In schools leading teachers play a vital and decisive role in leading change in their educational institutions. Change that is initiated and developed within a school is more likely to be adopted and lead to positive change. Ash & Persall (2000), talk about the importance of a supportive environment that encourages teacher development, collaboration, and celebrates the contributions of teacher leaders. They further note that positive school change is interactive and occurs when a clear framework for teaching and learning is evidenced along with a number of other practices. The positive school change at St Mary’s Catholic Primary School in Newborough validates these findings.

A case study of positive change in a small catholic school with 180 students in Gippsland, Victoria. The school leaders at St Mary’s agreed that the culture of the school needed to change. The teachers were often talking about how dependent the students seemed and how reluctant the students were to make their own decisions. After some discussion it was decided to try and change this learning culture to one that encouraged independence in learning. The Principal initiated the change. It became clear that to have greater impact the change had to come from within the staff and so the Principal, being very aware of shared leadership and building capacities, was keen to utilise the skills, knowledge and expertise of staff members, decided to empower two leading teachers to direct and support the change. Brock and Grady (2012) in reference to the 2008 Wallace Foundation report, suggest that leaders capable of developing the talents of others and coordinating the efforts of many in pursuit of a common goal are the ‘conductors’ who lead schools to excellence. The decision to empower two leading teachers to direct the change was pivotal as the change was now seen as being initiated and guided from within the group. It proved to be important that the leading teachers were practising classroom teachers and just as able to trial and implement ideas and strategies in their classes as the other teachers were.

Initially, the teachers wondered what the culture change might look like? In the early stages dependent behaviours were identified in the school and then an exploration of the advantages of independent behaviours followed. Professional readings on independence in learning were researched and the direction became clear in the formulation of a new theme in ‘Creating Independent Learners’. The leading teachers initiated a number of sessions on teamwork and shared vision for the school and together the staff further developed the idea of independent learners. Staff buy-in was demonstrated by some.

The next step was to document the thinking in order to direct learning and so the Performance Development Culture (PDC) framework was born. An initial framework was suggested and then through a number of collaborative meetings this framework was cultivated and further developed. The St Mary’s PDC framework was refined, agreed upon and owned by the staff. The future direction of the school’s learning was obvious. The leading teachers were able to strategically plan each term’s professional learning meetings with the shared vision as the goal. All learning and meetings were related to the PDC framework and the leading teachers very deliberately articulated and reinforced these links. The learning teams included input sessions and planned action research...
in classrooms in both level teams and expert/interest teams. Change was planned for, encouraged, supported and in fact, expected.

This case study evidenced a number of findings:

1. The formulation of a framework to direct the learning was crucial. The process undertaken to develop this framework was important as it lead to ownership and preserving the integrity of the framework. New initiatives and opportunities eg National Partnership Development in Mathematics, were incorporated into the framework and not explored as separate initiatives, alongside the framework. National Partnership work was seen as a lens through which change could happen.

2. Change was strategic and supported. Participation in learning teams was expected and leading teachers regularly checked in with teachers to develop accountability. Visually, progress was displayed in the school, both in classrooms and in the staffroom. These displays were often referred to.

3. As the classroom teachers experienced strategic and deliberate guidance in their learning teams, it was also crucial that the leading teachers had expert direction in their planning for positive school change. Direction was accessed in regular expert meetings with learning leaders (consultants) from the Catholic Education Office and also participation in professional development days run by the office staff.

4. Successes along the way were acknowledged and celebrated. Celebrations helped to maintain the positive spirit in the school and teamwork was further consolidated.

Naturally challenges presented themselves along the way. Administrative practicalities of time to meet were overcome by a strong commitment to the cause. The Principal was happy to employ emergency teachers to cover the classes of the leading teachers so these teachers could meet and plan together. It was agreed that if we want to see change then we need to plan for it to happen. The process of change was not all smooth sailing and comfortable. Many heated discussions were had in trying to agree and reach a consensus, but through a process of listening, negotiating and accommodating, a clear focus was maintained. In fact, through the heated discussions the commitment to the cause was further consolidated.

Change doesn’t happen rapidly. Teachers ‘bought in’ to the process at different times. Very often the feeling of ‘two steps forward, one step back’ was felt. The challenge to remain on track and not lose direction was imperative; this was helped by the fact that there were two leading teachers in this process of change.

Positive school change is an on-going strategic process at St Mary’s School. All work is related to the school framework for teaching and learning. Continual change is supported through focused teamwork and participation in regular professional learning meetings. John Hattie(2003) investigated the effects of influences on student achievement. He found that apart from what the students themselves bring to the learning (accounts for 50% of the variance of achievement) it is the teacher who has the greatest source of variance that can make a difference. The case study outlined above is an example of leading teachers working collaboratively with teachers to optimise the effect they have on the learning in the school.

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