

# Enhancing internal capacity: leadership for learning

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Let's put aside all the millennium hype. It's easy to forget that the shift from the 20th to the 21st century has offered us a significant opportunity to take stock of our world and the way we do things. The sheer magnitude of change should be forcing everyone in schools, and all those working with schools, to be asking themselves: "What, exactly, around us has changed or is changing?" and "What do we need to do to respond to these changes?"

So, what are these changes? Here, I describe briefly four change forces<sup>1</sup>, succinctly summarised by Chris Watkins<sup>2</sup>:

- **Socially**, we see changes to family structures, more women working outside the home, people living longer. On a global scale we are also faced with a population explosion, the world's population exceeding six billion in 1999, with more than a half a billion of those living in absolute poverty, including 190 million malnourished children.
- **Technological** advances come thick and fast, with one estimate saying that the knowledge base doubles every four years. Interactive technology has brought new meaning to finding out about things, and the cost of widespread communication continues to fall.
- On the **economic and work front**, part-time jobs and 'portfolio' careers have replaced the job for life, and many people work from home and in different locations. People entering the work world can expect to change their occupation many times, and a dramatic increase in service and knowledge work has coincided with a sharp decrease in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Globally, mergers of super-companies and moves towards global economies have led to increased movement between countries and questions about national borders.
- Worryingly, **environmental** deterioration continues, and will do so until sustainability is taken more seriously. So, for example, we read reports in the papers about the potential for flooding in low-lying areas in this country in the next 20 years.

What does this all mean for schools and leaders in schools? In short, it means learning.

## It's about learning<sup>3</sup>

Schools are responsible for preparing pupils for this changing world. The ultimate goal of school improvement is to enhance pupils' progress, achievement and development, but the learning outcomes for the future need to capture the breath of what it is likely to take to flourish in the 21st century. An RSA report<sup>4</sup> proposes five "competencies" for the 21st century that "can help

students become capable of meeting the more complex demands that will be made on them in the future” (p 7):

- learning
- citizenship
- relating to people
- managing situations
- managing information

In an alternative, but equally compelling, report, UNESCO’s International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century<sup>5</sup>, argues that the four “pillars of knowledge” should be:

- learning to know
- learning to do
- learning to live
- learning to be

Both reports acknowledge the importance of subject disciplines and skills. Importantly, however, they also recognise the fundamental importance of what Howard Gardner would describe as interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence and Daniel Goleman refers to as emotional intelligence<sup>6</sup>. Surely understanding one’s own learning, possessing a love of learning, and existing with others harmoniously have to be essential learning outcomes in today’s and tomorrow’s world?

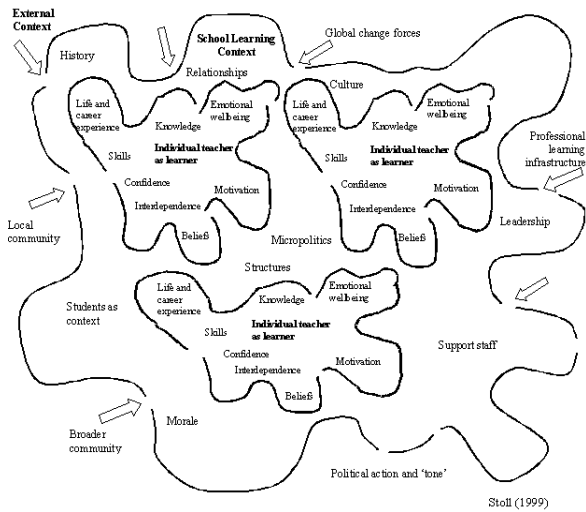
For adults in schools, keeping up and dealing with the complexity and influence of a plethora of changes that impact their work on a daily basis, learning is also essential. Indeed, change means learning. What is it about the context of successful schools that promotes and enhances learning? My research and development work in school effectiveness and school improvement in Britain, Canada and elsewhere has led me to believe that a vital clue is the school’s internal capacity.

