

Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

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A TIME TO FOCUS ON OUR REGIONS

From the Executive Director

Queensland is the most decentralised of any state or territory in Australia, with almost three in 10 Queenslanders living in regional areas.¹

Queensland's independent schools are also decentralised. They are located across 37 different Local Government Areas (LGAs) stretching from the far north to the Queensland/New South Wales border.

A significant proportion of independent sector students attend schools outside of the south-east corner of the state.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of independent sector enrolments by key LGAs.

Independent schools in the Brisbane LGA accounted for 22% of sector enrolments in 2018. When taken with Gold Coast (17%), Logan (9%), Redlands (4%), Moreton Bay (9%), Ipswich (5%) and Sunshine Coast (9%), the south-east area comprised close to 75% of enrolments.

It means that 25% of independent sector enrolments are in the regional and rural areas including Toowoomba and Townsville (at 3% each), and Cairns and Rockhampton (at 2% each). A total of 3% of enrolments are located in Inland LGAs.

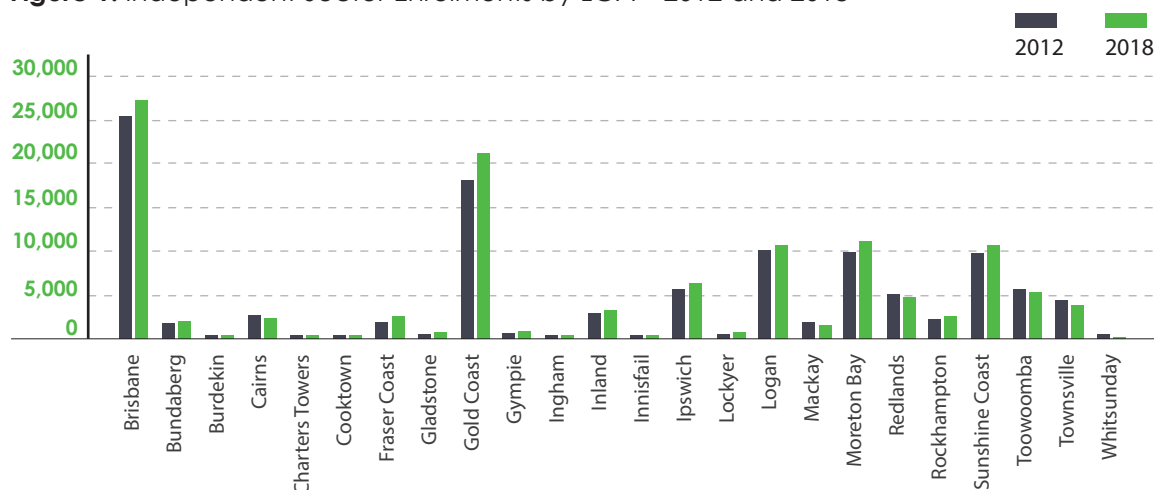
Whilst our regional independent schools are mostly located in the key coastal centres, there are independent schools in the rural areas, including some in the more remote parts of the state.

Demographic data highlights the growth in Queensland's population has been focused around the south-east corner for many years. Over the 10 years to June 2017, regional Queensland's population increased by an average of 1.1% per year, around half the rate of South-East Queensland (2.1%).

This pattern is replicated in the independent schools sector. Figure 2 shows the change in independent sector enrolments for the period 2012 to 2018. Whilst the Gold Coast is the standout growth area for independent schooling, it is notable that many regional areas have faced a decline in enrolments over this period. This includes Townsville, Mackay, Cairns and Whitsunday.

A range of factors are contributing to this trend including a long-term decline in the rural population, the ongoing drought, a lack of employment opportunities, changed circumstances of the mining industry and a series of natural disasters over several years.

