Building Capacity for Learning Communities: Schools that Work

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BUILDING CAPACITY FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES:

SCHOOLS THAT WORK

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Much has been written recently about the need for schools to be different from what they have been if they are to meet the challenges of the knowledge society (e.g., Hargreaves & Evans, 1997; Hargreaves, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). The persistent calls for school reform have prompted growing support for schools to be viewed as learning communities (DuFour & Eaker; 1998; Harris, 2002; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000; Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003). The ideas that underpin the learning community construct "are of wholeness and connections, diversity and complexity, relationships and meanings, reflection and inquiry, and collaboration and collegiality" (Mitchell & Sackney, p. 5). For us, "a learning community consists in a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning" (p. 9). It is the conscious, data-sensitive, reflective approach to practice that can lead to profound improvement of student learning experiences.

This paper is a report of Phase Two results of a three-phased research project to investigate the development of learning communities for a knowledge society. This, the qualitative interpretative phase of the study, builds on the results from the quantitative deductive phase. The purpose of this phase was to identify the practices of fifteen successful schools in two provinces that are building capacity as a learning community.

1. RELEVANT LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

To build a learning community is to build capacity for learning. This represents a fundamental shift in how learning is perceived. In the past, most educational expectations and arrangements have been grounded in a deficit model, which positions knowledge gaps as problems to be overcome. Learners are seen to be deficit in some ways and the task of the teacher is to eliminate or at least reduce the deficit. Prior knowledge is only relevant if it links directly with the learning tasks arranged and organized by the sanctioned curriculum. By contrast, the capacity-building model sees knowledge gaps as opportunities and challenges to be explored and investigated. Learners are seen to be resourceful, interested and interesting (Mitchell & Sackney). Prior knowledge serves as the foundation upon which future learning is grounded and around which learning goals are organized. Pre-determined curriculum is a springboard for learning rather than a restrictive package of expected outcomes. From this perspective, learning flows naturally from the interests of individuals and the interactions of group members. Learning communities best develop when the leadership is empowering and distributed (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). This perspective "means that leaders and followers are part of the same process and that different positions do not imply differences in status" (p. 3). Leadership is collaborative and interdependent, and people take on different leadership tasks from time to time. Power, leadership, followership, leading, learning, and teaching are mutual and

embedded constructs that, together, constitute a community of leaders who can move schools forward to become communities of learners. As such, a school learning community includes "educators, students, parents, and the community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities" (Epstein & Clark Salinas, 2004, p.12).

Within a learning community, the learning of teachers is as important as the learning of children. Professional learning, however, is not easily achieved. The complexity is evident, for example, in Gherardi's (1999) distinction between learning in pursuit of problem solving and learning in the face of mystery. The first is more instrumental and cognitive, the second more natural and intuitive. In her words, "problem-driven learning was propelled by the aesthetic of the rational, while mystery-driven learning is sustained by the aesthetic of the relational" (p. 117). For Gherardi, when professional learning is linked exclusively to problem solving and is pushed by institutional expectations, it loses its connection with the lives of professionals and runs the risk of being unnatural and ineffective. By contrast, when learning is linked to the mysteries and perplexities faced by the professionals, it is embedded in day-to-day context of the people and is more natural, effective, and durable.

Whether or not this kind of learning leads to knowledge that benefits other professionals in the school depends a great deal on what kind of professional community has been established within the walls of the school. There has been considerable recent attention on informal workplace learning called "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998; Sergiovanni, 2000). In fact, Sergiovanni positions community of practice as the critical element in school development. This notion implies that, just as students learn from and with one another, so too teachers construct their knowledge not only upon the exemplars that they discover in their own practice but also upon those they obtain from their colleagues practices.

The 'how' of building learning communities is one of the great mysteries. Scholars often talk about building capacity without explicating what kind of capacity or capacity for what. In essence, there has been too little attention to what we call a curriculum of capacity. Our conceptualization is based upon capacity building around three pivotal capacities: personal, interpersonal, and organizational (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Building personal capacity entails a deep and critical deconstruction and reconstruction of one's own professional knowledge. Interpersonal capacity addresses the development of collegial relations and collective practices whereby ongoing professional learning becomes a sacred norm within the group. Organizational capacity means building organizational structures and systems that support and value personal learning and that facilitates and encourages collective learning. Further, the context is a determinant of how and why learning communities develop. These elements comprised the conceptualization for this study.

