

Neil Dempster · Tony Townsend
Greer Johnson · Anne Bayetto
Susan Lovett · Elizabeth Stevens

Leadership and Literacy

Principals, Partnerships and Pathways to
Improvement

 Springer

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Managing and implementing a project across Australian states and territories required the acceptance of oversight and financial reporting responsibilities by one state government. Trevor Radloff, then-Executive Director of Schooling, undertook this role for the South Australian Department for Education and Children’s Services. He also chaired the National Reference Group for the Pilot Project. We thank him for his commitment to the project.

The PALL Projects gathered principals together from different state and territory jurisdictions and sectors, and this would not have been possible without the

dedicated work of Christine Perri. She was organisational efficiency personified! And she was ably supported by Ann Williams whose positive presence was a boon to Christine.

A final thanks goes to the literacy leadership advisers, the leadership mentors who worked closely with principals during the Pilot Project. These seven people, Dick D'Aloia, Linda Dawson, Sandra Easey, Keith Newton, Dawn Parkinson, Pam Pearson, and Paul Woodley, added immeasurably to the platform on which the work of other later mentors has been based.

But the Pilot Project was only the first stage of a substantial effort around Australia to support principals to become literacy leaders in their schools. After the Pilot Project, two new studies were undertaken by the Griffith Institute for Educational Research (GIER): the South Australian Study and the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities (PALLIC) Study. Together, these three studies led to the first three research reports used in this book. Subsequently, the Victorian Principals' Association under the leadership of President Gabrielle Leigh and Executive Officer Rebecca Vosper, and the Department of Education Tasmania under the leadership of John Ewington and Stephanie Hickey from the Professional Learning Institute, became new partners with Griffith University, first to offer the PALL Program to principals and, more lately, other school leaders in their jurisdictions, but also to partner with GIER in conducting the three further research projects mentioned in this book. It is appropriate to mention, although there are too many to name, the people who acted as leadership advisers to the school principals undertaking the PALL Program. These people took time to visit schools, to talk with principals, to establish professional learning communities and, through emails and phone calls, to support principals in their endeavours to improve the reading skills of students. Finally, we acknowledge the hundreds of school leaders who have chosen PALL as a process to improve their own knowledge in partnership with the teachers in their schools.

As this book goes to publication, the future of PALL is positive. Since the Pilot Program, PALL has been offered in all states of Australia, together with the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. Plans are underway for new cohorts of PALL school leaders to be invited into the program in Tasmania, South Australia, Queensland and Victoria in 2017. New research, such as following up on schools some years after PALL was introduced, is planned to document the sustainability of the ideas considered and the processes implemented. The story will continue.

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Contents

1	Leadership for Learning Research	1
	Introduction	1
	Why Focus on Principals?	2
	Shifts in School Leadership Literature	2
	Five Leadership for Learning Studies	4
	Conclusion	8
2	The PALL Approach	11
	PALL Positions	11
	The PALL Leadership Learning Modules	14
	Module 1: Leadership for Learning—What the Research Says	14
	Module 2: What Leaders Need to Know About Learning to Read	23
	Module 3: Leading Literacy Data Gathering and Analysis	25
	Module 4: Designing, Implementing and Monitoring Literacy Interventions	28
	Module 5: Intervention Evaluation and Future Planning	29
	Summary	32
	Judging the Quality of the PALL Leadership Learning Design	33
	The Accompanying PALL Research Program	33
	Data Collected	36
	Case Studies	36
	Research Questions	36
	Methods/Data Collection	36
	Conclusion	37
3	Using Disciplined Dialogue and Evidence to Build a Strong Moral Purpose	39
	Why Do Professionals Use Processes Such as Disciplined Dialogue?	40

