University of South Australia

Implementing Self-Regulated Learning in South Australian Primary Schools

A qualitative study of teacher and leader perspectives

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a qualitative evaluation of a Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) initiative trialled in South Australian public primary schools. The study complements a randomised controlled trial by exploring how SRL was enacted by educators, how it influenced student engagement and learning behaviours, and what conditions are needed to support effective and sustainable implementation across diverse school contexts.

SRL refers to the strategic process by which learners plan, monitor, and reflect on their learning. It is increasingly recognised as a foundational capacity linked to academic progress, emotional regulation, and learner agency. This initiative aimed to foster SRL through consistent use of reflective language, collaborative goal setting, and supportive classroom structures that encourage students to manage their learning with growing independence. The qualitative component draws on teacher focus groups and school leader interviews across a representative range of sites, with a focus on developmental, contextual, and cultural conditions influencing implementation and impact.

Key Findings

Educators observed meaningful shifts in student behaviour, mindset, and engagement. Across diverse school contexts, teachers reported that students became more reflective, showed increased willingness to take risks, and demonstrated persistence when encountering challenges. These behaviours emerged most noticeably in settings where SRL was embedded within classroom dialogue, peer collaboration, and routine learning processes.

SRL practices were interpreted and adapted differently depending on site culture and team dynamics. Teachers made localised adjustments to language, visuals, and strategy framing to suit their learners' needs, with considerable variation observed in how the SRL approach was taken up across schools. These adaptations often improved student accessibility, but also highlighted the importance of shared understanding and collaborative planning to ensure coherence across classrooms.

Developmental stage influenced how students engaged with SRL. Younger learners tended to rely heavily on structured supports and modelling, with successful engagement depending on how well SRL strategies were made tangible and relatable. In contrast, students in the middle and upper primary years were more able to articulate their goals and apply SRL behaviours independently, particularly when supported through peer interaction and feedback.

The impact of SRL varied across school contexts, reflecting differences in local conditions and resourcing. Teachers working in communities facing greater structural and socio-economic challenges described both the promise and the complexity of embedding SRL in their classrooms. In these settings, approaches that were adapted to meet students' diverse needs, through simplified tools, consistent routines, and strong relational practices, were seen to support engagement and accessibility. Where schools were able to provide continuity, leadership support, and opportunities for collaborative planning, SRL practices gained traction. In other cases, competing demands and limited capacity made it more difficult to embed SRL consistently, highlighting the importance of flexibility and targeted support in implementation planning.

Leadership support shaped staff confidence and consistency. Leaders who championed SRL, aligned it with site goals, and facilitated opportunities for reflection and peer learning created conditions where teachers were more likely to trial, refine, and sustain SRL practices. Conversely, where leadership engagement was limited, teachers reported feeling isolated in their efforts and uncertain about how to embed the approach meaningfully.

Peer learning, modelling, and shared experimentation supported deeper engagement. Teachers were more likely to persist with SRL when they had opportunities to observe its use in real classrooms, reflect on student responses with colleagues, and adapt strategies collaboratively. Professional growth occurred not through one-off sessions, but through short cycles of trial, dialogue, and refinement anchored in daily practice.

Educators viewed SRL as complementary to existing pedagogical priorities. When SRL was seen to reinforce current approaches, such as Berry Street, it was more likely to be taken up as part of the broader instructional ethos. Where it was positioned as an additional or disconnected program, implementation was more fragmented.

Recommendations

1. Reframe SRL as a foundational pedagogical approach: For SRL to be successfully adopted across South Australian schools, it must be framed not as a discrete initiative or time-limited program, but as a core pedagogical framework underpinning learner agency, motivation, and resilience. When positioned in this way, SRL can serve as a unifying structure that integrates seamlessly with current departmental priorities, including curriculum delivery, well-being, and differentiated instruction. The initiative should therefore be communicated as a key enabler of system goals, not an additional responsibility.

2. Promote whole-site adoption as the norm, not the exception: Evidence from both teachers and school leaders underscores that the consistent and sustained impact of SRL depends on whole-site adoption. Fragmented implementation, where SRL is confined to individual classrooms or year levels, undermines continuity for students and reduces overall efficacy. A whole-site approach ensures consistency in language, expectations, and routines, which is particularly important for students transitioning between classes or year levels.

3. Facilitate cross-curricular and contextual integration: SRL strategies were most effective when they were integrated across curriculum areas and embedded into everyday teaching practice rather than delivered in isolated sessions. This approach enabled students to internalise SRL as a generalisable method of problem-solving, applicable to both academic tasks and social-emotional regulation. Treating SRL as a pedagogical lens rather than a separate content strand fosters deeper learning and increased transfer.

4. Provide age- and developmentally appropriate scaffolds: The successful uptake of SRL is highly dependent on students' developmental readiness. Younger learners, particularly those in Foundation to Year 2, require structured, concrete tools and repeated modelling to engage with SRL concepts. These supports should be gradually reduced as students develop greater independence. This developmental sensitivity is essential to ensure equity of access and effectiveness across year levels.

5. Ensure equity by supporting contextual adaptation in low-SES schools: Schools in lower socio-economic contexts face distinct challenges that affect the implementation of SRL, including higher levels of student need, a lack of learning strategies development in the early

childhood and limited external supports. Teachers in these settings require flexible, easily adaptable resources and may benefit from enhanced coaching and modelling support. Simplifying language, using concrete visuals, and embedding SRL into predictable routines were especially important in these contexts.

6. Invest in Practical, Peer-Led Professional Learning: A critical enabler of success was the availability of professional learning that was sustained, classroom-embedded, and practically oriented. Teachers responded positively to opportunities to see SRL in action through peer demonstration, real-life case studies, and co-reflection with colleagues. Short, iterative learning experiences were more effective than one-off sessions. Similarly, leaders reported that teacher ownership and confidence grew when SRL professional learning was closely aligned with everyday instructional realities.

7. Standardise SRL Language and Artefacts Across Sites: Creating a consistent, recognisable language of SRL across classrooms strengthens student understanding, supports internalisation, and facilitates transfer. Visual artefacts, such as goal posters, feedback frameworks, and reflection prompts, played an important role in making SRL visible and habitual. System-wide guidance on these artefacts, while allowing room for local customisation, can enhance coherence and shared practice.

8. Support Strategic Leadership and Distributed Ownership: Leadership emerged as a defining factor in implementation success. Where leaders took active roles in reinforcing the SRL approach, monitoring practice, and facilitating professional dialogue, uptake was deeper and more sustainable. Leaders also contributed to school-wide consistency and ensured that SRL was embedded within broader improvement priorities. Distributed leadership, where responsibility for SRL is shared across coordinators, lead teachers, and professional learning communities, enhances the capacity for system-level scaling.

9. Enable Structured Reflection and Feedback Loops: Sustained improvement requires ongoing opportunities for schools to reflect, share experiences, and adapt. Leaders and teachers benefited from structured spaces to examine impact, refine strategies, and learn from peers. This kind of iterative practice fosters ownership, innovation, and local relevance. Feedback loops also help policymakers refine support based on real-time classroom insights.

10. Enable staged implementation through regional collaboration: A regionally coordinated approach to scaling SRL can support consistency, collaboration, and contextual adaptation across schools. Establishing implementation clusters enables peer learning, joint resource development, and shared problem-solving, while maintaining alignment with system-wide pedagogical goals. Early adopters within each region can play a central role in modelling practice and supporting sustained uptake across the network.

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1. Introduction

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is increasingly recognised as a core competency that underpins academic success, student well-being, and lifelong learning (Panadero, 2017; Zimmerman, 2000). SRL refers to the process by which learners actively manage their own learning through the deployment of cognitive, metacognitive, emotional, and motivational strategies. The ability to set goals, utilise strategies, monitor progress, adapt approaches, and reflect on outcomes has been consistently linked to improved learning outcomes across diverse educational contexts (Dent & Koenka, 2016). As such, there is growing interest in embedding SRL explicitly into curriculum and pedagogy, particularly in the primary years, where foundational habits and learner identities are formed (Perry et al., 2020).

Building on this foundation, a statewide SRL initiative was launched in South Australian primary schools, anchored by a pragmatic cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT) evaluating a structured SRL intervention (Brinkman et al., 2025). The intervention is directly informed by the German RCT conducted by Schunk et al. (2022), which demonstrated significant gains in impulse control, self-regulating and performance among primary-aged students through a school-based SRL program grounded in the "WOOPS" approach. WOOPS aims to provide students with structured opportunities to identify learning goals (Wishes), visualising a desirable outcome (Outcome), anticipate and manage barriers (Obstacles), creating actionable “if-then” plans (Plan) and engaging in ongoing self-monitoring to track progress and adjust strategies as needed (Self-monitoring). The intervention draws on implementation intentions theory (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2006), and recent advances in self-regulation research in early and middle childhood (Chatzipanteli et al., 2014; Whitebread & Basilio, 2012).

The study protocol (Brinkman et al., 2025) outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the intervention, which draws on social cognitive theory (Zimmerman, 2000), cognitive psychology (Duckworth et al., 2013; Efklides, 2011), and implementation science (Ryan et al., 2024) to guide its structure and delivery. Key features include structured support for the development of SRL strategies (goal setting, obstacle identification, strategy experimentation, mistake detection and self-monitoring), the integration of these strategies across multiple subject areas, and the use of visual scaffolds and shared language to promote transfer.

To complement the quantitative findings from the RCT, a robust qualitative component was embedded to explore how the intervention was perceived and enacted by key stakeholders. This report synthesises findings from teacher focus groups and one-on-one interviews with school leaders, conducted to understand how SRL strategies were received in practice, how they manifested in student behaviours and outcomes, and what supports are required for sustainable, system-wide implementation. By foregrounding the voices of educators and leaders, this qualitative analysis provides important context for interpreting the trial results and shaping future policy directions.

