Principal led school improvement and teacher capacity building in the Barwon South Network

Final Report

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Executive summary

The period of interest for this report is the beginning of 2011 to the end of 2012. The period commenced when the Regional Network Leader of the Barwon South Network of schools in the Barwon South Region of the Department of Education and Early Childhood contacted the School of Education at Deakin University, Waurn Ponds Campus Geelong. The Regional Network Leader outlined a desire to engage with Deakin University to research a short-term-cycle model of school improvement to be implemented in the region. While the model was expected to be taken on by all schools in the region the research was limited to the 23 schools in the Barwon South Network with four schools to be investigated more closely for each of two years (2001 & 2012) – eight focus schools in total.

Many positive outcomes flowed from the implementation of short-term-cycle school improvement plans and their associated practices but there was wide variation in the nature and degrees of success and of the perception of the process. The research team asked the following questions of the data:

1. **What aspects of the School Improvement Plan (SIP) approach were important for initiating and supporting worthwhile change?**

2. **What might we take from this, to provide guidance on how best to support change in teaching and learning processes in schools?**

The School Improvement Plan (SIP) worked in a range of ways. At one level it was strongly focused on school leadership, and a need to improve principals' capacity to initiate worthwhile teaching and learning processes in their schools. Underlying this intent, one might think an assumption is operation is that the leadership process involves top down decision-making and a willingness to hold staff accountable for the quality of their practice.

The second strong focus was on the translation into practice and the consequent effect on student learning, involving an emphasis on data and evidence led practice. Hence, along with the leadership focus there was a demand for the process of school improvement to reach down into students and classrooms. Thus, the SIP process inevitably involved a chain of decision-making by which student learning quality drove the intervention, and teachers responsible for this had a common view. The model therefore should not be seen as an intervention only on the principal, but rather on the school decision-making system and focus. Even though it was the principal receiving the SIP planning template, and reporting to the network, the reporting was required to include description of the operation of the school processes, of classroom processes, and of student learning. This of course placed significant constraints on principals, which may help explain the variation in responses and outcomes described above.

The findings from this study are based on multiple data sources: analysis of both open and closed survey questions which all teachers in the 23 schools in the network were invited to complete; interviews with principals, teachers and leaders in the eight case study schools; some interviews with students in the case study schools; and interviews with leaders who worked in the regional network office; and field notes from network meetings including the celebrations days. Celebrations days occurred each school term when groups of principals came together to share and celebrate the improvements and processes happening in their schools. Many of the themes emerging from the analysis of the different data sources were similar or overlapping, providing some confidence in the evidence-base for the findings.

The study, conducted over two years of data collection and analysis, has demonstrated a range of positive outcomes in at the case study schools relating to school communication and collaboration processes, professional learning of principals, leadership teams and classroom teachers. There was evidence in the survey responses and field notes from 'celebration days' that these outcomes were also represented in other schools in the network. The key points of change concerned the leadership processes of planning for improvement, and the rigorous attention to student data in framing teaching and learning processes. This latter point of change had the effect of basing SIP processes on a platform of evidence-based change. The research uncovered considerable anecdotal and observational evidence of improvements in student learning, in teacher accounts in interview, and presentations of student work. Interviews with students, although not as representative as the team would have liked, showed evidence of student awareness of learning goals, a key driver in the SIP improvement model. It was, however, not possible over this timescale to collect objective comparative evidence of enhanced learning outcomes.

A number of features of the short-term-cycle SIP were identified that supported positive change across the network. These were: 1) the support structures represented by the network leader and support personnel within schools, 2) the nature of the SIP model – focusing strongly on change leadership but within a collaborative structure that combined top-down and bottom-up elements, 3) the focus on data-led planning and implementation that helped drill down to explicit elements of classroom practice, and 4) the accountability regimes represented by network leader presence, and the celebration days in which principals became effectively accountable to their peers. We found that in the second year of the project, momentum was lost in the case study schools, as the network was dismantled. This raised issues also for the conduct of research in situations of systemic change.

Alongside the finding of evidence of positive outcomes in the case study schools overall, was the finding that the SIP processes and outcomes varied considerably across schools. A number of contextual factors were identified that led to this variation, including school histories of reform, principal management style, and school size and structure that made the short-term-cycle model unmanageable. In some cases there was overt resistance to the SIP model, at least in some part, and this led to an element of performativity in which the language of the SIP was conscripted to other purposes. The study found that even with functioning schools the SIP was understood differently and the processes performed differently, raising the question of whether in the study we are dealing with one SIP or many. The final take home message from the research is that schools are complex

institutions, and models of school improvement need to involve both strong principled features, and flexibility in local application, if all schools' interests in improving teaching and learning processes and outcomes are to be served.

Key findings of the study

Analysis of the multiple data sources yielded the following key findings.

Key finding 1: The value of Regional Networks

Regional network personnel were crucial mediators of teacher and leadership capacity building within the network, and a key resource for sharing knowledge of the SIP process and of supporting teacher practice. This finding suggests that the dismantling of the network may have a dramatic effect on the momentum of school improvement in the region.

Key finding 2: Decision-making

For many schools SIP goals were directly related to existing **annual** implementation plans. Principals described the decision-making as collaborative while teachers were more muted in nominating 'staff input' or 'negotiation' as their role.

Key finding 3: Processes supporting improvement

Principals, leadership team and teachers all focused on collaboration and communication, and the use of data to inform **teaching** and monitor progress, as the two key elements of the process of improvements.

Key finding 4: Effect of SIP on 'the way I work'

The SIP led to positive and substantial change in most schools' practices. In their descriptions of the nature of change, leadership teams emphasised school ethos and working relations with teachers, whereas teachers emphasised improved pedagogy, and collaboration with peers. Both groups nominated attention to evidence based planning for teaching as a means to improve student outcomes as a significant change.

Key finding 5: Stratified focus for SIP

Principals and school leadership teams cited big picture, process issues concerning teacher professional learning as the key focus of the SIP whereas teachers, their own professional learning as a means to improve student-learning outcomes was more prominent.

Key finding 6: Improvement in leadership capability

For most principals and leadership teams the SIP moved them in the direction of more collaborative approaches to improvement and greater attention to classroom practices and student-learning needs as identified in their school data. For some principals, the combination of the SIP requirements, the authority of the network, and communication with other principals constituted a significant professional learning experience in leadership.

Key finding 7: Changes in classroom practice

In most of the case study schools there was evidence that teachers had translated the SIP into significant changes to their classroom practice, focusing more on student-learning needs, and developing a more student-centred pedagogy. The key factor driving these changes was the collaborative and supportive nature of the professional learning enabled by the whole school focus.

Key finding 8: Student-learning outcomes

While the study was not able to establish objective data on improved student-learning outcomes, there was considerable anecdotal evidence presented during celebrations, teacher interviews, and student interviews, of instances of impressive improvements in student-learning flowing directly from the SIP.

Key finding 9: Variation in school outcomes

In a carefully shaped school improvement process, the complexity of schools, school size and associated leadership structures, school and leadership histories inevitably lead to variations in the processes developed, and the outcomes.

Key finding 10: Time frame of change and school structures

A disjunction existed between the temporal aspects of the short-term-cycle SIP model and the requirements of the decision-making structures and processes in schools. Change at this level takes time, more so for larger schools with more complex structures. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the urgency implied by the short-term-cycle model did have an impact on the pace at which the initiative was embraced and worked through, in some schools.

Key finding 11: SIP and school histories of reform

The way the SIP was presented by leadership, and the language adopted around the intervention, was conscripted to conform to previous histories of reform processes in individual schools.

Key finding 12: The effect of leadership style on operation of the SIP

The SIP was perceived and implemented differently by principals, depending on their particular histories and leadership styles and school contexts. At the same time, the SIP processes in some cases influenced the leadership style of principals and the leadership teams.

Key finding 13: Leadership practices

Enhanced improvement in teacher practice and student-learning outcomes seemed to be most evident when the principal and/or school leadership team:

- Were clear sighted about goals for the school, teachers and students;

- Encouraged, supported and empowered teachers through collaborative processes;

- Became knowledgeable about individual teachers, and in some cases students;

- Encouraged teachers in ongoing inquiry and explicit reflection on their practice; and

- Were committed to the SIP and expected it to produce successful outcomes.

Key finding 14: The focus of intervention

The SIP model works at two key levels: the professional development of school principals around leadership processes, and the framing of school decision-making processes that define the nature of effective change leadership.

Key finding 15: Accountability regimes

The structured accountability regime within the SIP model was critically important for initiating and sustaining change. The key elements were: the oversight of a network leader prepared to challenge and encourage consistency, and the public process of 'celebrations' and reporting which applied pressure on principals to deliver, provide ideas, encourage coherence, and provided positive feedback for successful initiatives. The negative side of the accountability regime is that it led in some cases to performativity where principals conscripted SIP language to make claims that were at base not consistent with the SIP vision and allowed for the appearance of performance (or conformance).

Key finding 16: Features of the SIP model supporting school improvement

In reviewing the case studies and survey findings a number of features of the short-term-cycle SIP model emerged as key to supporting effective improvement processes. These are:

- the focus on evidence for student-learning to frame and evaluate teaching processes which establishes a language through which teachers can share ideas, and sharpens decision-making structures in the school;

- the focus on teacher classroom practice as the key determinant of student-learning, with support structures such as coaches, principal advice, and collaborative planning;

- the focus on whole school planning which establishes a community of practice through which teacher professional learning can occur;

- the focus on school leadership with a mix of demands and supports, and a model of distributed leadership, through which principal professional learning can occur;

- a school improvement cycle that ensures attention to planning and implementation within restricted time frames in the school improvement cycle that ensure attention to planning and implementation are at the forefront of teacher thinking and reflection'; and

- a layered accountability regime embedded within support structures, including reports, celebration days, network leader support consultations with principals and network leader consultations.

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1. Introduction

This Report presents 2011/12 the findings from the 'Principal led school improvement and teacher capacity building in the Barwon South Network project' funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in partnership with researchers from the Faculty of Arts and Education at Deakin University.

1.1 Personnel involved in this project include:

Mr Grant Rau	Regional Director Barwon South Western Region, DEECD
Ms Robyn Jeffery	Regional Network Leader for Barwon South Network, DEECD
Ms Helen Fraser	Assistant Regional Director: School Improvement
Mr Steve Durkin	Acting Regional Network Leader for Barwon South Network, DEECD
A Prof Coral Campbell	School of Education, Deakin University
Dr Louise Paatsch	School of Education, Deakin University
Dr Shaun Rawolle	School of Education, Deakin University
Prof Russell Tytler	School of Education, Deakin University
Dr Muriel Wells	School of Education, Deakin University

Reference Group Members

Ms Raylene Dodds
Professor Richard Bates
Ms Celia Franze – student representative
Ms Greta Lynch
Mr Stuart McCoombe

1.2 Research Background and Collaboration between Barwon South Network and Deakin

The project emerged as a result of the interest of then Barwon South Network leader, Robyn Jeffery, who wanted to follow the progress and impact of a new model of School Improvement, and support for the project by then Assistant Director (School Improvement), Helen Fraser and the Regional Director, Grant Rau. This initiative was connected specifically with the role played by School Improvement Plans in the United Kingdom, which operated on a short-term cycle (6 weeks), and were attached to inspection practices. The practice and effects of this approach had been viewed first hand by the Regional Director in England and Scotland and considered as a possible model to trial in the region.

The focus on school improvement was a continuation of system wide policies in which Victoria was well positioned in international research and policy. In Victoria, School Improvement then featured as a core aspect of a system-wide approach that can be traced back to the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (DET 2003). The report had a section devoted to "continuously improving schools" and a section within this report, "flagship strategy 6: school improvement" that outlined specific Government commitments to the policy. Following the release of the 2003 Blueprint, school improvement was supported through the department through dedicated positions on School Improvement and initiatives such as the School Accountability and Improvement Framework, and was featured in Professional Development included in the induction of school principals (see http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/profdev/pages/satopics.aspx).

The system-wide approach to school improvement in Victoria was recognised internationally as a contribution to policy development, and was featured in an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) commissioned study in 2007 looking at leadership in schools (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche 2007). The Chapter on Victoria in the OECD report focussed on one key feature viewed as unique in Victorian policy around leadership and school improvement, a focus not on accountability or implementation of a model, but on human capital development, and the building of leadership capacity in schools (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche 2007, 205). It also suggested that a key aspect of this approach lay in both its evidence-based and data-informed decision-making but also on an explicit theory of action that underpinned changes (Fraser & Petsch 2007). The report suggested that Victoria was at the cutting edge of reform that linked leadership to school improvement (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche 2007, 205).

The problem that confronted the Network Leader was to find a way to understand the impact that the introduction of a new model might have on leaders in schools, on schools, and on teacher practices and student-learning. As noted by the OECD report, the overarching emphasis in earlier approaches to school improvement in Victoria was that it should form part of an overall strategy of improving human capital (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche 2007). In contrast, the UK school improvement plans were located within a set of policies concerned with inspection and accountability, involving both self-evaluation and external evaluation. The challenge was how to investigate a new approach to SIPs that was drawn from the UK and to understand how this approach could best fit the needs of leaders in a network of schools with formally appointed supports at a regional level.

Complicating this interest was the acknowledgement that there were other school improvement initiatives using SIPs prior to this new model, with different priorities and understandings. Consistent with some accounts of research into school improvement, the research approach involved collaboration between the network, researchers and schools in which aspects of the research design would be developed in consultation with researchers (McLaughlin & Black-Hawkins 2004). In addition, throughout the research project, reference group meetings would outline progress, discuss emergent issues and preliminary findings of the research. In short, though some aspects of the research were to have an evaluative function, the intent was that the research would involve an intervention in the working of the model, in the form of research based findings that could feedback on the operation of the model.

In practice, some large-scale shifts in government priorities had an impact on the research. The focus on school improvement, though common to Victorian schools in different guises since the 1970s, was a specific policy emphasis of the previous Government. Though a new State Government had come into power 6 months prior to the beginning of the project, on December 2 2010, this change took some time to impact on schools and regions in Victoria. While school improvement as a set of policy initiatives requires a long-term, system-wide approach to enact, this initiative was tied to the imperatives of the outgoing government (and subsequently to a policy announcement by the Federal Gillard-led Government). In the policy development and government restructuring that accompanied the new State government, two major changes impacted on the project. The first change was that network supported school improvement would no longer be a central focus of state government policy for schools, and that along with this change the support structures and positions that enabled school improvement to continue in its current form in regions and schools would also disappear. In its place more autonomy and responsibility for functions previously carried out by regions would be devolved to principals and individual schools. This kind of policy change impacts on the coherence of programs and services that schools are able to deliver to their communities (Newmann et al, 2001). The second change was that the formal support structures for schools and principals in the form of networks and regions would be reduced considerably, and in what eventuated, the Barwon South Network and Regional Office itself was collapsed.

In relation to the research, the policy changes impacted on the research design in a variety of ways. The most obvious of these was reduction of staff and eventual the collapse of Networks at the end of 2012. In terms of personnel, this impacted on changes in the specific people within the network responsible for school improvement, and for the introduction of a new model of school improvement plans within the Barwon South Network. In particular, the initial collaboration between Deakin and the Barwon South Network was through Robyn Jeffery, who left the network to take up a position as a principal in a school at the end of 2011. For the first 6 months of 2012, Steve Durkin, a principal in the network, took over that role until the position of Regional Network Leader was removed. At the end of 2012 the Assistant Regional Director, Helen Fraser, took over responsibilities for liaising with the research team, until the Network collapsed.

This broader set of changes to policy and personnel within the network also impacts the way that this report is written up. For example, though the word "Network" refers to support beyond individual schools in our case studies, the kind of support available to schools reduced over the course of the research. Likewise, the initial representation of School

Improvement Plans in the report implies a strong interaction and discussion between the network leader and principals, based on the completion of SIP documents written in a standard format that was provided by the network leader. Initially the completion of this SIP document was mandatory for principals. However, feedback from principals and changes in the network leadership impacted on how this negotiation took place, the format used to record the School Improvement Plan, and how rigidly the document was written and adhered-to.

1.3 Researching Leadership and School Improvement: School Improvement Plans

In order to research the impact of the new model on student learning some decisions needed to be made about the appropriate research design. For this, past research helped to identify some important considerations for the design. Studies pointed to the role of the principal, the importance of the teacher, and of classroom practices, in determining student outcomes (Fullan, 2010; Levin, 2012). Research has also shown that if education systems want to achieve improved student-learning outcomes they must put in place processes by which teachers are challenged and supported at the classroom level (Levine, 2011). Even so, reforms are only as successful as the extent to which they are evident in classrooms (Rogers, 2006). The research design developed for this project would address this connection through a focus on both the process of decision-making and the implementation of decisions into classroom practice and student learning.

The project focused on the introduction of a new model of school improvement in schools in the Barwon South Network, the leadership of this model in schools, and its effects in schools and classrooms. This new model offered a standardised approach to school improvement, which connected with past school improvement initiatives in the Network and broader region. When initially developed, there were seven main elements of this new model. Three of these elements were consistent with earlier school improvement initiatives in the Network, including

1. the language around developing a school improvement focus (SIF) that would direct the attention, motivation and energy of the leadership, teaching staff and students in the school (see summary of terminology for Principals discussed in DEECD, 2008);

2. there should be links between the focus and broader school planning, such as the cycle of Annual Implementation Plans (AIPs) and school reviews (DEECD 2008); and

3. the focus should have input and support from the Region, and would be directed and led by the school principal, and carried out by teachers and leaders in each school.

However, what distinguished this model from previous models were four elements that were specific to this model as listed below.

1. There should be a short-term focus or issue that directed attention to a problem within a school, and that this short-term focus would change in different cycles throughout the year;

2. There would be a specific SIP template that outlined the commitments for each school in predefined emphases of literacy and numeracy, a written text that contained a School Improvement Plan (SIP) of each school in a form that was common to all schools. These commitments included specific targets for changes in teaching practice and student learning;

3. There would be a suite of network support for the introduction and implementation of the initiative; and

4. The initiation of celebration days at the end of each cycle, at which representatives from schools would meet as a group to discuss progress they had made relative to the focus chosen for the preceding cycle, and key lessons that could be learnt from that cycle.

In order to investigate the model introduced in the Barwon South Network, the design of the research hinged on investigating the development and implementation of School Improvement Plans (SIPs) within individual schools as a central element of the model being implemented. While the research considered other issues, School Improvement Plans provided a tangible text around which different aspects of the research would revolve.

1.4 Researching School Improvement policies in Australia

This section discusses the emphasis on SIPs in the research design, provides an overview of past research on School Improvement Plans (SIPs), and develops a description of the way that this and other terms will be used in this report. This discussion draws on government and OECD reports, policies, research reports, books and articles, both from Victoria, Australia and other nations. Research findings later in this report relate to the understanding and use of SIPs in the model, so this discussion contextualises these findings.

As an ongoing policy initiative, school improvement has become one of the key mechanisms that governments and departments draw on to ensure that groups of schools learn from one another and improve their practices in a systematic way. There are conditions that are required for the introduction of school improvement initiatives. The success of school improvement initiatives is dependent on the provision of education services organised in systems, in which individual schools are connected in a variety of ways with other schools within the system. The assumption that underpins school improvement policy initiatives is that connections between schools form the basis for improvements, which results in improvements in leadership capacity, teaching practice and student learning (Matthews, Moorman, & Nusche 2007). These connections allow the flow of learning and capacity within the system, but also points of comparison across the system. School improvement considers schools as the core unit of these systems, so there is an expectation that changes and responsibility for changes are directed to the whole school rather than individual parts of schools (Goldstein & Woodhouse 2000). In this model, principals have a key role to play as the figurehead ultimately responsible for orienting and implementing school improvement initiatives as part of the overall governance of schools and colleges. In jurisdictions such as Australian states, these

systems have overseeing bodies – such as networks, regions and Government Departments of Education – that provide support across the system, and provide resourcing, funding and data collection and perform distributive functions and support for principals and schools.

One of the core components of school improvement is the identification of specific problems or issues in a school, that act as targets for intervention, which provide a place to focus attention and direct resources. This problem is often referred to as a School Improvement Focus (SIF). In school improvement, this acknowledgement of school problems is publicly reported to people outside the school, which could include other schools, departments or networks, or the wider community. Different approaches exist as to how broad this reporting should be, ranging from an overt emphasis on using SIFs to encourage accountability and answerability to groups beyond the school, to an emphasis on the diagnostic potential to guide decision-making within the school and system. Crucially, alongside this acknowledgement of problems in all approaches to school improvement are commitments to actions that will address these problems.

Represented in this way, school improvement presents a kind of social contract between schools, parents, students, districts, government and the wider community (Brockelsby & Crawford, 2005). The key mechanism that is used to identify problems and hold schools to account for these social contracts are School Improvement Plans (SIPs). There is a close relationship between a SIF and a SIP, in that School Improvement Foci are developed and then codified in School Improvement Plans, though as will be discussed further more than one SIF may be included in a single SIP.

1.5 Understanding School Improvement Plans

Given its central location to the research it is important to discuss School Improvement Plans, and what they signify to people in schools and networks. The texts that detail school improvement plans are developed, contested, negotiated and changed in a variety of different ways (see Figure 1). In practice, SIPs signify a range of changes in which the performance of schools, and principals, teachers and students, is located and evaluated against targets and timelines. This is consistent with reports of SIPs in other nations, such their mandated use under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) in districts and schools in the United States, and in OFSTED's school inspection framework linked to funding for schools in the UK.

Underlying this familiar language lies an assumption that SIPs are used in a similar way by all people involved with school improvement in schools, including leaders, networks, teachers and students. Though School Improvement Plans are non-negotiable elements for funding in many jurisdictions, not a great deal of research has looked specifically at the use and role of SIPs in the implementation of school improvement reforms. In many cases, a SIP is a taken for granted element in research, as it is a mandated part of school improvement and reform in other nations.

Figure 1: Sample SIP Form used in Barwon South Network

The limited research literature that does focus on school improvement plans highlights differences in perceptions between principals and teachers in different "phases of the SIP process" (Dunaway, Kim & Szad, 2012, 158). Dunaway et al. suggested the need to consider the different phases, processes and practices associated with the implementation of SIP within each school. This raises further questions about the use of SIPs in networks of schools, and whether principals, network leaders, teachers, and support staff share similar understandings or perceptions of School Improvement Plans.

For this current research an attempt was made to codify the meaning attached to SIPs in the research literature, as the development of instruments to investigate SIPs raise questions about the meaning that might be used by people invested or involved in their development, implementation or evaluation. In short, SIPs might mean different things to different people. The research design provides some ways to explore whether there are different perceptions of SIPs offered by principals, teachers and network leaders, and whether discussion about SIPs in schools and networks conflates sometimes disparate objects.

Based on previous research, there are a number of uses and meanings associated with SIPs. In research around school improvement a School Improvement Plan or SIP refers to a number of discrete objects:

1. A document that outlines the goals for an individual school;
2. The specific and overarching goals that are contained within the document;

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3. An ideal way to organise communication, decision-making, leadership and changes within a school; and

4. A model for improving schools across different groupings of schools.

Though connected, not all of these meanings are employed in all research on SIPs. In the first example, SIP refers to an specific document or text that is completed prior to the beginning of an intervention in a school, which may be referred to, added to, and reported on at different times in a school improvement cycle. These texts outline some kind of ideal end point and/or stage markers for achievement associated with the carrying out of this plan. This text also functions as a kind of written agreement. SIP may also be used to refer to the specific goals of intervention or School Improvement Focus, but may be broader in scope. This links to the third usage, in that it can be used as a model or ideal aspiration end point for communication and action within a school, against which the realities of school practices are compared. In this usage, SIP also refers to the processes, procedures, points of contact and practices that turn the text into action within a school. The final usage is employed more frequently in education reform and policy research, in which the overall approach to School Improvement across a system is the reference point, and the SIP is one element of the approach.

2. Research Aims

The main aim of this research was to investigate the implementation of a specific short-term-cycle model associated with School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in the Barwon South Network. The research focus had two main components:

1. The operation of this School Improvement Plan model, and the processes and decision-making that link the short-term school improvement focus to teacher practices and student-learning in classrooms; and

2. The ways in which school improvement processes within the network and schools translates into practice within classrooms.

