Skipton Primary School, a small rural school, is located in the small township of Skipton in the Western District of Victoria, 55 kilometres southwest of Ballarat and 165 kilometres from Melbourne. Agriculture is the main source of employment for local families with approximately half of Skipton’s student population living on farms. Its circa 1856 traditional, but recently extended and renovated, school house currently accommodates 70 students although enrolments are falling as local demographics change. Skipton was one of the very first schools to receive Performance and Development Culture (P&D Culture) accreditation in 2005 and became a P&D Culture Reference School, thereby enabling Skipton’s teachers to assist other schools throughout Victoria in implementing the initiative.

Staff at Skipton believe that the school had already started the P&D Culture journey before the initiative was announced. From the start, Skipton had a vision about teachers and students learning together – where work would be collaborative and no teacher would work in a classroom in isolation. The school was already structured into three learning and teaching units, a structure that supported a team approach. The accreditation process supported the embedding of teaching and learning at the centre of all activities.

So what spurred the development and what happened?

Skipton teachers see Karen Kirby, the principal, as having been the prime mover – even though leadership in the school is shared. They see her initial research – her reading and visiting other schools – as having made a huge difference. Karen joined a group of principals from the region visiting a large P–12 school in Queensland noted for implementing ‘productive pedagogies’. This model shaped what was to come at Skipton, but was reinforced by the principal’s visits to other schools across Australia, especially small schools which shared her vision of integrating the work of teachers, students and support staff – effectively abandoning the one teacher / one classroom situation.

Karen also wanted to overcome any disruption for classes with part-time teachers. With teachers working in teams, greater continuity was possible. Diane Britton, a leading teacher who has been heavily involved in the P&D Culture initiative since its inception pointed out: “Collaborative teaching teams were the way to go – but the starting point for
teachers doesn’t have to be the same. They just have to learn to work together and their practices change.”

Karen believed the innovation the school was embarking upon would complement the school’s embedding of a P&D Culture. She managed to share what she had seen in such a convincing way, that it had immediate appeal. But, after that, she knew teachers would need to decide what this would mean for them, their students and the school. Thus, the teachers shared responsibility for how these new ideas would unfold. As they put it:

We started to see that other schools did things differently and that we could too – and that everyone would benefit even though at first it was scary to contemplate doing things differently.

The most striking thing that Karen did is she didn’t preach to us and she took us from where we were. No one was made to feel inadequate – we were handed a possibility or a problem and asked to work it out together. The most supportive thing is being trusted to be professional and to take risks.

Skipton’s teachers embarked on research through professional reading and attending professional learning events organised by the region and central office. They shared ideas, reported on their professional reading and visits to other schools, they encouraged reflection and discussion which, all together, provided powerful professional learning challenges for their planning, thinking and teaching practices. Teacher Professional Leave provided a catalyst for teachers to investigate best practice individually and in teams, to participate in whole school action research and benefit from critical advice from visiting experts.

Like any change for improvement, there are always unexpected consequences and forms of resistance. One teacher explained:

Prior to the changes at Skipton, teachers were independent and worked individually in their own classes, doing their own thing – but then the principal challenged us to demystify what went on in classrooms – she challenged us to have our classroom doors open – and then things started to change.

Initially some teachers were happier about this than others, but as time went on, and as new practices were trialled “everyone came on board and saw the benefits for students and teachers”.

At first, some parents expressed concerns about the new methods. Resistance to change is very rarely wholesale, but any form of challenge to practice does lead
educators to be more articulate about their rationale and goals for change. With clear explanations and constant communications about the learning community focus, the programs were carefully implemented and the children’s enthusiasm and improved learning results spoke for themselves. As staff pointed out, “The kids turned the parents around.”

Skipton’s teachers are observably energised, excited, enthusiastic and committed about what they do, how they do it and what they’ve achieved for their students. Teachers take collective responsibility for challenging all students in their learning and for student behaviour. The teachers say they are encouraged to take greater risks, with support from their peers. As one teacher put it:

It’s about being brave enough to move out of your comfort zone in front of your peers. Other teachers provide the impetus and the ideas and you experiment and grow as a professional. It’s this way of working – the way we trust and support each other – that gives a sense of belonging and raises morale. We’ve found that the way we work is the way that students now work, cooperatively. They’ve all got their individual learning goals and they self-evaluate, but there are others around to review goals and to encourage them to excel.

This collaborative, team approach to planning, teaching and assessing students pays dividends. While intensive planning occurs prior to each term and every adult who works in the school, teachers and Education Support staff, attends staff and planning meetings, very few formal meetings are needed. Teachers say their work is less intensive and time consuming, with workloads shared rather than compounded. One teacher said she had more planning time through being in a team-teaching and planning situation throughout the school day. She felt she derived greater job satisfaction as a result.

Using data was initially a skill that had to be acquired, but once mastered, staff found it could be used to identify weaknesses, but importantly, to recognise strengths. As Diane put it:

We take on board the things that show the need for change, but we’re really good at knowing when there’s data telling us we’re doing a great job. We know where our strengths lie, but at first we had to really look for that – so I would advise other schools to look to find ways of doing that because it’s so affirming when you can see your own development as well as the kids’.

The Skipton staff members believe their success has been due to everyone being committed and willing to learn. Diane says:
At first the change was like a revolution in the move from tradition to innovation – but we shaped it to how we wanted it ... For once professional development had real meaning and we found that we could no longer speak about “I” or “me”. It was “us’ and “we”. Our individual goals became our goals - the school’s goals - almost unconsciously. The learning culture changed and now we see ourselves as changed. It brought the whole school together and we’ll never go back to the way we were.

Karen says:

The challenges of working this way are constant. The team is critical. No one has 100 per cent control over what they do anymore. It’s about what we decide as a group and what the feedback is telling us. So if there were to be someone that simply suited themselves, it wouldn’t work – it’s total commitment and team playing. You have to constantly change, question and think. You can’t cruise and get stale – the process doesn’t permit that. Once it’s working, you can’t shake it

Karen believes that in the future small schools will increasingly work more closely together.

I would encourage principals to work together – to visit each others’ schools and to find ways of supporting each other – using each other’s strengths. I think it’s important to reflect on our own experiences and other people can learn from that. We personalise our learning but a lot of our most useful learning comes from other schools. And we gain ideas. It’s important to have the time and permission to make those kinds of connections. We need to recognise and tap into our collective capacity.

This concept of sharing leadership and learning and capitalising on collective interests and strengths was further developed through Skipton’s role as a P&D Culture Reference School. “Everyone improves when what you do is on show,” Diane believes.

Skipton has made the very best out of the P&D Culture initiative and has made a concerted effort to build on and enhance its P&D Culture since being accredited. Staff are currently using the P&D Culture Revised Self Assessment Framework and the Instructional Model to guide further improvement in the quality of teaching and learning at the school.
As far as Skipton is concerned – the learning journey is never ending and “the sky’s the limit!” Karen is adamant: “And the reward is in seeing what students achieve – that’s the fruition of what happens here.”