In doing so, it responds to broader calls in the education research literature for studies that not only measure efficacy, but also interrogate *how*, *why*, and *under what conditions* evidence-based interventions succeed or falter in real-world settings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The focus on both classroom-level dynamics and whole-site cultural change further acknowledges that SRL is not merely a set of skills, but a pedagogical shift requiring coherence across instructional practices, leadership priorities, and systemic supports.

Part 1 – Teacher focus groups

The first part of this study employed a qualitative design to explore teacher experiences and perspectives following their participation in a RCT focused on the implementation of a SRL approach in primary school classrooms. The primary aim was to understand how the SRL intervention manifested in learners, the contextual and developmental factors influencing implementation, and the conditions necessary for sustained practice change.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Six focus groups were conducted with a total of 30 primary school teachers who participated in a randomised controlled trial of a SRL intervention in South Australian public schools. These teachers came from 13 of the 28 intervention schools and represented a diverse range of school contexts. The sample included teachers from schools with varying levels of socio-economic advantage, including three Category 1–3 schools, six Category 4–5 schools, and four Category 6–7 schools. There were 13 teachers working in Year 2, 9 in Year 4, and 8 in Year 6. The sample included teachers from culturally diverse communities and classrooms with a wide spectrum of student learning needs. This diversity supported a broad exploration of how SRL strategies were implemented and adapted across developmental stages, learner profiles, and school settings.

2.2. Data collection

Focus groups were conducted between February and March 2025 with primary school teachers who had delivered the SRL intervention in their classrooms as part of the randomised controlled trial. Each focus group included between 2 and 9 participants and lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Teachers were invited to reflect on the perceived impact of the SRL approach on student engagement, learning behaviours, and outcomes. Discussions also explored the contextual and developmental factors influencing implementation, along with the types of support needed to embed SRL into everyday practice. A semi-structured question guide was used to ensure consistency across sessions, with key questions and prompts included in the Appendix.

Six focus groups were held in total: four conducted face-to-face and two online via Zoom. Each session was facilitated by one of two members of the research team. A representative from the DfE also attended as a non-participatory note taker, supporting the documentation of contextual details and group dynamics.

2.3. Analytical framework

The teacher focus groups were analysed using a thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Byrne, 2022), selected for its capacity to explore patterns of meaning within detailed, context-specific qualitative data. The method was particularly suitable for this study, given its ability to accommodate both predetermined analytical categories and emergent insights from participants' reflections on classroom practice.

Thematic analysis offers the flexibility to trace how teachers interpret, adapt, and embed new pedagogical approaches within diverse settings. This flexibility was important for examining how the SRL approach was enacted in classrooms, and how developmental and contextual variables shaped student uptake and teacher engagement. The method also allows for a layered analysis by connecting individual experiences to broader systemic conditions influencing pedagogical change.

Analysis followed a structured process. Initial familiarisation involved reading all transcripts in full to gain an overview of the data corpus. A coding framework was developed using the key research questions as top-level categories, enabling deductive anchoring while remaining responsive to the language and priorities of participants. Coding focused on meaning-rich segments that illustrated shifts in classroom behaviour, teacher interpretation of SRL principles, and the influence of leadership, school culture, and developmental readiness.

Sub-themes were iteratively identified and refined through discussion among the research team. This process produced a nuanced coding tree that captured the depth and breadth of teacher experience (see Figure 1). The framework emphasised the integration of SRL into daily practice, the use of modelling and peer learning, and the importance of contextual adaptation, particularly in schools serving students with complex needs. Quotations were selected to preserve participants' voices and illustrate the themes in action.

2.4. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 205699). All participants provided informed consent prior to taking part in the focus groups, with clear information outlining the voluntary nature of participation, the confidentiality of their contributions, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

To protect privacy, all focus group transcripts were anonymised during transcription, and identifying information was removed. While participants shared the discussion space with colleagues, they were reminded of the importance of maintaining confidentiality and respecting the views of others. Focus groups were audio-recorded and stored securely on encrypted, password-protected university servers, accessible only to the research team. A representative from the DfE attended each session as a non-participatory note taker to support documentation of contextual detail. This arrangement was made transparent during the consent process, and the note taker did not participate in the discussion or have access to individual-level data.

To support participation and minimise disruption to classroom teaching, teachers were provided with Teacher Relief Time to attend the focus groups, either in person or online. This arrangement was facilitated through existing school and departmental channels.

2.5. Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility was supported through multiple strategies. Data from focus groups were triangulated with findings from the leader interviews and aligned with observations gathered during the broader trial to ensure consistency across data sources. Coding decisions were reviewed collaboratively by the research team, with regular discussion to ensure coherence in theme development and to minimise the influence of individual interpretation.

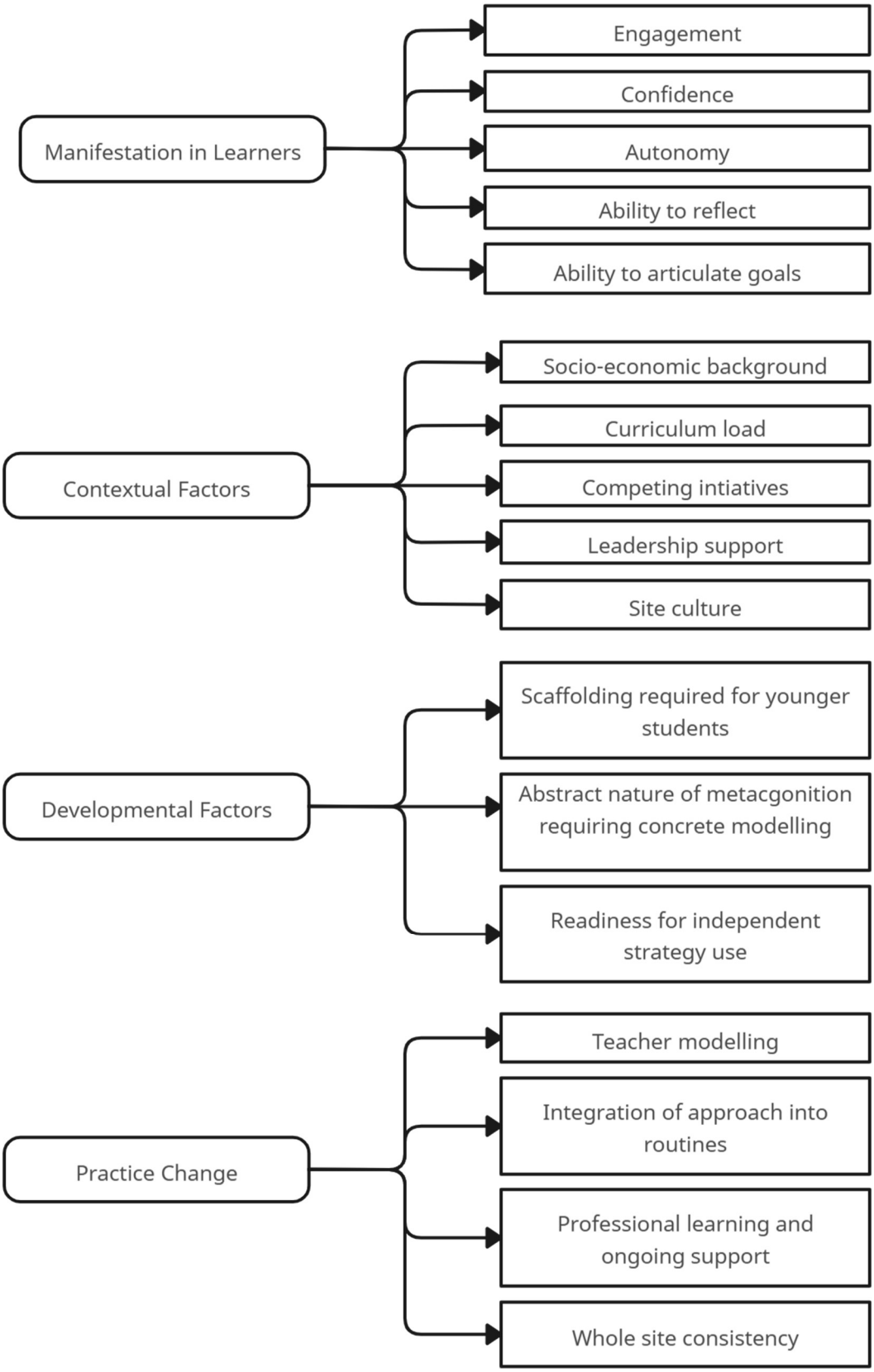

Figure 1: Coding tree for teacher focus groups

3. Results

3.1. How the intervention manifested in learners

3.1.1. Increased autonomy and engagement

Across contexts, teachers described a visible shift in student ownership over learning, especially among those who were already academically motivated or had strong support structures at home. These students often embraced SRL strategies with minimal prompting and were able to extend them across time and learning domains. Teachers noted that these learners began initiating their own goal-setting, self-monitoring, and even long-term planning, behaviours that were not common before the intervention. This emergent autonomy was most pronounced when the strategies were integrated into meaningful tasks or linked to student-identified goals (e.g., preparing for high school or managing a personal project).

> *"I had a year six girl that was really not good at organising and managing her time, but just through teaching this self-regulated learning she sort of picked up what her obstacles were, and she went home and she put together a timetable... I thought that was a good head start for her to start thinking about because she always left things to the last-minute and regulating herself, she realised that time management was something she needed to focus on and an obstacle for her. So, that helped her with setting up her time."*

Importantly, SRL also appeared to mitigate perfectionism and fear of failure in some classrooms, particularly where mistake-friendly practices (e.g., "careless mistake" tracking) were normalised. Students began to interpret errors as part of the learning process rather than as personal shortcomings, contributing to increased academic risk-taking.

