The Role of High-Performance Implementation Teams in Promoting Effective Use of Evidence-Based Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article posits that high-performance implementation teams are a powerful resource for administrators when supporting the effective use of evidence-based practices (EBPs) among teachers. Yearly, administrators purchase EBPs with the expectation that positive results found in research will be reproduced in their school settings. Unfortunately, teachers' execution of these practices can fall short of the quality needed to effect substantive progress among all students. A common response is for administrators to convene implementation teams to extend help for teachers implementing EBPs. However, many of these teams are structured traditionally and lack sufficient communication, coordination, and synergy among members to produce substantive outcomes. Yet, when administrators employ a team-directed continuous improvement process that includes a protocol for building high-performance teams, they create conditions for team members to effectively support EBP implementation, analyze performance data, cross the research-to-practice bridge, and work together to close achievement gaps.

Keywords: research-to-practice, high-performance implementation teams, continuous improvement, fidelity of implementation (FOI), evidence-based practices (EBPs)

Despite decades of development and implementation of research-based practices to advance student learning, recent results of achievement show overall flat trend lines among students nationally (Hansen et al., 2018). Considering improvements in student achievement have stalled, there is an urgent call for finding efficient ways to replicate positive research findings in real-world school environments. One of the foremost educational researchers accentuated this need in a recent blog when describing a vision to advance progress in student achievement (Slavin, 2020). The vision involved selecting evidence-based practices (EBPs) proven to increase student achievement and preparing administrators and teachers to employ them effectively (Slavin, 2020). Unfortunately, successful implementation is where many missteps occur when walking over the bridge from research to practice. Research-based practices found to be effective in the context of controlled studies are less likely to achieve the same or similar results in natural school settings. Attending to how practices are delivered in less controlled environments and to what extent they are implemented with fidelity is a key lever for achieving predicted outcomes and making positive impact on teacher performance and student progress. Since moving that lever requires more than a little push, administrators and teachers need processes that maximize momentum to cross the planks of the research-to-practice bridge. At minimum, the bridge includes five planks:

1. a well-defined EBP with clear goals, critical components, checklists, and evidence of impact;
2. a tiered structure of implementation teams (i.e., state, district, and school) to "make it happen" in the real-world context;
3. EBP resources for instruction and learning;
4. high-quality professional development with coaching for teachers; and
5. a team-directed continuous improvement process that includes a high performance-team protocol with decision-making techniques.

This last plank is especially challenging for administrators to crossover successfully, even when they convene implementation teams to provide additional support to teachers. Often, the implementation teams formed are too weak to handle obstacles at this point on the bridge, causing collaborative help for teachers to diminish.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Implementation Research

Without fidelity of implementation (FOI) of EBPs in the school context, student achievement results typically fail to reach intended outcomes. The importance of FOI shifts the emphasis of professional development from gaining fundamental knowledge of the EBP to implementing the practice with a sufficient level of quality as defined by its supporting research to effect positive student results (Learning Forward, 2015). A research review of 500 programs regarding the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation found that the effects of interventions executed with fidelity produced outcomes that were two to three times greater than those programs not adhering to defined implementation standards (Durlak & Dupree, 2008).

However, maintaining FOI is more than completing checklists for an EBP. Extensive implementation science literature indicates sufficient support for EBPs involves multifaceted components (e.g., active implementation drivers, enabling conditions, tiered implementation teams, etc.) that require considerable time and focus by individuals responsible for managing them (NIRN, n.d.). Administrators who understand the significance of FOI commonly engage in the requisite implementation science practices that support high-quality execution of EBPs. One of their primary tasks is forming implementation teams to garner help and enrich support for teachers implementing EBPs with fidelity. Team members work together to:

- examine results from FOI assessments,
- discover root causes of barriers to effective implementation,
- make data-informed decisions to find solutions, and
- provide meaningful feedback to teachers that results in improved student performance.

Considering each of these FOI actions involves numerous tasks, implementation team responsibilities should be equitably distributed across selected, capable individuals. Even with distributed support, managing multiple tasks, multiple responsibilities, and multiple individuals can be daunting for an administrator. How can these varied roles and myriad of responsibilities be addressed so they reduce the complexity surrounding FOI? How can implementation teams be formed so they are powerful enough to provide sufficient support for teachers using EBPs that results in improved student achievement? In other words, how can implementation teams create a smooth path across the last plank of the research-to-practice bridge? Surprisingly, the answer is straightforward—use FOI assessment checklist results in combination with a high-performance team protocol and a team-directed continuous improvement process.

