

New Collaborative Leadership Network lifts education outcomes

A new report - *Unleashing the Power of the Collective in Education* - by RMIT's Policy, Strategy and Impact team finds that The Connection - a Collaborative Leadership Development Network created by Social Ventures Australia - is having a positive impact on teachers' collective capability, school improvement practices and student engagement and learning outcomes.

We have a stubborn and challenging education problem in Australia. Half of all school students – about two million students from Kindergarten/Reception to Year 12 – may have poorer education outcomes due to where they live. It is unfair that living in a low socio-economic area or in a rural or remote region can limit a child's chance of reaching their academic potential.

There are a range of factors that contribute to this inequality gap, including isolation of teachers and school leaders, lack of resources and lack of contact between schools to share knowledge about what works to improve student learning.

The Connection – a new model to collaborate for excellence in schools

The Connection is a Collaborative Leadership Development Network that has achieved educational improvements in 50 Australian schools, across NSW, SA and Victoria. This network has connected 2900 educators and benefitted approximately 50,000 students over five years from 2014-2019.

Teachers and principals connect with peers in other schools, and with schools facing similar challenges in other states. They exchange information and expertise to bring new evidence-informed practices into action in their own school.

Evidence collected over five years shows that this pioneering collaborative network design does indeed improve leadership, teaching and learning environments in schools located in communities experiencing high levels of disadvantage in Australia. The design is also aligned to global best practice in education.

What makes The Connection effective and innovative

The RMIT evaluation confirms the premise that improving the knowledge and mindsets of teachers and school leaders will lead to the implementation of innovative and evidence-informed school-based and system-wide improvement practices, which then result in improvements in student learning outcomes.

The evaluation identified **four key characteristics** that define The Connection and drive its impact and **four conditions** that support its application within the education system.

The key characteristics of The Connection model that brings schools together are:

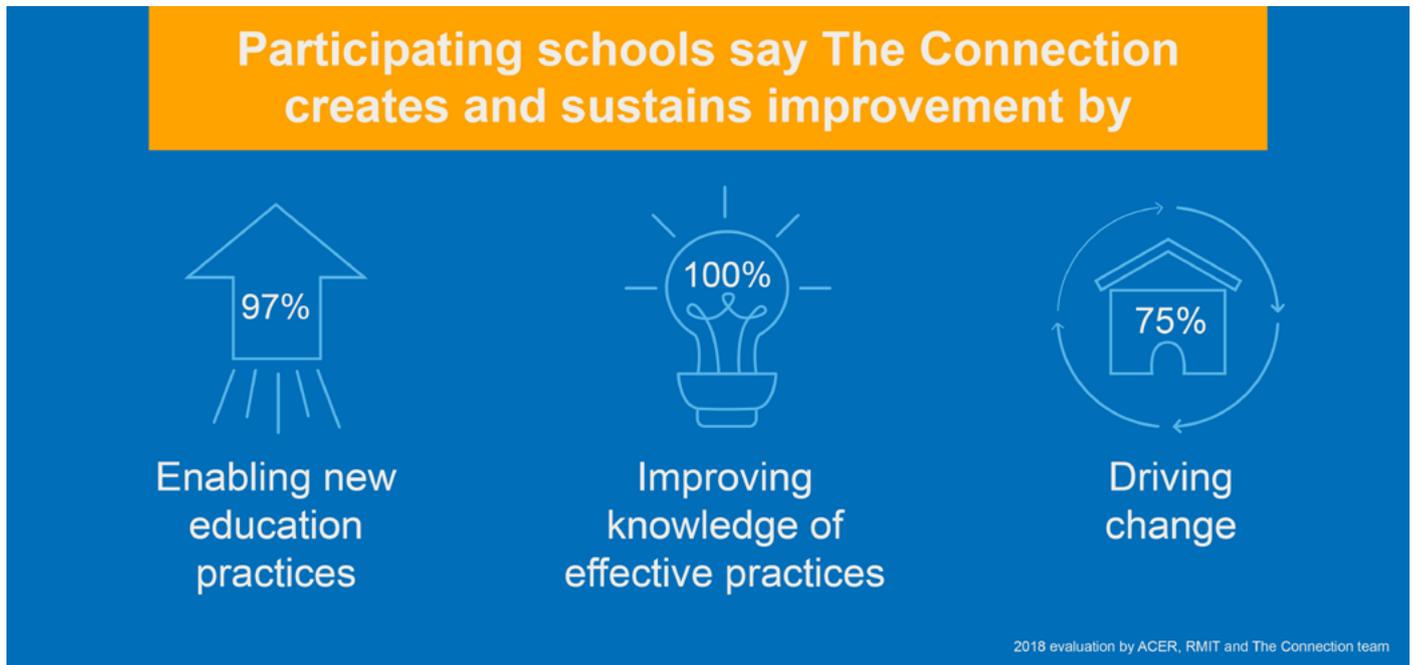
- 1:** A shared moral purpose across a diverse cohort
- 2:** A culture of trust and safe environment
- 3:** Collective accountability for shared success and impact
- 4:** A willingness to learn, share and exchange expertise by voluntary inclusive participation and structured inquiry