> *"I found that academically, they were more willing to try stuff because they weren't so scared about getting it wrong because they knew that there was a method in this. Like there's you're making a wish and you going to make mistakes. It's not like I made a mistake, I can't do it anymore. So, if I make a mistake, then I've got an out. I know what I can do to try to fix it and so they were a lot better at challenging themselves because it wasn't failure wasn't seen as a bad thing."*

3.1.2. Development of reflective thinking

Many teachers observed that SRL helped students develop more sophisticated language around learning and self-awareness. In classrooms where SRL language was consistently used, students began articulating not just what they were doing, but why they were doing it, and what factors might support or hinder their progress. This included awareness of emotional regulation, learning preferences, and the impact of social dynamics on focus and persistence.

> *"I think they got a lot better at giving each other feedback as well. That was specific to their writing goal because when they went and got feedback from each other, they would tell each other what their goal was. And then instead of the feedback being broad and not very helpful, the feedback that they were giving each other became more precise as the year went on."*

> *"They loved telling me that I'd done a careless mistake... getting the kids to write the green M on top and sort of modelling it."*

In addition to peer-to-peer feedback, several teachers highlighted the emergence of student-led adaptation, where students modified or re-applied SRL strategies without teacher prompting. In one example, students independently used SRL frameworks to construct a proposal to their principal around concert attendance procedures, suggesting that they had internalised the method and recognised its relevance beyond academic contexts.

3.2. Contextual factors influencing success

3.2.1. Environmental complexity and socio-economic diversity

Teachers working in high-complexity settings, including those with high numbers of students with trauma backgrounds, language needs, or learning difficulties, consistently noted the need for simplified, concrete tools. These tools not only made SRL more accessible but also helped build shared understanding in classrooms with a wide range of literacy and cognitive skills.

> *"The cognitive load is too much… simplifying it is what helped with those kids."*

> *"For my class, it was making it really simple… and they loved going back with the green pens."*

In these contexts, the SRL approach was most successful when embedded within existing behavioural or social-emotional routines. Several educators described how SRL overlapped with or was reinforced by systems already in use, such as check-in circles, zones of regulation, or ready to learn plans as part of Berry Street. Where this alignment occurred, SRL became an extension of established practice rather than a new cognitive demand.

However, implementation success was not determined solely by student background or need. Rather, it was also mediated by the extent of professional and structural support available to the teacher. Where teachers were isolated, under time pressure, or lacked leadership engagement, even motivated efforts were often short-lived. This finding reinforces the importance of context-sensitive implementation and the need to avoid deficit framing in schools serving complex communities.

> *"I felt very isolated with it all… it needs to be a whole school approach and it needs to be at the beginning of the year."*

3.2.2. Alignment with school values and structures

In schools where SRL aligned with existing pedagogical frameworks (e.g., Berry Street), teachers described smoother integration and stronger staff buy-in. In these settings, the SRL approach was not perceived as an additional task, but as a tool to strengthen existing priorities such as student agency, reflection, or emotional regulation.

Teachers in these environments often adapted SRL language to match the discourse already in place at their school, reinforcing coherence without compromising intent. This adaptation supported implementation fidelity while allowing for local ownership, a balance many teachers found important for sustainability.

> *"It connects with language that's already being used. So, it reinforces that as well."*

3.3. Developmental factors: Age and stage differences

3.3.1. Younger students

Among Foundation to Year 2 learners, uptake of SRL strategies was highly dependent on how concretely the strategies were introduced. Teachers emphasised that young learners often struggled with abstraction and required modelling, repetition, and shared routines to make sense of concepts like obstacles, planning, or self-monitoring.

Several educators adapted SRL tools using storytelling, visual templates, and whole-class goal-setting to support comprehension and retention. These adjustments enabled students to engage in simplified versions of SRL processes and helped establish early habits of reflection. However, transfer across contexts (e.g., from literacy to social settings) was limited unless teachers explicitly connected the strategies throughout the day.

Where SRL was not revisited frequently, students tended to revert to prior habits, underscoring the importance of daily reinforcement, particularly in early years settings where executive function and self-direction are still developing.

> *"Year twos... if you don't do it every day, it's just—it's gone."*

3.3.2. Middle to upper primary

In Years 4 to 6, students generally demonstrated greater capacity to engage with the SRL approach independently, particularly when SRL was connected to purposeful goals (e.g., group projects, behavioural challenges, transition preparation). Teachers found that older students could articulate and monitor individual goals more effectively and were more responsive to peer collaboration and self-reflection opportunities.

However, motivation and engagement still varied significantly between cohorts. Some Year 6 groups, for example, resisted SRL lessons or treated them as disconnected from other learning, suggesting that developmental readiness does not guarantee transfer. Teachers emphasised that student buy-in depended as much on classroom culture and task relevance as on age.

> *"My Year 6s... were organising their own goals... I would know that thing about our goals might say set yourself a goal for your behaviour for this week."*

> *"They did make goals... but they wouldn't kind of keep the language in their heads."*

3.4. Elements for sustainable practice change

3.4.1. Integration into everyday teaching

SRL was most sustainable when it was not treated as a discrete program, but rather integrated into the language and routines of daily teaching. Teachers who embedded SRL prompts into lessons, feedback, or classroom norms reported greater student transfer and retention. These educators noted that SRL strategies were more likely to "stick" when applied flexibly and repeatedly across subjects and social scenarios.

In some cases, teachers described students continuing SRL habits even after the trial period had ended, a sign that the strategies had become internalised.

> *"Not just, 'Hey, we're doing our SRL right now'... referring back to it constantly."*

"Even when we were lax with focusing on the words, what we had embedded kept on happening."

3.4.2. Importance of teacher modelling and peer learning

Teacher modelling played a critical role in building credibility and engagement, especially with students who were initially disengaged. When teachers positioned themselves as co-learners, by openly naming their own challenges, goals, and adjustments, students responded with increased curiosity and commitment. Similarly, classrooms where peer modelling was encouraged saw stronger uptake, particularly when high-engagement students informally led others in applying SRL tools. This suggests that SRL functions not only as a set of individual strategies, but also as a social practice that can be amplified through shared routines and relationships.

"I had to do a little bit more buy-in, so they had felt that I truly engaged with the programme and I was setting goals from myself and doing it with alongside them. I found that helped my disengaged learners."

"The modelling was definitely powerful... I actually feel like the children felt empowered."

3.4.3. Need for consistency and leadership support

Consistency in language, expectations, and reinforcement across year levels and teachers emerged as a foundational condition for sustainable practice. In schools where SRL was embraced by leadership and adopted site-wide, students encountered the same ideas and tools regardless of their classroom, enabling stronger retention and cumulative learning. Conversely, where SRL was seen as a one-off project or restricted to a small team of teachers, it struggled to gain traction. Several participants described feeling unsupported or siloed in their efforts, which reduced the perceived legitimacy of the work and increased the risk of initiative fatigue.

"Whole school approach to the leader at the top and then parents as well."

"I must admit, leadership didn't really come and ask how it was going... I felt very isolated."

3.4.4. Practical adaptations

Teachers displayed creativity in adapting SRL materials and processes to meet the needs of their learners. From visual goal "flowers" to new stories and collaborative discussions about mistakes and obstacles, these adaptations increased student engagement and accessibility. The ability to personalise materials was seen not as a deviation from the model, but as a condition for successful implementation.

"I made it like a little flower. I have the goal in the middle and each of the petals was an obstacle and were on the outside. They found that a lot more fun because they were making a flower and then we put them up and it was like a little garden of our WOOPS goals and that made it a lot more engaging for them."

"I changed the stories, the Herdy stories. I just used Ed chat and came up with some ones that were contextually relevant for the students. I've got lots of people that like basketball, so I have one about a basketball goal."

"And one thing that that I found is that when they were doing the self-monitor for success, they kind of weren't really looking too in depth at their own. Whereas when we did, I changed it and they had, we called it our WOOPS buddies. So, it was a buddy system, and I found that had a massive impact positively on WOOPS itself because then they were keen to be WOOPS detectives and find all the careless mistakes of their friend's book... it was like they're keeping each other accountable... And that was something that I found beneficial was the WOOPS buddy system compared to when they were just doing it themself, especially for careless mistakes that it is."

4. Discussion

These findings demonstrate that teachers observed meaningful improvements in learners' engagement, self-awareness, and behavioural regulation as a result of the SRL intervention. However, successful implementation and sustainability of the approach were contingent on several key factors. Our results confirm prior findings that SRL is not universally adopted unless integrated meaningfully into everyday routines and supported by leadership (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011).

4.1. Learner impact and equity

The SRL approach resonated strongly with students who were already motivated or developmentally ready to engage with metacognitive processes. However, younger students and those from complex backgrounds required additional scaffolds (such as visual cues, peer modelling, and structured routines) to access the same benefits. This highlights the importance of a differentiated, equity-informed approach that considers both developmental stage and socio-contextual complexity.

4.2. Embedding within whole-site culture

One of the clearest findings was the importance of whole-site alignment. Teachers across all focus groups highlighted that consistency in SRL language, leadership support, and shared ownership across the site were critical enablers of success. In contrast, isolated or fragmented implementations left teachers feeling unsupported and reduced the likelihood of transfer.

Leadership culture was shown to be foundational for sustainable implementation. Teachers were more likely to maintain SRL integration when they felt supported by leadership, had opportunities for professional collaboration, and were not burdened by isolated implementation. As such, SRL should be positioned within a coherent school-wide framework that aligns with other priorities like well-being and learner agency (OECD, 2019).

