

**SUSTAINING SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT IN A
DECENTRALISED SYSTEM:
LESSONS FROM NEW ZEALAND**

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**Cathy Wylie & Linda Mitchell,
New Zealand Council for Educational Research**

Author enquiries to: cathy.wylie@nzcer.org.nz

Introduction

New Zealand is one of the few countries which have made the individual school the major locus of educational administration.¹ From 1989 until the late 1990s, schools were left largely to their own devices in terms of improvement and attention to student achievement. It was assumed that accountabilities in terms of reputation, and roll numbers, which decided funding, and three-yearly inspections by the Education Review Office, based on legal requirements of schools and checking that schools were adhering to the national education and administrative guidelines, would ensure that schools would meet their student needs, and provide good quality education. By the late 1990s, it was clear that putting schools at the centre, and treating each as its own world – aligning them with the unit of the school which was the natural unit of the early school effectiveness literature – was insufficient (Fiske and Ladd 2000, Wylie 1998). There were also few signs that leaving schools to their own devices encouraged substantive innovation in a systemic way. While there were some exciting pockets of change, they remained pockets.

In looking at the school effectiveness research, it was apparent that though New Zealand had self-managing schools, we did not have some of the main conditions associated with the ability to make change within schools. Common factors in studies of schools that made noticeable change were professional development focused on learning, regular time for school staff to reflect, analyse, plan and review together, and access to external support for these activities (Calhoun and Joyce 1998). The assumptions underlying the implementation of school self-management in the 1990s treated schools as stand-alone units, without supplying infrastructure which could support them. Governance and management, and compliance with legislation were given prominence. Our NZCER series of national surveys of the impact of the educational reforms on primary schools showed that only 30 percent of primary teachers had any non-teaching time to work together in 1999, and that was less than the 35 percent in 1989. Government support was increasing for some schools and clusters, but with time limits of just a few years, often within a contractual framework. Yet the NZCER national surveys also showed that the centrally funded professional development which accompanied the introduction of the new national curriculum framework in 1993 played a key role in re-arousing teachers' enthusiasm and sense of purpose. It did so because, on the whole, it focused on teaching and learning rather than administration.

Since the late 1990s there have been some substantial policy changes, largely focused on building professional capacity and providing more support.² In the late

¹ Each school is governed by its own board of trustees, which includes 5 parent representatives elected by the school's current parents, the principal, a staff representative elected by school staff, and a student representative in secondary schools. The board of trustees appoints and employs the school principal and school staff, though in most schools the principal is the effective employer. Schools' government funding is largely based on student roll numbers, with weightings for socioeconomic disadvantage, remoteness, and small size. Teaching staff numbers are decided by student roll numbers, with central government covering actual staff salaries. Schools operate within a national framework of administrative and curriculum guidelines, must supply annual audited accounts, and are inspected by the Education Review Office (ERO) every 3 years, or more often if the reviews identify areas in need of attention.

² This trajectory is similar to other educational systems which decentralised in the late 1980s. Wylie (2002) provides a comparison of the roles of local governance and the centre in New Zealand, England, Chicago, and Edmonton, and looks at the tensions which continue in the

1990s, some shifts towards providing schools with more government support in terms of advice, curriculum resources, professional development were evident, particularly where accountability reviews by the Education Review Office had identified continuing difficulties. This support was not limited to additional funding, but began to look at ways to improve school capacity, and to support professional development through offering coordinated whole-school approaches rather than one-off courses for individuals. In contrast to England, which faced similar disappointments with the switch to self-managing schools, New Zealand policy has not recentralised through national achievement or performance targets for students, schools, and teachers, or through 'name and blame' singling out of 'failing' schools. However, the New Zealand government policy has resumed responsibilities for leadership, and for providing more infrastructure.³ The Ministry of Education has increased its number of local offices, and given them more of a role in working with schools. It has provided funding for schools to form their own voluntary clusters, and entered into partnerships with Maori iwi. Other papers in this conference address the changes which are occurring as a result of these innovative (though long over due) partnerships.⁴

However, individual schools remain the central unit for funding, and have lost none of their responsibilities. So how do self-managing schools make substantial change? Why did schools feel the need to make change? Did they change simply in reaction to outside pressure, or as a result of their own values? Did change become an everyday practice, or need heroic effort? What kind of change is sustainable over time? What role should government and central education agencies play?

