

Evaluation of the whole-school implementation of a language-based pedagogy at Southern Secondary College*

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* The school's name has been changed to protect the confidentiality of those participating in the research.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the evaluation of the whole-school implementation of an explicit language-based pedagogy in a state-funded secondary school in Victoria, Australia. In late 2013, the school began to adopt an explicit language-based pedagogy as a potential solution to improving students' writing. For that reason, a program offered by Lexis Education called Literacy for Learning (Lfl) was chosen as the vehicle for implementing this pedagogical model across the whole school. Since then, the students' writing has improved greatly, suggesting the implementation has been highly effective. In fact, the literacy outcomes achieved by the school in the national literacy test, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) showed significant improvement across all areas, exceeding the expectations of literacy leaders. Yet, these improvements were merely a part of many other positive changes in the school. The teachers involved in evaluating the program spoke of improved teaching practices, increased student confidence and improved behaviour in the classroom as a result of introducing the explicit language-based pedagogy.

EVALUATION

The evaluation was conducted in 2018, five years after the beginning of the implementation. To assess the extent of the improvement and to identify contributing factors and specific aspects of teaching and learning practices that have been positively altered over time, a range of data has been used, including qualitative and quantitative measures. The quantitative data is comprised of NAPLAN and VCE results over the last five years. In terms of the qualitative data, in-depth interviews with teachers, the principal and the Literacy leader were used and analysed for a deeper understanding of the changes over time and the impact of the new practices on teachers and students, as well as general learning culture within the school. Before we turn to examining the data, it is important to briefly explore the pedagogical model that underpins the intervention and, specifically, the LfL course that served as a vehicle for the implementation.

'LITERACY FOR LEARNING' ACROSS THE WHOLE SCHOOL

The functional model of language, principally developed by Michael Halliday and Jim Martin, and an explicit teaching and learning cycle (TLC) that had its origins in the Metropolitan East Disadvantaged Schools program, provide the two pedagogical pillars for the explicit language-based pedagogy underpinning the LfL course. Currently, this functional model informs the Australian National Curriculum and, in turn, the Victorian Curriculum, for its demonstrably positive effect on students' literacy outcomes. Evidence of such outcomes has been outlined in the article 'Linguistically based inequality, multilingual education and a genre-based literacy development pedagogy: insights from the Australian experience' written by Peter R.R. White, Giuseppe Mammone and David Caldwell, and published in the journal *Language and Education* (2015).

The whole-school model provides the most comprehensive and sustainable changes.

The LfL course is delivered using the train-the-trainer model, and is comprised of a tutor training course and a teacher course. Teachers, typically those identified as literacy leaders in a school, attend the tutor training, which equips them with the capacity to deliver the teacher course to their colleagues in their school. In this way, the school builds the capacity of teachers to implement an explicit language-based pedagogy across the whole school.

While the LfL course equips teachers with a suite of tools to improve student outcomes within their own classrooms, it is the whole-school model that provides the most comprehensive and sustainable changes across the whole school. There are

a number of interdependent outcomes that can be expected by involving all teachers in the school in an explicit language-based pedagogy. First, it is expected that all students will improve their capacity to use language and to understand and produce the texts that are required of them. Consequently, the reading and writing results across the school would improve, as demonstrated by improved NAPLAN and VCE scores. Second, teaching would become more explicit, resulting in improved teaching and learning practices. Third, a range of supportive structures would develop within the school, such as in-school training and mentoring, leading to greater self-sufficiency in the delivery of teacher professional development.

THE CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL

Southern Secondary College is situated in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. The school community has become more diverse in the last decade, with students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds enrolling at the school. Currently, 12% of students are classified as English as an Additional Language, and 2% are Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islanders.

As there are several private schools that have opened up in the area recently, the College, being a state-funded school, receives a disproportionate number of students from families with low socio-economic profile. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, the populations of students and teaching staff are highly transitory in this school, creating additional challenges to maintaining a sustainable learning environment. And yet, despite these difficulties, the school is committed to improving academic and other outcomes for all students. This commitment has been apparent in the recent improvements in VCE and NAPLAN results.

TIMELINE OF IMPLEMENTATION

Before 2013

Following the appointment of the current principal in 2009, the school tried many different programs in order to find an effective way to improve literacy outcomes, especially students' writing. However, none of the many programs or teacher development courses offered prior to 2013 had any impact on the results. These earlier programs were mentioned during the interviews as simplistic or discouraging, and, in one case, even demeaning to teachers.

2013

Throughout this year, the school continued to actively look for solutions to improving students' literacy outcomes. Towards the end of 2013, the LfL course was recommended to the school's principal as a possible solution to the issue of students' writing. As a result, the principal met with Brian Dare of Lexis Education, who was then invited to present to the whole staff, outlining in his presentation the benefits of a whole-school approach based on the principles of the LfL course. As a result of the presentation, the implementation commenced in November 2013 with 20 staff undertaking the LfL teacher course. The school principal was among the staff who attended this training.

2014

In early 2014, another group of teachers was trained and potential school literacy leaders were identified. These leaders were then trained as tutors, with a view to delivering the course to the remaining teachers. The 2013 group of teachers began to test the model in their own classroom. A group of enthusiastic leaders was selected to undertake the LfL tutor training and take on the role of tutors for the remaining staff. Early-measuring means were established, so-called 'pre- and post-writing', where students' texts were collected on two occasions – at the beginning of the year and later in the year – and results quantified. This early assessment indicated that the explicit language-based pedagogy was positively impacting on students' writing.

2015

During the first three years of the program, the in-school training continued, with each teacher attending 18 hours of professional development. The identified LfL tutors were given time not only to train but also to actively support and coach the teaching staff. As the external expert, Brian Dare continued to help teachers to integrate the explicit teaching practices into their own classrooms and maintain the integrity of the implementation. Specifically, he delivered faculty-focused professional development sessions for English, Science, Mathematics and Humanities.

The great majority of teachers are now incorporating the language-based pedagogical practices into their own practice.