2. METHODOLOGY

For the past three years we have been studying schools that serve the teaching and learning functions effectively. We have been particularly interested in schools that resonate with learning community theory and have transformed their practices by building capacity in three domains: personal, interpersonal and organizational (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). This is a three-year multi-phased and multi-method (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) study of 70 schools from each of two provinces, Saskatchewan and Ontario. These schools were nominated by their directors and central office staff as exhibiting elements of a learning community. The criteria included evidence of high

energy and enthusiasm, quality teaching and learning, a collaborative culture, distributed leadership, innovativeness, and reflective practices, evidence of action research and data collection, and community involvement.

In Phase one, principals provided contextual data on their school, and staff and a random sample of Grade 7 to 12 students completed the "Learning Community Survey." Using factor analytic techniques (Krathwohl, 1993) the underlying constructs were determined. A six-factor solution was the best predictor of individual, interpersonal and organizational capacity. The schools were clustered on the basis of their scores on the six factors. The fifteen schools that scored the highest on these factors were selected for the case studies in Phase two.

This paper reports the findings from the fifteen case studies. The data were obtained through individual and focus group interviews, observation and documentation (Merriam, 1998). We observed staff meetings, visited classrooms, collected documentation and reflective journals, attended parent council meetings, and wandered the halls and staffrooms in the school. We also examined the written comments that staff made on our survey.

Data were analyzed by means of analytic induction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998) and unitized into units of common content characteristics. Initial coding was based around the overall themes and questions that were asked. These themes were organized into categories and recoded until no negative cases were found.

3. FINDINGS

Amidst all of the diversity, we have found some common pathways among the schools that are functioning as high capacity learning communities. These pathways are described in the following narratives.

3.1. Shared Understanding and Responsibility

In the high capacity learning community schools, the staff developed shared understanding by focusing their classroom, hallway and staffroom conversations on teaching and learning, by sharing instructional strategies, by taking collective responsibility for student learning, by focusing the school vision on student learning, by encouraging innovation, and by taking generative leadership roles aimed at enhancing student learning. For example, in one school with a high number of students with learning disabilities, whenever one of the students 'acted out' everyone joined in to support the teacher. In another school, we frequently heard teachers saying, "It takes the whole village". when difficult circumstances were encountered.

In all high capacity schools there was a general understanding that teaching and learning were top priorities, and a vision had been articulated and promoted by the school principal and was at the centre of school processes. Ongoing collaboration within curriculum-focused teams and professional learning teams provided numerous opportunities for teachers to share ideas, to establish mentoring relationships, and to build common understandings and practices. The teachers viewed the team structure as essential for generating coherence and direction in the school, and they appreciated the procedural supports that guided the team processes.

In these schools we observed a high level of energy, enthusiasm, and excitement among the educational staff. They appeared completely invested in the success of the school and in the provision of excellent education for all students. Staff felt fortunate to be a part of an exciting educational

enterprise, and believed that their school was in a different world from other schools they were familiar with. Parents and students echoed this sentiment and appreciated the school emphasis on academic achievement and the willingness of teachers to work with students.

3.2. Reflective Practice

It was commonplace in these schools for teachers to reflect on their own practice, to assess the value of educational alternatives, and to discuss professional practice regularly. Many of the teachers not only engaged in action research activities, but they also consistently looked for best practice in a given area. Their reflections and research efforts were informed by their tendency to collect a wide array of classroom and school-wide data. Using a variety of data-gathering techniques helped them to target improvement efforts and provided important baseline information for monitoring progress. A number of the successful schools also used rubrics and benchmarking as a way of improving instruction. In one school, a teacher had taken the initiative to teach the other teachers how to develop and use rubrics, and in another school, grade 4 students were using the rubrics provided by their teacher to assess their own work. In all the schools, we found this widespread use of rich data linking school people together in unique and creative ways.

3.3. Organizational Resources

We found that the schools that worked had adequate technological, curricular and library resources and adequate opportunities for professional staff development, and received support and materials from the school division as needed. Even in jurisdictions that were not particularly wealthy, the school people had found creative ways to come up with extra resources by manipulating classroom arrangements, using scarce resources wisely, building on the talents available in the school, and generating resource support from the students and community. The principals' were creative in finding time and support for staff to collaborate and learn. In one Catholic secondary school of some 900 students over 100 parents were active participants in the school operations. Furthermore, in this school over 70 students were meaningfully involved in school-wide leadership.