These New Zealand questions are highly relevant to other countries. There are calls for more school self-management (particularly in the US), and for increasing accountability of individual schools. The increasingly sophisticated statistical analyses of school effectiveness and school improvement and their relation to student outcomes, have shown us the complexity of institutional change, and led to calls for more longitudinal studies of school improvement, and its sustainability (Sammons 1999). They have also shown the usefulness of complementing their findings with more qualitative case-studies of change, that can unpack processes and their relationships over time.

This paper looks at what we learnt from the initial phase of a four year NZCER qualitative study⁵ of changes in ten 'ordinary' primary schools which have gained a reputation for the improvements they have made in recent years. In this initial phase, we interviewed principals, teachers, board of trustees' chairs, support staff and parents, surveyed students, and examined existing documentation, including ERO reports and student achievement data, to find out what processes had occurred to bring about improvements over the last 3-5 years, and what the starting point of those improvements had been. We intend to go back to the case study schools in 2004 to find out whether the changes we heard of had been sustained, what further change has occurred, how, and why. Our intention is to explore the reality of school improvement, as it is experienced or perceived by those involved in a school: to show school development as a journey rather than a checklist of factors.

first three systems. Edmonton appears to have been the most successful in retaining individual school responsibility and scope while giving professionals meaningful roles and responsibilities beyond their own school, without developing new forms of central control.

³ The current policy approach is well set out in Ministry of Education (2002).

⁴ Three of these are described in other papers given at this ICSEI Congress: Parata & Wylie 2003, Ponika & Williams 2003, and Tipene, Waititi & Pitkethley 2003.

⁵ This study is funded through NZCER's purchase agreement with the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

The definition of improvement

There is no simple way to operationalise a definition of 'improvement' for research purposes. Had New Zealand had mandatory national testing with publically available results, we would probably have used these to identify a sample of schools, which would fit with definitions of improvement focused on student achievement. But New Zealand does not have such testing – it was resisted by parents and trustees as well as teachers in the mid 1990s largely because of fears that it would be used to unfairly compare schools. And recently, as more systems use such testing for school accountability purposes, critics have pointed to the costs in terms of narrowed curriculum, pressure on students, particularly at a young age, additional financial costs, and the uncertainty that mandatory testing actually improves student learning in a broad sense. There are also important issues about the validity of using annual changes in test scores as a reliable guide to gauging the effectiveness of individual schools, particularly where this is used to reward or punish schools (Kane & Staiger 2001).

This absence of the 'obvious' way to assess improvement meant that we had to think hard about what in fact it could mean. Yes, it should mean that student achievement was higher than it had been. But what if it was already high? Did we mean average achievement, or the absence of the 'long tail' of low achievement that has been evident in New Zealand for some time? Did we mean that students from disadvantaged groups, whom school self-management was particularly meant to benefit, would perform as well as others – in the school? In the country? Did achievement in some aspects of school work matter more than others? What about student attendance and engagement? What about behaviour and values: adults as well as students? What about engagement of parents, inclusion of all students?⁶

What about changes in school processes which appear in the school effectiveness research as related to student achievement, as indirect signs of improvement? Would the hard-working educators we had met feel that the lens of 'improvement' was a form of constant rebuke that their efforts would never satisfy? Should we think instead of a former term, 'development'? If the expectation was that all schools should be continually developing, responding to different student needs, new understandings of how to meet those needs, should we be looking for outliers, as much effective schools research has done, or concentrating on 'ordinary' schools making gradual changes?

When we interviewed government officials, sector organisation representatives, teacher educators, and researchers about their understanding of school improvement, it was the outliers, who had lifted their performance more than others, or turned around a poor performance, who came to mind most for government officials. Teacher educators, researchers, and most sector organisation representatives saw school improvement as generative development of distinct school cultures, but embedded in a practice of ongoing enquiry.⁷

⁶ The Audit Commission in England and Wales has recently concluded that exam targets and school league tables are encouraging schools to exclude or discourage students with special needs, and has recommended that 'when judging a school, inspectors should give the same weight to the integration of challenging pupils as they do to academic results' (Slater 2002, p. 11).

⁷ These views are covered in more detail in the full report from this first phase of the study (Mitchell, Cameron and Wylie, 2002). A third approach focused on market-based incentives for schools to improve performance.

In the end, we settled for schools which had made deliberate efforts to change their practice, were known to be doing good things, and which were seen as 'on the move'. We also wanted schools that were not involved in any of the Ministry of Education's formal school support initiatives, as schools requiring some form of intervention, but schools which were initiating their own changes. New Zealand has many small schools, with teaching principals, and it is all too easy to see change in these schools in terms of a change of principal (which may or may not be true). To avoid this possibility of confounding, we decided to concentrate on schools with at least 5 teachers.

