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Readiness for School Reform

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This paper is about school reform for the purpose of improving student academic achievement. More specifically the paper provides an insight into the concept of 'School Readiness for Teaching Improvement' by providing an account of an underpinning theory complete with an examination of an associated process and report format. The paper concludes with a sample of an associated 'Readiness Report' and an explanation of its key elements and how such a report is read for key points of reference.



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The improvement of education system outcomes is a common goal globally and school systems everywhere have linked education *system* performance and international competitiveness in ways that place pressure on the “black box” of *individual* schools (see OECD, 2013; 2010a; 2010b). Reports such as the *Programme for International Student Assessment* [PISA] and local testing regimes such as NAPLAN¹ indicate that governments and communities are interested in the academic performance of students across and within schooling systems. A significant effect of such interest is the “global competition in educational achievement in core subject matter areas like reading, arithmetic/mathematics and science” (Scheerens, 2013, p.16).

One of the main reasons for enthusiasm to reform education systems and especially school performance stems from pressures generated by the emergent knowledge-based economy (OECD, 1996) and the highly competitive trade environment since the 1990s. Numerous reports over past decades cite the economic benefits of maintaining high performing education systems in such a global knowledge-based economy (see for example, Hanushek, and Woessmann, 2009, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008; Access Economic, 2005; Barro, 2001).

While characterised by misunderstandings and misinterpretations, the association between improved educational performance and the future growth of most economies (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2011) appears to be real. National education systems defined as “the set of institutions, policies and factors that set the sustainable current and medium-term levels of economic prosperity” (Xavier Sala-i-Martin, 2010), are central to national economic competitiveness. It is not surprising that the performance of education systems is perceived as worthy of measurement and that relative standings take on significance irrespective of family background characteristics (Freeman, Machin, and Viarengo 2010, cited in West, 2012, pp. 15-16). It is important to clarify what is meant by school and education “reform”. Scheerens (2013, p. 5) discusses the distinction between how educational systems function, and how schools as organizations perform, as a way of identifying ‘facets of quality’ that can be subjected to empirical analysis and verification. In his proposed systems model, the school is the place where “processes or ‘throughput’ take place to transform inputs into outputs”. Figure 1 depicts the model. It can be seen that various approaches like “equity” and “efficiency” vie with “effectiveness” and “responsiveness” as criteria for designing and implementing reform. All are possible and are represented in the literature.

Linking *improvement* and *effectiveness* suggests school effectiveness research results are likely to contribute to school reform (Scheerens, 2013). Moreover, when the process of creating effectiveness enhancing conditions is approached as a *change process* distinct from the routine teaching and learning functions of the school, and is accompanied by *adaptations of the management approach* and *organizational conditions* as well, school improvement is more likely. In addition, Hanushek and Woessmann (2010) suggest that increases in the quantity of schooling students

¹ The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual national (for Australia) assessment for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. All students in these year levels are expected to participate in tests in reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.

receive will only bear economic fruit if they are accompanied by measurable improvements in students' cognitive skills. Policies that increase education *quality* in individual schools and across systems then are likely to generate a meaningful economic return (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2009).

Figure 1: Facets of Educational Quality²

Quality Facet	Key Indicators and Relationship Between Indicators
Productivity	Outcomes
Equity	The distribution of inputs, processes and outcomes
Effectiveness	Association between inputs and processes on the one hand and outcomes on the other
Efficiency	Effectiveness at the lowest possible costs
Responsiveness	The way input, processes and intended outcomes are fitted to the demands of the context

Education researchers such as Marzano (1998), Hattie (2012, 2011, 2009) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), have drawn attention to the effects of teaching capacities and school organisation on student performance. Hattie's omnibus examination of what works in education in particular is probably the most influential educational book in modern educational publishing and has been a prominent force in intensified government preoccupation with improving state school system performance. Of all the attributes of such policy movement, high-stakes testing has emerged as a way of 'steering at a distance', including attempts to improve teacher quality (Thompson and Cook, 2014, p.16). At the school level, Heads are charged with improving school academic results on the basis of what is revealed in such testing regimes. A policy hiatus though lies in the pedagogy area --- "teaching" --- in so far as it remains governed by cultural mores that prioritise the role of individual teachers implementing their own teaching approaches.