What Is Disciplined Dialogue?	42
How Is Disciplined Dialogue Conducted?	43
An Illustration of Disciplined Dialogue in Action	47
Disciplined Dialogue in Action	47
What is the Role of Principals and Other School Leaders in Disciplined Dialogue?	50
What Does the PALL Research Tell Us Are the Benefits of Disciplined Dialogue?	50
Summary	54
Conclusion	55
4 A Focus on Curriculum and Pedagogy	57
Introduction	57
Knowledge About Evidence-Based Research	58
What Needs to Be Taught and Why?	59
The BIG 6	60
Oral Language	60
Vocabulary	60
Phonological Awareness	61
Letter-Sound Knowledge	61
Comprehension	61
Fluency	62
Common Features Across the Research Reports	62
Valuing and (Re)Calibrating Professional Learning	63
Use of the Literacy Practices Guide (LPG)	67
Putting the Lens on Assessment Processes	68
Moving from Evidence-Based Research to Prioritizing and Planning	70
Moving from Prioritizing and Planning to Everyday Reading Instruction	72
Approaches to Reading Intervention: Waves 1, 2, and 3	74
Conclusions	76
5 Shared Leadership	77
Leadership as Activity Rather Than Leadership as Position	78
PALL's Research Position on Leadership	80
A Shared Moral Purpose Leading to Opportunities for Shared Leadership	81
Turning the PALL Program into School-Level Actions	83
Challenges and Opportunities Related to Sharing Leadership Work	85
Incremental Steps Towards Shared Leadership	88
Context	89

Human Agency	93
Agency of Teachers as Leaders	94
Agency Outside the Schools	95
Conclusion	96
6 Professional Learning for Both Leaders and Teachers	97
Introduction	97
PALL's Research Position on Professional Development	98
Supporting School Leaders for Reading Improvement	99
Principals Supporting the Development of Teacher Leadership in Reading	107
Conclusion	108
7 Establishing Positive Conditions for Learning	109
Introduction	109
Leadership Through the Alignment of School Resources for Reading Improvement	111
Leadership and the Physical, Social and Emotional Support of Learners	113
Leadership Through the Development of a Physical Environment that Is Conducive to Learning and Engagement	114
Leadership and Social, Emotional and Celebratory Aspects of the Conditions for Learning	115
Leadership Through Addressing the School's Policy Environment	118
Leadership Through the Promotion of Teamwork	119
Leadership Through the Development of a Culture of High Expectations	120
The External Environment	123
Conclusion	125
8 Schools Finding Alternative Ways to Engage Families and Communities in Children's Learning	127
Introduction	127
Australian Policy and Practice Perspectives on Parental Engagement	128
Connecting Schools, Parents and Communities Differently	130
Binary Discourses on Parental Engagement	133
Working Further to Disrupt a Deficit Discourse of Parental Engagement	134
Connecting Indigenous Schools, Families and Communities	136
A More Granular View	142
Concluding Comments	146

9	PALL and Student Learning	149
	Introduction	149
	Student Achievement	150
	What the Literature Says Related to Student Achievement	150
	The PALL View on Student Achievement	152
	How Student Achievement Was Examined in the PALL Studies	153
	Statement of Results Related to Student Achievement	
	in the Research Reports	156
	Pilot Project Study Report	156
	SA Study Report	158
	PALLIC Study Report	160
	Tasmanian Study Report	163
	TAS Case Study Report	164
	VIC Case Study Report	166
	Statement of Overall Results	169
	Implications for Policy	169
	Overall Conclusion	170
10	Looking Back to Look Forward	171
	Position No. 1. The Moral Purpose of Leadership	177
	What We Have Found from the PALL Studies About	
	the School's Moral Purpose	177
	Implications	178
	Possible Further Research	179
	Position No. 2. Shared Leadership	179
	What We Have Found from the PALL Studies About Shared	
	Leadership	179
	Implications	182
	Possible Further Research	183
	Position No. 3. Learning to Read	183
	What We Have Found from the PALL Studies About the BIG 6	
	in Learning to Read	183
	Implications	185
	Possible Further Research	185
	Position No. 4. Reading Interventions	186
	What We Have Found from the PALL Studies About	
	Reading Interventions	186
	Implications	188
	Possible Further Research	188
	Position No. 5. Support for Leaders' Learning on-the-Job	188
	What We Have Found from the PALL Studies About	
	Leadership Learning on-the-Job	189

