A project, funded by the NSW Department of Education Leadership Unit, aimed at building the capacity of teachers and school leaders in 28 schools to become practitioner-researchers to address contextually relevant learning issues.
Systems Leadership: Action Learning For Innovation (ALFI)

Name of Grant: Action Learning for Innovation (ALFI)

Lead Principal: Stacey Quince

Project partners: Professor Wayne Sawyer, Western Sydney University
Assoc Professor Susanne Gannon, Western Sydney University
Dr Chwee Beng Lee, Western Sydney University
Dr Simon Breakspear, LearnLabs
Education Changemakers

Schools involved:

Airds HS
Bardia PS
Beverley Park School
Blairmount PS
Bradbury PS
Campbelltown East PS
Campbelltown North PS
Campbelltown Performing Arts HS
Claymore PS
Georges Hall PS
Glenwood PS
Holsworthy HS
Ingleburn HS
Ingleburn PS
James Meehan HS
Kentlyn PS
Leumeah HS
Leumeah PS
Macquarie Fields HS
Minto PS
Moorebank HS
Mount Annan PS
Newbridge Heights PS
Nuwarra PS
Passfield Park School
Ruse PS
St Helens Park PS
Thomas Acres PS

Support PSL: John Selby
Overview

The Action Learning for Innovation (ALFI) project focused on developing the capacity and skillset of teachers and leaders in NSW Public Schools to become practitioner-researchers, utilising evidence-based practices to address contextually relevant learning issues. These issues were decided upon by each school team in alignment with their key priorities and school plan.

The project established a community of 28 schools, selected through an expression of interest, across the Campbelltown and Glenfield networks. A single school from the Macarthur Network also participated after hearing about the project and requesting to be included. These schools included 18 primary schools, 8 high schools and 2 schools for specific purposes.

The project was designed by a collection of external experts and critical friends from within Western Sydney University and school improvement fields in collaboration with school-based leaders. It was based on the experience of a secondary school in Campbelltown, which had used the process of action learning with great success for over 10 years, and which had also integrated the use of design thinking and a set of new evidence tools, co-created with Western Sydney University, into these projects for the past 3 years. The longevity of the relationships between the external providers and the project’s lead Principal meant that the expertise of each partner could be drawn upon to enhance the project as a whole and ensure continuity for participating schools.

Project description and processes

The 28 schools involved in the project each formed dedicated ALFI teams (2-6 members) who participated in professional learning and led the school-based improvement work throughout a 12 month period. This professional learning was mapped and provided to schools at the commencement of the program alongside a clear list of what schools would be expected to do and submit throughout the project (Appendix 1). This was accompanied by a program milestones document to guide individual school involvement. Each school was also required to develop and submit an ALFI project plan and milestones document, aligned to their school plan, in order to support effective implementation and
map progress.

Schools participated in five face-to-face professional learning days, with 130+ participants at each, as well as a clinic to respond to individual school needs part way through the action learning cycle.

The professional learning program was as follows:

- **Workshop 1 The Case for Change**: A collective focus on disciplined innovation for improvement. What is the problem? How do we know? How do we get specificity of the focus for improvement?
- **Workshop 2 Design Thinking Part 1**: Defining the issue, ideating, planning a **prototype**.
- **Workshop 3 Design Thinking Part 2**: Testing the prototype, evaluating impact, identifying next steps.
- **Workshop 4 Action Learning and Evaluative Thinking**: Teachers as practitioner-researchers and new approaches to evaluation.
- **Clinics**: School teams reflect on progress and identify current challenges. Project partners and principal lead provide feedback and support.
- **Workshop 5 Evaluating impact**: What does the evidence tell us? What is our theory of change? How do we scale and diffuse?
ALFI program outline

Schools began the program with a professional learning day focused on the case for change and the opportunity to use collective and agile approaches to embedded school improvement such as action learning. Teams were guided in how to create a focus ‘problem of practice’ for their ALFI project that was i) linked to their school plans ii) highly specific and iii) connected to student learning outcomes. A shared Google Drive space was set up and shared with all participants to share resources and planning/reporting templates throughout the project as well as a high-level milestones document for project implementation.