Nevertheless, the renewed interest in "teaching" is a progressive move. If schools are about learning, teaching must be effective or learning will not be successful. Instructional --- 'teaching' --- reform and school reform envisaged in policy speaks to the logic of *schools-as-organisations* as well as being safe places for nurturance and child development. If teaching is made effective and students learn successfully then Heads, staff and communities can get on with the rest of the reform jigsaw as Scheeren's model indicates.

Nevertheless, school reform efforts have come and gone over decades, but *teaching* reform has not happened. Any proposal for school reform at system or school level that does not propose instructional reform is just another chimera, "a Groundhog Day of ineffective policy" (GGSA, 2016). But at the same time, without adaptations of the *management approach* and *organizational conditions* as well, school reform will generate "activity" without structural and culture changes.

One might speculate that failure to address this central concern contributes to the speed and frequency at which "reforms" pass through schools only to be withdrawn or superseded. Staff become immune to and cynical about the organisation as a source of professional guidance and fulfilment. A common reaction to the "yet another innovation" is to ignore it or "wait it out".

² Scheerens, 2013, p. 6)



Schools and Change

Leaving aside political considerations and personal views of how the world is constituted, it would be presumptuous to assume that schools and teaching in their current form, that were developed in previous centuries, remain adequate for another historical age. The reality is, there are numerous criticisms of schools and teaching from multiple sources, based on the fact that schools and teaching continue to do what they have always done rather than being bold and taking fresh directions (Smith and Lynch, 2010).

It can be argued that there have been numerous changes to schooling in the last few decades, especially in the primary years, as schools and teachers have wrestled with such things as the impact of the multicultural society, the digital revolution, and the consequences of rapid social change. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that the outcomes of schooling are more equitable or commensurate with the requirements of global environment (West, 2012). Despite the myriad objections to national and international testing and the relative absence of other credible evidence that can be used to ascertain the quality of schooling (Popham, 1999), the need to ensure that *all* students are well prepared academically has never been greater as they face both local neighbourhood and international challenges. An important policy and professional issue then is how to deal with school change.

Slavin (1997) provides a key to where to begin the discussion. He uses a “seeds, bricks and sand” metaphor to propose that there are three kinds of schools. The “seeds” metaphor implies a school environment conducive to reform, a place where the staff and leadership are capable, aware of research, participating in professional development, well coordinated, cohesive, and unafraid of change. The school is probably capable of creating and evaluating its own reform methods and sustain and improve them over time, perhaps with general advice from consultants.

“Bricks” schools have committed and hard-working teachers and leaders and are definitely headed toward change, but for whatever reason, have not had the time or resources to become reform experts and are not likely to create effective reforms themselves. They are ready to ‘buy in’ proven models. The “bricks” metaphor refers to schools that require someone to bring bricks and a set of plans to the school to commence building and maintaining a viable organisation.

A “sand” school refers to a school where the staff and leadership do not synchronise, where there are beliefs about how well different categories of students can learn and may have experienced failure with previous reforms. Attempts to reform such organisations is like building a sand castle at the beach. These schools need serious restructuring.

We interpret Slavin’s (1997) account to mean that it is imperative to determine the “readiness” of schools to undertake significant changes to the way in which the school operates for the purpose of improving all student academic outcomes. In Scheeren’s terms, school reform ought to be about linking effectiveness with responsiveness in order to overcome equity and efficiency issues. These are local community and national policy priorities.

In previous papers and books, we have outlined models that research evidence indicate have a high likelihood of success in changing schools (See Lynch, Madden and Doe, 2015; Lynch and Madden, 2015). Further examples are also found in Marzano (2003) and Hattie, (2009), who provide evidence that indicates a “relatively clear idea on what aspects of school functioning should be optimized in order to enhance student performance” (Scheerens, 2016, p.244). These various



aspects are appealing to those seeking ways to begin a change journey, however they all tend to assume that “readiness” for change is present.