Contents	xi
Implications	190
Possible Further Research	190
Conclusion	191
References	195
Author Index	205
Subject Index	207

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Prof. Greer Johnson is Director of the Griffith Institute for Educational Research at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. She was a member of the Australian team on the University of Cambridge LfL Network-led Carpe Vitam Project, *Connecting Leadership and Learning: Principles for Practice*. Since then, she has worked on several LfL projects with Australian primary and secondary principals in most Australian states and territories, including in schools with high enrolments of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Her research has sponsored many

publications on the work schools do to encourage relationships with families and communities to strengthen children's achievements in reading. She has also completed an Australian Research Council Discovery project investigating school-to-work/further study transitions for at-risk students.

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Elizabeth Stevens is a senior research assistant in the Griffith Institute for Educational Research at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, where she has managed a number of action research projects including the PALL Project from 2013 to 2015. Her research interests include principals' capacities for leading, including sustainable leadership in the context of small rural schools; adolescent leadership in schools; and peer mentoring programs in teacher education.

Introduction

A book about school principals leading literacy is largely the consequence of an international agenda fuelled by the results obtained on tests such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). This triennial international survey aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in reading, mathematics, and science. These tests have been conducted, and country results' comparisons have been made since 2000. By 2006, the third set of PISA results was showing that although Australia was among the high performers, it was slipping and it had a "tail" where a "gap" in achievement was noticeable, particularly among students from low-SES and Indigenous communities.

These findings were hotly debated in the Australian press and formed a backdrop to the federal election campaign of 2007. In that campaign, an important part of the Australian Labor Party's platform was a commitment to improving the outcomes of education for groups of students facing disadvantage. Following success in the national ballot, the Labor Government introduced a program calling for Pilot projects aimed at "Closing the Gap" in literacy and numeracy achievement for children from low-SES and Indigenous communities. Some 40 such projects were finally approved for implementation by 2009. All had come from state and territory education authorities, except one—the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) Pilot Project, an original idea from the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA). This was the only project with a focus on the role that principals of primary schools play in improving literacy. This book describes the PALL Program and later PALL iterations in various states, and examines and analyses results from a series of research studies which accompanied its implementation in order to draw out useful implications and helpful lessons to inject into the international school leadership literature.

No innovatory program arises of its own accord. Champions or initiators are essential. Here we acknowledge the important role played by APPA in lobbying Australian government officials to secure a national project in the face of federal funding restrictions placed on state and territory treasuries and education authorities.

The Role of the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)

APPA is an umbrella organisation with membership available to principals from all government, Catholic, and independent schools in Australia. Its reach and influence covers the continent. Its National President in 2008 was Leonie Trimper and it was she who provided the advocacy and undertook the necessary political lobbying to gauge Australian government and departmental interest in principals as potential literacy leaders. Leonie had seen the results of work in Ontario and the importance placed there on the work of school leaders and she was convinced that members of her association would benefit if she were able to implement a project fixed on improving literacy with principals' needs in mind. The advertisement in 2008 by the Australian government of an initiative to fund Literacy and Numeracy Pilots in low-SES and Indigenous communities provided a vehicle to which she felt APPA should apply. At that time, little did she realise how difficult it would be to secure support for a national initiative in a federal political system such as Australia's. A brief account of what it took to develop, fund and manage a country-wide pilot project serves to emphasise the level of commitment given to literacy in primary schools by APPA.

A National Initiative in a Federal System

When the call for applications was sent to state and territory government, Catholic and independent school authorities, Leonie went immediately to the officers in the Australian government department responsible for the initiative, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). She soon found that there was an unalterable agreement on funding signed off by the Committee of Australian Governments (COAG), a committee of all state and territory Premiers chaired by the Prime Minister. This agreement meant that the funds allocated to Australian government initiatives were to be administered through state or territory treasuries and education authorities. As a consequence, the only way APPA could bring a project into the national arena was to get agreement from all state and territory ministers of education to share funds in support of a project across borders. She was also informed that if a national pilot project application were to be successful, then the monies granted would have to be held by one state for the benefit of partner states agreeing on the pilot project and the funds would have to be accounted for in the usual way by a host state treasury. She was left in no doubt that the Australian Government in this Closing the Gap initiative would deal only with states and territories, not professional associations.