The conditions that support success for participating schools are:

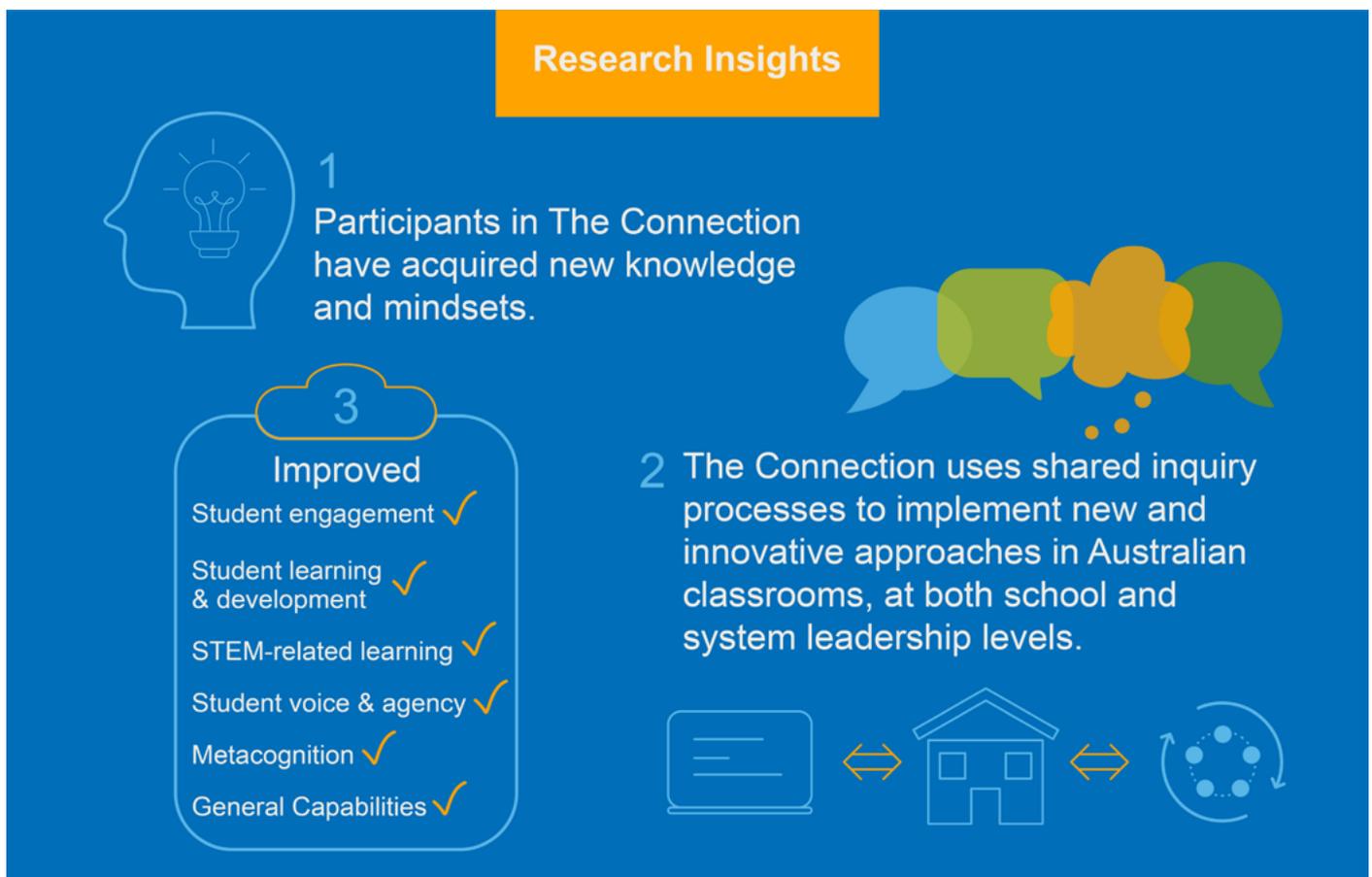
- 1:** An explicit and shared whole school improvement agenda
- 2:** Access to resources, including infrastructure, human (staffing) and financial
- 3:** Close integration between education system policy priority areas and The Connection priorities
- 4:** Active, strategic alignment between The Connection's Project Action Plans and education systems' school planning frameworks