Teams then participated in professional learning on how to use design thinking processes, led by Education Changemakers, to support them to identify the root causes of significant issues in teaching and learning, and develop and test prototypes for the purpose of identifying promising practices. These prototypes were then tested in schools over the subsequent 6 weeks, with Day 2 of the design thinking course supporting participants to understand what worked, what didn’t and what they could take into their action learning projects for deeper testing and exploration.

Once schools had specified their focus, the Western Sydney University partners sourced individualised research and resources to support each school to engage in research-informed practice. This provision of contextually relevant articles and chapters of up-to-date research ensured that each school’s ALFI prototype and subject action learning project were grounded in what the research indicated works best whilst still being responsive to school culture and practices.

Following testing of these prototypes, participants were supported to develop action learning projects, implemented in their school contexts over a six month period, to address their identified issue in more depth. To build their capacity as teacher-researchers they participated in a workshop day that developed their understanding of the action learning cycle and deepened their understanding of how to evaluate the impact of this research. This included professional learning on how to use the evaluation tools developed by WSU in
collaboration with Futures Learning <https://education.nsw.gov.au/futures-learning/media/Evaluative-Thinking-Toolkit.pdf>, and opportunities to develop an evaluation plan for their action learning project. These evaluation tools, aimed at evaluating emerging and innovative practices, supported participants to understand the impact of their research, and refine and re-direct their practices accordingly. The collaborative nature of action learning supported teachers to take shared responsibility for the improvement of learning outcomes and a more focused opportunity to deliver on school priorities.

Midway through the implementation of action learning projects, schools were provided with individualised support in clinics. A scaffold supported teams to identify a specific problem of implementation or evaluation. Using a tuning protocol, teams were then offered specific solutions and suggestions by the project partners including the team from Western Sydney University, Dr Breakspear and the project’s lead Principal, Stacey Quince.

The final workshop addressed issues of evaluation, scaling and diffusion of practice. School ALFI teams were supported to synthesise and analyse the evidence they had collected through the project and used this to identify next steps, both within their own schools and at a systems level.

It must be noted that, whilst all workshops were highly participatory, the bulk of the work for ALFI school teams was in implementing and evaluating new approaches within the school context in between workshops.

Each school ALFI team presented their projects, with a focus on evidence and impact, to each other and the broader education community through poster displays and “speed dating” at an ALFI Showcase. The showcase was attended by staff from approximately 50 schools and allowed schools to make or strengthen connections as well as start to spread their practices beyond the local site.

School ALFI teams provided a final summary report to the project partners for analysis, along with a completed milestones document, in addition to responding to a set of questions about the overall impact of the ALFI project on their school’s practice and culture.
Main Lessons for System Leadership for School Improvement

Four key lessons for supporting a high-impact and sustainable model for change.

1. **Create a school-chosen and highly-specific focus.** Schools have become incredibly busy places, and the multiple demands for improvement can often lead to activity without impact. Action Learning approaches are more useful when they are tightly focused on a specific priority that is already connected to the school improvement agenda. This focus supports educator teams to work collectively over time to make meaningful progress in one specific area.

2. **Use and generate evidence.** Action learning approaches to improvement are most effective when they support educators to become research-practitioners. Solutions should be based on the available research evidence, in addition to national and international experience. Teams should also be encouraged to harness evaluative thinking approaches to evidence collection, so that they move through iterative cycles of testing a hypothesis for change, gather evidence and then being responsive in the next phase of the project.

3. **Deliberately develop the capacity.** Capacity building and professional learning should be directly supporting the improvement work teams are seeking to lead. Due to the diversity of team focus areas, this professional learning should focus on the processes, tools and routines of leading improvement work, rather than providing a specific ‘answer’. Teams learn to do this work, by actually doing the work together. Professional learning should be redesigned to be collaborative, focused on the work of improving teaching and learning embedded in the contexts of local schools and classrooms.

4. **Cultivate professional collaboration.** Schools can accelerate their improvement work through disciplined collaboration within and across schools. Programs should be focused on the unit of the team, rather than the “hero innovator”, and professional learning and review should be conducted in the context of that team. School teams also benefit greatly by being part of a networked improvement community of other schools that they trust and from whom they can gain feedback, practical expertise and ongoing motivation.

