TEACHER-LEADER CLARITY INCREASES STUDENTS’ ACHIEVEMENT IN TWO CASE STUDIES FROM AUSTRALIA AND CANADA

by

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ABSTRACT:

The educational landscape is littered with failed initiatives and failed promises of better schools and better outcomes. The key reason for this resides in a significant disconnect between policy makers and the teaching profession. This broken link means that professional leadership expertise and professional leverage are often side-lined in policy making and implementation (Harris et al, 2017). In support of this view, Fullan & Quinn (2015) state that the imperatives for educational change are often very far removed from the realities of the classroom. Thus, there is a growing evidential base that posits an alternative thinking about educational change and reform (Evers and Kneyber, 2015). This approach puts teachers in the driving seat of improvement, innovation and change and calls upon their collective expertise to shape and inform policy decisions (Zhao, 2017). How can this be done?

This research examines the impact of a leadership structure which encourages specially-selected teachers teaching teachers. I hypothesize that teacher-leaders as ‘Knowledgeable Others’ (Sharratt et al, 2010) can effectively build teachers’ pedagogical practice to increase students’ achievement by bringing CLARITY to assessment and instruction practices in classrooms where a ‘culture of inquiry-learning’ is the norm. Analyses of data in two case studies from Australia and Canada reveal the impact of investing in teacher-leaders as instructional coaches whose schedules include time during the school day to work alongside classroom teachers. Three research findings that lead to increased students’ achievement in both jurisdictions are discussed: 1) the role of the teacher-leader as ‘Knowledgeable Other’; 2) the conditions necessary for professional collaborative inquiry into classroom practice; and 3) the importance of a framework for co-laboring that allows for precise assessment and instructional practices in classrooms.

Results demonstrate that student improvement is possible and probable when teachers and leaders have time to work together on differentiating practice to ensure students’ success. Implications of this research in Australia and Canada for leaders at all system levels include further identifying the professional development necessary to optimize the impact of teacher-leaders and promoting to policy decision-makers the benefits of the in-school leadership structure including teacher-leaders as significant actors to increase student achievement and teacher efficacy in the long term across systems (Sharratt, 2019).

Keywords: Teacher-leader, Knowledgeable Other, collaboration, co-learning, co-teaching cycle, building leader and teacher capacity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Others have studied and written about the relationship among collaborative culture, intentional practice, and increasing all students' achievement (Dana et al., 2011; Militello et al., 2009). In Realization (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009), the authors write
about the impact of the 14 Parameters on increasing student achievement at the system and school levels.

Parameter 1, the notion of shared beliefs and understandings, sets the stage for system- and school-wide shared beliefs and understandings that begin to create a positive cultural base and common foundation. Parameter 11 specifically addresses the importance of undertaking Collaborative Inquiry, using student data to ask system- and school-level questions. Parameter 2, embedding experienced teacher-leaders as Instructional Coaches or "knowledgeable others", builds teacher and leader capacity to increase all students’ growth and achievement. As one research participant said: "Collaborative leading is at the heart of building relational trust with staff and relational trust is foundational to a school that is genuinely focused on student-centered leadership".

This study involves teachers, principals and supervisors of schools in two jurisdictions in Australia and Canada, both using the 14 Parameter research, particularly Parameter’s 1, 2 and 11, to build teacher capacity to increase all students’ achievement. The underlying premises in each case are that:

a. developing a culture of learning demands that there is a shared belief and understanding, Parameter #1, that:
   1. All students can learn given the right time and support;
   2. All teachers can learn to teach, given the right assistance;
   3. Early and ongoing intervention and high expectations are critical; and,
   4. All leaders, teachers and students can clearly articulate what and why they lead, teach and learn the way they do; and

b. a teacher-leader, known in previous research as the Knowledgeable Other (Sharratt et al, 2010) and discussed in Parameter 2 (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, 2012, Sharratt, 2019), has time to work closely with principals, school leadership teams and classroom teachers using an inquiry approach, Parameter 11, to increase
students' achievement.

2 METHODOLOGY

There are two parts to this study: the research on Collaborative Inquiry (Planche & Sharratt, 2016) and the application of this research, pertaining to Knowledgeable Others (Sharratt, Ostinelli & Cattaneo (2010) in the two case studies discussed.