Readiness for Attempts to Improve Student Outcomes

In order to conceptualise “readiness” for school change, it is imperative to survey the elements that make up a “school”. Those of us in the teaching profession are rather adept at seeing “schools” as mainly “teachers” and “students” while “students” probably have a completely different perspective:

Strategies are the main learning outcome of all those years of school. Anyone who flunks strategy basically flunks school. In classes, the points come from figuring out the specific version of the game that the teacher in that specific class has set up, in a kind of free-for-all where the rules change all the time...(Blum, 2015)

Of course, teachers, teaching, students, curriculum and the “game” of school are fundamental ingredients of a “school” as we usually conceive of them. It is important to also think about schools as “organisations” that possess structures, adopt processes to get things done and that develop cultural cement that unites human activity into an entity. We educators are perhaps rather less likely to think about our workplaces in these ways given the role of teachers and the work of teaching.

In coming to understand the school change field while reminiscing about our careers as teachers, we explored the field of organisational research across many industries. A surprising finding is that organisations are very much alike, irrespective of what their core business is and how it is done. They all possess similar features like structures and cultures and people in them have designated as well as informal roles. Of prime importance for us is the fact that in all organisations the *people* factor is fundamental. That is, “people” are not only an expensive ingredient, but also represent the major resource for accomplishing the organisation’s mission.

We appreciated Schiemann’s (2012; 2014) position that “staff” are the organisation’s “talent” and that forging common ground between the goals of the organisation and those of the individuals in it, is a major investment (Schiemann, 2012, p. 238). If this ground is insufficiently developed, the chance of generating meaningful change is restricted. In organisations like schools, optimising talent is a complex process that requires effective leadership (Schiemann, 2014, p. 282).

Schiemann’s organisational perspective is a powerful reminder of what is at stake in the development of an effective school. The existing concepts and ways of expressing “teaching” and “school” have to be taken head-on. It is all to do with the language used by professional practitioners: it governs, not the subject matter of “teaching” and “school” but rather the group of practitioners who have a stake in maintaining the present arrangements. Any reform attempt must then begin by locating what Kuhn (1970) referred to as the responsible group or groups.

...paradigm debates are not really about relative problem-solving ability, though for good reasons they are usually couched in those terms. Instead, the issue is which paradigm should in future guide research on problems many of which neither competitor can yet claim to resolve completely. A decision between alternate ways of practicing science is called for, and in the circumstances that decision must be based less on past achievement than on future promise. ... A decision of that kind can only be made on faith (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 157-8).



To continue with Schiemann's approach, rather than seeing staff as "employed" he refers to people being "embedded" in the organisation. This approach has compelling characteristics in so far as it links the recruitment, training, retention, satisfaction and effectiveness of staff with a school's vision and goals without the cultural baggage and connotations of "teacher" and "school" and, provides an alternative view of the school-as-organisation. In this way, our awareness is enhanced to the fact that there are logically necessary *mutual obligations* between the organisation and embedded people, a feature generally missing from public service and other work conditions and we are bound to say, from a good deal of educational research on school and system change.

In such an environment, it is unlikely that toxic arrangements such as staff not being supported emotionally or professionally, an inability to achieve operational goals and commitments, poor internal communication and interpersonal relationships that are driven by manipulative and self-centred agendas will flourish.

The core categories of the model are *Alignment*, *Capabilities* and *Engagement* or ACE. These distinctive but interdependent categories include synchrony of people with the goals, clientele and brand of the organisation, wherever they are located within it. Again, capabilities are defined as the available knowledge, skill, information and resources available to people sufficient to meet the organisation's goals. Finally, engagement includes people satisfaction, commitment and willingness to take action for the benefit of the organisation in a discretionary way. Together these categories provide an agenda for understanding and exploring the main issues in the school effectiveness literature.

The three dimensions of A, C, and E together form an indicator of how an organisation is travelling. The A, C and E elements are, all other things being equal, a "canary in the mine", a litmus test of organisational readiness to commence change and innovation initiatives and programs.

Having laid the ground for our position, we define "readiness" as the state in which the *organisational* conditions are such that school staff are *prepared to engage* with change. Leaders within the organisation not only have day-to-day administrative requirements in their position descriptions but are also the people ideally situated to optimise people investments. Great leaders, Izzo (cited in Schiemann, 2013, p. 283) suggests, know how to optimise their talent by focusing it, developing the right capabilities, and creating engagement. Thus if a leader doesn't have people who are aligned with the goals and vision--- have effective competencies and are engaged in the task at hand--- then we suggest that something may be wrong? (Schiemann, 2013, p. 283). The leadership and school effectiveness literature is awash with this insight.

