Strategic Improvement for Literacy Project Evaluation

Dr David Gurr, *The University of Melbourne*
Ms Marian Nicolazzo, *Language and Literacy Education Consultant*

Catholic Education Office
Archdiocese of Melbourne

Introduction

Australian schools have long been expected to maintain high standards of literacy and numeracy. This was emphasized in national policy, in 1991, when Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (DEET, 1991) called for greater English proficiency and effective literacy for all Australians. Later, in 1996, a report (Masters, 1997) following the National Schools English Literacy Survey (NSELS) (Masters and Forster, 1997) suggested that at Years 3 and 5 there were a significant numbers of students who had not achieved a satisfactory standard in reading and writing. As a result of this, the federal government developed a National Literacy and Numeracy Plan (DEETYA, 1998) aimed at equipping all students in Australian schools with basic literacy and numeracy skills.

It is in this context, that in 1998, the Catholic Education Office Melbourne (CEOM), who had long been committed to improving the literacy learning of all students in its schools, implemented Literacy Advance (CEOM, 1997), a systemic strategy to improve student achievement and literacy teaching and learning. The CEOM recognised that there are some students for whom literacy achievement still remained a challenge and some schools that were yet to meet agreed literacy benchmarks.

In its continued commitment to help schools improve, the CEOM introduced the current School Review process in 2006 and School Improvement Literacy (CEOM, 2011) was introduced soon after to support this process by providing schools identified as needing to improve student literacy with a collaborative process that provides support in a strategic and flexible way in response to specific needs.

The School Improvement Literacy process aims to strategically support schools where literacy improvement is identified as a key priority. There are five phases (identification; setting directions for literacy improvement; from vision to action; building capacity and implementing change; setting directions for continuous literacy improvement) designed to drive the improvement and lead to sustainability. Recent reports (Zbar, Kimber & Marshall, 2009; DEECD, 2008) also point to a number of key factors that contribute to the success of improving and effective schools. These include strong leadership that is shared; high levels of expectation; sustaining improvement over time; building teaching and leadership expertise; using data to drive improvement; and a culture of sharing and responsibility. This thinking informs the five innovation streams of the Literacy Strategic Support Project (CEOM, no date, a & b): leadership for learning; curriculum by design; transforming pedagogy; assessment for learning; and, learning environment which aim to frame significant literacy improvement, and underpin the broader goals of the CEOM Literacy Strategy.

This report is an evaluation of the SIL project commissioned and facilitated by the CEOM. We studied five schools and interviewed the five Principals, eight Literacy Leaders, and ten teachers. We also interviewed three Principal Consultants and five Literacy Education Officers from the CEOM. A synopsis of the findings from each school is presented in the appendices.

Methodology

For each school, data collection included individual and group interviews with the principal, literacy leader, other senior staff and classroom teachers, with the following questions asked:

- Can you tell me about the evidence you have of literacy success?

- What has led to this success? (Depending on responses there may need to be additional questions focussing on leadership, the SIL CEOM initiative, etc)

- What has been the role of the central and regional people to support SIL?

- What are future literacy improvement plans of your school?

- What is needed to support these plans?

- In terms of the SIL CEOM initiative, do you have suggestions for how this might be improved?

For all interviews there were two researchers present, one conducting the interview and the other taking notes. All interviews were audio recorded. In addition evidence of success from the school was collected, such as the school review or annual reports, and any other school level evidence of literacy success.

Three Principal Consultants who had knowledge of the case-study schools, and five Literacy Education Officers (LEO) from the central office involved in the SIL project were also interviewed, individually or in groups. The following questions were asked:

- Can you tell me about the evidence you have of literacy success for the SIL project?

- What has led to this success? (Depending on responses there may need to be additional questions focussing on leadership, the SIL CEOM initiative, etc)

- What has been the role of the central and regional people to support SIL?

- How might the CEOM have done it differently?

- How can the project be developed in the future?

- This is the list of schools we are going to review do you have any comments about them?

Table 1: Participant numbers by school and participant category

| School	Principal	Literacy Leader	Teachers
St Mary's College, Seymour	1	3	2
St Thomas More Primary School, Hadfield	1	1	2
Corpus Christi School, Kingsville	1	1	3
St Margaret Mary's Primary School, Spotswood	1	1	1
St. Francis Xavier Primary School, Corio	1	2	2

Table 2: School features: SIL stage, school region and National Partnership participation.

School	Type Size 2011 ICSEA 2011	SIL Stage	Region	National Partnership Initiatives
St Mary's College, Seymour	P-10 368 1015	End 2009	Northern	Literacy and Numeracy
St Thomas More Primary School, Hadfield	P-6 324 1008	End term 1, 2011	Northern	None
Corpus Christi School, Kingsville	P-6 159 1019	End 2009	Western	None
St Margaret Mary's Primary School, Spotswood	P-6 147 1060	End 2011	Western	Literacy and Numeracy
St. Francis Xavier Primary School, Corio	P-6 188 936	End 2010	Western	Low SES

Table 2 indicates some characteristics of the schools, when SIL finished in each school, the region in which the school is located, and whether there is involvement with National Partnerships.

Only St Francis Xavier is in a particularly challenging socio-economic context as measured by the My School Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). All the other schools have ICSEA values close to the national average of 1000. All schools except St Thomas More are small schools; St Mary's College, despite having 368 students is small for a P-10 school. Three schools have received additional literacy resources through the Federal National Partnerships initiative.
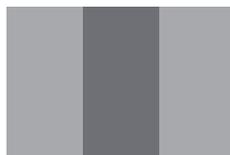
In this section we provide summaries of responses to questions and themes that arise from considering the responses overall.

Evidence of Success

Although all schools commented on the improvement of student literacy as a result of SIL, it was interesting to note that the use of literacy achievement data, such as NAPLAN, was not consistently used as a demonstrable indicator of the success of the SIL process. Across all schools, this quantitative data was invariably used to identify needs and to inform the School Literacy Action Plan at the beginning of the SIL project, but there was only very little evidence of comparison of this data at the end of the SIL process to show growth over time.

Table 3 provides a summary of the performance of the five schools. Due to changes in NAPLAN procedures, the composition of the similar school group has changed over this time and so is not the best comparison to judge trend. Comparisons with the national average are shown in Table 3. For each year there are eight possible comparisons covering English assessments for year 3 and year 5 students. The Table shows how many of these comparisons are below, at, or above compared to the national average

Table 3: Year 3 and 5 Literacy NAPLAN results compared to the national average (8 comparisons per year)

School	SIL stage	Year	Substantially below	Below	At	Above	Substantially Above
St Mary's College, Seymour	End 2009	2008	0	2	6	0	0
		2009	0	4	4	0	0
		2010	0	0	6	1	1
		2011	0	1	6	1	0
St Thomas More Primary School, Hadfield	End term 1, 2011	2008	0	1	6	1	0
		2009	0	4	4	0	0
		2010	0	0	6	1	1
		2011	0	1	6	1	0
Corpus Christi School, Kingsville	End 2009	2008	0	0	3	3	2
		2009	0	3	4	1	0
		2010	0	0	5	3	0
		2011	0	0	7	1	0
St Margaret Mary's Primary School, Spotswood	End 2011	2008	0	1	7	0	0
		2009	0	0	5	2	1
		2010	0	0	6	1	1
		2011	0	0	2	4	2
St. Francis Xavier Primary School, Corio	End 2010	2008	2	4	2	0	0
		2009	2	3	3	0	0
		2010	1	4	3	0	0
		2011	2	6	0	0	0

Even though there is variation across the years, the three shaded schools could be argued to have shown improvement over the period 2008 to 2011. At St. Mary's, there was a discussion of the NAPLAN data with evidence of marked improvement in literacy performance. St Thomas More has maintained performance, and St Francis Xavier has fluctuating performance; both schools may require more time to see evidence of success. Overall, signs of success in the form of improved NAPLAN literacy data is evident in three schools, but not in the other two.