School leadership teams, in the two school systems cited, applied the 14 Parameters research (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009, 2012) with Sharratt for at least 8 days over two years. The systems have both experienced significant gains in student achievement and growth as they report in separate case studies in this paper: one about school improvement (Australia) and the other about system improvement (Canada)In addition, both synchronous with and prior to the cases being written, Sharratt and Planche (2016), collected over 470 educator perceptions regarding the potential for and impact of Collaborative Learning making a difference to increase students' achievement.

Preparations for the Sharratt and Planche study included:

a. scanning and studying current research regarding collaborative practices that underpin school improvement efforts and the leadership behaviors that support the growth of collaborative cultures;

b. generating and then reviewing the results of a research survey in which questions probed the complexities of developing and sustaining Collaborative Learning cultures. Survey questions offered choices for response as well as opportunities for additional open-ended anecdotal responses which were followed up by interviews and informal conversations conducted with teacher-leaders and district leaders who promote Collaborative Learning;

c. collecting vignettes, case studies, and reflections from the field, highlighting the challenges and impact of Leading Collaborative Learning.

Specifically, the research questions included:
1. What are the leadership behaviors that build readiness for deeper forms of Collaborative Learning?
2. What are some tangible steps that foster a culture of co-learning about powerful practice?
3. What collaborative processes do you feel have had an impact on student achievement? What is the evidence of impact?
4. How do educators sustain a culture of collaboration and inquiry that increases student achievement?

The use of social media and professional and personal networking tools (e.g., Twitter, LinkedIn) made it possible to gather the views of a broad international group of survey participants from New Zealand, Australia, Chile, European countries, the United States, and Canada. The survey was written and translated into Spanish by researchers S. Rodriguez and S. Galdames. More than 470 educators participated in the research survey with many adding personal comments and anecdotes about their own experiences with Collaborative Learning endeavours. The results of the analyzed data are integrated into the discussion and content of the two case studies.

The detailed case studies for the purpose of this discussion paper are taken, one from Brisbane, Australia, and the other from Manitoba, Canada. Both jurisdictions have implemented all 14 Parameters research; however, Parameter 2, a Knowledgeable Other working alongside teachers, has been a focus in driving their improvement forward.

**Case Study 1: Brisbane, Australia**

Metropolitan Region is a large region of public schools in south east Queensland, Australia with 258 schools and approximately 150,000 students. The region includes the state capital and largest city, Brisbane, as well as the major provincial centre of Ipswich. Since the introduction of National testing in 2008 when Queensland results were very disappointing, Metropolitan Region has shown remarkable improvement through the use of increasingly targeted strategies. The senior leadership team in the region has worked with Dr. Lyn Sharratt ‘to ensure greater precision in their work alongside schools as documented in the regional improvement agenda to
achieve high quality teaching and leadership through consistent collaborative empowerment by implementing high impact strategies’.

The senior leadership team models the use of high impact strategies team by establishing a regional data wall and conducting weekly case management sessions to review school performance and identify areas or sites needing a sharper and narrower focus. Master Teachers were identified and deployed across the region. Of the many school narratives showing and sustaining significant improvement across the region, one representative narrative, that highlights the power of implementing Parameter #2, the Knowledgeable Other position, follows.

Brisbane Bayside State College (BBSC) is a metropolitan Year 7-12 high school in Brisbane, Australia, with 938 students and 79 teachers. It is but one of 257 Sharratt schools involved in this system improvement work and parallel research. The student population has a socio-economic status just below the national average (44th percentile) and represents a diverse range of cultural groups, including 61 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. In 2015, eight Year (Grade) 7 students and 15 Year (Grade) 9 students did not reach the national minimum standard for reading, and the school mean score was below the nation (45th percentile). Thus, the priority was established that every student will meet the national minimum standard in reading, and, that BBSC will have a mean score equal to or above the nation in reading.

