Students as partners in learning in rural and remote settings

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It can be said that leading school improvement in education is, at times, difficult for leaders, students and teachers. However, rural and remote schools bring with them challenges that can be categorised as being unique to their contexts. Considering the importance and influence of student-teacher relationships on students' learning, teachers' intentions to change in response to professional learning and teachers' job satisfaction, it is unsurprising that student voice and agency are becoming a key focus of the policy agenda within Australia.

The Northern Territory Learning Commission (NTLC) was established in 2016, and provides voice and agency to students across 16 schools from Katherine to Darwin, as well as Victoria, to engage with their teachers and school leaders in making evidence-informed decisions about their learning. The majority of schools are from outer regional, remote or very remote locations, with 15 of the 16 schools from these locations. The student, teacher and leader commissioners meet as part of the Learning Commission to discuss, analyse and set direction for the school year, informed by whole-school data sets. Based on their school data student, teacher and school leader commissioners set goals, design evidence-gathering processes, determine sample sizes for inclusion, and identify how they will measure the impact of their school-based research. Based on their findings, commissioners consider the wider implementation of the recommendations they make.

The in-school research projects that the student, leader and teacher commissioners undertake within the Learning Commission are scaffolded with the Evidence for Learning Impact Evaluation Cycle (Evidence for Learning, 2018) and incorporate the best available evidence about what is likely to work. An evaluation of the impact of the NTLC is currently underway.

Challenges in rural and remote settings

There can be many challenges to improving student engagement and learning in rural and remote settings. Attendance is reduced in rural and remote Australia, with major-city students being absent for 16 days. Meanwhile, provincial students are absent for about 23 days, 19.4 days in rural areas and 17.1 in remote. Therefore, on average, rural and remote students spend less time in the classroom than their counterparts in the city (Lamb & Glover, 2014, p. 67). This reduced attendance impacts students' achievement; students from rural and remote settings have less growth in their Year 3 to Year 5 NAPLAN scores than their major-city peers (Lamb & Glover, 2014).

Policy base and evidence for student engagement

The strength of the relationship between students and teachers is known to exert a positive influence on student learning, with an effect size of 0.72 (Hattie, 2009). Further, teachers' job satisfaction is positively associated with teachers' positive relationships with their students (Schleicher, 2015). When exploring the findings between teachers' intentions to engage in ongoing teacher professional learning, a high correlation is seen between teacher attitudes to change and their belief that the professional learning is "good for students" (Dunn, Hattie, & Bowles, 2018, p. 292).

The current policy agenda indicates the need for an increased focus on the development of student agency. *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* recommends that "students have the opportunity within schools to be partners in their learning" (Gonski et al., 2018, p. 26). Further to this, "Amplify", which is a student voice, agency and leadership practice guide published by the Victorian Department of Education and Training, describes that students "have the power to direct and take responsibility for their learning" (Department of

Education and Training, 2018, p. 9). Over 50% of schools within the Northern Territory have expressed that their priority in 2019 is to use student input and feedback to inform their whole-school strategy (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2019, p. 6). The Northern Territory Learning Commission seeks to respond to this identified need in a purposeful and meaningful way.

The Northern Territory Learning Commission

The Northern Territory Learning Commission (NTLC) began with seven schools in 2016 and has now grown to 16 schools in 2019 (Vaughan, Cleary, & Butler, 2017). These schools span a range of school types, sizes, locations and stages, as detailed in Table 1. Two secondary schools are currently involved in the NTLC – this participation was driven by students who had experienced the NTLC in primary school and exhibited a strong advocacy to continue to be involved with the initiative. The rest of the cohort of schools are primary, including one special school that has been involved since 2018.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) of the schools vary from those surrounded by high disadvantage, with an ICSEA of 567 to an ICSEA of 1063, which is slightly above the Australian average of 1000. The average ICSEA is 894, indicating that, as a group, these students are from backgrounds surrounded by disadvantage. The enrolment varies from 23 to 602, with an average of 287. The percentage of students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds has a range of 0%-96%, with an average of 36%. The percentage of students from Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) has an average of 43%, with a range of 2%-100%. The majority of schools are from outer regional locations (nine of the 16), with four remote and two from very remote locations.

The definition of a "Learning Commission" in this work is one in which intentional opportunities are provided for students to engage with their leaders and teachers to analyse trends in whole-school data, design possible responses to address the problems that they have identified, and to implement and determine the impact. This work is being led by John Cleary, General Manager of School and System Improvement in the NT Department of Education, with support by Dr Tanya Vaughan, from Evidence for Learning, and Helen Butler, a Victorian educator. The leaders, students and teachers in the NTLC collect evidence to inform the design of projects that are scaffolded by the Impact Evaluation Cycle and the Education Action Plan (Evidence for Learning, 2019). We describe the work to date on this in more detail below.