2016 – present

All teachers have now been trained. Any new teacher entering the school undertakes training and receives further support from coaches. All teachers are being coached and supported as needed, with coaches reaching out to teachers with new initiatives and extra support. The great majority of teachers are now incorporating the language-based pedagogical practices into their own practice, which has become more explicit and structured. Shared understandings have made it easier for teachers to work collaboratively. Within the school and across all faculties, teachers are developing materials such as model texts, workbooks, reference books, and word banks. Teachers now have a shared language to talk about language, making collaboration more likely. Classroom teaching is now more explicit and structured. There is increased confidence in the teachers and students, and evidence of improved behaviour in classrooms.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

In terms of quantitative data, the most comprehensive measure to consider here is the Growth Data based on the school's NAPLAN data from 2013 to 2018. The Growth Data is derived by measuring the difference between the Mean Scaled Scores¹ across two years of schooling, in this case from Year 7 to Year 9. The resulting difference between these two means can be used as a measure of how much students have improved in these areas over the two years or, in other words, a measure of the 'value added' over the two years. Included in the following graphs is the Growth Data for the five areas tested under NAPLAN; Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar & Punctuation and Numeracy for both the School mean, the Matched cohort mean² and the State mean. Some data from the VCE data from 2013 to 2018 is also considered.

Before whole-school intervention

The best data available that gives some measure of where the school was prior to the intervention is the NAPLAN Growth Data for Year 2013, as outlined in Figure 1. This and subsequent graphs capture the mean growth in NAPLAN scores across the whole-year cohort as they move from Year 7 to Year 9. If we focus on the Writing results in 2013, we can see that the mean for the state growth for Year 9 students across the previous two years was 30 points. Southern Secondary College, in contrast, showed a negative growth over those two years and remained some 48 points below the state

GROWTH DATA 2013

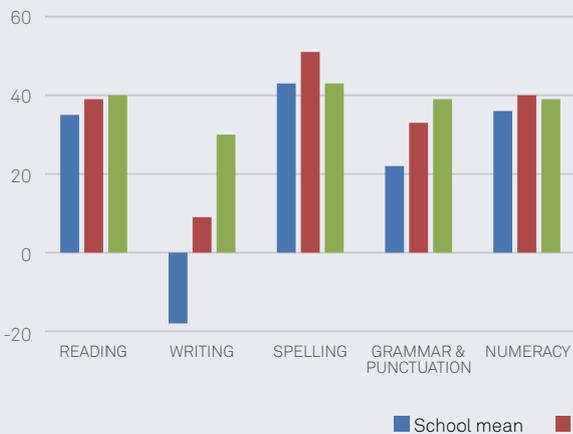


Figure 1: NAPLAN mean growth between Year 7 and 9 for the State of Victoria and Southern Secondary College in the years 2011 to 2013

GROWTH DATA 2014



Figure 2: NAPLAN mean growth between Year 7 and 9 for the State of Victoria and Southern Secondary College in the years 2012 to 2014

- ¹ The Mean Scaled Score is the the mean score achieved by a cohort of students and then adjusted (scaled) so that any given score represents the same level of achievement. This allows valid comparisons to be made (ie the Growth Data) regarding a student's level of achievement over a period of time.
- ² The 'Matched cohort' consists of those students who have attended the school from Year 7 to Year 9.

growth.

Early stages of intervention

A similar pattern can be observed the following year (Figure 2) where the school's mean in Writing had a 12-point growth, which was 21 points below the state growth. This, however, does represent a significant turnaround from the previous results and could reflect the initial efforts, particularly by the English faculty, which focused on writing. The only growth figures for these two years that matched or were higher than the state were in Spelling and in Numeracy in 2013. In 2014, both of these areas dropped significantly, so all areas were now below state growth.

Following the early stages of the implementation of the whole-school model, the 2015 Naplan Growth Data (Figure 3) began to reflect the effects of the whole-school intervention in some areas, notably Grammar & Punctuation (school growth/matched cohort of 51/52 respectively compared with state growth of 34). This was an early focus area for the school and attention given to it appears to have paid off. In other areas, the gap between state and school narrowed. Writing, however, despite some improvement, was still well below the state value.

Evidence of significant improvement

By 2016, strong improvements across all areas began to emerge. As can be seen in Figure 4, the Writing growth data showed significant improvement in students' writing. In contrast to the state growth of 45, the school achieved a growth of 72 and 57 in the School mean and the Matched cohort mean respectively. This reflected an 'added value' at a much higher level than would have been expected, some 60% higher in fact for the School mean. All other areas showed improvement well above state growth figures (Reading 31%, Spelling 46%, Grammar & Punctuation

GROWTH DATA 2015

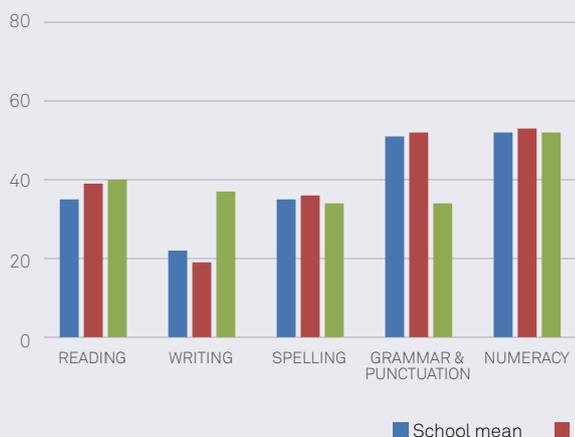


Figure 3: NAPLAN mean growth between Year 7 and 9 for the State of Victoria and Southern Secondary College in 2015

GROWTH DATA 2016

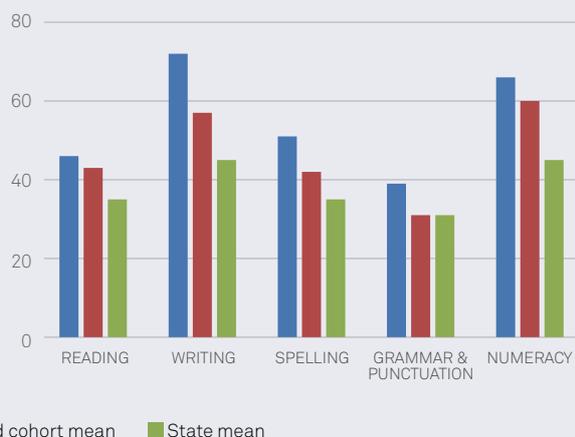


Figure 4: NAPLAN mean growth between Year 7 and 9 for the State of Victoria and Southern Secondary College in 2016

