

# **The Gowrie Street CONVERSATIONS with KIDS Program**

**An evaluation for**

**Greater Shepparton Lighthouse**

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## Introduction

CONVERSATIONS with KIDS (CWK) is an informal early years language initiative, co-ordinated and delivered weekly by volunteers at Gowrie Street Primary School in the Victorian regional city of Shepparton. Commencing at the start of Term 1, 2016, a group of Shepparton residents have provided voluntary support for the school's early years staff at weekly sessions that "*focus on improving [young childrens'] language skills through conversation*" and "*bringing these skills up-to-speed in a relaxed environment*". The initiative is part of a broader Volunteers program that is one of multiple actions being developed and co-ordinated by the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse organisation within its **Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project**.

According to a recent article in the *Shepparton News* (9 June 2016), positive results achieved to date by CWK are prompting Greater Shepparton Lighthouse to consider piloting the initiative at other local schools.<sup>1</sup> The current report examines the aims, rationale and delivery of CWK over its first six months.

## Background & Context

Greater Shepparton Lighthouse (GSL) is a collective entity that is representative of the broader community and includes more than a hundred organisations within the private, community, not-for-profit, philanthropic and State, Local & Federal Government sectors. Describing itself as "*a community of change*" that is "*united by a common purpose and shared goals*", GSL aims (over a 20 year time-frame) to effect social changes that will enable "*every child in Greater Shepparton every chance to realise their full potential*". GSL's long-term goals are: 'Supported families'; happy, healthy, secure and successful children and young people; and 'vibrant communities'. The vehicle for achieving these goals is the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project (the GSLP).<sup>2</sup>

The GSLP was launched in 2013 in response to concern at persistence within the LGA of such indicators of disadvantage as early years language and literacy deficits; low school retention rates and transition to higher education; and higher than average levels of youth unemployment, teen pregnancy, youthful offending, family violence and drug use. While, at one level, a shift over recent decades from manufacturing to service-based businesses has severely impacted on the opportunities for early school leavers to access employment in Greater Shepparton, at another level there is a perception that local schools are failing to facilitate awareness of, and pathways into, the diverse employment opportunities that do exist in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, D. (2016) Spotlight on learning: Lighthouse Project shows students the way, *Shepparton News*, 9 June

<sup>2</sup> Fitzgerald, D. (2010) *Disadvantage & Inequity in rural and regional Victoria: a response from Catholic Social Services Vic to the Inquiry into the extent and nature of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Vic by the Rural & Regional Committee of Federal Parliament*. Melbourne: CSSV.p3-4

Substantial Federal and State Government investment in social and welfare initiatives over recent decades (most notably the Best Start and Communities for Children projects) has gone some way towards tackling the issues confronting Shepparton. However, there remains strong feeling within the community:

- that Government provision of additional resources is not enough and that considerably more might be achieved; and
- that real impact and change will be dependent on greater community consultation, engagement and collaboration.

Taking its lead from successful American initiatives that include the COLLECTIVE IMPACT MODEL developed at Stanford University, the GSLP is seeking *“to mobilise people in Shepparton to work in a concerted, strategic way across all levels of the community, sectors and conventional boundaries, to improve the wellbeing and educational engagement and performance of each child”*.<sup>3</sup>

Following the tabling of three intensive research reports and a formal Strategic plan in 2015<sup>4</sup>, the GSLP recently moved from its initial ‘Exploring’ (i.e. fact-finding and pre-planning) phase into an ‘Action’ phase that is framed by 19 Priorities for Action. (These priorities range from the engagement of Shepparton’s professional community in Collective action to the development of shared – and cross-sectoral – data collection processes, creation of Mentoring opportunities and location of welfare and support services within a suite of Primary school hubs). GSL has elected to commence implementation of its Action phase by focusing on an initial six priority areas, that are the development of: a **Youth Space or Youth Hub in Shepparton**, a **Middle Years Experiential Learning Project** (drawing on the Dookie Campus of the University of Melbourne), a **Sector Leadership program**, a **Careers/Pathways initiative** and an initiative that connects local youth to **Sports, Arts and Music options**, and a **Volunteers Program**. The Conversation with Kids (CWK) pilot fits neatly under the ‘umbrella’ of the last, i.e. the GSLP’s Volunteers Program.