Undeterred, Leonie brought together a group of academics from three of Australia's universities to help draft an application. This was done because

DEEWR stipulated that pilot projects must be based on sound research. Extracts from the conditions set down for applications show the Government's intent.

Given the correlation between low SES school communities and low educational outcomes of students in these communities, Pilots have a particular focus on trialling approaches that are effective in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes in low SES and Indigenous school communities.

The literacy and numeracy Pilots are partnerships focused on literacy and/or numeracy around one of more of the following key reform areas:

- *effective and evidence-based teaching of literacy and numeracy;*
- *strong school leadership and whole school engagement with literacy and/or numeracy;*
- and*
- *effective use of student data to drive literacy and numeracy improvement.*

The second dot point above gave APPA the justification for its advocacy. Once the application was in draft form, Leonie went on an information exchange and lobbying mission with ministers and departmental heads for advice and support. The outcomes of her discussions resulted in commitments by three states and one territory to participate in the APPA-led Principals as Literacy Leaders Pilot Project. However, the official contractual statement accompanying the Pilot's approval reads as follows:

The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) is the education authority that has entered into an agreement with the Australian Government to undertake the action research Pilot project entitled Principals as Literacy Leaders. The Department of Education and Children's Services will use a partnership model to undertake the research for this Pilot project.

The partners in the project are:

DECS—Department of Education and Children's Services

APPA—Australian Primary Principals Association

Edith Cowan University

Australian Catholic University

Griffith University

Queensland, Northern Territory, South Australia, Western Australia—Government School Education Authorities

Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland Catholic Education Authorities

Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia Independent School Authorities

The Department of Education and Children's Services of South Australia will provide all of the funding provided by the Australia Government for the Pilot project Principals as Literacy Leaders to the Australian Primary Principals Association. The Australian Primary Principals Association will manage all these funds.

The steering committee and reference groups required by federal, state, and territory governments as essential organisational structures for the Pilot highlight the complexity of conducting a project that involves more than one Australian education jurisdiction. Extracts from the official project authorisation detail the governance arrangements and memberships mandated.

The administrative responsibility for managing the Pilot is that of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services.

The Australian Primary Principals Association has the responsibility of negotiating details of the Pilot with participating schools to ensure they meet the external reporting requirements and the responsibility to ensure that the implementation of the Pilot is monitored and evaluated.

Each education partner to the agreement has the responsibility of implementing the Pilot in selected schools within its jurisdiction.

The Pilot was to be managed through three governance layers with the lead in the hands of a Pilot Steering Committee as the extract below shows:

A Pilot Steering Committee will be established which will include the following members:

- *South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services*
- *Australian Primary Principals Association*
- *Griffith University*
- *Edith Cowan University*
- *Australian Catholic University*
- *Each cluster of schools established by the Pilot*
- *The Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations*

The Committee will provide guidance and audit the success of the initiative and ensure strategies are in place to ensure the sustainability of the project.

A National Reference Group was also established. The role of this group was to manage the Pilot and to respond to advice and feedback on the project's development. It was chaired by a senior officer from the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS), and its members were the APPA President and representatives from each of the three partner universities.

In the third governance layer, state and territory reference groups were also required. These were convened and chaired by the university attached to each state and territory school cluster with members from APPA, the partner universities, and government, Catholic, and independent school authorities. Each of these groups was responsible for overseeing local planning and clearing the way for the implementation of the Pilot in the schools in their jurisdiction.

When the funds were eventually released into the South Australian Treasury and thence to DECS, Leonie Trimper's travail had only just begun. Contracts had to be prepared between DECS and APPA, then APPA had to prepare subcontracts with each of the universities. Agreements had to be reached with all participating jurisdictions for the selection of clusters of fifteen (15) low-SES schools. Only then could the universities commence development of the Pilot's professional

development materials and processes and finalise a suite of accompanying research tasks. On this last matter, 11 research ethical clearance approvals were sought and granted by the government, Catholic, and independent school authorities in the states and territory involved. To sum up, getting a national Pilot Project supported and started took over a year of hard work: door knocking, discussions, dead ends, promising paths, multiple proposal drafts, submission anxiety, expectant waiting, and eventual funding approval. Then, the real work began for APPA and the universities.