Before New Zealand shifted to self-managed schools, our sample would have been selected after discussion with school inspectors, who were employed by the Department of Education, and were based at local boards. This role was a mixture of advice and judgement which was seen as impure in the more managerialist approach initiated in 1989. But most inspectors knew the schools in their patch well, and the loss of their advice and ability to connect schools working on similar issues has come to be lamented. As it was, we thought we could patch a comparable knowledge together for a given area by talking to a range of people: ERO, Ministry of Education, school support staff (formerly school advisors, and now mostly employed by colleges of education to provide Ministry of Education funded professional development), and sector organisations that often work informally with schools: NZEI, the primary and early childhood education teachers and support staff union, the NZ School Trustees Association, and the NZ Principals' Federation, and reading the latest ERO reports for the schools recommended. We expected some names of schools to come through consistently for each area, but on the whole, they did not, an indication of how segmented the decentralised New Zealand system has become.

Starting points in school development

We were able to locate ten schools through this process that met our criteria. All ten of these schools were lively, engaging places: but they were also quite distinct.

We could categorise them into three groups, not so much by their approach, as by the starting point in their development. Four of the schools had in fact no clearly identifiable starting point – we thought of them as *cultures of continual development*. The two 'starting points' for the others were largely related to roll changes, and hence, resourcing:

- Crisis – roll drops, some triggered by poor ERO reviews (4 schools)
- Rapid roll growth (2 schools).

We will describe the common elements and issues for all ten schools in their journey of the last few years, but we want to look first at the differences in their journeys over the last few years which can be ascribed to their starting point, and in particular, what was entailed in making substantial change.

The crisis 'turn-around' schools

The four schools that started from a point of crisis all had negative publicity at the crisis time that was causing parents to take their children away and rolls to decline. In each of the schools, the previous principal had resigned or been counselled to leave and there was a culture of low staff morale and division. The appointment and leadership of a new principal was the catalyst for positive change in these schools. Their appointment was in itself an important signal that change would occur.

It seems symptomatic of schools in crisis that there is low morale and division amongst staff and often between the school and community. Our schools showed different ways of approaching these problems, but it was apparent that in order to move forward, strong and decisive leadership was needed to create a positive climate, where people felt confident. This leadership took different shape in each of the four schools, according to the analysis made by each of the new principals of the quality of their staff, and the positioning of the school in its local context, including other schools to whom the school had lost students. Two of these approaches and how they played out are summarised below.

The first is one which fits the 'heroic' model of school change – rapid action followed by continual consolidation.

(1a) "Venture" intermediate school (for years 7 and 8, decile 2⁸) was rapidly losing students, and faced further losses as two local primary schools sought to improve their own rolls through taking on years 7 and 8. Community confidence in the school had not been helped by a national magazine article highlighting poor social conditions in the area. The school property was run-down, with large amounts of litter and graffiti.

"when I came here there was a very large core of very dedicated teachers who were sick of the way things were, had got dispirited and disheartened, but still believed in the importance of what they were doing... many of those staff are still with us, and they're dedicated and committed to the changes we put in place." [principal]

The new principal thought that the threat of further losses to the two primary schools was too immediate to allow internal staff collaborative strategic planning. But it did provide him with a common enemy for the school staff, to be met with a focus on positive, visible achievements. Said one teacher aide who remained with the school: *"From the first day he made you believe that this could be an amazing school. He sold this idea to us, made us believe it".* He created some of these by immediately improving the school environment, to signal to both students and staff that they were worthy of a decent place to work, focused on positive behaviour, with community involvement from local shopkeepers to notice and reinforce polite and appropriate behaviour, and put money into sports equipment to build up pride in the school through sports achievement. From being the school that came last in competitions with schools in the area, Venture gradually became the "school that everyone wants to beat". Divisions between year 7 and 8 students were countered by creating composite classes grouped in syndicates, encouraging friendships and collaboration between the teachers of the syndicates. The principal also *"moved on the small number of staff who did not believe in the ability of each child to learn successfully."* New staff were recruited to complement existing strengths, and to build further strengths in sports and the arts; current recruitment focuses on employing reflective teachers, *"who want to look at their own practice and the practice of their colleagues, and pick out the best and get rid of the worst, and improve constantly"*.

