

# School development in practice: creating learning communities

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## Introduction

Understanding how schools develop and become effective has been a focus of school improvement and school effectiveness research for over a decade. Yet recent research emphasises that individual classroom teachers are the most important of school-related influences on student learning and achievement. Hattie (2002) concludes that teachers account for about 30% of the variance in students' achievement, compared with schools' 5-10%. "It is what teachers know, do and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation" (Hattie, 2002, p.6). One challenge for school improvement research is to examine how good classroom teaching practice can be spread throughout a school (Lingard & Mills, 2002). Another challenge is to identify government policy frameworks that best support schools in this endeavour.

Common factors in studies of schools that have made noticeable change are conditions such as professional development focused on learning, regular time for school staff to reflect, analyse, plan and review together, and access to external support for this, but these conditions are not necessarily present in all New Zealand schools. Governance, management, and compliance with legislation were given priority during the 1990s rather than the infrastructure of support suggested by the international evidence.

In our study, *Sustaining school improvement: ten primary schools journeys*, we are investigating how schools in New Zealand develop and change over time. The schools in the study are 9 primary schools and 1 intermediate school that have made deliberate efforts to bring about positive improvement over 3 to 5 years up to 2001, efforts which were seen to be having an impact by the advisers, representatives of Principals' Associations, Education Review Office officials and/or Ministry of Education officials who recommended the schools. We chose this time frame because we wanted to find out more about the process of change.

## Research design

Questions that framed our research were:

- How do New Zealand schools make substantial change?
- Why do schools feel the need to change? Do they change simply in relation to outside pressure, or as a result of their own values?
- What kind of change is sustainable over time?
- How important are government provision and accountability frameworks?

Data collected in the first phase, in 2001, included school documentation on school policy, operation and student achievement. We interviewed the principal, the literacy leader, the science leader, 3 other teachers, the school secretary or office manager, a teaching support staff member, the chair of the board of trustees, and a group of parents. We surveyed Year 4 and Year 6 or Year 7/8 students on their feelings about school. We surveyed teachers and support staff about their views of the school, and change over the last 3 to 5 years. We intend to come back to the ten schools in 2004, to examine how the schools have further changed, and what is involved in improvement over time.

We also sought views on school improvement held by experienced school sector personnel, including government officials, organisation representatives, and teacher educators who work with schools on their development.

In this paper we want to outline findings from the first phase of our study about the different developmental paths taken by the 10 schools, and features of leadership, culture, and external support that helped these schools become learning communities, focused on bringing about positive changes in teaching and learning. We also describe the role played by government and some issues related to government policy and frameworks to support schools.

## Findings from the *Sustaining School Improvement* study

The 10 schools had unique histories. They operated within local contexts, setting their own priorities and following distinctive patterns of development. Nevertheless we were able to group schools according to common starting points for change or developmental paths. These were:

- Crisis turn around schools
- Rapid roll growth schools
- Cultures of steady development.

### Crisis turn around schools

The 4 schools starting from a point of crisis had negative publicity at the crisis time that caused parents to take their children away and rolls to decline. Poor ERO reviews highlighted a variety of compliances needing to be addressed and brought poor school performance to public attention. There was a culture of low morale and staff divisiveness, and in each school the

principal had resigned, sometimes after being counselled to leave. A new principal was the catalyst for positive change in these schools.

### **Rapid roll growth schools**

We described two schools as “rapid roll growth” schools, because of their spectacular roll growth over a short time period – one almost doubled its number of students from 300 to 575 students in 3 years, the other increased by about a third from 193 to 255 students in that same time. There were different reasons for the roll growth: the first because of demographic change and active marketing, and the latter because of changed community perceptions. A challenge for these schools was to adjust to roll growth, and the need to recruit new teachers, cope with staff changes and generate common goals and sense of purpose across the school. One school used structural means to preserve the “family” atmosphere of the school by arranging the school as a campus with separate primary and intermediate schools. At the same time, organisational structures were developed to bring teachers from across the school together in curriculum areas.