Enriching Use of FOI Checklists

Use of FOI checklists is not a new concept. FOI checklists are an extension of professional development and operationalize critical components of an EBP to unleash its power and realize intended outcomes from research. While checklist assessments vary, they often include observable descriptors of a proven practice and are used to gather data regarding the quality of implementation delivered by the teacher. They also identify focus areas for improvement and inform future professional development. Ostensibly, this strategy sounds reasonable and on target for effecting meaningful change in teaching behavior so that EBP practices are implemented with fidelity. However, implementation outcome data suggests otherwise in part because the degree of collaboration required to use and examine FOI checklists results is underestimated. Too frequently, analysis of FOI data tends to remain with a few members who may misinterpret the findings due to their

limited view of the context. In response, administrators form implementation teams to distribute analysis of FOI results and gather recommendations to boost FOI of EBPs and student achievement.

Yet, effectiveness and efficiency of implementation teams is relative to the competency level of those administrators responsible for creating cooperative conditions for high performance teaming. For many, if not most, administrators, specific training on how to establish, execute, and sustain high-performance implementation teams is a new undertaking. There is large variance in how well implementation teams are led by administrators and to what extent team members function cooperatively and efficiently as a productive team.

Furthermore, there is a prevalent assumption that implementation team members possess an intrinsic understanding of and competence in collaboration and teaming. This assumption is reflected within conventional continuous improvement processes since the first stage of their Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles begin with 'plan,' not 'team.' These PDSA approaches overlook the importance of direct training in high performance teaming as a critical component for establishing smoothly operating implementation teams. They lack explicit procedures to ensure goal, role, and task interdependence so members realize their performance is mutually connected (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Explicit references to key cooperative teaming principles, such as positive interdependence, individual accountability, and promotive interactions are scarce.

Typical PDSA implementation teams are configured predominately in relation to title, role, and duties within the district or school. Of course, these are important considerations. However, teams can be formed according to these functions without raising awareness among team members that each one shares responsibility for team analysis, decision-making, and performance. Absent this cooperative principle, implementation team members are prone to think and work individually. When team members keep an individualistic mindset, they do not see beyond their own achievements nor perceive the need to assess progress toward team accomplishments (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). What results is a team in name only or, in other words, a work group that usually lacks the coaction needed to reach identified goals.

A more promising approach is to embed high performance teaming directly into continuous improvement procedures. Decades of research consistently indicate that training teams in principles of effective cooperative teamwork promotes positive team interactions and productivity (Gillies, 2016; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Johnson et al., 2008; Katzenbach, 2000; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993). When implementation team members learn and apply these principles, they touch the heart of cooperative teaming, which is positive interdependence. Team members realize they are united around a common goal and follow a discipline of cooperative actions that requires each team member to fulfill specific responsibilities and help others to do the same (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Interacting with cooperative teaming principles routinely, such as in every implementation team meeting, creates promotive interaction in which team members continually commit to put forward greater, if not extraordinary, effort to reach shared goals and become a high-performance team.

Benefits for Administrators

Administrators who focus on building high-performance implementation teams make great strides in crossing the research-to-practice bridge. They affirm that traditional work groups are not powerful enough to maximize both the strength of individual members and the team to tackle thorny implementation barriers and produce substantive results. They intentionally provide quality professional development to the team on "what is and what is not" a team, stressing that members work interdependently to attain clear, ambitious goals. They understand the burden that FOI implementation rests on the team, not solely on the individual. They acknowledge that everyone is accountable and responsible when challenges and barriers to implementation emerge. They provide a team rating system for members to assess their individual and team performance level as either high, sufficient, or low. Having a performance rating system provides a structure for team members to distinguish the quality of their work, make improvements in their individual and team contributions, and bring forth extraordinary results.

The benefits of high-performance implementation teams are considerable. One resourceful, efficient way for an administrator to bring them to fruition is by using a team-directed continuous improvement approach, such as TAP-IT (Team, Analyze, Plan, Implement, and Track) (Stein & Mainzer, 2013). Unlike typical PDSA cycles, TAP-IT is a five-stage process that integrates high-performance team principles and actions within *each* stage to guard against barriers to group effectiveness from emerging. These specially designed features help administrators and team members learn how to work together to address threats to high-performance teamwork, such as free riding, groupthink, large group size, dominant responder, lack of equity, and poor engagement. In essence, TAP-IT offers embedded professional development on how to establish, use, and maintain high-performance implementation teams. As its continuous improvement cycle rotates, team members engage in multiple learning opportunities about how to function as a cooperative, productive team. Over time,

members' competency in teamwork accelerates and the team begins reaching goals, realizing their mission, and even exceeding expectations.