3.4. Currency

In the high capacity learning community schools, staffs were current on the latest research on teaching and learning. When they encountered problems, they tended to examine what research had to say about that particular issue. They constantly sought out what was best practice. Moreover, they were active learners; they were constantly reading new material and talking about what they had read. In a number of these schools, we found reading clubs, discussion circles, and various other venues in which teachers shared their learning. Furthermore, the staff was trained in the use of new technology, and teachers and students alike made extensive but intelligent and critical use of technology in the teaching and learning process.

3.5. Learning Opportunities

In the high capacity learning community schools, there were greater opportunities for staff, students and parents to learn. That is, there was explicit attention to the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum and the attained curriculum (Marzano, 2003). Staff also saw failed initiatives as learning opportunities and innovation was encouraged and supported. Several times we heard teachers say with unrelenting persistence, "Let's try and see if it works, and if it doesn't let's look for another way." If conflict emerged from a collaborative venture, it was not seen as or even labeled as conflict. Rather, the staff saw it as a catalyst to start talking about an issue or solving a problem. As

one teacher in an elementary school stated, "We don't have conflict [in a bad way]. It's the way we work to solve our problems."

The successful schools also had numerous opportunities for students to learn. Staff members spent time after school, during noon hours, and even on weekends assisting students with their work, and students commented on several occasions that their teachers cared about them as individuals and about their ability to learn.

3.6. Interactive Instruction

In the high capacity learning community schools teachers were constantly seeking ways of improving teaching and learning. They talked to students about how they could improve the way they learned and they helped them to be better learners. Moreover, these teachers were caring, had a sense of humor and presented the curricula in interesting ways. In one Catholic secondary school the physics and chemistry teachers used a school heating problem to teach part of the curricula. Another teacher who was teaching a mathematics unit on volume took the students to the local swimming pool to calculate the volume of water in the pool. In an elementary school a teacher taught metric measurement by having students measure their smiles and calculating the mean, range, and aggregated scores. There was competition with another classroom as to who had the largest smile meter. From our observations in these schools, we noted enthusiasm, energy, a love of teaching, collaboration, and a wealth of authentic instructional approaches.

3.7. Learner Engagement

In the high capacity learning community schools the level of student engagement was high. Students did not find school boring but rather they thrived in the exciting environment. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) indicate that engagement exists at three levels. Behavioural engagement draws on student participation; emotional engagement encompasses negative and positive reactions to teachers, classmates, academics and schools; and cognitive engagement draws on the idea of investment in learning. In the schools that exhibited high learning community capacity, we observed extensive student participation in all these categories. Students made numerous positive comments about their teachers and peers, they were actively involved in their learning, and they tended to achieve high academic test scores and scholarship awards.

In the successful schools, there was close monitoring of student homework, and parents were regularly informed of student progress. In one elementary school, a parent focus group indicated that the parent-teacher interviews seldom produced new information because of the communication used by the school, such as sending weekly school and classroom newsletters and daily log books to parents and making extensive use of the internet and telephone to keep parents updated on school events. Another focus of teachers was the attention paid to using time well. In our observation of student work activities and student self-report, student time on task was high. Classes started on time and students were monitored in their use of time. There was flow to student learning in that activities were planned so that there was little, if any, instructional down time. A good example of this was demonstrated in a kindergarten classroom where students knew the details of what was expected of them and could successfully function with the principal covering for the classroom teacher during her absence.

3.8. Community of Leaders

In these schools leadership was distributed. All stakeholders, including parents and students, felt empowered to take action. Interestingly, the leadership styles of the school administrators differed across the schools. Some of the administrators were very outgoing and charismatic whereas others

were more reserved and quiet. However, there were some commonalities: they all had a sense of vision as to the type of school they were trying to create; they all fostered improved teaching and learning; they all worked to develop a learning community environment; and they all exhibited high energy, commitment and involvement. They encouraged others to take a leadership initiative and provided opportunities for recognition and celebration of accomplishments of all stakeholder groups.

In all of the successful schools, and in spite of the distributed leadership, staff, parents, and students recognized the school principal as the architect responsible for the success of the school. In one community, the parents successfully lobbied to have the vice-principal appointed as principal upon the retirement of the then principal because they did not want to lose the teaching and learning momentum that had emerged under this administrative team. Moreover, these leaders knew how to involve others in the decision making and learning activities. As one teacher related, "She talks to you about an idea and before you know it, it was your idea and you were willing to do something about it."