The Legacy

This introduction serves as a testimony to the leadership of APPA, its then-president, and her support team who are recognised in the Acknowledgements which precede this chronicle. The promise shown in the Pilot Project study led to project extensions involving more than a thousand principals in all Australian states and territories as well as in remote Indigenous communities across Australia over the period 2010–2016, a valuable legacy from the efforts of many.

The text which follows outlines the reasons drawn from compelling research findings showing why a concentration on principals as leaders of learning offered literacy improvement potential. We describe the research basis for the teaching and learning of reading and how the PALL Program was designed and experienced by participants. The research carried out in six studies over this time is summarised together with an examination of significant themes found to be linked to improvements in leadership, teaching practice, student learning, and reading achievement. All this is done in a work of 10 chapters.

Chapter 1: *Leadership for Learning Research* describes research into leadership for learning which has been drawn on in the initial and ongoing development of the PALL Program. It commences by reviewing studies undertaken in the first decade of the present century with a particular interest in a number of influential meta-analyses. This work is supplemented by confirming research carried out more recently. The purpose of the chapter is to isolate and describe important connections between the daily practice of school leaders, teacher practices, and student learning, which have provided a foundation for the positions taken on leadership and leadership learning which are elaborated in Chap. 2.

In Chap. 2: *The PALL Approach*, we explain how the PALL Program was developed using relevant research literature as the source for a series of positions underpinning its design. Five positions are explained: the centrality of the moral purpose of leadership; what it takes to learn to read; how reading interventions are planned; what shared leadership involves; and the importance of support for leaders learning on-the-job. Following an elaboration of these positions, the design of the PALL Program is explained. We show how five linked professional learning modules: (i) Leadership for Learning, (ii) Learning to Read, (iii) Gathering and

Using Data, (iv) Planning Reading Interventions, and (v) Evaluating Interventions were coupled with between-module tasks supported by leadership mentors over a 2-year period. A series of criteria drawn from the research literature on leadership learning is then used to critique the quality of the “time-rich,” context-related modular design (Dempster, Lovett, & Fluckiger, 2011). The chapter concludes with a description of the six studies accompanying each of the PALL Program iterations. These were the original Pilot Project study explained above (undertaken in 2009–10 with the report published in 2012); a South Australian study (undertaken in 2010–11 with the report submitted in 2012), called the SA study whenever referred to in this book; the Principals as Literacy Leaders with Indigenous Communities study (undertaken in 2011–12 with the report published in 2014), in future called the PALLIC Study; an initial Tasmanian study (undertaken in 2013–14 with the report submitted in 2014), henceforth called the Tasmanian Study; a Tasmanian case study (undertaken in 2014 with the report completed in 2015), referred to from here on as the TAS case study; and a Victorian case study (undertaken in 2014 with the report completed in 2015), in future referred to as the VIC case study.

Chapter 3: *Using Disciplined Dialogue and Evidence to Build a Strong Moral Purpose* deals with the central hub of the Leadership for Learning Blueprint (LfLB), a framework used as a guide for action during the PALL Project. We explain the term “disciplined dialogue” to show how professional conversations stimulated by evidence about student learning in general and reading in particular can be conducted, always with an eye firmly fixed on the moral purpose of the educator. That purpose is widely accepted as working continuously to improve the life chances for students through learning. In this particular case, the moral purpose was evident in a commitment to improving reading for all children. The driving questions employed in disciplined dialogue are illustrated through a simulated discussion of sample evidence gathered from principals and teachers using a well-tried tool. The chapter also shows that the sources of evidence go well beyond student reading assessment results, though these are clearly essential. Other necessary sources of evidence are derived from the dimensions of the LfLB explained earlier in Chap. 1. The benefits which flow from the use of disciplined dialogue identified during the six PALL research studies are outlined.