### **Cultures of steady development**

The 4 schools that were characterised as having “cultures of steady development” had been recommended as schools that had continued to develop over time and were making new inroads into areas associated with teaching and learning. These schools were able to concentrate on raising teacher expectations of student achievement, and working to improve teaching and learning. All these schools had principals who had been at the school for a reasonably long time (6, 8, 12, and 13 years respectively).

## **Features of leadership, culture and external support that helped schools become learning communities**

### **School culture**

All schools had clear school goals which seemed to be shared and understood by staff. Having a common vision and philosophy seemed to encourage adults to be united in their approaches to student learning. Schools regarded learning broadly, encompassing achievement in the curriculum framework’s essential learning areas, social and interpersonal skills, students developing positive attitudes about themselves and others, and development of learning dispositions to assist students to become lifelong learners. Most schools placed priority on basic literacy, oracy and numeracy skills. In the lower decile schools there tended to be more expressed concern with “care” and “stability” for students. This was not expressed as a deficit view of students, but as an important part of establishing a strong basis for learning, and for developing resilience.

These views of the purpose of schooling were similar to views expressed by most school personnel, officials and education sector organisation representatives whom we interviewed about school improvement. (An exception was a minority view that learning to socialise and become good citizens could be learned outside schools, which should focus solely on scholastic achievement).

One conceptualisation of effective schools is that they are “rational goal oriented systems”, having clear and agreed goals. Goals relate to student achievement, are results focused, and measurable (Bennett & Harris, 1999). The Education Standards Act 2001 takes such an approach, requiring schools from 2003 to set out goals for student achievement for the next three to five years, improvement targets for the current year and the actions the school plans in order to reach its strategic goals (Ministry of Education, 2001). Most of the Treasury and Ministry of Education officials we interviewed emphasised the use of student achievement data to raise performance as an essential part of school improvement. They referred to government aims for improving student achievement, particularly for Maori and Pasifika students, and for literacy and numeracy. They also described government policy associated with encouraging school performance and improvement through school improvement initiatives for clusters or groups of schools that are not at “safety net” level, and Schools Support for schools that are at risk and require more serious intervention.

However, not all goals related to learning are measurable. The schools in our study, while valuing the use of achievement data, regarded this as part of a picture for gauging performance. They were attuned to their students, parents, and community and found ways to celebrate, lift confidence, and affirm.

The experiences of the schools came closest to the views of the teacher educators, academics and researchers in our study who, like Stoll (1999), emphasised that in an improving school the purpose of schooling is debated, negotiated and constructed. This requires active involvement of those involved in the school in generating their own school culture which is valued and evolving. There is no blueprint for a good school: each needs to work out the meaning of this for themselves. As one academic stated (Mitchell, Cameron, & Wylie, 2002a, p.261):

I see the improving school as one that is quite discerning about the nature of the content of what actually comprises its instructional programmes, and I think the improving school has to transcend, elevate itself beyond the systemic view of “This is the laid down curriculum” and consider “What is the appropriate curriculum to this learner?” (Lester Flockton, academic).

The schools that seemed able to most strongly incorporate elements of ongoing enquiry about teaching and learning without other major distractions were the schools described as having cultures of steady development. Those turning around crisis had to put considerable energy into changing the school’s physical and social environment, and actively addressing immediate challenges of poor public image, dysfunctional relationships and low staff morale. The pressures of crisis meant that they were less able to make teaching and learning their single-minded emphasis. The principal’s workload in the crisis schools was high. Similarly, there were additional demands in the roll growth schools.

## **Generating a learning community**

Nevertheless, there was evidence that all the schools in the study were strongly focused on teaching and learning, with deliberate school wide efforts being made to bring about positive change. Perhaps the clearest examples of this focus came through in the descriptions of the “steady development” schools.