Impact Evaluation Cycle and Education Action Plan

Simply put, the Impact Evaluation Cycle is an innovation cycle that helps educators to frame and structure evidence and data collection in a systematic way, as shown in Figure 1 on the next page. Effective use of data is vital to improving learning. As educators shift their focus from reporting data to using the data to create practice-based evidence to inform learning, they need to apply an approach to engage with evidence in a process of continuous improvement (Bryk, 2015; Vaughan, 2019). We have previously described this cycle as detailed below:

> The Impact Evaluation Cycle is a 10-stage process that starts from outlining the improvement challenge specific for the school context, designing and implementing an approach, to developing an evaluation plan to measure and evaluate its effectiveness. It is not a static process. Educators can decide the stage at which they want to operate in the Impact Evaluation Cycle, depending on their context and current situation.
> (Vaughan, Ho, & Cleary, 2018)

Table 1: Demographics of the schools involved in the NTLC

Name of School	Location	School type	Enrolment	ICSEA	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	LBOTE
Keilor Views Primary School, Keilor Downs, VIC	Major Cities	Primary	452	995	0%	57%
Alawa Primary School, Alawa, NT	Outer Regional	Primary	234	968	26%	32%
Dripstone Middle School, Tiwi, NT	Outer Regional	Secondary	498	961	21%	47%
Nakara Primary School, Nakara, NT	Outer Regional	Primary	509	1063	8%	58%
Wagaman Primary School, Wagaman, NT	Outer Regional	Primary	263	968	22%	51%
Henbury School, Wanguri, NT	Outer Regional	Special	134	903	53%	33%
Wanguri Primary School, Wanguri, NT	Outer Regional	Primary	305	991	17%	42%
Leanyer Primary School, Leanyer, NT	Outer Regional	Primary	498	1002	14%	52%
Manunda Terrace Primary School School, Karama, NT	Outer Regional	Primary	152	763	60%	38%
Bruthen Primary School, Bruthen, VIC	Outer Regional	Primary	48	932	15%	2%
Casuarina Street Primary School, Katherine East, NT	Remote	Primary	348	1028	12%	15%
Katherine High School, Katherine East, NT	Remote	Secondary	602	817	56%	51%
Katherine South Primary School, Katherine South, NT	Remote	Primary	326	910	36%	24%
MacFarlane Primary School, Katherine East, NT	Remote	Primary	188	643	92%	90%
Manyallaluk School, Eva Valley, NT	Very Remote	Primary	23	567	96%	100%
Mataranka School, Mataranka, NT	Very Remote	Combined (P-9)	27	803	48%	40%
Average			287	894	36%	43%