At this level of functioning, implementation teams are extremely engaged and eager to discover common ground as they make decisions. One simple voting technique (5-Agree with Enthusiasm; 3-Agree with Support; 1-Disagree) incorporates positive interdependence and individual accountability and is an effective method of establishing strong agreement for a decision. If just one member selects "1-Disagree," the team engages in further discussion until a new vote is taken that indicates agreement by all members. Joining simple decision-making techniques with the high-performance team protocol not only saves time but increases equitable opportunities for team members to express their views. Inclusive decision-making builds a stronger foundation for providing relevant support to teachers. Basically, this union extends an administrator's reach so more teachers have adequate help to use EBPs with fidelity, promote improved learning outcomes, and close achievement gaps.

From Status Quo to High-Performance

The perspective that high-performance implementation teams are a driving force behind effective FOI of EBPs is unconventional. It involves understanding the importance of integrating proven cooperative teamwork methods within a continuous improvement support process as a means of advancing teachers' competency levels in employing EBPs. As with most change in thinking, this view has been slow to proliferate. Implementation teams in which members view their individual and team performance as an essential element in the FOI continuous improvement process are not the norm. More prevalent are traditional teams that avoid reflecting on their own improvement or refrain from holding members accountable when goals or targets are missed. Many traditional team members withdraw from asking difficult questions or engaging in authentic root cause analysis. Rather, they become satisfied with drawing superficial conclusions from data analysis, thereby making FOI checklist data reviews a perfunctory task. Lacking team solidarity, they are content to settle into a status-quo frame of mind, assuming impediments to effect positive, sustainable change are too numerous and difficult to tackle. Additionally, if FOI checklist data reveal that students are not making predicted achievement gains, these disjointed teams tend to accept the cursory view that teachers are the primary barriers to implementation. By placing the problem with the teacher, the implementation team misses a critical point—poor implementation fidelity data reflects their weakness as a team as well.

Administrators carry the prime responsibility for transforming status quo thinking and elevating implementation teams to more advanced levels of working together. Yet, breaking through traditional mindsets and barriers requires confronting counterproductive group inertia. The intention is to establish a highly structured team strong enough to repel complexities arising from chronic mutability within the school and district context, opposing opinions, new priorities, or coercion of team members to retreat to the status quo. This degree of change requires administrators and leaders to develop competence beyond basic strategies for convening teams. It demands they facilitate promotive interaction between team members to support each other's efforts to complete tasks and attain team goals (Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Kristiansen, et al., 2019). Their charge is to spark a "we" factor, so team members execute coordinated actions that boost productivity and create collaborative conditions that promote FOI.

Getting to "We": The UNITED Protocol

An efficient way to get to "we" is to have team members at the initial stage of convening engage in procedures that explicitly incorporate high-performance team principles and step-by-step actions for operating as a productive, cooperative team that is committed to a common purpose, continuous improvement, and reaching goals. High-performance teams are more than the sum of its parts. Members work together to maximize their own and each other's success and often outperform reasonable expectations (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Different from traditional groups, members hold themselves accountable for fulfilling role responsibilities and producing excellent work.

These cooperative characteristics are uncommon within current implementation teams since most are traditionally structured with low interdependence. Members of weaker performing teams do minimum joint work and are accountable as individuals, not as part of a cooperative, high-performance team. If administrators continue to employ traditional implementation teams, they can expect to mark time on the last plank of the research-to-practice bridge. Moving past this obstacle demands professional development on how to establish implementation teams that are cooperatively structured where members believe they "sink or sail together." In short, administrators require more high-performance team provisions for taking the final step across the bridge.

One team-directed protocol, called UNITED, is an excellent resource to add to the pack of provisions. UNITED is a timesaving protocol with specific activities for launching a cohesive team. Within two hours, new team members create a sense of belonging, advance their understanding of the principles that empower high performance teamwork, and commit to do "whatever it takes" to realize their mission. UNITED provides administrators clear, sequenced steps detailing a straightforward path for moving a team from a loosely coupled group to a goal-oriented cohesive team prepared to confront challenges together. UNITED is composed of six clear-cut steps for advancing high performance teaming (Mainzer et al., 2016). Each letter in the UNITED protocol prompts team members to take a critical step toward becoming a smoothly functioning team. They work together to:

- **U**nveil beliefs, vision, mission;
- **N**ame team operating standards;
- **I**dentify six high-performance team principles;
- **T**arget team goals and roles;
- **E**stablish team identity; and
- **D**etermine logistics for working together.