GROWTH DATA 2017

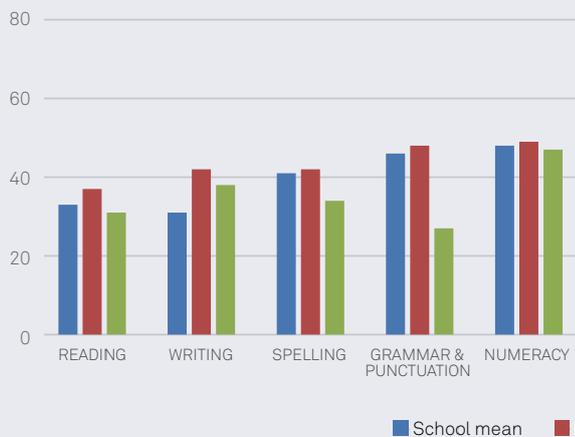


Figure 5: NAPLAN mean growth between Year 7 and 9 for the State of Victoria and Southern Secondary College in 2017

GROWTH DATA 2018

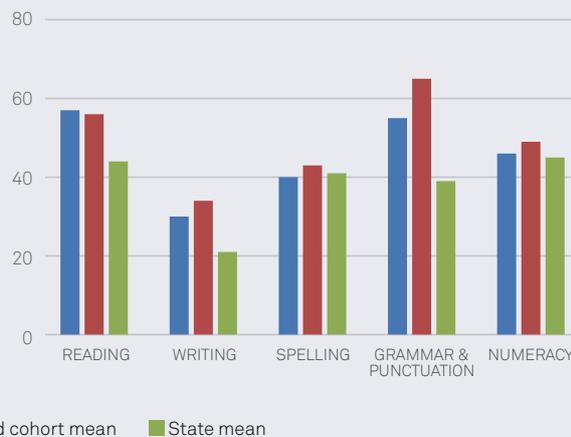


Figure 6: NAPLAN mean growth between Year 7 and 9 for the State of Victoria and Southern Secondary College in 2018

26% and Numeracy 47%). Importantly, for the first time, the school achieved greater improvement than the state in Reading.

Consolidating significant improvement

The two years from 2017 to 2018 have seen a continuation of the trend of the school achieving above state mean growth in all areas, particularly when considering the ‘matched school cohort’ scores (Figures 5 & 6). While there is a slight drop in the school mean for Writing (31) in 2017, the ‘matched school cohort’ showed slightly higher growth (42 versus 38) than the state. However, in 2018, we see the school achieving significantly higher growth (62% higher) than the state in Writing.

If we focus on school means again, then, in both years, Grammar & Punctuation showed very strong growth as well (70% higher than the state in 2017 and 41% higher in 2018). The school continued to achieve growth in Reading above the state figure with a very significant difference in 2018 (30% higher than the state growth). This is quite impressive in light of the fact that, in that year, Victorian schools overall achieved their best results in reading in Year 9 in 2018.

In terms of VCE data for the school, a useful figure to consider is its median VCE study score. In 2013, this was sitting at 25 (see Table 1) and, at this stage, the goal was to raise this to 27, which was reached by 2017. This was very rewarding for the school given that it is quite an achievement to move up one point on this score. It was all the more meritorious since it was achieved under a new policy of letting all students who chose to do the VCE to follow their choices rather than be ‘advised’ otherwise.

Year	Median Study Score*	40+ (as % of cohort)**	VCE Rank***
2013	25	N/A	N/A
2014	26	0.4%	441
2015	26	1.6%	426
2016	26	1.0%	430
2017	27	1.8%	392
2018	27	1.9%	378

Table 1: Summary of VCE results for Southern Secondary College between 2013 and 2018

* A school's Median Study Score is the middle or 'typical' Study Score for all of the students in that school.

** 40+ indicates that a student has achieved a better Study Score in a given subject than 91% of students in Victoria who took that subject. The average score across the State is 30. Very few Study Scores below 20 are awarded so the lowest VCE ranking must be above 20. The lowest Median Study Score ever achieved is 21.

*** VCE Rank is a comparison with all other secondary schools in Victoria.

QUALITATIVE DATA: ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The interviews were conducted in November 2018. The school principal, a literacy leader, and teachers of Mathematics, Science, English, Art and Woodwork were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for the most in-depth engagement with the interviewees and to maximise the insights and information. The data was then transcribed and collated.

The questions focused on several broad aspects of the implementation. First, we focused on the reasons that motivated the school to consider a whole-school language-based pedagogy and the factors that influenced the decision to implement such a model. Second, we explored the factors that supported or challenged the implementation, including the role of leaders and experts. Third, we spoke of the effectiveness of the explicit language-based pedagogy and the way it influenced the teaching practices and students' learning. Finally, the teachers were asked to elaborate on their classroom practices, behaviours and students' results, and how these changed since the beginning of the implementation.

Conducting the interviews added greatly to the whole-school quantitative data (NAPLAN and VCE) and assisted in a greater understanding of the dynamic changes that have been happening in the school since 2013. Following is the summary of what teachers and school leaders talked about.

Scaffolded complexity

There are many teacher training programs available today attempting to provide answers to common educational problems. A model of explicit language-based pedagogy offers a long term, complex solution that has the potential to generate meaningful changes and consistent, positive results, especially when it is taken up across all learning areas within the whole-school model.

Such a comprehensive, long-term model may seem like too big a challenge for school leaders because of its perceived complexity. Also, it may seem difficult for

teachers who lack confidence to engage with such complexity. Moreover, teachers may be hesitant to introduce the new pedagogical principles in the classroom, underestimating students' ability to interact with such complexity, believing such a model to be too difficult for students who already struggle.

