievement in project schools through intervention.

Module 5: Intervention evaluation and future planning

Module 5 took school leaders through three necessary steps in planning school-based evaluations of the interventions they had implemented: firstly, defining the purpose of the evaluation; secondly, identifying appropriate data gathering processes; and thirdly, determining how to use the data.

In between the modules, school leaders were expected to return to their schools and work through the issues brought up during each module. They were then expected to plan with their teachers an intervention that would focus on improving student engagement with, learning of and achievement in reading.

Research on PALL

Seven studies of PALL were carried out by my colleagues and I in 2010–17. Three of them—the pilot program study (Dempster et al., 2012), the South Australian study (Konza, Fried, & McKennarney, 2013) and the Tasmanian study (Dempster, Johnson, & Stevens, 2014)—concentrated on the program's effects on school leaders themselves. A further study, based on PALLIC, applied the general design of the pilot research to ascertaining the effects of PALL on principals of

schools with significant Indigenous communities (Johnson et al., 2014) and also included some case studies. Two studies in Tasmania and Victoria in 2014 (Townsend et al., 2015; Townsend, Wilkinson, & Stevens, 2015) were designed as case studies in order to get a deeper understanding of the leadership effects on student learning. Finally, in late 2016, five case study schools were visited—three that had previously been visited in 2014, and two that had been identified by the Victorian Principals Association as successful PALL schools. The subsequent report (Townsend, in press) provided further information on the sustainability of PALL over time and some of the key leadership qualities that supported such sustainability.

Findings from the studies

There is not enough room in such a short paper to provide a detailed review of the results from the seven different PALL studies, so here I can only report on the major findings from the first six studies; more detail is contained in Dempster et al. (2017). The findings are briefly reported using the five positions that PALL adopted for the professional learning itself. The 2016 case study research is then examined in more detail.

PALL research and the moral purpose of leadership

In most of the research, much attention was paid to the moral purpose of leadership as captured in conversations focused on the purpose of, goals for and expectations related to reading. Principals consistently reported an improvement in the knowledge and skills required to build vision and set directions collaboratively; to set high expectations; to gain consensus on goals; and to see those goals embedded in classroom routines. We found that paying attention to the shared moral purpose of those leading learning produced, almost as a matter of course, stronger staff collaboration than had been observed in the past. The data clearly show that the reaffirmation of the rights of all children to a literate life through a focus on reading brings principals and teachers together, creating opportunities for leadership distribution not previously possible.

PALL research and learning to read

There were five salient messages found in relation to leaders' positions on the teaching of reading. First, school principals need to have a high level of understanding about what it means to teach reading if they are to lead staff in their schools to strengthen student satisfaction and achievement. Second, teachers require targeted professional development in specific methodologies for teaching the fundamentals of reading, dependent on capabilities, over an extended period of time. Third, interventions in the teaching of reading should be based in robust evidence about students' capabilities in learning to read and teachers' knowledge about the explicit teaching of known areas of

student need. Fourth, knowledge about the cultural and social context for the teaching of reading should take account of student data and conditions for learning in particular schools and communities. Fifth, a strengths-based approach to engaging parents and community members in the teaching and support of reading is likely to result in a more productive take-up than the more familiar deficit alternative.

PALL research and the use of reading interventions

Across the first six PALL studies, it can be seen that successful interventions in reading have been based on sound qualitative and quantitative evidence. What became apparent in numerous intervention evaluations was that, while some schools had previously been using evidence to guide their teaching and learning programs, they had not necessarily used it consistently or strategically. Participation in PALL engendered sharper and more purposeful collection and use of data along with the ability to discuss the data sets using a common language. In addition, a whole-school approach was frequently mentioned by schools as making a significant contribution to the effectiveness of their interventions. This did not mean that all classes or year levels had to be doing the same thing, but rather that a shared commitment had to be evident.

