School Impact Process
The Sapphire Learning Alliance:
Inspiring Each Other

Context Matters

On the traditional lands of the Kamilaroi people, the Sapphire Community of Schools spans approximately 7800 square kilometres in the Northern Tablelands of rural New South Wales. Judith Wright's[1] "clean, lean, hungry country", some years the land is parched and dry from drought and other years the air is thick with the haze of nearby bushfires. There are seven schools in this community; Inverell High School, Inverell Public School, Ross Hill Public School, Macintyre High School, Delungra Public School, Gilgai Public School and Tingha Public School, and to these schools, this geography is not incidental – understanding context is everything.

The harshness of the landscape is challenging community wellbeing, reflected in experiences of trauma, compromised mental health and higher-than-average rates of domestic violence. Context matters because it's with the consequences of these realities that the schools must contend every day.

This is where their three-year engagement with Visible Learning+ School Improvement Process (SIP) has been instrumental, as the Sapphire schools not only work within their unique circumstances but empower students in their learning and teachers in their understandings of their impact. Carla, a Head Teacher and Impact coach at Macintyre High School gives a keen insight into the types of situations confronting their students:

"Our kids are currently on the frontline. They go home; they feed their stock; they help their mums and dads at night; they don't go to bed till 12 o'clock and they have an HSC exam the next morning, after they've already helped dad in the paddock before they come to school. Our kids are facing the problems of regional Australia – adult problems."

Naomi, another Head Teacher and Impact Coach from Inverell High recognises the responsibilities their schools hold in encouraging their students to be drivers of their own lifelong learning:

"We're trying to make it that kids see that value and [we] create some kind of generational change with valuing education... [students] seeing the opportunities, not just something they have to do if they feel like it."

Therefore, right from primary school Michelle from Inverell Public, wants students to dream big, asking them: What do you want to be, that you don't have to set ceilings for yourself? The potential is life changing.

Given their circumstances one response could be to focus on the disadvantage and seek system intervention. But that's not the country way, and it's definitely not the Sapphire schools' way! Indeed, the group are sceptical of perceived city-centric mindsets that can't comprehend their circumstances and needs. Rather, they are confident they already have deep knowledge and an internal capacity they have further developed and strengthened through their Corwin partnership. As a group of schools, they have grown fiercely independent and strongly interdependent.

So, they have developed a unique way of being and doing that relies on their resourcefulness, capability and, above all, commitment. Beyond the rhetoric of "collaboration" and the buzzwords surrounding "communities of practice" and "professional learning communities", the Sapphire schools know that it's more than about meeting together, "more than just sharing". That's why they have formed a representative group and adopted the name, Sapphire Learning Alliance - to encapsulate their commitment to a common vision of excellence in teaching and learning, their alignment to common values and their allegiance to each other.

Commitment to the Learning Alliance has meant a shift from communicating with each other to directing their attention to a single and sustained focus on the essence of quality pedagogy and building a web of professional relationships centred on knowledge of impact. Toni, the Principal of

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Delungra Public School, describes how Visible Learning SIP has provided the mechanism and process for that constant focus on teaching and learning.

Differentiating Context

While the schools of the community share a geography and have much in common, there are significant contextual nuances to be recognised and respected. The seven Sapphire schools are individual, with their own distinctive communities and needs. Several of the schools serve small remote communities and have populations of around 40 students. In contrast, the primary and secondary schools of the township of Inverell have populations over 500. They are rural, remote, smaller, larger, primary or secondary, staffed by teachers with varying levels of experience. They all agree their combined strength is enhanced when they differentiate according to their respective needs. In practice, this might mean providing common professional learning but, come implementation, focussing on elements most relevant to an individual school or teacher.

This is what initially attracted the Principals in 2016 to Corwin's flexible delivery model which could provide high quality professional learning delivered locally, accessible to all, contextually relevant and inclusive of all their school environments. As Amber, Impact Coach at Gilgai Public School elaborates, her coaching must be appropriate to the needs of the teacher. At Inverell Public, for example, there are a significant number of beginning teachers and so Michelle is very aware of their stage of development as

teachers and monitors for possible excessive "cognitive load"[ii]. Above all, it's about differentiating by student, thus "number one" for Naomi is teacher student relationships;

"we know our kids. We know a lot about their home life, their context, whether they're coming off the land, whether they've got water, whether they're up at night. To us it comes down to knowing your students and how they learn."

The relational art interweaves with the pedagogical art "knowing how they learn" central to the Visible Learning SIP. It entails cycles of gathering, analysing and using evidence of learning, and empowering students through the process by genuinely attending to their voice.