⁸ All New Zealand state and state integrated schools are assigned to deciles based on their proportion of students from low socioeconomic communities, Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, with 3 levels within deciles 1-3. The decile rankings are used for funding, with decile 1a schools receiving the highest weighting per student.

These changes took place a decade before: they have been sustained in the eyes of school staff by the culture which was put in place in these early days, the syndicate structure, continual but gradual change working with a stable school staff and board, encouragement for all staff to take part in professional development, including further university study, and educational initiatives beyond their own school, such as the development of assessment exemplars within a Ministry of Education project (both an indication of their capability and a way to sharpen their own practice), open and respectful relations with parents, which begin with the teacher contacting each student's parents in the first two weeks of the school year with a positive and welcoming message, and adequate government funding. Venture Intermediate is now one of the few low decile schools to put an enrolment zone in place to limit its roll.

(1b) The second school serves quite a different community: high socioeconomic status. The principal here has also undertaken a 'heroic' and directive role, moving rapidly on first entrance. Villa school had a significant roll drop in 1998 after a negative ERO report which received media attention. It was a decile 9 school, and had enjoyed a good reputation. Staff worked hard, but not collegially. *'We weren't accountable to anyone, just to our inner selves'* (teacher). The new principal had a reputation as a successful change agent with his previous school. *"I go in and I sort out a problem and I like moving on"*⁹ He was appointed by a very knowledgeable board of trustees, whose chair is an educator at the nearby university, and who played a key role as the principal's critical friend.

The principal's main thrust was to change the existing structures, breaking down the barriers between school levels, and to shift teachers around to new class levels. In the process, he was prepared to shift on staff he thought were not performing, and the rapid changes and increased expectations of a new way of working and higher performance moved others on: 3 years later, just under half the staff who were there in 1998 remained. He recruited young, energetic teachers, gave them distinct responsibilities, brought teachers together through shared whole-school professional development, making good use of Ministry of Education contracts, annual staff retreats to plan the year ahead, and a focus on ICT, which gave the school an early visibility as being innovative. It also enabled the school to gain additional Ministry of Education funding as a lead school for an ICT cluster. He encouraged staff to take opportunities to work outside the school as advisors, seeing this as a way to 'recharge' themselves, as well as testify to the quality of the staff.

Parents felt the school had become more open to them, and they felt more listened to than in the past. They received more information about their child's progress, through portfolios of work, including a student comment on the work in relation to its purpose. The school is confident about its assessment practices, and able to convince ERO reviewers who were looking for more standardised tests and consistent approaches across the school (of the kind that can easily be captured in electronic record systems). Roll numbers are restored and growing further.

The staff were enthusiastic and committed to meeting high expectations. They were hard-working: to the extent that parents as well as teachers themselves raised the issue of potential burn-out. Becoming known as a cutting-edge school led to increased attention and visitors, which put additional pressures on school staff. Looking ahead, it was the sustainability of what had been achieved, when this effort and the principal was seen as central to its achievement, that concerned people at the school.

⁹ Indeed, he has just left Villa school, after 4 years.

The second approach was more gradual.

(2a) At Totara school, the principal took a more low-key approach. This was partly due to necessity: she started as a teaching principal, and found that responsibility for a class of 35 made it difficult to make the changes she would like to make: to lead the school to lift its performance and reputation. The story in this school is not one which lends itself to a clear 'story' so much as a gradual coherence in its work, deepening of practitioner knowledge and confidence, using professional development, and enlisting the energy of parents, building their confidence as well. There is a strong emphasis on the real difference that teachers can make in children's lives, not by 'rescuing' them from low income homes, but by respecting and building on their home experiences. The school is a decile 1b, and serves a very poor, multi-ethnic community, yet the reading levels of children who have had all their schooling here are appropriate for their age. The school analyses its achievement data to identify the students whose needs are not being met – whose achievement is lower – and has found that its transient students were not achieving so well. Attention is given to establishing good relationships with transient students as quickly as possible, not only with their teacher, but with other students. Parents are encouraged into the school to find out more about the curriculum through sports events and the sharing of food, and encouraged to read with their children at home, in their own language if that is not English. Teachers spend much out of school time attending events in which the children are taking part, and encouraging and supporting them to achieve in sports and arts.

Considerable effort was also needed in this school, and while it continued to attract eager and energetic staff, there was some concern that it could not always keep them due to the high demands of their role.

(2b) The fourth school attended immediately to the areas identified by its poor and publicised ERO review, and worked hard to use the local media and informal networks through its chair of trustees to spread good stories about the school. It also focused quickly on student behaviour and the appearance of the school. Within two years the roll was climbing again, and confidence was restored to the school.