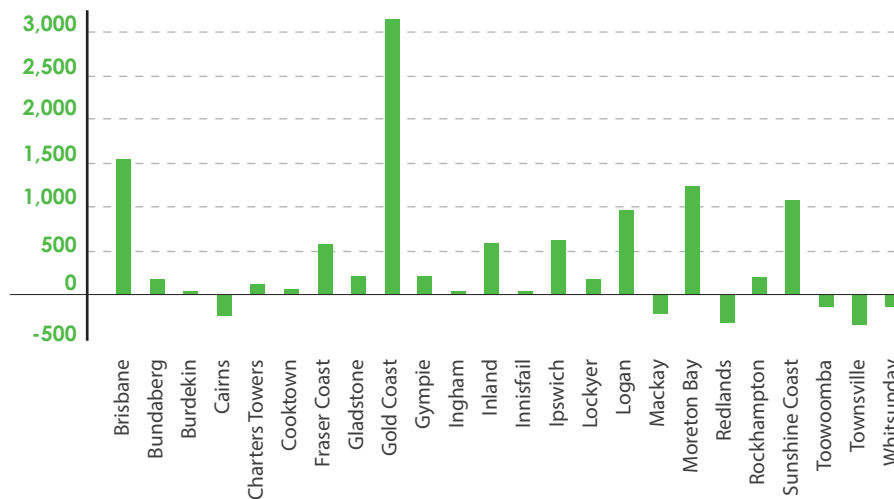
Figure 1: Independent Sector Enrolments by LGA – 2012 and 2018



¹ The estimated resident population of Queensland as at 30 June 2018 was 5,012,176

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Figure 2: Change in Enrolments by LGA – 2012 to 2018
– Queensland Independent Schools



It is clear many of our regional areas are doing it tough.

The recent floods in Townsville and rural areas will further impact significantly on North Queensland. Some commentators estimate the economic impact of the loss of cattle alone related to the floods will be around \$500 million to \$1 billion in 2018/19².

It is also well known, as reported in the recent *Independent Review into Rural, Regional and Remote Education*³ that the educational outcomes of students in these areas lag behind the achievements of urban students whether it be in NAPLAN, international tests such as PISA and TIMSS or the completion of Year 12. The review also reports that in relation to transition to university and the proportion of persons aged 25-34 years with a

bachelor degree or above, there is also a decreasing trend with increasing remoteness.

Independent school principals in regional and rural areas of Queensland regularly report significant difficulties with not only attracting teachers and specialist staff to their schools but in retaining staff. The looming teacher shortage is likely to have a significant impact on regional and rural schools, a situation not helpful to addressing the gap in educational outcomes between the city and country.

What can be done to boost schools in regional and rural areas and to address the disparity in educational outcomes for their students?

Governments have a responsibility to implement policies to promote economic growth and employment opportunities in our regions. As

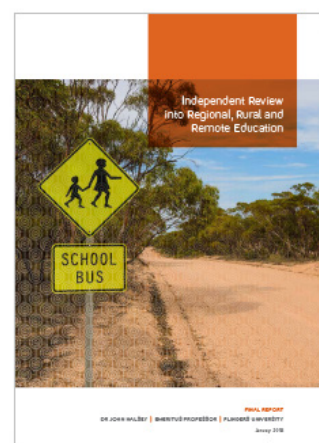
noted by the *Independent Review of Rural, Regional and Remote Education*, “vibrant, productive RRR communities are integral to the long-term sustainability of Australia.”⁴

A good example of this is the Queensland Government’s annual budget which includes Regional Action Plans.⁵

Importantly, as concluded by the independent review “education and training plays a critical role in building the social fabric of communities, but also in developing social capital for economic prosperity.”⁶

Specific actions to support schools in regional areas should therefore also be considered.

The Australian Government’s Choice and Affordability Fund⁷ which is scheduled to commence in July 2020 will have as one of its objectives support for schools and students impacted by special circumstances or in priority areas such as rural, regional and remote locations and areas affected by drought or other natural disasters. This will potentially assist schools and communities in regional areas impacted by the drought and recent flooding. The Queensland Government could further assist impacted communities by considering



INDEPENDENT REVIEW INTO RURAL, REGIONAL AND REMOTE EDUCATION (JANUARY 2018)

2 See, for example, <https://queenslandeconomywatch.com/>

3 The review, commissioned by the Australian Government, was undertaken by Dr John Halsey and reported in January 2018.

The review report is available at <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/50281>

4 Independent Review of Rural, Regional and Remote Education page 81

5 See <https://budget.qld.gov.au/budget-papers/#regional-action-plans>

6 Ibid page 81

7 Announced in September 2018 as part of the Australian Government’s new funding arrangements for non-government schools

8 See <https://www.qld.gov.au/education/schools/financial/ruralremote/lafhas#2018LAFHAS> for details of the Living Away From Home Allowance

Whilst some measures targeted at regional schools are being progressed through the recently signed National School Reform Agreement, it is time for a sustained focus on the health and vitality of our regional schools.

an increase in the Living Away From Home Allowance⁸ which is important to ensuring that rural families are afforded choice in education and in particular do not have to relocate to access preferred schooling options.