When school leaders, the Master Teacher as Knowledgeable Other, and staff joined the ongoing work and research of Dr. Lyn Sharratt, their improvement strategies were quickly linked to the 14 Parameters including adoption of the two-pronged (Data Wall and Case Management Meeting) Case Management Approach (Parameter #6). Their first targeted reading assessment (base-line) was administered prior to the first Case Management Meeting (CMM). Each meeting focused on three students and was facilitated by Master Teacher, Sarah Matthews (Parameter 2: Knowledgeable Other), and attended by the English teachers, English Head of Department, and a scribe (non-teaching staff). The operating norms for the CMM established a safe environment for teachers to present their “FACES” and to listen for suggestions from the other teachers. The next stage of the CMM for each of the three students involved their teachers committing to act in the next teaching cycle using the new instructional strategies recommended. Follow-up CMMs were
held at the end of the unit, after the second reading assessment. Using the same formalised structure, teachers shared their experiences, successes and follow-up changes in practice.

The assessment data highlighted that five of the six case-managed students improved their reading scores; however, the real discovery was the impact of the Case Management Approach beyond the six targeted students. Through the guidance of the Master Teacher teachers’ willingness to be involved and their level of engagement became overwhelming; not only was the CMM a productive way to focus on individual student learning, but it was also an incredibly rich opportunity for teacher Professional Learning (PL). Teachers’ and students’ efforts were rewarded. In the seven weeks between the pre- and post- tests, 69 students out of 112 Year 8 students improved their reading scores! Furthermore, 96 out of 102 Year 9 students had a positive gain in reading between their Year 7 and Year 9 achievement in the national assessment.

This process of having a Knowledgeable Other ‘walking alongside’ teachers supported student growth, and, also helped teachers to understand the importance of using student performance results as evidence related to their own efficacy. They now see a direct correlation between their own instructional and assessment decisions and actions, and increased student success.

The national reading data show that students have closed the gap and emerged ahead of the nation, meeting one of the school-established targets. In 2016, the Year 7 students had a mean scale score of 537 (below the national mean of 541), yet, the same students in 2018 (now in Year (Grade 9) had a mean scale score of 593 (above the national mean of 584). There is still work to be done in having all Year 7 students meet the national minimum standard. Leaders and teachers at BCSS now say that putting “FACES” on the data through Data Walls, the focused work of the Knowledgeable Other, and CMMs have provided the clarity needed in instruction, and have helped to align their class-wide strategic approaches to reading improvement.

Staff all agreed that the collaborative inquiry required for their “FACES” journey was positively led by the Master Teacher’s vision and skills. They could now see that within a collaborative environment, Data Walls provided a way of linking the school priorities (reading, numeracy and data use) and that co-teaching was a next logical step to could take together.
Case Study 2: Manitoba, Canada

Seine River School Division, in South Eastern Manitoba, Canada, is a small rural/urban school division with 18 schools and approximately 5,100 students in three K-8 French Immersion schools, two K-8 dual-track English/French schools, eight K-8 schools, one K-4 school, one 5-8 school and three high schools. The school division, recognized for excellent inclusionary practices, has a high percentage of special needs students and a diverse student population.

At first, the school division leadership team only consisted of central superintendents and operational administrators; however, this was broadened to develop collective capacity with school leadership teams and teacher groups by adding consultant resources in literacy, numeracy and early childhood. These new Knowledgeable Others (Parameter 2), who were Reading Recovery® trained teachers and literacy coaches, enabled and facilitated Professional Learning for all by being actively involved in implementing the co-teaching cycle (Figure 1.2) with groups of teachers and school teams.

Of particular concern, noted on their System Data Wall, was the 58.5% of students entering Grade 2 in September 2015 in the lowest band of reading as measured by the newly-purchased benchmark assessment kits. These data showed urgent action was required in Grade 2 classrooms in every school. Thus, the system focus for the teacher-leader role of Knowledgeable Other appropriately became Grade 2 Reading as the catalyst for change in practice, beginning in all early years classrooms.

The central leaders, school leaders, Knowledgeable Others and teachers began this change process with the shared belief and understanding of Parameter #1: all students can and will learn. They also committed to inquiring and ensuring that high-impact literacy strategies and interventions were known and understood. To close the gaps, in Grade 2 and then beyond, for example, each school team with their Knowledgeable Other agreed to:

- develop an individual intervention plan for every student in grade 2 who was in the lowest band in reading;
- track individual student reading levels through running records, data analysis and matching them with appropriate additional supports and teaching interventions;
• engage with classroom teachers to assist them in the development of intervention plans and regular monitoring of student process;
• adopt a Case Management Approach (Parameter #6: Data Walls and Case Management Meetings) for those students not making significant gains in their reading despite interventions;
• develop clear, high expectations for closing gaps for all students; and
• provide time for teachers to co-plan, co-teach, co-debrief and co-reflect (Figure 1.2) with counterparts and student support team members.