Evaluation Results

A 2018 evaluation by ACER, RMIT and The Connection team showed that this model catalyses and sustains change that builds capacity of participant schools:



The latest and most comprehensive evaluation by RMIT's Policy, Strategy and Impact team: *Unleashing the Power of the Collective in Education (September 2020)* grouped improvements in teaching and learning within three key Insights:



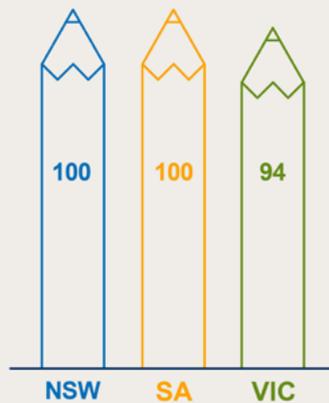
Insight 1: Participants in The Connection have acquired new knowledge and mindsets.

2020 RMIT Evaluation found after 3-5 years of participation

Teachers & principals gained new knowledge (%)



Teachers improved knowledge of teaching practices (%)

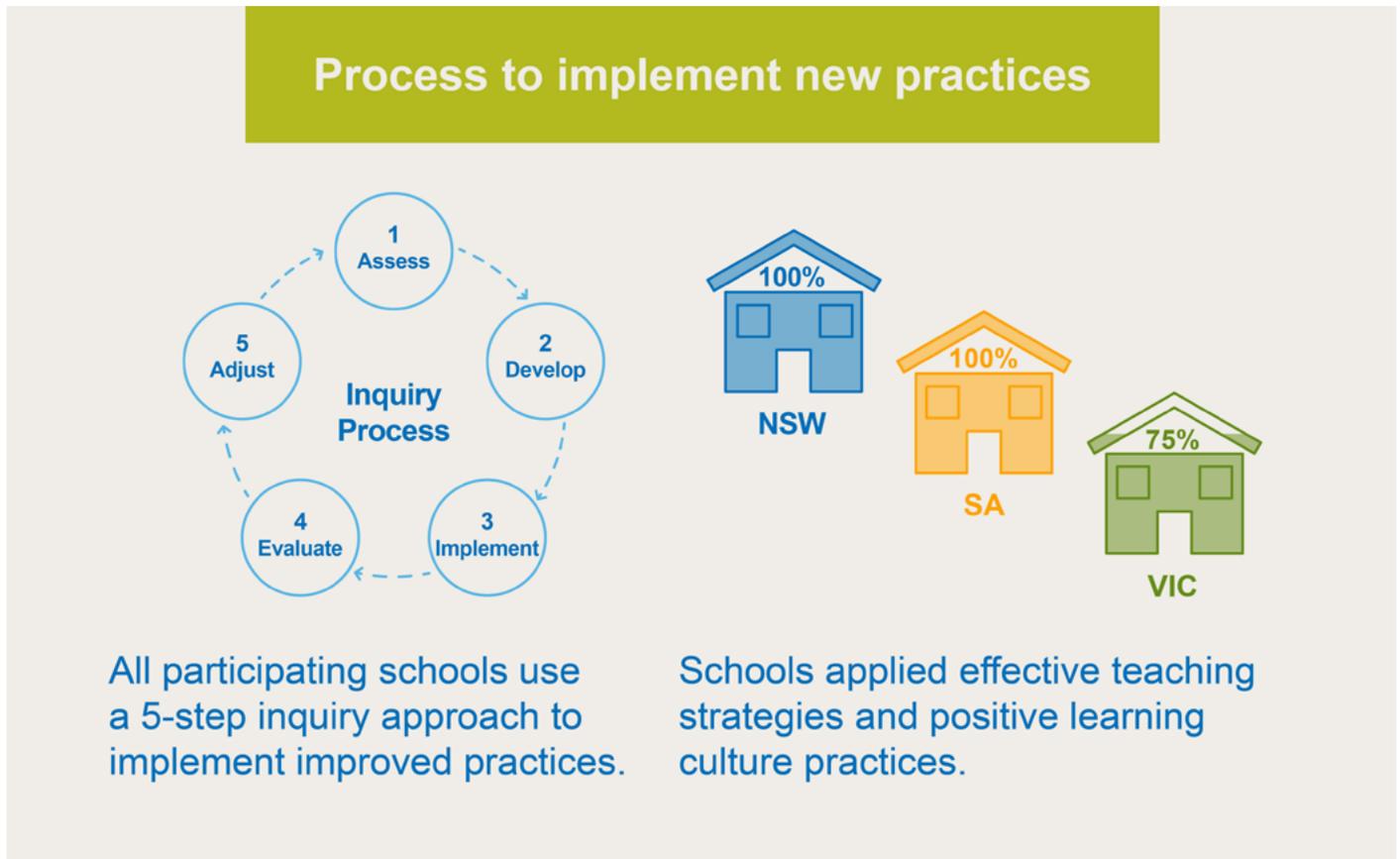


Teachers & principals developed a system mindset (%)



- All participating NSW and South Australian principals and three quarters of participating Victorian principals reported gaining new knowledge relevant to their role [Finding 1]
- 100% of teachers in NSW & SA and 94% in Victoria reported very high improvement in pedagogical content knowledge (eg techniques for teaching STEM subjects) [Finding 3]
- A high proportion of principals and teachers in all three states reported developing the motivation to share knowledge with other schools for system-wide improvement [(Agreed with the statement: *I am more motivated to share knowledge and expertise outside my school as part of my role as a system leader.*) (Finding 5)]

Insight 2: The Connection uses a shared and structured inquiry process to implement new and innovative practices in Australian classrooms, and at school and system leadership levels



- All participating schools use a 5-step inquiry approach, introduced by SVA, for the implementation of improvement practices. This supports teachers to assess and adjust new practices: Assess-Develop-Implement-Evaluate-Adjust [Finding 17]
- All participating schools in NSW & SA and three quarters of Victorian schools reported implementing effective teaching strategies and practices, that promote a positive learning culture. [Finding 6]