4.3. Developmental sensitivity

Developmentally, younger students benefited from more structured guidance and repeated exposure to SRL processes. Younger students, particularly those in Foundation to Year 2, required simplified language, visual anchors, and repetitive modelling. This supports the developmental SRL frameworks proposed by Whitebread et al. (2009), which emphasise the need for structured practice and scaffolding in the early years. Additionally, their ability to retain and transfer strategies dropped sharply when SRL was not reinforced regularly. Meanwhile,

older students demonstrated a more robust ability to set personal goals and apply strategies across contexts, particularly when supported through peer dialogue.

4.4. Contextual factors

The data clearly showed that learners benefit most when SRL is contextualised and made relevant to their daily lives. Students were more motivated when they perceived SRL strategies as tools to address real-world challenges or personal goals (e.g., developing plans for handling social conflict or improving peer relationships). Embedding SRL into these authentic situations appeared to strengthen its transferability and deepen its impact on learner agency, particularly when it was treated not as an isolated skill but as part of broader goal-directed behaviour throughout the school day (Paris & Paris, 2001).

In addition, socio-economic and linguistic diversity influenced uptake. Teachers working in lower SES or EAL/D contexts found they needed to simplify content, provide more scaffolding, and use concrete visual supports. This aligns with prior work on differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014) and points to the need for further localisation of resources.

4.5. Leadership as seen from the classroom

While teachers spoke in detail about how SRL strategies played out in their classrooms, their reflections also highlighted that the success of implementation was not determined solely by individual effort or classroom-level practice. Instead, teachers repeatedly pointed to the influence of leadership (both its presence and absence) as a key factor in shaping whether SRL was embedded across the school or remained fragmented. These accounts reflect wider research showing that school leadership plays an important role in creating the conditions for innovation to take hold, through vision and resource allocation, by modelling commitment and enabling collaboration (Leithwood et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2007). When leaders signalled that SRL was a shared priority, teachers reported greater confidence, coherence, and sustained use of the approach. Conversely, in contexts where leadership engagement was minimal or inconsistent, teachers described feeling isolated, uncertain, and under-resourced. This aligns with work in implementation science emphasising that local leadership is critical for both creating organisational readiness and ensuring that new practices become routine (Damschroder et al., 2009; Fixsen, 2005). Teachers' observations thus point to leadership as a central enabler of pedagogical change. These themes are explored further in Part 2, which draws on leader interviews to examine the organisational and strategic conditions that supported or constrained SRL uptake across schools.

Part 2 - Leader interviews

The second part of the study adopted a qualitative interpretive design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to examine how school leaders experienced, implemented, and sustained the SRL approach as part of a broader RCT across South Australian public primary schools. The goal was to better understand the perceived impact of the SRL approach on both learners and educators, as well as the practical and contextual enablers and barriers to scaling the initiative system-wide. The interviews served as a critical complement to the teacher focus groups by providing leadership perspectives on the structural, cultural, and pedagogical shifts required for sustainable practice change.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Thirteen individual interviews were conducted with site leaders, including principals, assistant principals, and other senior leaders, from a representative sample of participating schools. Participants were purposefully selected based on their direct involvement in supporting or coordinating SRL implementation at their site, ensuring that insights reflected both strategic oversight and day-to-day decision-making. The schools varied in terms of geographic and demographic characteristics, encompassing both urban and regional settings and a broad range of socio-economic contexts. The sample included three Category 1–3 schools, six Category 4–5 schools, and four Category 6–7 schools, reflecting a diversity of implementation conditions. Participating sites also differed in their prior programmatic commitments, with several concurrently engaging in initiatives such as the Berry Street Education Model, trauma-informed practice, or the Brightpath writing assessment tool. This variation allowed for comparative insight into how SRL was enacted alongside existing whole-school frameworks.

5.2. Data collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to capture both descriptive accounts and reflective perspectives from participants. Interview questions explored leaders' roles in supporting SRL implementation, perceived impacts on teaching and learning, alignment with existing school priorities, and suggestions for system-level improvement (see Appendix). Follow-up prompts encouraged participants to elaborate on specific actions taken, adaptations made to suit their site context, and professional learning needs that emerged during the process.

Individual interviews were conducted by two members of the research team and took place online via Zoom, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent. Transcripts were anonymised during processing, and all identifying information was removed to protect participant confidentiality. Transcription accuracy was verified through cross-checking a sample of transcripts against the original audio files to ensure data quality and integrity.

5.3. Analytical framework

The individual interviews with school leaders were also analysed using thematic analysis, building on the same foundational methodology to ensure alignment and comparability with the teacher focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021; Byrne, 2022). This method enabled an in-depth exploration of how leaders framed the implementation of SRL within their organisational contexts, including how they shaped cultural conditions, influenced teacher practice, and navigated system demands.

The decision to use thematic analysis was informed by its suitability for interpreting both strategic and reflective data. As leaders described how SRL was situated within their broader school context, the method enabled the research team to identify recurring patterns while also capturing variation in how implementation was shaped by leadership approaches, available resources, and the characteristics of each school community.

The analytic process followed several stages. Transcripts were reviewed in full by the research team, who developed an initial set of codes based on the study's research questions and on literature related to implementation science and school change (Damschroder et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2024). These codes captured recurring references to leadership practices, strategic alignment, staff development, resource adaptation, and system-level engagement. The coding was conducted using a deductive approach, ensuring that the analysis remained anchored in the core aims of the evaluation while allowing for emergent detail.

Meaningful segments of text were extracted and clustered into descriptive categories reflecting the main themes raised by participants. Categories included, for example, leadership alignment with site goals, and perceptions of material suitability and adaptability. These categories were then organised into a coding tree that captured the key domains shaping implementation (see Figure 2). The coding tree served to structure the analysis and to distinguish between related but analytically distinct aspects of the data, such as differences between leadership actions and leadership beliefs, or between local adaptation and system-level needs.

Quotations were selected to illustrate the themes and to retain the language used by participants when describing their experiences. These excerpts illustrate the strategies and conditions that shaped SRL implementation and offer a detailed view of the decisions and priorities that guided leaders as they navigated systemic expectations and local realities. The resulting analysis provides a detailed account of how leadership shaped the uptake and sustainability of SRL, both as a pedagogical practice and as a broader cultural shift within schools.

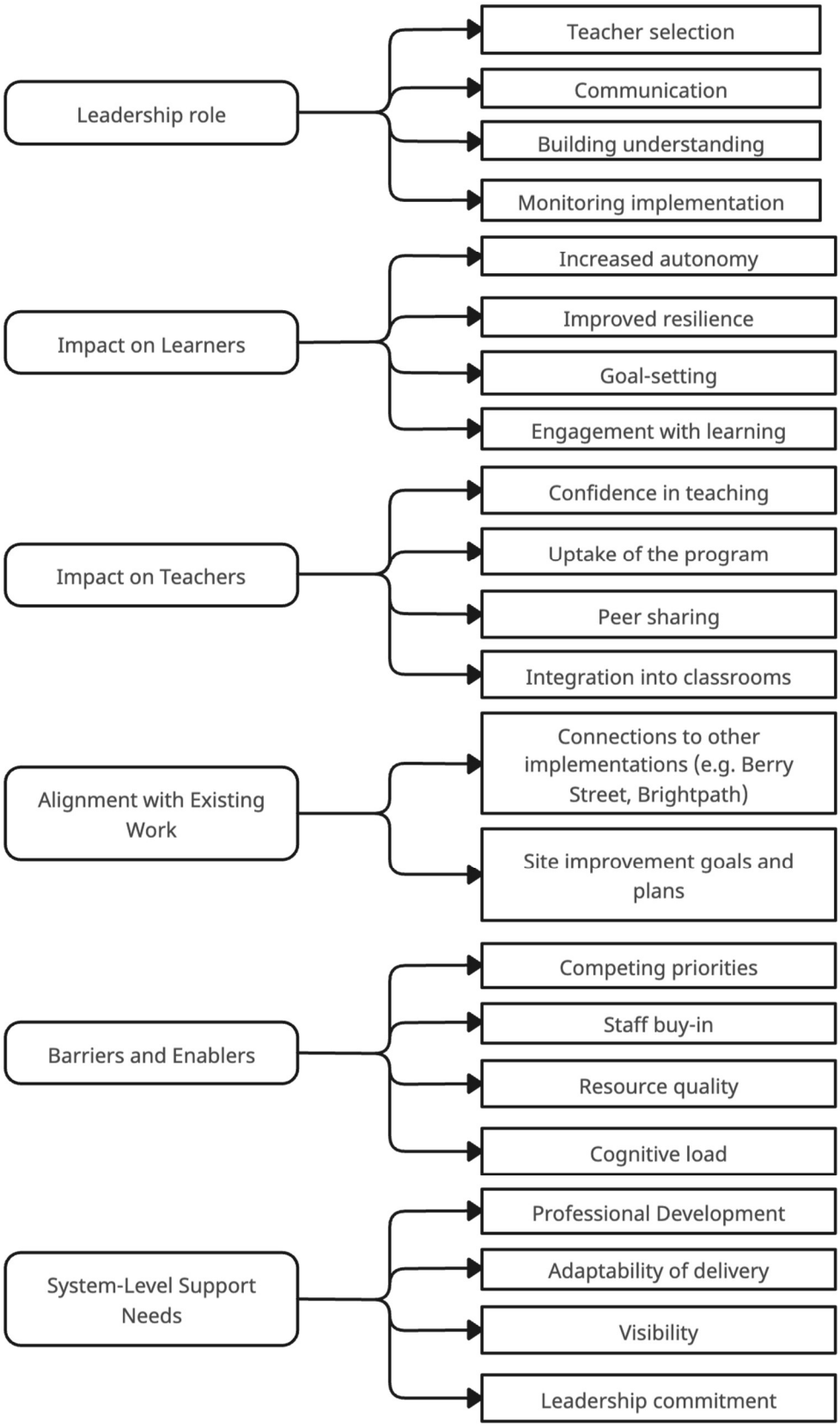

Figure 2: Coding tree for leader interviews

5.4. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No. 205699) and adhered to the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, with assurance that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence.