The four "crisis turn-around" schools all worked to change the physical and social environment of the school and a poor public image. There were common approaches to this task: making the school grounds and buildings attractive and the environment welcoming, working to ensure high standards of student behaviour and developing links with the community. Two schools were engaged in active marketing through strategies aimed at attracting media coverage for positive achievements and events and gaining awards for individual students.

Effective professional leadership, management and governance at the crisis time is crucial. The principal's initial analysis and determination along a particular path is key to their ability to harness the energy, knowledge, and trust of school staff and school boards. There needed to be occasions to celebrate – some found in what the school was already doing, some newly created. The process of turn around was not always a linear one, fitting an input-output model. It involved action, but also belief, in the efficacy of action, in taking and sharing responsibility, and changing perceptions so that those within a school could value themselves and feel they mattered. It also involved great effort, particularly from school staff and, in some schools in the initial stages, trustees, particularly chairs.

All schools pursued their goals and direction with tenacity. Goals became more singularly focused on student learning as immediate challenges of negative image, dysfunctional relationships and loss of staffing or resources due to roll drops were addressed. These schools are now like the “steady state development” schools described below: they are confident and focused on learning and achievement. They are lively places, both supportive and challenging.

A recipe for turning schools around?

Do we have here a recipe for turning schools around? A set of ingredients and relationships which can provide a reliable guide? We would note these cautions:

- These are schools which have made notable progress. What of schools which have similarly faced crisis but which have faltered or fallen further back? Would we find that principals could make good analyses but fail to carry staff and boards with them to make and carry through the effort needed? Would we find that changes in the local area and other schools’ efforts to carve out niches for themselves undermined a school endeavouring to turn itself around?
- What of the schools that cannot find a critical mass of thoughtful, determined, and knowledgeable principals and teachers? What of the schools which could not afford to provide a new mirror for the school by sprucing up buildings, buying new equipment? What of the schools that cannot access or afford good quality professional development and advice when they need it? What of the schools who pick up programmes to improve student behaviour and achievement which do not deliver what they promise? How are schools to know what programmes they can trust, or what might work best in their school, and the conditions needed to make a programme work? What of the schools whose own priorities get derailed by changes in government policy?

Rapid roll growth schools

Two of the ten schools experienced rapid roll-growth over a period of three years: one school almost doubling in size, and the other growing by a third. These changes were driven partly by demographic changes in the area, and partly through the school’s growing reputation. Roll-growth focused school attention mainly on two aspects:

- the school structure and organisation, particularly to retain a sense of whole school and shared purpose, while providing smaller units for staff to work in
- distributing leadership and responsibility throughout the school, and the development of more systematic approaches to assessment and teacher support.

Cultures of continual development schools

While no clear instigating factor could be identified in people’s outline of the changes in these four schools over the last few years, there definitely was a shift in purpose and enjoyment. Each of the schools had moved to raise teacher expectations of what students could achieve, to increase student achievement, and improve student behaviour.

“Once you’d have walked into the staffroom and the talk would have been about the weekend. Now we talk about work, about children and teaching.”

Two of these continual development schools served low income communities (decile 2 and decile 1a), one was decile 3 and one decile 7. All schools had principals who had been in the school for a reasonable time (6, 13, 12 and 8 years respectively). These schools placed a strong focus on classroom teaching and teachers' commitment to developing their assessment, planning and teaching practices to benefit students' learning. In all schools, school-wide professional development played a critical part, including critique and development of classroom teaching, moderation of assessment so that teachers were not only consistent in their assessment judgements, but also saw what could be achieved at different levels. The professional development which made the most difference was not single-session, involving one or two teachers only: it was whole-school, used the teachers' own work over a period of time, and established new understandings, relationships, and knowledge that were geared to the school itself. It created 'learning communities' (Cameron & Mitchell 2002).

Ministry of Education professional development and other contracts played an important role in providing the schools with this professional development. The Ministry of Education has developed frameworks for literacy and numeracy professional development in primary schools which incorporates pedagogical knowledge, assessment, and analysis of assessment results, developing an ongoing cycle of analysis or self-review. This approach appeals to teachers because it focuses on their actual work with students: the professional development is not something additional to that work, but becomes part of it.

The quality of these professional development contracts was dependent on the advisors involved, and the schools were careful who they engaged, both within Ministry of Education contracts and using their own funding.