Ways of Working

The Alliance team have established ways of working to maximise the effectiveness of their collaboration. Typically, they used a group process to identify and agree a set of operational norms. Their six norms offer an interesting insight into the dynamic of the Alliance. They require:

• their full engagement during and after meetings;

• decision-making through consensus and subsequently speaking with one voice;

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- being respectful of each other and of their group decisions;

- having a focussed and relevant agenda;

- showing trust so that meetings are safe places to share, and

- laughing together and making the experience enjoyable for all.

Of these norms the group spoke most particularly of the centrality of trust. That trust is deep and wide – principals trusting each other; school leaders trusting middle leaders; staff and leaders trusting each other; communities trusting their schools, and importantly, the trust within the Alliance team. As Toni says:

"We learnt really early on that trust was very important and that the group would break without trust. So, we had to do we had put systems in place to create that trust and that professionalism, but also built the friendships."

It's this trust that allows them to share failures and struggles and seek advice from each other on effecting change. Amber believes that in her smaller school context she doesn't feel alone and can tap into the larger supportive group to share those challenges. Naomi points out the need for trust and professional respect is amplified in the context of close-knit country communities where partners or colleagues' children may be in each other's schools.

The Sapphire Community of Schools is not a recent invention. The principals of the schools within the area have long-established professional relationships. They play a crucial leadership role in the operation of their Learning Alliance. At their regular breakfast meetings, they agree the directions for the group, which are then developed at the wider Alliance meeting, comprised of representatives from all the schools. The two-way communication between the sets of meetings is essential to ensure clarity and to maintain momentum. The principals, leaders and Impact Coaches form the engine of change that is the Learning Alliance.

There is collective responsibility for the organisation of the Learning Alliance. For example, Melinda, the Principal of Tingha Public who arranged my interview, passed me on to the safe hands of her colleagues. As with all they do, it's an organic, collaborative effort. People assume responsibility as needed. Even the membership of meetings changes regularly, with different school representatives moving seamlessly in and out. This shared ownership is fundamental to the sustainability of the Alliance.

Most important of all are their pedagogical ways of working. Here it's about utilising the Visible Learning+ Impact Cycle of determining student learning needs and teacher learning needs, identifying high impact interventions, implementing, and evaluating impact to determine next steps. The focus

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is on "what works best" and the ultimate point is the core business of determining impact on student learning.

The Centrepiece

In 2020, all the Sapphire schools will be introduced to the draft of a living document that encapsulates the work of the Alliance. As Carla says:

"We actually have created and deliberately designed a vision and strategy for ourselves about what teaching and learning looks like for our communities."

It's a guide that articulates the vision and purpose of the Sapphire Learning Alliance; makes explicit the mindframes[iii] teachers bring to quality practice, and sets out the goals the schools share - related to a growth mindset; learning goals; collaboration; evidence-based practice; feedback; assessment, and the language of learning.

The focus is squarely on excellence in teaching and learning and making explicit what's entailed in achieving that excellence. Expectations are clear and unequivocal. Importantly, these expectations of teacher practice continue to be supported through ongoing professional learning, impact coaching and instructional leadership. The aim is to develop Visible Learners: learners who are clear about what they are learning, how they are doing and their next steps; learners who know how to learn and draw on effective learning dispositions. As they look to 2020 and beyond, the Learning Alliance team see the Guide as the centrepiece of their collaboration.

One of the resulting future strategies will be inter-school walk-throughs or "learning snapshots" as they call them, where colleagues from across the schools visit each other and provide feedback on practice. The strategy is a practical expression of their commitment to collective efficacy[iv], whereby they not only share ideas and resources but, in pursuing their common goals, are intentional and accountable to and for each other.

Stronger Together

Our conversation flows across the afternoon. As if in one continuous breath, the colleagues effortlessly tag-team through our discussion, willing me to appreciate their distinctive circumstances and collaboration. I'm treated to a cameo of their ways of working. They want it understood why and how they draw strength from each other in serving the children of their communities. Their collective mission as teachers and leaders is to know their impact and to act to ensure all their students are learning and progressing. Toni explains it's not about silos but about being a dynamic group that's stronger together than apart. She's confident in saying:

We've got a group that's driven by pedagogy and that's trying to improve themselves as professionals… and inspiring each other.

So, there you have the Sapphire Learning Alliance. As they confront the tyrannies of distance and environmental and economic hardship, they not only inspire each other but all those who might follow their lead in giving absolute priority to excellence in teaching and learning - not despite their context, but because it matters.

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[i]Wright, Judith. (1946). "South of My Days". The Moving Image: Poems. Melbourne: Meanjin Press.

[ii]Sweller, J. (1994). 'Cognitive load theory, learning difficulty, and instructional design', Learning and Instruction, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 295-312.

[iii]Hattie, J. & Zierer, K. (2018). Ten Mindframes for Visible Learning: Teaching for Success. London: Routledge.

[iv]Donohoo, J. (2016). Collective Efficacy: How Educators' Beliefs Impact Student Learning. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.