To protect confidentiality, all interviews were anonymised during transcription, and any identifying information (such as names of individuals, schools, or specific locations) was removed. Participants were assigned pseudonyms or generic role descriptors in any reporting or quotations. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely on encrypted, password-protected university servers accessible only to the research team. Representatives from the DfE was informed of the research process but was not present during interviews or involved in data analysis, to ensure participants felt free to speak openly.

5.5. Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through triangulation with data from the teacher focus groups and alignment with observational notes collected during the broader trial. The consistency of themes across data sources enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings. Coding decisions were reviewed collaboratively by members of the research team, with regular discussion to ensure coherence in theme development and to minimise the influence of individual interpretation.

6. Results

Thematic analysis of the thirteen one-on-one interviews with school leaders revealed five interrelated themes: (1) alignment with site vision and priorities, (2) whole-site implementation and consistency, (3) shifts in teacher practice and confidence, (4) practical supports and adaptability, and (5) recommendations for sustained scaling.

6.1. Alignment with site vision and priorities

Most leaders emphasised the importance of SRL aligning with their existing school improvement goals—particularly around learner agency, goal-setting, and well-being. Where alignment was perceived, SRL was enthusiastically adopted. In contrast, when leaders viewed it as misaligned or "just another initiative," uptake was superficial.

> *"As a site, we've had goal setting for students and, you know, working within the student agency realm for more than 12 months and, and have been talking about that. So again, this is where SRL sort of fits within that goal-setting and reflection time."*

> *"We do Berry Street, we've done Berry Street stuff in the past... I think it sort of sits. It's within that realm, but also to me, this is like one of those all-encompassing skill sets... if kids can know what goals are, can set good goals and understand how to work through challenges to achieve them, that is a skill set that could be done in any context in the school."*

Leaders consistently reported that where SRL could be seen to complement Berry Street or Brightpath, it was more likely to be sustained.

6.2. Whole-site implementation and consistency

A majority of leaders viewed whole-site implementation (i.e., embedding SRL across year levels, learning areas, and routines) as essential. This was tied to a desire for consistent language and reduced cognitive load for learners transitioning between classes. The sentiment was echoed across sites, with leaders emphasising that SRL should not be confined to trial classrooms or specific subjects, but rather integrated into a shared pedagogical framework school-wide.

> *"We want it the same, but it has to be different… if we've got the same routine, it takes a lot of that cognitive load off… So, we give them more space to practise that well-being, mindset, agency."*

> *"We're still implementing this, we're not going to stop it… We're going to keep going because we started this."*

Some leaders linked consistency with equity of access, ensuring all students benefit from the approach, not just those in SRL trial classrooms. Several sites were actively working toward whole-school alignment, using internal structures such as site improvement plans, peer sharing at staff meetings, and classroom walkthroughs to maintain focus.

6.3. Shifts in teacher practice and confidence

Leaders reported observable changes in teacher confidence, particularly in goal-setting, modelling, and embedding SRL into academic and social-emotional contexts. This included use of SRL language during feedback, conferencing, and yard duty.

As one leader noted:

> *"Teachers now embed it in writing conferences… they check in with kids on their SRL goals regularly."*

Another observed that the language of SRL was becoming a shared discourse across staff:

> *"I'm hearing language like 'what's your goal?' and 'how will you know if you've succeeded?' across classrooms now. That wasn't there before."*

This shared language served both as a sign of conceptual uptake and as a mechanism for cultural consistency across classrooms. Leaders perceived this shift as a sign of individual teacher growth. However, this growth was not uniform. Some leaders acknowledged that newer or less confident teachers required significant modelling and guidance to integrate SRL fluidly into daily teaching.

6.4. Practical supports and adaptability

Nearly all leaders highlighted the need for context-sensitive resources and flexibility in implementation. While the core framework was generally well received, many noted that some of the initial training materials and resources felt overly academic or mismatched with the developmental or cultural needs of students.

> *"The teachers thought some of the resources were pretty crappy… the stories in particular… the kids just didn't respond to well."*

> *"A lot of the stories... the kids didn't hook onto whatsoever. So, they [the teachers] came up with their own."*

This led some teachers to adapt the materials or create their own examples that better reflected their students' experiences:

> *"They came up with their own little stories... based on their kids in their class at the time. So use real-life examples."*

In highly diverse or EAL/D contexts, adaptation was especially important:

> *"So, we we're a very multicultural site and we have an intensive English language program... So, in her class, she would have had not all, but a number of children who had English as a second language and who may not have you know, What she was doing was adapting some of those resources because she said she felt they weren't developmentally appropriate for all of her children."*

Some suggested lightweight, accessible ways of sharing practice, such as video snippets, online communities, or visual demonstrations, where teachers could quickly draw inspiration or troubleshoot challenges:

> *"Educators like real-life examples... things that they can hook into and see or go, 'Oh, if I did this just that little bit differently, I might get more of an impact."*

Overall, leaders advocated for an approach that maintains fidelity to SRL principles but allows enough local flexibility for adaptation. As one leader put it:

> *"It needs to be tight, but it also needs flexibility in there to suit the context of the school. I think that's the most important thing for anything and everything. We differentiate for our learners. We need to differentiate for our educators."*

Finally, leaders also advocated for a "drip-feed" model of professional development, ongoing, peer-led, and grounded in real classroom examples.

7. Discussion

The interviews with school leaders offered a nuanced perspective on the implementation of the SRL approach in primary school settings. Rather than viewing SRL as an isolated program, most leaders spoke of its potential to complement and enhance existing school-wide practices. Many described SRL not as an "add-on" but as a useful framework to integrate student agency, reflection, and goal-setting into the daily life of the classroom. In several schools, SRL was seen to align naturally with ongoing initiatives such as Berry Street Education Model and Brightpath writing assessment, offering continuity rather than competition. This finding aligns with research emphasising the importance of coherent reform implementation, where new practices are embedded into pre-existing structures and pedagogical routines (Coburn, 2003; Fullan, 2007).

Leaders described varied experiences based on school size, readiness, and existing professional cultures. Some were able to integrate SRL into site improvement plans and staff professional development cycles, which seemed to facilitate more consistent uptake. Others noted that their school improvement priorities were already aligned with SRL principles, allowing for a smoother integration into their teaching and learning agenda. These differences

illustrate how implementation is shaped by organisational context and leadership capacity (Honig, 2006).

There was strong recognition that sustained adoption of the SRL approach depends not only on its conceptual alignment but also on the practical supports offered to teachers. Leaders consistently advocated for resources that model SRL in action (visual tools, real-life case studies, and adaptable planning templates) rather than prescriptive, standalone lessons. They also emphasised the need for time-efficient professional learning that can be immediately applied in context, echoing previous research on effective teacher professional development (Desimone, 2009). In particular, there was a preference for ongoing, peer-driven learning over one-off workshops.

Crucially, school leaders highlighted their role not just as instructional managers but as cultural stewards who shape the values and beliefs underpinning SRL. Several described how they deliberately created space for reflection on SRL in staff meetings, walkthroughs, and classroom observations, thereby reinforcing a shared language and expectation across the site. This reflects the importance of distributed leadership and strategic messaging in embedding innovation (Hallinger, 2011; Spillane, 2005).

Finally, the discussions revealed that a system-level rollout of the SRL approach will require attention to flexibility, contextual adaptation, and alignment with broader departmental goals. Leaders expressed a desire for centrally developed materials that retain adaptability to site-specific needs. Many suggested that SRL could be most impactful when situated within a broader pedagogical shift toward learner agency, goal attainment cycles, metacognition, and growth-oriented feedback, rather than treated as a bounded program.

These findings collectively point to the importance of coherent integration, responsive leadership, and sustained professional learning in supporting SRL at scale. Future efforts should consider how to balance guidance with local autonomy, and how to scaffold the development of whole-site cultures of self-regulated learning.

8. General discussion

The findings from this study provide compelling evidence for the promise of a SRL approach in South Australian primary schools, while also highlighting critical considerations for its successful and sustainable scaling across diverse school contexts. Drawing on qualitative data from both classroom teachers and school leaders, this study underscores the multi-level complexity of embedding SRL into everyday educational practice, and the supports required to ensure meaningful implementation at both the classroom and whole-site level.

8.1. SRL and learner development

Teachers and leaders alike observed notable growth in student autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and motivation when SRL strategies were used consistently and meaningfully. Students across a range of abilities began to articulate their learning processes more explicitly, reflect on obstacles, and set actionable goals. This is consistent with prior research that links SRL to improved academic outcomes, particularly when learners engage in goal-setting, monitoring, and reflection (Panadero, 2017; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2011). Notably, the SRL framework was reported to benefit not only academically capable students but also those with anxiety, executive functioning difficulties, or trauma backgrounds when adequately scaffolded.

8.2. Developmental and contextual sensitivity

A key finding across both data sets is the importance of tailoring SRL strategies to students' developmental stages. Younger learners required highly structured, teacher-scaffolded activities and visual supports, such as checklists, posters, and simplified language. Older students, by contrast, responded well to opportunities for independent goal-setting, peer collaboration, and self-monitoring routines. This aligns with socio-cognitive theories of learning that emphasise the developmental trajectory of self-regulation, wherein support is gradually withdrawn as students gain competence (Hadwin et al., 2011; Vygotsky et al., 1978).

Context also emerged as a critical factor. In low-SES or complex school communities, learners often needed more explicit modelling and concrete tools to internalise SRL strategies. Leaders reported that visible, repeated use of SRL across curriculum areas and social contexts (e.g., recess problem-solving, whole-class routines) supported broader cultural adoption, especially where families may not model such practices at home.