The schools also used a variety of ways to actively engage parents, particularly in the low-income areas, to develop greater coherence between school and home or school and early childhood centre through a range of measures. This effort to not only bring parents into the school, but bring education into the home, and give parents a role in their children's learning, differs from some of the earlier US research on effective schools, where effective schools serving high poverty neighbourhoods were found to have weak links with parents and the home (Hallinger and Murphy 1986).

These schools had also all developed links with community groups and local organisations with the aim of strengthening resources for students and families.

The school was the site of responsibility and effort, but these schools did not see learning as stopping (or starting) at the school gate. When we look at schools with cultures of continual development, we see focus, but not to the exclusion of their place in their local community, or as part of a wider system. Although these are self-managing schools, they are not solipsistic.

But as with the picture which emerges in looking at schools which have turned around from crisis, can we be sure that these processes are all mutually supportive? In looking to sustain cultures of continual development, are all of these dimensions all equally necessary? One is tempted to say they are, otherwise these schools would not have felt the need to extend themselves. So: what if these schools could not access good professional development and advice? Or could not find curious, eager teachers who could respect children and their homes, however different from their own? Crucial aspects of initiating and sustaining school development lie beyond individual schools' control.

Systemic issues for sustainable school development

Teacher Supply

The hallmark of a continually developing school may be that it can continue to attract a critical mass of committed, knowledgeable teachers who are themselves engaged and excited by learning. But does this mean that these schools are sustaining themselves at the expense of others, without such reputations? When we did this research, teacher supply in New Zealand primary schools was good, though it continues to be difficult for schools in remote or low socio-economic areas to both attract and retain staff. But in secondary schools, shortages have become apparent in key areas, and even schools which are thought of as lively, or offering students who are likely to be interested in school, are talking of being unable to fill positions. There is a looming teacher shortage throughout the Western world, and less interest in taking principal and senior management positions as the jaws of accountability bite more relentlessly.

Accountability

Much current and past thinking about how to make systemic gains in student learning has rested on increasing individual school accountability. There is an assumption in policy approaches to accountability that schools are – or should be - “rational, goal-oriented systems” with clear and agreed goals which relate to student achievement and are results focused and measurable (Bennett and Harris, 1999, p.535). With self-managing schools, there is an assumption that funding decisions should serve goals set by student learning needs. However, recent English research suggests that assumptions about the nature of strategic planning in school resource allocation may not be found in practice, especially in smaller schools (Levacic et al, 2000).

Most of the officials we spoke with about school improvement saw it as necessarily using achievement data to raise student performance. New Zealand is to have a new schools planning and reporting framework which explicitly emphasises such an approach as a way to improve schools (Ministry of Education 2002, p.1).

The ten schools in this study do have a systemic approach to their work, and a clear focus on student learning. But not all their goals are measurable, and their views of student learning encompass more than achievement on tests. They take both a horizontal and vertical view of student learning: seeking to widen achievement and confidence, to inculcate openness, curiosity, perseverance – to create intrinsic learners - as well as raise average levels on tests. They are less rational and goal-oriented in a narrow sense, and more attuned to the spirit of students, teachers, and parents and the community. They find it important to look for ways to celebrate, affirm, and lift confidence. Any system of accountability has to take account of the reality of school development, and ensure that it supports the principles which underlie it and which appear to sustain it.

Six principles underlying sustainable school development

At the risk of creating yet another checklist, we offer six principles which underlie the activities, relationships, and processes which allowed these schools to develop over time:

The creation of self-recognition and the role of positive mirrors

Often the first priority in the processes of change was the creation of a community which could recognise itself positively. This was particularly important for schools

where the impetus for change came from external attention and devaluation, such as a poor ERO review reported by local media, which led to substantial roll drops.

Changes in the quality of buildings and playgrounds take on important symbolic meaning: improvements here can provide positive mirrors which show the people who learn and teach in them that 'we' matter, we have substance, and we can make a difference. There are other ways in which schools can build up new reflections in which to see themselves with more pride, more confidence. One school focused on developing sports teams (with uniforms). Others work to get coverage of their celebrations and changes in local media, or, further along, enter national competitions for schools, or put themselves forward as lead or anchor schools for clusters.

Student behaviour, particularly in playgrounds, was another initial priority, particularly by schools coming out of crisis. There were quite different approaches to student behaviour in the ten schools, but each school had systems that emphasised student responsibility in relation to peers and school staff. Again, this is another way to provide a positive 'we' experience.