PALL research and shared leadership

PALL involved the acceptance of the need for leadership depth and breadth—depth within the school, and breadth beyond its boundaries. During the PALL studies, we saw encouraging examples of depth and some promise in attempts at breadth, but continuing issues in both. The need to establish shared views of the school's moral purpose brings shared leadership into the foreground. The research interviews were replete with terms such as 'same page', 'same language', 'teamwork', 'team planning', 'community conversations', 'agreed strategies and solutions', 'trust in each other', 'collective responsibility' and so on. Most principals and teachers expanded their capacity to share leadership within their schools, in this way seeing leadership as activity, not position. The research also uncovered a small number of concerted efforts to move outside the gates of a single school. When and where this occurred, the value to principals and teachers was reported enthusiastically.

PALL research and support for leaders' learning on the job

Across the six original studies, school leaders made consistent reference to two main aspects of this PALL position. The first is that school leaders need the knowledge required to make changes that will result in improved reading outcomes for students within their schools, and the second is that school leaders need support systems to enable them to be successful in

implementing changes. The PALL program itself can be seen as a support system with its action research approach. Principals were provided with evidence-based knowledge, and for many principals, the use of robust data gave them with the skills and confidence to better lead disciplined dialogue about learning and teaching practices. In addition, the role of PALL's leadership mentors cannot be understated. They were critical friends, not only ensuring that the various post-module tasks were carried out but also, because of their capacity to work with achievement data and other evidence of student progress, providing ongoing support for whole-school development. They helped to connect the modules, tasks and materials, all generic in nature, to the specific needs of each school.

2016 case study research

The findings from this study were:

- PALL had a positive impact on the school leaders that attended the program, and the BIG 6 made sense when it came to considering ways to improve reading.
- The use of PALL and the BIG 6 had a positive impact on student engagement in reading; enabled students to become more articulate about what and how they were learning to read; and provided evidence, from both NAPLAN and school-based assessments, that students were performing at higher levels than before PALL was introduced.
- Case study schools were able to articulate a shared moral purpose. They were more efficient in collecting and analysing data to use when making decisions about reading, and they were more effective in their professional conversations related to this data. The elements of professional development from the Leadership for Literacy Learning Blueprint—attending to the conditions for learning; making curriculum and teaching practice decisions about reading; encouraging active parent and community engagement with the school to support reading; and sharing leadership—were all evident in the case study schools.
- Case study schools recognised the important role that the Victorian Principals Association played in supporting and promoting PALL, not only through the professional learning modules but also through the state conferences and the website.
- Critical elements associated with improvements in reading included:
 - Perseverance—case study schools had been testing, adapting and using PALL and the BIG 6 for more than three years.
 - Professional conversations were far more frequent and focused than had previously been the case.

- There was a high level of trust generated by all people in the school. This enabled a shared leadership approach to occur easily. This was supported by the principal's passion for improving reading in the school.

In the final analysis, the ongoing success of PALL and the BIG 6 in the case study schools can be traced back to a number of leadership characteristics that provided teachers in the school with the support they needed to make the changes required. The role of the principal had not been lessened, but the leadership of others had expanded. Leadership characteristics that counted include:

- an absolute commitment to improving student reading and a passionate way of sharing this goal
- the ability to develop positive, trusting relationships across the school, fostering leader–teacher, teacher–teacher and teacher–student relationships based on communication and mutual support
- a willingness to remain in the school for the duration of the project while enabling much of the responsibility to be passed over to others, ensuring that the whole school is part of the process
- the ability to share leadership by letting go and allowing other people to take responsibility for some of the work done (in this regard, the case study schools could be seen as exemplars of shared leadership)
- a view of themselves as fortunate to have a staff that was willing to try things, test them out and to play around with them for a while in order to move towards best practice.

Conclusion

Overall, the research on PALL has demonstrated that school leaders with the required knowledge about how to improve student learning in reading, and in conjunction with a capable, knowledgeable and determined staff, can have a real impact on student learning. The lessons of PALL go beyond reading, however, in that if the same principles are applied to other curriculum, social or environmental aspects of school life, improvement will follow in any or all of them.

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