This focused plan made a significant difference to building a strong literacy foundation and to closing the achievement gaps for grade 2 students. At the start of the school year, the system had identified 195 Grade 2 students out of 347 Grade 2 students in the lowest reading level. By the end of the school year, the number of students in the lowest band dropped to 41 students – a dramatic reduction. Their plan of blending high expectations, accountability, and shared capacity-building made an impressive difference. This school division continues to be focused on building teacher capacity to teach all students, to scrutinize their data and question their instructional strategies and to run Case Management Meetings, led by the Knowledgeable Others, to improve their overall performance in Reading.

3. RESULTS
In each instance, the Australian and Canadian teacher-leaders were consistent, persistent and insistent in implementing their improvement plans, and in following up on the actionable next steps, including intentional teacher Professional Learning that began with data scrutiny provided by system and school-based Knowledgeable Others.

The following three lessons were learned/reinforced from combining these recent outcomes from the two case studies with the research undertaken by Sharratt & Planche in 2016.

3.1. to be successful, teacher-leaders must be consciously skilled
Our first finding is that teacher-leaders must be “consciously-skilled” to work alongside others in classrooms as master teachers with evidence-proven knowledge of teaching and learning and strong interpersonal skills as shown in Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1: The Importance of a Consciously-Skilled Teaching Force**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unconsciously-Skilled</th>
<th>Consciously-Skilled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unconsciously-Unskilled</td>
<td>Consciously-Unskilled</td>
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Source: adapted from Mind Tools, 2017

According to the fourth dimension of shared beliefs and understandings, educators must all be able to clearly articulate what they are teaching, why they are teaching it and how they are teaching it. This only happens when teachers learn 'alongside others' who have proven track-records in teaching and learning. Teacher-Leaders as Knowledgeable Others who can articulate why they choose the strategies they do to make the differences they make for each student, are 'consciously skilled' and 'consciously competent'.

Unless every discussion, meeting, and Professional Learning Community forum has a Knowledgeable Other, regardless of title or position, to guide the learning conversations (without participants fearing retribution), nothing of substance will be decided to improve students' achievement. Putting FACES on the Data and acting on the careful interpretation of the data, demands that we include Knowledgeable Others in the conversations and at leadership decision-making tables. Therefore, the teacher-leader as Knowledgeable Other must be a consciously-skilled, highly-competent teacher who can clearly articulate and model how to use assessment data to inform instruction and how to work alongside every teacher in every classroom.
3.2 Teacher-leaders are carefully selected

Key to the success of teacher-leaders is their careful selection. Research participants said that teacher-leaders must be able to:

- articulate their evidence of having made an impact on building teachers' capacity and increasing students' achievement; and
- give specific examples of their personal and professional attributes.

Further, research including the interviews (Sharratt et al, 2010) (Sharratt & Planche, 2016), and the experience from these two case studies indicate that the teacher-leader is a Knowledgeable Other who:

✓ is respected and respectful; is trusted;
✓ is still teaching in the classroom part-time;
✓ has strong interpersonal skills - reliable, responsible, resilient;
✓ is knowledgeable in content, process and product in the classroom;
✓ is able to work 'alongside';
✓ is not viewed by her/himself as 'the expert';
✓ has facilitation skills;
✓ is flexible and humble;
✓ can demonstrate proven student success;
✓ has a wide repertoire and is curious about others' processes and practices; and
✓ is well-versed in research-based practices and is able to adapt them to specific contexts, learning situations.

3.3 Teacher-leaders are collaborative

Having a highly developed interpersonal skill set is important. It enables teacher-leaders to strike a balance between being perceived as being highly competent and therefore 'threatening' to individual teachers who normally don’t collaborate in their improvement or their daily work, and, being ‘too soft’ or not challenging enough to make a difference to practice. Tonya Ward Singer (2015) gives thoughtful tips on how teacher-leaders as Knowledgeable Others must proceed when working with a pair or a
small group of teachers in a co-teaching cycle to shift teacher practice and personal professional expectations:

“**Be sincere about fear.** Brainstorm together the worst-possible outcomes of observing together and notice the universal fears that emerge. Create norms together that honor those fears and create safety for team observations.