Work with parents and the community also provides opportunities for positive mirrors, affirming the role of teachers, while extending the size of the 'we'. The schools in this study have found ways to involve parents more. Teachers are available to parents, visible to parents. They provide them with more information about student achievement, and enlist their interest and support to strengthen areas of weakness.

Shared occasions are made for celebration, or to unpack the mysteries of new curriculum and assessment. Ways are found for shy parents to contribute to the school, and gain confidence. Trustees saw themselves as part of the 'we', providing ideas and resources, and representing the school positively: part of a shared endeavour.

In schools where change came with new principals brought in after crisis, some existing staff could not identify with the new 'we', and left. The principal plays a key role in shifting schools and building platforms for change. It can take longer for a teaching principal to work with staff to develop shared values and systems and support to make those values live.

Strong leadership

Leadership is not confined to principals. Most of the ten principals had an iron determination as well as being good communicators, with a love of their school and its students, and sound educational knowledge. They were also incurable learners, taking part in mentoring groups and professional associations, professional development and study. They provided good models for their staff, and most encouraged others in their school to take on leadership roles. The principals in these schools had a genuine interest in others, an ability to discern strengths – and to seek these first rather than weaknesses, though they did not shirk from attending to those, where they undermined teacher and team competence.

Meaningful effort

Creating and living an affirming culture is an important dimension to the ability of school staff to put in the effort required for change in schools. This effort appears to be sustainable in schools which have a culture of continual development: staff did not speak of any tensions between their dedication to their school and students, and finding time or room for their own families and interests. We did hear of such tensions in the other schools in our sample: schools which are 'turning around', and schools

which serve communities which experience considerable poverty and transience. Schools which have also positioned themselves at the cutting-edge of educational change and attract substantial external attention may also put heavy demands on staff.

The loads were not light, but on the whole they were not unevenly distributed. Staff were working in collaborative cultures, able to share experiences, both good and bad, and to provide each other with support. Talk in staffrooms at breaks was often used for this purpose, rather than to put the classroom behind them. Planning and evaluating became priorities for staff meetings.

There were also gains in student learning and behaviour to be witnessed and enjoyed. Some were substantial, some quickly observable; other gains were slight in overall terms, but mattered for individual students.

Real stimulus

Another key ingredient in the effort which school staff make to improve student learning is their participation in stimulating professional development which had a direct bearing on their teaching and support. All the schools put a premium on ongoing professional development, often with a whole-school or whole-area emphasis. They were selective in the Ministry of Education funded contracts they went for, and had learnt to limit what they took on. Quite a few of the principals and teachers felt that they also needed to set limits on the curriculum they covered: better to go fully and deeply, than broad and shallow. They used external advisors whose worth was proven. They put into practice what they learnt, and analysed its effect.

Changing beliefs and practices is hard, as Phillips, McNaughton & MacDonald (2002, p.99) point out, because existing classroom structures and practices have to be left intact while new ones are developed or old ones refocused. There may be competing beliefs that need to be judged and practicalities of limited time and large class size can impose constraints. Teachers need good reason to change their practice. Changes in belief for teachers in the ten schools were associated with whole school professional development that engaged the teaching staff in developing a shared vision of what they wanted to achieve and collaborative beliefs about expectations of “good” work in specific curriculum areas and the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches and programmes. Teachers were keen to find out more about their students’ learning, and how they could improve it, and were paying more attention to analysing individual pieces of work and contributions in class.

Finding one’s own way

The ways in which the ten schools operated and worked were not formulaic. There were different approaches to curriculum learning areas and different degrees of breadth and focus, with lower decile schools putting singular energy into numeracy and literacy, while some higher decile schools offered a range of extension activities.

The schools that have a culture of continual development had a single-minded focus on student learning, through critique and development of classroom teaching. These schools displayed features that were congruent with the overseas research, and with the experienced teacher-educators we interviewed, who emphasised that schools need to debate the curriculum within their own context and generate their own values – not as a static one-off discussion or formation for an accountability document, but through an evolving process. The schools were confident enough to draw their own curriculum priorities.

Schools that had to deal with turning around crises of poor image, low morale and strained relationships were less able to apply this singular focus, more apt to also put effort into “marketing” their school and ensuring that they would gain favourable ERO reviews. They tended to make greater use of external support in aspects of school operation that were not directly related to classroom teaching.