In Chap. 4: *A Focus on Curriculum and Pedagogy*, our discussion focuses on how teachers responded to what their principals took from their participation in the five PALL professional learning modules. While the mandated Australian Curriculum was the basis for teachers working towards students’ attainment of expected achievement standards, how they strived towards them was diverse. Discussion will focus on how decisions were made about schools’ reading priorities and the factors that influenced their choices, such as composition of their student cohort, evidence and data gathered from a range of assessment processes, principals’ preferences, teachers’ content knowledge, and teachers’ pedagogical confidence. Examples are given about how reading priorities were enacted by participating teachers at the classroom level. Tensions that arose for teachers in their planning, programming, and instruction are considered, and examples of their reflections are included. The role and impact of the principal in the everyday

teaching of reading is demonstrated, while the convergences and divergences in a school, and between schools, are highlighted and reviewed.

Chapter 5: *Shared Leadership* makes a contribution to understanding conceptions of leadership and the way a particular version of it can be progressed in schools. The research-informed position about leadership in the PALL Program is based on the notion that leadership work is too much for one person and needs to be the work of many. Across the PALL Projects, it is not just principals who are the leaders in schools. Teachers are also leaders when they share their expertise with one another and provide support for their colleagues. Typically, teachers move into the leadership space because they have an interest in quality teaching and see their colleagues as a source of reciprocal learning and support. The strong moral purpose of wanting to make a difference to students and their learning is the catalyst for viewing leadership as a collective responsibility involving teachers, parents, and students. Ultimately, we want students to be leaders of their own learning. Case study data from the PALL schools highlight the importance of teachers joining the leadership pool and playing their part in leading learning for school-wide action. The PALL Program design, with its concurrent reading curriculum and leadership focus and associated tasks, helps schools create their own learning pathways. Case studies of the effects of leadership actions on teachers and their teaching highlight what is possible when leadership work is a shared activity, albeit in very different school settings.

Chapter 6: *Professional Learning for both Leaders and Teachers* considers the importance of ongoing learning for teachers and school leaders both during and after principals' involvement in the PALL Program. It discusses the important role of leadership mentors—literacy achievement advisers, regional leadership consultants and others—in establishing an ongoing supportive relationship for schools involved in reading interventions. The chapter identifies ways in which schools themselves provided literacy support through the development of Professional Learning Communities, both within the school and in some cases in conjunction with other schools, by selecting professional learning activities focusing on elements of reading. We also consider how external support and advice can be utilised by schools to provide an independent review of what the school is doing and to provide feedback on ways in which student learning can be further enhanced. The importance of establishing local, regional, and statewide networks where what has been learned in one school can be shared with others is also a feature of the PALL Program.

In Chap. 7: *Establishing Positive Conditions for Learning*, we argue that it is now recognised that developing positive achievement in reading (as with other curriculum areas) requires more than good teaching: it also requires an environment that supports and promotes students as learners as they are encouraged to do their best. This chapter discusses ways in which schools involved in the PALL Program focused their attention on establishing strong positive conditions for learning within their schools. The strategies used by individual teachers, groups of teachers, and the whole school to promote both engagement and proficiency in reading are considered. The importance of consistent and explicit approaches to teaching reading are highlighted but with particular attention to the physical, social, and emotional

conditions which are known to support children as they learn. Resource issues so intrinsic to enhancing the conditions for learning are also discussed, drawing on the extensive research data available on this matter from the six PALL studies.