8.3. Implementation, transfer, and the role of teachers

While many teachers were enthusiastic about the SRL approach, they also reported time pressures and difficulty integrating it across subjects. A frequent barrier to transfer was the tendency to treat SRL as a discrete program or lesson rather than as an embedded practice. In line with research on effective instructional reform (Coburn, 2003), the most successful teachers adapted SRL strategies to fit existing routines, student needs, and local priorities. Peer-editing strategies, collaborative reflection, and teacher-modelling of goal-setting were particularly effective.

The teacher focus groups strongly affirmed that modelling was essential, by teachers in classroom practice and also through leadership support. Where the SRL approach was reinforced in staff meetings, leadership walkthroughs, and whole-site planning, uptake and sustainability improved. Leaders noted that school-wide consistency in language and visuals helped reduce cognitive load for students and enhanced transfer between learning areas. These findings echo research on "whole-school" models of professional learning, which emphasise the need for systemic alignment, visible leadership, and a shared pedagogical vocabulary (Timperley et al., 2007).

8.4. Leaders as enablers of culture change

The leader interviews highlighted the role of school leadership in cultivating a site-wide culture of SRL. Many leaders framed SRL as complementary to existing priorities such as the Berry Street Education Model, well-being goals, and learner agency agendas. Where alignment was clear, SRL was seen not as "another initiative" but as a practical mechanism for realising broader school aims. Leaders who took a proactive role in selecting staff, supporting initial rollout, facilitating peer sharing, and connecting SRL to site improvement plans reported greater engagement and more coherent practice.

Moreover, leaders emphasised the importance of allowing teachers to adapt the framework, balancing fidelity with professional autonomy. The need for real, practical examples, including video demonstrations, annotated student work, and contextualised case studies, was repeatedly mentioned as a way to support busy teachers without overwhelming them.

9. Recommendations

9.1. Reframe SRL as a foundational pedagogical approach

For the SRL approach to be successfully adopted and sustained across South Australian schools, it must be positioned not as a program to be delivered, but as a foundational way of thinking about teaching, learning, and learner development. This requires a shift from viewing SRL as an 'add-on' or specialised intervention, to recognising it as a driver of system-wide educational reform that promotes adaptive expertise among both teachers and students.

At its core, SRL supports students in becoming self-directed, reflective learners who are capable of managing complexity, overcoming learning obstacles, responding to feedback, and taking ownership of their progress, skills that are increasingly vital in a rapidly evolving educational and social landscape. These capacities are academically beneficial, and they align directly with the broader aspirations of the South Australian education system to foster confident, capable, and resilient citizens who can thrive in diverse and dynamic contexts.

Importantly, adopting the SRL approach as a pedagogical framework also supports coherence at the policy level. Fragmentation, where multiple, disconnected initiatives vie for attention, has been identified as a barrier to sustainable change in many jurisdictions. The lack of coherent policy implementation strategies across different phases of teacher professional development can hinder the effectiveness and sustainability of educational reforms (OECD, 2020) (Gouëdard et al., 2020). In contrast, the structured and practice-driven implementation approach used in this initiative helps unify teaching practice by providing a common rationale, set of adaptable tools and shared language that can be applied across schools, regions, and professional learning contexts. Rather than delivering a pre-packaged SRL framework, the process enables educators to explore and refine SRL principles though iterative classroom use and metacognitive dialogue. This approach fosters deeper engagement and clearer alignment between everyday teaching decisions and broader system goals, supporting coherence without constraining local adaptation.

Strategically, embedding SRL in this way offers a low-cost, high-impact pathway to improve student engagement, teacher efficacy, and site improvement outcomes, all while reinforcing the broader values of learner agency, equity, and adaptability. To achieve this, system-level messaging must clearly communicate that SRL is not a time-limited trial or compliance exercise, but a strategic opportunity to enhance existing practice and respond to the complexities of contemporary classrooms. This includes highlighting SRL's compatibility with ongoing departmental initiatives and demonstrating how SRL strategies can elevate these efforts rather than distract from them.

Actionable strategy: Embed the SRL approach within state curriculum documentation, professional development frameworks, and quality teaching standards to reinforce its centrality to effective instruction.

9.2. Promote whole-site adoption as the norm, not the exception

Evidence from both teachers and school leaders strongly indicates that the consistent and sustained impact of SRL hinges on whole-site adoption, not fragmented implementation. While individual classroom efforts can demonstrate pockets of success, a site-wide approach is

important to achieve meaningful cultural change and ensure that all students, regardless of teacher or year level, have equitable access to SRL strategies and support.

Schools that adopted a whole-site implementation model, embedding SRL into their vision, policies, classroom routines, and professional learning structures, saw greater coherence, stronger student outcomes, and deeper teacher engagement. A unified approach ensured that SRL language, expectations, and routines were visible and consistent throughout the school. Whole-site adoption can also facilitate smoother transitions between year levels. As students progress through primary school, they bring prior SRL experiences into new contexts. When these experiences are acknowledged, built upon, and consistently reinforced by all teachers, students are more likely to refine and deepen their skills over time. For example, a student who learns to set simple behavioural goals in Year 2 can evolve that practice into more complex academic planning by Year 5, provided the language and expectations remain stable and scaffolded across their schooling.

For teachers, a whole-site approach fosters collaboration and shared ownership. Staff are better able to align their planning, co-develop strategies, and observe SRL in action across different classrooms. It also reduces the risk of misalignment, where inconsistent use of SRL terms or visuals leads to fragmented student understanding. When the SRL approach becomes part of a shared pedagogical culture, supported by leadership, reinforced in staff meetings, and referenced in site improvement plans, it moves from being an "initiative" to being a norm.

Policy support for whole-site adoption is therefore recommended. This includes enabling schools to build SRL into their strategic goals, providing leadership training on culture-building and instructional coherence, and offering practical tools for consistent implementation across levels and subjects. Additionally, recognising and resourcing the time needed for staff collaboration and cross-year planning will help maintain fidelity and adapt SRL in context-sensitive ways.

Actionable strategy: Include expectations for school-wide SRL implementation in site improvement planning templates and provide leaders with tools to monitor alignment across teams and year levels.

9.3. Facilitate cross-curricular and contextual integration

Embedding SRL strategies across subject areas and into regular classroom routines enhances both sustainability and relevance. Evidence from teacher and leader interviews suggests that the approach is most impactful when integrated into everyday teaching across the curriculum, rather than delivered in isolated sessions. When the SRL approach is treated as a guiding framework for how students engage with learning, rather than as an additional content area, it becomes easier to reinforce over time and across contexts.

In settings where the SRL approach was delivered only in weekly or isolated blocks, separate from core curriculum instruction, students often struggled to transfer skills across contexts. For example, goal-setting language introduced during a dedicated SRL lesson was rarely applied in writing tasks or behavioural conversations unless it was explicitly and repeatedly reinforced in those domains. This compartmentalised delivery limited students' ability to recognise the relevance of SRL strategies beyond the immediate context, reducing both uptake and long-term retention. By contrast, when SRL principles were woven into all subject areas (e.g., literacy, mathematics, science, and even playground conversations) students began to internalise them as part of their cognitive and emotional toolkit. Students learned to approach academic

challenges, peer conflict, and behavioural decisions with the same problem-solving framework, demonstrating increased self-awareness, autonomy, and persistence.

Embedding SRL into everyday classroom discourse also allowed teachers to reinforce key strategies through authentic, context-specific feedback. For example, during a science experiment, a teacher might prompt students to plan steps ahead (planning), reflect on errors (monitoring), and adjust their methods (strategy adaptation). These moments not only support learning within the content area but also model how SRL operates as a flexible and transferable toolset. Importantly, this integrated approach is also more developmentally appropriate. For younger students, applying SRL strategies in familiar contexts, like shared reading or classroom routines, supports comprehension and retention. For older students, cross-disciplinary application helps consolidate SRL as a generalisable, metacognitive skill, deepening its relevance and utility.

From a policy perspective, the integration of SRL across the curriculum should be a central focus of implementation guidance and professional learning. Teachers must be supported to understand SRL concepts, as well as to embed them into unit plans, lesson structures, and assessment tasks. This requires subject-specific exemplars, planning templates, and ongoing coaching that show what SRL looks like in action across different learning areas and student interactions.

Furthermore, treating SRL as a pedagogical lens (as opposed to a separate curriculum strand) can help streamline priorities and reduce the cognitive and logistical load on educators. Rather than "fitting SRL in," teachers can apply SRL principles to strengthen existing instructional goals, such as improving student reflection in writing, fostering persistence in problem-solving, or developing emotional regulation during group tasks. This pedagogical coherence supports not only student transfer but also teacher uptake and sustainability. Positioning SRL as a core pedagogical approach, embedded across curriculum and classroom routines, helps students engage more purposefully with learning. It encourages learners to take greater ownership of their progress and supports the transfer of strategies across different subjects and situations. When consistently reinforced, SRL becomes part of how students think about challenges and make choices about how to approach their work.

Actionable strategy: Develop subject-specific exemplars that show how SRL strategies (e.g., goal setting, monitoring, reflection) can be embedded into various domains such as writing, maths, science, and well-being curricula.

9.4. Provide age- and developmentally appropriate scaffolds

The successful uptake of SRL strategies is intricately tied to students' developmental stage, cognitive maturity, and emotional readiness. Research and classroom evidence alike confirm that SRL is not a one-size-fits-all framework. Its effectiveness hinges on a developmentally sensitive approach that acknowledges the evolving capacities of learners as they move through early and middle primary years.