We have elected to use the ACE model as a mechanism for identifying and measuring school "readiness" for change. In studies already completed, we have shown that the ACE scale has a story to tell about the readiness of diverse schools to engage in change and innovation, despite the host of malleable conditions experienced at school level (Scheerens, 2013, p. 8).

The Concept of a Readiness Report for Teaching Improvement

In what we term a 'Readiness Report for Teaching Improvement' (See Illustration 1 at the end of



this paper) four readiness elements are highlighted in a summary report format, namely: Student Academic Performance; Staff Readiness Indicators, School Readiness Ratings and Identified Impediments and Contributors to Readiness. It is these factors that provide an insight into a school, or any learning organisation's readiness for "change", including teaching improvement.

NAPLAN³ is used as a proxy for a school's overall academic performance. The NAPLAN literacy elements we think tap into the text-based foundation of the Australian Curriculum so that they offer an indication of how well the students in the school are performing. This indicator is mediated by "like schools" and "high performing schools" for comparative purposes. The incorporation of a "target" line shows the point at which a school can be considered to be operating at an optimal level.

The combination of staff "alignment", "capability" and "engagement" provides a thumbnail summary of the school organisational preparedness to participate in change programs. The statistics are derived from an on-line survey, based on A, C and E statements, of the full school staff. We reiterate the importance of full staff participation in the survey because school change involves everyone in an intensive organisation such as a school. The outcome of the survey is an indication of *staff readiness for school change*⁴. Again, comparisons with "like" and "high performing schools" positions a school amongst its peers.

These elements represent both performance level and staff readiness for reform programs such as teaching improvement. The former provides a realistic, externally determined performance target on which a leadership team can work with staff, while the latter provides insight into the degree to which staff are likely to voluntarily participate. Taken together, the report contents provide indicators about the likely success of a school's strategic plan.

In coming to a *School Readiness Rating* we amalgamate these two factors to reveal one of four descriptors of 'readiness for teaching improvement'. These descriptors are designed to succinctly capture the overall readiness of the school and to focus the school to the next steps in plans such as teaching improvement. The top three "impediments" and "contributors" to readiness on the report highlight staff feedback from the survey. The report is designed as a succinct point-in-time check and a more detailed set is available for school Heads that provides more detailed information. Schools can track progress in subsequent reports to gauge the impact of strategies in the change process.

Interpreting a 'Readiness Report for Teaching Improvement'

To this point in the paper we have explored the notion of schools and change as a background to the key concept of a school requiring a state of "readiness" for teaching improvement. Subsequent discussions have expanded on this concept to a point where a "report", which brings to bear key elements associated with readiness, has been outlined. In this section we refer to Illustration 1 to provide a series of comments to explain the messages that a Readiness Report seeks to convey for teaching improvement agendas.

³ The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual national assessment for all students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9 in Australia. All students in these year levels are expected to participate in tests in reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy. See www.naplan.edu.au

⁴ "Indication" is used advisedly. It means just that and cannot be confused with "solution".



As outlined previously, the report has four sequentially detailed sets of findings. We discuss the associated message conveyed through each in turn.

Student Academic Performance enables the School to take stock of how well their students are performing by comparing a set of key standardised performance measures (in this case NAPLAN⁵) with a prescribed target and the results of the “top performing like school”. The ‘prescribed target’ is a statistical point at which a school would report all students having met the required standards as set by appropriate policy documents. The graph is illustrated in a scale, such that the “Top Performing School” line, can be used to calibrate a school’s overall performance. Taken together this section becomes a proxy for how well the School has performed and the scope of improvement required.

Staff Readiness Factor provides an account of how “ready” the School is to undertake a teaching improvement process (or undergo a school-wide change agenda). The combination of a “readiness score”, together with references to “similar schools” and the “highest performing school” (from a cumulative bank of Schools in the Readiness report system), indicates the current state of readiness and the scope for improvement. This readiness factor is then interpreted through a series of succinct statements which detail the current state of ‘readiness’ and the implications for attempting a teaching improvement strategy.