However, the evaluation of the implementation undertaken by Southern Secondary College shows that such doubts are unsubstantiated. With the right leadership and appropriate planning, the explicit language-based pedagogy has the potential to provide a solid basis for continuous, long-term improvement in students' writing across all learning areas. The fears that students may find the pedagogy difficult were also unsupported and, in fact, the opposite was shown to be true. Students benefited from the take-up of the pedagogy, and even the weakest students were able to engage with the complexity.

With the right leadership and appropriate planning, the explicit, language-based pedagogy has the potential to provide a solid basis for continuous, long-term improvement in students' writing across all learning areas.

Many arguments were presented by the interviewees in support of this, with two accounts worth mentioning here. First, at the beginning of the program, teachers were asked by senior students, who, acknowledging the value of what they were being taught at the time, asked teachers repeatedly why they were being introduced to this pedagogy so late in their schooling. Students from nearby schools that are now introducing the pedagogy asked similar questions.

And the feedback from one school close by, that's from kids, was 'why didn't we learn this earlier'? And this was the same thing that we got when we started, 'why didn't we learn this earlier?' And the simple answer is [that] we didn't know about it. We didn't know how to teach it. (The principal)

The second account refers to practices around literacy support for weaker students. These are students who struggle the most with academic work and who are withdrawn from the classes in order to work with teachers in small groups. At Southern Secondary College, these weakest students are now achieving results that are beyond anything they achieved prior to the program's start.

The literacy support teachers now are teaching the curriculum to the students And yeah and everything we can see that is coming out of that, these are the kids who normally would not produce any work. . . . But now they are producing good level work, in terms of . . . they are writing essays It used to be the teacher would write an essay and the kid would basically be filling in the word here and there. Now the kids are writing. (The literacy leader)

The reason for such high-level engagement and the effectiveness of this pedagogy seems to be that a high level of complexity is being matched with a high level of targeted, explicit teaching. The increased challenges are easy for the students to take on because of the highly scaffolded teaching practice. In other words, while seemingly more difficult, the pedagogy provides structures and explicit strategies that make it easier for the students to effectively deal with higher levels of abstraction and technicality.

The beginning

The implementation started late 2013, five years before this evaluation. Looking back, the steps taken by the school and the leaders, while guided by the expertise of Brian Dare, seemed to be a big undertaking on their part. Perhaps what impelled the school to take on something so comprehensive and complex, in a very challenging environment, was the sheer determination to change things after many failed attempts to find simple, quick and easy solutions.

I have been a principal here for about 5 years and, through that time, trying to come to grips with the complexities around improving students' writing, and that represented a significant challenge and, despite a lot of people's best efforts, we couldn't make any inroads. (The principal)

The principal, appointed a few years before the implementation, was clearly determined to find a way to improve his school's results. He certainly searched for answers at that time in the hope of improving students' writing. As he told us, many other interventions were trialled in the school with no impact whatsoever. It was not until the explicit language-based pedagogy was introduced that things started changing for the better.

We have tried other models but they didn't quite hold, they didn't stick. This one stuck. (The principal)

Improved results

The NAPLAN and VCE results tell a positive story. The students' writing improved in a significant and consistent way, with data now confirming that there was a marked difference in the students' ability to write.

And that's clear that the NAPLAN results showed a significant growth in two of the three years, in particular in writing. But one of the things that the Year 12 examiner said — we had an examiner cross-mark with teachers — and one of the things he was saying is that the kids were writing differently. So there is a general understanding that the kids are writing differently. (The principal)

Teachers also commented on how the new strategies and new pedagogy were improving students' results. One teacher told us how, at the beginning, she taught the same strategies to a very different cohort with surprisingly similar results, highlighting even further the effectiveness of this model.

I was just going to add that with the improved results, and how we can notice that there are improved results. So the best example for that would probably be [that] when we first started implementing these strategies into the school, I was teaching a Year 7 English class and a Year 11 English class and ... I taught them exactly the same way when I was teaching them these strategies ... and I can honestly say that my

Year 7s were producing essays as good as my Year 11s. So, what I was teaching to Year 11s, who are 4 years apart, they were getting the same skills. So that to me just shows you ... that teaching these strategies to people is making a big difference because I was getting the exact same quality. (English teacher)

There was a consensus among everyone we spoke to that students were now clearly producing better written texts.

The texts that the students are producing have significantly improved. (English teacher)

It's [writing in Science] something I never used to really think about because it doesn't really look like a huge piece of writing but even those paragraphs, they are a lot ... the kids are really good with it now. (Science teacher)

It's as simple as it being a little paragraph for them evaluating their product. It would be like night and day if I went to another teacher's class and got their evaluations of their products who doesn't do it in this manner compared with if you got mine. Because they didn't give them tools to complete the tasks to their ability, and I'm not necessarily teaching them English, I'm just giving them the tools to write good evaluations. What would have been very limited [in the past] is now a well-structured, formulated piece of writing. (Art teacher)

While improved writing was a goal, and initially, the major focus of the intervention by the school, the results extended beyond just writing. The three areas that teachers commented on were improved comprehension, improved behaviour and increased confidence.

Comprehension

When I teach a new concept, I feel like the kids can grasp it a lot quicker because it's very consistent. Any new concept that we introduce is always introduced in the same way so they know exactly what they're doing. It's like a routine has been built into our classroom so they appreciate that routine to begin with. (Mathematics teacher)

We were finding that our Year 12s were finishing and the feedback they were giving was "We don't really know how to use the books in the exams. It's great that we've got it there, but don't know how to use it." So we decided to introduce [the resource book] into every single year level. Those steps and that modelling structure that the teacher does, then we do a joint construction again, those all go into their resource book so they have a whole book of every single concept that's new to them in there with three examples laid out in the exact same way. They found because they can use it and rely ... because they can reference it, they are much more confident because they know every single question even if the language in the question stem has changed; they can relate it back to what's in their book, so that's really good, because that's that additional consistency that we didn't have before. (Science teacher)