The Research and the Decision-making Processes were conceptualised by the research team to have two components, represented by figures 2 and 3 below:

2.1 Component One: Decision-making in schools

This component investigates the decision-making processes in schools. Figure 2 identifies key data sources in relation to these.
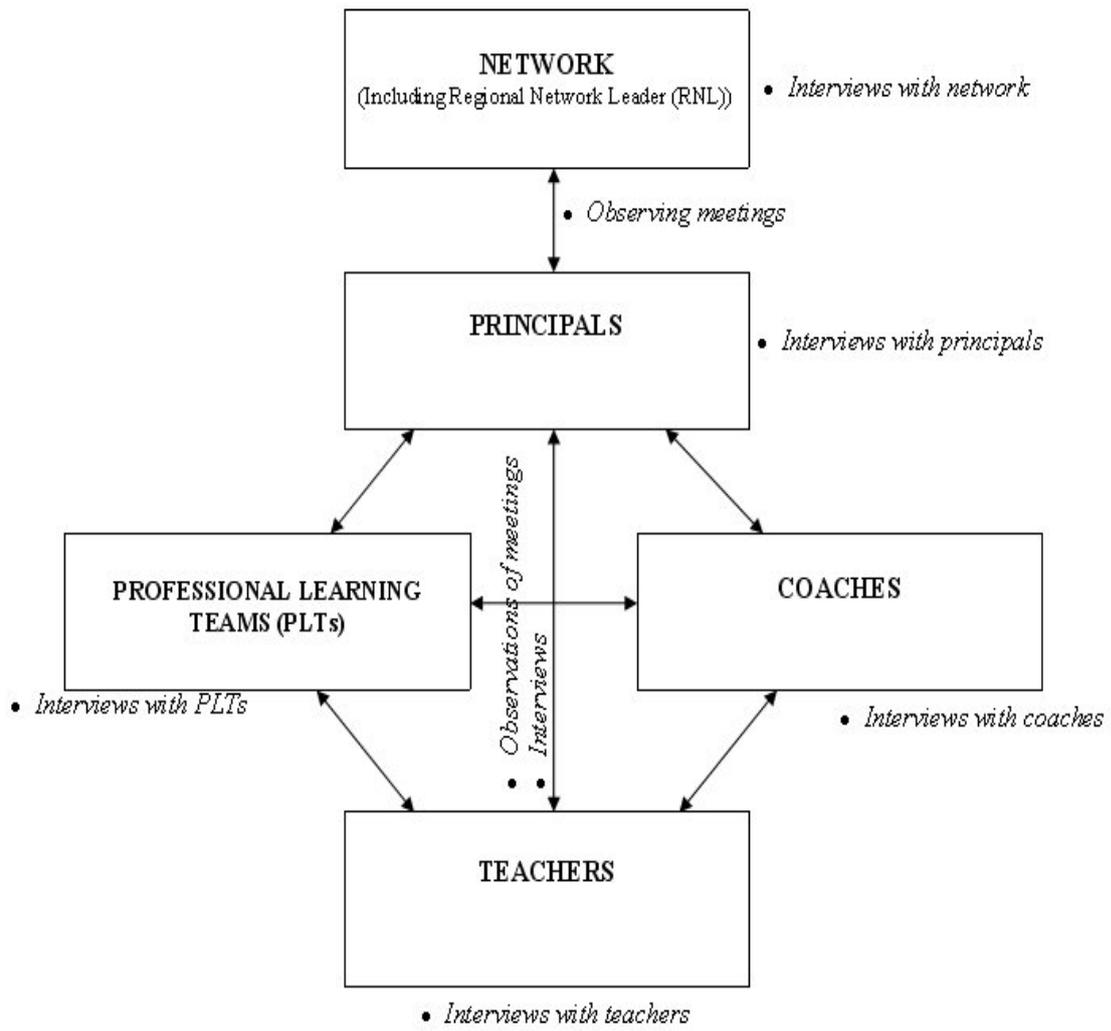
Figure 2:

2.2 Component Two: Translation of improvement plans to classroom practice
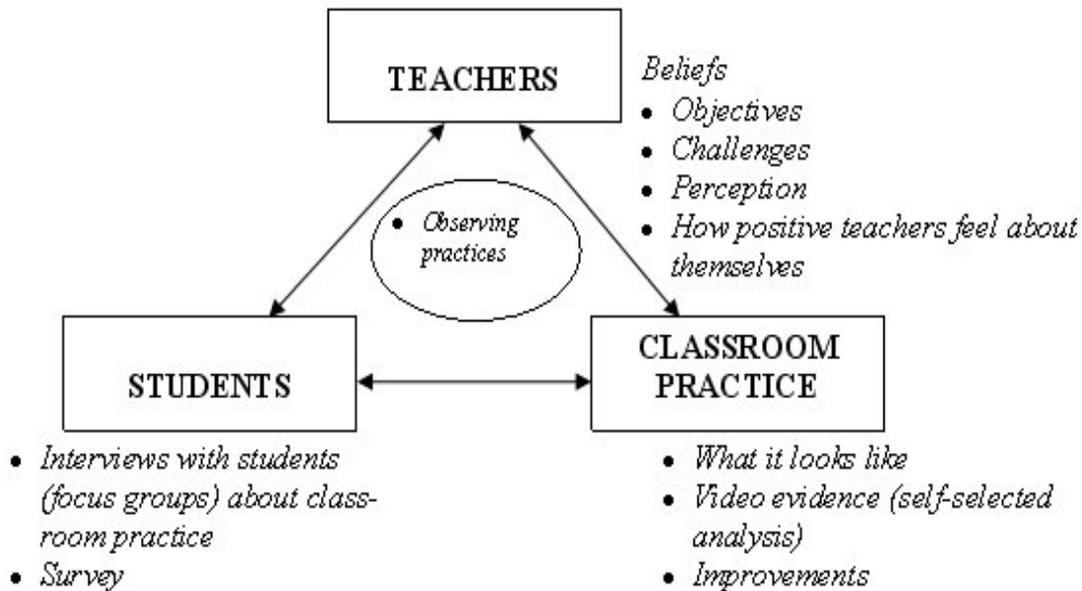
Figure 3:

3. Method

3.1 Project Participants

There are 23 schools within the Barwon South Network that were initially asked to implement the new short-term-cycle School Improvement Plan model from 2011. As part of the current research project, staff from each of these schools was invited to participate in an anonymous online survey.

Eight focus schools from the Barwon South Network were selected by the Regional Network Leader to be involved in more in-depth case studies in order to investigate the way school improvement communication processes functioned in these schools and how they translated into changes in classroom teaching and learning practices. Four focus schools were selected in 2011 and a further four focus schools were selected in 2012.

Deakin researchers were also invited to present details of the research project at Regional Principal meetings. They presented at 5 Regional Principal meetings, including one in Warrnambool. During this time and through these investigations, a collaborative relationship developed between the Deakin researchers, the Network, and the focus schools.

3.2 Data Collection 2011/2012

This research used a mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) approach through the use of an anonymous on-line survey, interviews, observations and video data. The anonymous on-line survey was developed to investigate principals', members from professional learning teams, coaches, and classroom teachers' perceptions and understandings of the School Improvement Plans currently operating in their school. All staff from the 23 schools in the Barwon South Network was invited to complete the survey. In addition, principals, members from professional learning teams, classroom teachers, coaches, and students from the eight Focus Schools were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The Deakin researchers were also invited to attend the Celebration Days involving staff from the four focus schools.

4. Regional Office leaders' engagement with the SIP model

The Regional office level provides a point to discuss the introduction of a short-term cycle SIPs model in schools within the Barwon South Network. At the beginning of this research the Regional office sat above the network level and linked to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), overseeing the operation of Networks (like the Barwon South Network) and coordinating the implementation of new policy and initiatives. At the start of this project the regional office level included key personnel involved in school improvement, including the Regional Director, the Assistant Regional Director (ARD), Regional Network Leaders (RNL) and School Improvement Partnership Officers (SIPOs). During the course of the research, both regions and networks were restructured, the RNL positions disappeared, and the Assistant Regional Director assumed responsibilities for overseeing the SIPOs and school improvement across a number of networks. The discussion that follows is drawn from interviews with the ARD and two RNLs located in the Regional office, who were involved with SIPs in the Barwon South Network.

As discussed earlier, school improvement was one of the major commitments of Regional office leaders. The RNLs in particular worked with school principals in relation to setting targets and goals for school improvement, while SIPOs assisted in providing ongoing operational support for meeting these targets and goals, and for assisting in teacher and principal capacity building (e.g. identifying specific areas of need for professional development). It was from this Regional office level that the short-term cycle SIPs model emanated into schools and, in conjunction with principals, specific School Improvement Foci (SIF) were decided for particular schools. The case presented here of the Regional office leaders connected to Barwon South Network provides some insight in relation to decision-making processes about SIPs made in specific schools. The selection of data from this case provides a background context to the survey data and the eight case study schools, and helps understand decision-making in schools and translation into practice.

4.1 The introduction of a short-term SIP model

The short-term cycle SIP model was borrowed from the UK after the Regional Director undertook a tour of England and Scotland. Whilst members of the network leadership mentioned that short-term school improvement had previously been viewed as a mechanism for achieving change, this model formalised the approach. This model standardised approaches that RNLs had been doing in a variety of ways:

> I suppose short-term improvement has always been something that the RNL's as a group felt could be a high leverage for school improvement so whilst we probably had something short-term and something specific we had all different iterations of that and then [the Regional Director] went away on a study scholarship and he saw what was happening across in Scotland and England in terms of their intervention approaches and he came back with the notion of a short-term improvement cycle of six weeks but it was very prescriptive in terms of the six weeks. (ARD)

However, the basic structure of the model brought back from Scotland and England was modified after discussions within the Network leadership group:

> …actually adapted … what was happening across in the English/Scottish system because it didn't kind of fit us. So that's probably how it came about in terms of the formalized approach to the pro-forma that was first used in terms of documenting and recording the short-term improvement cycle (STIC) or pro-forma or [SIP] or whatever we ended up calling it.… (ARD)

The proposed model was initially 6 weeks, but was then extended by schools to 10 weeks or a term. The structure of the form borrowed from the UK was also adjusted so that it matched the Annual Implementation Plans (AIPs) that principals already followed, and wording of the form was adjusted to include Hattie's (2009) concepts of "learning intentions" and "evidence of success" or success indicators. This linked the SIP model to already existing language in schools within the network and, and the ADR suggested that there was "value of it linking in for us in terms of the annual implementation plan" which "made it quite accepting of a strategy for us to adopt across the region".

Though some within the network viewed the roll-out of the short-term cycle SIPs model as being relatively smooth, the RNL noted that there may have been a different experience of the roll-out by some principals. In particular, some principals questioned why the template was being mandated, and "why [they] had to fill in that when [I] already had my AIP as a grand plan on the wall". Expanding further, some principals "queried whether [they] needed to have another layer, that was a common discussion" though "no one had a query with doing school improvement and the process was very well received that idea of getting together for a meeting with and RNL around a short-term implementation, it made [them] do it".

Two major roles were played by people involved in Regional Office roles in relation to SIPs. Firstly, the Regional Network Leaders provided a common set of expectations and framework within which principals would discuss the direction and movement of their schools based on whole school data. This role provided a base point for discussion of school improvement around an engagement with education research and setting expectations for principal and school performance. This also extended to the negotiation and establishment of SIPs in specific schools. The emphasis of this role could be seen when comparing the different kinds of SIPs in schools:

> …if you lined up and put all the SIP's … out on a table you could still see some elements of differentiation amongst them and you could see some of those SIP's that were quite educative … having the line of sight right to the classroom whereas others if you wanted to put them on a continuum probably still tended to be devolving leadership to other groups within the school and not necessarily coming under the direction of really the Principal [as an] educative leader. (ARD)

The second major role played by people in relation to SIPs lay in the coordination of capacity building in schools within networks, both of principals, but also of broader leadership capacity building for aspirant leaders in schools. The role of capacity building took a number of forms related to the project. The first and most direct way of capacity building lay in identifying the skill-needs within a school relative to their school improvement goals, and providing opportunities for ongoing professional learning to address these needs. The RNLs and SIPOs worked closely to meet this goal. As one RNL commented:

…the goals of the network were to develop teacher capacity so that's a lot of the work around the SIPO's… That's working at teacher level developing pedagogical skills and so on; the second component was 'leadership capacity building' so that's where we start to look at, in a formal principal meeting structure, the work of Hattie, what is Hattie telling us about learning intention and effective teachers. The network really does a lot of that work around 'okay principals you're hearing about these things called school improvement how are you going to do it' and that was something that even to this day since I've taken it over this year there's a whole lot of different levels of expertise because principals were at different places in their own career development and also some of the principals that have been in one or two schools in their whole career have only seen one dimension of how it can work. [RNL].

This capacity building also included providing opportunities for aspiring leaders to shadow principals in other schools, enabling exchanges between schools, through to providing professional development in the regional office. One specific form of professional development highlighted at a Regional Office level was related to the access and use of a variety of data sources to guide decision-making within schools. In addition to facilitating capacity building within the network, the Regional Office also provided opportunities for people to build capacities through short-term and longer-term secondment to the regional office. This took the form of principals who took up positions as RNLs in the Regional Office, which enabled them to understand, from a broader perspective, the way that schools deal with specific challenges. One of the RNLs commented on this in the following way:

…coming into this role … allowed me to start to look at a lot of other schools in terms of 'okay how do other schools do it' and I loved the opportunity to get into schools and to see and ask what they're doing but also to look from a systemic role around school improvement. This whole department is school improvement, this whole section is school improvement and I really wanted to get my head around that more in terms of 'where does it all fit into things'. [RNL]

Specifically, what this enabled specifically was to see the way school improvement works across different schools, in a way that is not necessarily available to principals due to their daily responsibilities:

We all do our little things in our little silos in our schools but where does it fit into the bigger picture and for me to see the amount of under work being done around school improvement … that's been great for me because I can go back to my school and I think I'll have a whole new perspective around 'what is individual student learning' and 'what are some of the drivers behind where we want our kids to get to'. [RNL]

The idea that learning from this kind of position could be taken back to inform practices at their school is also mirrored by other positions, such as the SIPOs, whose capacities around school improvement would be used to inform their practice when they returned to schools in leadership positions. This capacity building and moving between network and Regional Office also provided the Regional Office with a renewed capacity to engage with the concerns of principals within the networks. One RNL who had previously worked as a

principal in a school noted reasons behind his own initial scepticism towards the need for another form of planning in the form of a SIP:

> Oh the mandatory nature of it I guess was one and I was one at the time [the Regional Director] surveyed it, I queried why I needed to have that formal document, why I had to fill in that when I already had my AIP as a grand plan on the wall in my school as well as my professional development plan, my personal development plan. So I queried whether we needed to have another layer, that was a common discussion, no one has a query with doing school improvement and I actually think the process was very well received that idea of getting together for a meeting with and RNL around a short term implementation, it made you do it. So that was a positive and a negative, probably for me and I know for some of my colleagues it was around the formalisation of it but the process I think mostly has been pretty well received 'let's just sit and talk about it'.

In reflecting on the net outcome of this capacity building this same RNL commented that:

> …probably the biggest shift, not just in terms of the SIF but the school improvement as a whole has been that nailing data, making evidence based decisions on what kids can and cannot do…

> The RNL went on to note that this shift has not been a result of external testing such as NAPLAN, but that…

> …most schools now have got an assessment schedule and most schools initially said 'okay we've got a triangulated assessment schedule I should say so let's start with reading, writing and number, we want three distinct measures for kids reading, three distinct for writing and three distinct for number". So most schools have got that now and principals are getting better at having [data informed] conversations with teachers.

In addition to the ongoing strategies for capacity building in the Regional Office, the short-term SIPs model also adopted an additional level of capacity building, based on what were described as "celebration days". During these days, organised by the RNL, principals, or their representatives, would come together and share the strategies that they adopted to meet their specific SIF, and present some evidence for the success or otherwise of these strategies. Though treated with suspicion by some principals, the concept of identifying potential strategies to have as a set of resources to school improvement was a conscious effort to embed capacity building within the SIPs model itself, and to enable distributed learning within the network.

4.2 Perceptions of the SIPs model from the Regional Office

When asked about differences in the ways that different schools approached the process of SIP, one RNL noted the importance of the staffing profile of the school and the nature of the principal in the school:

> [In] some of the smaller schools their biggest issue is around resourcing, trying to make time to meet with teachers or whatever, the goals and the conversation is

similar but the implementation varies. [For example] we really got bogged down at rich task development at [one school] last year that was our third or fourth SIF, 'now we've looked at the what and the why let's get on, so we've got the data' that very same thing I was saying a minute ago 'what are we going to do with the kids we need to look at task', that's the tricky one depending on experience of the teacher, the network the teacher has… I've just been out to [the same school] and [L] has taken over from [E] this year while [E] is ill and [L] is very inexperienced and that's why I spent a lot of time with him, he's not sure how to go about 'okay what have we got'. He's got a staff that's been there longer than him, been teaching longer than him, so he's got those sorts of issues to deal with around moving people who he's still developing his own credit with them I guess, they're sussing him out. So it's a bit harder for him to get teachers to move and it's a bit harder for him to identify a way forward because he's inexperienced, no other reason.

On the whole the RNL reflected that there was success of the short-term model in terms of changing teaching practice…

Yeah I think it was successful, in terms of moving behaviour and practice I think it was very successful. We all did have four foci during the year and yeah sure they came off the AIP but they would have anyway it was work that had to be done but it did allow you in terms of [the principal] going into a staff meeting saying 'nothing else is on the agenda, this is what we're doing, this is what we're looking at for the next ten weeks' and teachers appreciated that and understood that. I don't think I'd shared the first SIF with them at all I just said 'we're going to do this' and got my head more around it and 'okay we need to be talking about this in a group' and we did it at network level, we started by saying 'we need to be talking to our people about this' then I inform them 'well this is where it's at' and there was that 'oh'.

However the RNL was less certain about attributing student achievement to the model, arguing that the complexity made such claims problematic:

So yeah in terms of student achievement I don't know, like I said before 'I don't think it's professionally responsible to attribute learning going one way or the other to a practice' but in terms of the positivity out of the actual change of practice, yeah absolutely I'd say it was really powerful and that's the message right across the network.

4.3 Reduction of the Regional Office and Leadership

Near the end of the research the region and network changed considerably. The ARD reflected on the nature and effects of these changes on the Regional Office and the role it played in the networks:

It's changed the whole role of the regional staff who were in the school improvement team especially those who were working more at the principal or the leadership level. The school improvement team at the regional office still has priority projects like EAL and Languages, those projects have still kept going, but in terms of the role of the regional network leader it became a lapsed program and it's now finished. The regional network leaders who have remained and have not chosen to go back into a school setting and/or retired have really had to change

their mode of operation. I suppose that was a very definitive and a very difficult time for a lot of us it's a little bit like a death of something that you've actually had a major role in because you knew the value of it, you believed in it but we knew that that was no longer to be our work.

In spite of the collapse of the Regional roles, the last months of the Regional Office involved putting in place structures that would enable some of the programs to be sustained. Yet the ARD also acknowledged that:

> … all of us know that unless you've got sometimes a dedicated driver that sometimes is difficult because with the role now of a principal it's pretty difficult and it's pretty hard to fit everything. That's what they're grappling with, the principals are grappling at the moment with the fact that they now need to take on board that responsibility for their own professional learning but also for their colleagues professional learning and they haven't quite been able to work out how they're going to do that with everything else that was going on.

This has entailed a shift in the kinds of supports offered by the Regional Office:

> …our role moved very quickly; in the last six months when we knew that the role was finishing up we were trying to put structures and processes in place but then from July onwards for those who've remained we've actually reverted back to being more of a senior contact for those schools and a support role but not leading the school improvement agenda.

Effectively this reduced the possible roles that could be played by members of the Regional Office and stopped the strong role played by the office in School Improvement envisaged as distributed learning and capacity building between schools within a network leading to changed teacher practice and student learning. SIPs, as one aspect of the school improvement policy, would now be pursued without this support and only through the ongoing initiative of individual schools on whom greater responsibilities now lie.

4.4 Conclusion

The Regional office played an important role in establishing and supporting the SIPs model that was implemented in the Barwon South network. It is important to note that though the model seemed merely to have been borrowed from another nation, significant alterations were made to the original design to fit with the education language common within schools in the network, and the established cycles and practices of school reflection planning and renewal. Hence the version that was eventually trialed had significant links to the AIP process, and had embedded language around learning intentions and evidence.

Though the model originated from the Regional office, members of the leadership team were also critical of aspects of the design throughout its implementation, and modified aspects of the process in response to their own experiences and from feedback from principals involved in the short-term cycles. A key finding from the Regional office level is that the regional leaders are crucial mediators of teacher and leadership capacity within the network, and act as brokers for school change and improvement. This capacity acted as a

key resource in sharing knowledge of the operation and structure of school improvement, and in particular of changes to teacher practice. Another key finding from the Regional office level is that uncertainty and structural changes attached to policy shifts have a drastic impact on the ability of regional office leaders to support school change. This translated into the loss of this level of leadership capacity, sometimes to other education systems still committed to this kind of school improvement, and in other instances the disposition to share this knowledge more broadly than the local schools to which regional office leaders ultimately returned.

Key finding 1: The value of regional networks

Regional network personnel were crucial mediators of teacher and leadership capacity building within the network, and a key resource for sharing knowledge of the SIP process and of supporting teacher practice. This finding suggests that the dismantling of the network may have had a dramatic effect on the momentum of school improvement in the region.

5. Summary of findings from the online Survey

Perceptions and understandings of School Improvement Plans: Responses from teachers, principals, coaches, and members from professional leadership teams across the Barwon South Network.

Teachers, members from the professional learning teams, and principals from the 23 schools in the Barwon South Network were invited to complete the anonymous on-line survey. Seventy-five participants completed the survey in 2011. Detailed results from the survey are shown in Appendix 1. Overall, results showed that the majority (79.7%) of the 75 survey participants were classroom teachers. Sixty (80%) were female and the highest represented age group (26.6%) were those in the 26-30 years bracket. All responses, except one, came from primary school staff (See Appendix 1, Tables 1 to 3).

Results also showed that 41% of the participants had been teaching for more than 10 years, followed by 24% who had been teaching for 6-10 years. In regards to the number of years the participants had been teaching at their current school, results showed that most had been teaching either Less than 1 year (25%) or 3-5 years (24%). Further, the majority of those surveyed were teachers of Grade Prep -2 students (41%). (See Appendix 1, Tables 4 to 6).

A detailed discussion of the findings from group data from open-ended questions is presented in Appendix 1 (Survey questions 8 to 24). These detailed findings were presented in a previous Deakin University report for the Barwon South Network. However, for the purpose of this final report, a summary of the main findings related to perceptions and understandings of SIP, the process for selecting goals, and the process for achieving these goals is presented. In line with the way the case studies of the eight focus schools is presented, the responses from the 75 completed surveys were separated into three main participant groups: (1) Principals (n=7), (2) Classroom teachers (n=59), and leadership team (n=6). The leadership team included assistant principals and leading teachers in the area of numeracy, literacy, ICT, and PE. One participant did not indicate their role in the school, while the other 2 participants were regional coaches and are not included in this analysis. A summary of the main findings, including similarities and differences between responses from the three groups, is presented below.

Participants were asked to describe their current SIP. Overall, responses from all participants showed that they viewed the SIP as a set of specific goals rather than as a plan or process, or a formal document enacted within the school. Responses from principals showed that goals were mainly linked to the professional learning of teachers or around content specific areas. Specifically, responses relating to teacher professional learning included *"how to teach specific strategies", "using our own school level expertise as well as looking at some professional readings",* and *"to improve teacher capacity and understanding".* Responses relating to developing content specific goals *included "personalised learning goals", "writing focus"* and *"how to assess reading."* Similarly, the leadership team group also reported goals related to teacher professional learning and improving teacher practice with very few responses containing the word "students". Typical responses included *"strengthen the capacity of all teachers to practice differential,*

evidence-based-teaching in the classroom" and *"…individual teacher knowledge of students, their data, goal setting, and working towards collaborative teaching."* In contrast to the responses from the principals and leadership team participants, classroom teachers articulated very active goals which were strongly linked to "improving student outcomes." This improvement in student outcomes was related to content specific areas or improving standards as measured by NAPLAN and VELS. It also appeared that many of the goals selected were based on previous school data.

Participants were also asked to describe the current goals in their SIP and to outline how these goals were decided. Principal responses reflected goals that were either related to improving teaching and learning practices in the content areas of literacy and numeracy or to improve student outcomes as measured by NAPLAN and VELS data. The goals outlined by the leadership team group also reflected a strong focus on using data to improve student learning and to improve leadership practice by supporting teachers to improve their teaching practice. For example, the leadership team stated that their current goals were to *"strengthen the whole school evidence based assessment practices"* and *"educational meetings with the AP and the Principal surrounding data and individual students"*. While teachers also articulated the need to improve student outcomes, most of the teachers' responses were related to change in teacher practice and implementing professional learning opportunities. Typical responses describing goals included *"have all staff unpack the working mathematically domain"*, *"have our literacy coach observe on a weekly basis and then reflect on our practice"*, *"to be more accurate with our scores for speaking and listening"*, *"to increase the assessment and reporting accuracy"* and *"to have a shared understanding of VELS levels."* Similar to the principal and leadership team responses, some teachers also stated the centrality of the use of data and moderation processes to inform teaching and to measure student progress.

Key survey finding 2: Stratified focus for SIP

Principals and school leadership teams listed big picture, process issues concerning teacher professional learning as the key focus of the SIP whereas for teachers, student outcomes were prominent in their focus on their own professional learning.

All participant groups stated that goals were usually decided by people in specific roles with some form of collaboration between the groups. In particular, principals stated that the process was either initiated by the principal in consultation with staff or by the whole staff. The majority of teachers stated that goals were decided by the principal or leadership team with *"staff input"* or were *"negotiated with staff."* Classroom teachers also strongly articulated the importance of looking at student data within staff forums as a process for deciding goals. All three groups indicated that there was a strong relationship between selecting goals and the school's Annual Implementation Plan. Four of the seven principals stated that the goals were aligned with their AIP while all responses from the leadership team stated that goals were based on the AIP in consultation with staff. Many classroom teachers were also aware that the SIP goals were in response to the school's AIP stating that goals were decided *"in response to our AIP"*.