The final section on the report provides a snap shot of typical survey respondent statements detailing aspects of readiness. The top 3 “contributors” and “impediments” are derived from each school’s readiness survey results and suggest possible impediments to readiness for change and innovation. A more detailed report can be generated using a variety of demographic data and more detailed extrapolations from the data.

Conclusion

This paper describes a means for linking school *improvement* and *effectiveness* mediated by the idea of “readiness” to undergo disruptive school reform. In addition, a focus on externally derived student performance data as the reason for engaging in whole-school reform of teaching implies disruptive *adaptations of the management approach* and *organizational conditions*. Taken together, organisational pre-conditions are essential school reform ingredients and suggests that school effectiveness research results are likely to contribute to school improvement. The model has a further strong point in so far as measurable improvements in student cognitive skills are likely to accommodate system and political imperatives about meaningful economic returns from “Education”.

At the school level, the ACE survey approach introduces an organisational perspective to schools-as-organisations. This is a heuristic device that shows research promise for better understanding of how and why schools operate as they do and how they might be changed efficaciously.

A significant implication of the “readiness” approach is that new requirements are placed on school Heads. They must act as leaders capable of developing appropriate staff “talent” to achieve ambitious school strategic objectives, as well as having management credentials. Similarly, leadership, teaching and support staff capabilities to engage as “talent” with strategic objectives

⁵ The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual national (for Australia) assessment for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. All students in these year levels are expected to participate in tests in reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.



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using high-end pedagogical skills and processes will be at a premium. Given the respectful symmetry between school staff and leaders, the “readiness” model pre-figures a workplace unlike that characterised by public service conditions and more akin to those in other knowledge workplaces in the global economy.

School X, Queensland

READINESS REPORT FOR TEACHING IMPROVEMENT

REPORT PRODUCED - MARCH 2016

STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

SCHOOL NAPLAN PROFICIENCY

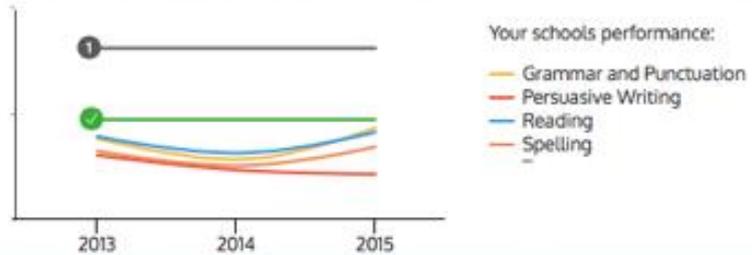
Performance comparison with similar schools.



TARGET LEVEL
(top 10% of similar schools)



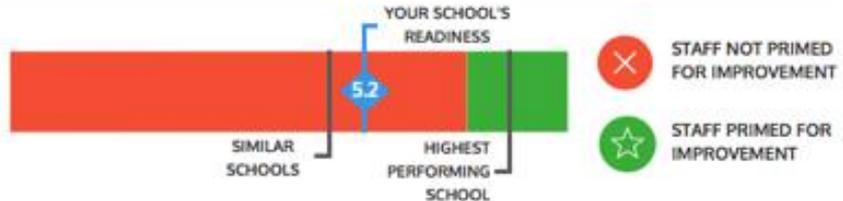
Highest Performing School
(top school within similar schools)



STAFF READINESS INDICATOR

SCHOOL READINESS PROFICIENCY

The readiness for change is assessed with the staff readiness indicator which takes into account the level of Alignment, Capability and Engagement (the ACE Factors) observed in school staff. The average response to the ACE survey for your school is shown in the blue diamond.



SCHOOL READINESS CLASSIFICATION

READINESS CLASSIFICATIONS

Staff Readiness Primed; Students Performing

Staff Readiness Primed; Students Not Performing

Staff Readiness Not Primed; Students Performing

Staff Readiness Not Primed; Students Not Performing

STAFF READINESS NOT PRIMED AND STUDENTS NOT PERFORMING

Your student academic performance and your staff readiness factor are low. This is an indication that your school is not performing at an optimal level and that work is required to remedy below par student academic achievement. Your first step is to ready your staff for teaching improvement. There are three elements that need to be established before teaching improvements strategies can be implemented. These are: (1) generating school wide staff alignment with the strategic plan; (2) engaging staff with an improvement agenda; and (3) identifying and building the required pedagogical capabilities in your staff.