Behaviour

The way we do the teaching and learning cycle and the deconstruction, the modelling, that has definitely improved student behaviour in the Maths classroom. The way we

do it, when the teacher is modelling, all the kids have to do is watch, they don't have to write anything down, they know they've got time to ask questions and they know that they've got time to write it down afterwards but, at that point, all they have to do is sit there and watch what the teacher is doing on the board and I think that period of time which only takes like five minutes to do it, not even on some days, but because it's always at the start of the lesson, or at the start of a new part of a lesson, it's just a really good way to calm the kids down from wherever they've come from and then I just find that the rest of the lesson continues to flow from there. So I found an improvement in the Maths classroom definitely. (Mathematics teacher)

Confidence

Behaviour is quite often related to the students' ability to complete the task. So, if they are more confident and know what they're doing and are being helped through the class or the task, they obviously are going to be more engaged. Because if they have no idea of what they're doing or have no ability to do it, that is when they're more likely to go off task and misbehave. So that would have to help. (Woodwork teacher)

***“When I teach a new concept, I feel like the kids can grasp it a lot quicker because it's very consistent.”
(Mathematics teacher)***

Teaching practices

One of the advantages of using qualitative data alongside quantitative data is the richness of the understandings and insights that can be generated from such a study. The interviewees shared details that would otherwise be lost, and yet it is only by engaging with these details that the story unfolds in meaningful ways.

It is clear from the NAPLAN and VCE data that the students of Southern Secondary College really struggled with writing prior to 2013. This was also reinforced by the teachers and leaders we spoke to. Students struggled to write and it was disconcerting to most teachers. It would be easy to find many plausible explanations in a school that services one of Victoria's most disadvantaged populations about why the students are not doing well, and many of these explanations could shift the responsibility away from the teachers. Yet, such an easy way out was not acceptable to the leaders in this school.

Teachers who were most concerned with their student's ability to write were those who taught 'practical' subjects like Art or Woodwork. One Art teacher, in particular, found it irreconcilable that students who produced such outstanding artwork lacked the skills to explain or evaluate it in writing. While writing could be considered the last priority for the 'practical work' teachers, this serves to show how important the writing skills are across all subjects, and how much more crucial it is to equip teachers of subjects other than English with the skills to teach the writing component in a systematic and explicit way.

We have what we call our instructional model . . . so last year or so I said to [the principal], we need the teaching and learning cycle in there. Because up until now, officially in our documentation, Literacy for Learning was not there. And [the name of the art teacher], his comment was, 'it's got all the Literacy for Learning in it now, so it is worth its weight in gold'. That's how he views it. So yes, he is very passionate. (Art teacher)

However, it is not just this single Art teacher who spoke highly about the results of the implementation. "I teach differently now", or "it changed the way I teach" are just a couple of examples of frequently occurring comments in the interviews.

Ever since then, it's completely changed the way that I teach. Now, when I am introducing a concept for the first time, there is a really structured modelling [of] the steps, and the steps are very explicit and they are really cut down and it is, like, it's very scaffolded in the way in the kids have to work through a problem now. So it is modelled in every stage. (Science teacher)

I would always teach them in a step-by-step way because that's the way that made sense for me to teach it. But, just those little changes of being more explicit and making each step actually meaningful was really important and I guess that's how it changed my own teaching practice. (Mathematics teacher)

The other thing is that, maybe it wasn't for the same for English teachers but, for us in Science, we know what good scientific writing looks like but we didn't ever know the principles of it, like the fundamentals that make it good, we didn't even know them as teachers. We knew obviously how to write well, because I'm here and made it through and out the other side, but we didn't know the principles of it. Now that we can teach it, there's definitely an improvement in the writing . . . I was never taught writing explicitly, I guess, but I know what good writing looks like, but now I can identify and say 'yes, it was good writing because you used these elements'. (Mathematics and Science teacher)

Many teachers commented that they now design their work in the classroom differently. There is more structure and more predictable patterns in how they introduce the topic to students, and how they engage with them. This makes the work easier for both teachers and students, and most importantly, gives students a chance to improve comprehension and writing skills.

Since we did the program and implemented it within the school, I know that in my own subject area, which is English and Humanities slash History, I definitely think, particularly in English, it's much more structured and progressive how we teach, the content and the skills, everything is sort of step by step. (English teacher)

I think it is just being really good in making everything step by step and filtering through all the year levels and . . . rather than 'I teach Year 7s so I am focusing on Year 7', it is filtered right across the school so it has had a significant impact on the way that we teach throughout the school, especially in English. (English teacher)

I would say that the task isn't different . . . but the way I teach that task and the way lessons are structured around the way I teach the task is completely different. (Art/Woodwork teacher)

[Previously] I would give them these questions and tell them to go away and evaluate their product and I would get back these answers like ‘mine was good’ or ‘it was really cool’. And now I basically use the exact same way I teach the art analysis ... I would say the correct terms and, before we even start, we go through [terms] together and write, ‘let’s remember what the correct names of all the tools are’, so they don’t say the saw-y thing, as well as the correct names of the process, because they may say the word ‘cutting’ but it is actually ‘sawing’. I don’t know how we expected them to write good evaluations about what they were making without giving them the tools to be able to complete them. (Art teacher)

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Collaboration

The unified pedagogy across the whole school created a culture of collaboration and support among teachers, enabling them to work together in much more beneficial ways. The shared language and understandings have created a culture that not only helps teachers but has far-reaching consequences for students’ results and their behaviour.

And because we have now got people in the school that are really good at this stuff, lots of teachers are visiting other classrooms and acting as an expert voice and that has improved behaviour as well because they know this person is coming in to teach me something specific to what I need and I need to be listening and I need to be doing this. And I think giving them that opportunity to have that additional person has just been – they know it’s really important, they do the right thing following that. (Science teacher)

Teaching tasks have become more explicit, meaning that the teachers’ confidence and ability to structure the classroom work and teaching materials have improved greatly. Many resources have been developed that are now used within the school by all teachers. These include word banks for each subject, reference books and pamphlets, and model texts of what students need to produce.

