

CASE STUDY

Education Improvement Branch
Research Centre
March 2021

School improvement is a continuous and highly contextualised process, with every Queensland state school at different stages of their improvement journey. The Education Improvement Branch produces case studies to showcase great practices implemented in schools and regions to identify what contributed to their success.



Developing leadership capability through intentional collaboration

In the south-west corner of the Darling Downs region, eleven principals of small, rural and remote schools are taking part in a series of authentic learning experiences designed to boost their leadership skills and improve education for students in the 'bush'.

Leadership in rural and remote schools

Principal leadership is both embedded in and strongly influenced by the contexts in which they operate. In Darling Downs South West (DDSW) region, the context is characterised by a large number of schools located outside of a major town, with limited access to services. While these schools may have the financial resources to purchase specialised services, it is often a challenge to find the person available for the job. This remoteness encourages schools to be innovative in how they deliver teaching to students, and very committed to ensuring equality and inclusive education.

In an initiative led by the assistant regional director (ARD), 24 schools have been working collaboratively to develop

school leadership capability. These schools usually have only one or two classes, with principals often carrying a very significant teaching load, leaving them with limited time for other duties. These schools typically have long-serving auxiliary staff (teacher aides and administrative officers) and strongly embedded practices. This can present a challenge for new principals trying to get to know the school or change existing ways of working. What distinguishes these schools is their collegiality and a shared belief that education in the 'bush' can be as good as any offered throughout Queensland. This belief, along with a strong sense of pride and accomplishment, has been a driving motivation for many rural and remote school principals.

Rural and remote principals

The principals in the cohort have extensive teaching experience and expertise, which is critical in a rural and remote context as an end in itself, but also as an integral part of community expectations that focus on ensuring children receive a quality education. Quite often, however, they are at an early stage in their leadership careers - for many, this is their first principal position. In general, their average length of stay as a principal in a rural and remote setting is just over two years. There is also a significant age diversity within the group, but despite this, the principals are very collegial, open to collaboration, and eager to learn. This thirst for knowledge is most apparent in the areas of leading learning at a school, community engagement, and strategic planning, which most of these principals have not previously led.



Intentional collaboration to enhance instructional leadership

Despite their remoteness, the principals have established many informal networks. Building on this 'social capital', a range of collaborative opportunities have been developed at the regional level to strengthen the principals' leadership skills. Following a gradual release of responsibility approach, the principals have been working collaboratively with their ARD to develop their instructional leadership capability. Practices have included three-tier instructional leadership coaching, co-teaching, and moderation. This is complemented by principal induction and ongoing, on-the-job training and ARD support.

Induction

In addition to an annual general induction event conducted by the region for all new principals, the rural and remote principals receive one-on-one induction from their ARD, specific for the context in which they operate. This one-and-a-half-day event is tailored to each principal's needs, as well as those of their school. The induction is guided by the nine domains of the National School Improvement Tool (NSIT) and the department's teaching and learning expectations. The purpose is to prepare principals for any pitfalls or sensitive issues they may encounter while leading the school.

Ongoing on-the-job training is also provided and seen as a valuable element of professional support for principals in remote locations. This allows for learning to occur when issues and emergencies arise.

Instructional leadership coaching

Instructional leadership coaching involves a cycle of modelling, observations, feedback and collaborative group reflection each term. The focus of these activities is on the collaboratively agreed aspect of teaching instruction, but the key purpose is to enhance principals' instructional leadership skills by leading them through the process of improving pedagogy via coaching and feedback.

Instructional leadership coaching has three tiers. The first tier, 'principal-ARD' (PARD), sees the ARD observing a lesson conducted by the principal, using chosen elements of Anita Archer's framework (Archer & Hughes 2011). This is either a face-to-face observation, or virtual, using FaceTime, Skype or iSEE platforms. The ARD then models a lesson for the principal to see how they can enact instructional leadership within their own school. The ARD also gives principals feedback on their teaching. The second tier, 'principal-to-principal', sees the previously observed principal with their peer watching each other's lessons and giving feedback. Finally, the third tier, 'principals-ARD professional learning group' (PARD PLG), involves collaborative discussions between the ARD and all of the principals on what they learnt from being observed or observing others and giving feedback.

The PARD PLG meets twice a term over Skype. During these meetings, the ARD introduces each topic before inviting principals to share their experiences, challenges and successful practices. Before each meeting, principals consider a number of questions, inspired by Sharratt (2019), and bring their findings to the meeting. The questions are discussed from both a teacher and student perspective.