TOP 3 CONTRIBUTORS AND IMPEDIMENTS TO READINESS

Drawn from the survey, staff in this school indicated that:

- 1 Work units/departments or teams regularly evaluate progress in meeting the school's student outcomes expectations.
- 2 The educational philosophy embodied in the school's strategic plan is something that staff value highly.
- 3 There is clarity about the school values or they are reflected in the ways people do things in this school.

- 1 There is a mismatch between what staff and the school's Principal/Director/School Leader view as good teaching.
- 2 The school is not one of the best schools to work for in this part of the country.
- 3 The school's leadership does not inspire staff to do their best.

Readiness Report for Teaching Improvement

School Readiness

There are three fundamental elements that should be established in a school's staff before a process of whole-of-school teaching improvement (a change strategy) takes place: Alignment, Capability and Engagement. When staff in a school are aligned, capable and engaged, the performance potential of the school can be considered optimal and thus 'ready' for teaching improvement.



1. Alignment

Alignment is the extent to which staff are 'aligned' with; (a) the goals and strategies in the school as well as (b) the espoused school values and (c) the expectations of stakeholders.

2. Capability

This is the extent of skills, technology and processes that help staff perform their roles in the school and which ultimately enables it to deliver a quality product.

3. Engagement

Engaged staff will be working at their peak of performance. Engagement also represents the extent to which staff advocate that the school is a 'great place to work' and that the education programs on offer are of a high standard.

Reading the Report

Student Academic Performance: This graph represents your overall school performance in NAPLAN literacy elements over three years. The graph's target line represents the point at which your school would be in the top 10% of 'similar schools'. The 'highest performing similar school' has been included as a reference point.

Staff Readiness Indicator: The readiness score and its positioning on the 'readiness scale' represents the level of staff alignment, capability and engagement in the school. It is an indicator of the readiness level of staff to engage in a whole-of-school teaching improvement strategy.

School Readiness Classification: Student Academic Performance and Staff Readiness Indicator have been reviewed to produce a readiness classification. There are four levels of readiness, each representing the reported profile of your school.

Classification	Summary
Staff Readiness Primed; Students Performing	Your student academic performance and your staff readiness factors are high. This circumstance means you have capacity and potential to explore value-added propositions within the school. But it is important to focus on continual improvement or key report factors may diminish over time.
Staff Readiness Primed; Students Not Performing	Your student academic performance is high, but your staff readiness factor is low. This means that while your students are performing at the required levels your staff do not have a clear understanding of the School's strategic plans. In this circumstance staff are likely to be devoting energy and resources to tasks and activities that are not a high strategic priority or potentially contrary to the School's strategic plan. This is a precarious situation to be in, because should any negative circumstance emerge within the school or if new strategic initiatives are required, you will find that staff are not ready to deal with it.
Staff Readiness Not Primed; Students Performing	Your student academic performance is low but your staff readiness factor is high. This indicates that your staff are ready to focus on a teaching improvement strategy.
Staff Readiness Not Primed; Students Not Performing	Your student academic performance and your staff readiness factor are low. This is an indication that your school is not performing at an optimal level and that work is required to remedy below par student academic achievement. Your first step is to ready your staff for teaching improvement. There are three elements that need to be established before teaching improvements strategies can be implemented. These are: (1) generating school wide staff alignment with the strategic plan; (2) engaging staff with an improvement agenda; and (3) identifying and building the required pedagogical capabilities in your staff.

Top 3 Contributors and Impediments to Readiness: Based on the readiness survey that staff completed, this section provides an outline of key indicative elements that will contribute or impede readiness of the school to undertake whole of school teaching improvement (or a change strategy).

For a more information on the detailed report where a comprehensive breakdown of all associated elements in this report are revealed, please contact:

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¹ Schiemann, W.A. (2012), *The ACE advantage: how smart companies unleash talent for optimal performance*, Society for Human Resource Management, Alexandria, VA.



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⁶ This Reference List is still to be finalized



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