Key survey finding 3: Decision-making

For many schools SIP goals were directly related to existing implementation plans. Principals described the decision-making as collaborative while teachers were more muted in nominating 'staff input' or 'negotiation' as their role.

Responses from the three groups in relation to the processes involved in achieving the goals showed the importance of communication and discussion, working together, and using data to monitor progress. Principals and leadership team participants also indicated the importance of *"regular professional development"* and *"coaching"* and explicitly allocating time and support for teachers to develop skills, monitor student progress through the use of data, and to interpret data. Similarly, teachers also recognised the importance of their own professional learning and working together as a process for achieving specific goals. Typical responses included *"weekly coaching", "through professional development", "working together to create banks of knowledge and share individual expertise"* and *"series of PD meetings timetabled."* It was also clear that teachers valued regular meetings such as staff meetings, meetings with the principal and the AP, and unit meetings as a way *of "discussing and sharing student data", "evaluating and reflecting", "support our teaching strategies", "moderation in teams"* and *"review assessment strategies."*

Key survey finding 4: Processes supporting improvement

Principals, leadership team and teachers all focused on collaboration and communication, and the use of data to inform and monitor progress, as the two key elements of the process of improvement.

Participants were also asked to describe how the specific SIP goals have affected the way they work. Principal responses were related to whole school improvement *"we are a school that is committed to continuous school improvement and the goals feature heavily in our daily work"* and *"they have improved the focus of staff to go in the same direction at the same time and work together on the areas designated for that term."* In contrast, the leadership team strongly indicated a change in their relationships with teachers and students, stating *"I have worked with teachers and students in achieving these goals"* and *"had more contact with teachers…this allowed me to have a greater insight of student levels/abilities across the school."* Teacher responses tended to be related to improved classroom practice, increased knowledge in specific content areas, and a greater understanding of how to interpret assessment data to monitor progress and plan for future teaching. Responses also appeared to be much more personalised and often related to student learning. Typical responses by teachers included *"gives me clarity on my role as a teacher to use data effectively to help improve student outcomes", "my teaching has been positively influenced", "they have made us more focussed…on improving our teaching", "the use of data has impacted both on the style and learning intentions with each lesson"* and *"refinement of classroom teaching and learning strategies and approaches".* Similar to the responses from the leadership team, teachers also indicated that the selection of SIP goals and the process for achieving these goals had a positive impact on the relationship some teachers had with students and other staff members – *"enabled PLTs to work more as a team", "team work and more involvement with leadership team"* and *"ensure that children are clearly aware of the goals and expectations."*

Key survey finding 5: Effect of SIP on 'the way I work'

The SIP led to positive and substantial change in most schools' practices. In their descriptions of the nature of change, leadership teams emphasised school ethos and working relations with teachers, whereas teachers emphasised improved pedagogy, and collaboration with peers. Both groups nominated attention to evidence based student outcomes as a significant change.

6. Summary of findings from the Case Study data from the eight focus schools

Within the research, four schools were selected as focus schools by the network leader in consultation with the research team in the first year of the research project and four focus schools in the second year. Data within these schools were produced as cases within a larger case study of SIPs within the Barwon South Network. However, comparisons between these cases suggested that there were differences in terms of the impact that SIPs played in each school. These differences occur both in relation to the **operation and processes** associated with SIPs in schools, as well as the effects of **translation of SIPs into practice**. Illustrative samples from the eight cases are presented below, focusing specifically on themes related to the use of SIPs. Drawing on the research components (see section 2) these themes are grouped according to different roles played within each school, including Principals, Professional Learning Teams (or Leadership team), Teacher and Students. The overall account illustrates the role that School Improvement Plans make in decision-making and translation into classroom practice.

6.1 Case Study School ONE

In this school, the School Improvement foci were selected by the leadership team based on their Annual Implementation Plan (the AIP) and their school data as displayed in data walls. This was seen by both staff and leadership as a positive way forward for this school since the foci were based on the school's data from the previous year. Teachers commented that they liked this approach and that it felt much clearer, they knew what to focus their energy on. They knew what the foci were and why they had been selected. Having a shared understanding of the school improvement process in their school lead to a collaborative approach in which the leadership team was highly involved in a whole school change as they supported teachers to translate the foci into changed classroom practice. Leadership, teachers and students were interviewed in this small rural school which had an equally small leadership team.

Operations and processes

The school spent a lot of time focussing on their data at the start of the year and then decided that goal setting would be their first focus. They commented that the data meetings, the big four (Hattie) and all of the literacy foci "*all flowed very nicely and became second nature*" to the teachers.

The original idea of a six-week short-term-cycle with one school focus did not play out that way. This school changed to a term cycle which allowed some time at the beginning for planning with at least 6 weeks within the term for their foci. Their focus was the use of data for goal setting in Literacy. They drew on the work of Hattie about success criteria, feedback, learning intentions and rich tasks. In the upper school they incorporated the use of the Ultranet with their students. In 2012 the focus became the introduction of AusVELS.

In this school, during 2011 the Principal or Assistant Principal met with each teacher once a fortnight to discuss the data collected about their students and their goal setting. The data meetings continued throughout the year. All teachers were required to ensure that each student had goals set in in literacy and numeracy, in reading, writing and numeracy. The leadership team explained that the teachers seem have accepted it very well because it was part of the SIP process

The Principal and the Vice Principal met with teacher regularly and went into classrooms to observe their teaching practice. These observations were then discussed with the teacher at the next data meeting. This did change at the instigation of the teachers who told the leadership that they wanted immediate feedback. They commented that they were careful not to be judgmental initially but the teachers indicated they wanted some judgment and they wanted immediate feedback. An example of this is provided below:

> I was sitting there observing a lesson and he came up to me and said 'I can see you're writing what are you writing?' and I said 'I'm just you know' and he said 'can you please tell me now I don't want to go for the next forty-five minutes doing something that you think I should have changed. So I just said 'Well I can see those boys not really focused on what they're doing and I would probably now go and target those kids first' and he goes 'Oh okay' and he did that straight away and he came to me the next day and said 'I did it in reading this morning too and it was fantastic'. So that's what our teachers want now and that's all come from this process because it wouldn't have been as targeted I think.

This example also demonstrates the importance of relationship building between school leaders and classroom teachers and how feedback can be used effectively. They are all working towards shared goals. Another element apparent here is the respect and acceptance of knowledge and experience of the leadership team. If teachers do not believe the school leaders have sufficient knowledge or experience it is less likely that an effective working relationship will be developed.

Teachers

The teachers stated that the selection of foci was carried out by the leadership team but that teachers had input too, *"We do look at our results together, and the AIP as well."* Decisions are made at whole school staff meetings. Due to the size of the school, all staff are able to sit together at the one staff room table which is an effective enabling strategy for shared decision-making. Everyone knows how and why a decision has been made. This seemed to be a very powerful element of this particular school context.

In 2011, based on the school's data, the decision was made to focus on Literacy and then Numeracy and the implementation of the Ultranet. At the beginning of the year 2011 the whole staff participated in a lot of professional learning in the after school meetings about how to use the range of data (diagnostic, On Demand and NAPLAN data) and about using the data to group students. Quite challenging but fruitful discussions took place. The Principal wanted to know specifically *"Who might be the ones who are struggling? Who are our extension students' and then he said, 'Who are those that can get lost? You know…*

the ones in between'. Yeah so we really needed to know where everyone was at. So basically we were looking at the students who were capable but weren't moving much.. not showing much growth".

Teachers were challenged to get to know more about their student's abilities and to use that information in their teaching. The focus was on goal setting in Literacy and Numeracy and the use of the Ultranet to publish goals and evidence of achievement of the goals. Goal setting came out of Hattie's work in regard to learning intentions, success criteria, and rich task development.

Translation into Practice

Teachers

Interviews with classroom teachers and students provided insights into how the adoption of the foci for School Improvement translated into changes in teaching practice. At this school, teachers spoke about how they are:

> always questioning yourself to make sure you know that you're doing the right thing … sometimes you have to bring yourself back and say... well it's for the children and not just for my teaching not for my benefit, but it's for the childrens' benefit. They're a lot clearer in setting their own goals and knowing what they have to achieve. And I think we're a lot more open with the kids about what we're doing and why we're doing it.

Another demonstration of this is:

> I spoke to my kids yesterday about doing a writing sample but doing it on the computer this time rather than hand written and I talked about the reasons why we would do that and just involving them in the process and decision-making and things like that.

This example demonstrates a commitment to shared decision-making and empowerment of staff and students.

Students

Student interviews were conducted at the commencement of Term 4, after three key school foci had been implemented at Case Study School 1. While they did articulate an awareness of how the changes came about (Processes, Communication), they were well aware of how they translated into changed classroom practices.

The students interviewed from year 1/2 and 5/6 all articulated an understanding of at least one of the school foci implemented as part of the short-cycle SIP. Grade 1/2 students stated an understanding of the focus for Term 3 *Learning Goals in Literacy (Reading).* Grade 5/6 students stated an understanding of the foci for Terms 1 and 3 as the *Use of the Ultranet and Learning Goals*. The students were able to demonstrate their understanding during discussions and by showing examples. Examples of Articulating the Foci:

- "Yeah, we've been doing goal setting...the other day I achieved my goal and that was using paragraphs" **(Year 1/2 student)**

- "...this year we're doing everything on the Ultranet...we set our goals in our own personal space on the Ultranet...every time we complete that goal we get a different one" **(Year 5/6 student)**

- "I had a goal to um correctly structure my persuasive writing towards the start of the year" **(Year 5/6 student)**

In 2011 the students also used the language of VELS which the school had translated into VELS KidsSpeak. The following are some example of this:

- "VELS KidsSpeak progression points"

- "...and I had heaps of evidence"

- "show that we achieved our goal".

- "when we read through [VELS KidsSpeak] we can actually see how and what goals that we need to work on and it helps us..."

Several key themes emerged from the analysis of the student interviews. Students demonstrated their understanding of the impact of the school improvement foci on their learning in terms of the a) Level of challenge, and b) Knowing the purpose of completing particular tasks. They also demonstrated their understanding of the differences between the current School Improvement foci and previous practice. Students interviewed from years 1/2 and 5/6 articulated an understanding of some of the differences between the current School Improvement Foci and previous practice. Students expressed positive differences, and they described their experience of this difference related to their own levels of engagement in their learning.

The students in this case study school (8 to 12 year olds) in 2011 were able to: clearly articulate the foci for the School Improvement Plan; provide evidence that demonstrated how they had achieved these goals and the purpose of learning goals; articulate how they believe that each of the foci helped them with their learning; use specific language that showed an understanding of the foci, and articulate differences between previous and current practices. This is a very impressive achievement.

The focus in 2012 has changed from VELS KidSpeak to AusVELS so it is now the schools' intention is to rework AusVELS into Kidspeak.

Concluding comment

In Case Study School One the SIPs was experienced in a very positive way. The school leadership regularly observed teaching in all classrooms and conducted productive teaching conversations with teachers in follow-up sessions. Teachers prepared students to take more responsibility for their learning by teaching them how to set goals for their learning and how to collect evidence to demonstrate that they had achieved their goals.

Teachers and students were equally confident and comfortable discussing these changes to practice in this school.

The success of the SIP and the collaborative nature of change in this school seems to have been closely related to the size of the school, the opportunity that affords all teachers to meet together in one room, and for all to be able to contribute to discussions and decision-making. The leadership style and their commitment to, and support for, whole school change also seems to have been strong contributing factors to the SIP's success in this school context.

6.2 Case Study School TWO

The introduction of SIPs at this school was embraced by the principal, leadership team, and classroom teachers as part of other projects already existing in the school. The goals were selected based on thorough scrutiny of student data in order to improve aspects of curriculum, teacher professional learning, assessment and reporting, and teaching practices. This report will focus on the operation and processes of decision-making surrounding SIPs and how this translates into classroom practice, as perceived by the principal, members of the leadership team, and classroom teachers.

Operation and processes

Principal

The principal at this school indicated that the inclusion of the SIP as a short-term cycle model did not add to anything that they were currently doing at the school but rather, fitted within other "School Improvement projects". In particular, this principal stated that the school improvement foci were directly related to the recommendations from the school review. As a leadership team they "took all the recommendations from the reviewer… and grouped them…to middle management …to teaching and learning…and to environment." The teaching and learning recommendations then formed their "whole school learning strategy." Interestingly, they then formed further projects which they termed "action research projects." While these projects had different names to the short-term cycle SIPs, it followed a "fairly similar process, fairly short-term." Each of these action research projects were based on data and their whole school learning and was a process that was very familiar.

Discussions, collaboration and decision-making occurred between the leadership team then with level leaders and as a whole staff. Broad goals were decided at the leadership level and worked at two levels: 1) around curriculum, professional learning, and student outcomes, and 2) at a leadership level. Goals were selected as a result of feedback, discussion and review of student data. Goals around curriculum were refined and made more specific to match the needs of each year level. This refinement and specificity of goals occurred with discussions at the level of whole staff and within year levels at the school.

The principal also highlighted the importance of the role of the network leader and the whole-network approach to implementing SIP. While the short-term cycle and the selection of specific goals to enhance school improvement were not new to this school, the principal stated that:

> …the work that we did last year in sharing our school improvement projects gave me a better understanding or greater insight into what my neighbouring schools were doing and I think that's really important if we're to work as a network.

However, it was also apparent from the responses from the principal that there were also fears about the loss of the existing structure of the Barwon South Network in relation to

connectedness to colleagues, support for new principals, loss of feedback and support, and the possibility that schools will go back to "*working autonomously.*"

Leadership Team

A number of interviews were conducted with members of the leadership team including the assistant principal, curriculum coaches, and year level unit leaders. Similar to the view of the principal, the leadership team also believed that the inclusion of the SIP as it was presented at a Network level was not dissimilar to what was already in existence at the school. The Assistant Principal believed that "what it did just framed it for us a little bit differently", while one of the coaches stated that "we…took the core of the SIP project and integrated it into our current framework." The use of this term "SIP project" by both the leadership team and the principal perhaps suggests that this school saw the short-term cycle SIP more as a "one off" project that became embedded in other projects within the school.

Many of the responses from the coaches highlighted the importance of professional learning for teachers, planning together with teachers, and providing feedback as part of implementing the curriculum goals from the SIP. They confirmed that there were broader goals around the two areas of curriculum and building leadership capacity. Specific curriculum goals were determined by examining NAPLAN data from the previous year and using that data as a "platform to bring that to the teachers and talk to them." This process confirms earlier views articulated by the principal regarding the selection of goals, which suggest that goals appear to be initiated by the principal and leadership team and driven by student data. Furthermore, curriculum goals were refined and developed by classroom teachers in consultation with members form the leadership team.

Another interesting finding reflected in the responses from the leadership team showed the evidence of a shift in focus in the way staff meetings were conducted and the role of curriculum leaders as a result of having a specific whole school focus for school improvement. Meetings which were "predominantly administration" now focussed more on professional learning. Furthermore, the shift in roles of leaders from managers to "curriculum leaders" also provided a "huge shift of understanding."

The other main finding from the responses from the leadership team reflected a change in the time the school spent on focussing on a particular goal. In particular, the leadership team acknowledged the different rates of learning not only of the students in their school but also within the whole staff. Often a short-term goal would need to be extended into the following term because "…some people get it and they go off and others really need that extra support so I think it's becoming more and more of our culture that there is a different rate."

Overall, the leadership team believed that the implementation of the SIP as embedded into their school had resulted in significant changes in leadership and teacher practice with a greater sense of accountability. Communication between leaders, coaches and teachers has increased and "the whole purpose is around the student." "Teachers really are now

very accountable for their thinking and for their responses and for what goes on in classrooms with kids, for their planning, so it's not all about the nice…they do challenge teachers…because it's that challenge that's moving people forward."

Classroom Teachers

Classroom teachers also participated in a number of interviews conducted at the school. Responses showed that teachers were aware of the curriculum focus goals but made no mention of the goals around building leadership capacity. When teachers were asked how the school improvement focus was selected for the whole school, it appears that they were not completely clear of the process. One teacher stated that *"all I knew was apparently at the start of the year they said the Department wants us to participate in this project and I think it may have come from our NAPLAN data not being quite as strong against other like schools."* Another teacher stated, *"I don't really know. It was more generated from leadership and then we discussed it as a whole school in our staff PDs and staff meetings."* Once the teachers were made aware of the "Department project", there were numerous sessions of professional development: "so it was basically PD by the coaches and the leadership and then it moved more towards teachers." Teachers articulated the importance of breaking the goals down into smaller manageable parts within their own year level and echoed the perceptions of the principal and leadership team with the use of data to drive selection of goals.

Teachers also valued the increased opportunities for professional learning, the time allocated for professional conversations, and time for moderation. One teacher indicated that it was important to have "a consistent approach to the language that's used" suggesting different levels of understanding of specific terms used interchangeably by various members of staff.

Translation into practice

It also appears that increased professional learning opportunities not only developed teacher knowledge but also resulted in changes to teacher practice and levels of student engagement, and an overall increase in teacher confidence and student outcomes. One teacher stated that having a focus has changed the way she approaches the particular curriculum area so that now "[she} can get to all the kids throughout the week. I can chat to them two or three times…so it gives me a better opportunity to be on top of where they're at." Another teacher stated that "it has enabled us to…extend our kids and beyond." Similarly, one of the curriculum coaches noted the change in teacher practice stating that "…I think also with the teachers now it's more student centred whereas before it would have been very driven by the teacher and they followed a format, they followed a structure for every child."

Students

Teachers were also able to report how the development of these specific goals translated into practice and gave many examples of how children were noticing the difference in their learning. For example, one teacher stated that there was a notable difference in the way students approached the curriculum tasks "… just the enthusiasm that they have for the writing now. I've got kids in my class who've been very reluctant writers at the start of the

year… and yet [now] in fifteen minutes…complete a page and a half or so." Another teacher from the grade 3/4 area hadn't noted children actually articulating any changes to their learning but rather had noted a change in the children's behaviour she felt that "they definitely enjoy writing now it's obvious that they enjoy it because most of them will sit down and get into it straight away." In contrast, the prep and grade one teachers felt that there had been no difference in the level of engagement with these children as it is easier to engage the very young children. These junior level teachers also indicated that the younger children would not be aware of the SIP focus "because it's not something different for them. It would only be the types of learning intentions or lesson intentions that are different."

Concluding comment

Leadership structures and styles in this school tended to be distributed and top down. Teachers and students in this school showed less understanding, commitment and enthusiasm for the process than in some other schools. The context of Case Study School Two is one in which change has been a constant for many years. During that time the school has taken pride in being a leader in innovative schooling practices well before the SIP was introduced. As a consequence, some of what was encountered by the research team was a form of change burnout. Teachers were wary of 'another change'. In this context what they needed was time to consolidate so the timing of this project was not embraced by many of the teachers in this school. The way the school coped was to try to modify the approach and absorb the SIP project into the processes to which they were already committed.

Data was interrogated and this knowledge was used to prepare the SIP documents. The translation into practice occurred but was not connected to SIP processes in the perception of many teachers or the students we interviewed.

6.3 Case Study School THREE

Case Study School Three is a large secondary school within Barwon South Network. The introduction of SIPs at this school was not understood or perceived in the same way by people occupying different roles. Significant in terms of understanding these differences, the introduction of the SIPs occurred alongside a range of "projects" that were undertaken by different groups within the schools. These projects corresponded with different experiments in improving aspects of curriculum, assessment or teaching practice, which were developed under the leadership of one or two staff members in consultation and with support from the Principal. If these projects proved convincing to the Principal, then they would potentially be rolled out across the school, if appropriate. The SIPs for specific terms was sometimes referred to as one of these projects within interviews. This is significant for understanding the experiences and perspectives of SIPs of the Principal, Leadership Team Members and Teachers. This also provides a context for understanding the lack of student data produced in Case Study School Three in relation to SIPs. Discussion will focus on the operation and processes of decision-making surrounding SIPs above the classroom, and will also present an account of the experiences and perspectives of teachers charged with the responsibility of bringing into practice the goals of the SIP.

Operation and processes

Principal

Within the SIPs project at Case Study School Three, the Principal ultimately made the decision about the specific Focus for each term Plan. There was considerable consultation between the Principal and the leadership team that prefigured this decision, based on different kinds of data and feedback from different people identified as having an impact on the Focus. However, the final choice was guarded by the Principal and chosen from a number of potential options. The Focus for each of the SIP chosen by the Principal was limited to some selected teachers within a single year. This is illustrated in the **description of the SIP**'s focus on Mathematics Results in year 10: "So the improvement is going to be around the Year 10 Maths results".

The description of the development of SIPs by the principal was underpinned by a set of elaborated interpretations of the role that the network plays in support of Case Study School Three, and of the kind of leadership role enacted by the Principal. The argument suggested that SIPs are goals that were required to be developed, but that they are fundamentally concerned with a level of accountability that the Principal has to the network. The language of SIPs and AIPs was not prominent in communications between the Principal and the leadership team and teachers:

> …I don't operate off the Annual Implementation Plan and key targets and those sorts of things…when you're dealing with teachers nobody is going to quote a target at me but everybody will quote results, results.

The core value that became a mantra that underpinned the principal's leadership when dealing with teachers at her school was that of "results, results, results", which indicated the ultimate emphasis on the improvement of student results and other indicative data.

Teachers and the leadership team did not need to know directly about the AIPs and the SIPs that were in place, as these were network level accountability measures for the Principal. This was explained by the principal as a point of distinction between the context of a Secondary College and Primary Schools:

> If I was to tell you what my top three priorities were, I would say they are results, then results, then results, as our student outcomes are not strong. So everything sits under those… so then you have to come up with a number of projects in a large number of different areas. Then when you have such a large diverse staff to operate through then you… well I struggle to come up with how you get things in place before you implement them with the whole staff.

The mantra of "results, results, results" was a basic principle underpinning leadership practice, but not necessarily directly related to SIPs. Instead, in order to maintain a consistency with the language used by leaders and teachers at Case Study School Three, SIPs were presented to teachers as another kind of "project" that the Principal was supporting in the school.

As a specific kind of project however, the Principal argued that the SIPs should not be directed towards aspects of the school that were already working well, but as a way to direct attention to specific areas of the school whose performance was symptomatic of larger problems. These ultimately would be judged against the criterion of the extent to which they improved the results of students in year 12 exams. The SIP (and AIP) was therefore subordinate to the pre-existing, over-arching value of improving results.

Given these links, the process of identifying a SIP was then about identifying a specific problem that required a resolution. The link to accountability highlighted that the kinds of problems that would be considered for a SIP were those that could be quantified. The major concern that the principal had with the then current application of SIPs in the Barwon South Network was that options available for SIPs foci were too restrictive to use as a mechanism for whole school change in high schools. In particular, while there may be a clear rightness of fit between numeracy and literacy in primary schools, which ties with one of the core aspects of accountability for the practice of teachers, in high schools this rightness of fit was absent from many teachers. The principal suggested that tor teachers of KLAs other than mathematics and English, the NAPLAN results and focus on literacy and numeracy were not viewed as directly relevant.

One leadership issue raised by the Principal extends from this insight and understanding about the need for a rightness of fit between expectations for change in teacher practice and student outcomes. Notably most of the language around this change stressed the practices and behaviour of teachers. The Principal suggested that the effectiveness of specific initiatives designed to change and improve teaching practices and student outcomes in schools was dependent on identifying "natural triggers of accountability" that exist. These triggers were points at which the culmination of teaching and the expectations of learning were reconciled, which are already embedded within schooling practices and the cycles of teaching and learning within a school. These triggers could be the release of report cards, external test results, internal testing, parent complaints, student surveys or

teacher surveys. For the principal, changes should be structured around these triggers. For the upper levels of high school, the major trigger of accountability that the Principal identified was exam results both those internal to the school, and final exam results for year 12 students. The Principal thought, therefore, that these natural triggers provided points at which discussion of the need for change could be channelled, at which teachers and students had a clear and shared investment. A major SIP thus focused on improving Year 10 students' examination results, specifically targeting revision practices to achieve this.

Knowledge of how to apply these triggers of accountability was developed across the SIP chosen during each term. The effectiveness of a specific SIP and the experiences of how successful this was in one term were used as the bases for changes in the development of SIPs in following terms. The application of these triggers was supplemented with other resources as a symbolic gesture to highlight the importance of specific changes.

> So this does have a natural trigger of accountability because it will be the exam and it will be reports and parents response to the exam results and reports because that's what triggered my knowledge of the issue last year and certainly teachers themselves hadn't identified it as an issue, they didn't think that five kids in each class passing was sufficiently important enough to even speak to the other people and say 'did we set the exam too hard', 'do we need to moderate this', it was like 'huh they got what they deserved didn't they'.

These triggers of accountability were therefore also triggers for the Principal, as they highlighted areas of concern that were made public, and that produced unexpected outcomes, such as only 5 students in each mathematics class passing their exams.