More noticeable though, was the anecdotal evidence of the success of SIL across schools.

> *Many schools are relying on anecdotal evidence to indicate success, especially if there are major culture change issues. Before they focus on NAPLAN results the schools are reporting change in teacher practice because this reflects a change in culture. They are changing in terms of data use, but they know that it is a long term change plan. (LEO)*

As another LEO noted: "We can see a school that has changed – it feels alive – even though the data hasn't improved."

This was attributed to a range of factors that are briefly described next.

- Teacher judgement of student performance.

In their School Improvement Survey Interpretative Reports in the year of concluding SIL participation, three of the five schools Student Surveys indicated significant improvement across areas such as purposeful teaching, engagement and stimulating learning.

> *Teachers commented that student reading and writing had improved and the evidence for this was the usual ongoing assessment the teachers used to structure their classes. Teachers indicated there was increased student engagement, and students more willing to take risks with learning. A teacher at Corpus Christi commented: "Children are more risk-taking, more willing to share their work and give each other feedback." At St Thomas More, teachers commented that students were more articulate about their learning.*

- Improvement in teacher morale.

In three schools' School Improvement Survey Interpretative Reports in the year of concluding SIL participation, Teacher Surveys indicated significant improvement across areas such as team based practice, staff morale, professional growth and role clarity.

> LEOs commented that they saw staff survey results improve substantially, especially in the areas of professional feedback, appraisal and morale.

- Changes in teacher practice.

This included participation in meaningful PLTs, more focused and data driven teaching and collaborative planning, more professional dialogue, increased pedagogical knowledge, shared understandings, and higher student expectations.

> *I look at data and plan the next day. I love it because I have captured what a child needs and can then plan and respond to this. (Teacher, Corpus Christi)*

> *It changed everything I was doing in Literacy – linking reading and writing, making what you are doing in literacy more authentic, using multimodal texts and what to do with these, how to do guided reading. (Graduate teacher, Corpus Christi)*

In one school, the School Improvement Survey Interpretative Reports in the year of concluding SIL participation Parent Surveys indicated significant improvement across all areas: Relationship, Engagement and School Climate.

At St Thomas More the Principal described changes associated with improving spelling and engaging parents. In this description note the change in the work of the Literacy Leader, and the significant role of LEO in supporting the Literacy Leader's work.

> *SIL led to a change in spelling at the school. A seed was planted through SIL and has continued with Anneliese's (the Literacy Leader) work with her SIL mentor. Families that come to the school are changing and there are now families choosing the school from outside the area and who have high expectations and so willing to challenge the school about learning. Martina (the LEO) had identified the need to improve spelling and so the school began to focus more on this. Parents wanted more spelling, and so the school could respond easily to these concerns. Anneliese, through her postgraduate studies, was also focussing on thinking about the parent concerns. An invitation to parents to come to an open-day focussing on literacy and numeracy (a walk around) made the school transparent and satisfied parental concerns. The LEO had recently done several PLTs on spelling [at another school] and shared this with Anneliese, who used these and the LEO's notes to run PLTs for staff and information evenings for parents. SIL was the springboard for this and gave Anneliese the skill and confidence to address this area. If you visit the school website you will that the curriculum page has blogs and includes a literacy learning blog which has a great range of resources for parents and teachers.*

- Change in principal leadership style.

The LEOs noted principals are moving from managerial to instructional leaders, and are more collaborative and involving of others, relying in particular on their Literacy Leaders to improve teaching practice.

- Change in school culture.

At Corpus Christi the teachers reflected on how SIL supported them to see themselves as learners and reflective practitioners and raised the profile of literacy in the school community. A LEO at another school commented: "We can see that the school has changed – it feels more alive – even though the data hasn't improved as much as we would like."

At St Thomas More the Principal described the degree to which culture had changed:

> *There has been a change in culture in terms of the openness of classrooms, the engagement of students (they have purpose to what they are doing), the safety of the school (it had a negative, discipline-focussed culture, whereas now there are expectations and a sense of care and community), and community involvement; and staff (staff come with solutions rather than problems).*

- Redistribution of resources to better target identified literacy needs.

This included the allocation of time for PLTs, space and materials as well as the provision of Literacy Leaders across the schools: "SIL brought out the need for Literacy leaders in our school " (LL, Seymour).

The LEOs commented on the greater reliance on this more anecdotal data rather than the schools' use of NAPLAN, P-2 assessment data, or LAP data to measure success. They noted, however, that over such a short period of time, this growth might not yet have had any significant impact on NAPLAN data.

Principal consultants noted that in many schools, the emphasis was on improving literacy teaching and learning, in particular changing teacher beliefs and understandings, as well as practice. It was believed that this would then result in improved NAPLAN results, but this was not a key feature of our discussions across most of the schools.

What Led to Success

Success ultimately rests with changes in teacher practice, because it is this that will lead to improved student learning outcomes in literacy. The teachers at St Mary's College, for example, noted that through involvement in SIL they felt better supported in planning and implementing a literacy program, which was focused, student centred and highly responsive to student needs as identified through good assessment data. This school was clearly able to show improved student literacy both through teacher judgment and NAPLAN. There were four broad areas that led to this type of success: Principal leadership; strategic leadership; building the professional and leadership capacities of the Literacy Leader; use of a variety of strategies to promote success; and, synergy of improvement programs.

Principal Leadership

It was evident in each school that the principal's leadership was very important in the adoption and successful implementation of SIL.

> *The leadership got it going, and kept it together.*
> *(Teacher, CC)*

Leithwood and colleagues (2007) have defined educational leadership as having four main elements: setting direction, developing people, leading change, and improving teaching and learning. These elements provide a convenient framework to consider the work of the principals.

In terms of **setting direction**, in three schools (St Thomas More, Corpus Christi and St Margaret Mary's) involvement in SIL was directly related to the appointment of a new principal, whilst in the other two schools (St Mary's and St Francis Xavier), the principal saw that SIL would help in the school improvement process that they had begun earlier. In all schools, it was the principal who was instrumental in setting an improvement agenda and in maintaining this over several years and melding several reforms. They had developed a school direction that was focused on improvement overall, and literacy in particular. The LEOs noted the importance of principal leadership both to overall strategic direction and, in some cases, to modeling the importance of the SIL process by participating in SIL sessions. The story of the importance of principal leadership links to the themes that follow. It is sufficient to note at this point that without the clarity of direction it is likely that the schools would have struggled to improve.

The **developing people** dimension is most evident in how the literacy leaders in each school have been supported to take on true leadership roles - to be involved in the literacy area in setting direction, developing people, leading change and improving teaching and learning. This is an important point – the Literacy Leaders were expected to be leaders, and they were supported to be leaders. Too often, middle-level leaders like these teachers are not supported or not expected to be leaders (Gurr & Drysdale, 2012). The principal's role in supporting the Literacy Leaders in each school was to recognise that SIL would likely provide excellent support to the build the capacity of the Literacy Leader, and to provide the additional support to enhance this such as: at St Margaret Mary's, including the Literacy Leader as part of the school leadership team; at St Mary's appointing three Literacy Leaders and supporting them by providing sponsored postgraduate study in addition to SIL support.