We hope that these lessons may support schools, networks and departments and may provide input for the design of effective approaches in the future.
Action Learning for Innovation (ALFI) and the NSW Department of Education State Priorities

Raising expectations and enhancing the quality of student learning

Improvement in student learning outcomes was the initial primary driver for all school projects. From the beginning of the program teams were encouraged to identify specific areas of learning outcomes in their school that they wanted to improve and specific groups of students to focus on. This analysis was based on school assessment data and their own scan of student learning across the school. School teams brought and maintained high expectations for student learning and growth throughout the project. They believed that all students can make substantial progress in their learning, regardless of their starting point, if teachers are responsive to individual learner needs and school improvement efforts place student growth at the centre of their work.

Learner engagement and the processes of effective learning were also prioritised throughout the program. Whilst improved outcomes was the ultimate intention, school teams were supported to focus on student engagement as a critical precursor to any final improvement in outcomes. The program emphasised approaches to designing rich and meaningful learning that would be compelling to young people. Furthermore, heightened attention was placed on building in student perspectives, voice and feedback in both generating an understanding of the learning challenges to be solved and in iteratively improving the project.

Fostering quality teaching and school leadership

High quality professional learning design is critical to the fostering of quality teaching. The ALFI project applied the best available evidence on adult learning to support the development of collective and adaptive teacher expertise. The professional learning was built on the assumption that educators working together in teams through cycles of collective inquiry is the most effective way to build context-relevant knowledge and skills and shift mindsets and beliefs. The 12 month longitudinal design of the program supported the deep embedding of practice and shifts in thinking and beliefs about how complex improvement work is achieved. The emphasis on using research literature to inform the design of improvement work, and the collection of evidence of impact to steer further adjustments ensured that the inquiry processes were highly disciplined.

In order to support the active participation and sustained motivation of educators, school teams were able to choose the focus for their improvement work, as long as they could show alignment with their school improvement plan and state priorities. This choice heightened the sense that educators were working on their practice in an area that was seen as relevant and important to their local context. The provision of tailored workshops,
individual guidance on research and evaluation and implementation clinics enabled a level of personalisation for adult learning that many teachers had not experienced before.

The project underscored the importance of leadership for learning at all levels in order to create effective and sustainable change. School leaders have a critical role in creating the conditions for continuous improvement and inquiry. They were encouraged to develop a culture of trust, evidence-informed risk taking and support the development of lateral accountability within and across schools. All teams required the commitment and involvement of executive leadership in the ALFI project to ensure a sustained school-wide focus. This buy-in from senior leadership ensured the ALFI teams were working on a project that was embedded into the broader school improvement efforts, and that they would be provided the necessary support.

The project also deliberately worked to develop leadership capacity at all levels of the school. Focusing on opportunities for teacher leadership, the ALFI project supported the development of key knowledge and skills that will support the pipeline of leadership development within and across the schools involved. Teacher leaders were given opportunities to analyse problems, review research and design and evaluate improvement initiatives.

**New and better ways of doing business**

The core contribution this project has made to new and better ways of doing business is through the development of repeatable school improvement and innovation processes that are appropriate for school-led change. Schools were supported to address improvement areas through new processes including design thinking, action learning and new tools for evaluative thinking. These skills and processes can be replicated and applied to new opportunities and problems beyond the specific ALFI project. These processes supported school leadership teams (including executive and classroom teachers) to further prioritise research- and-practice-informed professional judgment within local complex school contexts.

In addition, this project has modelled an approach by which individual schools working on improvement can work in close partnership and collaboration with others. Participant schools developed and enacted a disciplined, supported and collective approach to
innovation shared across schools. There are promising signs that these approaches can support the scaling up and diffusion of powerful approaches to supporting student and teacher learning.

**Evidence of Impact**

1. **Teacher learning and practice development to improve student learning**

   a. **Literacy and numeracy**

   Literacy and numeracy improvement was targeted in many of the ALFI projects. Systems data including NAPLAN, PLAN, EAFS trend data, as well as extant school data such as student work samples and stage level professional discussions, were all utilised. All of these provided initial impetus and enabled schools to identify aspects of learning, or cohorts of concern, on which to focus their investigations.