Leadership Teams

Within Case Study School Three the Leadership Team played an extensive role as a place of consultation for the development of specific SIPs in each term, but this consultative role was not equally shared amongst the leadership team, and the final decision about SIPs was made by the Principal. This was clear in comments made by one of the Assistant Principals at the school, AP1, who when asked about the current SIP at the school replied that:

> To be honest I don't know what our current SIP is, I know in the past what our SIP's have been, [the Principal]'s raised issues with us about where our improvement focus should be but I suppose we haven't come down with 'this is what are definite from my perspective', what our definite improvement focus is going to be on.

The decision about what the SIP would be became a source of speculation amongst the leadership team. The leadership team suggested a range of Potential options with reasons that these might be chosen, including the progress of students who entered the school on academic scholarships who might be underperforming (Middle School Manager [MSM]), collaborative learning (AP1; MSM; Acting Leading Teacher in Professional Learning [LTPL]), exam preparation and technique (AP2), and the focus on using data to help improve results ("results, results, results") (LTPL).

Once selected, however, the Assistant Principals had a clear understanding of the SIP for each term. Hence, AP1 named and elaborated on the focus of the SIP from the previous year: "I think that last year we looked at Year 11 exams and …seeing how they're prepared for their exams and … what revision is actually taking place, do the kids actually know what is on the exam itself".

This **description of the SIP** at Case Study School Three highlighted that SIPs involved an area for improvement and some overarching approaches that would be drawn on to diagnose specific problems within this area of improvement (e.g., looking at test results, parental views, investigations by the principal).

While the description of each SIP was not as clearly demarcated or articulated as the description made by the Principal, **the process through which the SIP was decided** was clearly described by the APs, and the reasoning and investigation that underpinned these decisions. One AP described the decision to focus on exam technique as being "… (b)ecause our expected results and our final results were not matching up". Leadership members saw that the process for making decisions about the SIP for a term involved in depth investigations. Given the comments above about a certain ambiguity of the specific focus, this implied that there were a range of different projects of this kind that were being trialled in different parts of the school, from which a specific SIP was selected and developed.

Despite this ambiguity, members of the leadership team felt that they were widely included and consulted in decision-making that led up to the announcement of the SIP for the term, though with different emphases depending on their specific role. One AP for example explained that...

> I suppose my role in it and how do I get involved seems to be that [the Principal] talks to me about issues that we've got and we debate things and we look at it from different perspectives. My role is primarily in student management and facilities, transition enrolments and stuff like that and the other Assistant Principal's more curriculum focused. So often [the Principal] will have more conversations with her around the SIP and where it's heading and doesn't have as much with me.

Teachers

The involvement of teachers in decision-making about SIPs was highly dependent on their role in each specific SIP. As SIPs were targeted and discussed as projects that were happening at the school, the relevance to those outside the SIP focus was minimal. As the Principal had not employed the language of SIPs with teachers outside of the Leadership team, the language that was substituted in place of SIPs was that of projects. Hence, the research described in this report around SIPs was described by teachers as "your [the researchers'] project". Those who were involved with the SIP provided clear descriptions of projects related to **the SIPs**. One teacher (T1) described the SIP as being an additional project that was connected to a project that she was running with year 10 mathematics:

> Well I suppose primarily your project is to do with improving or looking at how schools improve different parts of their processes and their running and the project

that we were conducting is all to do with improving Year 10 maths and their outcomes so I suppose the improving is the common link.

While this division helped to separate two aspects of the teacher's work this did create some issues around the teacher's own role and involvement with the project. T1 was invited to take on a maths project concerned initially with year 10 examination preparation, though did not teach this year. This broad focus was identified from an accountability trigger the previous year, the year 10 exam results, in which the performance of students was poor, though knowledge of this potentially poor performance was not shared more broadly within the school. This ultimately led to some students being withdrawn from the school. The broad question prompted the Principal to approach T1 to "find out what the problem is" (T1).

Preliminary investigations at the beginning of the following year revealed a more systematic problem facing student performance in year 10:

> …we had two new teachers and one of them was brand new to our school I was asking 'do we have a course outline that we can give to him because he doesn't really know what we're going to be doing this year in Year 10 maths' and the answer was 'no we don't have a course outline'.

This highlighted a set of other allied issues, such as no clear decision about the first topic, no regular meetings at which curriculum or pedagogy was discussed, and an unwillingness of teachers to make time to meet with T1. Discussions between T1 and the Principal therefore identified that there was not one but a set of problems that required attention in year 10 mathematics. Exacerbating the hurdles presented by these problems were some questions about the authority that T1 had to make demands on other teachers in year 10 mathematics. In response to this dilemma, the Principal identified and brought in a consultant to help identify problems amongst the year 10 teachers, who would sit in classes, make notes about the way mathematics was taught and then report back to the Principal.

This teacher was identified by the Principal as needing some leadership guidance in an earlier quote. T1 expressed some concerns when discussing how she introduced her role to teachers involved in the project:

> 'I've got this project and I need to investigate what's going on but I want to make sure that I'm doing things that are useful for them'. I don't feel that that's actually what's eventuated but I don't feel like I've had control over where the project has gone, [the Principal]'s had that control, she's had the ability to employ [a consultant] and employ the other people coming into the classes so I put it to them like that so maybe the way I put it to them was a bit too like coming in at the side instead of 'I'm in charge of this project' I suppose I put it to them like I was going to be supportive for them.

T1 described the way that the SIPs project undertaken in this research was enthusiastically discussed by the teachers when raised, though permissions slips were only handed out by one teacher, and was not viewed as being high on some teachers' lists of priorities. T1

expressed some frustration with the way that the mathematics project had developed. There was, therefore some confusion offered by T1 about her role and the role of the consultant in leading this project. This was expressed in part in terms of the official hierarchy of authority within the school, and her legitimacy in suggesting specific changes:

> …we've got the Principal Team then we've got Leading Teachers, we've got KLA Leaders and then there's other people that have different roles and responsibility positions. To the teachers I don't think this position is valued with any authority and saying any authority is probably the best way to say it.

In contrast with T1's concerns, a teacher of the year 10 mathematics, T2 described other issues that might be at play in the seeming reluctance of teachers to be involved. When asked about how T2 thought teachers would be involved in video-recording their lessons as part of the SIPs project, T2 suggested:

> Well obviously it was going to be our Year 10's but we didn't have a specific time or a topic or whatever we had to have done. It got towards the end of the term and we got into exams and we were doing revision and we didn't think that that was the appropriate time to video-tape the students because it wasn't really showing our teaching, well partly it was but partly it wasn't, I just didn't think it was the right time to do it.

In elaboration of this comment, T2 suggested that T1's main project was concerned with the improvement of exams for year 10. It might therefore be reasonable to suggest that if this was the representation of the problem, then other changes would seem tangential to the focus on exams.

Concluding comment

The SIPs undertaken at Case Study School Three linked to a cluster of problems associated with performance in examinations and preparation for examination conditions. A number of projects and external supports were introduced over the course of the SIPs address these problems, in the form of systematic interventions. The projects were then supported in a variety of ways, with selected people being invited to be involved in the leadership of the projects and their evaluation. Decisions made about these projects were made in consultation with the leadership team and with other teachers who share an involvement or investment with the specific project being considered. If successfully trialled with a small group of teachers, the insights from these projects would be extended to other parts of the school. There was what might be called a *modulation of educational reform and innovation* at operation throughout the school rather than a singular top down approach to school improvement. Leadership practices were both consultative and authoritative, and led to the gradual support and enabling of leadership capacity within the broader teaching staff around the carriage of different projects. Within this broad context SIPs were positioned as another kind of project. Within this high school, the focus on literacy and numeracy involved in the SIPs was viewed as making its impact more limited than a more open focus on improvement of results. The focus on problem areas of Case Study School Three proved somewhat problematic, as the role of research and researchers was resisted by some teachers. One concern raised in relation to the variety of projects being undertaken at Case Study School Three lies in the authority that staff members have to

take carriage of a project, particularly where there is reticence from teachers, or for whom that specific area is not their focal point. There was some ambiguity about how the Barwon South Network short-term cycle SIP Research linked with some of the other projects that were being undertaken by different members of staff.

6.4 Case Study School FOUR

At the end of 2010, Case Study School Four prepared an Annual Implementation Plan (AIP) for 2011 and that was reflective of the school's new strategic plan, which was developed following a review of the school. At the beginning of 2011 the leadership team shared the AIP with staff. Each staff member received an individual copy and it was shared at the staff meeting. The Principal believed everyone was aware of the goals and the things that the school leadership team wanted to achieve. At this point, the leadership team consisted of the Principal, Assistant Principal and a professional Learning Team of 4 Leading Teachers form across the levels of the school. However, part-way through the year, the principal was moved to a regional position and the assistant principal moved into the role of Acting Principal. This did provide some consistency in terms of the operation of the SIP within the school, with the Acting Principal continuing with the initial whole school plan for SIP. However, what this also meant structurally, was that one of the Leading Teachers stepped up into the role of Acting Assistant Principal and one of the classroom teachers became an 'acting' leading teacher.

At this school it was explained that they initially used the term School Improvement Partnership Model but this later changed to Short-term Improvement Cycle (STIC).

Operations and Processes

The whole school was involved in the decision-making process and selection of the first focus. The whole teaching staff was asked for suggestions about possible foci then the leadership used that to select and 'flesh out' a selected focus. This was then taken back to staff to make the final decision. Once the decisions had been made, the leadership worked hard to bring teaching staff on board with the process. From there, the unit level Professional Learning Team (PLTs) leaders would work with the unit level teachers to translate the focus into classroom practice.

In Case Study School Four the Term 1, 2011 School Improvement Plan (SIP) focus was related to the writing part of literacy. In Term 2 their SIP focus was related to numeracy. Literacy and Numeracy were selected because they were the two significant items in the school's AIP, which came out of the diagnostic school review that was conducted the previous year. The AIP and the SIP foci reflected the school's new school strategic plan. In Term 3, 2011 they focussed on the implementation of the Ultranet.

Principal

The Principal was fully involved in the 'Celebrations' sessions and indicated how these sessions had helped him focus on moving staff and the school forward to achieve the school goals. He commented that his knowledge and understanding of early years' literacy had improved significantly as he was closely involved with all teams and was able to discuss individual children's abilities and attainments. He took these celebrations back to staff and set up a small 'celebrations' focus during staff meetings, although it is not clear how this was implemented.

The whole staff was involved in the development of the school strategic plan and the annual implementation plan. For the school strategic plan, an outside reviewer interviewed nearly all staff including the Education Support staff, students and parents. There was a complete review of all of the school's programs. The report on the school review was used in the development of a new strategic plan.

The Acting Principal explained that they "set up a working party to develop the annual implementation plan which is a one year plan, so for 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and by the end of 2014 it's designed for the school strategic plan, which is a four year plan, the goals are met, it's broken down over four years."

The Acting Principal saw this as a step-by-step process to achieve the goals of the strategic plan. With the regional/network expectation of the take up of SIPs, the Acting Principal thought that the school "would use or highlight the key areas that we need to focus on as a result of the review. The two main things were literacy and numeracy, so with the staff we **negotiated** to have a look at literacy first and then we came up with an idea of looking at writing, so it's writing in Term 1". The word negotiated is highlighted here since it seems to reflect a particular view of leadership and decision-making at this school.

The Principal and Acting Principal explained how, at the beginning of the third term, they looked at their AIP and did a review of what they had achieved and which aspects had not been addressed. They looked at all of their goals, ranked them zero to 5, with zero being most important. The three Ultranet goals were ranked, zero, zero and zero which led to the decision to make the implementation of the Ultranet the focus for term three. The focus for the beginning of 2012 was Assessment and Reporting and the introduction of a new reporting format.

Leadership

During interviews with members of the leadership team "communication" was mentioned in terms of teams and staff forums for communication.

Following the lead from earlier in the year, under the leadership of the initial Principal, the Acting Principal, Acting Assistant Principal and Leading Teachers continued with their regular meetings (once each week) and worked out how best to support the rest of the teaching staff. There were also regular 'Unit meetings' (Grs P-1, 2-3, 4-5, 6) within the school, with one of the Professional Learning Team members reporting back to the unit on directions of the SIP, and developing ways of operating with the teachers and taking the Units' successes and concerns back to the Profession Learning Team meetings with the Principal and Acting Principal. The leadership style appeared to be collaborative and relatively relaxed, however, discussion with the leadership team indicated a strong focus on improvement, which was transferred back through unit meetings. Interestingly, a very junior member of staff commented that he wasn't aware of the processes of decision-making, other than directly through the unit in which he operated. When asked to sketch the lines of communication, he included the principal in a circle with lines to staff meetings.

Teachers

Teachers' perceptions of this change were apparent in comments about how in previous years the school goals were not always apparent to them. Leadership many have known what they were and may even have told the teachers but without any clear process of accountability teachers quickly moved their attention to the day-to-day work of teaching. At the beginning of the year "learning walks" took place within the school followed by teachers' written reflections. The walks and reflections were used as strategies to begin the intellectual conversation. This was followed by preparation by each unit (by year level) of an action plan which described what they intended to do differently to improve student learning in their unit. A template was used for this task. At the top of this template teachers responded to the following prompts: 'What are the students doing?', 'What is the learning intention?' 'What is the learning goal?'. There was also a section on the template for recording of observations and actions. This was described as the 'What we were going to do about it?'.

Translation into Practice

The teachers believed change was happening in both their teaching practice and in student outcomes. Teachers believed that they were learning through supported team professional learning where problems were shared. Seeing student improvement appeared to be sufficient motivation.

The teachers at this school were very positive about the translation of the School Improvement focus into changes in classroom practice. One teacher explained that:

> I think it's made us all look at our teaching and I know I specifically looked at reading ... and conferencing and working with the students and peer assessment as well. My focus was very small but in a small amount of time you can make a big difference if you keep it small. … just doing something very specific … in two weeks you can work on that if you do some intense work on that so I think generally for me it's making me think all the time and keeping focused and across the school I think it's raised the bar a bit.

Teachers explained that the implementation of the School Improvement foci in 2011 and the attention paid to data lead to better teaching and improved student learning. The teachers believed that the specific foci lead to the most improvement for the 'lower edge achievers … the ones we're trying to lift'. The teachers felt that even though the whole class had been included in the process, the greatest beneficiaries of the changes were the lower achieving students who had been targeted.

Students

Students in Grade 4 who were interviewed were able to clearly articulate their personal learning goals with respect to both the earlier SIP of writing and the later one of mathematics. They indicated that their progress was recorded on various wall displays. They indicated that the teacher had spoken to them about learning goals. In discussion with the children, they did not use the language of 'SIP', rather talked about personal

learning goals and how they had to achieve them. They were able to discuss the strategies used by the teacher and themselves to improve their learning.

> We set our goals...we look at writing…we have a conference with our teacher… she has a piece of paper with all goals on it and we/she picks a goal that's more accurate for us to be at.

> With writing we have to pick three pieces of writing to show that we have reached our goal. ...We go and tell her and show her our three pieces and if she still thinks that we haven't done it, then she'll give us extra days …

When asked what form of assessment occurred, they spoke about mathematics 'on demand' tests and other ways the teacher assessed their writing. Students spoke about looking at their NAPLAN results, looking at the bar graphs and also looking at the state results for NAPLAN. They indicated that they found it interesting to compare grades from different schools.

Speaking with children from a more junior grade (1/2) was quite different. Whilst the children were able to discuss what they were doing in class, they didn't use the language of learning goals. They were able to speak about changes they were making to their writing, using punctuation and general writing forms, and were able to indicate what they needed to improve in their own writing. They appeared to be uncomfortable about being asked about them and needed to be prompted by the teacher to provide responses to the question "tell me what you are learning in literacy".

Concluding comment

Whilst this school was subjected to change of its Principal and the situation of having a number of staff moving into acting roles, it managed to maintain its energy in working through the SIP. The original leadership of the school only changed slightly, so most of the ways of proceeding had been established and just needed following. By recruiting through 'acting' roles, the equilibrium of the school and the consistency of approach to the SIPs were maintained. The Acting Principal, coming from the teaching ranks, was very particular in maintaining a real collaboration and seemed to appreciate the value of the leadership team. Rather than be quite so involved as the previous principal, at the level of classroom, the Acting Principal seemed to allow teachers the responsibility for change within their classroom. He ensured they had support. He also attended the celebrations, but seemed less impressed with their value. His focus seemed to be more inward towards school progress, rather than big-picture network change.

Overall, this school seemed to manage the SIP. Stability and consistency of approach seemed to be key elements in the progress of teachers in achieving change of practice and improved student-learning outcomes.

6.5 Case Study School FIVE

Context

Case Study School Five is a rapidly expanding school of 450 students in a rural growth area. After some years of constant change with the school leadership (changing and acting principals), the school has now stabilised with the principal and leadership team being in place for the last two years.

At this school, the School Improvement Focus (SIF) was based on the their Annual Implementation Plan (the AIP) as this then reinforced that the focus was not about doing more, but about doing their job. The AIP had both numeracy and literacy as key aspects for improvement. Comments from the principal indicated that the school had moved away from the language of 'School Improvement Plan' so that what they were doing was not seen as an imposed model from above. The focus of the SIF was strongly based around the data from the previous year, which highlighted that the area of writing was an area of need.

Operations and processes

The school operates with the leadership team consisting of the principal and two leading teachers, although it seems that much autonomy is given to the staff. There is a management team consisting of all the year level coordinators, including specialists. The Professional Learning teams previously had consisted of a team for literacy, numeracy and sustainability/science, however in 2012, the entire staff was the professional learning team, concentrating on writing. The school staff were involved in analysing data: NAPLAN, VELS teacher data using a software program called 'Student Performance Analyser'. As one leading teacher indicated, "…it's everyone's responsibility to improve the data". After staff decisions about what need's improving, it goes back to the leadership team to 'decide the direction, how we're going to build this change and improvement into our professional learning teams." So, from the leadership viewpoint, the change process involved them with staff in analysing data, making decisions about directions and then taking it back to staff for input and implementation. At this school, staff input seemed a crucial element in ensuring all teaching staff were in agreement. In undertaking the simple task of a diagram to represent the process, all three teachers had slightly different interpretations, but essentially the same direction of communication.

The NAPLAN data from 2008-2011 was analysed and this identified elements of writing as being a need across the entire school. Teachers found this level of analysis was confirming teacher judgements of where children were at in their learning. Staff worked in small groups on different aspects and the data were analysed to the level of identifying specific children with needs (lowest 10%, top 10%) as well as emerging areas of need. Identifying to the level of child really "gave meaning to what the graph does". The data analysis continued at item level to identify the most common errors and what skills and knowledge children needed. This data analysis was collated and presented back to all teaching staff.

Staff decided to focus on literacy first and then move onto numeracy about half-way through the year. Within this broad focus, weekly professional learning sessions were implemented with the leadership team and a whole school target was identified. There is

usually a cycle of working with the staff, leadership team taking away ideas and pulling them together with possible recommendations, then returning to the teachers. Teachers reviewed their own practice, in teams, with guidance in terms of structured practice. They reviewed different models of improving children's writing, undertook professional reading in the area and fed back information to staff meetings. Eventually, after several months of review and discussion, they came to the conclusion that a focus on the 'Writers Workshop' strategy was the way they wanted to direct their attention and energies.

At staff meetings, teachers generated a sense of ownership of the strategies to use and some of the teachers wanted to attend outside professional learning around the Writer Workshop strategy. It took about 6 months for all teachers to start to practise the strategy across the school within their own level. At this time, it became clear to teachers that to attempt the numeracy focus they had originally planned, was not an efficient use of time. It was better to bed down the writer's workshop strategy and to ensure that data supported the improvement of children's writing skills. The original idea of a short-term-cycle with two school foci in the year did not play out that way.

Principal

In this school, the Principal saw the need to involve all staff in decision-making, but wanted to ensure that there was sufficient support for the teachers to implement change. Establishing two leadership positions in "Curriculum' and 'Assessment', he used the leading teachers to provide professional learning sessions for the other teachers. The principal commented on the ongoing support that was provided to teachers.

The principal saw a need to take the approach of staff collaboration as he believed the previous leadership team, including the principal, had been authoritarian in its approach. He wanted staff to feel ownership of the process. "I've been trying to give staff more of a say and input into things and some of them aren't actually quite comfortable with that, some of them actually quite like the idea of being told exactly what they need to be doing."

Leadership team

In particular, the curriculum leader appeared to be instrumental in leading the discussion around the literacy strategies and providing the professional learning to other teachers. The curriculum leader was a young teacher, new to the school, and his presentation and understanding of literacy material provided staff with a 'knowledgeable other' with whom they could confer. This is important to staff to feel that they are being supported and that there is someone they can turn to for advice and assistance.

The leadership team commented on some teachers who wanted to short-cut the process of consultation. Some staff had originally thought that the 'Writers Workshop' was the appropriate strategy and did not want to undertake the research into other approaches. However, the time was important for other staff in particular to really understand the needs of the school "… other people didn't really have a good understanding of Writers Workshop, it was like… what else is out there… what does a good writing program look like?…" The leadership was assisting staff in the development of the focus, using weekly Professional Learning Team sessions where teachers talked about their implementation

strategies and what had been doing in their classrooms. "I haven't seen staff that relaxed about sharing, which was really nice to see."

The Principal and leadership team met regularly and also met with staff to assist in the development of the literacy focus. Interestingly, one of the leadership team, who had been on staff a few years, disagreed with the principal's comment about a previous authoritarian approach at the school.

The principal commented that the 4 SIPs put into place the previous year, had had an impact although they could not indicate whether they were long-term positive effects. The principal had previously been a Cluster Coordinator for that and other local schools and commented that, "That's when I saw the most significant change in practice across any school was through that model." (Short-term-cycle model)

Teachers

Decisions were made at whole school staff meetings. The Leadership team provided guidance, but all staff felt that the decisions were theirs. The amount of time given to the review and research on effective literacy strategies meant that teachers were able to come to a consensus based on a strong understanding of alternatives and were able to clearly define the elements of the strategy which suited their purposes. "…M and V lead the discussion that takes place and the sharing of ideas but last term… we had to take on an area of expertise and research it and find out information and then brought it all together… now we all seem to be on the same page with it."

The Grade Six teacher believed that there would be a smaller focus on numeracy for the last half of the year, although confirmed what the others had indicated, in that the focus on writing would continue.

Translation into Practice

Teachers

At the level of classroom practice, one teacher indicated that she had revised her previous practice, building on new knowledge about the 'Writers' Workshop'. She realised that she had not provided the children with all the strategies from the approach. She specifically discussed the changes in the teaching approach with the children, continually revisiting the process with them.

An outcome of the review process meant that work undertaken previously was revised, with students looking at previous writing and actually changing what they had done previously. " I had them actually go back through their notebooks and fixing up what we didn't do properly… " When questioned about how the children responded, the teacher indicated that 'it made sense to them" and we do so much collaborative learning. As the teacher feels the children are now coping with the changes introduced, she is focussing on other aspects of the writers workshop strategies, such as editing as well as broadening their writing genre.

The teacher commented that at the level of practice, some of the other grades had only just started to alter their practice (term 3). The reason given was that teachers in those grades wanted to complete all PD and really understand what they were doing first. "…wanting to start it properly rather than in bits and pieces and they didn't have the resources."

Students

The Grade 5 students were quite comfortable talking about the changes to their writing. They were able to clearly articulate the changes in detail that had been occurring in their classroom. It appeared, from the way the students answered questions, that the teacher had explained the reasons for change and the process being undertaken. The students were confident in their responses to all questions. The students commented on how they had used the 'Writers' Workshop' previously and how they had made adjustments. "…then Miss W found out that we're meant to actually write our idea…" When asked whether the specific instruction of re-writing the text was of benefit to them, the group of five children all nodded in the affirmative.

In addition to the 'Writers' Workshop' they have been introduced to book awards "a thing where we celebrate our learning." The children confirmed that they had not had other changes to writing, but had been closely following the newer process for Writers Workshop. Much of their writing is placed on display in the writing corner of the room. Each child seemed to be aware of what they needed to do to improve their own writing, so although they didn't use terms like 'personal learning goals', this is in effect, appeared to be what they were talking about.

Concluding comment

The school is growing rapidly from about 150 students in 2008, to around 400 by the end of 2012. This has meant that staff has increased to about 26 teaching staff, two specialist staff and about 5 School Support staff. (This does not include the administration staff.) As a consequence, many of the staff are relatively new which may contribute to the introduction to a new way of operating. The new principal (last two years) has a different manner of operation, being more consultative and more engaging of all staff in school decisions. As one teacher indicated." …we never knew about the Principal coming back, we had someone Acting and we had someone else underneath and it was a changeover of a new way of doing it and it is a very different type of leadership to what our previous leadership was – absolutely it's a much more consultative one. Now we are overlapping from the 'You'll do it' to a more "Let's all decide together".

In 2011, the school did attempt to embrace four separate SIPs and these were implemented to some extent. However, there was no confirmation that the short-term changes had bedded themselves in practice across the whole school or had resulted in changed long-term student outcomes.

6.6. Case Study School SIX

This is a large regional primary school located in a growing community. Being a large school it has a large leadership team with three assistant principals. It has four team leaders with the school structured into four smaller 'schools' or teams. It has been through significant structural changes in administration in the recent years moving from a P-6 primary school to a combined primary and secondary school to two separate schools in 2012. It is now a P-6 College. The Principal of the current P-6 College has been the principal throughout these difficult changes.