All principals seem to be expert in **leading change** and this was most evident in the descriptions of how SIL was one part of an improvement jigsaw. For example, the principal at Corpus Christi described how the year after his appointment the school underwent school review, which led to involvement in SIL and the Performance and Development Culture program (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011a; Gurr & Drysdale, 2011), and which is now leading to thinking about how the development in teacher capacity and understanding of literacy development can be used to improve the teaching of mathematics. This example also illustrates the final leadership dimension, **improving teaching and learning**, as all the initiatives at Corpus Christi were designed to help to reflect on and improve current teaching practice.

The Literacy Education Officers and the Regional Principal Consultants were seen as important support for the principals' efforts to improve teaching and learning. Regional Principal Consultants tended to not work directly with teachers but did influence teaching practice through their work with Principals, the LEOs and Literacy Leaders. The combined knowledge and expertise, and commitment to change helped to form a guiding coalition to lead improvement in teaching and learning.

Strategic Leadership

Strategic leadership is another way to consider the work of principals and the framework of Davies (2011) provides guidance on this. The principals demonstrated strategic leadership in terms of setting direction (improving literacy), translating strategy into action (adopting SIL), aligning the people, school and strategy (using school improvement-SIL-other initiatives to improve literacy, with the literacy leader empowered to lead this), determining effective intervention points (e.g. identifying SIL as an important initiative to improve literacy), and developing strategic capabilities with the school (e.g. developing the capacity of the literacy leaders). LEOs noted the excellent strategic leadership of some principals, particularly in how they could meld SIL and other support programs into a long-term improvement agenda; all the principals in this evaluation were able to do this.

> *Some principals are very strategic and use SIL to help with other improvement agendas. (LEO)*

Building the professional and leadership capacities of the Literacy Leader

Whilst leadership is important for school success, and Principals are the main source of this leadership, the key story was how SIL helped the Literacy Leaders to develop.

> *SIL rocked our world, it changed us. (LL, Seymour)*

This is encouraging as this was a core intent of SIL. It has already been noted that principals had an important role in supporting the development of the Literacy Leaders, but the key person for this in each school was the Literacy Education Officer. We had two LEOs represented across the five schools, interviewed five LEOs and had comments from three Principal Consultants about their work. The nature of the relationship LEOs had with schools varied. Some worked only with the Literacy Leaders, others were also involved with teachers, classes and the school leadership. However they worked, central to their work was a focus on developing the capacities of literacy leaders. This might have included building knowledge about successful literacy development, modeling good teaching, coaching and modelling staff development, acting as a critical friend and being a supporter. At St Mary's this support included helping the Literacy Leaders to run effective Professional Learning Team meetings that included professional reading, reflection on teaching,

analysis of classroom data, moderation of student work samples, and the sharing of strategies to support the most at-risk students. Often the relationship with the LEO continued after SIL was completed.

Leadership of the Literacy Leaders was as important as that of Principals. All principals acknowledged the importance of sharing leadership. Building the leadership capacity of Literacy Leaders was viewed as important by most interviewees if Literacy Leaders were going to be able to effectively help improve schools.

SIL has helped the LL to do her job better and for her and me to drive change. (Principal, Spotswood)

At St Thomas More interviewees described how the five key SIL foci – leadership for learning, curriculum by design, transforming pedagogy, assessment for teaching and learning, and the learning environment – provided a support framework within which Literacy Leaders could develop changes in practice, both personally and with their teachers

Use of a variety of strategies to promote success

Many of these have already been mentioned but the interviewees described the following (main actors are acknowledged in the brackets):

- Modeling and classroom demonstrations of good teaching (LEO, LL)

  Modeling is now part of our culture – teachers will ask for help (LL, Corpus Christi).

- Coaching for improvement (LEO)

- Observing teaching and providing teachers with timely feedback on their teaching (LEO, LL)

- Establishing collaborative practices such as learning walks, teacher-teacher collaboration, Professional Learning Teams

- Confronting poor practice (Principal, LL, LEO)

- Discussing strategies for dealing with difficult staff (LEO)

- Insisting on accountability for student learning (LEO, LL, Principal)

- Continuity of support (LL, LEO)

- Acting as a critical friend to school planning, and policy and practice development (LEO)

- Constructing meeting structures (Secondary at Seymour) and/or effectively using Professional Learning Team meetings (LEO)

- Reflection and discussion in Professional Learning Team meetings (LEO, LL).

  We talk about what each of us is doing and whether we need support from each other. The culture of collaboration and sharing has been a huge shift for us… (LL).

- Allowing time for change to occur and sustaining the improvement effort over time (Principal, LEO)

  SIL is not a fix-it but part of a continuous improvement involving a range of other things (LEO).

- Establishing sense of urgency to drive change (Principal, LEO, LL)

- Creating a guiding coalition to lead improvement (Principal, LL)

- Celebrating success (Principal, LL)

Synergy of improvement programs

Across all schools it was emphasised many times that SIL was one element, albeit important, in an overall school improvement process. There was a strategic linking of school review, SIL, National Partnership coaching and the Literacy Assessment Project evident in the comments from St Francis Xavier. At St Mary's College, SIL acted as a strong foundation for the school's participation in the National Partnerships initiative. It was seen as another lever for change and improvement within the school. SIL had prepared the school for the coaching model used by the NP initiative, with the teachers feeling comfortable having an expert working with classroom. It was suggested by interviewees that they could not have participated in the NP initiative as successfully if they had not worked within the SIL process first

Role of Literacy Education Officer

The role of the LEO was seen as a critical factor in the success of the SIL process across all schools. Two LEOs worked across the five case study schools. Their role in individual schools can be described in a number of ways including building relationships, building confidence in utilising expert knowledge, strengthening the capacity of the Literacy Leader, individualising the SIL process, and maintaining motivation and focus in each school.

It was deemed important for the LEOs to build trust with Principals, Literacy Leaders and classroom teachers. These relationships would then underpin all the SIL work implemented in schools. Some schools commented that more time needed to be given to this stage of relationship building at the start of the SIL process to ensure that future work proceeded smoothly. The LEOs also supported the Principals and Literacy Leaders in some schools to build relationships with their teachers. At St Thomas More, the LEO modeled and assisted the new Literacy Leader to conduct meaningful PLTs and to implement Literacy Walks through classrooms where teachers were observed and constructive feedback offered to further improve literacy teaching and learning. All schools commented on the non-threatening and professional way in which the LEOs approached their role in schools. At St Margaret Mary's, the principal attributed the authenticity and credibility of the SIL process to the role of the LEO as an outside expert coming in to the school.

A key feature of the LEO role across all schools was to build expert content and pedagogical knowledge in literacy for teachers. All schools commented on the high levels of expertise that the LEOs were able to provide. This expert knowledge was demonstrated in classroom modelling sessions and in the feedback provided to teachers after observations and in PLTs. At some schools, professional readings were also provided to Literacy Leaders and classroom teachers to assist in building this knowledge.

Across all schools, the LEOs worked most closely with the Literacy Leaders and were responsible for the building of capacity of these teachers in their leadership roles. At Corpus Christi, the LEO and the Literacy Leader worked as a team, with the experienced Literacy Leader continuing to build her skills through her observations and discussions with the LEO. At St. Margaret Mary's the LEO supported the Literacy Leader of this small school to work with difficult staff and to drive the change agenda. The Principal at St Thomas Moore described in detail how the LEO had supported the Literacy Leader in a responsive and nurturing manner:

> *Martina (the LEO) was a great support for Anneliese (the Literacy Leader). Martina mainly worked with Anneliese, sat in on planning and staff meetings, ran sessions for staff, and generally supported Anneliese. In the past staff had been appointed as literacy leaders but with little enthusiasm for the role. The school was in disarray, with planning on the fly (selecting resources in the morning for example), little use of data to inform teaching (mainly only for reading recovery), little understanding of contemporary teaching in terms of data use, planning, room organisation, sharing practice, etc. Now we have these in place. SIL helped us with this by: Martina provided Anneliese with readings and resources to use in PLTs; modeling good practice occasionally; talking with Anneliese about what the CEOM was focussing on in terms of literacy; challenging the school's practice (such as expanding the notion of text type; flexible grouping of students, with the groupings based on data; responses to student writing); and, revisiting the vision of the school.*

The LEOs work in a responsive way. They see their role as one which develops on a needs basis with the nature of their work dependent on the individual needs of the school, and in particular, the needs of the Literacy Leader and teachers of the school at that time.