Yet each of the schools had a sense of ownership about their values and the goals and processes that came from those values. These values included high expectations for student learning, and a real belief that schools could make a difference for all children. Teachers in the low decile schools acknowledged the obstacles their students faced, but they were interested in making bridges for the students and their families which began with respect for their lives, and a sometimes tremendous sense of responsibility to provide opportunities for students to learn and experience success.

The teachers in low decile schools operated in conditions which could make the sustainability of change in these schools more precarious. Their curriculum resources were often meagre and fund-raising was being carried out for basic curriculum activities, rather than extension. The additional demands on staff to build bridges with parents, especially if there are a range of ethnic groups, and highly mobile families, appeared to foster higher turnover, which has implications if key staff leave and both curriculum knowledge and community knowledge and contacts go with them.

Broader economic and social policies had a particular significance for low decile schools. Staff at two of the four low decile schools, although not asked explicitly, thought government education and housing policies since 1999 had brought a less competitive environment between schools, a less transient population since the introduction of income-related rents, and more parents into paid employment. These changes impacted positively on student stability and well-being, and on the work of the schools.

The role of external support

None of the ten schools operated in isolation. They benefited from open doors within education: to professional developers, advisors, networks of other principals and teachers, access to national organisations for staff and trustees, and the availability of useful curriculum and assessment resources. Getting a wider view and using specific expertise where this was relevant to their goals helped enhance the core work of teaching and learning. Shining examples came through of the value of Ministry of Education professional development contracts in helping schools clarify pedagogical goals and values, leading to change in classroom practice. Those schools that took part in the Literacy Enhancement Project found the workshops, critical feedback, opportunities to observe other teachers and work together to develop literacy goals, assess and evaluate students’ work gave them an inspirational process that had an impact on teaching and learning. Teachers talked of how their participation had generated higher expectations for student learning, a sense of excitement about learning within the school and a willingness to take risks by trying new things. They had also learnt to value working together, to develop exemplars for student work, so that there were common standards operating through the school, and teachers could feel confident in their judgements. Again, such work also helps sustain a shared culture.

Assessment remains an area in which teachers particularly value external support and advice to develop or select appropriate assessment tools, decide what data to

collect and analyse, and use the data to plan teaching programmes and improve teaching. Teachers also learn from communicating with teachers in other schools.

The schools' confidence with literacy and numeracy, and the priority they gave it, was not matched in other curriculum areas. Science operated on the margins, often under the leadership of newly trained teachers, or without any teacher taking responsibility to lead the area for the school. We suspect this is because there was no national focus on science and no professional development contracts offered to support it, even though good science curriculum resources are available.

The schools also opened their doors to government, community, and church agencies supporting vulnerable children or families, particularly in low decile schools. They sought out opportunities for sponsorship, support, and for their staff to work with others as educators and advisors. Building strong linkages was influential in supporting students, the staff, parents and the school. These linkages tended to be long-term, and to develop over time.

Where meaningful connections were not built, as in ERO reviews that did not have relevance to the school's own goals, the interaction had no value in making a genuine contribution to school development. In these cases, compliance with outside requirements was achieved but not much else. ERO reviews could precipitate a crisis which led to positive action, but the review itself was of use in only one school. The "naming and shaming" of one school that occurred after a bad ERO report was not constructive and heightened problems rather than helped the school. ERO's role was to act as a catalyst for change, but not to bring about or sustain positive change. This may be changing: a review of ERO in 2000 has placed more emphasis on it offering suggestions for schools on the areas which its reviews identify as needing improvement, and on taking more account of schools' own goals.

The importance of systemic support for school development

There is no question that the change brought about in these ten schools was due to the people in the schools themselves, their sense of responsibility for the school, its students, and staff. School self-management helped bring about change and sustain it because it could underline this sense of responsibility, allow schools to allocate their funding, appoint staff to suit the school, and edge out those who did not.

But there is also no question that the ability of people in individual schools to produce change was dependent on the wider system. The accountability measures of a publicised poor inspection report could trigger rapid change – but no more than that. We do not know if it does so in all New Zealand schools which have received poor inspection reports, though these are the schools which are more likely to receive additional or direct Ministry of Education support. The real gains in teaching and learning are those which have come from the new forms of professional development, grounded in large part in new Ministry of Education initiatives. These seem to bring about more enduring changes, and provide more ongoing stimulus and satisfaction for school staff.

What we might be learning in New Zealand is how valuable it is to have central education agencies focused on teaching and learning, and providing the tools and experiences that promote learning through good teaching and ways for teachers to work together collegially, rather than their initial focus during decentralisation, on governance and management and accountability which was geared to compliance.

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