Questions to teachers/principals	Questions to students
What are you teaching?	What are you learning?
Why are you teaching that?	How are you going with your learning?
How are the students going?	How do you know how you are going with your learning?
How do you know how the students are going?	What are you working on? What success criteria are you currently working on?
What are your next steps in teaching?	Where can you go for help?

To put the challenge of practice in a broader context, collaborative discussions refer to each school's strategic plan. This serves as the 'scan and assess' phase of the inquiry cycle that schools follow in their improvement journeys. Principals collaboratively 'traffic light' each school's annual implementation plan against the domains of the NSIT to better understand how each school is travelling.

PARD PLG meetings are not only the culmination of a series of instructional leadership practices; they are also a point where capability building and the school improvement agenda intersect, ensuring better alignment between the two.

“Effective learning cultures ‘backwards map’ from student learning needs to teachers’ professional learning to leadership learning.”

(Timperley et al. 2019, p. 37)

The co-teaching cycle

The practice of co-teaching is inspired by the work of Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan (2012) (see Figure 1) and is an extension of instructional leadership coaching conducted with some rural and remote schools.

After co-planning to determine the area for improvement at a particular school, the ARD visits the school to demonstrate and co-teach a lesson. The lesson is observed by the principal, the head of curriculum and/or another teacher. It is followed by co-debriefing, during which the group looks at the evidence of learning (how particular students performed during the lesson). Finally, co-reflection is undertaken to determine the strategies for each student to improve their learning in the next teaching episode. The same cycle is later applied by the principal with a teacher.

The co-teaching cycle is seen as a key practice to enhance the instructional leadership of principals and teachers.

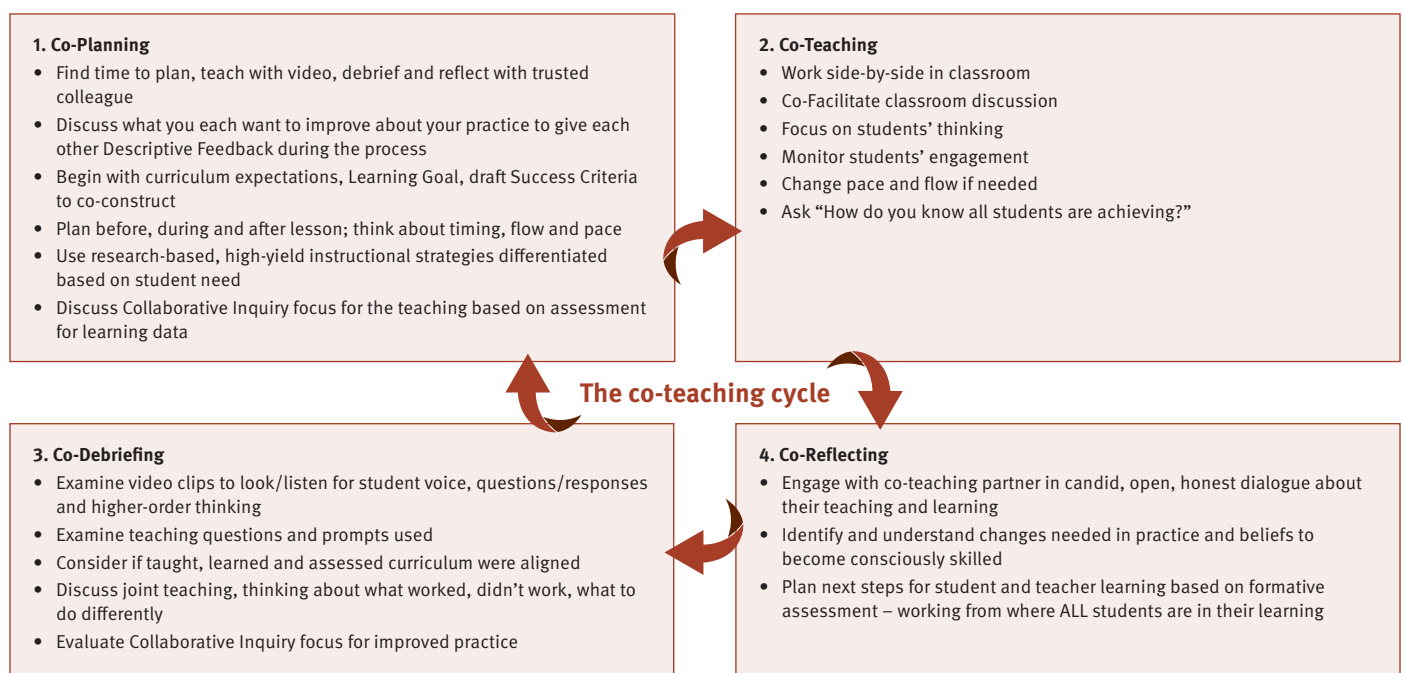


Figure 1. The co-teaching cycle (Sharratt & Fullan 2012, p. 120)