> *We work with schools at their point of need and one of the first and last things we do is a needs analysis- initially this can be very confronting but it can also show change. (LEO)*

In this way, their role might be one of coach or mentor, or critical friend and might involve different levels of in-classroom demonstration. The level of support was at times decreased as the project continued. In this way, the school teams were given increased responsibility to drive and sustain change in their schools.

> *We are not meant to be saviours or judges because whatever changes are made need to be sustained. (LEO)*

In some cases, the LEOs continue to work with schools even though SIL has finished.

Most of the schools also commented on the role of the LEO in helping to maintain a strong focus on literacy teaching and learning throughout the duration of the SIL process. Some teachers

also commented on the increased accountability on their teaching practice with the continuing visits from the LEO. This managed to maintain a "press" on the school team to continually think about and implement improvements in literacy teaching and learning.

It is important to note, however, that the work of the LEOs is underpinned by a strong, systemic and disciplined approach to improving teaching and learning. The core focus and principles of their role are drawn from a common framework designed around the five innovation streams: Leadership for Learning, Curriculum by Design, Transforming Pedagogy, Assessment for Teaching and Learning and Learning Environment.

Role of Principal consultant

The role of the Principal Consultant, although a lot less visible in the schools, was of utmost importance in supporting the SIL process across all schools.

Particularly in the initial stages of SIL, the Principal Consultant supported the Principals and liaised between them and the central office. They also worked with the Principals and LEOs to identify individual school needs and to establish a viable School Literacy Action Plan, which would drive the SIL Process for the duration of the project. The Principal Consultant was also able to assist Principals to make choices about the best personnel to work in Literacy leadership at the school. In some cases, the Principal Consultant conducted staff meetings to introduce the SIL process and offered professional learning to teachers around interpreting data. At St. Thomas More, the Principal Consultant attended most of the Leadership team meetings but was not involved in the work that the Literacy leader undertook with the classroom teachers.

In essence, the Principal Consultant acted as a facilitator between the school, regional and central office, ensuring that all participants were supported and that the process moved forward in a coordinated and focused way: "Everyone was on the same page" (PC).

Lessons learnt from implementing SIL and improvements to SIL

The responses to these two questions are analysed together as the lessons learnt were often expressed as improvements for future implementation of SIL.

The support of an external expert was universally acknowledged as key to the success of SIL and to any future programs of this type. The external expert needs to have a level of visible expertise, and they need to have the interpersonal skills to develop trusting and respectful relationships with school staff. As all schools are somewhat different, the external expert needs to have the capacity and permission to respond to each school individually.

Time is an important element for project success. Many interviewees stressed that the schools were undergoing major cultural change, and that this needed time to become embedded in daily practice, and hence to improve student learning outcomes in literacy. Not all schools were as yet able to demonstrate sustained learning improvement, although all were able to describe significant change in teacher practice. As SIL is a project focused on culture change, a one-year improvement expectation is too severe, and more likely three to five years is more realistic in terms of leading to sustained change in practice and sustained improved student learning.

SIL encouraged the schools to think beyond the current project and to continue on their improvement journeys. Areas for future development included: greater personalisation of student learning; extending improvement learning to other areas such as mathematics; encouraging more collaboration between teachers; encouraging teachers to be more reflective and more responsible for their own professional development, and, engaging families in student learning.

The success of the SIL process can also be attributed to the collaborative relationship that developed between the schools and the CEOM. With principals, Literacy Leaders, teachers and LEOs working together, schools were enabled to build on their individual strengths from within, rather than working from a deficit model. This also allowed schools to take responsibility for sustaining future improvement.

> *The LEO doesn't have a deficit model for staff, she provides us with direction, questions and points us in a way forward. (VP, Corio)*

In each school, SIL was part of an improvement journey, sometimes planned and sometimes

relying on serendipity, but which can, in hindsight be seen as a coherent strategic improvement process. For example, at St Thomas Moore SIL happened in a culture of change. The current principal began in 2008 and was immediately involved in a school review that highlighted the need to improve literacy outcomes and to develop staff capacity. The principal appointed the Literacy Leader in 2009 and encouraged them to pursue study through the CEOM Literacy Leaders program. A major building and refurbishment program (2010), a large staff turnover (2009/2010) and involvement in SIL (2010/2011) all provided opportunities to help transform the culture of the school as described earlier.

There is systemic learning evident in terms of sharing of the good practice and improvement evident in the SIL schools.

> *SIL schools should be linked with other schools so there are network opportunities for sharing knowledge. This could be good for linking experienced and new schools. (LL, St Mary's College)*

The LEOs and Principal Consultants were important conduits and promoters for sharing knowledge, and the LEOs discussed the importance of this:

> *Do we bring these schools together? The schools are not all the same, yet they have been branded as a SIL school, and so it may be good to bring them together and share stories of success and challenge.*

Discussion
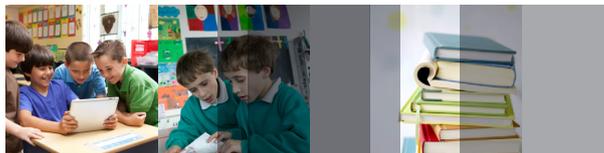
SIL has undoubtedly had a powerful effect on the schools involved. As part of a larger improvement agenda at each school, it has enabled the Principal and Literacy Leader to lead literacy improvement. Learning improvement was evident in most schools, and in those schools in which there was inconsistent evidence for improvement, there was a belief that learning was improving. In all schools there was clear evidence from all interviewees, school-based and those from the CEOM, that teacher belief and practice had changed.

SIL proved to be a conduit for discussion about using relevant knowledge and promoting good practice. At each school it enabled the leadership team, the Literacy Leaders and teachers to engage in discussion about literacy practices that work and how these can be used in the school to improve student learning outcomes. It was an empowering view of change as it did not operate from a deficit model. Current teacher practice was valued, but within an improvement framework – "How can we improve what we are currently doing?" An emphasis on collaboration and common purpose ensured that changes were seen as a collective endeavour to improve practice rather than a targeting of poor practice.

SIL was an improvement initiative that schools could own. Whilst it was dependent on the work of an external expert, the LEOs worked in such a way that there was a sense of teachers improving their practice rather than having improvement imposed on them. Importantly, Literacy Leaders were supported to build their capacity to lead school change, and it is this aspect that means that the SIL initiative is likely to be sustainable. It is a project premised on building school capacity to improve. The LEOs were highly valued and were seen as part of the collective effort to improve, but the improvement was not dependent on the LEOs continuing with the schools (although the relationship in many cases was so strong that LEOs are continuing to have some involvement with the schools).

SIL has led to culture change in the schools involved. The CEOM has for some time used the work of Michael Fullan on change (e.g. Fullan, 2001), with this evident, for example, in the development of the guiding conceptions of the Leadership Standards Framework (www.lsf.vic. catholic.edu.au).

Culture change is viewed as taking three to five years to embed and in the schools we visited they were all talking a long-term of change.