Drawing in diverse ways on the mentoring skills, professional backgrounds, goodwill and community commitment of (predominantly retired) Shepparton residents, the Volunteers Program predates the formal creation of the GSLP, having been successfully trialled in a number of Shepparton schools since 2012. Partnering GSL with the Goulburn Valley Community Fund, the program has been providing support to educational settings identified as ‘disadvantaged’ on the basis of low parental volunteering or participation in School council, low AEDI and high SEIFA ratings, large numbers of Indigenous and refugee families, and so on. Examples of volunteer input to date have included a weekly lunchtime knitting circle, assistance with a school breakfast program, provision of lunches, development of an on-campus vegetable

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<sup>3</sup> For detail on Collective Impact theory, see the GSLP Strategic Plan.

<sup>4</sup> See Sexton Consulting (2015) *Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project. One thousand conversations: Project Report*, August 2015; Fiona Johnson Consulting (2015) *GSLP: Youth Services Mapping Final Report*, August 2015

garden and creation of a number of scholarships.<sup>5</sup> Based on the recommendations of an evaluation tabled in August 2015, progressing of the Volunteers Program has included appointment of a part-time Volunteers co-ordinator, Fiona Smolenaars, and expanded outreach that includes development of the CWK pilot at Gowrie Street Primary School.<sup>6</sup>

## Research Design

Both the University of Melbourne and Latrobe University have been identified as potential partners in addressing GSLP priorities, in particular in the establishment of an alternative Year 9 experience and the development of program-related research initiatives. (The Vice-chancellors of both universities are Patrons of the GSL). University of Melbourne support to date has included a Vice Chancellor's Grant to enable the Youth Research Centre to complete both a short status update on the 'Exploring' phase of the GSLP<sup>7</sup> and the current Evaluation Report.

Development and delivery of the CWK Pilot Program has been guided by the general aim of ***Building vocabulary skills in early years students.***

The evaluation examines the success or otherwise of the CWK in achieving this aim at Gowrie Street Primary School.

### ***Timeline***

Evaluation of the program has been conducted in June-July 2016.

### ***Evaluation Activities***

Data has been generated by

- (a) a sequence of interviews and focus groups conducted at Gowrie Street PS and the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Offices.

Interviews were conducted with:

- Lisa McKenzie and Fiona Smolenaars (GSL, 10 June 2016)
- Travis Eddy, School Principal, & three Early years teachers (Gowrie St PS, 20 June 2016 & Nov 2016)
- Roseleigh Priestly, Program leader, & seven volunteers (Gowrie St PS, 21 June 2016)

- (b) Oral Language assessment data (supplied by Gowrie St PS).

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<sup>5</sup> For further detail, see the Innovative outcomes evaluation, *Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project Volunteer Program Review and Recommendations, August 2015.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>7</sup> Stokes, H. & Turnbull, M. *The Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project: a Summary of initiatives and activities undertaken during the project's phase*, unpublished report, tabled in October 2015.

# Evaluation Findings

## Context

### The Setting

Enrolments at Gowrie Street Primary School reportedly reflect the socio-economic and cultural diversity of the Greater Shepparton community. Between 25-30% of 280 students in 2016 are Indigenous; 20% are ESL students; 40% of the remainder can be identified as Low SES. At the same time, it is noted that recent years have seen a slight increase in “middle class” families. The SFO “still hovers around .8 but is declining”, notes Principal Travis Eddy. There are 50 teaching and support staff.