Given the state of regional economies, governments could consider a stimulus package to be delivered through schools. This would not only have the advantage of providing a stimulus to local economies but would also provide a direct boost to school infrastructure and community confidence.

Schools are ideal conduits for the delivery of stimulus packages as evidenced by previous government programs such as *Investing In Our Schools* and the *Building the Education Revolution*.

The independent sector has a proven record in efficiently and effectively delivering the benefits associated with stimulus packages both in terms of providing value for money and speedy implementation.

The Federal Government could consider a one-off 3-year boost to the location loading⁹ used in the funding model for schooling. The location loading is based on a school's Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) score, a measure of the remoteness or accessibility of every location in Australia.

Governments might also consider giving high priority to the recommendations of the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*. The review made a range of recommendations covering curriculum, and assessment, teachers and teaching, leaders and leadership, schools and community, transitions, philanthropy, entrepreneurship, information and communications technology and improving access.

Our regional communities are too important for governments not to give priority to a range of measures and initiatives to assist those areas doing it tough. Whilst some measures targeted

at regional schools are being progressed through the recently signed National School Reform Agreement, it is time for a sustained focus on the health and vitality of our regional schools. A good starting point would be a robust debate during the forthcoming federal election campaign about measures to boost not only our regions but the schools that are so important in the social and economic fabric of regional Queensland.



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9 See <https://www.education.gov.au/what-government-doing-support-students-regional-and-remote-schools> for further information on the location loading.

ADDING VALUE IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS: MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN READING



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At a time when Australian student outcomes have declined in key subjects including reading since 2000, the Gonski 2.0 report, *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (Department of Education and Training, 2018), prioritises the need to deliver at least one year's growth in learning for every student every year.

Recent data from the Grattan Institute suggests that relative to the rest of Australia, Queensland is a 'bright spot' particularly in the early years, achieving significant growth in National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) reading and numeracy scores (The Conversation, 2018).

Though NAPLAN is simply one test, at a point in time, it is comprehensive in providing granular detail to track student progress over time across any given school and school system. In an effort to maintain this growth for every year at school, Goss and Hunter (2015) state that the best schools are not necessarily those with the best NAPLAN or Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores, but those that make the greatest progress in learning.

In 2018, in this ongoing study, Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) approached 13 schools achieving significant growth schools in NAPLAN reading, when compared against all Queensland and Australian schools. The focus of this ongoing study is to contribute to the limited knowledge base on the value-added factors that lead to significant gains in learning – in this instance in reading. These 13 schools amount to six percent of all Queensland independent schools. These figures compare favourably to a new analysis by the Grattan Institute which states that taking socio-economic factors into consideration, "about 5% of schools are routinely doing better than we would expect given their student population mix" (The Conversation, 2018).

2017 Research Design and Outcomes

In 2017, ISQ began a long-term research project to understand how some schools are sustaining long-term achievement and most importantly increasing their gain above and beyond minimum expectations for growth, using NAPLAN, as a measure.

The first research cohort consisted of 20 high-gain, high-achieving Queensland independent schools who participated in a mixed methods research study. The schools were selected based on two NAPLAN tests (reading and numeracy) using data extracted from the MySchool website. The overarching research question and sub-questions aimed to understand if there were common instructional practices inherent in the 20 schools, contributing to high or improved student gain in literacy and numeracy.

More than 800 responses were collated from the 29 questions. These questions integrated with the following six themes:

- Mission
- Leadership
- Data
- Preparation
- Literacy
- Numeracy

The focus of ISQ's ongoing study is to contribute to the limited knowledge base on the value-added factors that lead to significant gains in learning – in this instance in reading.