> We are now getting linkage and understanding as part of our seven year culture change cycle. (Principal, Corpus Christi)

> You are changing culture and so the program needs to be regular and long-term to help support this change. (LL, St Mary's College)

Hence, whilst two schools had not yet shown strong evidence of literacy improvement in terms of NAPLAN, they were confident that the changes they were seeing in teaching practice would lead to improved student learning. In essence, whilst literacy improvement is still developing, the culture of the schools has changed. Teachers are more focused on discussing and implementing ways to improve their practice. It could be described as teachers developing into professional learning communities. They have been supported in this through targeted leadership intervention at the middle (Literacy Leaders) and senior (Principal, LEOs) levels, and this relates to the next point.

There was a strong sense of project implementation coherence. The intended project was what was implemented in the schools, and this suggests that the project could be implemented again with a high level of integrity.

With the implementation of SIL across these schools, there has been a reframing of the relationship between the central CEOM office and the individual schools. Through this systematic and disciplined process, delivered consistently around a core set of principles and values, CEOM has been able to work collaboratively with schools to provide the support and structures necessary, thus enabling schools to take on ownership of the improvement agenda, and work towards sustainability. This is evidenced by the schools' ability to articulate the outcomes and learnings from SIL and to use these to frame further school improvement. As noted by the Principal at Corpus Christi: "We can now access learning ourselves. We are independently reflective. We now want to focus more on Mathematics."

We now want to highlight two important areas: the importance of leadership, and changes in teacher beliefs and practices.

The importance of leadership

A key finding from SIL is that the type of culture change required to improve literacy teaching practice was dependent on leadership. We know that leadership in schools is second only to the work of teachers in terms of impact on student learning (Leithwood, et al., 2004). Whilst Principals are the main source of this leadership, in contemporary schools it is important for other senior leaders (e.g. the Deputy Principal) and middle-level leaders (e.g. Literacy Leaders) to also be leaders.

Principals were important for initiating and supporting the adoption of SIL, for engaging with the LEOs and supporting their Literacy Leaders to be true leaders. LEOs were important for supporting the Literacy Leaders, and engaging the school and staff in a collective improvement endeavour. Literacy Leaders were important for leading the development of teacher practice and for enhancing the school's literacy direction. SIL provided a model which empowered the middle-level leadership of a school, in this case the Literacy Leaders, to be leaders. It is a model that has implications for other programs that need strong middle-level leader support.

Our own model of successful school leadership (Drysdale & Gurr, 2011b; refer to Figure 1) provides some guidance on how leadership was enacted in the schools and why it was important.

Principal leadership mostly has an indirect effect on student outcomes through activity at Level 2 whereby principals seek to enhance school capacity across the four areas of personal (professional development of self, both that of the principal and encouraging staff to take responsibility for their own development), professional (supporting teacher development), organisational (enhancing school practice), and community (enhancing community relationships). Enhancing these capacities leads to improvement in teaching and learning (Level 1) and hence student outcomes.

Within the Teaching and Learning area, the quality of instruction, the design of the curriculum, the various forms of assessment and the ability to motivate and equip students to manage their own learning, directly impact on student outcomes. Literacy Leaders need to be involved in direct interventions with teachers at this level. Working at Level 1 could include such aspects as coaching and modeling good practice in teaching and assessment. They also need to work with their teachers to enhance the school capacity by working at Level 2 on such aspects as enhancing teacher knowledge, modeling and trialing outside of the classroom good teaching, organizing effective Professional Learning Team meetings, and helping teachers to engage with families. This is aligned with the new Australian professional teaching standards (www.teacherstandards.aitsl.edu.au), which describe leading teachers in ways that would have them operating equally at Levels 1 and 2 of our model, and occasionally at Level 3. This is best achieved by focusing on providing greater support organisationally and personally to these leaders, helping them to clarify their role and enhance their capability to provide leadership interventions at all levels to help improve student outcomes. Of course, SIL is an example of how to support the Literacy Leaders and these aspects feature in how interviewees spoke about the impact of SIL.

Figure 1: Drysdale and Gurr Successful School Leadership Model
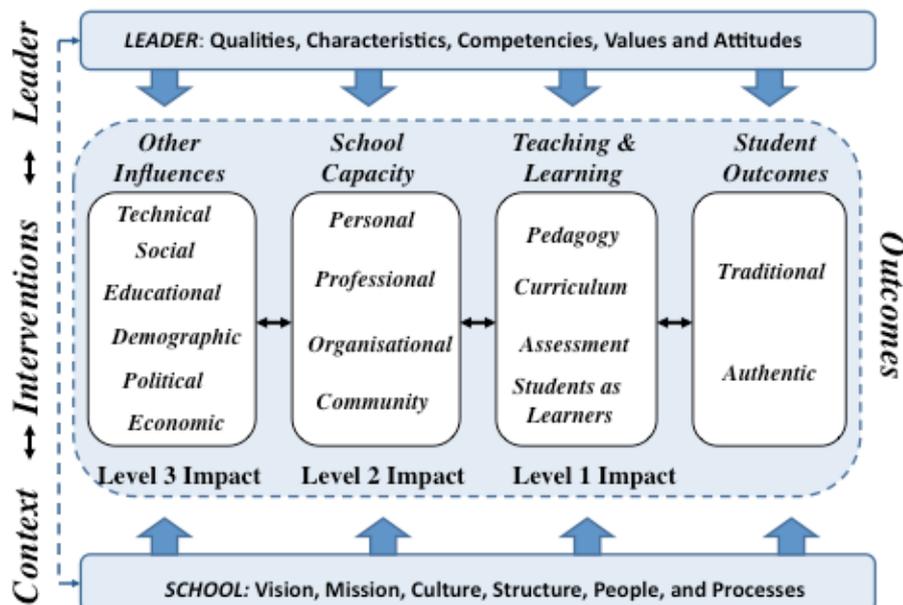
Teacher beliefs and practices

Another key finding is that, as a result of SIL, classroom teachers have refined and deepened understandings of what constitutes effective literacy teaching and learning. They report on a number of important factors:

- Need for high expectations of student achievement. A classroom teacher from St. Francis Xavier stated: "Students always used to be a bit behind and now we know that they can work at benchmarks. We expect more from them and they are reaching these expectations."

- Focused and explicit teaching based on the needs of the students. As the Literacy Leader from St Mary's College commented: "We choose a focus for learning and then the activities that will suit our students."

- Use of effective set of teaching strategies, for example, Guided Reading and Modeled Writing.

- Use of rich and diverse texts. Here teachers recognized the need to use a variety of texts – print-based, electronic and multimodal – to reflect the real-life experiences of their students in a contemporary world.

- Use of data to inform teaching. "We use data to actually work out what to do."

- More engaged learning time. A classroom teacher noted: "Students are probably more engaged and can do higher order things like inferences. We are doing complex activities like debates".

At a school level, through involvement with SIL, teachers arrived at shared understandings and a shared language about their practice.

We know what each other are doing, we are all talking about literacy in the same way, and students can see this. (Classroom teacher, Corio)

This was supported by the implementation of regular Professional Learning Team meetings across all the schools. Through these meetings the teachers also became more confident in their professional judgements as they developed the ability to be explicit about their teaching decisions, drawing on increased professional knowledge around literacy and an ability to use assessment data carefully to inform instruction. As noted by the LL at St Margaret Mary's:

PLTs should be about where the kids are at and moving them forward…a forum for sharing ideas, reflection, brainstorming student support strategies.