A distinctive feature of Gowrie Street is its on-site Early Childhood Centre (ECC). According to the Principal, this facility (a) acknowledges the crucial importance of pre-school intervention, socialisation and education in attempting to counter the negative impacts on school readiness and learning engagement associated with social disadvantage; and (b) articulates the school’s commitment to

tackling the limited learning experiences that are characteristic of its particular demographic. (“We do it because we know it’s good to do. It’s all a lot of work but we’ve got ‘the right people in the right seats on the bus’”). Initially set up in the 1990s to assist families looking for an alternative site following closure of two local church-hall kindergartens, the ECC has since evolved as part of the overall school. It currently encompasses two fully funded 15 hour Kinder programs, a full fee-paying Three-year-old Fun group, and four hours daily of Occasional Care (the last accessible to infants as young as three months). The ECC also houses a Paediatric Clinic with a view to supporting children with high needs before they commence Prep.

The Principal notes that the ECC is helping increase higher socio-economic enrolments, and thereby “providing a bit of balance”. The “last couple of years” having seen “a marked increase in kids starting Prep after having completed Kinder on site”, the ECC’s greatest impact is (in his opinion) being felt at Transition.

*“The kids start Prep familiar with the environment ... there’s no down time ... the staff already know them and it adds another dimension when the teachers talk to each other over transition statements ...”.*

Even so, it is acknowledged that up to 30% of current Prep enrolments have still not experienced Kindergarten, and lag significantly behind their peers in terms of expressive and receptive language. (This clearly reflects the finding that 24.6% of Greater Shepparton’s children test as vulnerable in one or more domains of Australian Early Development Census, as compared with a state average of 19.5%).<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, when asked by GSL ‘What can we do in your school?’, school leadership immediately identified targeting early years language levels as

<sup>8</sup> Greater Shepparton City Council (2014) *The State of Greater Shepparton’s Children Report 2014*, p.8

a priority. The school also recognised the need to start bringing in the volunteers as quickly as possible. (“Given how far some of the kids are already needing to catch up ... It’s a question of how much growth do we lose before we start doing something”).

## Program rationale

The recognition by Gowrie Street staff that tackling language delays is an educational imperative aligns with regional findings (collated during the ‘Exploring’ phase of the GSLP) indicating the persistence of lower than (State) average rates across Greater Shepparton of:

- Kindergarten attendance; or
- parents reading regularly to their child and actively involving themselves in their child’s education.

*“We know the levels are low. We also know more and more that trauma [associated with generational poverty] can affect the child’s capacity to participate ... Our kids come in with lower knowledge sets of the upper and lower alphabets, the Golden Words and so on. Our teachers do a fantastic job but some of this year’s Grade 1s still came out of Prep with quite low scores on letter identification, sight words and so on ... Instead of trying to get them when they get to Grade 2 with Reading Recovery, we need to fast track them now. We’re struggling to get them up to speed – and we need some intensive involvement at this point ... [The program] opens up a door ... not only to have general conversation with child, but also to do the one on one stuff”. [Principal, Gowrie Street PS].*

Likewise, support for CWK taps into the solid body of research, pioneered by Bernstein (1960) and Deutsch (1965), and subsequently amplified by the likes of Locke (2002), Hoff (2006) and Ginsborg (2006)<sup>9</sup>, that has demonstrated and confirmed the nexus between language functioning and social class and/or minority status. Both Deutsch and Hoff, for instance, have explored the influence of level of parental education on the extent of time spent by mothers verbally interacting with their child, the nature of language used during those interactions (i.e. employment of *restrictive* or *directive* use of language as opposed to *elaborative* usage), and the child’s capacity to use language to analyse, reflect, reason and consider possibilities. Ginsborg

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<sup>9</sup> Bernstein, B. (1960) Language and social class, *British Journal of Sociology* 11 (3): 271-276 ;

Deutsch, M. (1965) ‘The role of social class in language development and cognition’, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 35(1): 78-88;

Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. & Peers, I. (2002) Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond, *International Journal of Language & Communication disorders* 37(1): 3-13;

Hoff, E (2006). "How social contexts support and shape language development." *Developmental Review* 26.1: 55-88;

Ginsborg, J. (2006) The effects of socio-economic status on children’s language acquisition and use, in *The language of social disadvantage*, ed. J. Clegg & J. Ginsborg, Chichester 2006.

has bluntly identified the low SES cohort as (a) almost twice as likely to experience RECEPTIVE language delays, and (b) FIVE times as likely to experience EXPRESSIVE language delays.<sup>10</sup>

## Program Participation

The CWK augments a number of initiatives that have been implemented by the school in recent years aimed at improving language and literacy levels. These have included participation in:

- a Best Start-funded initiative that, in providing pre-Prep children with Book bags and readers, aimed to assist parents in preparing them for starting school; and
- the *Opt In* program, aimed at improving Reading levels in Grade 3 (i.e. the first year of NAPLAN testing), also draws on the skills of volunteers.