Members of this school community were very keen to discuss the very rich curriculum learning experiences offered by the school which seemed to sit outside the SIP model. These learning experiences were highly valued by all members of the school community including leadership, teachers, students and parents. An example of this was a teacher who was passionate about Spanish Dance running a Dance Club and another teaching organising social games for those requiring the development of specific social skills. A perceived lack of valuing of such rich in-school and out-of-class cultural and curriculum activities within the SIP model was a cause for frustration.

The Principal also expressed frustration with recent notification of significant reduction in school budgets by DEECD (as at December 2012) and the sorts of programs such as Language Support that would have to be cut.

School Leadership

In 2011 while the school was experiencing ongoing and significant changes to school structures and organisation, the School Improvement Plan (SIP) was introduced by the regional network leader. The principal indicated that not all of the school staff was happy to have to change direction again. The principal indicated that if felt like they had to throw out their Annual Implementation Plan (AIP). Even so, the school decided to focus on writing. In this school the School Improvement foci were selected by the leadership team based on data. The school had two coaches; one for literacy and one for numeracy so the literacy coach played a key role. The principal noted that they 'used the paper that was provided' to write up their plan (the template provided by the regional network leader). It had to include the focus, success indicators and evidence of success. Even though the school had to change the plans they had carefully prepared the year before the principal noted that:

> … it was amazing even though at the start of the year staff were feeling, 'Oh no do we have to take this on?' the buy-in was fantastic. Because the whole school was doing it we were able to offer quality PD; we used our coaches to support teachers who needed up-skilling (and) … graduates who came in with very little knowledge of teaching that area anyway, so they were able to come straight on board which was really good ... We decided not to go with the four for the year. We started off with one and we got to the end of first term and we'd nowhere near completed it so we kept going.

The principal also commented that:

... by taking a little longer than a term we got quality material out of it and we've actually embedded what we did and that's continued this year [2013]. There's no question anymore about the way we teach writing ... This year we've continued the program in a modified form. We don't do the documentation on this format anymore but we've established professional learning teams and the professional learning teams have had a focus for the half-year.

Decision-making and communication processes

The principal explained how the SIP was initially introduced and the initial challenges:

> When I came back and said we have to do SIF's because at that stage we already had written our AIP and a lot of it was about transition, building and curriculum for Year 9, 10, 11 so we had to change completely. It really meant we had to throw our AIP out for last year but we took it and did each SIF. We … used our accountability for the school … we used the GROW model. We wrote our SIFs on the paper that was provided to us. It was a form that you add your actual focus, you had to have your success indicators and then at the end we had the evidence of success.

The principal explained that the selection of the school improvement focus happened in the following way:

> There were four of us (principal and assistant principals). We worked with the two coaches and used the team leaders to establish what the focus would be for each of our SIFs. Yes it is the one that [the Regional Network Leader] provided us with initially. We found that to be very helpful and it was amazing even though at the start of the year staff were feeling, 'Oh no do we have to take this on' the buy-in was fantastic. Because the whole school was doing it we were able to offer quality PD. We used our coaches to support teachers who needed up-skilling or graduates who came in with very little knowledge of teaching that area anyway, so they were able to come straight on board which was really good. So we actually completed, we decided not to go with the four for the year, we started off with one and we got to the end of first term and we'd nowhere near completed it so we kept going.

While the principal and the assistant principals supported this version team leaders and classroom teachers had different memories of the process.

One interviewee noted that:

> As far as I knew the SIF came from AIP areas that we wanted to improve, so it was writing and maths which whenever we have the AIP's it's always obviously literacy and numeracy focused. The specifics I think came from NAPLAN areas as well but we didn't have a huge involvement from what I can remember deciding what exactly the main focus was. It was just presented to us as 'these are the school improvement areas that we're going to focus specifically on'.

Another classroom teacher explained:

> I don't know why writing was chosen as the focus … I'm just assuming from data that they decided that that was an area that the school in general needed to work

on … I'm thinking perhaps [it came] from Regional Office and whether they based that information on school data or whether it was an area across the region that they considered to be an area that needed improving, … I'm just from a classroom level, I don't really understand the process.

When classroom teachers were asked to describe the decision-making process for selecting the school improvement foci they all referred to the "School Improvement Partnership Project Deployment Flowchart" dated February 2011 and the "Roles and Responsibilities" document both of which were posted on the wall of the room where interviews were conducted. This document shows top down model moving from a formal process with the Regional Network leader followed by instructions about how school leaders and staff will 'build goal setting skills' including the 'delivery' of professional development of developing goals. A SIP planning day is mentioned in which teams were to be given 'guidelines and a range of ideas to develop a draft model suiting the needs of the student cohort'. Leadership and staff were then expected to discuss and construct ILPs (Individual Learning Plans) for the student cohort. The leadership team was then expected to finalise the ILP models to ensure consistency and a whole school approach.

In this case study school, the decision-making process appeared to be a very layered approach which 'looks' like a distributed model of decision-making but in fact tended to be a top-down leadership model in which the top level administration – Principal and Assistant Principal came to decisions which then filtered down to staff through coaches, curriculum leaders and team leaders to classroom teachers. Even so there was a sense by classroom teachers that the SIP process was imposed upon the school by the region. The teachers described how the leadership team carried out the selection of foci. They referred to the wall documents about how the process worked.

This process appeared to position classroom teachers as relatively powerless in the decision-making structures and processes. Classroom teachers were the ones that were expected to translate the decisions into changed classroom teaching practices but their motivation, commitment and ultimately buy-in can be compromised in this sort of process. Whether this is an outcome of the size of school or the leadership style or is, more likely a combination of the two, is debatable.

Selecting the focus

The selection of the School Improvement foci in this case study school was based on data. The leadership team explained that:

> What we've also done is used the data collection, the triangulated data in the school more effectively, we developed that in the first term last year and we've continued the way we use that data right through until now. … We graph the whole school data.

The large leadership team was involved in the selection of 'writing' as the first whole school focus (although classroom teachers also mentioned numeracy foci as well as writing). The leaders and teams looked at their 'writing' policy and programs through staff meetings and professional development nights. A decision was made to restructure meeting schedules to allow for whole school staff meetings, team meetings (in grade levels) and professional

learning team (PLT) meetings. PLTs are based on curriculum areas so one teacher from each team (grade level) will be a member of each PLT such as literacy or numeracy team.

Once this organisation was in place the PLT person took the information about their curriculum area back to their grade level team (eg. Literacy). This restructuring process meant (according to the Principal) that the school improvement focus was taken on right across the school and they 'haven't had any problems'.

After having selected writing as the focus for year 1, spelling was selected as the literacy focus for 2013.

Using data to inform teaching and learning

The use of data, which was commonly mentioned by the first cohort of focus schools, also determined the selection of this school's focus. The Principal noted that they use: 'On demand testing' … 'VELS' data … 'NAPLAN' data for the three classes ... the 'AVI' plus the 'Early Years collection.

AVI was described as the 'National program that looks at the early year's social development and backgrounds of students, what they're coming into school with'. The early year's assessment was described as being 'done at a regional level before they start and then Prep teachers' The grade 1-2 teachers follow through with early year's assessment in literacy and numeracy for benchmarking. The principal explained that they:

> Look at our data now. NAPLAN has only one use in my opinion. I personally don't like NAPLAN and I think the My School site is detrimental to schools like ours because we focus on the whole child, the education, here we offer diversity of curriculum … we take teacher's passions and use them.

Coaches, team leaders and classroom teachers assumed or understood that data was the driver for the selection of the SIP. One commented that:

> I think it was based on our data from the previous couple of years, I would assume that's why we'd have that as a focus it would have been a combination of NAPLAN data I suppose and school based judgments as well perhaps on demand testing.

Translation into Practice

The only data about translation into practice available from this school was a video prepared by teaching staff for what seemed like promotional purposes. No video of unedited classroom practices was available for analysis and no children were interviewed at this school. In some ways this demonstrates how by the second year of the project the school improvement processes as designed by the initial regional network leaders were sidelined and they had been further marginalised over time. Changes in the state and regional structures left staff and leadership feeling as though the SIP processes were no longer valued and so they chose to design their own plans for school improvement and to conduct their own forms of professional learning.

Concluding comment

There seemed to be a discrepancy between the rhetoric of the leaders and the experience of the classroom teachers in this large school. The classroom teachers were much less clear about the processes than the leadership team might have expected them to be. Some of these issues may be to do with the ways schools are organised. In larger schools communication is not always easy. If devolved forms of leadership are set up, such as happens in this school, then collaborative decision-making is not easily achieved. When separate groups of teachers work closely together and effectively operate as mini schools then messages from 'above' may be diluted, ignored or simply missed. One teacher provided insights into how change processes play out in these kinds of contexts:

> Look we were talking about this at leadership last night about change and I've had theories about big changes take seven years …if it comes out from the Department. So it is really a trickle effect. It's that water seeping through the flood plain type thing.

6.7. Case Study School SEVEN

Case Study School Seven is a coeducational government special school located in the Barwon South Network. This school caters for students with moderate to profound disabilities aged from 5 to 18 years.

The introduction of SIPs at this school was positively embraced by the principal, leadership team and teaching staff. The principal and vice principal strongly articulated the importance of the network leader and possible challenges that they now face with the restructure of the regions within the DEECD.

(NOTE: All participants in this case study used the term School Improvement Foci (SIF) rather than SIP. Therefore, in the following discussion, SIF is substituted for SIP where referred to by a participant.)

Operation and processes

Principal and Vice Principal

Both the Principal and Vice Principal from Case Study School Seven indicated that the inclusion of the SIP as a short-term cycle was a very positive inclusion to the school. While the SIP did not represent a six-week short-term cycle as initially outlined by the Network leader, the adaptation of this model represented one which selected and implemented goals over the period of a term, and appeared to result in positive outcomes for the school. Both the Principal and the Vice Principal articulated that the "SIF" was a vehicle for enforcing change within the school with the external support and drive of the network. For example, the principal stated that "it gave to us a beautiful framework…it gave us the opportunity to say 'this is our focus for the term, it's a regional thing, it's there…" This reference to the region as a way of enforcing the implementation of the SIF was also articulated to teachers after the Network and Region were restructured in 2012. In particular, the Vice Principal stated that, "…by omission we didn't admit to the fact that they [SIP] weren't being pushed by the Region because we'd found it really useful so we just continued on with SIFs."

Responses from the Principal and Vice Principal also highlighted the importance of the SIF as a way of making the goals of the AIP more explicit as well as providing greater structure, consistent understandings of goals, and better accountability processes. For example, the principal stated that as a result of SIF "we've tightened up around accountability …it was validating what we do…prior to that [SIF] there was a little bit of structure but not a lot. Getting the SIFs and using that as a vehicle to drive change." Similarly, the Vice principal reported that SIF "…was a really good way of implementing change and making sure the teachers had an understanding of what the expectation was for that term…and then the accountability to it was everybody was in."

Processes regarding the selection of goals for the SIP were guided by the school's AIP and the vision of the principal. It was also clear from the responses from the principal and the vice principal that the Network meetings were pivotal in guiding the process for selecting goals and keeping focussed. For example, the principal stated that "it was a lot of the talk

that was happening in our network meetings around Hattie …that discussion you know "the trend was", "research is showing', so we took a lot of that on board." The Vice Principal concurred with these views stating that "… tasks which sort of sat with the work we were doing around Hattie…"It was also clear that these goals were also decided by the leadership team and "…teachers with parents at the beginning of the year for the students." Similarly, the principal stated that "we do it, we consult with staff, the whole staff, we review our AIP, we set up goals, we do it with the whole staff but really it's the leading teacher team and principal but also we interview parents."

In addition to the role of the network in supporting the selection of goals, the Principal and the Vice Principal also strongly articulated the challenges that the school now faces as a result of the re-structuring of the education department and the removal of the position of the network leader. In particular, the work is now "headed by principals rather than Regional Network Leaders." The Network leader was "fantastic because she is a regional network Leader …was inclusive of everyone…she always had the time, she always promoted us…and she was a great advocate for us and we don't have that anymore…being able to have those conversations with [other] principals at that level [celebration days] was very empowering but that's already just dissipated…I don't get nearly half the amount of emails which principals would be celebrating but you just don't know what's going on…" This particular response also highlights the noted change in the level of involvement at the regional level since the restructuring.

Reflections on the value of implementing the SIP into this school were very positive. The specific goals decided as part of the SIF were seen as successful. Both the Principal and Vice Principal believed that SIF translated into practice because they witnessed that the selected goals gave students "…the power over their own learning and I think that feedback from the teachers was one of the best things we've done…' Specifically, the Vice Principal stated that "…the kids were talking about their goals so the work was really embraced and was successful…so yeah we knew we had goals, we needed to be explicit about how we were getting there." Overall, both participants expressed that the implementation of the SIF was highly successful in regard to both changes in staff attitude, knowledge and professional knowledge, and student's understandings of their own specific goals for improvement.

Teachers

Five teachers from the school were interviewed in relation to the processes implemented in selecting goals for the current SIP. All participants indicated that goals were selected on the basis of the school's AIP with recognition of parental input from the school's parent opinion survey. For example, one teacher stated that she thought, "all of them came out of student learning, all our STICs and SIFs, I think came from the student-learning component of our AIP… [they came] from the parent opinion survey." Similar to the responses from the principal and vice principal, these five teachers also believed that the SIP goals were clearly linked to the Principal's vision. As one teacher stated, "…so certainly it came with our new principal… she had a definite vision to see students as part of the learning community and for them to start having a say in their learning…" Interestingly, it appeared that the teaching staff was well aware of the Principal's vision with all five teachers

articulating the transparency of this vision. For example, "I think she [principal] actually did outline her vision to our staff meetings."

Teacher understandings of the process involved in the selection of goals appeared to be similar across the group of five teachers. All believed that the principal selected the goals, based on the school's AIP and the Principal's vision. These goals were discussed with the leadership team then passed down to student-learning team and to other classroom teachers. For example, when asked to comment on the process for selecting goals one teacher stated that, "I guess the student-learning team and the principal defined the goal of the SIF, took the goal to the staff." Similarly, another teacher stated that goals were selected by "the principal, her vision…it then got shared with leadership so there was discussion with the leading teachers. Then it went to the student-learning team so discussion about how we were going to share it with staff, how we were going to implement it…"

Responses from both the Principal and Vice Principal, and the teachers also appeared to show the importance of professional learning around goal selection and the celebration of goals at the end of the cycle. For example, one teacher stated "… [Implementation of goals] was up to the student-learning team to facilitate all the learning around that so we explored Hattie, we explored e5 …developed some guidelines and we would always put out a very explicit document about the SIF. Then at the end of the cycle which was just the term there'd be our whole school level feedback and celebration of it and sharing of resources…"

There were some noted differences in the responses made by the Principal and Vice Principal compared with the responses made by the teachers. These differences included a greater emphasis by teachers for whole school community understanding of the SIP goals. For example, while all participants articulated that SIP was a way of making learning goals more explicit, there was a stronger emphasis on greater accountability as a result of making these goals more explicit by the principal and vice principal. In contrast, teachers did not articulate any sense that the SIP was a way of enforcing greater accountability but noted the importance of a whole school community understanding of the SIP goals in order for these goals to translate into practice. For example, one teacher stated that it was "important that everyone in the school community has a common understanding of the STIC or SIF goals." Another teacher stated, "parents are involved and aware of the goals." As a result of the emphasis of making these goals more explicit, these teachers believed that there had "been a really powerful change" in the students. One teacher noted that it was much more explicit for the students, "…if you said to them "what are your goals" they could either tell you or they could show you on their desk "these are my goals" or show them on the wall "these are my goals", while another teacher noted that, "just the ownership that they've taken over their goals so they're responsible …so there's been a real shift from it being teacher responsibility, so just the ownership of their learning is obvious." A third teacher believed that making goals more explicit to the whole community was "a way of making the practice into goals more authentic and meaningful to the students."

Translation into practice

It appeared that one of the greatest challenges facing teachers in relation to the implementation of the new SIP was around the translation of the goals into practice. Many teachers appeared to understand that modifications to the original six-week short-term cycle were made so that goals were allocated to a term, however, they believed that this time was not adequate for some goals to be successfully achieved. As one teacher stated "you need time to consolidate …we try to refine and clean up the previous STIC before we moved on…we did it term by term, we sort of have one in Term 1 so it was a term by term.." This recognition of the challenge in implementing too many goals was fed back to leadership at staff meetings…" we just said too much, people are feeling that they're doing a thousand things and not doing anything well and we want to consolidate, we want to embed, something has to drop, and we just can't keep adding, adding, adding…so term 3 STIC was dropped, we don't have term 4 STICs because of the busyness." This feeling was confirmed by another teacher who stated "…that it was one of the staff feedback things that we did get that if you're introducing something new each term and embedding it and then introducing, where does it stop, you can't keep introducing and embedding without creating this huge workload …something has to give if you keep introducing new things into a workload."

Another important difference between the responses made by the principal and vice principal compared with responses by the teachers related to the language used around SIPs. Teachers believed that it was critical for the whole school community to have a common understanding of the language of SIPs and the language of the goals. As one teacher stated, "getting parents to understand the language, we're also trying to introduce the jargon of what schools operate with and introducing that through newsletter to parents." Another teacher stated that "they would introduce the school improvement language with the parents "through the newsletter, through the principal's weekly newsletter would have told parents what SIF and the latest STIC was for the term." Furthermore, another teacher summarised that consistent language use across the school community was critical because "it's developing language …for students, the parents and the staff really so that the staff are all using consistent language across the school." In addition, many teachers noted a change in their own language that they used with the students "teachers modelled that language …we're going to practice your goal now, so all that language became part of every day." "We [student-learning team] targeted the language that we wanted teachers to start using with the students and educational support team as well …using the language of learning at the commencement of a lesson." As a school community they wanted "…to build up the language so they [students] know a goal is what you're going to be learning about. So hopefully if you start there [prep] and then as they go through the school they do it as part of the school language."

Concluding comment

Case Study School Seven, while avoiding the use of SIP, embraced the SIF as a positive process for implementing change and improving student outcomes. The transparency of goals was evident within the school and wider school community. The implications of the absence of the Network Leader and the specific role of the network in providing support to newly-appointed principals was strongly articulated. This suggests that this network-led

school improvement model was valued and seen as a critical aspect of improving school and student outcomes.

6.8. Case Study School EIGHT

Case Study School Eight is a coeducational government high school located in the Barwon South Network that was formed in 2012. This school began as a 7-10 school in 2012, expanding to year 11 in 2013 and a projected year 12 cohort beginning in 2014. During the research the school sat at a temporary site alongside a primary school, and some of the teachers moved from this primary school. As a new school, the school's organisation was distinguished by its integrated learning programs in years 7-10, known as FUSE with a focus on technology use and individualised learning plans for each student. The school caters for students from the local community and in 2012 had an enrolment of 204, and projected growth of student numbers. At the time of this research the school was in the process of preparing to move into a new campus.

The need for a focus on School Improvement was positively embraced by the principal, leadership team and teaching staff, though by the time research began in the school, the original school improvement plan template was no longer in use and network support had diminished as a result of policy changes. The principal and vice principals strongly articulated the need to incorporate school improvement and planning in their structure, even though the school was still in the process of establishing routines. Despite this need, as school improvement plans were not a key text in school planning, other texts fulfilled this purpose. The Annual Implementation Plan was identified as a key document in the planning of changes within the school, which was supplemented by a strategic plan. The principal and one of the vice-principals had previously been involved in the regional office in roles related to school improvement. Though not formalised in an official school improvement plan, the focus of school changes was oriented towards placing student-learning, and individual student needs at the centre of school efforts. As a new school, the focus on issues related to school improvement was set within the emergence of new school procedures, practices and ways of dealing with and negotiating unforseen issues. The major document that articulated the school improvement agenda was the Annual Implementation Plan, which comprised four major foci, and was directly tied to the position statements and responsibilities of the leadership group and classroom teachers. These four foci included: 1) self-directed learning and development of high quality curriculum, 2) development of a one-to-one learning program in the school, 3) setting high expectations and creating an orderly environment, and 4) using restorative practices. Each of these foci was considered to cover the whole school, and did not change markedly between 2012 and 2013, though some emphasis shifted with the addition of year 11 classes in 2013. As an expanding school that was also increasing its offerings to years 11 and 12, the number of teachers grew between 2012 and 2013. In addition to the principal, the leadership group included two Assistant Principals and two leading teachers. Teachers at the school included those originally located in the adjacent primary school and teachers who moved from other schools in the local region.

Operation and processes

Principal

The principal expressed interest in being part of the SIPs research as a way to embed feedback about progress towards goals into the regular practices of the new school. The

principal held a definite vision for the direction of the school, which was an aim to create a space for learning to meet the challenges and needs of 21st century learners. In practice, this meant an emphasis on student centred delivery of education, using an integrated curriculum to motivate students and make connections between discipline areas. This program, known as FUSE, as it would "light a fuse for student engagement", integrated English, maths, humanities and science. The large classroom spaces were designed to accommodate the teaching of multiple disciplines in the one space. There was widespread use of technology throughout the school. Underpinning the use of technology was a rationale that the emphasis in the school would not be content delivery (which students could access anywhere using computers or tablet computers), but equipping students with skills that would allow them to find, access and utilise knowledge in creative and meaningful ways to meet their own learning goals. The set of skills necessary for specific integrated tasks was spoken about as a capacity matrix. This broad vision, articulated in a variety of ways, underpinned the leadership of the principal, and helped him to understand the kinds of decisions that he needed to make to bring this vision into being. This implied overturning many conventional notions of the organisation of high schools, and an emphasis on "flipped learning" or "flip learning" implying a switch in the expected roles of the teacher and learner (teachers would guide student-learning and encourage the development of skills, while students would access and identify content that they needed for specific tasks). To encourage this breaking of conventions, the principal also emphasised the need for language and keywords that would be consistently used to express this vision with students, teachers, parents and the broader community. This was important, as the organisation of the school contrasted with some of the expectations of school that students had developed through their previous schooling experiences. Students, being the focus of the school, were also expected to have a much greater say in their own learning goals, and to be proactive in challenging their own learning.

When asked about the process of decision-making about the emphasis of the school, and its organisation, the Principal stressed the wide consultation that was undertaken prior to the new school being established. As a new school, face-to-face consultations were held with parents, students, teachers and the broader community. A number of key decisions about the school reflect this consultation, including the AIP focus on creating an orderly environment and employing restorative practices throughout the school. An emerging aspect of this consultation was the need to develop a flexible reporting system, and in 2013 one of the classroom teachers was given the task of finding a way to structure this feedback to provide a continuous stream of information about individual student's progress, accessible to parents, teachers and the leadership of the school. In addition to this initial decision-making, teachers and leadership of the school were selected with full awareness of the emphasis of the new school, and specific issues requiring decision were raised in staff meetings, in dialogue between teachers and the leadership group, in response to student and parent surveys, and student performance data. Though the broad vision for the school was directly related to the Principal, dialogue and feedback accompanies subsequent decision-making and changes within the school. As the Principal was also negotiating different aspects of the impending move to a new campus, he delegated responsibility for this feedback to his leadership team, and trusts their experience and input when specific issues were raised. Decision-making in a new school was not without problems, and some parents raised concerns about the kind of feedback and approach to learning that was being adopted by teachers in the school. The Principal expressed some

concern that feedback of this kind highlighted that key messages about the way the school operates were not always understood or approved by parents.

Leadership

Apart from the Principal, other members of the leadership team at the school were divided in the kinds of responsibilities they held, with the two Assistant Principals being focussed on Digital Learning, Curriculum and Pedagogy, and Curriculum respectively, and the Leading Teachers focussed on years 7-8 and 9-10 respectively. In 2013 an additional Leading teacher was added to the leadership team with a specific emphasis on data and reporting. In the main, the APs held a broader view of the connections between school improvement and decision-making than the Leading Teachers. Within the leadership team, discussions about the focus of school improvement in the school consistently referred back to the vision for the school, which was important to the school in order to establish its identity and orientation towards planning. This was important as the orientation of teaching practices and student-learning was challenging to some parents. One of the AP's expressed this underlying concern as the school "…want(ing) to be providing our kids for the most contemporary up to date model of teaching and learning that we possibly can and that we wanted to be reflective of what's happening in the global world and the types of skills that kids need to be using or having to be successful and that we didn't want to be having our teachers standing out in front of a classroom for forty minutes lecturing kids. We wanted to educate them on different ways of instruction and to support them to experiment with what works and what work doesn't as well."

The key document in which the leadership team saw school improvement functioning was through the Annual Implementation Plan, which was connected directly to the focus or vision of the school. The AP highlighted the four key school foci in the AIP (see introduction). As a new school, it was more difficult to identify one specific focus for change across the school in a shorter time-frame, as there were multiple aspects of school practice that required attention. The leadership team did consider the AIP to be clear and well communicated throughout the school to teachers, to students and to parents. Within the school individual aspects of the AIP were attached to the specific responsibilities of members of the leadership team. One leading teacher suggested that the exact description of the AIP goals were less clear when it came to areas beyond their role, noting that "I suppose for me with the AIP I know the ones that I work to day to day". In comparing their experiences at Case Study School Eight with their previous experience, members of the leadership team commented that the working knowledge of the AIP was much clearer at the school in comparison to previous schools they had worked at.