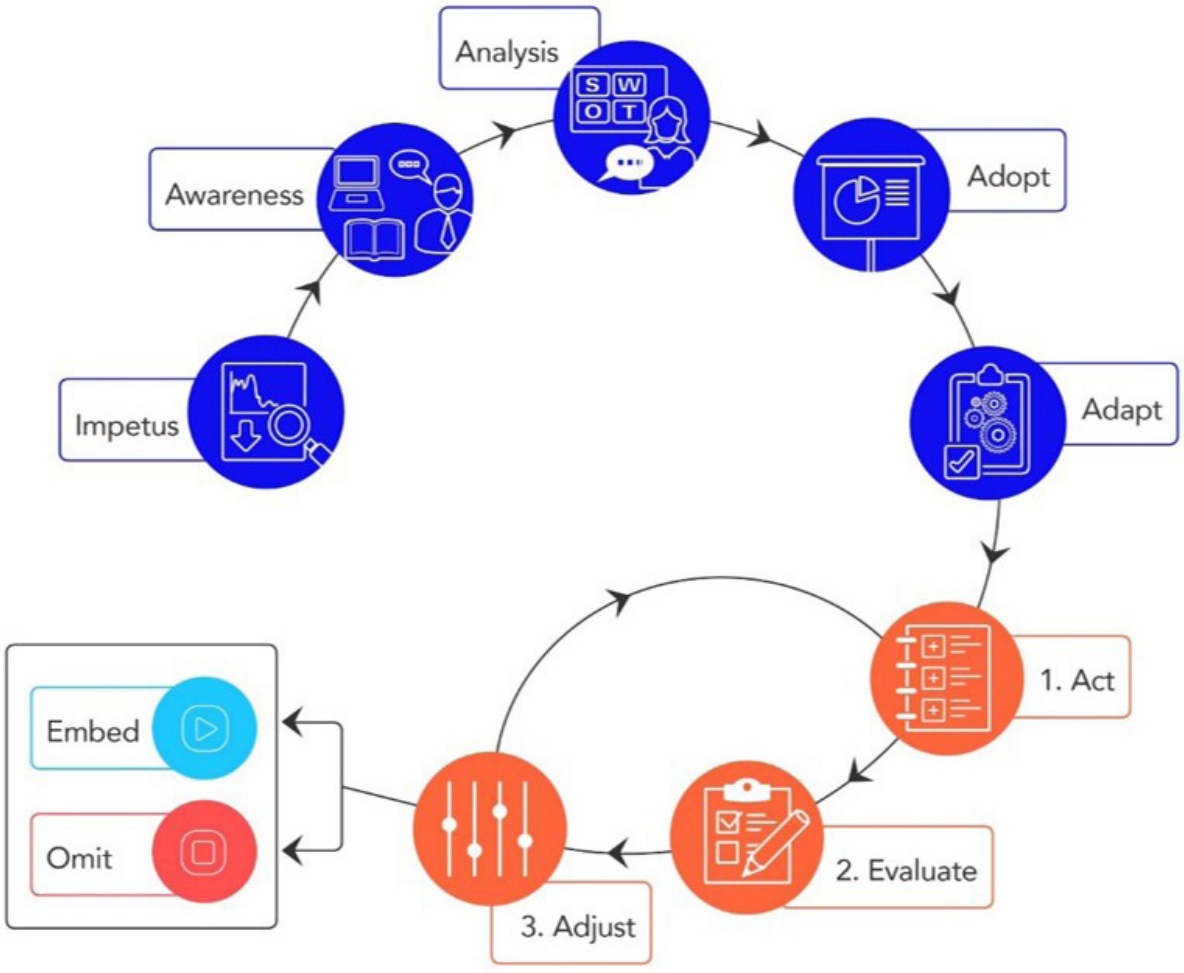

Figure 1. An Impact Evaluation Cycle (Evidence for Learning, 2019)

The Education Action Plan (EAP) is a road map for an improvement journey. It is an action plan for educators to develop and plan their approach and evaluation activities to reach their goals, as shown in Figure 2 on the following page. When used together with the Impact Evaluation Cycle, the EAP provides a supporting resource for decision making as students, leaders and teachers plan and implement each step of the cycle. The educator outlines the following within the EAP:

- Where are you going?
- How will you get there?
- What will tell you that you have arrived?

Working with students with the Impact Evaluation Cycle and EAP

The following are 10 stages of the Impact Evaluation Cycle as well as the questions that we used to scaffold the change using a worked example from the NTLC.

Impetus

Educators often cite time as one of the challenges in engaging with data and generating practice-based evidence. External forces such as an array of assessments that are used to gather information about student achievement can become overwhelming for teachers and schools.

The overabundance of information about students, and different types of tests and sources of data, often make it difficult to figure out how best to use, or respond effectively to, data to improve student achievement. Spending more time at this stage aims to ensure all available information has been collated for analysis.

The schools involved defined their goal based on the analysis of their school's data. An example from one school was, "The consistent use of robust practice-based evidence to determine student growth in literacy" (Vaughan, Ho, & Cleary, 2018).

Awareness and analysis

School leaders need to have an awareness of which approaches demonstrate good evidence of success and be able to easily distinguish them from the plethora of available information. This is scaffolded by NTLC workshops with the leaders, students and teachers. Tools and concepts used within these workshops included:

- Hierarchy of evidence (Deeble & Vaughan, 2018).
- Teaching & Learning Toolkit (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019).
- Students categorising their teachers' evidence of learning according to whether it is qualitative or quantitative, and the strength of the evidence. The lock rating system from the Toolkit was adopted for this process.

Analysis of the evidence-based approaches entails understanding the conditions that have led to prior success and consideration of whether it is likely to provide similar benefit in the specific local context (Evidence for Learning, 2019).

Adoption and adaption

What is the plan of activities, and how will you know that they are working? Leaders, students and teachers plan a set of activities to lead within their school to improve literacy.

Act, adapt and adjust

Implementation is conducted in a mini cycle of Act, Adapt and Adjust that ensures active learning to make immediate difference and generates new data (Evidence for Learning, 2019). Leaders, students and teachers measure the short-term, mid-term and long-term outcomes and progress against these.

Embed or omit

Leaders, students and teachers decide to embed, omit or make changes to improve the outcomes based on the weight of the evidence before them. School leaders receive direct recommendations from student and teacher commissioners, and work to reflect these in the strategic planning and focus for the school in the following year. This may often relate to where school energy can be best utilised, but may also provide an opportunity to ask the question: "What would it take to convince me that a current approach or way of working is not having the desired impact?" The NTLC asks school leaders to reflect on what they must stop doing before adding new initiatives and recommendations that student evidence may provide.