These regular meetings played a crucial role in all the schools as a context for professional learning and dialogue around effective literacy teaching and learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that SIL has led to substantial change in teacher practice and to improved student learning outcomes, even though in some schools this is still to be seen in measures such as NAPLAN. Importantly, SIL has enabled the Literacy Leaders to be true leaders in their schools, ones who set direction for literacy improvement, and develop the understandings and practices of teachers. In all schools SIL was part of a larger and long-term improvement focus and the Principals were able to fit participation in SIL with other improvement initiatives that their schools were involved in. The role of the Literacy Education Officers was crucial to the development of the Literacy Leaders and the ultimate success of SIL to change teacher practice and improve student literacy. The leadership of Principals to support the Literacy Education Officers and the Literacy Leaders was important for the success of SIL, and whilst the Principal Consultants did not have a large role in the implementation of SIL they were important in the establishment stage of getting schools involved and underway in SIL. As a systemic initiative to improve student learning outcomes it seems that SIL holds much promise as it empowers schools to take charge of change.

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1. St Mary's College, Seymour

SIL Evaluation Report

Interviews conducted on Monday May 7. The principal, three literacy leaders and two teachers were interviewed.

St Mary's College is a P-10 school situated in the rural town of Seymour, 110 kilometres from Melbourne. The school's population is drawn from Seymour and surrounding towns. With 12% of children coming from Australian Defence Force families situated at nearby bases such as Puckapunyal, the school population is somewhat transient. The school's SES ranking has dropped from 97 to 91 over the past eight years with 20% of families now receiving the Education Maintenance Allowance. Approximately 60% of the children come from separated families. While the population in Seymour is slowly declining, the school population is steady at 390 students (primary-210, secondary -180).

As a result of very poor performance on NAPLAN tests, St Mary's College was identified by the CEOM as being eligible for SIL strategic support from the beginning of 2007. The very low levels of student achievement reported in literacy at this time acted as a major catalyst for change in school culture, teaching practice and student learning outcomes. The principal, appointed in 2005, and with prior teaching experience at the school, took on a strong leadership role in managing the SIL process and resulting change. After negotiation with CEOM the school was granted an extra year's support in SIL with the process completed at the end of 2009. At this time, the school was then successful in joining the National Partnerships Initiative and through this was able to continue and build on the work commenced in SIL. With a school review completed in 2011, much of the improvement efforts sustained through SIL and National Partnerships were embedded within the School Improvement Plan.

Within this time, the school also attracted a large grant of $4,000,000 from the Federal government under the auspices of the Building Education Revolution. This money was used to construct a new multi-purpose stadium and new science laboratories. This helped to create a new environment at the school, providing new learning opportunities for students, lifting staff morale and raising the profile of the school in the local community.

Indicators of success for the school in SIL come from a variety of sources. Literacy achievement results have improved. This has been measured by teacher judgements and by marked improvement in NAPLAN performance. Teacher morale has improved as measured on the staff survey, and there has been considerable change in teacher practice, with purposeful learning team meetings, classroom observation and feedback practices, focused teaching and collaborative planning. The teachers also became more willing to share ideas and to be reflective practitioners.

The success of SIL can be contributed to a number of factors. Most important was the leadership provided by the principal and key literacy leader within the school. The principal was determined to take responsibility for the change process initiated by SIL and later embedded in the National Partnerships initiative. His work was informed by current research literature in leadership. While maintaining a persistent focus on continuous improvement, the principal also allowed for flexibility and innovation in challenging existing models of practice and establishing new ways of working and teaching to ensure enhanced learning opportunities for the students. The key literacy leader at the time worked closely with the Literacy Education Officer to support teachers through the planning and implementation of regular professional learning team meetings which included opportunities for professional reading, reflection on teaching, analysis of classroom data, moderation of work samples and the sharing of strategies to support the most at-risk students in the school. As a result of SIL, literacy leadership was then shared between three teachers across the different levels of schooling (P-2, 3-6 and 7-10). These three leaders were also supported to undertake sponsored postgraduate study in order to build leadership capacity and increased professional knowledge.

A second factor was the opportunity to work with an expert Literacy Support Officer from the CEOM who worked with the regional principal

consultant to provide support to the principal, key literacy leader and classroom teachers. In her role, the Literacy Education Officer observed classroom practice, affirming good teaching and providing feedback, modelled teaching strategies and helped with analysing data. All teachers interviewed commented on this person's high level of expertise around literacy teaching and learning and her ability to develop strong working relationships with all staff, responding to their particular needs. The opportunity to work with the Literacy Education Officer in a extended manner over the three-year period ensured that teachers were given sufficient time and support in developing their skills and knowledge. In terms of future support provision from the CEOM, the school believes a close relationship with an external expert working within the school over a sustained period of time is crucial.

Most importantly, success in SIL was made possible through improved teacher practice. Teachers noted that they felt well supported in planning and implementing a literacy program, which was focused, student centred and highly responsive to student needs as identified by assessment data. Increased accountability also ensured that expectations remained high and professional learning team meetings offered opportunities for further professional learning and dialogue to develop shard beliefs and understandings.

A final outcome is that SIL has led to considerations for future improvement. Besides sustaining current practices and pedagogies, the school would like to further develop a focus on personalised learning, document planning in a more systematic way and transfer the knowledge and skills gained in SIL to other discipline areas, such as numeracy, in both primary and secondary parts of the school.

In addition, the principal and literacy leaders at the school noted that SIL acted as a strong foundation for the school's participation in the National Partnerships (NP) initiative. It was seen as another lever for change and improvement within the school. They highlighted that SIL had prepared them for the coaching model used by NP with the teachers feeling comfortable having an expert working with them in the classroom. The school could not have been able to participate in NP as successfully if they had not worked within the SIL process first.

2. St Thomas More Primary School, Hadfield

SIL Evaluation Report

Interviews conducted on Wednesday, May 16. The principal, Literacy Leader and two teachers were interviewed.

St Thomas More is a primary school situated in the northern metropolitan suburb of Melbourne. The school's population of 316 students is made up of 40% students from Anglo-Saxon backgrounds with the remainder containing many second generation students from Italian and Greek backgrounds. A quarter of the school's families receive the Education Maintenance Allowance.

After the appointment of a new principal in 2008 and with the identification of poor literacy results in the school review that same year, the school applied for some strategic support through the SIL process. This was also timely as in 2009 a new inexperienced Literacy Leader was appointed to the school and SIL was hoped to support this new teacher in her role of leading other staff to improve literacy outcomes for the students.

There have been a number of indicators to show evidence of SIL's success in the school. Apart from a fall in Year 3 NAPLAN performance in 2010, all other years have shown an improvement in student literacy achievements. There has been considerable change in teacher practice, with more purposeful PLT meetings, collaborative planning, shared beliefs and understandings, more openness in the classrooms and more consistent practices across the school. Students are more engaged and reflective in their learning and have a greater understanding of the purpose of their learning.

In addition to this, SIL has helped in other ways. It has provided very strong support for the literacy leader growing her expertise and confidence to lead staff. The five key foci of SIL - leadership for learning, curriculum by design, transforming pedagogy, assessment for teaching and learning and learning environment - provided a useful framework within which the literacy leader could develop changes in

practice. There has also been a change in school culture. As a result of the principal and staff listening to parent concerns and offering some parent education around aspects of literacy, the school culture has shifted from a negative, discipline based one to one with a strong sense of care and community with greater parental involvement and support. It has also led to changes in school organisation including a dedicated daily two-hour literacy block to allow for focused teaching.

At a round this time, the school was also involved in a major building and refurbishment program and there was a high staff turnover at the end of 2009. As a result, the school now enjoys a more positive profile within the community attracting students from without the school zone.

The success of SIL can be contributed to a range of factors. The key to this success was the strong leadership provided by the principal and literacy leader within the school. With both these leaders new to their positions within the school, SIL provided a platform for change.