Three of the 20 schools also agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews using questions based on their survey data and responses. All survey data and interview data were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and NVivo (text organisational and analysis software) respectively.

Due predominantly to the broadness of the survey design, making conclusive statements was not the objective of the study. Collation of survey and interview data resulted in observations being made, with the recommendation that these observations be considered a starting point for future research in the area. The six observations followed by a brief elaboration covered the following areas:

- Systemic pedagogical frameworks
- Multi-faceted teaching and learning approaches
- Differentiated learning and differentiated learning resources
- A relentless focus on data
- Student ownership of learning
- Culture and capacity building.

2018 Research Design and Method

Based on 2017 learnings, the ISQ research team decided on the following research design criteria for 2018:

- A narrow focus on one learning area – reading;
- Focusing on the primary school narrative in reading;
- Targeting high-gain schools only (as identified by NAPLAN data from 2013-2017);
- Selecting schools based on historical data (longitudinal gains) from 2013-2017 (5 years);
- Using only a qualitative research design – in-depth interviews across multiple school sites.

Table 1: Characteristics of selected independent schools

SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS	CATEGORY	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
ICSEA Score	Low (<1000)	2
	Moderate low (1000–1050)	2
	Moderate (1051–1100)	0
	Moderate High (1101–1150)	3
	High (1151–1200)	1
Location	Metropolitan	4
	Regional	4
Gender	All Boys	1
	All Girls	1
	Co-Educational	6
Year Level Range	Prep to Year 12	8
Year Level of Research Focus	Year 3–5	4
	Year 5–7	3
	Year 3–7	1

Based on these five criteria, a number of Queensland independent schools were identified as being high-gain schools. Data comparisons were made against: all Queensland schools; all Australian schools; and in some cases, statistically similar schools.

All schools were invited to participate in the research study during Terms 3 and 4 of 2018. Eight schools agreed to participate (see Table 1).

The overarching research question remained similar to 2017, but with a specific learning area focus:

“Within identified independent schools, what are the school structures, programs and practices that result in substantially improved learning outcomes in reading?”

Semi-structured interview questions were arranged within eight topic areas:

Strategic – The extent to which a school’s strategic planning, thinking and direction articulate a deliberate focus on improving and maintaining achievement in reading

Pedagogy – Teaching practices/ pedagogical practices utilised in reading

Resources – Reading resources and supporting literacy resources that are utilised

Data – All forms of data utilised to monitor and track reading achievement and progress

Interventions – Programs/ interventions for students who are identified as requiring more support or requiring extension

Professional Development – How practices are shared, implemented

School Community – Including involvement/engagement of parents

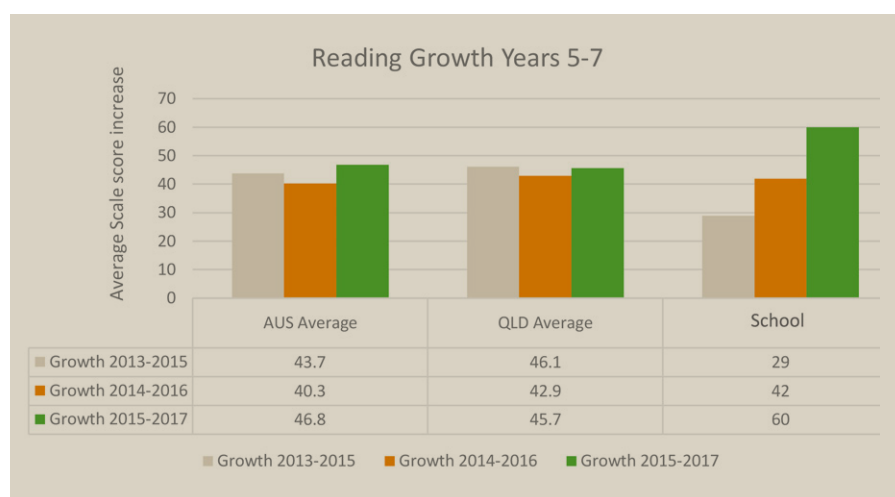
Structures – The internal structures and arrangements that support the learning of reading

Two members of the ISQ research team visited each of the eight schools. Schools were given the freedom to select the people they felt could best answer the research questions and talk about their school in relation to the success of their longitudinal school data. Figure 1 provides an example of the data supplied to the school.

