

*Greg Turnbull and Melissa Clarke were directly involved in working with the teachers at Grassland Public School as part of Schooling for a Fair Go in 2014. In that project, their school organised for specific teachers to become instructional coaches to groups of other teachers, with each asking a research question about their own practice and receiving support in focusing on that question. Katina Zammit was the school's academic critical friend and co-researcher. In this article, we reflect on the influence of the Fair Go Program (FGP) from a leadership perspective and discuss: the outcomes from their involvement in the FGP, what has been retained, what professional learning directions have been undertaken, and the challenges associated with sustaining a whole-school focus on student engagement and student learning.*

## Background

Schools make a difference to students' learning outcomes, more so for students from low socio-economic backgrounds than those from more affluent backgrounds, especially when there is a focus on the quality of teaching (Hayes et al, 2006). Three of the case studies written about in the book reporting on the *Schooling for a Fair Go* project (Sawyer et al., 2018) were whole-school adaptations of the principles of the *MeE Framework*. While leadership was not a focus of that overall project, the three case studies represented school-based approaches incorporating the *MeE Framework* across a critical mass of classrooms within the school (Sawyer, 2018a; Zammit, 2018a, 2018b) and led the authors to conclude that:

*Changed cultures in classrooms and changing the culture across a whole school, and focusing on sustainability as a leading priority could also ensure that engaging messages are reinforced throughout a student's education. Action research in such contexts could focus on 'insider school' developments. This would place pedagogical leadership at the centre of the work in high-poverty school communities... these kinds of schools need to collectively work towards a 'fairer go'.*

(Sawyer & Zammit, 2018, p. 157)

These three schools positioned professional learning as central to their work, using teacher-practitioner research as their approach, which resulted in individual teachers shifting their pedagogy with the aim of improving student learning. The leadership teams called upon teachers to engage in challenging their practices and to focus on "mak[ing] sure that schools are places of learning, so that learning is one of the effects of schooling" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 182). They exemplify the processes of an 'insider school' (Sawyer, 2018b; Sinclair & Johnson, 2006): professional discourse, mentoring and collegial feedback, professional self-assessment, and collegial talk. Through these processes, engaging messages to teachers are promoted so they 'are considered knowledgeable, capable, are supported in making pedagogical decisions, are listened to and feel valued as an educator and colleague' (Zammit, 2017a). What follows are reflections from Greg and then Melissa on the influence of the *Fair Go Program* on their subsequent leadership experiences.

## Greg: A Principal's reflection on leadership

The main outcomes for Grasslands Public School's (and my) involvement in *Schooling for a Fair Go* were the importance of teachers investigating their own teaching practices about what works to improve student learning. This was based on their own collected evidence, with professional learning support and with time organised during the school day to meet, plan, reflect upon, and discuss pedagogy, and then to base ideas about practice on research that was focused on their students' learning.

The *MeE Framework* (see the article by Geoff Munns in this edition) is the entry point for the leadership team, coaches and teaching staff to discuss pedagogy. It has been our constant; it is the thing we always go back to. It provides a common language for professional dialogue around the teaching practices and the quality of the independent tasks being planned. We ask: Are they high cognitive, high affective, and high operative or are they busy work or time fillers? It is about the quality of the learning experiences and of practice making a difference to students' learning and their engagement in learning. This is especially useful for early career teachers as it enables them to reflect on the quality of their practice. However, it is always challenging to maintain because of staff turnover, especially in the executive and coaching team, as well as the teaching staff, and each year we have to build the capacity of new people and start again.

The one-to-one coaching model which supports an individual teacher's professional learning has been maintained so that each teacher's learning journey is different although we are all heading in the same direction: improved student learning outcomes and engagement in learning. Staff also meet in Stage teams for two hours each fortnight and work through a challenge in their classrooms they would like to improve, perhaps around literacy or numeracy.

Additional whole-school professional learning has continued with a focus on student learning and teaching practices. Together with other schools, we worked with Social Ventures Australia on student voice and student agency. We have also investigated visible learning (Hattie, 2009), feedback in terms of success criteria, spirals of inquiry (Timperley et al., 2014) and learning dispositions (NSW Government, 2019), which incorporates aspects of Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006). But the *MeE Framework* is not sitting alongside these other frameworks; it sits over the top.