A second factor was the opportunity to work with an outside Literacy Officer from the CEOM who worked closely with the principal, Literacy Leader and staff. In her role, this expert attended staff and planning meetings, provided professional resources for PLT meetings and modeled some teaching in classrooms. A crucial part of her role was to support the newly appointed and inexperienced Literacy Leader by modeling good practice in PLT meetings, providing professional readings and giving direction about school focus for literacy. The Literacy Officer worked closely with the Literacy Leader in a non-threatening way to develop her role and build expertise in literacy. As a result, the Literacy Leader has grown in her ability and confidence to lead staff and manage change in literacy beliefs and practices across the school.

A final outcome is that SIL has led to considerations for future improvement. The school plans to use the learnings from SIL to inform work in writing in upper primary classrooms as well as across other curriculum areas while maintaining established current practices and pedagogies. This will be timely as the school heads into the next review cycle.

A further outcome is that the Literacy Leader is now involved in a mentoring program to continue support at the conclusion of the SIL process.

In terms of suggestions for the improvement of the SIL process, the school valued the role of the Literacy Education Officer in supporting the initiative at the school and classroom level. Allowing more time to establish relationships between the Literacy Education Officer and the school staff as well as more flexibility in responding to the specific needs of the individual school would ensure the continued success of similar initiatives.

CORPUS CHRISTI
KINGSVILLE

3. Corpus Christi School, Kingsville

School Improvement Literacy Case Report

Interviews conducted on Monday April 30. The principal, literacy leader and three teachers were interviewed.

Corpus Christi is a small primary school of less than 200 students. The school opened in 1942, with peak enrolments of over 600 in the 1960s. The surrounding community comprises families of many different nationalities, and whilst income levels in the community are relatively low, there are emerging indicators of gentrification of the area as new families move in. The school population has 12 different cultures represented with Vietnamese being the highest proportion at 30%. Over 60% of families are classified as being of Non-English Speaking Background, and over 30% of families are eligible for the Education Maintenance Allowance. The buildings and grounds are of a high standard, with a Church prominently adjoining the school complex.

Involvement in SIL came about for several reasons. The current principal arrived in 2006 and a school review occurred in 2007, with both identifying the need to improve the teaching of literacy and student learning outcomes. It was also evident that numeracy needed improving. The CEOM suggested that the school become involved in a numeracy improvement strategy but the school decided it would be better to continue work on improving literacy and so it was agreed that the school would be participate in SIL for 2008/2009. As part of the school's long-term improvement agenda, the school is now working on performance and development culture initiatives. This context of change – a new principal, school review, involvement in SIL and the availability of the performance and development culture program – is important in considering the success of the SIL project. SIL is not a one off improvement effort but part of larger and continuing story of change, one were there links and synergy between different improvement efforts.

Indicators of success for the school come from several sources. Literacy results (both teacher judgements and performance on tests such as NAPLAN) have improved, although it was noted that with a small school there is fluctuation in some of these results. Teacher attitudes to school have improved as measured on the staff survey, and there has been considerable change in teacher practice, with this both formal (such as the regular and purposeful professional learning team meetings, the acceptance of observation processes such as literacy walks) and informal (such as the enthusiasm to try new ideas and the desire to work more collaboratively). There have been regular visitations by other schools as the school's reputation for high quality teaching and learning grows.

Involvement in SIL helped in several ways. Key was the provision of an external expert from the CEOM (the Literacy Education Officer) who worked closely with the literacy leader and teachers, modeling good practice, observing practice, providing feedback and celebrating success. The person established their professional credibility easily and all interviewed commented on the person's high level of literacy teaching expertise. The continuity of having the Literacy Education Officer over a two-year period was an important element in giving teachers time to develop their skills and knowledge. In terms of future CEOM support programs, the school believed that the ongoing contact and support of an external expert, working within the school would be important.

A second element of success was the leadership within the school provided by the principal and literacy leader. Again there was a high level of credibility shown in both people, and integrity, high regard, and professionalism were qualities exhibited. The principal came with a vision for improvement which became manifest through the school review process. The literacy leader was particularly important in terms of providing continuity of support for teachers to improve practice. The literacy leader and Literacy Education Officer worked closely together to support teachers. Also important was the celebration of success, the provision of professional reading, the presence of the leadership team in professional learning opportunities (including internal opportunities such as PLTs and literacy walks), and using student and teacher data to create a sense of urgency for change (Kotter, 1996).

Related to both the Literacy Education Officer's role and the leadership of the principal and literacy leader was the process for improving teacher practice which relied on observation and feedback, demonstration/modeling of

good practice and reflection and discussion of teachers in professional learning teams. Importantly, most of this work was located within or close to the classroom. This reflects good practice in professional learning and supports Richard Elmore's assertion that for professional learning to improve student learning it needs to be located as close as possible to the classroom.

The fourth element of success is that there was always a focus on identifying and supporting student literacy learning needs. Teachers mentioned that they had become better teachers through SIL because they were more attuned to the needs of their students and had more strategies to help them.

Outcomes of participation in SIL include, importantly, evidence of improved student learning (early years assessments, NAPLAN, teacher assessments). Without this there would be little point in such a project. Student learning outcomes have improved and student behaviour has also changed with students more risk-taking, more willing to share their work and to give each other feedback. However, the path to achieving improved student learning is through changes in teacher behaviour. At this school there is evidence of several major changes. Teachers commented that they were more explicit about how they teach, and have a shared language about teaching. Teachers commented that they use assessments on a daily basis to help plan what they do the next day with their students – moving towards a more individualised/personalised approach

to teaching and learning. Teachers are more comfortable in being observed by the leadership of the school and by colleagues. Literacy walks are now part of normal practice, and so too is regular teacher-teacher collaboration. Professional learning team meetings are now a regular and important part of professional practice and the meetings are more focused on supporting improvement in teaching and learning through professional conversations, reading and learning. Teachers commented that they were now better able to evaluate their own practice and access appropriate learning; they have become independently reflective practitioners. The school has used worthwhile teacher improvement practices such as videoing teachers and collegially reflecting on this, releasing teachers to formally observe other teachers and to give feedback,

A most important outcome is that there are new improvements being considered. A focus on literacy non-negotiables and success criteria is freeing teachers to be more creative in how they approach literacy development. The school wants to continue on its individualisation/ personalisation journey, and there was discussion of how the SIL approach could be used to improve other areas, such as mathematics.

4. St Margaret Mary's Primary School, Spotswood

School Improvement Literacy Case Report

Interviews conducted on Monday May 14. The principal, literacy leader and a teacher were interviewed.

St Margaret Mary's school is a small primary school of less 170 students. The school opened in 1954 with 76 students. The surrounding community is mainly of European origin. Approximately 19 percent of families are of a language background other than English, and in an increasingly gentrified neighbourhood, approximately 15 percent of families are in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance. There are 19 students receiving special needs funding. The buildings and grounds are in good condition and provide stimulating learning and recreational spaces. The Parish Church adjoins the school. On the school website the school is described as 'a vibrant school community that continues to flourish as a place of faith-filled experiences and rich learning opportunities.'

Involvement in SIL came about as part of the turnaround of the school. The school was in need of major change. Learning outcomes were low, classrooms were uninspiring and teaching very teacher centred and not responsive to individual student needs. There was a lack of teacher planning, accountability, and knowledge of student learning needs. The school had a poor reputation in the community. The appointment of the current principal began a five-year reform program that continues. SIL was important in terms of supporting the literary leader and principal in their reform efforts. It gave them the platform to implement change. Importantly, SIL linked well with the National Partnerships Coaching program, and the importance of this linkage was emphasised throughout the interviews. Also emphasised was the synergy between participation in SIL and the school review process.