There is a greater understanding of how you teach them to write better. Previously, the language would be around ‘the kids’ve got to write more formally’. And that was about it. Full stop. And now the kids have got to write more formally by doing X, Y and Z, and that I think is probably the ... So the lessons that I teach now are extremely structured. The worksheets that the students use are very scaffolded in the approach that we do it. I give things like word banks, emotive word banks, I have word banks for all the art elements and principles, things that I would never have even contemplated or thought of doing before I did the LfL training. (Art/Woodwork teacher)

The model texts and linguistic understandings help the teachers focus on the goals and how they can be achieved. Rather than focus on what needs to be improved, teachers are now able to explain how to improve and what the expected level of work looks like.

I just wanted to add and I even say this to students: ‘when I was in high school,

I remember this amazing English teacher saying to me “you need to extend your vocabulary” but never actually taught me how to do that’. For me, this program, and the way we’ve implemented the Literacy for Learning strategies, we’re actually teaching them how to do those things. . . . Instead of saying what not to do, it’s actually showing people what to do. I think that’s the most important thing in school that I’ve learned and taught others with this particular process. (English teacher)

Revisiting the basics with the newly acquired understandings was also commented on as something that helped to produce better work.

In primary school, when I think about it, it seems much more structured because you do have those basic goals of learning the alphabet and learning the basic sentences. In high school, you just assume they know all that and you’re too busy teaching, and then they’ve got exams and they have to do this and we’ve got to get this assignment in, that you’re not actually looking at the language as much as you should be. Whereas I think this program has brought it back to the higher level of those basic things you learn in primary school, and that’s what I think has made the most significant impact on the way I teach. (English teacher)

Shared understandings and whole-school engagement helped teachers across all faculties to engage with language easily, without having to feel that they needed to be as expert at language as English teachers.

I would say by the end of Term One, you could speak to any Year 7 student and they would know what the language continuum is, and it would seem an odd thing for a Year 7 student to walk into Year 7 Woodwork and for the Woodwork teacher to be talking about a language continuum. If they hadn’t been taught that in another subject, they’d be like ‘what are you talking about, we’re here to do woodwork’. However, with the whole-school approach, they just see it as the way we learn in our college. (Woodwork teacher)

It is also important for the pedagogy to be applied in disciplines other than English. In particular, Mathematics and Science teachers found that, in the early stages, it was hard to apply the principles of this pedagogy to their work. Extra days with the external expert warded off their fears and provided them with a range of strategies to apply in their own classroom.

Building the capacity, building the understanding of how that can be applied to Maths or Science or the Humanities. And that worked really, really well. The follow-up with the faculties was really, really important. (The principal)

When I first did the program, speaking to other Maths and Science teachers at the time, they were kind of like ‘oh, it’s good, but we don’t know how it would fit into a Maths class’ and that sort of thing. Then, we as a group worked more closely with Brian and we developed ways, like the model text or what the model text looks like in the Maths classroom and what the teaching and learning cycle can look like in our classroom, because the language continuum is really important and we use that all the time. That has been really helpful for me in both my Science and Maths classrooms. Especially with my senior kids in Science, there is a lot of technical jargon in their . . . textbook and their general readings, it is very technical language that they may not have come across before, so we are using the language continuum constantly in those classes, trying to get them to understand what it is One of the things we spoke about for doing Maths was adding a diagram to show them what the concept looks like and I do that a lot in science as well because I think then they can . . . see

something and understand it and then learn the technical terms for it. So that's been really good. (Science and Mathematics teacher)

Factors that made it possible

While the LfL course, with its clear focus on an explicit whole-school pedagogy, forms the essential foundation of the success of the program, there were steps that the school had to take, with the guidance of the principal, school leaders and the external expert, to create the seamless and straightforward implementation of the new pedagogical principles. Among many that the interviewees discussed, the following seemed to be stressed as the most important: the whole school and all teachers being involved; good quality, ongoing coaching and expert's assistance when needed; and gradual teacher training during work hours rather than after hours. These elements were principal factors that ensured the successful and challenge-free unfolding of the program.

Sharing a common language and understandings created a strong culture of involvement and collaboration.

Whole-school means *whole* school

The strict whole-school policy created a solid base for the take-up of the model. After initial trialling and subsequent decisions to take up this pedagogical model, there was a clear understanding that all teachers needed to be involved.

They don't have an option. It's not an option. But I think also, it never has been ... it's one of the weird things. But I think it hasn't really been an issue. (The principal)

Since then, all teachers have been trained, and new teachers that come to school (and there are new teachers entering every year) are trained straight away and introduced to what is now considered to be a big part of the school's culture.

We continue to train people who are new to the school. This is just about how we teach so you need to know the Literacy for Learning capabilities and what that means. (The principal)

Sharing a common language and understandings created a strong culture of involvement and collaboration.

You have to have a high percentage of teachers on board because I can go to my Year 9 Art class and talk about nominalisation and they all know what I'm talking about. My knowledge of nominalisation is limited compared to [our Literacy leader's]. However, they already know what they're doing [they know the terms, etc]. I don't have to be as much of an expert as the English teachers because they're getting the same language. (Art teacher)

The 'slow burn'

Once the decision was made to train the staff and adopt a whole-school model, the principal faced an enormous task of training and supporting his teachers in this new endeavour.

When you think about it, 60 or 70 staff, in the first two years, the 60 or 70 staff did 18 hours of professional development around literacy. That's unheard of. (The principal)

Not surprisingly, it took a couple of years before all the staff were trained, and even longer before the clear results began to show. The principal called this gradual unfolding a 'slow burn', and we found that this way of doing things had many advantages. For example, it enabled the school to take on this pedagogical model without excessively disturbing the day-to-day school activities. It also helped to minimise the costs as there was a gradual take-up of expertise and increased levels of self-sufficiency. This practical solution worked well to create many positive outcomes and ward off possible resistance among the teachers.

We did it from the point of view of more a 'slow burn' and that was more around practicalities. Releasing small groups of people and letting them get involved in the program a) made it manageable and b) we had to be patient because we were on a two-year journey essentially before we had everyone trained. People that came first, it was more about cross-faculty, the challenge became more around how you built pockets of teams, so they can support each other in the implementation. (The principal)

The positive momentum that was created that way not only helped to minimise resistance but created a lot of positive anticipation in those who eagerly awaited their turn.