*“The whole idea is to give our kids a leg up”,* summarises the Principal.

Both Conversations with Kids (CWK) and the larger GSLP volunteer program are tapping into a strong volunteer ethos within the Greater Shepparton community. According to Gowrie Street’s Principal, the CWK *“ladies”* (and one male volunteer) are:

*“... all well-educated people ... a lot of them have teaching skills ... there’s [also] a naturopath and a retired psychologist... they’re all parents and grandparents and a lot of them knew each other before they started. They’ve built the program themselves, taken on responsibility for the sessions ... setting their own plan ... In terms of value, each one of them is providing input that [otherwise] might cost us \$35-\$50 an hour. They’re enabling the teachers to work with smaller groups themselves ... this makes for more intensive teaching ...”.*

During Term 1 & 2, 2016, 17 volunteers have worked with 23 Students (15 in Prep and 8 in Grade 1). The student participants are described as:

*“Kids identified by the class teachers as likely to benefit from the additional attention ... kids who struggle a bit ... very basic readers, very basic users of oral language ... poor articulation, a sense of structure that is under-developed for five-six year olds ... a couple are ESL students, but in the main, they’re kids who are not getting language experiences at home ... they’re used to hearing their families use directive language like ‘Get to bed’ instead of chatting ... by contrast, the volunteers are able to have conversations with them in a less directive way. ”*

## Program history & delivery

CWK grew out of an informal address by the GSLP volunteers co-ordinator to members of the Shepparton Ladies Golf Club in December 2015. According to CWK’s volunteer leader Rose Priestly : *“We choose an annual charity to support ... Fiona spoke about Greater Lighthouse and we noted that a lot of us are ex-teachers who have something to offer. About ten of us are from the Golf Club”.* (Mrs Priestly, a life-long Shepparton resident, is a retired Primary Principal and both a former student and former teacher at Gowrie Street). A training session, led by Sally Rose,

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<sup>10</sup> Ginsborg, *ibid*.

Director of Children & Family Services for the City of Greater Shepparton Council in January 2016, brought in additional recruits (among them women with backgrounds in psychology and naturopathy), and provided basic guidelines on how to engage children, how to use conversation to expand vocab, etc. Program delivery, i.e. supporting teachers in the school's Prep and Grade 1 classes during the morning Literacy block, commenced on the second Tuesday of Term 1.

From the outset, the manner of working, rostering and liaison have all been driven by the volunteers themselves, enabling GSL to focus on overall co-ordination and entrenchment of the organisation's relationship with school leadership. Program leader Rose Priestly organises each Tuesday's volunteers by text (using the WhatsApp device); to date, she reports that this has been "*hiccough-free*", with volunteers happily "*covering for each other*" if and when unavailable. Conceding that "*we were not sure how we were going to operate at the start*", Mrs Priestly notes that trial and error (punctuated by informal discussion with teachers, regular debriefing and brainstorming with each other over coffee) has produced the current *modus operandi*, i.e. a mixture of small group work and withdrawal for 1:1 activities. According to Mrs Priestly:

*"In the PREP area, 3 or 4 or 5 volunteers take about 10-12 children from their classroom ... We generally start with a group story, then divide the children into smaller groups. In these groups we have been doing different activities, drawing, puzzles, Leggo, reading together, playing memory, playing with construction toys, etc. ... using whatever interests them. During all these activities, the children are encouraged to engage in conversation".*

Recognition that some students have already experienced failure before completing Prep has underlined:

*"... the need for us to go one on one with individual kids in Grade 1 ... quick, short, sharp ... giving kids who might have high needs that extra attention ... helping them concentrate without being distracted ... giving them some continuity ... enabling them to experience success and negating some of that early sense of failure".*

While volunteer Interviewees note that the program is "very fluid ... as much about engagement as anything", they emphasise that the interactions are considerably more than "*just unstructured play ... these are teaching sessions where we're using play to drive learning and expand the child's vocab*". At any one time, as many as 10-12 volunteers are supporting the teachers across the two grades.