**Choose a focus that matters.** Engage teachers in identifying a challenge in their practice that they especially want to solve and use that as the reason for their Collaborative Professional Inquiry.

**Use a non-evaluative protocol.** Observers watch to gather descriptive evidence of student learning, not to evaluate the teacher. Knowledgeable Others use a protocol to keep conversations centred on impact, and ask each other during the debrief: "what can we as a team do to refine our approach?"

**Model risk-taking.** The host teacher teaches the first lesson the team plans and observes.

**Honor imperfection.** When a lesson doesn't go as planned, teams have the richest conversations. Don't rob yourself of this experience by structuring or rehearsing lesson elements to the point of predictability. Invite imperfection so that together you can dare to push the edge of what is possible for students – and yourselves.”

### 3.4 Teacher-leaders do purposeful work

Becoming knowledgeable about the impact of various collaborative approaches is important for school leaders with or without positional power. Protected teaming time in Professional Learning Communities must focus on building collective capacity for CLARITY in assessment and in instruction, including modelling Collaborative Inquiry with students. Our Research from Leading Collaborative Learning: Empowering Excellence (Sharratt & Planche, 2016) showed that highly-impactful teacher-leaders include these six evidence-proven Professional Learning practices in their coaching
work alongside teachers and leaders:

1. Lesson Study;
2. Co-Teaching Cycle;
3. Instructional Coaching;
4. Collaborative Assessment of Student Work;
5. Demonstration Classrooms; and,
6. Professional Collaborative Inquiry.

While co-learning is fundamental to all six learning approaches, the Co-Teaching Cycle discussed here, is a key strategy that teacher-leaders use to bring coherence and precision to assessment that informs instruction (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012; Sharratt & Harild, 2015; Sharratt & Planche, 2016). As displayed in Figure 1.2. Co-Teaching is an opportunity for a Knowledgeable Other and a teacher to plan, teach, debrief and reflect together on their practice following very specific steps. Three important observations are made here:

1. **Critical**: planning to be a mirror for each other’s improvement;
2. **Imperative**: videotaping the classroom during the teaching so that the Co-Debrief and Co-Reflection processes can accurately focus on collecting the evidence of students' thinking during the teaching; and
3. **Essential**: knowing that the process is messy and not lock-step but ongoing, striving for continuous refinement in practice.
Co-Teaching is most powerful when the teacher-leader/Knowledgable Other and a teacher have time during the school day to be engaged in the all steps of the process, as follows:

**Step 1: Co-Plan**

- Find protected time with a trusted colleague to plan, teach with video, debrief and reflect; Discuss what you each want to improve about your practice to give each other Descriptive Feedback during the process (your Collaborative Inquiry focus);
• Begin with the Curriculum Expectations, then plan the assessment: to deconstruct the Learning Intentions, co-construct the Success Criteria and provide an engaging performance task for students to be able to demonstrate their learning;
• Plan before, during and after the lesson, thinking about flow, timing and pace;
• Plan to use research-proven, high-impact instructional strategies differentiated based on student need.

**Step 2: Co-Teach**

• Set up the video camera, using a swivel camera if possible, to follow the voice and images of the moving teachers;
• Work side-by-side in a classroom;
• Facilitate classroom 'Accountable Talk', hearing every student's voice;
• Ask yourselves 'who is doing the most talking and the most thinking in the classroom'? Monitor students' self-assessment by asking them: What are you learning? Why? How are you doing? How do you know? How can you improve? Where do you go for help when stuck?
• Change pace and flow if necessary;
• Give ongoing Descriptive Feedback to students against the Success Criteria; Check for students' understanding and learning against the Success Criteria.