By doing it slowly, we were able to build in sustainability, give people the opportunity to try. And that in the end also created a level of momentum that I didn't expect. Because people were saying that it was good. And by people saying it's good, well, 'when am I getting my go?' (The principal)

As a result of this gradual unfolding, the model was eagerly taken up by all teachers and the resistance was practically non-existent.

I still think that what I call a slow burn is probably what built a high level of sustainability, than just going 60 odd staff. If you did 60 staff, all at the same time, you would get too many of the nay sayers ... (The principal)

Involving the whole school meant that the focus needed to be placed on doing it across all faculties, not just English. So while it was more likely for the English teachers to take on the role of leaders, the training had to focus on all faculties.

It is really important that you are involved, as a principal, classes and faculty teams are involved and it was really important that we had all faculties do it first. If we just focused on English, it would have just sent a message around [that] this is just something for English. There is no doubt that English is a key driver, because that's where the actual teaching comes, but the concept of model text or a noun group is now something that clearly can be applied across all faculties. (The principal)

The best way to ensure cross-faculty engagement was to allow extra time and resources for faculty-specific coaching. This work went beyond the basic training and was a crucial part of making the content available to every teacher.

Training during work hours

From day one, the principal wanted to highlight the importance and value of the training. One of the ways to convey this message was to conduct the training during school hours. Doing it after hours would have been not just tiring, but could also have created tension and resistance.

You needed a three-hour session to do a module, you can't expect teachers to do it after school, to sit from four to seven or three thirty till six thirty, that's just too much. By giving them the internal time, we raised the importance of it, I am sure. (The principal)

Many interviewees also stressed the importance of training teachers in their school time, and not as an add-on to their normal hours.

And [the principal] gave it great weight, 'This is important, I am taking you off classes, this is important'. So the take-up was good and people were keen to do it and wanted to be a part of it, which was great. (Literacy leader)

Leadership matters

The transformation that happened within the school would not have been possible without strong, decisive and enthusiastic leadership. While many teachers and staff contributed to the enthusiasm and take-up of the work, two people in particular — the principal and the Literacy leader — were considered as the most important driving forces behind the changes.

The principal's willingness to engage with such a vast and complex program, as well as taking time to attend the training himself, sent a strong message that 'this was important'. Furthermore, the strict, whole-school policy, as well as allowing time and resources for teachers to do the training in school hours, were decisions that brought many people on board with no resistance or complaints.

Because if I was going to ask people to do that then I had to do it too. It highlights the importance of it, it's a bit of leading from the front, it's the active involvement of the principal in the professional learning opportunity ... just the symbolic nature of it, that I have done it and I did it first. I was in that first group, that's really, really important. (The principal)

The leader regularly engaged the external expert to make sure the integrity of the pedagogy was maintained. The principal believed that expertise was important on all levels of the implementation; for individual teachers, for faculties, for coaches and for himself. He was working closely not just with the external experts who developed the training, but also with the leaders in school. The strength of leadership lay in knowing what resources and support to engage for success.

At the beginning, so much of this was ... I am not a good writer, I have never been one, so you really are relying on key people, like our Literacy leader ... Having Brian working so closely with us has been invaluable. So that has been really good that we can call on the expert and get him in. (The principal)

In the first two years of the implementation, there were a number of coaches supporting the staff and providing training to the teachers. Over time, the number of coaches was cut down to only one, as the need for intensive training and support diminished. The coach that continues the work today is not only enthusiastic about

the work but also very experienced and knowledgeable. She provides ongoing support, ensuring that all teachers are true to the model and engaging with it in the classroom. Her duties involve a range of activities including one-on-one support, faculty-specific support, developing written materials for teachers and advising the principal and faculty leaders.

Someone has got to be passionate about it. In order for ... it to work, someone has got ... and for me, any English teacher with any self-respect would look at it and say, this is great stuff, this is fantastic. ... And you can see within the school, different teachers take it up and become passionate about it. And it starts to filter in. (Literacy leader)

Overall, the in-school mentoring by the Literacy leader has been one of the most important factors in the positive changes that the school undertook in the past five years.

[The Literacy leader] ... has been a big influence in the school, it has a lot to do with her enthusiasm and passion for the course. And that's given staff the confidence to get onboard. (Art teacher)

Pro-active mentoring

The role of the school mentoring was, undoubtedly, an important element of the implementation. However, it was not merely token mentoring and coaching that was provided. The mentoring was provided in a well-structured way, with coaches actively looking for the areas that could be improved. It was not up to teachers to necessarily ask for help, but to coaches to actively engage with teachers for individual support and encouragement, to classroom modelling and developing faculty-specific model texts.

The Literacy leader was allowed ample time and resources to actively seek teachers who needed any help, and to develop ways to engage with them and help them. As a coach, she is still, to this day, making sure that teachers are given all the necessary assistance to bring the pedagogy into their classroom, whether it is their skills or confidence that needs to be built up.

The challenge came in ... getting them to actually start using it in the classroom. That was the big thing ... and I was having this conversation with the school that was here the other day, there are going to be some teachers that never get to breaking down the language with the kids. It's too hard for them. It's too scary for them. Not English teachers, the English teachers know that this is an expectation. They are the driving force. We are the driving force behind the language aspect of this. (Literacy leader)

The leader acts as a mentor, helping with faculty-specific planning and documentation. For example, she has been actively engaging teachers and faculty leaders across all faculties to develop units of work that specifically focus on language. She also participates in developing 'model texts' for each of the subjects. She regularly models the teaching in the classroom to encourage a more in-depth take-up of the language-based pedagogy.

Such hands-on involvement of the coach has had a valuable impact on teaching practices across the whole school. It has encouraged teachers to collaborate more actively and to support each other in the uptake of this work, and it has created a greater sense of community and shared values.

Sustainability

The evaluation further showed that the school has become increasingly more self-sufficient in the delivery of the teachers' PD and in building internal expertise, which has proved to be cost-effective.