In the early years of schooling, students are still acquiring foundational executive functions such as attention control, working memory, and impulse regulation. At this stage, abstract concepts like goal setting, self-monitoring, or obstacle planning can exceed their developmental capacity unless grounded in highly concrete and structured experiences. For younger learners, successful engagement with SRL depends on routine-based repetition, visual scaffolds (e.g., posters, charts, colour-coded prompts), and whole-class modelling of SRL

strategies in context. Teachers must actively guide learners through each step of the process, by articulating goals aloud, narrating self-checks, and providing tangible exemplars of what reflection looks like. For example, framing simple behavioural or academic goals during circle time or literacy blocks, and then reflecting on these through shared language and feedback, can help build early habits of reflection and planning.

As students move into middle and upper primary, their capacity for metacognition and independent planning increases. These learners begin to benefit from opportunities to co-construct goals, monitor their own progress, and use peer dialogue to refine their thinking. The teacher's role evolves from direct modeller to facilitator, gradually reducing scaffolds to encourage autonomy. However, readiness still varies within cohorts. Some Year 4 students, for instance, may need continued adult prompting and simplified tools, especially if they have additional learning or emotional regulation needs.

Developmentally sensitive SRL implementation represents both sound pedagogical practice and a necessary step toward educational equity. Without tailoring strategies to students' cognitive and emotional stages, there is a risk that only the most academically advanced or verbally fluent students will benefit. This can exacerbate existing disparities in self-efficacy and learning independence. To ensure equitable access, SRL resources and delivery methods must be differentiated across year levels and student profiles, allowing every learner to engage with SRL at a level that is meaningful and achievable for them.

Policy implications include the need for tiered SRL implementation guides, year-level specific professional learning modules, and scaffolded resource kits aligned with developmental markers. These should include example goals, sentence stems, visual planning tools, and video exemplars that reflect a progression from teacher-led to student-directed self-regulation. Moreover, regular opportunities for teachers to reflect on developmental alignment, as part of planning meetings or professional learning communities. will support adaptive, evidence-informed classroom practice.

Actionable strategy: Curate a library of age-differentiated SRL resources, such as visual templates, provocations, question starters, 'bump it up walls' and simplified planning tools, accompanied by teacher guidance on how to scale scaffolds appropriately.

9.5. Ensure equity by supporting contextual adaptation in low-SES schools

Schools in lower socio-economic contexts face distinct and compounding challenges that directly shape how SRL strategies are received, enacted, and sustained in the classroom. These contexts often feature higher concentrations of students experiencing educational disadvantage, which may include limited access to stable home environments, reduced exposure to metacognitive or self-directed learning strategies outside school, and greater emotional or behavioural regulation challenges. As a result, teachers in these settings must navigate heightened cognitive and emotional demands within their classrooms, making the implementation of abstract or language-heavy pedagogical approaches more difficult without appropriate scaffolding.

Students in low-SES contexts may not have the same background experiences that prepare them to engage in goal-setting, strategic planning, or reflective thinking. In these settings, the cognitive load required to adopt SRL practices is compounded by the need to also navigate

basic learning routines, social regulation, and literacy development. For example, abstract goal-setting activities or complex self-monitoring templates can be overwhelming without tailored support. Moreover, external supports such as parental reinforcement of learning strategies, access to homework routines, or exposure to self-reflective dialogue at home may be limited, reducing the likelihood of out-of-school transfer.

Teachers in these schools consistently reported the need to simplify SRL language, model behaviours more explicitly, and use tangible, visual tools to engage students effectively. Importantly, these educators also stressed the value of embedding SRL into predictable, routine classroom practices to build familiarity and trust. In this way, the SRL approach does not compete with core learning but becomes a reliable scaffold through which students can navigate academic and emotional challenges.

For these reasons, implementation in low-SES settings should be approached as an opportunity to design responsive, equity-oriented adaptations that recognise and build on local strengths. Rather than lowering expectations, we need to empower the students better able to deal with their specific obstacles. Supporting schools in these contexts means recognising the additional demands placed on educators, resourcing them appropriately, and providing the professional autonomy to localise tools and strategies without compromising the integrity of the SRL framework.

Policy action should therefore prioritise contextual flexibility, differentiated resourcing, and sustained professional learning tailored to the realities of disadvantaged schools. This includes co-designing materials with teachers in these settings, offering school-based coaching or peer mentoring, and ensuring SRL is framed as a method of empowerment and routine-making rather than an abstract ideal.

Actionable strategy: Develop differentiated implementation pathways, with additional scaffolding and resource flexibility built into the support package for schools serving complex and high-needs communities.

9.6. Invest in practical, peer-led professional learning

A critical enabler of successful SRL implementation was the availability of professional learning that was sustained, embedded in classroom practice, and grounded in real teaching contexts. The depth and quality of professional learning directly influenced not only teacher confidence but also the consistency, creativity, and persistence with which SRL strategies were applied over time. Teachers consistently reported that their understanding of SRL principles and their capacity to adapt them for diverse learners grew significantly when professional learning was closely tied to the realities of their instructional environments.

What set the most effective professional learning apart was its *practical orientation*. Teachers were more likely to trial and sustain SRL strategies when they had opportunities to observe them in action, discuss implementation challenges with peers, and iteratively reflect on their own classroom practice. Viewing real classroom footage, analysing annotated student work, and participating in peer walkthroughs can give abstract SRL concepts concrete meaning. These modes of learning can clarify "what SRL looks like" in practice, and make the work feel accessible and achievable, especially for early-career or time-stretched teachers.

Short, frequent learning experiences, sometimes referred to as "bite-sized" or "drip-fed" learning, were particularly valued. Teachers noted that brief, targeted inputs spaced over time

gave them room to experiment, reflect, and revisit key ideas in light of lived experience. This contrasts with the limitations of one-off workshops, which, while informative, often failed to support ongoing practice change. Instead, SRL professional learning was seen as most powerful when it was iterative, context-sensitive, and facilitated within or alongside existing school routines, such as team planning sessions, curriculum meetings, or coaching conversations.

Importantly, the most successful sites treated professional learning not as an event, but as a continuous process of co-learning. Teachers were encouraged to take ownership of their SRL journey by sharing adaptations, co-designing resources, and reflecting publicly on what was working. This collaborative ethos fostered a sense of professional agency and collective responsibility. Moreover, it allowed SRL strategies to be tailored to the particular needs of each class, cohort, and school community, rather than enforced through top-down fidelity models. Ultimately, teachers were more likely to persist with pedagogical change when they felt supported, when learning was seen as collaborative and relevant, and when the system signals that innovation was both expected and valued.

Actionable Strategy: Fund regional SRL learning communities, create video libraries of effective classroom practice, and support site-based coaching models that allow for ongoing skill development and adaptation.

9.7. Standardise SRL language and artefacts across sites

Establishing a consistent, recognisable language of SRL across classrooms was perceived as a foundational component of successful implementation. When students encounter the same terminology, routines, and visual cues across year levels and subject areas, they are more likely to internalise SRL strategies and apply them independently over time. Consistency in language and visuals supports metacognitive development and reduces cognitive load, enabling students to focus on the content of their learning rather than navigating shifting expectations.

A unified SRL language acts as an anchor, particularly for younger learners, students with additional learning needs, and those transitioning between classes or year levels. When a term like “goal,” “plan,” or “obstacle” carries the same meaning across the school and is supported by a shared set of tools or sentence stems, students develop a coherent understanding of what SRL entails. This familiarity fosters confidence and encourages transfer: students are better able to apply SRL skills across contexts, from academic problem-solving in maths or writing, to navigating peer interactions and managing emotions.

Visual artefacts play a particularly powerful role in reinforcing this shared language. Tools such as goal-setting posters, step-by-step planning templates, traffic-light check-in systems, and colour-coded feedback frameworks function as both instructional scaffolds and environmental cues. Their visibility in the classroom and around the school helps to make SRL an everyday habit rather than an abstract concept. In focus groups and interviews, both teachers and leaders consistently described how these artefacts supported student engagement, prompted reflection, and enabled teachers to reinforce SRL routines efficiently and consistently. Beyond their pedagogical function, these artefacts also serve as markers of cultural coherence. A school that displays common SRL visuals across learning areas signals to students, staff, and families that SRL is a valued and embedded part of school life.

To support consistency while respecting local context, system-wide guidance on SRL artefacts and language should be developed and disseminated. This does not mean enforcing a uniform set of tools; rather, it involves providing a clear conceptual foundation and a curated suite of

optional, adaptable resources that schools can tailor to suit their learners and site culture. For example, a system-endorsed "SRL toolkit" might include developmentally aligned goal-setting posters, reflection sentence stems, and sample classroom displays, each with suggestions for modification based on year level, subject area, or learner profile. Such system guidance would offer both structure and flexibility, helping to build coherence across diverse school environments without constraining innovation.

Actionable Strategy: Disseminate a visual SRL toolkit aligned with departmental learning principles and encourage schools to co-design artefacts that reflect both system guidance and local culture.

9.8. Support strategic leadership and distributed ownership

Leadership emerged as one of the most powerful determinants of successful, sustained SRL implementation at the site level. The extent to which SRL took root and flourished within a school was strongly influenced by how actively and strategically leaders engaged with the approach. This influence extended beyond administrative support or logistical coordination. Effective leaders shaped the cultural and pedagogical conditions that allowed SRL to move from theory to embedded, everyday practice.

In schools where leaders actively championed SRL, the approach was visibly prioritised through site-wide messaging, professional learning schedules, and integration into existing improvement agendas. These leaders endorsed the SRL approach conceptually and also took deliberate steps to model its importance. They referenced SRL in staff meetings, participated in classroom walkthroughs focused on SRL strategies, and created opportunities for teachers to share implementation experiences. Their presence signalled to staff that SRL was not a passing trend, but a core school-wide priority aligned with deeper goals around learner agency, well-being, and academic engagement.