Following this team protocol, members unveil their beliefs, vision, and mission. They delineate operating standards, identify goals, and commit to high performance. They learn the principle of positive interdependence, not just in theoretical terms, but in authentic practice. They routinely use a team performance rating system embedded within the protocol to determine how well they worked together as a team and how effective they were in realizing their performance targets. They develop competency in teaming and cultivate a shared belief that they have the collective strength to solve complicated implementation issues. Teams completing these streamlined procedures advance to "we" rapidly, which is particularly important when onboarding new members. An esprit de corps and synergy evolve to do "whatever it takes" to achieve performance targets, such as improving implementation of EBPs to increase student achievement.

Crossing the Bridge and Closing the Achievement Gap: A District Administrator's Perspective

A school district administrator for early learning and special education was ready to do "whatever it takes" to improve outcomes of children, including those with disabilities, related to skills, knowledge, and behaviors (SKBs) in pre-K settings. Results from several years of implementation of a state formative assessment indicated less than optimal FOI results along with minimal progress in SKBs. Being aware of barriers that impede crossing the research-to-practice bridge, the decision was made to find a continuous improvement process that put productive teaming as a central component for driving change and progress. The choice was Dynamic Impact, a team-directed continuous improvement approach that includes the five-stage TAP-IT process (Mainzer & Stein, 2013; Stein & Mainzer, 2013). As mentioned previously, each stage contains embedded action-oriented, team-driven procedures. The first stage, *team*, uses the UNITED protocol to establish a high-performance implementation team (Mainzer, et al., 2016).

Consequently, the district administrator formed an implementation team comprised of the director of special programs, coordinator of early childhood/special education birth-K, early childhood teacher specialist, and two pre-K teachers to improve formative assessment in pre-K classes. They actively engaged in the steps of UNITED during a two-and-a half-day professional development institute with follow-up coaching to build a high-performance implementation team. The administrator viewed high-performance teams as a bedrock for a solutions-driven approach for improving and sustaining student success. Sharing this belief intently with team members inspired them to commit to high-quality execution of the Dynamic Impact continuous improvement cycles and robust support for teachers striving to improve FOI and achievement.

Members discovered that when they engaged in the UNITED protocol, cooperative principles of positive interdependence, individual accountability, promotive interaction, and mutual concern emerged through each step of the process. In relatively short time, they worked efficiently together to identify district goals, examine FOI data, conduct a streamlined root cause analysis, and determine areas impeding teacher and student performance. A unique feature of this team approach was the dimension of routinely conducting a performance rating of their individual and teamwork efforts. The team rating procedures were simple, yet powerful. Every month members decided as individuals and a team if they were high performing, on track, or needed to target improvement. Having a practical process for maintaining and advancing the quality of teamwork was instrumental to the team facilitating successful FOI of the formative assessment practice in the pre-K environment.

When high performance teaming was coupled with FOI data, outcomes exceeded identified yearly performance goals. According to the district administrator, the spark that was lit during the high-performance teambuilding not only sustained

but grew brighter as they worked together addressing challenges and improving their own team performance. Augmenting the use of checklist assessments with streamlined, high-performance team protocols added a collaborative force that empowered team members to commit to the common purpose of maximizing their own and each other's success.

The implementation team did "real work together" through each stage of the improvement process to attain their goal: to improve FOI of formative assessment to increase child outcome results. They mobilized their team efforts and created conditions to complete their mission of increasing implementation fidelity of formative assessments. Evaluation results indicated that the implementation team found the specific goal-setting procedures in UNITED facilitative in generating explicit measurable goals that could be attained and stretched for greater impact. As such, they set a goal that by the end of the year, 50% of the teachers would implement formative assessment at 80% FOI. They were well on their way to surpassing the goal in March with 78% of the teachers reaching full implementation indicators. Child outcome data increased as seen in Figure 1. In the 2018-19 school year, 48% of children without disabilities demonstrated kindergarten readiness compared to 57% of children without disabilities in the 2019-2020 school year. Even larger one-year increases occurred among students with disabilities, rising from 14% to 36% demonstrating kindergarten readiness (Ready at Five, 2019; Ready at Five; 2020). These data indicate that implementation team members changed the status quo. They were not just another work group, or loosely coupled, traditional team. Rather, they were a high-performance team that walked across the research-to-practice bridge by engaging in a team-directed continuous improvement process, following the UNITED protocol to establish high- performance teams, and using FOI checklist results to determine implementation quality of the selected intervention. Although this example illustrated findings at the elementary level, the streamlined resources are used successfully across grade, district, and state levels.