When describing the how the focus of the AIP was decided, the leadership team were consistent. The AIP linked directly to the vision that the Principal outlined to potential staff members in the months leading to the establishment of the school. Though this was a vision of the school from the new principal, this was considered to be clearly communicated to teachers to ensure that there would be "buy-in" to the aims and development of the school. This vision led to an official statement that was formed through consultation with teachers, students, parents and the community. Teachers who were recruited from the adjoining primary school were given a day's release to help with this vision statement, which was developed through a process of building on shared language and words. The

initial AIP, though informed by data and discussion with staff, was written by the Leadership team, including the principal. In reflecting on this process one of the APs commented that "… at the start of this year the five of us [the leadership team] sat down and determined what those things would be so I guess that's where this starts, particularly here." Subsequent revisions of the AIP were concerned with refining the original goals based on how relevant they were or workable in their current format rather than changing them completely, though this was not without some discussion and disagreement.

In order to implement the vision and enact the AIP foci within the school one of the key contributing factors commented on by the leadership team was in the initial selection of staff and communication of focus by the Principal when they were interviewed to become a part of the school. The AP also highlighted the processes of performance review of each staff member were connected to the AIP, and were conducted in groups by individual members of the leadership team, which involved communicating the meaning of the AIP and ways that it should link to goals. The implementation of the AIP also involved regular meetings between different members of the leadership team. One of the key features that the leadership team noted as an ongoing concern for the school was establishing ways to support and document the impact on student-learning. This was expressed in a variety of ways, noting some of the limitations of traditional forms of reporting and accountability, such as the VELS progression points. One of the APs noted that "…it's not always easy to evidence what the improvements have been because some of it is 'yes we still want to get good results with our kids of senior literacy and all of our other teaching and learning areas as well, we want to get great VCE scores out of these kids when they go into it in the next couple of years but we also want our kids to be motivated and self-directed and good collaborators as well."

To address this limitation, a number of alternative forms of accounting for student-learning are pointed to, including the use of online learning blogs of students. This attempt to collect evidence also involved the construction of development charts for student performance in a variety of areas, which may be developed further in subsequent years. This extended to considering the development of new continuums around skills that are valued by the school, such as a self-directed learning continuum, or looking at the development of scales to measure creativity and higher order thinking. The focus on these scales highlighted a belief that there was a connection between these capabilities in that overall student-learning would increase if students showed high levels of self-motivation, higher order thinking and creativity… "Yes we still want to get the kids' outcomes but we believe that the more motivated and self directed and creative and collaborative they are then their outcomes will improve."

The focus on evidence was one of the continuing concerns for the leadership team, and as one of the APs represented this concern: "[The leadership team] sat down a little while ago and thought about all the work that we've got to do and determined that we do need another leading teacher next year I guess to assist me with a lot of my work and with that focus will be a lot of data and evidence stuff." Part of the problem lay in finding ways to communicate the direction of the school to a few parents of students at the school. "Some parents, like the one I had in yesterday, her child's been in this way of learning all the year and she has no idea what he's doing, she hasn't seen the matrix, she hasn't looked at his books, she hasn't done anything but I think when we sit down with parents and we show

them all this stuff and ask them 'have you looked at his book, have you done this, have you done that' it's been in all the newsletters, we can show them all this, they have to sit there and go 'okay I have to do my job too'."

Teachers

Classroom teachers' views about school improvement and the focus of the direction of the school were consistent with leadership, though in interviews the emphasis was placed on foci that they saw most directly impacted on their teaching and planning. Teachers indicated that they were clear when they began about the expectations of the school, but that it was not until they arrived that the extent of difference to other schools was apparent. The specific focus emphasised by teachers was on student directed learning and on the curriculum, and in particular the curriculum design modelled on FUSE and Flip learning. Technology use was viewed as a necessary connection between these broad foci. In relation to student-learning, teachers highlighted the emphasis on increasing the "self-efficacy of students and putting the responsibility on them to take charge of their learning, to have more choice and responsibility in how they would like to learn". In one discussion with a teacher the connection was made between this kind of learning, Flip learning, the pattern of technology use and the FUSE program integrated curriculum. In expanding on this focus, teachers highlighted how this focus corresponded with a range of connected emphases throughout the school, which provided a coherent direction for changes and improvements. Subsequent additions to the suite of changes linked to student-learning helped to support and provide feedback to students about their own direction, such as the development of a capacity matrix. One teacher explained that

> …the programs and curriculum are set up with that [student directed learning] in mind. Particularly in the FUSE program, the way that it is integrated and we use a capacity matrix and task cards; students have a capacity matrix with four different levels of tasks for each learning target… they choose which target they will do after they have self -assessed their level based on their current and prior knowledge. They then go and complete that task based on their own assessment and choices.

Teachers viewed the expectations and arrangement of the school as very clear and highlighted the specific requirements that this approach to teaching and learning held for the practices of teachers. The emphasis when a new student arrived in a class was on both explaining the expectations on the student, but also to ascertain the students' current levels relative to the specific tasks being undertaken through the capacity matrix, and their degree of familiarity with technology use. The responsibility for collecting this level of data lay with each classroom teacher. When reviewing units for any necessary changes, knowledge of student capacities informed any alterations that might be required to the instructions, design of tasks or the kind of resources available to students to access specific content. This was done for English science, maths and humanities for years 7-10, and was done by teachers with other teachers in the FUSE team. Data of a variety of sources was taken into consideration, including student performance on tasks in prior units, and pre-testing data immediately prior to the units of work beginning and their ability to use the technologies.

The data around student capacity and performance that was collected was then discussed in meetings with other FUSE team members, and as a team possible actions or changes

that could address issues raised by the data were brought up. In this way the team helped to analyse and make meaning of the individual learning data, and relate this to specific and collective issues in student performance or capacities to complete the set tasks being undertaken. In discussion where teachers were asked to represent how they see school improvement working at Case Study Eight, students were placed first, which were subsequently linked to teaching staff who provide feedback on student performance but also passed feedback forward to the team leaders, to the Assistant Principals and to the Principal. In each case of connections there were bi-directional links, and free flow of data and information to inform changes and decisions. Teachers highlighted that the Principal and Assistant Principal in effect helped to set the agenda and direction of the school, and communicated this direction to the other nodes of the diagram.

Translation into Practice

Case study Eight did not have a School Improvement Plan written in the form of other Case Study schools. One consequence of this was that the kinds of directions for the school, contained within the AIP were not presented in the language associated with the initial SIP template, including success indicators, evidence of success; evidence of impact on teacher practice and evidence of impact on student-learning. Despite the language of the AIPs being represented in a way that did not link to the SIP template in the Barwon South Network, one of the APs employed language consistent with other schools, having an explicit interest in the use of data in school planning. In practice, then, in interviews with the principal, the leadership team and classroom teachers, there was an awareness of the need for evidence to support claims about student-learning, and a clarity about both the evidence that could be located and those gaps in data that could not yet be supported.

In relation to evidence for the success in relation to self-directed learning, both teachers and members of the leadership group pointed out specific instances where students demonstrated self-direction, which was included in places such as student's blogs, which provided an ongoing record of their engagement within a specific task. The focus on the use of technology to complete tasks allowed for a quite thorough record of tasks that students had completed, the levels that they had set themselves for their task, and the progress and learning that took place in their FUSE units. Teachers' practices were impacted by the AIP in significant ways, aided by the fact that the structure of the school, responsibilities of the leadership team and classroom teachers were all set up and structured around this Plan. Teachers, in particular, highlighted the way that team meetings within the FUSE program provided ongoing guidance and expectations for their practice, and for finding ways to initiate the one-to-one learning for individual students while providing adequate resources for students to access in relation to their learning tasks. Teachers also mentioned the active involvement of the principal in classrooms, occasionally setting in classes and asking students about their work and progress.

Concluding comment

Though Case Study School Eight was not involved directly in the original SIPs template developed by Regional office, its structure and organisation reflected a range of features consistent with a focus on school improvement. This link to the emphases of school improvement can be related specifically to the role of leadership capacity building within the

network, and the movement of people in key leadership between the Regional office and the school. This capacity was reflected in the coherence presented between the overall vision of the school presented by the principal, the AIP and its four related foci and its implementation in teacher practice and student-learning. Though the complexity of a growing school did not allow singular foci for the school, as a variety of organisational practices required setting up and embedding, the close monitoring of newly arrived staff, feedback of emphases based on data and responsiveness to feedback from a variety of sources did provide a coherence to ongoing changes. This does suggest that successful models of school improvement and SIPs that are relevant to new schools require some flexibility to the sometimes unforseen circumstances that confront leaders and teaching staff.

7. Overview of findings from the Case Studies

In this section the experience of the eight schools is used to interrogate commonalities and variation in the operation of the SIP, principals' and teachers' perspectives, and outcomes for the schools and the network. In this research we aimed to: 1) make sense of the operation of this particular form of school improvement approach in relation to the history of school improvement initiatives in the network, particularly given the complexity of the language and processes associated with school improvement identified in the introduction, and 2) identify features of the SIP that contributed to successful outcomes, and the local contextual factors that acted as enablers and constraints on these outcomes. At this point we should remind ourselves of the core features of this particular approach of the network to school improvement. The SIP was designed with a very specific set of processes in mind based on a number of overt principles:

- The short-term / quick turn-around cycle of identification of learning focus and intervention;

- The focus on leadership as the key to change in schools;

- A model of leadership which emphasised shared decision-making across the leadership layers of schools to teachers and ultimately to students;

- The focus on the use of evidence to frame and monitor progress on SIPs;

- A focus on change in teacher classroom practice;

- A set of structures to support the process and to provide layered accountability mechanisms. These included the coaches, documentation and reports, and the 'celebration' days in which principals reported on progress; and

- A strong quality control mechanism provided by the network leader who was not afraid to question and challenge.

In this analysis we will use the case studies to focus on these different processes, in order to make judgements about their significance in supporting change.

7.1 Did the SIP make a difference?

As described in the findings based on the survey, these case studies demonstrate that in all of the case study schools there were changes, in most cases significant changes, in their teaching and learning processes. Despite the SIP processes as laid down by the network leaders being closely conceptualised and managed, however, the pathways to improvement and the nature of the improvement varied. This section provides an overview of the nature of change in schools at the level of leadership practices, teacher classroom practice, and student outcomes. The following section will examine the contextual factors that influence improvement, in order to identify the key points needing to be addressed in an effective approach to school change.

The practice of principals and the leadership team

A number of the principals claimed that the SIP interrupted processes they already had in place around the AIPs and that they adapted the SIP to their ongoing practice without implications for change in leadership practices. However in most cases, even those that were confident about their previous practices, the SIP drove changes in the way the leadership team operated to support improvement in classroom practices. In some (small) schools the SIP encouraged principals to become much more involved with student learning by sitting in on classes or interviewing students, and discussing with teachers their practices. The 'learning walks' described by the Case Study 1 principal, involving observing and helping teachers in their classrooms, is consistent with a current government focus on 'instructional rounds' as a means for principals to show professional leadership focusing on detailed accounting of what happens in classrooms (Petch, 2010). In Case Study School 3, even though the principal subverted the process to an extent by running specific projects through teams, her reasoning on the SIP requirements led to investigations of the adequacy of student exam preparation and significant discussions at leadership team level about appropriate foci. In some schools there was a changed focus in discourse around staff interactions with school leadership, with increased emphasis on curriculum leadership. Thus, the requirements of the SIP regarding focus on evidence-based improvement in learning worked to focus the attention of school leaders on curriculum, classroom processes, and student outcomes.

In a number of schools principals used the authority of the network requirements to enforce a whole school focus, so that the SIP had the effect of providing support for principals to implement a comprehensive plan that involved significant professional learning and collaborative planning. The strong network leadership, overly invasive to some, provided for other principals (perhaps those less confident in their authority) the authority and framework to pursue a comprehensive whole school improvement program.

The other aspect of the SIP processes that was referred to by principals as supportive of change was the interaction with other schools in the reporting and celebration meetings. These had the effect of providing ideas and assurance regarding the SIP processes and leadership strategies supportive of improvement.

Key case study finding 6: Improvement in leadership capability

For most principals and leadership teams the SIP moved them in the direction of more collaborative approaches to improvement and greater attention to classroom practices and student-learning. For some principals the combination of the SIP requirements, the authority of the network, and the communication with other principals, constituted a significant leadership professional learning experience.

Teacher change

Across these case studies there are many stories, through the teacher interviews, of significant changes to classroom practice. Teachers talked about the professional learning opportunities opened up by having a common whole school focus around evidence-based teaching, incorporating sharing of ideas and experience with peers, and coaches. Teachers in a number of schools talked of greater awareness of student-learning needs through data

generation, more attention to extending students, clarification of goals, and more student centred pedagogy. In these schools, the collaborative nature of the improvement process, professional support from coaches and other staff, and the opportunity to share problems and successes were identified as important elements.

For some schools, however, the process of translation of goals into practice was slow, and there was no direct description of change. For some schools, it seemed no impetus had been developed at the classroom practice level.

Key case study finding 7: Changes in classroom practice

In most of the case study schools there was evidence that teachers had translated the SIP into significant changes to their classroom practice, focusing more on student-learning needs, and developing a more student centred pedagogy. The key factor driving these changes were the collaborative and supportive nature of the professional learning enabled by the whole school focus.

Student outcomes

The evidence for improved student outcomes is more tentative than for whole school processes and teachers, partly because of the timeframe which made it difficult to establish objective data on improved results through standardised tests, partly because we did not conduct many student interviews, and partly because our plan to collect videotaped evidence of student-learning in classrooms yielded little data. However, there were numerous examples presented in the celebration meetings of exemplary student achievement and knowledge of their learning goals and processes. There were also descriptions of improved student enthusiasm for learning tasks. This claim of student awareness of learning goals, as part of changes classroom practices, was supported by student interviews especially in Case Study School One where 8-12 year old students demonstrated considerable metacognitive awareness of their learning.

Key case study finding 8: Student-learning outcomes

While the study was not able to establish objective data on improved student-learning outcomes, there was considerable anecdotal evidence presented during celebrations, teacher interviews, and student interviews, of some instances of impressive improvements in student-learning flowing directly from the SIP.

7.2 Contextual variation in school stories of change

These case studies demonstrate considerable variation in processes and outcomes flowing from the SIP, that bely the tight processes assumed in the SIP model. For some schools (Case Study One, Case Study Four) the SIP was enthusiastically and productively embraced. For other schools, there was resistance and to a certain extent subversion. What inevitably occurs with a closely managed intervention that pushes up against a complex system, is a variation in outcomes

Key case study finding 9: Variation in school outcomes

In a carefully shaped school improvement process, the complexity of schools and their histories lead inevitably to variations in the processes developed, and the outcomes.

The school context

From the case studies, the school factors that emerge as important in determining the nature of the processes and outcomes of the SIP intervention were: 1) the size of the school and the complexity of its management structures, 2) the history of reform processes in the school, and 3) the particular leadership style of the principal.

School size and structure

The schools for which the intervention seemed to flow more smoothly (Case Study One, Case Study Four) were small schools where the principal could exercise direct influence on a small number of staff, observing and discussing lessons with teachers, and even participating in data gathering from students. For these schools the project offered principals an opportunity to exercise leadership in a direct manner and to productively focus on student learning and teacher capacity.

For larger schools, especially secondary schools with more complex staff structures and intersecting groups of teachers with year level and disciplinary commitments, the model was resisted, particularly the notion of a whole school focus. The data aspects of the project were not as clear for secondary schools, with literacy and numeracy, for which there is much test data in primary schools, not as important a focus. Secondary school principals saw themselves as managing much more at arms length to pupils compared to their primary school colleagues, and dealing with overlapping and complex leadership structures. In Case Study Three secondary school, the response to this complexity was to manage change through small projects led by handpicked staff.

Arguably, the short-term-cycle embedded in this SIP model forces a somewhat managerialist emphasis, requiring schools will respond to a time-tight process of problem identification, intervention and evaluation. This potentially contradicts the intention of collaborative processes within whole school planning. The short-term-cycle improvement process, viewed through the stories collected during this study, assumed responsive, compliant school systems. In practice, inherent inertia in the decision-making structures in schools rendered this aspect of the model largely unsuccessful. While there were notable instances of success evident in a number of these case studies (e.g. Case Study Schools One, Four, Five) these all occurred over a longer time period (Case Study School Five analyses this process in some detail), and they were all smaller schools. The evidence indicates that larger schools with more complex structures cannot respond in the shorter time frames.

Key case study finding 10: Time frame of change and school structures

A disjunction existed between the temporal aspects of the short-term-cycle SIP model and the requirements of the decision-making structures of schools. Change at this level takes time, more so for larger schools with more complex structures.

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the urgency implied by the model did have an impact on the pace at which the initiative was embraced and worked through, in some schools.

History of reform

Schools generally had existing agendas for change, which provided a platform for the SIP focus. In Case Study Schools 1, 2 and 5 the continuity of focus was an important aspect of school confidence in the SIP. In some schools (Schools 3 and 6) the leadership team was confident in their history of having initiated and sustained worthwhile change so that the SIP was seen as an imposition, and subverted to fit previous models.

In many schools the language of the reform became confusing, with SIPs and SIFs and AIPs overlapping in intent, providing the opportunity to slide between these different processes. Schools also had different histories of disclosure of network or department mandated initiatives. Thus in some schools the language of the SIP or its processes were hidden from staff who, while they went through the process, had no clear idea of the genesis or network requirements or language (School 7). The principal in School 3 did not disclose the existence of the SIP to staff, choosing to 'protect' them. For other schools the authority of the network was used to justify the process and staff were explicitly introduced to the language and processes of the SIP. For other schools the language was blurred between the SIP and previous experiences, and different layers of management had different access to information, and different degrees of involvement in /control over the process.

Key case study finding 11: SIP and school histories of reform

The way the SIP was presented by leadership, and the language adopted around the intervention, was conscripted to conform to previous histories of reform processes in the school.

Principal management style

Principals in the case study schools sat in quite different relations to their staff and to the SIP and the network leader, leading to considerable variation in degree and style of implementation of the SIP.

Some principals, perhaps not yet established and confident to insist on adherence to SIP processes, used the authority of the network to enlist staff. The figure below shows a diagram drawn by a teacher of the SIP structure, typical of a number at that school, showing a very hierarchical decision-making process in which the principal complies with regional requirements and uses the leadership team to interpret these in the school context.
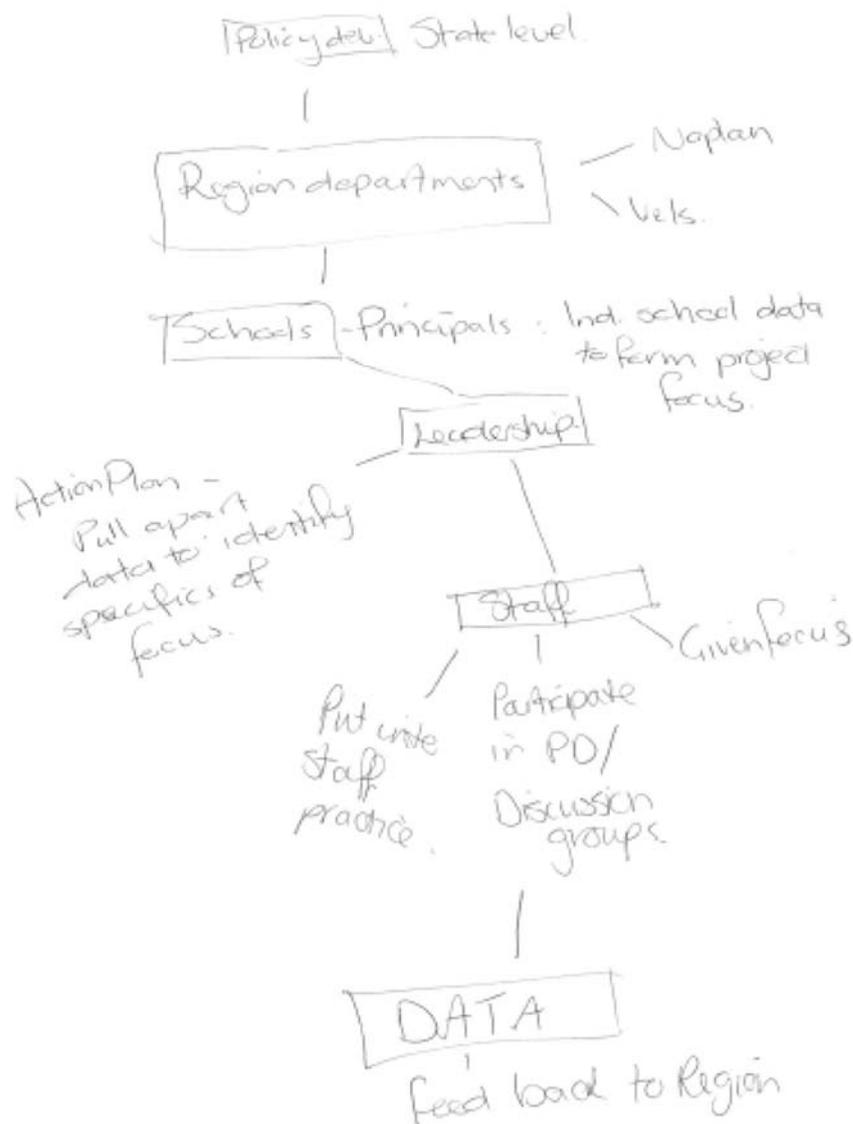
Figure 4

For others (Case Study School Seven) a desire for consultation based on previous experience, and the need for the new principal to get management personnel in place, delayed the cycle considerably. In School Seven there was a commitment to collaborative planning that took place over a much longer time period than the model envisaged.

For some principals the SIP process helped them articulate a collaborative and distributed leadership style, and they drew on the support structures (coaches, network leader) to both justify and expand a practice growing in confidence. The sketch below, by a member of a leadership team, shows the principal and leadership team working with professional learning team leaders in the school through a staff forum, to construct plans that are interpreted and implemented by unit teams. One of the leaders working on the sketch during interview said elaborated: "I was thinking teams and staff forums for communication." The circles at the bottom were "…unit teams, but then they come together into PLT teams ... We have a leadership team and a PLT leader who facilitates the learning that goes within the meetings. ...of course that all comes back to staff forum for discussion."