Thirty-one interviews of approximately 40 minutes per person were conducted, amounting to almost four people per school. In all eight schools either the Principal (4) or a senior leader (4) was interviewed, and in some instances, more than one interviewee was in the room at the same time.

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Figure 1: Example Year 5-7 NAPLAN reading growth data for an individual school



All schools were sent a copy of the semi-structured questions in advance.

Detailed notes and an audio recording were taken during each interview. Where invited, the research team visited multiple classrooms in the school. Post-interview, the two researchers transcribed the audio recordings, supported by interview notes. An 'in-case' analysis (per school) was carried out using coding and categorising, taking a grounded theory approach to data analysis. This was followed by a cross-case analysis (across all schools). All interviewees were sent a summary of the interview and transcribed notes to check for accuracy.

The Learnings

The research findings are presented within four broader themes:

Pedagogy – Differentiated teaching practices;

Data-driven learning – Systems in place to assess and monitor reading progress and achievement;

Culture, strategy, leadership – An inferred narrative of 'literacy is everyone's business'; and

Supporting structures and systems – Leadership actively enabling literacy activity.

In presenting these findings, the research team believe an overarching factor attributing such substantive gains in reading, is that all eight schools, do most of these things, most of the time.

Finding One: Pedagogy

Under this heading four connected practices stood out, many of which fall within the label of differentiated teaching practices. These were:

Reading components – Schools generally articulated that their reading programs consisted of: phonics and phonemic awareness, sight words or word recognition, reinforced reading (including accuracy, fluency and comprehension) and vocabulary. All eight schools focused on all or most of these components, particularly the importance of reading comprehension.

Guided learning/reading with explicit teaching – Regardless of the pedagogical framework in the school, most schools spoke at length about teaching reading using guided learning approaches. This approach relies on focused differentiated learning with smaller groups of students. Group selection is driven by multiple data forms. Explicit teaching of reading in these smaller groups was invariably a priority. It is important to note that this form of explicit teaching is not to be confused with the explicit or direct instruction model, though commonalities do exist. Only one school in this study identified with being an explicit teaching school.

Non-reliance on one pedagogical approach or method – Though most schools had a dominant approach, most schools invariably utilised additional approaches or methods to teach reading, for example: shared reading, reciprocal reading, independent reading, etc.

Early intervention and personalised learning – The Year 3-5 cohort of schools made mention of capturing those falling behind early

The research team believe an overarching factor attributing such substantive gains in reading, is that all eight schools, do most of these things, most of the time.

and using diagnostic testing to achieve this. Where such students 'fell behind' personalised learning programs and plans were often implemented to accelerate student progress.

Finding Two: Data-driven learning

All schools appeared to have excellent data and evidence systems in place to assess and monitor reading progress and achievement. Aligned with this was good data literacy.

Seven in eight schools believed they used standardised test data from NAPLAN and Progressive Achievement Tests extensively.

All schools carried out additional and often substantive diagnostic testing to ascertain progress and achievement in reading, in addition to using screeners and resources such as MIOWW, THRASS and Soundwaves to gather additional data.

Most schools also had detailed and documented expectations of what and when to test, why certain data was captured, and how this data should inform reporting and next-steps learning.

Two schools displayed data walls in the classroom showing progress and achievement in sight word knowledge, reading goals, comprehension levels and NAPLAN results, while data capture for NCCD featured in data tracking and monitoring of progress and achievement.

Finding Three: Culture, strategy and leadership

Though not always well articulated, there was an inferred narrative of 'literacy is everyone's business'. In all schools a key leader was very knowledgeable and aware of:

- Progress and performance data in reading and literacy in general;
- The importance of modelling and leading professional learning; and
- Adopting relevant pedagogy.

Some key comments from the leadership team included:

"We set high expectations with our planning and organisation of reading. It starts right from the whole school strategic plan and the academic imperative the Headmaster blankets across the school"

"All teachers have a literacy focused goal linked to the strategic plan"

In some schools there was evidence of strong literacy links flowing from the school improvement focus (strategy) to the teaching and learning focus, (pedagogy) to the performance and development systems (culture and accountabilities).