   **Writing** was the explicit focus for several primary schools. Students not meeting writing benchmarks across all levels of the school required comprehensive whole school strategies at three schools (CEPS, CNPS, TAPS). Each of these schools recognised that improving and aligning teachers’ knowledge, skills, confidence and expectations about teaching writing were crucial for developing consistent high quality writing lessons. Professional conversations drew on research evidence, supplied by WSU, about the effective development of writing capacity in schools. Factors including clearly articulated purposes and audiences for writing, the importance of talk, explicit teaching of writing concepts and approaching writing as a process were identified as important. Prototypes of writing samples and data walls were utilised in some schools (TAPS). Formative feedback was embedded throughout the teaching and learning cycle, and students’ capacities for self-assessment of writing improved throughout another school’s project (CEPS). Developing consistent professional judgment amongst teachers was essential in all sites. Students and teachers were able to describe in more detail what they were learning about writing, how to achieve writing goals and what was entailed in successful writing. Teachers’ personal action plans incorporated goals for writing and teachers at one of the participating schools noted 30% improvement in their capacity to teach writing (CNPS).

   **Writing** that could demonstrate and enhance imaginative and creative thinking was the focus of two schools (SHPPS, RPS). This focus required moving teachers beyond a skills focus on writing (e.g. grammar, text types) to programming for creativity, and deep engagement in writing. Teachers’ understandings of the literary qualities of effective imaginative writing improved through these projects (SHPPS). Research on effective instructional practices for writing, supplied by WSU, informed collaborative programming and teachers developed and tested prototypes. There was an increased use of metalanguage by teachers and students, expanded repertoires of ideas for student writers, increased enjoyment and engagement in writing and the establishment of cumulative portfolios of student writing (SHPPS). Authentic audiences and purposes for writing were
emphasised, partnerships were established with authors and organisations and a biannual writers’ festival was established at one of the participating schools (RPS).

**Reading** comprehension in foundation years was the focus in one school which developed targeted reading strategies in Years 1 and 2 within a teacher observation and support system (GHPS). Research evidence, supplied by WSU, demonstrated that direct instruction of targeted metacognitive strategies for reading is highly effective for improving student learning outcomes. Improved results were evident within 4 weeks, when 80% of students were able to explain three or more targeted strategies. Plan data for 2016 indicates significant improvement in student results.

**Numeracy** was the focus of several schools. This was identified as a project focus for some schools as learning along the numeracy continuum was inconsistent, with uneven student progress and variations in teacher judgement and capacity within and between stages. One school recognised that high proportions of students were not meeting grade expectations; higher achieving students were fearful of challenging maths problems and teachers lacked understanding of how to teach problem solving (MAPS). This school developed a continuum of cognitive problem solving and a bank of linked resources, accessible via a website. Collaborative planning was undertaken within stages and drew on expert advice. Problem solving tools and strategies, including turning a worded problem into a mathematical problem and collaborative problem solving, were developed and embedded into lessons. Another school focused on Early Arithmetical Strategies and Place Value to improve teacher understanding of best practices and markers of student progress along the continuum (MPS). The effective use of data to inform practice became the focus and data walls displaying student achievements were developed for numeracy and literacy. These built a culture of consistency and enhanced teacher capacity to analyse and utilise data effectively to drive teaching. ‘Data days’ enabled collegial planning and in-depth conversation about teaching and learning in numeracy.

**Non-verbal communication** was the focus of one of the schools for specific purposes in the project, as a number of students in the school have communication challenges (PPS). A Communication Literacy Framework was developed and trialled within the school, extending and drawing on the Students With Additional Needs (SWANs) Assessment tool, leading to data-informed planning and the design of Goal Attainment Scale Goals (GAS Goals). Greater consistency in learning outcomes and communication techniques has enabled more precise mapping of growth and clearer understandings of next steps in developing students’ communications skills.

b. **Student ownership and agency**
Through ALFI, teachers were able to embark on a learning journey to enhance their own learning and practice for continuous improvement in students’ learning. Teachers’ learning and practice development impacted students’ learning in prominent areas such as positive social and emotional learning, self-directed learning, growth mindset and co-creating learning with community.