Figure 5

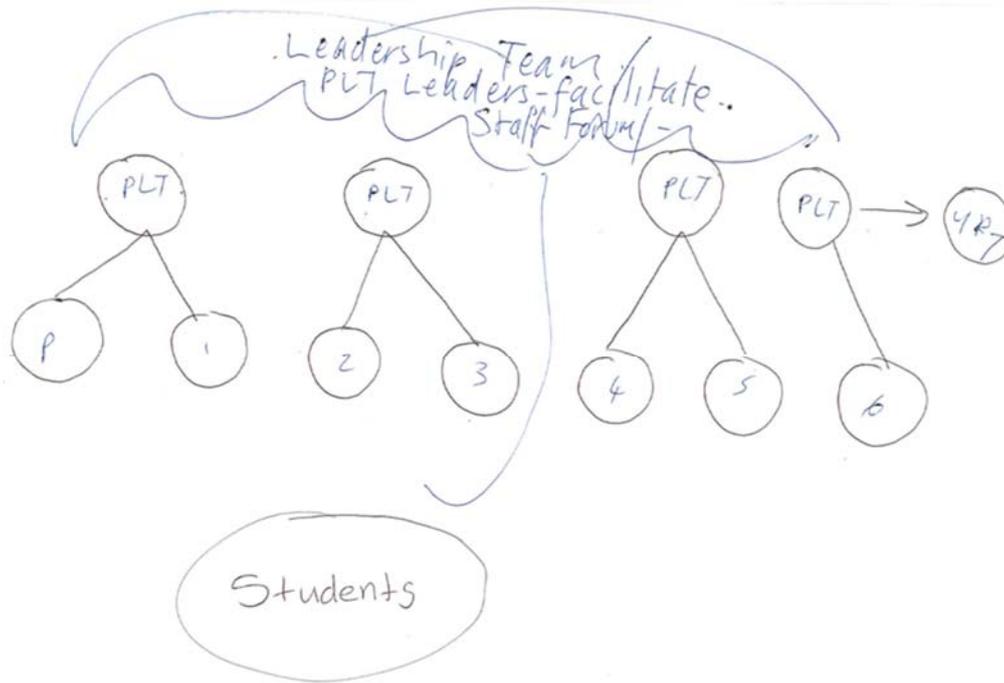The principal from School Three resisted the SIP both in terms of its whole school focus and its collaborative intent in the sense she managed the consultations with her leadership team very carefully and took control of the process of identifying issues, and staff who would take carriage of projects. Her diagram is interesting in that it has no real structural elements at all (see Figure 6).
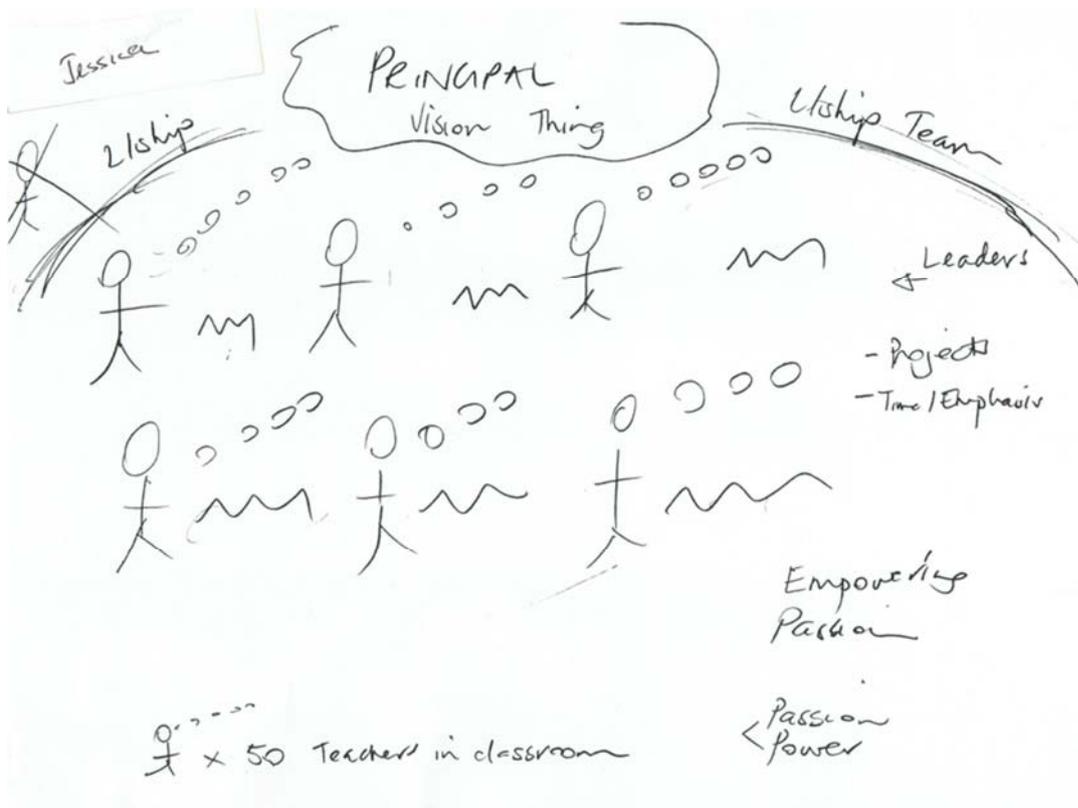
Figure 6

She chose to represent her practice in terms of vision, and ensuring consistency through all levels of the school with this vision. Her diagram consisted of a circle at top centre labeled 'PRINCIPAL Vision Thing', with an umbrella like extensions on each side identified as 'Leadership' and 'Leadership Team' which enclosed a grouping of figures representing 50 teachers each operating in their classrooms. Added to the side were the words 'Projects' and 'Time/Emphasis', and 'Empowering' and 'Passion'. She saw herself as promoting and controlling a coherent vision for the school that was the centre of innovation processes including the SIP.

Thus, the ways in which the decision-making and implementation processes associated with the SIP depended crucially on the particular leadership styles of principals and their relationships with their leadership teams and staff. The parameters on which this variation turned included principals' confidence and secureness in their own leadership, the coherence of their vision of managing change, and their position on the scale from autocratic to collaborative decision-making. As described above, the SIP processes including the celebrations and support of the network leader provided significant professional learning opportunities for principals, and for some influenced their leadership style.

Key case study finding 12: The effect of leadership style on operation of the SIP

The SIP was perceived and implemented differently by principals, depending on their particular histories and leadership styles. At the same time, the SIP processes in some cases influenced the leadership style of principals and the leadership teams.
Within the different schools, from the interviews with staff and observations of celebration presentations, there were differences in outcomes relating to the degree of improvement in teacher practice and student outcomes that correlated with certain aspects of leadership style.

Key case study finding 13: Leadership practices

Enhanced improvement in teacher practice and student outcomes seemed to be most evident when the principal and/or school leadership team:

- Were clear sighted about goals for the school, teachers and students;

- Encouraged, supported and empowered teachers through collaborative processes;

- Became knowledgeable about individual teachers, and in some cases students;

- Encouraged teachers in ongoing inquiry and explicit reflection on their practice; and

- Were committed to the SIP and expected it to produce successful outcomes.

Resonance: modeling variation in impact

How can we imagine the variation in extent to which the SIP processes were taken up as intended in some schools yet subverted in others with the language conscripted to a variety of processes? We might think of the SIP intervention as the input of a signal of a particular frequency, and the question of whether this causes significant and productive change, a matter of whether the particular school resonates with this input. Resonant systems have a specific frequency matched to the input, which we might think of as a simple structure for the school that is responsive to the SIP ideas. More complex structures will not have such a unitary response, so that there is no frequency which will excite the system, but a more muted response.

One can only take such analogies so far, but perhaps it makes sense of two features of the data – first the potential mismatch between principal and school beliefs and practices and the SIP, leading to little energy flow or impact. Second, the difficulty with large, complex systems to achieve a clear and efficient process of change, particularly in a short time-cycle. Having a very specific and focused intervention thus worked well for some schools which by dint of their histories and structures were receptive, but the scripted, specific focus tended to run counter to the rather more complex change processes operating in larger schools.
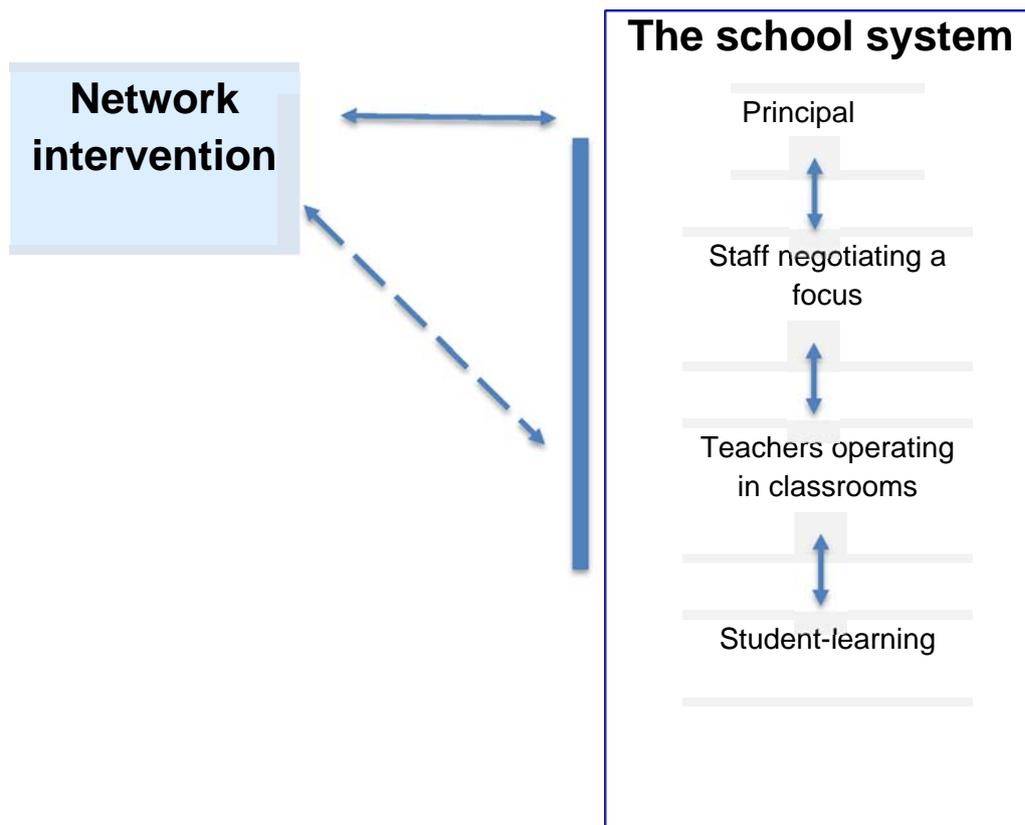
7.3 Making sense of school improvement processes

Many good outcomes flowed from the SIP, and in many cases the 'celebrations' had a genuine feel of successful implementation and outcomes. On the other hand, there was wide variation in the nature of the process in schools, different degrees of success, or of the perception of the process. In this section we ask the questions:

1. what aspects of the SIP approach were important for initiating and supporting worthwhile change?

2. what might we take from this, to provide guidance on how best to support change in teaching and learning processes in schools?

The SIP contained a number of levels in its targeting of the network to initiate change. At one level it was squarely focused on school leadership, and a need to improve principals' capacity to initiate worthwhile teaching and learning processes in their schools. Underlying this intent one might think an assumption is operating that the leadership process involves top down decision-making and a willingness to hold staff accountable for the quality of their practice.

However, another strong focus was that on student learning, involving an emphasis on data and evidence led practice. Hence, along with the leadership focus there was a demand for the process of school improvement to reach down into students and classrooms. Thus, the SIP process inevitably involved a chain of decision-making by which student-learning quality drove the intervention, and teachers responsible for this had a common view. The model therefore should not be seen as an intervention only on the principal, but rather on the school decision-making system and focus. Even though it was the principal receiving the SIP planning template, and reporting to the network, the reporting was required to

include description of the operation of the school processes, of classroom processes, and of student-learning. This of course placed significant constraints on principals, which helps explain the variation in responses and outcomes described above. The intervention can be pictured acting on the school as below.

The school system

Principal

↕

Staff negotiating a focus

↕

Teachers operating in classrooms

↕

Student-learning

Network intervention

The principal, thus becomes a conduit through which the intervention operates on the wider school system. As we saw, in some cases the principal shielded staff and resisted the model, so that the negotiation was essentially between the network leader and that one person. In most cases however the principal represented the school, which was the intention. This intention was reinforced by the accountability processes. That being said, the SIP processes had built into them requirements for a focus on evidence based student outcomes, and collaborative planning, so that while the intervention process operated through the principal, the relationship between the principal and decision-making and focus was managed through the SIP requirements and accountability processes.

Key case study finding 14: The focus of intervention

The SIP model works at two key levels: the professional development of school principals around leadership processes, and the framing of school decision-making processes that define the nature of effective change leadership.

Accountability processes

There were a number of accountability measures built into the SIP that were important for supporting change: the focus on data as evidence for learning, the network leader prepared to question and challenge, and reporting to peers in the celebrations.

The focus on data as evidence of student learning focused attention on classroom processes in a way that required teaching intentions and approaches to be built around an explicit language. This meant that principals, in managing the process with staff, and reporting on both the process, the evidence base on which the initiative was built, and

evidence for change, needed to be explicit and directed in their focus. It made it more difficult to build interventions around vague ambitions, and laid the groundwork for explicit and productive discussion of teaching and learning at all levels of the school.

This explicitness of purpose couched in common language was evident in a teacher of Case Study School Five's assertion that 'everyone is tackling the same approach here'. The focus on teaching and learning at the individual student level is consistent with the findings of a large OECD commissioned study of successful education systems, concerning the importance of pursuing change at the level of classroom instruction, where the real effects on learning take place (Barber & Mourshed, 2007).

The celebrations were important as accountability events, in that principals were required to describe the SIP processes and student-learning outcomes to peers, and the network leader who asked questions and passed implicit judgments (almost always positive). While the celebrations were not mooted as accountability exercises and in fact were a cause for acknowledgement of achievements in many cases, there is always pressure in peer exposure. Some of the reporting meetings were somewhat tense, with some principals antagonistic to the process.

The presence of the network leader at the celebrations, and her visits to schools and other meetings with principals, represented a strong element of control over the process and an impetus for quality control of what was happening. This was partly because of the personality of the network leader. She was not averse to challenging and cajoling, and was insightful in her support or challenge for principals in terms of their development of plans and use of data. For some principals she was a welcome support person who enabled them to exercise renewed leadership. For other principals, less amendable to the SIP process, she was someone to be kept at arms length.

Once she had left the position, because of a change in regional support structures going into the second year, we noticed a drop in the level of commitment to the change process. This was explicitly referred to by some principals. She was an important impetus.

The evidence from this study thus shows the accountability regime to be a critical aspect of the success of the SIP process. It had the effect of ensuring, through shared reporting processes, commitment to evidenced based principles, a level of consistency in school approaches, a shared understanding of the key features of the model and the language surrounding it, and the promotion of effective strategies to implement improvement. The other face of the reporting process was the positive feedback it afforded for gains made in teacher practices and student-learning. Even with relatively non-compliant principals, the existence of these measures provided impetus for change that was not necessarily consistent with the model but nevertheless characterised as such through conscription of language.

This is the negative side of accountability regimes. The research team, in interviewing principals and staff and taking notes at the meetings, became aware of a number of strategies principals in particular were using to present initiatives in the best light, and to present processes and outcomes which were not centrally based in the SIP intentions, by conscripting SIP language. Thus, and least two principals we interviewed explicitly made

the point that the SIP did not conform to successful processes they already had in place and was inappropriate, in which case their strategy was to describe initiatives in language consistent with the SIP as a performativity strategy. In the celebrations we heard many genuinely enthusiastic and at times impressive stories of change and of improved student responses, but in some cases it seemed that enthusiastic student responses were rather scripted to conform to the particular languages of learning underpinning the SIP. This is not a criticism of either these principals or of the SIP, but simply an observation that where an innovation is resisted for whatever reason, accountability demands inevitably lead to subversion of language and evidential processes by partially-compliant participants.

Key case study finding 15: Accountability regimes

The structured accountability regime within the SIP model was critically important for initiating and sustaining change. The key elements were: the oversight of a network leader prepared to challenge and encourage consistency, and the public process of 'celebrations' and reporting which applied pressure on principals to deliver, provided ideas, encouraged coherence, and provided positive feedback for successful initiatives. The negative side of the accountability regime is that it led in some cases to performativity where principals conscripted SIP language to make claims that were at base not consistent with the SIP vision.

Key case study finding 16: Features of the SIP model supporting school improvement

In reviewing the case study and survey findings a number of features of the short-term-cycle SIP model emerge as key to supporting effective improvement processes. These are:

- the focus on evidence for student-learning to frame and evaluate teaching processes, which establishes a language through which teachers can share ideas, and sharpens decision-making structures in the school;

- the focus on teacher classroom practice as the key determinant of student-learning, with support structures such as coaches, principal advice, and collaborative planning;

- the focus on whole school planning which establishes a community of practice through which teacher professional learning can occur;

- the focus on school leadership with a mix of demands and supports, and a model of distributed leadership, through which principal professional learning can occur;

- a school improvement cycle that ensures attention to planning and implementation within restricted time scales; and

- a layered accountability regime embedded within support structures, including reports, celebration days, and network leader consultations.

It is also important to have built into the model sufficient flexibility to allow for school ownership, and accountability regimes that were in some senses 'soft' but nevertheless established the protocols for the required change.

8. Conclusion

The findings from this study are based on multiple data sources: analysis of both open and closed survey questions, interviews with teachers and leaders in the eight Case Study Schools and interviews with leaders within the regional network, and field notes from network meetings including the celebrations. Many of the themes emerging from the analysis of different data sources were similar or overlapping, providing some confidence in the evidence base for the findings.

8.1 The impact of the SIP on the network schools

Overall, there were many positive outcomes deriving from the SIP. It was clear from the scale items from reports at network meetings, and from interviews that respondents perceived the changes that occurred as a result of the SIPs as a clear and positive impact on schools, classrooms and student learning. There were two main positive theme groupings emerging from the survey data, reinforced by the case studies, concerning the positive outcomes of the SIP in schools. The first was centred on the supportive nature of school processes set up as part of the SIP planning and implementation, including focused professional learning, and enhanced communication between the leadership team and the staff. In most cases the SIP led to enhanced collaborative practices involving to some extent all elements of the school community. The second theme grouping was around student outcomes, with the major element the impact of data and information about student outcomes on planning, teaching and evaluating practices in schools. There were many stories of enhanced student engagement and quality of learning, although, as noted in the key findings, no objective data that was able to pin this down.

At the Case Study Schools the core value of "results, results, results" outlined by the Principal in Case Study Three reflected a broader commitment in all schools to using data to inform changes in teaching practices and to influence student-learning. In all schools there was some form of collaboration in the setting of goals, consistent with the survey data responses. All schools at some point had a focus on improving literacy or numeracy performance of students, informed by student performance data.

8.2 Supportive SIP processes

In all schools, SIP was viewed as an opportunity to examine development or growth. In all schools, some form of professional learning or professional development was employed as a support for reaching these goals, though the form or process employed differed between schools. Most schools also emphasised the importance of the network leader, and some explicitly referred to the loss of momentum in the second year as the network structures unravelled. Principals generally emphasised the opportunities for learning through communication from other schools across the network, with the celebration days specially picked out.

The success of the SIP in supporting improvement in school leadership and collaborative processes, teaching practices and student outcomes were due to a combination of two classes of factors:

1. Support structures including the network leader and coaches available in some schools, the opportunity to share ideas, the structure provided by the SIP process template, and the impetus generated by the short-term-cycle (although this was a mixed benefit as we will discuss below)

2. Accountability processes embedded within the support structures that ensured principals maintained momentum. These included the network leader's oversight, and the celebration days and network meetings in which principals were effectively subjected to a peer review process.

8.3 The SIP and the literature

The processes embedded in the SIP align in important ways with current literature on systemic school change. The drilling down to classroom processes and the evidence-based approach to student-learning is consistent with the findings of a major OECD commissioned international review of school systems (Barber & Mourshed, 2007) which argued on the basis of comparative data across educational systems, using data on student outcomes, that reform efforts are often ineffective in delivering student-learning and engagement if they do not reach down into classroom instruction, where the real effects on learning take place.

The SIP network processes resonate with the findings of the OECD (2008) that:

> School leaders are willing and able to take the lead in developing world-class education systems that meet the needs of all students, as this report demonstrates. System leadership can build capacity in education; share expertise, facilities and resources; encourage innovation and creativity; improve leadership and spread it more widely; and provide skills support. The collective sharing of skills, expertise and experience will create much richer and more sustainable opportunities for rigorous transformation than can ever be provided by isolated institutions.
>
> OECD (2008, Foreward)
> Improving School Leadership
> VOLUME 2: CASE STUDIES ON SYSTEM LEADERSHIP
> Edited by Beatriz Pont, Deborah Nusche, David Hopkins

In our dealings with network personnel it was very clear that they had a confident grasp of the literature around school and system change, which perhaps explains the quality of the processes embedded within the SIP documents relating to collaborative school based processes. A clear grasp of the literature around school change processes enables clarity when dealing with advice, and challenge to school leaders managing these processes. This was evident in the dealings of the network leader with principals, during the celebration meetings.

8.4 The language of the SIP

In all schools, the language associated with the SIPs varied and was shaped to suit their specific context. The shorthand language of SIP (School Improvement Plan) is not consistently use by teachers at Case Study Schools, although allied terms were used such as School Improvement Focus (SIF)(a key part of School Improvement Plans), School Improvement Project, or linked to other terms used within the school, such as the Growth Model, or Action Research Projects or simply Projects. This change of language was often deliberate, as Principals adapted the SIP language to already existing and accepted language used within schools.

A number of the Case Study Schools closely aligned their SIPs to existing planning based around annual implementation plans and four yearly strategic plans or as the result of recommendations from a whole School Review. In other Case Study Schools the SIPs were decided by the Principal in consultation with staff, to focus on current problem areas identified through available data and feedback. The SIPs developed were presented as specific projects suggested by the leadership team and/or other teachers. In these schools the projects that were identified were carefully selected to address specific problems whose impact affected the progress of individual students and the future performance of the school on external tests such as NAPLAN and exams. The way that these SIPs were framed was around specific naturally occurring "triggers of accountability", points at which there was a natural connection made between student performance and teaching practices.

8.5 Standardisation and variation in school improvement

The variety of different projects being undertaken at two of the Case Study Schools all had time-frames for their progress that closely reflected the short-term cycles originally proposed for SIPs. These short-term cycles were viewed positively by a majority of interview at these schools but for larger, more complex schools there was a mismatch between the short-term-cycle time scale and the inertia represented by system complexity. A number of the schools quickly abandoned the short-term-cycle in favour of a longer-term change process.

It was clear from both survey findings, case study schools and the network that the term SIP was used to refer to different things. Survey responses from all participants showed that they viewed the SIP as a set of specific goals rather than as a plan or process, or a formal document enacted within the school. The use of SIP within case study schools also emphasised specific goals or foci rather than a plan or a document. In contrast, within the network, SIP was used to refer to all three associations at different times.

One of the core issues raised by this research is a question as to what value is there in a specifically named short-term cycle SIP model. Is this new or does it already exist as differently named models within schools? This issue revolves around an ongoing question about the language of SIPs, and its role within School Improvement in the network more broadly. Both survey data and case studies highlighted the perception that processes around the implementation of improvement goals or foci had existed in schools prior to the

introduction of this model. However what was done in relation to these goals was not easily compared across the models. One value of this short-term cycle model that was not a feature of previous models was to put a specific focus on the achievement of goals that would then be shared amongst schools at celebration days. These provided a form of accountability, which for some principals validated the achievements that had been made, and providing a professional learning opportunity. Ultimately this encouraged a standardisation which provided a basis for comparing what Principals and schools were doing in relation to school improvement. The establishment of these standards of practice also provided a shared language within which challenges and movement could be expressed.

Contextual factors framing variation in the SIP

This research raised some questions about how change processes and language of SIPs were perceived by School Principals. In schools in which there was an established Principal who had made achievements in terms of student data, or had established processes for managing change, the introduction of a mandated form for SIPs was not viewed as being helpful. In School Case Study Three the principal expressed a pride in the change practices that had been operating for some time and which she saw as a distinguishing feature of the school. In an increasingly competitive environment for Victorian schools, being able to point to changes and successful processes established within a school could be viewed as a key strategy for a Principal to make a school distinctive. Introducing new SIP processes that might disturb or dilute what was seen as a coherent process, or sharing too much about these existing successes, could be viewed as potentially losing a market advantage. There was then a potential risk associated with Celebration days in relation to this competitiveness.

In contrast, most established and newly appointed primary school Principals viewed positively the role of the network in building leadership capacities, and the celebration days were perceived as places within which these capacities could be developed through professional learning.

One key value of SIPs was to provide an overt focus that had legitimacy and support through the Network, which could be used to authorise specific changes, and in some cases provide a focus that would not otherwise be available. The SIP thus provided a mechanism for achieving specific changes within a school. In School Case Study Seven, the leadership team did not highlight to staff of the collapse of network processes in the second year, in order not to disturb the momentum or legitimacy of SIP processes.

While not all schools were able to directly point to effects in student achievement over the course of each cycle, the SIPs did provide a rationale for focussing on teacher practices, and these practices were a major emphasis in the focus schools. This highlighted one potential disconnect between *triggers of accountability* at different levels within the education system. At a school level, these *triggers of accountability* refer to "points at which the culmination of teaching and the expectations of learning were reconciled, which are already embedded within schooling practices and the cycles of teaching and learning within a school". These occur naturally as a part of school practice, such as release of report cards, test or exam results or parent comments. At a school level the natural triggers of

accountability reconcile individual student-learning with teacher practices. However, at a system level, these triggers of accountability are necessarily through the production, release and reporting on data sets, such as NAPLAN, MySchool or PISA results. These system level triggers of accountability though connected with student-learning are more precisely concerned with the maintenance of growth curves, value adding measures and the overall profile of data sets. The dilemma is that the time frames for these two levels of triggers of accountability are not necessarily aligned. For example, the release of NAPLAN data does not directly help improve the performance of individual students, particularly in light of the time lag between the tests being undertaken and the release of school results. If School Improvement is tightly linked to system triggers of accountability such as NAPLAN, then work is needed for Principals and teachers to connect these to planning for learning in specific classrooms, or to informing individual student-learning.

One of the results of the focus on data on student-learning to plan for intervention is that subjects that are the province of these systemic triggers of accountability, namely literacy and numeracy, become by default the key focus of SIPS to the detriment of other curriculum areas. It is perhaps no accident that the curriculum and assessment in these competencies are structured around carefully constructed developmental pathways, making it possible to conceive of learning as progressing through well understood stages. Other subjects' assessment regimes have not been set up in this way, so that the data driven focus causes a default to these subjects. This is possibly part of the reason that secondary schools found it difficult to operate in the same data focused way as primary schools, given the breadth of subjects that have status within the secondary curriculum.

8.6 Final comments

The study demonstrated a range of positive outcomes in the case study schools concerning school communication and collaboration processes, and professional learning of principals, leadership teams and classroom teachers. Positive change occurred in the leadership processes of planning for improvement, and the use of student data in framing teaching and learning processes. The research uncovered considerable anecdotal and observational evidence of improvements in student learning. It was however not possible over this timescale to collect objective comparative evidence of enhanced learning outcomes.

A number of features of the short-term-cycle SIP supported positive change across the network. These were: 1) the support structures represented by the network leader and support personnel within schools, 2) the strong focus on change leadership within a collaborative structure, 3) the focus on data led planning and implementation that helped drill down to explicit elements of classroom practice, and 4) the accountability regimes represented by network leader presence, and the celebration days in which principals became effectively accountable to their peers.