Finding Four: Supporting structures and systems

In one instance the Principal of a large school had carried out hundreds of classroom visits, visiting most days to drive and support the school improvement agenda, where literacy was a major school focus.

Some schools employed literacy coaches and/or master teachers with reduced teaching loads. As their title suggests, their core role was to develop teacher capacity in literacy by working in classrooms alongside teachers – giving feedback, coaching and mentoring.

Supporting Finding Three was a purposeful focus on literacy professional learning. In most schools, key leadership staff modelled and led this professional learning.

In all schools there was clear articulation of literacy being embedded in all curriculum areas.

Finally, all schools used age appropriate reading resources, most used teacher aides to support struggling readers, and all schools involved parents in home-school reading to enhance a child's progress.

Glossary of Terms

Guided Learning

[Benefits of guided learning and how to achieve – UK essays](#)

Explicit Teaching

Focusing on critical core content and breaking this down into smaller foundational blocks and sequences

Guided Reading, Shared Reading, Independent Reading

[Teaching practices for reading and viewing – Victoria Government, Education and Training](#)

[PATs Progress Achievement Tests ACER Assessment](#)

MIOWW

[Magic 100 Words](#)

THRASS

[Teaching handwriting, reading and spelling skills – The THRASS Institute](#)

Soundwaves

[Whole-school phonemic approach to spelling – Fireflyeducation](#)

NCCD

[Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability Quick Guide – Australian Government](#)

Literature Comparison with Research Findings

In a New South Wales study titled *High Value-Add Schools: Key Drivers of School Improvement* (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015), five success factors were identified as driving improvement. To a greater or lesser extent every one of these factors was evident in the findings of this research study, particularly the focus on the use of explicit and effective teaching strategies.

There currently exists considerable debate about the place of phonics in reading. Researchers (Beeman-Rygalski, 2013; Collins, 2018; Hanover Research, 2014; Sheppard, 2017) support the importance of phonics stating that it is still an essential foundation skill in learning to read, particularly amongst struggling students (Collins, 2018) but caution that it is only part of the

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approach. These studies emphasised the need to focus on the same components ISQ schools involved in this study were focusing on; sight words, comprehension, vocabulary, delivered through effective teaching strategies. Guided reading, both in literature on the topic and in this research study, was considered the most effective teaching strategy.

It is pleasing to note the strong focus on data-driven practices in this study. Professor John Hattie believes that teaching strategies with the greatest impact are those that “use evidence of learning to inform and improve teaching” (Goss et al., 2015, p. 1). Additionally, the use of literacy coaches or master teachers by many schools in this study is positively supported by literature (Flynt and Brozo, as cited in Johnson-Holder, Wilson-Jones, Jones and Jones, 2017) highlighting the positive correlation to improved student learning outcomes as a result of modelled practice, and the giving of constructive feedback to help students achieve higher levels in reading.

Returning to the NSW study (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2015), the remaining success factors were also a part of the narrative of factors perceived by these eight schools as contributing to their significant growth and gains in NAPLAN reading results. These include effective collaboration, engaging and sharing in professional learning, setting whole-school goals and strategies for change, creating an environment that promotes learning and high levels of student engagement, and setting high expectations for achievement.

Conclusion

This 2018 study supports the concluding comments from the 2017 study. As a result of 31 in-depth interviews and over 800 interview responses from 2017, there exists strong evidence to support the findings of this research. Many of the 2017 considerations were adopted in this study. Carrying out a comparative study may be a future direction of this research. Undoubtedly, there exist independent schools in Queensland, who are not achieving such strong student gain, who would appreciate feedback about their practices in reading, and who would find these findings beneficial. Working with these schools to understand their unique situations would add authenticity and credibility to this research.

Can these research findings be transferred to other schools? The principles of ‘transferrability’ and ‘generalising’ are critical terms in this study using a qualitative, interpretive methodology. The underlying intention of this research is not to apply such principles and findings. What is more important is what works for that individual school. That said, based on the similarity of the findings in all eight schools; the eight schools constitute 63% of all schools that had substantial gains in reading; and literature supporting some of the findings, it could be reasoned that many of the study’s findings are likely transferrable to other school contexts and similar learning areas.

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