Moderation

Moderation is a common practice in Queensland state schools, but in the DDSW rural and remote context, it takes a unique twist. The aim is to model what it means to lead moderation so that principals can apply the skill in their schools.

More than 60 teachers and principals from the region meet once a term in a virtual auditorium. Each of them is given a virtual avatar that locates them in a few different groups run by 13 facilitators. The facilitators include the principals from rural and remote schools and Heads of Learning from the Centre for Learning and Wellbeing in Roma. Other participants in moderation are heads of department, curriculum experts from local schools, and teachers. Apart from the actual moderation, it is the instructional capability of the principals-facilitators that is the main focus of the sessions. It is about how they could lead moderation in their own schools. The ARD works with facilitators in a structured and purposeful way, exposing them to expertise they would not normally have access to in a rural and remote context.



Virtual auditorium

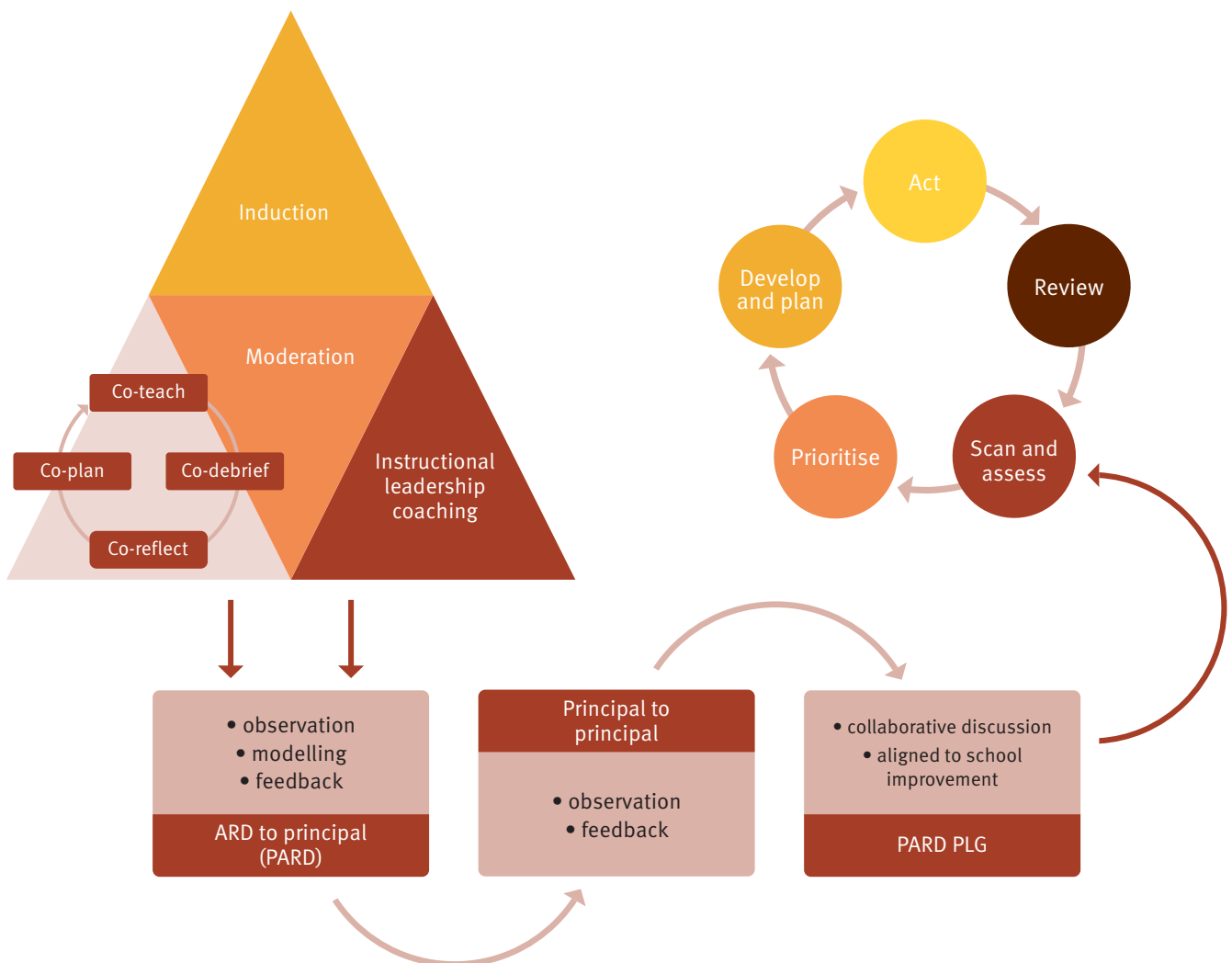


Figure 2. Collaborative professional learning practices for rural and remote school principals in DDSW region

Outcomes

The comprehensive and contextualised capability building program in DDSW region has helped to enhance the instructional leadership capability of small rural and remote school principals. It is seen as an important investment, supporting principals at the beginning of their careers by equipping them with key leadership skills. The increase in expertise and confidence of principals to share their work with others has been remarkable.

The practices have also helped to increase the quality and consistency of teaching and learning across the region. One example of this is the use of Learning Walls (practice described in [one of EIB case studies](#)), which are now visible in all schools across the south-west corner.

Although school leadership is one of many factors affecting student achievement, its positive influence is significant, particularly in regards to instructional leadership (Hattie 2009, p. 83-5). The region noted a significant rise in the percentage of Prep-Year 6 students who reached the regional benchmark in reading proficiency in the last three years (from 27 per cent to 69 per cent). The work around instructional leadership contributes to children's engagement with curriculum, the key factor affecting student attendance.

The instructional leadership practices have also resulted in greater principal engagement in the cycle of inquiry. They have helped develop a collaborative, learning culture that supports school improvement. The principals are approaching school improvement with a new mindset,



seeing themselves as both learners and drivers of a learning culture.

The rural and remote principal capability development program would not have been a success if it were not for the collaborative opportunities, professional companionship and support by the ARD, aligned to authentic, everyday challenges faced by principals. It is also the individual, tailored approach, considering the perspectives and needs of participating principals, and the collective learning culture valuing diversity of views, risk-taking and innovation, that has made the program so powerful.