And so now there is a level of sustainability that relies on the expert for some advice but not ... so much for direct implementation. We ... are self-sufficient, which is a nice thing. But we have become self-sufficient essentially over the period of four years. (The principal)

In-school expertise

Over the years, four tutors have been trained and they, in turn, have delivered the LfL course to all the teachers. The tutors have taken on the role of coaches and supporting staff to all other teachers. Encouragement for teachers to take on the model and apply it in the classroom is a priority, ensuring high consistency and collaboration among all teachers and faculties. Over the years, the school has moved from relying on external expertise to building their own capacity and knowledge. This has helped build a level of self-sufficiency and, therefore, has cut the costs of professional development. The resources have been allocated to make this possible and to allow time for coaches to offer continuous, pro-active support to all teachers.

The school has become increasingly self-sufficient in the delivery of the teachers' PD and in building internal expertise.

However, it has been important to call on external expertise when appropriate. Brian Dare has supported coaches in their professional development. Importantly, he has guided teachers of subjects such as Mathematics, Science, Humanities, Arts and Technology to understand how the language-based pedagogy can be applied in their subjects. Initially sceptical, Mathematics and Science teachers found this to be transformative.

So our tutors were working parallel with Brian to broaden their skill set and that worked really, really well. (Literacy leader)

After we worked more closely with Brian in Maths, we developed all these ways where it was clearer the way the program could lead into Maths. Ever since then, it's completely changed the way that I teach. (Mathematics teacher)

Currently, the school has the Literacy leader supporting existing teaching staff and training new teachers coming into school. Everyone we spoke to commented on how the role of this particular teacher has been very influential in the success of the program.

[The Literacy leader] has been a big influence in the school and I think it has a lot to do with her enthusiasm and passion for the course. And that's given staff the confidence to get onboard. I think it's really important for the program to be successful. (Art teacher)

She has been a prominent driving force behind the program from the first day, not only because of the unyielding support she provided but also because of her enthusiasm for the language-based pedagogy. Being the English teacher, she took on a role of advising the principal on the value of the program and took on the leading role in every step of implementation. Overall, it seems that her role has been crucial to its success.

Challenges

As challenging as the whole project might have seemed, it has been relatively challenge-free. The steps taken by the school for rolling the program out slowly and for consistently supporting teachers has paid off by ensuring a relatively seamless transition to a new model of pedagogical practice. And while some teachers initially were reluctant to engage, the pro-active coaching has made it easier. There is little doubt that the shared understandings developed within the school, not only among teachers, but also students, has helped these reluctant teachers engage with the pedagogy more readily.

Summary

In summary, there have been many factors that have contributed to the successful implementation of the language-based pedagogy across the whole school. The content of the training and the expertise provided to the school was clearly invaluable. However, taking steps to disseminate this expertise across the whole school while minimising resistance and building positive momentum was equally important. Paramount to the program's success was strong, decisive and hands-on leadership, continuous mentoring and coaching at all levels, and generous time allowances.

Most importantly, the students are benefiting from the new way of teaching in many ways. The school has now become a model to other schools seeking to improve literacy outcomes. The students of Southern Secondary College have been the lucky beneficiaries of the pedagogical changes implemented in the past five years. The teachers' pride in their own and their students' achievements is obvious in the way they speak.

I never thought we would get there. I had this little dream that ... it was the national average that I was hoping we would one day hit, because it is lower than the state average, so I wasn't even thinking of the state, I was trying them to get to national average. ... Back in 2013 our kids weren't even in the game, they weren't competing. Now, they are matching the state. (Literacy leader)

CONCLUSION

This paper summarises the evaluation of the results of implementing an explicit, whole-school language-based pedagogy in one of the most economically disadvantaged schools in Victoria, Australia. The evaluation was conducted using NAPLAN and VCE results as well as recorded interviews with school leaders and selected teachers.

The program was first considered in the hope of improving students' writing, which, at the time, was the worst performing area across all learning and literacy capacities. A range of earlier interventions brought no such improvement. Yet, in the first year of the implementation of this pedagogy, the school's pre- and post-writing assessment of students' writing showed promising results. Consequently, the school continued with the implementation, providing training, coaching and support to all teachers within the school. While the implementation of the LfL course was a large project, appropriate steps were taken to ensure effective engagement of all teachers and produce a high level of self-sufficiency. Identifying and training in-school tutors and coaches was a big part of the model that led to self-reliance, as well as an economical way to ensure further growth and professional development of new and existing staff.

Analysis of the results and interviews has shown that, over time, the school has achieved significant improvement in students' writing across all learning and literacy areas. The mean scores of all NAPLAN results show that the students of this college achieved greater-than-average growth in writing and other areas of learning as they progressed from Year 7 to Year 9. Similarly, the average scores of Year 12 VCE exams show that the school results have improved significantly over the past five years, achieving a median study score of 27 in 2018. Considering the profile of the school and the transient population of students and teachers, the results achieved are noteworthy.

While the learning capacities improved, other positive changes have also been discussed in the interviews. These include more collaborative networking and co-working among teachers, and the development of a wide range of faculty-specific materials. This has created more structure and a more predictable flow in the design of lessons, and it has helped teachers engage with each other and with students in more meaningful ways, sharing understandings and language to talk about language. Furthermore, interviewees discussed improved student confidence as well as their own confidence in providing feedback and using a wide array of strategies and tools. Finally, many commented on improved behaviour in the classroom as a result of the new pedagogical endeavour.

There have been several factors that have led to this achievement. First of all, the training provided by Lexis Education – the LfL course – and Brian Dare's expertise have formed a sound and well-informed base for this program. At the same time, many steps taken by the school have enabled the implementation to unfold in the most effective and least challenging ways. The three most important factors that were mentioned were: the fact that the course was delivered within school hours, the unfolding of the course over two years (what the school called 'slow burn'), and the continuous support of teachers. This support included faculty-specific training in which teachers were shown how to apply the principles in their discipline, as well as continuous, pro-active in-school coaching to all teachers. Being strategic about investing resources in these areas has created high levels of enthusiasm as well as lasting self-sufficiency and, as the data shows, significant improvement in the teaching and learning capacities of the staff and students.