Five elements were identifiable in the “steady development schools” of ways in which these schools developed as learning communities. These were that:

- School principals (and management team) were active learners themselves, valuing their own and others’ learning, and making teacher learning a priority in the school.
- There was emphasis on whole school professional development focused on specific aspects of teaching and learning. There was coherence across school programmes.
- External support was available from a skilled external professional development adviser.
- A climate of discussion about teaching and learning was created. Teaching and learning became a strong focus of staff meeting discussion time as well as informal teacher discussion. Classrooms were open places, with teachers willing to allow their teaching to be observed and critiqued.
- School wide efforts were made to ensure consistency in planning and assessment. However, accounts of experiences showed that becoming “assessment literate” could be hard.

### **School principals were active learners**

Principals played a leading or supporting role in professional matters. They were inveterate learners themselves, with many belonging to principal mentoring groups, undertaking tertiary study, taking part as educational leaders in working with others outside their own school, being involved in principals’ associations. They structured the adult work environment to encourage teachers to talk about learning, through time and emphasis in syndicate and staff meetings. Principals sought out professional development opportunities in line with school priorities, and were discerning in choosing skilled advisers whom they knew had a track record of offering worthwhile professional development. They usually took part in the professional development themselves.

### **Whole school professional development**

Professional development that seemed to be most useful in encouraging effective pedagogy to spread across the school involved teachers working together with a common focus in a whole school approach. Analysis of data on student learning was often the basis for identifying learning needs within the school and areas where a collective effort could lift achievement for all students, both as groups and individuals. Whole school professional development enabled teachers in the school to have common goals and knowledge, encouraged teachers to share their skills and be open about difficulties, and made for greater coherence for students moving between classrooms and year levels.

Because of the common experience and development of expectations, whole school professional development offered a good basis for teachers to talk about teaching and learning, not taking practice for granted, analysing and discussing their own and others’ practice. In one school, professional development was held jointly with early childhood teachers through the Early Childhood Primary Links project offered by the Ministry of Education. These practices of sharing professional development seemed to contribute to schools becoming places of ongoing enquiry and to gathering viewpoints from others. Comments from teachers who had engaged in the Ministry of Education Literacy Enhancement Programme showed that they had assumed

there were common understandings among teachers in their school: the process of professional development showed this not to be the case. Teachers were encouraged to take risks within a non-judgmental environment.

One noticeable finding was the emphasis placed on literacy and numeracy in the schools in our study. One reason for this was the central role played by primary schools in teaching numeracy and literacy. A second was to do with the availability of free professional development contracts in this area. All nine schools had taken part in the first part of the Ministry of Education's Literacy Leadership Project for primary school principals. Seven schools had participated in the second part on using literacy materials. Four schools had undertaken or were undertaking the Literacy Enhancement Programme involving a whole school approach over three terms to enhance literacy.

### **External support**

External professional development advisers were involved in professional development provision. Usually they were skilled teachers themselves, taking a hands on role in observing and giving feedback to teachers, modeling, working alongside the curriculum leader so that he or she could take on a similar role in their absence. Ingredients of the approaches that seemed to be most helpful involved:

- Raising teacher expectations. Some teachers commented that they learned to “get that little bit more” out of students, and they learned not to take a deficit approach to students who had difficult home circumstances. One school for example, described a shift in thinking that children needed time to settle into school before formal teaching began to providing straight away a mix of formal and informal teaching.
- Offering substantive theoretical and content knowledge. Many teachers commented on the new ideas, both practical and theoretical, that they learned from professional development.
- Offering professional development in a variety of forms, including whole school workshops, teachers observing others teach, teachers working in pairs, and teachers being observed and receiving feedback.

### **A climate of discussion about teaching and learning was created**

Significant change in some of the schools taking part in whole school professional development was the climate of discussion that was created. As the assistant principal in one of the case study schools said (Mitchell et al., 2002a, p. 53)

Once you'd have walked into the staff room and the talk would have been about the weekend. Now we talk about work, about children and teaching.