**Social and emotional learning** was the focus of some primary and secondary schools. In one school, playground behaviours were identified as problematic leading to a whole school ‘Play is the way’ implementation linked with Positive Behaviours for Learning (GPS). A secondary school reported success in building students’ capacity and ownership of their learning through engaging pedagogy (LHS). The school focused on how they could create productive classroom cultures (‘One 4 One’ project) and promote a whole-school culture of learning. The school understood the need to focus on individual classrooms to identify which environment and instructional approaches best support student productivity. Using a range of evaluative tools, the school reported positive student learning outcomes. For instance, a pre and post Student Engagement Instrument showed both a high percentage of students in the focus class who understand the impact their own productivity in learning has on their short and long term progress, and an increase in this over time from 87% to 96%. Students also placed greater value on school in relation to its importance in achieving their future goals, increasing from 83% to 100%. There were also positive results from the qualitative data analysis as students were able to articulate why increased productivity in learning is important. Improved student attendance was another key area where teachers’ learning and professional development evidently led to students’ learning. One secondary school focused on reducing truancy (AHS). Through a multiple case study approach, the school reported that teachers who improved their teaching practice and improved teacher/student relationships also demonstrated a decline in truancy rates and improvement in student engagement.

**Personal learning goals** were identified by several schools as their area of interest. One secondary school developed a process to assist teachers in allowing students to achieve in their subjects and reported positive results from their intervention (CPAHS). Students demonstrated greater abilities to keep track of their own achievements and application, and there was an improvement in students’ ability to identify and pursue specific learning goals. Triangulation of the data collected demonstrated that students’ learning had improved as a result of teachers’ efforts in developing their students’ capacity for goal setting.

**Growth mindsets** were the explicit focus for several schools. A primary school investigated strategies for developing resilience and perseverance in students to improve learning (BPS).
A range of evaluative tools were utilised in data collection including pre and post surveys, interviews and work samples. After explicit growth mindset lessons, students indicated that they were more likely to take on feedback to improve the quality of work and they were more likely to engage in and persevere with challenging tasks.

Co-created learning with community was the focus of one secondary school (CPAHS). Tools were co-created with students to help them understand the significance of utilising the community in their learning, leading to a video created by the school. The school used a range of evaluative tools and reported important findings. For instance, the post tests and focus group interviews revealed that students had developed deeper understanding of the importance of connecting with the community, they understood the significance of community and developed confidence to independently make connections. Among some of the promising results that were reported, 95% of their students enjoyed co-creating a unit of work with their teacher and community.

c. Collaborative teacher practice

Teacher collaborative practices were at the heart of this project and perceiving the value of this aspect of the work was a big part of the impact on teacher professional learning. Action learning by definition involves collaboration among practitioners, and project teams reported on areas such as ‘feedback from the learning and support team’, the ‘opportunity to discuss ideas prior to potentially implementing them’ and ‘being more likely to take risks’ as being significant. Collaboration, collegial planning and discussion was highlighted by teams as a cornerstone of the project. One school (CEPS) listed as an enabling condition for change in schools the collaborative practices in which they had been engaged, such as ‘Teacher Professional Learning through workshops, Quality Teaching Rounds, staff meetings, networking with other schools, team teaching, demonstration lessons, sharing at Stage meetings, feedback…’. Teacher coaches focusing on aspects of pedagogy, including, but not confined to, early career teachers was important in some sites.

Teachers’ learning and professional development is evidently the catalyst to improve students’ learning. With teachers identifying the critical teaching practices, schools were able to embark on learning journeys that not only enhance teachers’ capacity but also impact on students’ learning in multiple ways.
2. Changes in improvement processes used by schools

The use of new approaches and methods of evaluation throughout the improvement work

Apart from the fundamental issues of engaging in action learning and working within a team, there were a number of strategies that schools used that were either new to them or applied in new ways. These included the use of a broader range of evaluation methods and tools throughout the improvement work. There is a range of evaluation practices on the Evaluative Thinking section of the Department’s Futures Learning website. These tools were adapted and developed by the WSU team. This range of tools includes more well-known methods which proved valuable to the schools in this project and included:

- pre-and/or post-project testing data (CPAHS, SHPPS, GHPS)
- pre-and/or post-project teacher focus groups and interviews (CPAHS, MAPS, MPS, CEPS)
- pre-and post-project teacher surveys (CPAHS, MAPS, CEPS, CNPS, GHPS)
- student work samples and/or test results (CPAHS, SHPPS, CEPS, TAPS)
- student interviews and focus groups (CPAHS, CEPS)
- teacher observation (Ingleburn PS, SHPPS)