## **Documentation & Assessment**

Volunteers and school staff acknowledge the importance of recording changes to student performance over the course of program delivery. Accordingly, from commencement of the Pilot, volunteers have:

- maintained a journal for each of the 23 student participants, noting (for instance) any significant achievement during a CWK session, or any topic or theme that might have elicited a particularly positive response from the child;

- debriefed informally with teachers at the end of each session;
- met, as a group of volunteers and teachers, to discuss the program at the end of each term.

Because CWK has been running for only two terms (at the time of writing), it has not yet been possible to quantify changes to student performance as recorded on school data sets. It is anticipated, however, that Term III re-testing, utilising the English on-line and Marie Clay Record of Oral Language tools, will affirm the positive feedback the program has elicited from teachers and volunteers.

## Program Outcomes

### *For the school*

Gowrie Street's Principal and teachers report that the school has welcomed the program and that the CWK volunteers are providing *"real added value ... as extra pairs of hands and ears"*. They note that *"on a general day we have between 45 and 50 Preps ... two class-teachers and another two teachers in the Literacy block plus two teacher-aides, making our ratios around 1:8 ... when the volunteers come in they go down to 1:3 or 1:4 ... making it possible for more kids to have more 1:1 attention from an adult"*. By spending time with individuals or small groups of children who are *"struggling"*, the volunteers are likewise enabling teachers to focus more intensely on the needs of the rest of the class.

Teachers report:

- a general improvement in the students' letter recognition (according to the Principal, *"a shift the teachers wouldn't otherwise see"*) In one instance, the child was able to recognise only six letters at the start of the year, and *"is now up to 40 or 50"*.
- that experiencing success through CWK has contributed to improved classroom behaviour in several instances; and
- that, as a result of gains made through working with a volunteer, several children have already been able to 'graduate' from CWK back into the main class group during the Tuesday session. (For example: *"One little fellow he was very young, very timid ... now his learning gone ahead, more confident to speak, so we took him out of the program and left the ones who really needed it"*).

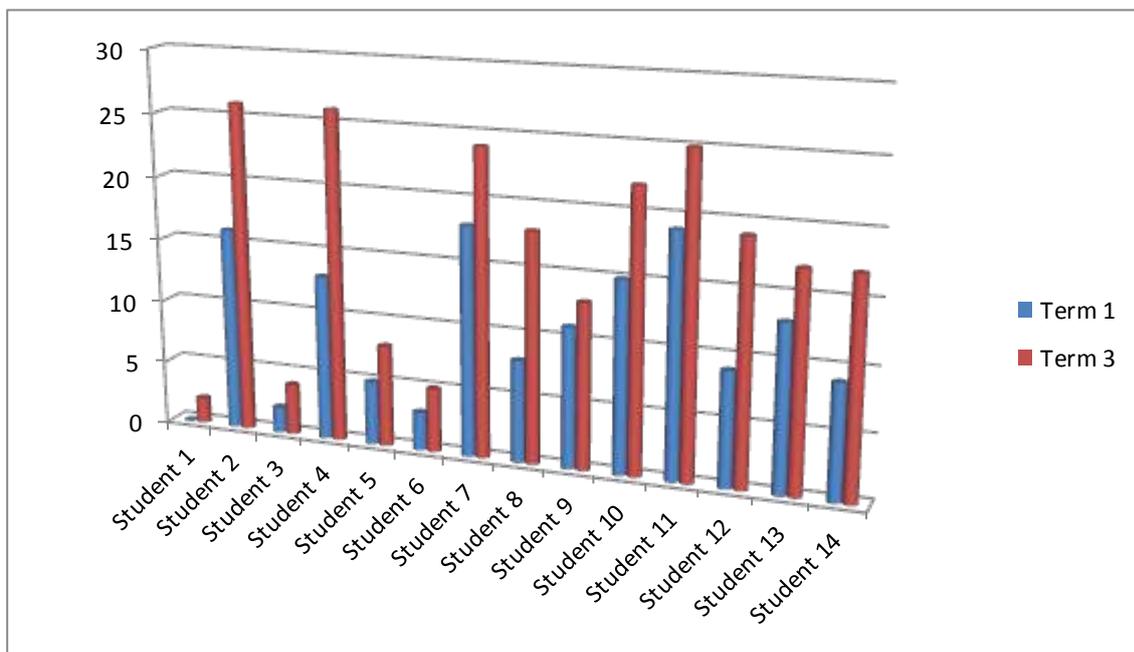
Positive responses from school staff are echoed by the volunteers who have cited a number of specific "success stories", including the instances of:

- A little girl who, at the start of the year, sat in isolation and was reluctant to look at books. With volunteer assistance, she recently wrote a card to her parents, informing them that *"you should be so proud of me, I'm writing this by myself"*.
- One little boy, who sat scowling at the volunteers at the start of the year and was prone to tantrums, has become eager to contribute. (*"We can't stop him reading now ... he's really proud of himself ... when I heard him read last week he said: 'I'm very good at this'"*).

- Another little boy, formerly quite disengaged, was annoyed at arriving too late for his Tuesday 1:1 time, and was heard asking ‘When is it my turn to go with the ladies?’
- Another little boy, who formerly expressed himself through single word utterances and tended to shrug or say ‘forgot’ when asked a question in class, is now able to construct orderly five word sentences and has built up the confidence to commentate on classroom activities.
- A child, recently arrived from Fiji, who started the year non-verbal and with no writing, letter recognition and number knowledge. By the end of Term II, the child was recognising 44 letters and letter combinations and had learned to form sentences.

The school reports that these positive outcomes of CWK have been reflected in the shifts recorded through formal classroom testing. The following chart provides an at-a-glance summary of improvement over two terms for 14 PREP participants in the program, as recorded through ‘Record of Oral Language’ data. <sup>11</sup> Noting that the benchmark for retesting was 14, the class teacher expressed delight that

- 9 students, i.e. 64%, attained or (significantly) exceeded benchmark.



While some improvements in test outcomes were conceded to have been predictable (i.e. as the result of ‘normal growth’ over the year), others were described as “extraordinary”. Pointing specifically to Students #9-14, she noted that all six demonstrated **markedly increased confidence, enhanced engagement** and sufficient **readiness for participation in group**

<sup>11</sup> The Marie Clay Record of Oral Language was originally developed in New Zealand as a means of recording and assessing change in children’s language development. Widely utilised by early Primary teachers, the tool (a) responds to research confirming that many children start school without the oral language skills needed for formal reading/writing instruction, and (b) provides an overall picture of difficulties being experienced by the student within the three broad categories of ‘Meaning’, ‘Grammar’ and ‘Auditory memory’. See: Gentile, L.M. (1996) Oral language: assessment and development in Reading Recovery in the United States, *Literacy, Teaching & Learning* 2(1): 4-5

**learning** to enable them to ‘graduate’ the Conversations program. In her view, this level of improved performance had been facilitated by the **combination of an intensive new Early years Language program (introduced in 2016) and the additional individualised support provided by teacher-trained volunteers through the Conversations Program.**

### ***For GSL and the volunteers***

More than one interviewee has noted the desirability of interventions like CWK in seeking to address what the *1000 Conversations project (2015)* identified as “the biggest and most challenging issue facing the Greater Shepparton community”, i.e. Shepparton’s negative self-image. Noting the pervasiveness of perceptions of Shepparton as “*certainly not a place where you might want to live, work, get educated or raise a family*”, and citing concerns that that such criticism is increasingly “*infiltrating the beliefs of young people*”, Sexton has highlighted the imperative of fostering a more ‘informed’, optimistic and inclusive culture.<sup>12</sup> Implicit in calling for such change is recognition of the need to raise awareness among more affluent community members of (a) the realities and impacts of generational poverty, and (b) the potential for educational innovation to improve the situation.