Figure 1

Closing the Gap: Student Readiness Outcomes on State Assessment
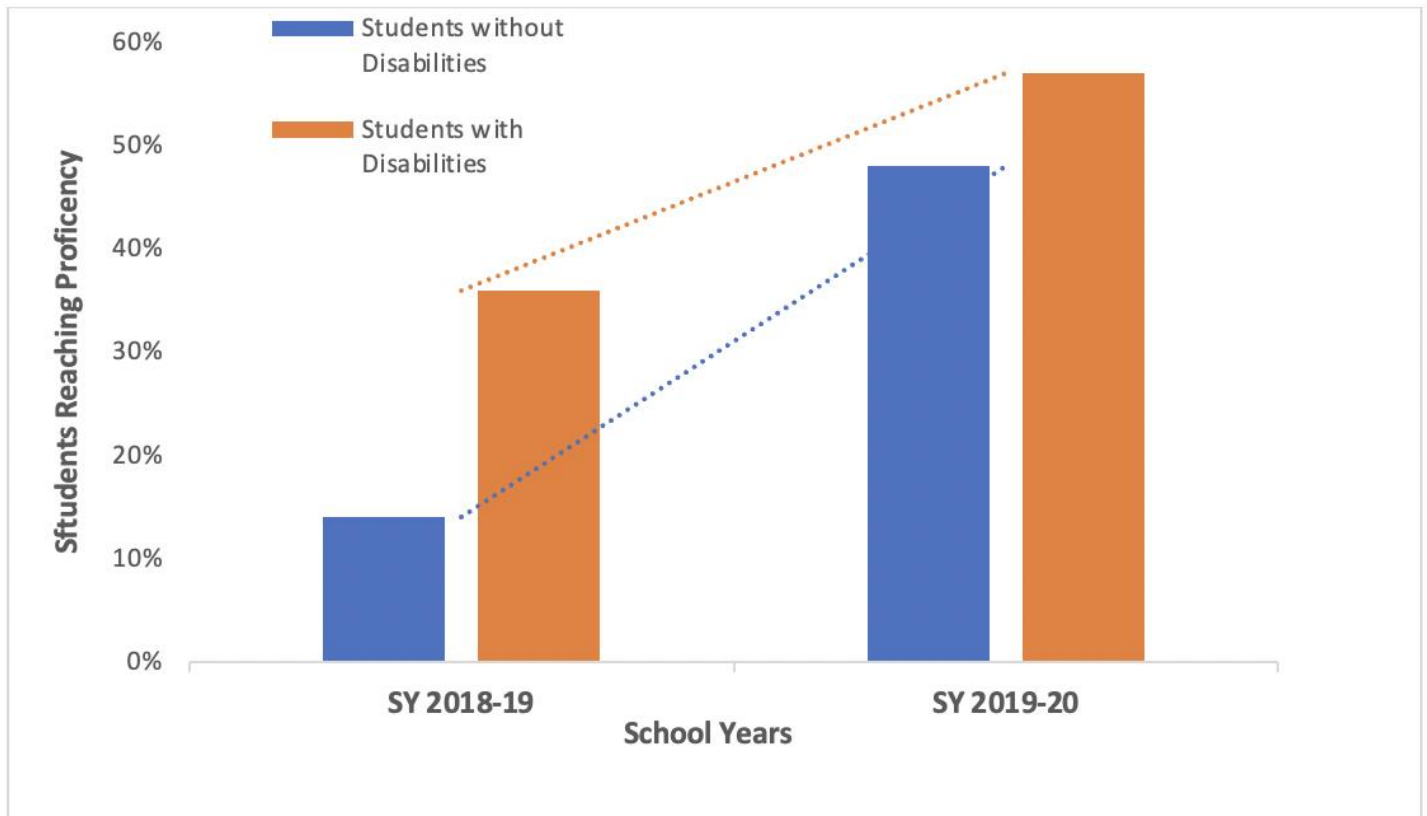


Note: Ready at Five, 2020.