Staff, with the support of their coaches, have focused on gathering evidence of student progress and learning outcomes as they investigate the impact of their practices and analysis of the evidence to reflect on the pedagogical changes and whether they are making a difference. In the spirit of action research, they try to make some small changes to see if these have an impact on results, for a bigger rollout. They gather evidence of results, unpack the pedagogy that they are using, and do some micro-researching about what other secondary material is available. The evidence is used to reflect on their practice. Sharing of their learning journeys with each other, the school community and colleagues in other schools occurs via *Twitter*, where individuals post photos, videos and achievements.

The FGP supported our journey, shifting from 'compliance' to 'engagement', as we had identified that our students were compliant but not really engaged. They were doing quite low-level cognitive tasks. We have shifted towards a focus on student voice and agency which is springboarding off the engagement process of the *MeE Framework*. It has allowed us to keep that journey going and it also underpins our dispositions, providing our students with a metalanguage to talk about what learners do to take risks with their learning. Our journey as a school is visualised in our school plan (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Grassland 2018-2020 school plan

## Melissa: Moving from one leadership position to another

From my *FGP* involvement at Grassland Public School, I have taken my understandings about the *MeE Framework* and *Fair Go* principles to my Principalship at a new school to inform my leadership practices. While Edelweiss Public School has a higher Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), of 1008 than Grassland, at 933, it has a significant population of families from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. In 2020, as a result of COVID-19, there was also an increase in referrals for integration and mental health support as well as a number of family breakdowns; I believe there was also a shift in the socioeconomic status of our families. My experiences with the *FGP* proved particularly useful.

The *MeE* is a building platform for the school's vision as we focus on student engagement, investigate our teaching practices, and learn about collecting, analysing and using data to inform changes to teaching practices. However, while the *MeE* is not explicitly referred to in the school's plan, the *FGP* instilled in me a valuing of quality teachers and of students and a motivation to ensure that we keep the curriculum, teaching and learning at the heart of everything that we do in order to have a greater impact.

In the first six months at my new school, I introduced myself with reference to the *MeE* and *FGP* principles and worked with the leadership team to build their understanding of the 'insider school' and engaging messages framework in order to build their capacity to support the teaching staff and teaching teams. The school took a collaborative approach to come up with our vision and our commitment to research informed evidence-based change to teaching practices that improve student learning and emphasise student progress which is captured in our vision board in Figure 2.



**Figure 2 Edelweiss vision board**

The one-to-one coaching model was transposed and implemented across the school, with time provided for the coach and teacher to work together on each teacher’s professional learning journey. What surprised the leadership team was the link teachers made between the coaching support and their wellbeing. It was one of the support mechanisms teachers appreciated during COVID-19. We stopped talking about behaviour, and focused on teaching and learning as well as dispositions and learner qualities.

Research-informed changes to practice were also supported throughout the school with the coaching model as well as within teaching teams. This also provided opportunities to build the capacity of staff and encouraged professional dialogue with colleagues. As a whole school we also engaged with visible learning (Hattie, 2009) and went on to investigate spirals of inquiry (Timperley et al., 2014), to support the development of teacher pedagogical understandings.

However, we also supported teachers to learn more about data, including the collection, analysis and use of evidence to challenge teaching practices and demonstrate impact on student progress. Students have been the driving force, especially student leadership, and we ensure that students are at the centre of everything that we do. In short, we are listening to them.

In relation to the *MeE Framework*, what has guided our decisions related to student learning has been the quality of the learning experiences for students, specifically, the ‘insider classroom’ processes and engaging messages to students, especially around ‘control’ and ‘voice’. Together, these two features of the *Fair Go Program* have stayed with me and reinforce our whole-school strategies.

## Conclusion

*The MeE Framework*, while not dominating the professional dialogue and professional learning, or being explicitly connected to the whole-school focus, has continued to frame the work of the leadership teams in both schools and their pedagogical leadership. There has continued to be a focus on learning and the quality of teaching, with ‘opportunities to reflect on goals, practice and performance ... as part of organisational operation, (and) opportunities to build shared understandings, and to develop joint capacity for addressing problems and learning from experience’ (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 195). With student learning as the core focus, the leadership provide opportunities for teachers to critically reflect on their practices in order to build their capacity to support student learning, student engagement in learning and quality of teaching. As noted in the final chapter of *Engaging Schooling*, “teacher professional development that is enacted through collaborative teacher-research is a key enabling condition for successful pedagogical change in schools” (Sawyer & Zammit, 2018, p. 150).

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## Schooling For A Fair Go: Reflections On Leadership for School Change



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