In this regard, Gowrie Street’s Principal cites the value of CWK in both enlightening some volunteers as to the real challenges being faced by some families, and in promoting the school’s many strengths. (Noting, with satisfaction, that when prospective parents actually tour the school and see what is on offer, “*they are [pleasantly] surprised ... and nine times out of ten they choose us*”, he reports that spending time at the school has likewise been a positive “*eye-opener*” for some of the volunteers).

Feedback from eight members of the CWK team likewise highlights the personal satisfaction and enjoyment the volunteers are deriving from:

- seeing students improve in language and reading and general classroom participation and engagement (eg. learning to take turns and put in effort to gain rewards);
- seeing growth in concentration and confidence in children who were initially resistant or withdrawn. (“*The difference in some kids – then and now – is phenomenal ... Some who used to sit under the table or roll around the floor are now engaging more ... It’s been exciting to see*”); and
- the opportunity to “*give back*” to the community in a practical way that may have longer-term reverberations. As one volunteer, observed:

*“A lot of us have Education backgrounds and, as ex-teachers, we still are able to give something without going back to work ... The Shepparton stats overall have been difficult ... for a long time we’ve been recognising how crucial early years intervention is ... if we can help do something now, it might impact later on and affect the community at large”.*

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<sup>12</sup> 1000 Conversations, p.15-16

Volunteers also acknowledge enjoying the social side of the collective experience, noting that meeting up for coffee in order to debrief or plan activities has proved invaluable in helping them shape the strategies being employed in the classroom. Such informal meetings have also been a factor in enriching the skill base (as the initial cluster of regular golf-players has welcomed in newer recruits).

## Challenges

GSL personnel believe that the main challenge faced by the GSLP to date has been

- establishing the initiative's credentials and profile within the community and
- persuading sub-program partners (including Gowrie Street PS) of its longer-term commitment.

*"People promise the world and then ... six months down the track they're gone ... We've worked at developing the school's realisation that GSL has something tangible to bring to the table ... that we're here for the 'long haul'" (Lisa Mackenzie, GSL).*

Thanks to the skill bases of this particular volunteer cohort, delivery of the CWK component of the GSLP's overall Volunteers sub-program has been largely trouble-free to date. While there was a degree of uncertainty at the start as to (a) procedure and (b) the extent to which the weekly sessions might need to be managed by class teachers, interviewees report uniform agreement that the teaching experience of many of the CWK team quickly refined the roll-out process and enabled the volunteers to take ownership of the program.

A few glitches aside (*"some of the kids tested the boundaries at the start. That's stopped"*), and notwithstanding occasional logistical difficulties (such as finding sufficient quiet spaces for 1:1 work), the main challenges identified by volunteers have tended to be *"only what the teachers are facing, such as kids acting up or understanding what some of the kids are saying"*. Given the personal day to day hurdles being faced by some of the students, both teachers and volunteers are realistic in recognising that some weekly sessions will proceed more smoothly than others (*"Some days are diamonds ... Some days we're philosophical and say 'Better luck next time'"*). At the same time, all adult players recognise the value of the mutually beneficial relationship that has developed between school personnel and the volunteer team.

- Comments by volunteers include: *"The teachers are amazing"* and *"I've never heard a teacher raise her voice to a child"*, *"we had a meeting with the teachers last week and their feedback was really positive"*
- Comments by teachers include: *"We wondered at first 'how is this going to work?' ... now our involvement has become minimal ... We're lucky to have a group who can think on their feet"*.

It is apparent that, the team's enviable skill base aside, CWK is managing to avoid some of the challenges or pitfalls frequently associated with other volunteer initiatives.