Success factors

- Differentiated model of building instructional leadership capability – ensures that different learning needs of principals are addressed.
- Culture based on trust and respect for diversity – increases the effectiveness of mutual learning.
- Genuine collegial relationships between the ARD and principals - encourage the principal's voice and engagement.
- The use of ICT in professional learning – facilitates collaboration and enhances networks across geographic boundaries.
- Capability building activities linked to the school improvement agenda - enhance school's strategic planning and inquiry cycle.

Insights from participating principals

“ With instructional leadership, you are going on a journey with your ARD, instead of someone going to your school and dictating what you have to do. It feels as though you are in it together, you’ve got the same line of sight and the same common goals. Your supervisor is an active participant and is walking the path with you. This is so much more powerful; it is not just ... compliance. So, we are walking the path together when we look at the data, we see things that need to be improved and then how we are going to improve them. And that increases my capability of doing it with my staff. It filters down from the ARD to me to filter down to my staff. ”

Principal 1

“ The PARD sessions have been a fantastic opportunity for my own leadership development but possibly more so for my own professional health and wellbeing. While it has been a great way to keep up to date and discuss matters and issues of concern ... it gave the opportunity to interact with principal peers facing similar circumstances to myself and this provided a great deal of support and reassurance that the work that we are doing is not easy but we are in it together and here to support each other. We were able to share our successes and challenges and validate our own feelings and thoughts about topics or subjects. ”

Principal 2

“ The moderation sessions provide a wonderful opportunity for principals and staff from rural and remote schools to openly and confidently participate in a moderation process, which normally could not occur due to the constraints of distance and travel. These sessions provide staff with the chance to ‘quality assure’ assessment tasks and to ensure that interpretations of GTMJ’s are consistent across the DDSW region. These sessions also provide a wonderful networking opportunity for staff who would not usually have the opportunity to converse and share experiences due to the vast size of the DDSW region. ”

Principal 3

“ The PARD sessions have fostered high levels of collegiality and trust between all Band 5 Principals and the ARD, which has led to a genuine sense of support and the opportunity to share challenges and problem solve collective solutions. ”

Principal 3

References

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