However, some methods of evaluation that were newer to schools and which they also found valuable included:

- student surveys (CPAHS, CEPS)
- schools developing their own growth continua and tracking students on these (PPSSP)
- written teacher reflections (CPAHS)
- forms of photo/video data, such as ‘photo voice’, ‘photo elicitation’ and ‘video capture’ (MAPS, CEPS, IPS, MPS, SHPPS, CNPS, GHPS)
- ‘most significant change’ method (IPS)

A number of schools also explicitly validated their evidence through such strategies as prolonged engagement in the site and the use of audit trails, as well as triangulation of data. Project teams within schools used the evidence they collected to steer their improvement work and individual school projects tell this story. Teacher reflection on this evidence - in written form, in discussion with peers, or in discussion with students - was fundamental to the action learning process.

Participants were supported from the first professional learning day to create a highly specific focus for their improvement work that was, if possible, directly connected to student learning outcomes or important changes in teacher practice. The vast majority of the teams began their project by identifying specific student learning outcomes areas they would like to improve throughout the year. Over half of the schools decided to focus on an area of literacy or numeracy improvement. After the first design thinking session, the analysis of root causes led some schools to shift their focus more intently on teacher
practice, because they became aware that the leading challenge to further gains in student learning in their context was the pedagogical capacity of teachers in this area.

It was evident that schools were able to identify the root causes of their challenges through the design thinking process and formulate more contextualised and practical aims for their action learning projects. Project directions shifted where required in order to better meet the identified areas of need. A primary school that had an initial focus on increasing student outcomes in writing through the development of a whole school writing program turned to capacity-building for inexperienced teachers. With much discussion throughout the year, the school was able to identify the main challenges and thus decided to focus on beginning teachers by supporting them by building a foundation of teaching fundamentals (CPS). The school enjoyed success with this new focus and reported that beginning teachers indicated an increase in their overall confidence in teaching. Similarly, another school whose initial goal was to improve student learning outcomes in writing shifted to teachers’ pedagogy (CNPS). Through rounds of discussions and reflections, the school identified the key area of focus which was building the capacity of teachers to teach writing. This changed direction enabled the school to focus on specific areas of building teachers’ pedagogy and attitude. A secondary school started with a broad focus on student engagement and achievement for the improvement of the school’s NAPLAN and HSC results for all students (LHS). However, through constructive discussions, the school was able to focus particularly on aspects of cognitive engagement which led to the formulation of the project as creating productive classroom culture. In their effort to build students’ capacity in identifying and contacting community members who could provide research, feedback and improve their product quality, another secondary school planned to produce a short video showcasing members of the local community (CPAHS). However, the school quickly identified the challenge of not getting community members and professionals to assist. Through feedback gathered from the ALFI clinic, the school was able to bring clarity to the project and determined a practical and successful solution for the project.

Western Sydney University provided a pack of school-specific research literature relevant to the particular issue/problem/question identified by each school in the first phase of ALFI. Packs were tailor-made for each site and were drawn from high quality international research journals and scholarly books. Each of the research articles and chapters provided up-to-date evidence of research initiatives and their effects in schools and provided sound foundations for school-devised inquiries and interventions. Brief summaries and guidance were provided with the research packs. Schools contacted the Western Sydney University researchers between ALFI meetings when they required additional resources or changed their focus. Schools also used the research packs to guide their further inquiries into their particular area of interest.

School final reports noted how the research literature had guided professional conversations and decision making through the project:
“The journal articles that were provided by Western Sydney University were very informative and one large reading was quite influential – ‘Writing Next – Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools’ (Graham & Perrin, 2007). They identified eleven specific instructional practices that when implemented, improve the quality of students’ writing. It drew upon the fact that good readers are not always greater writers, as they encompass a different skill set. ‘Engaging and motivating children to write’ (Boscola, 2009) emphasised the key idea that writing as a routine is not interesting to young writers and leads to negative attitudes and low perceptions of themselves as competent writers. It was difficult to find current research ourselves in relation to our project focus, as it appeared that we were investigating an area that had not been explicitly addressed in any DEC publications or supporting materials. We did find general resources that supported our lesson activities.