The opportunity for teachers to create and moderate benchmarks in curriculum areas that were of concern to the school as a whole, as happened for schools taking part in the Literacy Enhancement Programme, led to a great deal of debate about goals in specific areas, and ways of achieving these. Teachers owned the philosophy and goals that underpinned their work, rather than working to imposed goals. Some practices seemed to help generate a more open climate: mentoring by more experienced teachers or teachers with particular skills, opening the classroom

to observation by others, seeing other people teach. In combination, these practices seemed to help generate an open climate where discussion about teaching and learning became a norm.

Some schools had linkages with research organisations and other schools, or became lead schools in a curriculum area. The school therefore developed its own internal learning community, and also was part of a wider network.

### **Assessment**

All but one of the schools in our study made school-wide efforts to ensure consistency of planning and assessment across classes. Their accounts of their experiences in assessment showed that becoming “assessment literate” could be a struggle. Schools appreciated help to:

- develop and select appropriate assessment tools, interpret data and learn how to use data to improve learning
- develop and moderate their own benchmarks.

Two schools produced some data that we were unable to interpret, yet this data had been provided as report of student achievement to boards of trustees. One school used factual recall information which measured one aspect only of student performance to support instructional decisions.

Schools that learned to develop and moderate their own benchmarks found benefits in achieving consistent shared standards across the whole school and using the benchmarks diagnostically. Several schools used assessment to pinpoint differences between groups of students: some found ethnic and class differences that required further action, and one school found that transient students had lower achievement levels than those who had spent their entire life at the school. Some gave evidence that they used assessment to track student progress and identify particular need, using the information to determine teaching programmes and to see whether sufficient progress was made.

Few schools provided data prior to 2001, but those in which there was evidence of rises in achievement over two or three years showed that this was not always upwards. Scores could leap, then remain the much the same for some time. Encouraging positive trends were found in two schools that had worked in a professional development contract with an external adviser on writing. Linn and Haug (2002) have shown that student scores do vary over time, a finding that schools and government need to understand in respect to setting targets and conveying assessment information to parents in line with the new reporting requirements.

### **Government policy and frameworks**

One of the researchers we interviewed about school improvement described (Mitchell et al., 2002a, p. 259) schools and classrooms as follows:

We can consider the classroom as an activity system. But that activity system is nested in the whole lot of other activity systems which are classrooms in the school, and the school itself as an institution. And the school itself as an institution is nested in the activity system which is the

education system. So you can legitimately seek improvements at any of those levels: micro levels, the institutional level . . . or at the . . . public policy level (Phil Capper).

We want to highlight 3 classroom related areas where government policy and systems can be aligned with schools' efforts to improve teaching and learning in order to achieve a stronger foundation for good classroom teaching to be spread across the school. These are:

- Access to school wide professional development and advice, focused on learning, and extended over time
- Curriculum and assessment resources
- Adult work conditions that enable space and time for teachers to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, and watch others teach.

Cathy Wylie (Mitchell, Cameron, & Wylie, 2002b) outlined questions and issues related to these areas of policy. She suggested we are probably at a stage where it is important to look at the long term provision of professional development programmes and resources, how programmes are best followed up and whether it is possible to reconnect teachers working in different schools through giving them opportunities to work together. Similarly, in respect to national assessment tools she stated (Mitchell et al., 2002b, p.39)

Again, we may be coming to a decision point about what will be provided systemically in the future and what is the best way to do it, since there is a desire for local sharing as well as national examples.

In recent years, the government has taken more heed of conditions in schools to support principals and classroom teachers as professionals. These include negotiation of conditions of employment such as more non-teaching time in the Secondary Teachers Collective Agreement and sabbatical leave for primary teachers, establishment of a professional body for teachers, additional school staffing, and extension of professional development programmes and resources.

When we return to the schools in our study in 2004, we will have opportunity to find out what changed in schools alongside government policy changes, whether schools that began their journeys as crisis or experiencing roll growth stabilised, and what happened to the schools described as "steady development".



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