DISCUSSION

Within the education community, there is widespread understanding that the research-to-practice bridge is far from a clear path. Rather, it is like an obstacle course interspersed with barriers of competing priorities and weak implementation teams. The last plank of the bridge is especially challenging to navigate if administrators fail to accept prime responsibility for ensuring teams have sufficient provisions for supporting teachers implementing EBPs. Moreover, those who successfully lead the trek embrace proven findings that high-performance implementation teams promote collective commitment toward continuous improvement, goal attainment, and positive student outcomes. Consequently, a team-directed continuous improvement process, such as TAP-IT, that seamlessly incorporates protocols for establishing high-performance implementation teams gives administrators straightforward tools that catalyze team members to reach beyond status quo groupwork and do "whatever it takes" to accomplish their implementation goals. As shown in Figure 2, administrators and implementation teams can cross the bridge when equipped with the following three powerful provisions:

1. a team-directed continuous improvement process;
2. a protocol for establishing high-performance implementation teams; and
3. FOI performance results.

Figure 2

Research to Practice: Team-Directed Continuous Improvement, High Performance Team Protocol, FOI
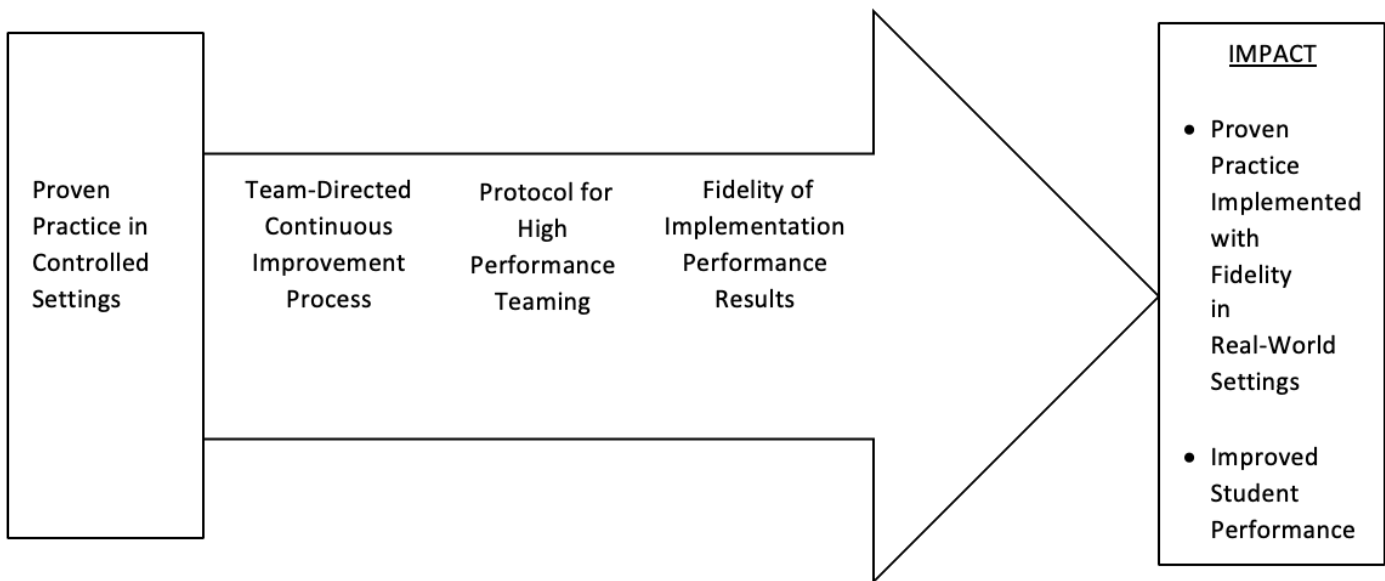
Each of these resources has its own purpose. Taken together, they act as a smoothly operating engine with synchronized parts. The TAP-IT team-directed continuous improvement process infuses the UNITED high-performance team protocol with its simple decision-making methods (e.g., 5-3-1 voting technique) and FOI performance results. The interaction effect creates cooperative conditions for team members to "get to we" and use FOI results to determine improvement actions for teachers and the team. Providing professional development on using these integrated resources when onboarding and executing implementation teams is a promising strategy to help administrators cross the last plank of the research-to-practice bridge and close achievement gaps.

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