In Chap. 8: *Schools Finding Alternative Ways to Engage Families and Communities in Children's Learning*, we commence by examining an Australian report by Emerson et al. (2012), *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from the research*, for the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY). This work confirms what is commonly known—the fact that parental engagement in learning improves academic achievement, well-being, and productivity. Similarly, findings from a systematic evaluation of successful interventions for home-school partnerships internationally has found that children's learning opportunities are increased significantly when parents are engaged in a joint commitment to education based on a shared understanding between families and schools of the purpose of the partnership and their respective roles, and where parents are positive about the perceived benefits of the partnership for learning. The findings from the six PALL research studies show that family engagement in children's learning continues to be an issue that is unresolved. It is clear that the nature of the modern family, in many cases with both parents working, sometimes long hours, and with other families not having enough resources at home to make ends meet, makes parent engagement a complex issue. If we are unable to attract more than a small percentage of parents to the school, perhaps we need to think of other ways of communicating with them and encouraging them to be involved with their children in speaking, listening, and reading at home. The implication of this is that both school leaders and teachers need to have targeted professional development on strategies that enable a full range of family engagement activities to be established, some of which might not actually be at the school or involve reading, at least initially. Following the presentation of some of the positive findings from the PALL studies as well as the negatives relating to continuing difficulties, this chapter provides a positive snapshot of Australian schools where principals who have undertaken PALL have found a sustainable way to reach out to families.

Chapter 9: *PALL and Student Learning*, the penultimate chapter, commences with the truism that inside the school gate, teachers have the greatest level of influence on student achievement, but it acknowledges that principals play a vital role in supporting them. Data from the six PALL studies are analysed for the light they throw on the effect the program had on teachers and their professional learning related to the BIG 6 of reading used in PALL professional learning (oral language, phonological awareness, letter and sound knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency); their contributions to disciplined dialogue; their participation in designing interventions; their attitudes to shared leadership; and their sense of satisfaction in their students' achievement. The second part of the chapter discusses the impact of this work on students, their engagement in aspects of the BIG 6, their attitude to reading, and their improvement journeys. Overall, we highlight many of the ways in which teachers became more able to assess and analyse quantitative student performance data, complementing this with the assessment of qualitative evidence of improvement in student work samples.

In the final chapter, Chap. 10: *Looking Back to Look Forward*, we summarise what has been found through the PALL Program research overall. We point to the confirmation of its five design principles and to a series of issues which we argue should underpin professional learning for school leaders concerned with literacy learning and achievement in their schools. On the basis of our findings, we advocate the bringing together of generic leadership processes with curriculum content knowledge if leaders are to make significant differences in intractable learning problems wherever they are encountered. We also affirm the need for much greater attention to be given by school leaders to the relationship between teachers, children, and parents in learning to read. This is particularly so where children live in difficult economic and sociocultural circumstances. We note that it is encouraging that the program has been offered in all Australian states, and in both government and non-government school systems. Finally, the research has shown that the program has a high level of acceptance in schools, that the frameworks offered make sense to school leaders and teachers, and that the resources provided are seen as valuable to practitioners pursuing reading improvement. We end with an overall summation of the conclusions reached from the research findings and a consideration of future research opportunities.

Chapter 1

Leadership for Learning Research

Introduction

In this introductory chapter we provide an account of the leadership research lying behind the design and development of the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) Project. To provide clarity to a number of terms used during the course of this book, the PALL Project contains two components, the PALL Program, which is a professional learning activity of 5 full-day workshops together with school-based activity spread over two school years, and the PALL Research, which now comprises six separate studies that provide the data we discuss in subsequent chapters.

While the design, development, implementation and effect of the PALL Project is our focus in this text, we are conscious of the pressures placed on schools by governments intent on using international comparative performance test results as an educational policy lever. We have observed the impact of PISA and other international test results on schooling in the last decade and the extent to which they have been used as an impetus for reform efforts across the globe. In some countries, the results in 2000 were considered so troublesome that the term “PISA shock” was coined and used by politicians and policymakers to demand improvement. In Australia, it was somewhat different, with quite positive views for the first two PISA rounds when results were amongst those of high-performing systems. However, after the third testing period in 2006, downward trending results provoked predictable policy responses from the Australian Government, particularly when it was noted that there was a “gap” in performance between students in Indigenous communities and low-SES areas, and mainstream Australian students—hence the government initiative undertaken in 2008 to fund Pilot Programs in literacy and numeracy aimed at “Closing the Gap”. Subsequent results in PISA of 2009, 2012 and 2015 continue to reinforce political demands for ongoing professional attention to improvements in literacy.

As has been mentioned in the introduction to this volume, the conditions for literacy and numeracy Pilot Program applications were advertised by the Australian