“We knew that explicit teaching of reading strategies was of academic benefit to primary aged school children. According to Ness (2011), standardised measures of reading students found that those who received direct explanation of reading comprehension strategies outperformed peers who received no such instruction. “Comprehension instruction is best when it focuses on a few well-taught, well-learned strategies” (Duke and Pearson, 2002). We decided to use the SS metacognitive strategies as they could be explicitly taught over stage 1 and developed over K-6 eventually. Also, recent studies (Ness, 2011) show that students were able to internalise comprehension processes and transfer to reading tasks after a period of eight weeks direct instruction. We felt that this was something that we could hope to see in our project. Although our actual implementation time was only six weeks our prototype class had previously started the implementation earlier and had had good results after four weeks.”.

“The original research provided by WSU helped us to identify the need to shift our focus toward the use of data in our school before exploring the area of best practice in mathematics and improving numeracy results.” (CEPS)

A number of schools reported that the design of a prototype was valuable as they were able to trial their project on a small and manageable scale. More importantly, prototyping provided a platform for teams to build their capacity for successful action learning. For instance, to improve students’ reading comprehension skills, a primary school designed and implemented their prototype on one class over a four week period (GHPS). Through prototyping, the team was able to refine their strategies and skills, and build the team’s capacity for collaboration for action learning. The team identified new processes such as setting up a lesson study process through a buddy system, where teachers participate in a cycle of planning lessons for reading. Secondary schools also found prototyping valuable, with schools identifying that through prototyping they were able to refine their project goal to include more specific and measurable targets, or to use feedback and experiences gained
from the implementation of a prototype to improve the subsequent action learning project (LHS, CPAHS). Another school reported that through prototyping, the team was able to build their capacity to adapt and change focus (AHS). Prototyping also allowed “buy-in” from staff which ensured that the scale up of the project was supported (GPS).

Throughout the professional learning sessions teams were encouraged to be specific about how they believed their action learning initiatives would have an impact on their focus area of student learning outcomes or teacher practice. Many teams reported on the benefit of learning how to construct a Theory of Change to describe their program’s underlying logic for impact. A Theory of Change is a logical diagram that explains how a project may have an impact on a specific outcome. For many teams this provided a clear, concise explanation of what they were doing and the intended impact they were having, and through what pathways. Once completed teams were able to use the Theory of Change to more easily communicate their project to other teams and to educators outside of the ALFI project. The Theory of Change also supported the design of effective evaluation approaches that gathered evidence on the activities, intermediate outcomes and ultimate outcomes.

3. Improvements in student learning

The focus of the project was on teacher professional learning. Its evaluation focuses largely on that area. However, the aim of teacher professional learning is ultimately impact on student outcomes and we highlight some suggestive areas here.

A number of projects either focused on, or had some attention to, students’ explicit understandings of themselves and their learning. The capacity of students to make such judgements is a higher order skill with arguments about, and evidence for, impact being made by the relevant school teams. One project on personalised learning commented on the ‘(i)mprovement in student ability to identify specific goals and methods of achieving/measuring these’ (CPAHS). Teacher commentary from this school was positive about the impact of this on student learning:

“...it has become easier to deal with the content when students have a focus
on their areas for development and specifically working towards these”

“Many of the students were more in control of their learning and in identifying their strengths and areas for development.”

In the period of time for which this project ran, and given the depth of the work being undertaken, the accompanying depth of change in the school would not necessarily be obvious during the life of the project. However, schools adopted promising practices around measuring the impact on students both within and beyond the life of the project. These are listed in the discussion of evaluation above. Focusing on a range of evaluation practices and instruments across the schools suggests that some practices seem particularly promising and suggestive in terms of impact on student learning. A selection of these (with evaluation tools listed) includes:

- students’ personalised goal setting (observation, teacher interviews, student interviews and focus groups, student surveys, assessment results)
- school-based development of growth continua (teacher observation, assessment against continua)
- more engagement in extended writing, including imaginative writing (student work samples, observations, teacher and student interviews, focus groups, student and staff surveys), video capture, standardised data)
- focus on particular aspects of reading comprehension (video capture of students discussing comprehension strategies, comprehension scores)

**Future directions**

There are a number of ways in which the ALFI project could and will continue to have a sustained impact at a school and system level. At a school level, teams were supported to develop a plan for scaling the improvements they have made throughout the ALFI project with their school context to broaden and deepen the impact of their work. Many teams have also reported a deeper understanding of processes that are both sustainable and replicable and could be used to drive improvement in other priority areas within their local context. These processes include design thinking and prototyping, action learning and new approaches to evidence and evaluation.