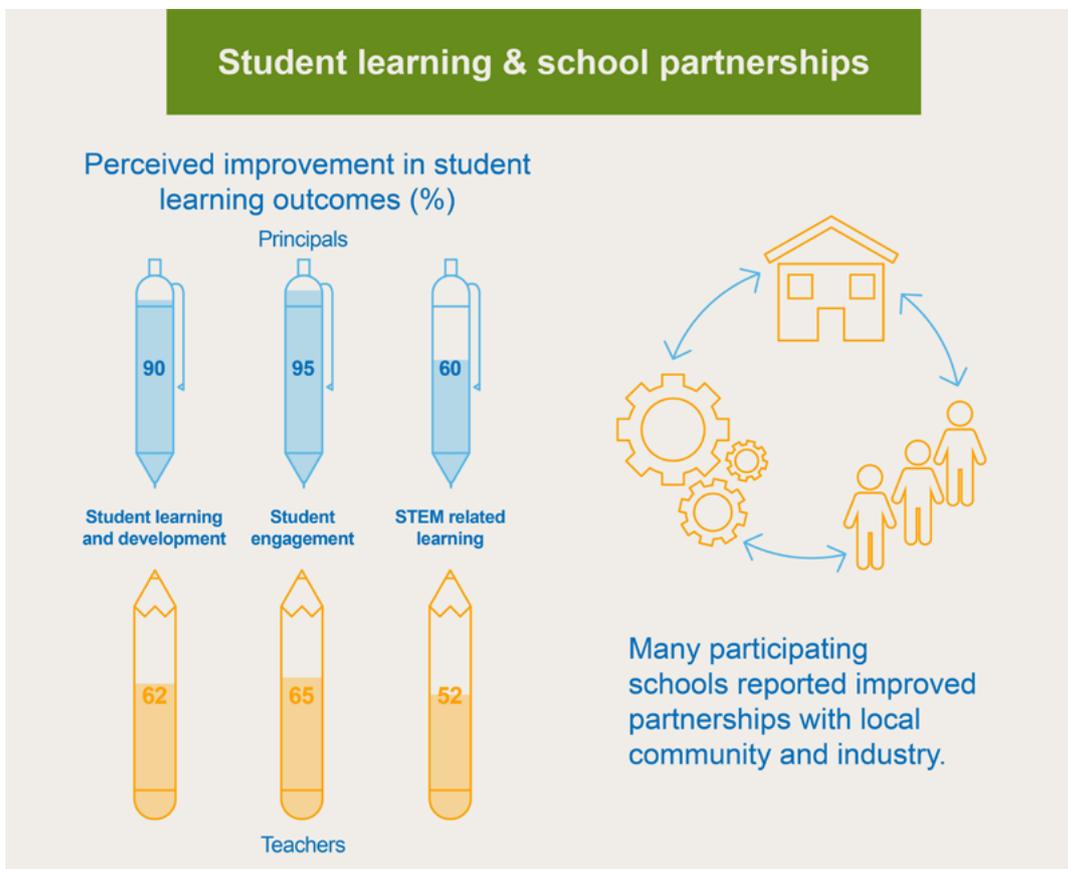
“We have seen schools in communities that experience high levels of disadvantage accelerate their journey into learning power houses and level the playing field for their students.”

“These achievements show that when schools are facilitated to connect their work and support each other, it’s an effective and efficient way to find, share and then develop new teaching and learning practices that are fit for purpose and drive better learning outcomes for children.”

Education Director with Social Ventures Australia Suzanne Cridge

Insight 3: Overall, there are perceived improvements in student engagement, student learning and development, and STEM-related learning over the life of a school's engagement in The Connection. There is growing evidence of the impacts of The Connection on new and innovative measures of student learning, such as student voice and agency, metacognition (ability to understand their own thought and learning processes), and general capabilities.

- A moderate to high number of participants observed improvements in student learning outcomes, student engagement and development, and STEM-related learning [Finding 18]
- 95% of principals observed improved outcomes in student engagement [Finding 18]
- 90% of principals observed improved outcomes in student learning and development [Finding 18]
- 60% of principals observed improved outcomes in STEM-related learning [Finding 18]
- Many Schools report a range of improvements in academic outcomes, student voice and/or agency, and metacognition. [Finding 19]
- Many participating schools reported improved partnerships with local community and industry. [Finding 13]



“The evaluation found The Connection sets a distinctive example of how system-wide school improvement can be achieved to help close the inequality gap in Australian education. ”

“The Connection is an exciting, living model for building learning capability and collaborative leadership development at a school, community and system level.”

*Report co-author, Professor Tom Bentley,
Executive Director for Policy and Impact at RMIT*

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