**Step 3: Co-Debrief**

• Examine the video clip to look/listen for more students' voice than teacher voice; higher-order questions and responses; creative critical thinking; students' use of the Success Criteria; students self-assessing and self-correcting;
• Discuss teaching practices and prompts used;
• Assess if the taught, learned and assessed curriculum-based Learning Intentions were aligned using student work samples as evidence;
• Give each other Descriptive Feedback about the Collaborative Inquiry question that each wanted to improve about his/her practice, looking closely at the video clip;
• Use work samples to assess students' understanding and learning growth against the co-constructed Success Criteria. Ask, “Were they the correct Learning Intention and
Success Criteria?"

- Decide what needs revision.

**Step 4: Co-Reflect**

- Discuss the Co-Teaching process: What worked? What didn't work? What would we do differently next time?
- Engage with partner in an open, honest dialogue about improving practice;
- Identify and understand what changes in practice and beliefs need revision for you each to become 'consciously and competently skilled';
- Plan next steps for students' and teachers' learning in this cycle of inquiry.

One educator was quoted as saying, "the best professional development time that I've ever spent is when I've been given release time by administrators to work with other teachers . . . That's invaluable time. That's where we accomplish so much more because we are learning from each other and from each other's experience . . . Creating units and lessons for our classes - that's the time that we need. Together. It's the collaboration that is huge (University of Ottawa, 2012 p. 54)."

System and school leaders in Brisbane Australia and Manitoba, Canada look to their cadre of teacher-leaders who are specifically-skilled collaborators, such as literacy coaches, curriculum consultants, Master Teachers or subject specialists when planning improvement actions. A teacher-leader is a valuable asset who persuasively works alongside system leaders, school leaders and teachers to make a difference - often one teacher-at-a-time - which is an affordable and scalable investment of resources when we think about the number of students being impacted each time and for many successive years. My findings from both Case Studies indicate that *teacher-leaders, when deployed in every school to work alongside classroom teachers, build leader and teacher capacity to increase students' growth and achievement.*
3 CONCLUSIONS

One Knowledgeable Other succinctly summed up the power of the teacher-leader role in this study, by saying

“Leaders of Pedagogy (Knowledgeable Others) must build strong relationships and lead the change wanted in teaching and learning. They must use data to evaluate such change and think strategically about how they can use data to improve the learning culture of their schools, both for teachers and students. The impact of this role, I believe, is improved collaboration between staff members; increased student achievement; and more staff members taking risks and trialling unfamiliar pedagogical strategies as a result of a more rigorous focus on student and teacher learning.”

Amelia Woolaston, Leader of Pedagogy, St. Mary’s College, Gunnedah).

Finding ways of “making space” for embedded Professional Learning through teacher-leader collaboration is the basis of an insightful report by the Rennie Center on Educational Research & Policy and Edvestors (2012). The report focuses on "Schools on the Move-Best Practice Research" highlighting five successful elementary schools in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Their effective practices included organizing time for teachers to work together, setting professional norms, and using learning protocols. Structural changes such as merely introducing teacher-leaders were not seen as sufficiently powerful in themselves to build strong collaborative cultures. Similar to my research findings, leaders in this study who could articulate a vision for a school culture that valued increased teacher voice and teacher-leadership, were especially influential (p. 9). Similarly, teacher teamwork became a teacher-owned enterprise and was found to be the key to improving student learning. While principals may share influence with teacher-leaders, school principals have the means to mobilize learning through resources, such as time and facilitation assistance, for teachers and teacher-leaders as Knowledgeable others to work together.

This research on the power of teacher-leadership aligns with the V. Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd meta-analysis of international studies that made links between teachers’
school leaders’ participating in Professional Learning together and increased student outcomes. They stated that when school and teacher leaders promote or participate in effective teacher Professional Learning and Development, they have impact across a whole school, not just in one class (2009, p. 39). Their findings reinforce the concept of school- and teacher-leaders prioritizing time to be lead learners among many learners on school staffs, resulting in increasing teacher capacity and students' achievement.

It is this evidence of impact that can influence policy-makers to lean more heavily on educators’ views of what is ‘good’ policy when budgets and policies are being discussed. In both Metro Region, Brisbane Australia and Seine River, Manitoba Canada, the quality of improvement in student achievement led by teacher-leaders and school leaders caused system leaders and elected officials (policy-makers) to endorse the internally-generated vision and structural changes supporting it, enabling a convergence of thinking and actions needed between educators and policy-makers.
5 REFERENCES


Mind Tools, 2017