The connections made across schools, both within the 28 schools involved in ALFI as well as those schools who connected via the ALFI Showcase, will see more informal and self-managed approaches to ongoing collaboration and transference of strategies across sites.

Preliminary discussions have taken place regarding how to formalise a partnership with Western Sydney University and Dr Breakspear for the sustained implementation of ALFI, which would be school-funded. Many schools involved in ALFI have indicated that they would like to continue a program of work and would be willing to prioritise school funds for
this purpose. Options include:

- ongoing support for interested schools from the 2016 ALFI cohort;
- development of a program for a new cohort of ALFI schools;
- a combination of the above.

The models of support will continue to be negotiated into 2017.
### Action Learning for Innovation – Systems Leadership Project

The project aims to develop the capacity of teachers and leaders in Public Schools NSW to become practitioner researchers, utilising evidence-based practices to address contextually relevant learning issues. This capacity will be developed both individually and collectively, within and across schools, supported by academic partners and aligned to School Plans.

The educational partners who will contribute to the project include:

- **LearnLabs** – Dr Simon Breakspear
- **Western Sydney University (WSU)**: Prof Wayne Sawyer, Dr Chwee Beng Lee, Assoc Prof Susanne Gannon
- **Education Changemakers**

### Key dates and actions

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<td><strong>Pre-work</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Term 1 Week 4 – 16 Feb</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lead team + LearnLabs – Dr Simon Breakspear Western Sydney University (WSU): Prof Wayne Sawyer, Dr Chwee Beng Lee, Assoc Prof Susanne Gannon</td>
<td>The Case for Change Collective focus on action Disciplined innovation</td>
<td>Gather additional data/evidence on focus area for improvement Share refined focus via Google drive Engage with research on focus area Suggest resources/research/existing promising practices for other participating schools (where relevant) via Google drive</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Term 1 Week 5 and Term 2 Week 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Design Thinking</strong> – Part 1 and 2 Defining the issue Ideating Prototyping Identifying promising practices Scaling and sustaining</td>
<td>Test prototype/s Gather evidence of impact and share via Google drive Consider future application</td>
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<tr>
<td>Term 2 Week 5 – 30 May 2016</td>
<td><strong>Action Learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Develop Milestones doc</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lead team + Western Sydney University (WSU): Prof Wayne Sawyer, Prof Chwee Beng Lee, Assoc Prof Susanne Gannon,</td>
<td>Planning for implementation New approaches to evidence and evaluation</td>
<td>Develop Action Plan for Action Learning Project</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Implement AL Project and gather evidence</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term 2 Week 9</th>
<th><strong>Milestones and action plans</strong></th>
<th>Milestones uploaded to Google drive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action Plans uploaded to Google drive</td>
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<tr>
<th>Week 2 Term 3 - 28 and 29 July</th>
<th><strong>Clinics</strong></th>
<th>Implement AL project and gather evidence</th>
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| Lead Team + WSU LearnLabs     | Small group support for school teams based on school needs. These could include:  
- Progress  
- Challenges and derailers  
- Evaluation to date  
- Refining or recalibrating | Bring updated Milestones doc, Action Plan and evidence of progress to date. |
| Schools to have 2 participants (preferably team leader and a member of the executive) attend a 2 hour Clinic for individualised support. There will be 4 - 5 schools in each clinic. Clinics will be run at the following times:  
- 8 - 10 am  
- 11 - 1pm  
- 2 - 4 pm | Identify issues for discussion at Clinic. |
|                             | Register for Clinics via Google drive | |

| Term 4 Week 3 - Tue 25 Oct | **Evaluating impact** – What does the evidence tell us?  
**Scaling and diffusion** – What next? | Bring Milestones, Action Plan, and all evidence collected (and collated) for evaluation |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|