- At one level, for instance, CWK differs from volunteer reading/language programs that focus on developing a 1:1 'buddy' relationship between a single volunteer and individual child. Instead, children have been encouraged to get to know, and work with, several visiting adults. Similarly, volunteers have been encouraged to get to know a range of student participants. Thus, should particular volunteers be unavailable on any Tuesday, others can provide a 'familiar face', thereby minimising any impact of a regular volunteer 'going on holiday' or being otherwise unavailable.
- By extension: there is recognition that volunteer initiatives need to strike an effective balance between reliability and continuity (from the point of view of the school) and the volunteers' multiple personal commitments and capacity to sustain their involvement. The pragmatic design of CWK acknowledges that the number of volunteers will inevitably vary week to week, and teachers have demonstrated their readiness to work with whatever adult resources might be available on any one day. (*"Any extra pairs of hands are a bonus"*).
- At a co-ordination level, technology (texting, WhatsApp) has simplified and streamlined what might otherwise have been the onerous task of organising rosters.

There is general agreement that, program flexibility aside, the key strength of CWK is the cohesiveness of a volunteer team comprised of core members (with pre-existing social connections and a mutual interest in education) and additional members who have been well-integrated into the cohort.

## Conclusion

Asked to identify key factors in CWK's success to date (i.e. what is working), interviews have highlighted:

- Recognition by all stakeholders of the inherent value (in terms of the research surrounding early language and literacy development) of the program
- The receptiveness of the school and its willingness to trial the initiative
- The flexibility and co-operation of the teachers
- The skill bases and commitment of the volunteers. (A particular strength of the cohort is its social connectedness, based on pre-existing networks)

From the viewpoint of GSL, CWK is *"ticking several boxes"*. By bringing in people who have strong local networks and a range of professional skills, projects of this nature are a step forward in addressing the breakdown of social fabric and lack of connectedness that has become evident within the Shepparton community.

*“There is a very clear two-tier structure to this community ... Programs like Conversations with Kids can help to bridge the divide ... it’s supporting one of our more vulnerable schools and giving some very vulnerable kids greater access to resources, the luxury of extra time and attention ... it’s targeting kids in the crucial early years of schooling, addressing their needs early, trying to get them up to speed from Day One ... It’s educating some of the volunteers and developing their empathy and their understanding of the realities of poverty in peoples’ lives. They all know some vulnerable students now [while] the kids now know some more trusted adults and role models ... Their enjoyment of working together is an added bonus ... The volunteers are becoming champions for some very vulnerable kids and isolated families and strong advocates for Greater Shepparton Lighthouse” [Lisa McKenzie, GSL].*

## **Where to Next?**

Given the success of CWK to date, it is unsurprising that volunteers and school staff have expressed enthusiasm for continuing. The initiative is seen as a valuable component of the Gowrie Street PS’s overall Language and Literacy outreach and a strategy (along with Reading Recovery and other interventions) towards achieving the current Principal’s goal that every child exit Grade 1 at the required standard. As noted earlier, its success is also providing a platform for GSL to set up CWK in other schools.

Taking a longer term – and bigger picture view, both the school and GSL see CWK (and the larger Volunteers Program) as a conduit in enhancing both community connectedness and community awareness. It is anticipated that (over time, at Gowrie Street and elsewhere):

*“They [volunteers] will start to see brothers and sisters, then whole families ... already teachers have been able to share kids’ backgrounds with the volunteers ... explain the impacts of trauma, build understanding of the complexity of families’ lives ... explain why some weeks kids are more communicative than others” [Principal, Gowrie Street PS]*

From the point of view of the GSLP’s aims, it can be argued that CWK, along with other volunteer activities, is a significant early step towards the community connectedness, collaboration and cultural change needed to realise the goal of enabling “every child in Greater Shepparton every chance to realise their full potential“.

*“There’s readiness to volunteer in the community ... Through the 1000 Conversations report, we’re aware that there’s a cohort of middle class people available, willing and accessible ... people who have circles within the more affluent community of Shepparton ... business circles [etc] where they don’t really get it until you have the conversation ... Already the word is getting out ... a lot through word of mouth ... organisations are starting to recognise that GSL is not going away, they’re kicking a few goals and we want to align with them” [Lisa McKenzie, GSL].*