Active leadership also served to maintain momentum and coherence. In many cases, school leaders played a central role in building and sustaining a shared language of SRL across year levels and learning areas. They helped align SRL practices with site-specific goals (e.g., improving student writing, developing social-emotional capabilities, or enhancing engagement among priority cohorts), ensuring that teachers saw the SRL approach as a lever to achieve the outcomes they already cared about. By embedding the SRL approach into School Improvement Plans and appraisal processes, leaders created a systemic architecture that supported implementation over time.

In contrast, schools where leadership was passive or disengaged often experienced fragmented delivery. Teachers in these contexts reported feeling isolated, unsure of expectations, and unsupported in adapting the approach to their classroom needs. Without visible leadership commitment or structured opportunities for collaboration, SRL risked becoming siloed and limited to a few motivated individuals and vulnerable to attrition when workloads increased or priorities shifted.

Importantly, the most effective schools did not rely solely on a single principal or deputy to drive the SRL approach. Instead, they embraced distributed leadership, a model in which responsibility for implementation and innovation was shared across a range of roles. SRL coordinators, lead teachers, year-level team leaders, and professional learning communities were empowered to adapt resources, mentor colleagues, and build a bank of contextualised practices. This distributed model enhanced collective ownership, built internal capacity, and

allowed SRL to be tailored in ways that reflected the diversity of student needs and teaching styles across the site. Distributed leadership also made SRL implementation more resilient to staffing changes. Where SRL knowledge and practice were concentrated in one or two individuals, transitions in leadership or staff turnover often disrupted progress. However, in schools where SRL was embedded in collaborative structures and supported by a wide leadership team, continuity was maintained, and innovation continued. These schools were also more likely to generate and share examples of practice that contributed to broader system learning.

For system-wide scaling, these findings carry significant implications. Site leaders must be explicitly positioned and supported as cultural and instructional leaders of SRL. This involves professional development in the core principles of SRL, as well as training in how to build shared vision, model reflective practice, and lead sustained pedagogical change. System guidance should encourage schools to formalise SRL leadership roles and embed SRL into team meeting agendas, and school-wide communications.

Actionable Strategy: Include SRL leadership capability within leadership development programs and establish formal leadership roles (e.g., SRL coordinators) within school structures.

9.9. Enable structured reflection and feedback loops

Sustained improvement in SRL implementation depends on the availability of structured, ongoing opportunities for schools to reflect, collaborate, and adapt. While initial training and rollout efforts are important, long-term success hinges on a continuous cycle of learning, refinement, and knowledge-sharing that engages both classroom practitioners and school leaders as co-designers of practice. In this model, implementation is an evolving process that is responsive to local contexts, student needs, and lessons learned in real time.

Teachers and leaders involved in the SRL initiative repeatedly emphasised the value of dedicated spaces to discuss what was working, what was challenging, and how practice could be adjusted. These opportunities, whether formalised through professional learning communities, instructional coaching, or reflective staff meetings, served multiple purposes: they reinforced shared language and expectations, reduced isolation, surfaced promising practices, and built a collective sense of ownership. When reflection was scaffolded and supported, it moved beyond anecdotal sharing and became a mechanism for professional inquiry and site-based innovation. Importantly, these forums also encouraged a mindset of continuous improvement. Rather than viewing implementation fidelity as rigid compliance, teachers were supported to try out SRL strategies, observe student responses, make adjustments, and reflect on outcomes with colleagues.

At the leadership level, structured reflection helped site leaders monitor progress, identify patterns across classrooms, and provide more targeted support. Leaders who created time for cross-team dialogue were better able to embed SRL into whole-school improvement efforts. This visibility also contributed to alignment between individual classroom strategies and broader site-level goals, reinforcing a coherent, site-wide approach.

From a systems perspective, creating embedded feedback loops between schools and central policy structures plays a significant role in supporting adaptive and responsive implementation. When insights from local contexts are regularly collected, discussed, and considered in decision-making, the broader system is better positioned to adjust supports, refine strategies,

and maintain relevance over time. These feedback mechanisms also provide opportunities to foreground the voices of educators, ensuring that policy is shaped by those who are most directly engaged with students and the realities of classroom practice. Without these structures, there is a risk that implementation becomes static, disconnected, or overly top-down.

Several processes can support this dynamic exchange between practice and policy. Termly school-based SRL reviews, for example, can prompt staff to document successes, challenges, and refinements, offering a regular point of reflection that informs both site-level planning and system-wide learning. Peer moderation processes, where teachers from different schools come together to share experiences and evaluate implementation across varied contexts, can deepen collective understanding and foster alignment without enforcing uniformity.

Actionable Strategy: Establish feedback channels through online platforms, cluster-level forums, and termly site reviews to gather implementation insights and support continuous improvement.

9.10. Enable staged implementation through regional collaboration

While the trial results point to strong potential for the SRL approach to improve student outcomes, caution is warranted when considering how to scale it across the broader system. Rapid, uniform implementation, where all schools are expected to adopt SRL within the same timeframe, regardless of their starting point, risks diluting the quality and depth of practice. This kind of top-down rollout can overwhelm schools that may not yet have the leadership structures, professional learning foundations, or cultural readiness required to meaningfully embed the SRL approach into daily teaching and learning.

A more strategic and responsive path forward involves adopting a phased implementation model. Beginning with a cohort of early adopter sites (i.e., schools that have demonstrated interest, readiness, and enabling conditions) can create an environment where the approach can be tested, refined, and contextualised in diverse settings. These early adopters can serve as both learning sites and peer models, helping to inform system-wide implementation through grounded experience.

However, the notion of "readiness" should not be interpreted as a prerequisite for SRL adoption. Teacher feedback across this study indicates broad professional alignment with the principles of the SRL approach, suggesting that the key implementation challenge lies in building shared understanding and practical capacity rather than overcoming resistance. A more coherent and sustainable approach may involve establishing regional clusters of schools working collaboratively, supported by departmental coordination. Such a structure would maintain a unified pedagogical direction while allowing for context-sensitive adaptation, peer exchange, and joint resource development. Beginning with early adopters within each region may help generate momentum and distribute leadership capacity, while ensuring all schools are supported to engage meaningfully with SRL, regardless of their starting point.

Actionable Strategy: Launch an SRL expansion through regional clusters that include early adopters, enabling peer learning, joint resource development, and context-responsive adaptation. The insights gathered from these regions can be used to inform a scalable system-wide implementation framework.

10. Conclusion

The findings from this study highlight that SRL is not simply a collection of instructional strategies. Rather, it represents a broader cultural and pedagogical shift with the potential to strengthen learner agency, metacognitive development, and resilience. Its value lies in its adaptability to diverse school contexts, its responsiveness to both developmental needs and local conditions, and its alignment with system-wide goals related to engagement and equity. Realising this potential, however, cannot rest solely on individual teacher effort. It relies on the capacity of the broader system to enable, sustain, and support meaningful implementation over time.

Successful and lasting adoption of SRL calls for coordinated leadership, embedded professional learning, and supportive policies that prioritise contextual flexibility and alignment with school improvement goals. A universal, top-down approach is unlikely to deliver meaningful or equitable outcomes. A more adaptive strategy, responsive to local conditions, may offer a practical pathway for embedding SRL at scale by supporting ongoing refinement in practice.

By positioning SRL as a pedagogical priority across the system, and supporting it through leadership engagement, infrastructure, and ongoing adaptation, South Australia can continue to lead in the national effort to translate educational research into effective, classroom-based practice. This approach offers a roadmap for policy and practice that is grounded in the lived experience of educators and students, and that reflects a commitment to deep, long-term educational improvement.

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Appendix

Focus group questions

1. Can I ask you to think about some of your learners that come from challenging/supportive environments?
    - Can you provide examples that illustrate the impact of the SRL approach on those students?
2. Where are you noticing the impact of the SRL approach on your learners, where are they applying this learning?
3. What are the key ingredients for transfer, what is required to support learners to apply SRL strategies in different contexts (academic, social, behavioural etc)?
    - What is going to 'stick'?
4. How can you tell your students are using SRL strategies? What actions, words, or artifacts produced by students will give you clues as to whether this new approach to has improved the way they interact with their own learning processes?
5. What do you feel is missing from your understanding of the SRL approach that, if provided as part of the professional learning, could have made your implementation more effective?
6. What is your advice in implementing this approach in classrooms like yours?
7. What is your advice in implementing this approach with learners who are at the same developmental stage as yours?
8. We know that this approach was conducted across many classrooms and environments. What would need to be true (in the environment) to make this approach more impactful in your context?
9. Are you planning on using the SRL approach with your class this year? If so, what changes are you going to make?

Leader interview questions

1. What role did you have in the implementation of the SRL approach at your site?
    - If they took an active role, then follow up: what did you do to facilitate: cultural change, behavioural change, practice change?
    - If they took a passive role, follow up with 'why'?
2. What central and local support would be needed for sustainable change?
3. In your context, what were your obstacles for adoption of the approach?
4. What advice do you have for the system for successful adoption of this approach?
5. What other competing priorities are in play? How are leaders making their choices. Point of this: How do we appeal or market to leaders to make them 'choose' SRL? How do we 'nudge' the system?
6. What other competing programs are in the play (same topic) (e.g. Berry St)? Was the messaging aligned? If not, how did you manage this in your context?
7. What advice do you have that would help us design professional learning for teachers that will support them to integrate SRL into their everyday teaching practice?
8. What advice do you have on the best ways to support teachers to integrate this approach into their everyday teaching from a site leadership perspective?
9. Are you noticing the impact of the SRL approach on your learners? Where are they applying this learning?
10. Are you noticing the impact of the SRL approach on your teachers? What have you noticed?
11. Since the initial implementation:
    - What are your teachers continuing to do?
    - What have your teachers stopped or changed?
    - Why?