3.9. Learning Flow

Finally, we noted that in these schools they had what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) referred to as "learning flow." Students reported that they were getting better at learning, they were using their time better, and they were pleased about how much they were learning. Staff similarly reported that things were working well and that they enjoyed their work—everything was "in sync." Parents were pleased with the quality of education their children were receiving and they were highly supportive of the school leadership and staff.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

From the data we noted that in these schools everyone lived out the vision in their daily activities. Although it was difficult to determine how the school vision became a collective entity, it was clear that the vision in each of the participating schools was directly related to the welfare of the students. In these schools staff took collective responsibility for each child rather than being solely concerned with the students formally in their charge. This orientation was clearly visible in the hallway, classroom, staffroom and playground dynamics. The concept of a child-centered responsibility has been noted by Conzemius and O'Neill (2001), Huffman and Hipp (2003), and Stoll *et al.* (2003). What made these schools so unique is their focus on a child-centered vision and the collective responsibility of the staff to ensure that each child's needs were being met.

There was a pedagogic focus by all stakeholder groups. School-wide initiatives were directly related to curriculum and instruction, and directions and decisions were focused on enhancing student achievement. Stoll *et al.* (2003) and Conzemius and O'Neill noted similar focus by schools that were successful in meeting the learning needs of students. We noted many examples of staff members using a wide array of data to plan programs, to generate interventions, and to create learning activities. The intensive emphasis on educational matters kept teaching and learning at the top of the conversational agenda. Further, these conversations occurred in various places and times. Staff spent minimal time in the staff room. Rather, we noted teachers in hallways, in classrooms and in various locations throughout the school talking, meeting and planning.

We also concluded that in the successful learning community schools, staff had moved beyond strategic thinking to systemic thinking. They were committed to building school-wide systems that would serve as a foundation for shared expectations and common experiences for staff and students. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) in previous research noted that schools engaged in profound improvement were those that had progressed to systemic thinking.

In the high capacity learning communities, capacity existed at the individual, interpersonal and organizational levels (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). At the individual level, teachers invested in their own growth and development. They were lifelong learners; they constantly sought new ways of teaching and their focus was on "what works for this child." At the interpersonal level, teachers had established collaborative relationships with their colleagues and school community. Whenever they encountered a problem they found assistance and support from a variety of sources. They knew how to work as a team (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll *et al.*, 2003) and they mentored and supported each other (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). They constantly tried to ascertain what constituted best practice in a given area. Organizationally, these schools built capacity through structuring processes and through the involvement of other stakeholder groups. They regularly collected data, used benchmarks and engaged in action research. They constantly sought information from students and parents and then made adjustments in how they operated.

Finally, we concluded that in order to build learning community, leadership was crucial. Yet, this leadership was one that was shared with staff, students and the community, that was visionary, that was transformative and that engaged others. In every successful learning community, all stakeholders gave credit to the school leader as the one who provided the synergy and inspiration for enhancing teaching and learning. These individuals knew how to engage others and how to create the ethos necessary for creating a learning community. Their leadership was "about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (Lambert, 1998). They inspired others to live out this vision through "habits of mind."

5. AN AGENDA FOR EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Based on our experiences in these schools, we are convinced that the agenda for educational reform should be redirected towards the essential purpose of education in a knowledge society: learning—to create, to solve problems, to think critically, to unlearn and relearn, to deal with the ecological environment, and to develop a lifelong learning capacity.

Over the years, we have worked with and witnessed many schools that do not work well, and we have heard numerous laments in the media about schools that fail the children. It was, therefore, a breath of fresh air to spend time in these schools. We felt the energy, excitement, and enthusiasm from the moment we entered the hallways, and we witnessed exceptional teaching and learning.

Because of the wide demographic diversity in the participating schools, the project has affirmed our belief that good teaching and learning is not limited to high socio-economic communities. We found that education can work in a diversity of school types—rural, city, public, separate, large, and small schools. We found that education can work in high and low socioeconomic communities and in any ethnic community. We discovered that any type of school can work if the school people walk the pathways we have outlined in this paper. Our experience raises the question that we have pondered: Why can't all schools be like these schools?

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