Indicators of success are many. NAPLAN performance indicates improved literacy performance from 2008 to 2011, with especially strong results in 2011 that have the year 3 and 5 students performing at or above national and similar school averages in reading, persuasive writing, and grammar and punctuation, and at the national and similar averages for spelling. The school does item analysis of NAPLAN to make best use of the test. Teacher practice has changed. There are now regular literacy professional learning teams, and teaching is more focused. Parents are reporting improved learning, community reputation has increased, and the school is now experiencing enrolment pressure.

Involvement in SIL helped the school in several ways, mainly in terms of supporting the school leaders to lead change. Strong leadership is a feature of the school. By strong leadership we mean leadership that has clear direction and moral purpose, is focused on developing people, and has the knowledge and skills needed to bring about improvement in teaching and learning. The principal was the instigator for change and SIL came along at an opportune time, as it became the vehicle for change. It helped to give the principal the right to insist on change, and the literary leader the right to work with teachers to improve teaching and learning. It established a sense of urgency for change and allowed a guiding coalition, in this case the principal and literacy leader, to form to bring about a focus on improving literacy. The external Literacy Education Officer supported the principal's work through helping to revisit the school vision and goals, and supporting the work of the school leadership group.

SIL helped the literacy leader to be a leader in terms of establishing a goal of improved literary and developing staff capacity to achieve this. The literacy leader already had passion, enthusiasm and knowledge, and through SIL and the support of the principal, she was able to help others understand the need for change, and to support their professional growth. The literacy leader is now part of the leadership team, she has the opportunity to address staff on literacy issues, classrooms are more open and she has more opportunity to work with teachers to improve teaching and learning, and, as literacy has improved, she has been able to change her work (e.g. less time spent on reading recovery) to focus more on teacher development. Whilst the principal has been a major support for the changed work of the literacy leader, also important was the Literacy Education Officer who supported the literacy leader through: mentoring; strategies for dealing with difficult staff; confronting poor practice; and, insisting on teacher accountability. The Literacy Education Officer worked in two classrooms to confirm that there were teaching and learning concerns, and then acted as a mentor for the literacy leader; this relationship has been maintained even after SIL finished.

Outcomes of involvement in SIL, apart from the learning outcomes mentioned previously, are many. Teachers are teaching differently, with a much stronger student focus, better understanding of student progress, and more targeted teaching as evidence is used to guide teaching and learning. Teachers are working together, more accepting of support from others, open to suggestions for improvement, and actively seeking to improve. Trust has been developed and there is a sense of collective effort to improve literacy. Planning has become more focused on meeting the needs of students, and professional learning is more targeted on school needs. PLTs are more focused on discussing the needs of students using an evidenced-based approach. Student language has changed in that they are more articulate about describing their learning.

Future improvement areas include being involved in the Literacy Assessment Project (LAP), extending the learning associated with improving literacy to also improve numeracy, further developing teacher responsibility for professional learning through initiatives such as personal inquiry (teacher nominated study focus).

The link between SIL, the National Partnership coaching program, and LAP was emphasised; they are important elements in the continuing school improvement journey of the school, and LAP will provide important skill development in assessment of learning.

In terms of suggestions for the improvement of SIL, the school recommended incorporating more coaching, continuing the use of an outside expert, and making the process more consistent, regular and longer term.

5. St. Francis Xavier Primary School, Corio

School Improvement Literacy Case Report

Interviews conducted on Friday May 25. The principal, two literacy leaders and two teachers were interviewed.

St. Francis Xavier's School is a small primary school of approximately 200 students. The school opened in 1976 and serves a low-income community with 64 percent of families in the lowest income quartile. It is also serves a culturally diverse community, although English language is relatively strong as only 12 percent of families have a language background other than English. Approximately 8 percent of students received special needs funding. There is a strong sense of family and community partnership (the school is involved in family-school projects) and evidenced by families committed to staying with the school approximately three quarters of prep enrolments in 2013 are siblings). The school's reputation in the community is such that there is now a waiting list for new enrolments. A permanent Church and parish centre adjoins the school, and the school buildings and grounds are in excellent condition. With a consistent history of new building and upgrades, the school facilities are contemporary with excellent open-plan spaces that support collaborative and personalised teaching practice. On the school website the school describes itself as:

> We see ourselves as a community of students, parents, parish and school staff working together in a spirit of faith, hope and love. It is our belief that we can pursue excellence and make a positive difference in the world by being responsible, caring and Christ-like.

The leadership of the school has been in place for several years with the principal in his eighth year and deputy principal in his fourth year at the school. There are two literacy leaders with responsibilities for years prep-2 and 3-6 respectively.

Involvement in SIL came about as part of an overall and sustained school improvement plan. SIL is part of a suite of improvement

projects including Restorative Practice, National Partnerships Coaching program, and the Literacy Assessment Project all facilitated by the school review process. The place of SIL as part of an overall improvement strategy was emphasised. An example is how the school has appointed an experienced literacy teacher, through National Partnership initiative funding, to support teacher development, with this work supported by the literacy leaders who have benefitted from their involvement in SIL. There is also evidence of a strong professional learning community with nearly half the staff involved in some type of postgraduate study (literacy leadership, mathematics, student wellbeing).

The school explained that there were many indicators of success. Most of these were associated with changed student and teacher practice. The school indicated that there was greater student engagement, a more personalised approach to student learning and greater use of assessment to drive student learning plans, teacher talk in planning meetings that is now more focused on learning issues, and teachers who are more active in the classroom (teachers are fully engaged in individual conversations with children, and in small group and whole group activities). Teachers indicated that they are better prepared for class and that as a consequence students are better prepared for learning. These teachers also talked about indicators of learning success in that most students are now reaching national benchmarks and there is an expectation that this will continue to improve. The school now uses like and mixed ability groupings for literacy and numeracy and this has led to improved student confidence and self-management. Students are working at their ability level and no longer feel they are behind or being restrained. Groupings are fluid and based on assessment of student learning needs.

External indicators of literacy success are, however, ambivalent. NAPLAN performance does not indicate with clarity that there has been improvement. Whilst reading performance of the 2008-2010 and 2009-2011 cohorts has shown good growth, schools with students at the same starting point showed greater growth (for both the 2008-2010 and 2009-2011 comparisons), as did schools with students with similar students but who had lower starting point (2009-2011). For narrative writing from 2008-2010, growth was somewhat better than schools with similar students. Comparison of mean scores across all English areas indicates that the school is at or below similar schools, and below or substantially below compared to the Australian average. Overall NAPLAN data suggest that there has been some improvement in literacy but with substantial work still to be done to achieve the next aim of being consistently above similar schools.

Involvement in SIL helped the school in several ways. The Literacy Education Officer supported the literacy leaders, worked with the Professional Learning Teams (PLT), modeled good practice, and shared knowledge, introducing new ideas such as writer's notebook, writer's chair, and conferencing, In regard to modeling, the school noted that the CEO expert didn't have a deficit model, and instead modeled good practice that worked from the point of need of children. Teachers have become more knowledgeable and skilled in good teaching practice, and SIL has helped build leadership capacity to support teacher development. The Literacy Education Officer worked with the literacy leaders to build their capacities, and the literacy leaders worked with the teachers to do the same. Planning has changed with PLT meetings more data driven and focused on improving student learning. Practice has changed with teachers working in a more consistent way. They know what each other are doing, they are talking about literacy in the same way, they support each other and students can see the consistency in approach.

Future improvement areas include aiming to have students with average literacy performance close to the national average, further development of needs-based literacy grouping of students, more team-based teacher professional learning, more sharing of best practice across years prep to 6, and further development of family-school partnerships.

In terms of suggestions for the improvement of the SIL process, the school valued the role of the external expert acting as a critical friend, as well as coach and mentor. They also discussed the importance of promoting interaction between school stakeholders (internal and external).