The SIP processes and outcomes varied considerably across schools. The contextual factors leading to this variation included school histories of reform, principal management style, and school size and structure that made the short-term-cycle model difficult to implement. In some cases there was overt resistance to aspects of the SIP model. The

study found that even with functioning schools the SIP was understood differently and the processes performed differently. Schools are complex institutions, and models of school improvement need to involve both strong principled features, and flexibility in local application, if all schools' interests in improving teaching and learning processes and outcomes are to be served.

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Appendix 1. Detailed group data from the online survey for the 75 completed surveys.

The data collection included an online survey of all teachers and Principals in the Barwon South Network using *Qualtrics survey software*. The survey data was filtered to remove incomplete data sets. This left 75 completed survey responses from the participating schools as at March, 2012.

Survey Questions 1-7: Demographics

Table 1: Responses to the online survey

Role	Response
Principal	7
Classroom Teacher	59
Coach	2
Other	7
Total	75

Table 2: Gender

Gender	Response
Male	15
Female	60
Total	75

Table 3: Age

Age	Response
Less than 25	11
26-30	20
31-35	8
36-40	7
41-45	5
46-50	9
51-55	12
55+	3
Total	75

Table 4: Number of years teaching

Years	Response
Less than 1 year	5
1-2 years	7
3-5 years	14
6-10 years	18
More than 10 years	31
Total	75

Table 5: Number of years teaching at current school

Years	Response
Less than 1 year	19
1-2 years	11
3-5 years	18
6-10 years	12
More than 10 years	15
Total	75

Table 6: Year level currently teaching

Year level	Response
P-2	31
3-4	17
5-6	20
7-10	0
11-12	0
Non teaching	14
Total	75

Survey Question 8: Briefly describe your current school improvement plan

Question 8 asked participants to describe their current school improvement plan. All participant comments were scrutinised for emerging themes and then collected into broad categories. Table 7 shows the main categories which emerged from the data. These included: content, assessment/reporting and moderation, data, students, teacher professional learning, and other (these comments were too few in number to constitute themes).

Table 7: Focus of School Improvement Plans

Category	Theme	Number of times theme was mentioned	Total	% responses
Content	Literacy focus (could be reading, speaking or listening)	36		
	Mathematics focus	5	41	55
Assessment, Reporting & Moderation	Assessment	14		
	Reporting	8		
	Moderation	16	38	51
Data	Data or evidence mentioned	19		
	Student outcomes or standards	18	37	49
Students	Students	22	22	30
Teacher professional learning	Coaching or coaches	2		
	Professional development	5		
	Building teacher capacity	5	12	16
Other	e[5]	2		

Rich task development	4		
Links with AIP	1	7	9

*Note – many responses introduced more than one of the themes.

The majority of the responses (55%) included some reference to content areas being chosen as part of the School Improvement Plan (SIP). However, these content areas were specifically related to mathematics and literacy. It is possible that as schools really only had quantitative data on these two areas of the curriculum, they worked within these content foci.

With 51% of responses mentioning skills relating to assessment, reporting and moderation, this was the second most popular School Improvement Plan focus. Statements included: "*To improve the consistency of assessment and reporting through moderation* (5)" or "*Moderating student assessment data leading to more consistent VELS teacher judgements for December reports*".

The use of data or evidence featured strongly in many of the participants' responses (49%). Most of the comments related to the preliminary use of data to identify gaps, *"Education meetings used data to inform teaching strategies and goal setting",* whereas a few comments saw improved data as the end point of their efforts "*We are looking at Speaking and Listening to improve our students' data.*"

Only 30% of participants mentioned the word "student(s)" in their responses. This was often linked with student goals, responses, and data. For example, some statements include, "*To improve students' outcomes in speaking and listening". "90% of students deemed capable to be achieving at or above expected VELS levels".* In the statements, it is often implied with statements like, "improving Speaking and Listening".

The next largest category (16%) was related to the professional learning of teachers. This was achieved through the use of coaches or coaching, and specific professional development sessions as ways to build teacher capacity. Some comments include, *"To inform literacy instructional practice, informed by the data and a literacy coach", Professional development sessions on rich assessment development", and "To strengthen the capacity of all teachers to practice differential, evidence based teaching in their classrooms".*

The final category of responses is labeled here as "Other". These included comments that could not be categorised into the main categories.

Survey Question 9: Describe your current goals in your 2011 School Improvement Plan

Question 9 asked participants to describe their current SIP goals. All participant comments were scrutinised for emerging themes and then collected into broad categories. Table 8 shows the six main categories which emerged from the data regarding how the SIP goals were decided. These included: student outcomes and expectations, content goals, evaluation processes, professional learning, differentiated learning tasks and student engagement.

Category	Theme	Number of times mentioned	Total	% responses
Content Goals	Literacy	39		
	Mathematics/numeracy	15		
	Ultranet	5	59	79
Evaluation Processes	Monitoring	4		
	Use of data	6		
	Assessment	13		
	Moderation	11		
	Reporting	4	38	51
Professional Learning	Developing teacher capacity	21		
	Professional development	5		
	Distributive leadership	2	28	37
Student Outcomes	VELS expectations	14		
	Student outcomes	8		
	Improved student outcomes	5	27	36
Differentiated Learning Tasks	Higher order thinking	2		
	Differentiated learning	4		
	Rich task development	2	8	11
Student Engagement	Student engagement	4	4	5

Although content areas still dominate the comments, they are always linked with one of the other theme areas, for example, "*To maintain the percentages of students above the expected VELS in English.*" Over half the comments were around evaluation processes which take teachers' assessment from the use of data through moderation processes to assessing and reporting. For example, "*The focus this term is on strengthening the whole school evidence-based assessment practices.*" These themes indicate that the focus of each school is clearly around improving schools through better and more efficient strategies in actually making the assessment measurements. "*Increase the assessment and reporting accuracy using clearer assessment strategies and regular PD.*" This was shown strongly by the number of comments which demonstrated a focus on the curriculum standards and the improvement of students' learning outcomes. "*Improve student-learning – literacy and numeracy.*" Many of the school goals relate to improving teacher capacity, so 37% of comments talk about professional learning, with particular focus on how these impact on the school improvement goals. "*Whole school professional learning project, focused on writing.*"

Some comments relate to the specific teaching and learning strategies such as the development of rich assessment tasks, using higher order thinking or differentiated teaching. For example, "*Developing intellectually demanding tasks.*" Student engagement was mentioned by only 5% of participants.

Some of the responses were very similar in structure as if several staff had responded to the survey together and had discussed what they were going to write. For example, seven responses were worded: Term1 – Writing, Term 2 – Numeracy, Term 3 – The Ultranet, Term 4 – Moderation. Whilst this is not problematic, it doesn't allow for interpretation at the level of an individual as this is obviously a group response.

Survey Question 10:   How were these goals decided?

Question 10 asked participants to provide comments about how the SIP goals outlined in question 9 were decided. All participant comments were scrutinised for emerging themes and then collected into broad categories. Table 9 shows the four main categories which emerged from the data regarding how the SIP goals were decided. These included:

1. By people in specific roles;

2. Through processes or relations between people;

3. Based on specific forms of information, and

4. Triggered by specific events or feedback mechanisms.

The responses from each participant were tallied for emerging themes which were then collected into each of the four main categories. In many instances, one response by a participant may have contained more than one emerging theme and more than one broad category.

In the theme of "By people in specific roles", there were 6 broad themes evident in the data. The most frequent themes included Teachers (72%), the Leadership team (41%) and the Principal (8%). The theme of teachers was often used to nominate a group involvement with processes, such as "Suggested by leadership and negotiated throughout staff". This indicates a relationship to the development of goals but not as an initiator of these goals. In contrast, the leadership team and principal were most often represented as initiators of the goal decision-making.

There were 8 broad themes which emerged from the data within the second main category of "through processes or relations between people". The most frequent themes included Unclear (25%), Consultation or Negotiation (17%), and Decision or Directive (15%). It should be noted that the theme of Unclear was given to responses where the decision-making process was unclear, rather than where the word unclear was given as a response. For example, the response "from the principal" was categorized as unclear because it doesn't specifically outline the process but rather, it nominates the person. Consultation and negotiation were often used to discuss mutual processes between either the leadership team or principals and teachers, such as in the response "Principal decided in consultation with staff needs and preferences". Other responses showed that decisions or directives often involved one-way processes from the leadership team or principals and teachers, such as the response "based on staff feedback from meetings earlier in the year and directed to achieve our AIP".

Within the third category "based on specific forms of information", there were 15 themes evident, including the three most frequent themes of Staff Feedback (49%), Leadership Feedback (43%) and Student Performance Data (37%). Typical responses under the themes of Staff Feedback and Leadership Feedback included "Decided by the leadership team in collaboration with all staff" and "staff collaboration and consultation with the leadership team." Both these examples show differences in who is responsible for initiating the development of these goals but clearly show that collaboration is part of the process. Typical responses regarding the theme of Student Performance Data included participant responses such as "By comparing data against other schools and comparing NAPLAN results" and "By looking at school data and outcomes and identifying areas that need improving."

The most frequent themes of the five themes evident within the final category "triggered by specific events or feedback mechanisms" included Staff Feedback (41%), Trends in Student Data (24%) and AIP (21%). Typical responses from participants categorised in the theme "Staff Feedback" included "It was developed through our student data, leadership team and staff identification of an area of need"; "At a meeting of all staff when looking at our VELS data"; and "Through student data and asking teachers what they would like to focus on." Responses categorised under the theme "Trends in Student Data" included "After analysing the long-term trends in formal testing and assessment results ... there was a clear need to spend some substantial amount of time concentrating on the development of writing skills across the school." The theme "AIP" included specific responses such as "[The goals] came straight from our AIP" and "Aligned with our Annual Implementation Plan and we thought it would be a good way to inform our planning and practice."

Table 9: Four main categories and themes related to Question 10 "How were these goals decided?"

Category	Themes	Percentage
By People in these Roles	Principal	8
	Network / Region	5
	Coaches	1
	Teachers	72
	PLT	1
	Leadership Team	41
Through these processes or relations between people	Consultation or negotiation	17
	Negotiation	4
	Discussion	8
	Input	5
	Decision or directive	15
	External review	3
	Developed	3
	Unclear	25
Based on these forms of information	Student Performance Data	37
	NAPLAN	4
	AIP	23
	School Review	4
	Staff Feedback	49
	Student survey	1
	Parent survey	1
	Regional Advice	4
	Leadership Feedback	43
	Comparisons between schools	1
	Previous SIPS	1
	Curriculum Reviews	1
	Videotaping	1
	Strategic Plan	5
	School needs	1
Triggered by specific events or feedback mechanisms	Unexpected student performance	12
	Trends in student data	24
	School Review	7
	AIP	21
Category	Themes	Percentage

Survey Question 11: What are the processes for achieving these goals in your school?

Question 11 asked participants to provide comments about the processes for achieving the SIP goals. All participant comments were scrutinised for emerging themes. Table 10 shows that 10 themes emerged from the data regarding processes for achieving these goals. As there was a close consistency between responses, these themes are dealt without further grouping in the analysis below. The 10 themes from respondents include:

1. Through communication and discussion
2. With specialised forms of expertise
3. Through goal setting and planning
4. By explicitly allocating time
5. At specific group meetings
6. Through knowledge construction and professional learning
7. By working together
8. Through implementing decisions
9. Through assessment practices
10. Through evaluation and reflection

The theme of "through communication and discussion" emerged in 39% of responses. The theme of communication and discussion was used to nominate specific forms of communication, such as in the responses "discussions about student progress at PLT meetings" and "continual discussion around the How, Who, When segments of the plan forms the basis of our action". This theme provided information about how processes of change were perceived as being communicated within each school.

The theme "with specific forms of expertise" appeared in 28% of responses. The theme of Expertise nominated responses that directly linked specific experts whose specialized knowledge was drawn on within the school to achieve these goals. One of the most common examples within this theme included the naming of coaches, such as "We have a literacy coach who has worked with teams to implement new ways of teaching and coached us individually." Other examples included Leadership in the school, such as "With support from leadership teachers (to) accurately administer appropriate on demand levels for individual students (assistance with up levelling…)". Expertise therefore related to the capacities of specific individuals rather than general knowledge within the school.

The theme "through goal setting and planning" appeared in 40% of responses. The theme of goal setting and planning referred in part to the overall SIP goals, but also nominated sub-processes that were identified in responses which contributed to reaching the overall goals attached to the SIP. The theme included strategies or tactics used within the school to achieve the SIP goals, and could refer to teachers, school leadership, the principal, students or coaches.

Examples of goal setting and planning include quite detailed accounts, such as:

- - fortnightly 'student achievement' meetings with principal and assistant principal;
- - series of PD meetings timetabled;
- - teachers plan a week using different types of activities for a specific learning concept. E-documented work programs;

- - all staff have got goal setting procedures in place on a 2 weekly timetabled cycle;
- - student goals displayed in every classroom, linked to VELS kidspeak continuum, consistent strategy within levels in school."

Besides naming the involvement of specific people, this theme also included examples that made explicit reference to planning tools, such as "Student's Learning Improvement Goals". These were referenced as a planning device for meeting the SIP goals, such as the example "Looking at our SLIGs for the students who continually achieve C's to reach their full potential".

The theme "by explicitly allocating time" appeared in 15% of responses, and nominated responses that made reference to specific time frames within processes. For example, some responses referred to the time frame for specific responsibilities within the SIF, "Weekly staff Meetings now go for 10 minutes and then 1 hour of educational discussion all relating to independent reading leading towards comprehension which will form the basis of our Term 2 SIF; Coaching observations weekly; Coaching conversations held weekly-1 hour".

As the most frequently occurring theme, "at specific group meetings" appeared in 48% of responses. This theme was used to describe responses that named specific collective meetings at which processes attached to the SIP were mentioned. For example, one of the most common meetings referenced was school meetings, illustrated in the quote "Whole school staff meetings to deliver professional learning and readings. Discussions about student progress at PLT meetings".

In contrast with individual expertise, the theme of "knowledge construction and professional learning" (appearing 27%) collected together responses that made explicit reference to processes in which the general capacity of the school was engaged or strengthened in one form or another. One of the most common examples of this theme was that of Professional Development: "We have been undertaking regular PD and discussing students in PLT meetings and ways to better teach and assess them in the area of S&L.". However, there were also novel examples of this theme which illustrated local innovation and strategies for supporting SIPs. For example, one response highlighted building a repository of expertise in the school: "staff working together to create banks of knowledge and share individual expertise". Another example of this theme involved the collection of teaching products for later comparison and evaluation "We pre-test or gather samples of work or video of students before we start a goal then we compare work or video evidence at the end of the term".

The theme "By working together" appeared in 29% of all responses and was illustrated by explicit comments that referenced processes that involved a collective group of teachers or staff. Typical of this theme was the following example: "As a staff working on the students indicators".

The theme "Through implementing decisions" appeared in 35% of all responses. Examples of this theme highlighted the carrying out of processes attached to the SIP, such as the following example:

> Students colour code where they feel they are on the Maths progression points and then set personalised learning goals that align with their perception. Teachers use this to inform their practice and use assessments to test accuracy of student's perception of what concepts they understand and can apply.

The theme "Through assessment practices" appeared in 43% of all responses and was illustrated by explicit comments to either the assessment of student performance or artefacts or teacher performance. For example:

> Regular PD sessions have been held where we interpreted the VELS Speaking and Listening information and put it in our own language with examples. We also then viewed videos of children at various progression points and then assessed children in our grade according to our new information.

And

> All PLT meetings devoted to moderation of work samples, discussion across grade levels on assessment measures, the use of data available including On Demand, NAPLAN, pre and post tests and teacher observations.

The theme "evaluation and reflection" appeared in 36% of all responses and nominated instances where teachers take account of their own practice, as a group or individually, in terms of pedagogy, curriculum or assessment. This theme is illustrated in the following quote:

> Ensuring that we agreed on the work samples which covered a cross section of writing genres. Consistency and showing work samples and discussing the students' achievements and inadequacies in depth throughout the Prep to 2 classroom teachers.

Overall, these 10 emerging themes appear to reinforce a close engagement between schools and the processes associated with the implementation of SIPS. Some responses within these themes illustrate elements of an approach that mirrors "Action Research." Further exploration of the data is required to support this in more detail.

Table 10: Main themes related to Question 11 "What are the processes for achieving these goals in your school?"

Themes	Number of responses	%
What are the processes for achieving these goals in your school?		
Through communication and discussion	29	39
With specialised forms of expertise	21	28
Through goal setting and planning	30	40
By explicitly allocating time	11	15
At specific group meetings	36	48
Through knowledge construction and professional learning	20	27
By working together	22	29
Through implementing decisions	26	35
Through assessment practices	32	43
Through evaluation and reflection	27	36

Survey Question 12: How have these goals affected the way you work?

The responses from participants to question 12 provided themes which tended to be related to classroom practice.

Table 11: Affect of School Improvement goals on work

Category	Theme	Number of times mentioned	Total	% responses
Awareness of teaching and learning issues	More focussed/more specific	12		
	More aware	20		
	More accountable	2		
	Reflective practitioner	4		
	Improved teaching and learning	10	46	61
Changed school practices	More discussion	5		
	Planning	9		
	Setting of goals	9		
	Team work/collaboration	15	38	51
	Use of data	9		
Focus on student needs identified through data	Student-learning outcomes	12		
	Learning intentions/learning needs	12	33	44

In describing how these goals affected their practice, 61% of responses indicated that teachers became more aware of exactly what they were doing in the classroom. They were more focussed in their approaches and more reflective of their practice in general. Many mentioned that they had improved their teaching overall. *"They have made us more*

focussed I guess on improving our teaching." "I am more conscious of what I am doing and why I am doing it." " Becoming more aware of these goals and how to teach them more effectively." Some teachers indicated that they were much more reflective in their practice, for example, "*Ensured that I was a reflective practitioner."*

The other single strong theme that was evident from survey question 12 responses, was that teachers felt schools were operating differently. *"It has allowed the school staff to all work collaboratively together."* Comments relating to more discussion across school teams, working collaboratively with more time devoted to planning and setting goals as a team, dominated the responses around the effects of a whole school approach. For example one respondent reported, *"…discussion was a great way to make sure we had a shared vision on where students were achieving".* The comments were very positive about the collaborative approach. *"Yes, they have improved the focus of staff to do in the same direction at the same time and work together on the areas designated for that term."*

There was still some commentary on how the teachers were actually changing their teaching practice in terms of the use of data for setting up student-learning intentions by focusing on students' needs. "*The use of data has impacted both on the style and learning intentions with each lesson."* Some commented on how their changed practices would enable improved learning outcomes for students. *"Gives me more clarity in my role as teacher to use data effectively to help improve student-learning outcomes."* With 44% of comments relating to students, it is clear that the teachers' focus is on improved practice for improved learning for students. *"These goals have become a part of our lessons and we plan to ensure students learning needs are met."*

Most of these responses were personalised, reflecting the individual teacher's views of his or her response to the goals. For example, one specialist staff member commented that the SIP did not affect his teaching stating that, *"With my role as a specialist teacher, the aspect of marking, speaking and listening against VELS is not a key aspect of my assessment. The ICT and PE assessment do not reflect this specifically."* Another teacher commented that the classroom practice hadn't really been affected much reporting that, *"In my classroom, these are already activities that I completed and incorporated prior to this goal." "Some teachers have adopted and embedded new practices in their teaching and learning programs. Some have trialled new ideas, but tend to return to prior methods".* Again, while most comments were quite positive, others made negative comments. *"Excessive time spent on data collection."*

Survey Question 13:   Please indicate the extent to which aspects of the 2011 School Improvement Plan processes at your school are working well, or need some degree of improvement

64 – 72 % of survey participants think that leadership processes are working well (or extremely well) in relation to communication, consultation, the development of a shared vision, the use of student data for planning for teaching and learning, attention to student-learning needs and translation of the SIP into classroom practices in their school settings. Between 3% and 11 % think that these processes need to be improved.

67 per cent of participants indicated that **communication between teachers and the leadership teams** worked well (30%) or extremely well (37%). 8% think that this needs improvement.

72 per cent of participants indicated that **consultation on directions for improvement** worked well (34%) or extremely well (38%). 3% think that this needs improvement.

66 per cent of participants indicated that **communication within the school on teaching and learning processes** worked well (28%) or extremely well (38%). Only 8% thought that this needed improvement.

67 per cent of participants indicated that **a shared vision for learning outcomes** worked well (23%) or extremely well (44%). 8% think that this needs improvement.
68 per cent of participants indicated that **effective use of student data for planning teaching and learning** worked well (25%)or extremely well (43%). 7% think that this needs improvement.

67 per cent of participants indicated that **attention to individual student needs** worked well (28%) or extremely well (40%). 7% think that this needs improvement.
64 per cent of participants indicated that **translation of school SIP plans into classroom practice** worked well (30%) or extremely well (34%). 11% think that this needs improvement. Although still quite high, the degree to which school SIP plans were translated into classroom practice received the most negative responses.

* It is noteworthy that none of the participants felt that 2011 School Improvement Plan processes at their school were in need of substantial improvement.

Survey Question 14 provided an opportunity to add an optional response to build on question 13. There were very few comments related to this question although one participant explained how,

Generally the SIPS have been well received but many teachers still see them as additional workloads and respond negatively

While another participant responded,

In my opinion SIPs have been extremely valuable for the school. It has developed a great knowledge of teaching and learning.

This would indicate that the experience or perceptions varied across school locations and was not the same for all teachers.

Survey Question 15 asked the participants to indicate the likelihood of the following occurring as a result of the implementation of the School Improvement processes during 2011 (compared to 2010).

     1.   Student-learning will be improved

2. Better communication between teachers and the leadership team

3. Classroom teaching will improve

4. There will be more worthwhile talk between teachers about teaching and learning

5. Students will be better engaged

6. Struggling students will be better supported

The majority of the 75 participants indicated that each item was likely to better than 2010 or may be better than 2010 with only between 1 and 3 participants out of 75 indicating that any of the categories were unlikely to be better than 2010. For one item from this category (Item 2) 7 participants thought that communications between teachers and their leadership teams was unlikely to be better than in 2010. It is possible that these 7 participants may have selected that response because communications were so good in 2010 that they were unlikely to be able to improve in 2011. For example, in one comment associated with this question the participant commented, "*The statements in the 'May be better than 2010' have always been strong and will not necessarily change because of SIP.*" Another response (not related to item 2) was, "*Do not believe the improvements are attributed to the SIP - strongly believe the improvements would have occurred regardless. We have a strong vision and focus at … pre SIP.*"

Survey Questions 17 – 23 asked participants to comment on the extent to which school improvement planning processes during 2008 – 2011 contributed to the following:

1. Improved Teaching

2. Improved Student-learning

3. Increased focus on individual student-learning needs

4. Increased use of student data to improve learning

5. Increased use of student data in future planning for teaching

6. An increase in communications about teaching and learning.

With the possible range of 0 to 10 to choose from, the responses to this set of questions shows that an improvement across these years with from quite low (2.8) in 2008 to quite high (7.79) in 2011. Three illuminating comments associated with this set of questions include:

> The conversations we have had as a staff have been very different in the last two years. This year especially we are all working o n a common goal and understanding about our SIP and focused on student data and individual needs.

> There has always been and continues to be a culture o f continued improvement and high degree of professional development in across school programs. The focus has been continued student improvement of individual students as well as teacher skills.

We have an excellent Performance and Development culture at our school and have used data and focussed on improved student learning for many years. SIP hasn't changed our approach to student learning.

Survey Question 24 asked the participants to indicate the extent to which the following personnel were involved in the School Improvement planning process in years 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Participants could select from a scale from 0 to 10, from not at all (0) to a very large extent (10). Their responses show that:

1. The Principal - 2.55 in 2008 increasing across all years to 8.4 in 2011;

2. The Network Leader - 1.45 in 2008 to 6.45 in 2011;

3. The Classroom Teacher - 1.93 in 2008 to 7.65 in 2011;

4. The Coach - 1.55 in 2008 to 6.54 in 2011; and

5. Other Leadership Personnel - 1.55 in 2008 to 6.8 in 2011.

The data from this question indicates that participants perceived a significant change in involvement in the SIP planning process across these years with the Principal have the greatest involvement.

Other Leadership Personnel were described as:

- 2010 - Ultranet lead users

- 2011 - TPL member, Leader of Learning member

- Senior Teacher

- Assistant Principal

- Barwon South Western Region Support Staff

- Team Leaders, Expert teachers

- Unit leaders

- Assistant Principal and leading teachers

- Leadership team in both junior and senior learning teams

- Leading Literacy & Numeracy teachers

- Leading teachers

The table below shows the data for **Survey Question 30, "To what extent do people in the following roles impact on your teaching practice".**

Table 12: Impact on teaching practice

#	Answer	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little or no impact
1	Principal/Assistant Principal	55	15	5
2	Curriculum coordinator or other leadership personnel	57	16	2
3	Professional learning team	52	21	2
4	School Improvement Coach	44	13	18
5	Other colleagues	40	32	3
6	Subject department colleagues	34	22	19

This tells us that participants perceive that the Curriculum coordinator and other leadership personnel had a lot of impact (57/75) with the Principal (55/75) next and the Professional learning teams (52/75) close behind.

#	Answer	A lot of impact	Some impact	Very little or no impact