Measuring the impact of the NTLC

The evaluation of the impact of the NTLC is currently in progress, with data being collected on students' progress in Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) and student perception data from an annual NT survey. The growth of the average scale score from 2017 to 2018 in comparison to "like" schools in mathematics (PAT Maths) and reading (PAT Reading) is being analysed (ACER, 2019). Similarly, the growth in students' perception data is being investigated using "like" NT schools as a control group. As the analysis is not finalised, definitive statements about the students' outcomes cannot be made. This analysis will be supported by additional qualitative analysis as the focus of John Cleary's doctoral studies that he is undertaking at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

Conclusion

The Australian policy base is encouraging the position of students to be central to leading their own learning. The Learning Commission provides an opportunity for school leaders, teachers and students to co-design and lead change projects within their school with the ultimate goal of school improvement. While it is acknowledged that schools in rural and remote locations face challenges, the Learning Commission is engaging students in the process of identifying ways of navigating these while maintaining a focus on learning. The most important influence is the positioning of the students alongside teacher and leader commissioners to solve the problems as *partners in learning*. The projects are scaffolded through the Impact Evaluation Cycle and the EAP to involve school data analysis and the gathering of practice-based evidence. External evidence of what has worked in other settings is integrated into the awareness and analysis phase through the Teaching & Learning Toolkit.

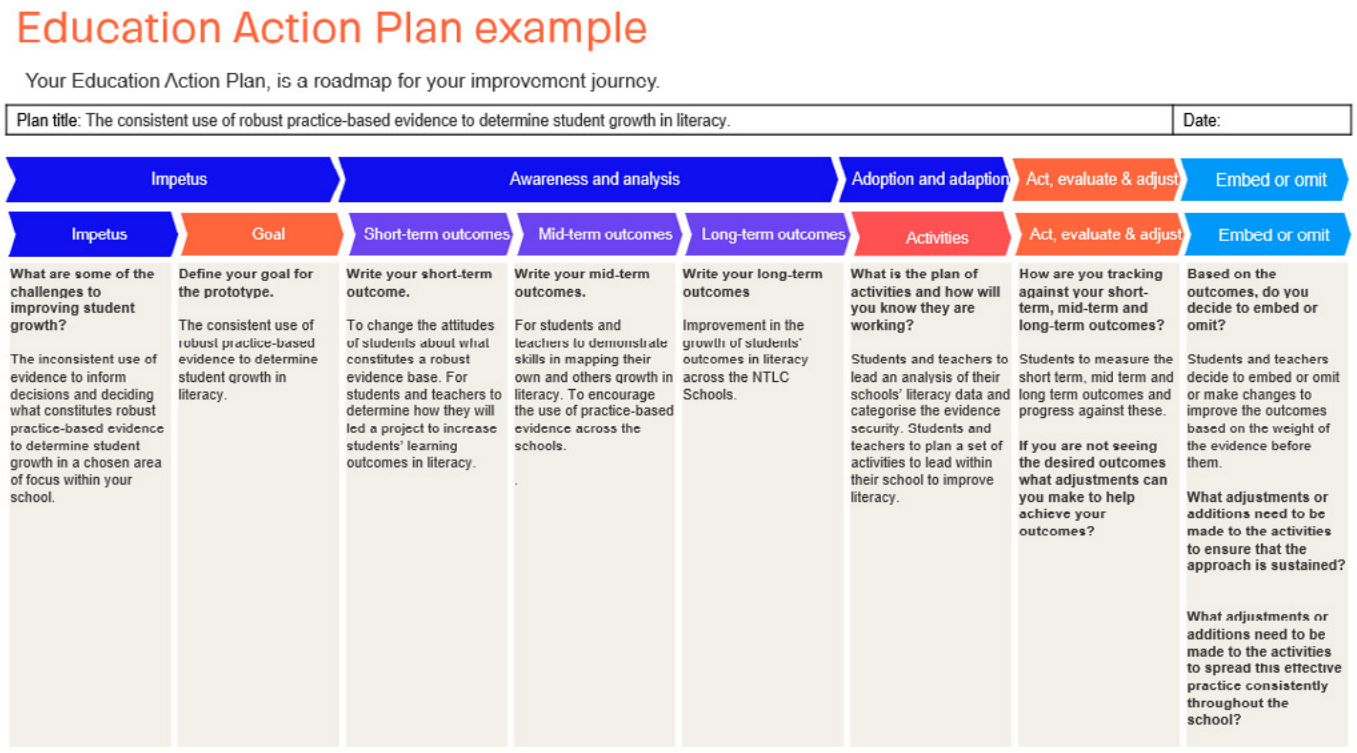

Figure 2. The Education Action Plan (Evidence for Learning, 2019)

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