## **Internal capacity and its influences<sup>7</sup>**

Internal capacity is the power to engage in and sustain continuous learning of teachers and the school itself for the purpose of enhancing pupil learning. Such a school can take charge of change, irrespective of its source, and can thrive in a changing environment.

Before discussing ways leadership can enhance capacity, the influences on internal capacity need to be understood. There are three key: individual teachers within the school, the school’s social and structural learning context and the external context (see Figure 1). Determining particular patterns of influences on a school’s internal capacity is essential because they will influence both the school’s readiness for change and its ability to sustain it and keep changing where necessary.

**Figure 1: The influences on internal capacity**



### Individual teachers as learners

The individual teacher as learner is located right at the centre of school change. Nothing or no one is more important to school improvement than a teacher. As Michael Fullan reminds us: “Educational change depends on what teachers do and think: it’s as simple and complex as that”<sup>8</sup>. Changing teachers’ practice is notoriously difficult. Eight interacting influences are particularly important in determining the teacher’s capacity to engage in and sustain continuous learning:

- life and career experience
- beliefs
- emotional well-being
- knowledge
- skills
- motivation to learn
- confidence that he or she can make a real difference
- sense of intersdependence

## **The school learning context**

Teachers as learners, however, do not operate in isolation. Individuals interact with the learning context in which they are located (as the spaces in the model outline denote). This context – the other fundamental part of a school's internal capacity – is influenced by a set of social forces:

- the particular mix of pupils
- the school's history
- relationships between teachers
- morale
- school culture
- power issues
- support staff
- structures
- leadership.

## **External contextual influences on internal capacity**

While the school's capacity and its readiness or orientation for change is internally driven, the external contextual influences on a school's internal capacity cannot be ignored. Central among these are:

- the local community
- the broader community
- political action and 'tone'
- professional learning infrastructure
- the global change forces described earlier

Quite simply, in certain external contexts, school improvement is more challenging.

## **Enhancing capacity: the role of leadership**

While society as a whole, policy-makers and others outside schools have their own important role to play in helping enhance schools' capacity for learning, ultimately the key players are those within schools because they know their schools best, and as Roland Barth says: "understanding schools is the single most important precondition for improving them"<sup>9</sup>. Here are four imperatives at the core of leadership of and for learning.

## 1. Don't lose sight of your learning vision

There is consensus in the educational literature that leaders of effective schools have a vision of where they are going. This has been also been found true in other organisations; for example Lynda Gratton's study of several US and UK companies led her to affirm the need "to create and develop a vision of the future that is compelling and engaging, and provides a shared view of what could be possible and how this could be achieved"<sup>10</sup>. But any old vision won't do, any more than vision without subsequent action is merely hallucination! For schools to adapt to their changing world, and offer their pupils the best development opportunities, this vision must be focused on learning at all levels: pupil, teacher, leaders and school as an organisation. It has to be clear to all concerned that everyone, pupils and adults alike, can and must learn. So, for example, to determine pupils cannot learn because they are deprived, handicapped in some way, or not academically bright, is to be uncaring and inhumane<sup>11</sup>. Pupils tell us they want challenge<sup>12</sup>. It isn't always easy for leaders to engage others in developing a shared vision of high expectations for the learning of all. One feature that is critical in bringing people on board and keeping them there is getting the emotional climate right.

## 2. Engage hearts as well as minds: create the right emotional learning climate

The human side of change is all too often ignored<sup>13</sup>. Change is an intensely personal experience. The change process is often likened to the experience of bereavement or other kinds of loss, which can include shock, anger, denial and depression, and only then (and often after much support) acceptance of what can't be changed<sup>14</sup>. In schools with limited internal capacity, facets of their climate need attention before people feel able to participate actively in improvement efforts and concentrate on the serious and vital business of learning and teaching. This means leaders devoting time and energy to building trust and openness between staff, pupils and the community, recognising and celebrating teachers' as well as pupils' successes, dealing with power conflicts, and looking out for the funny side of things. Improving the physical environment for pupils and teachers is also important.

Attending to people's perceptions of reality, and particularly to their sense of self, is key to bringing about successful change. The relationship between those who choose to lead and those who follow is critical. Leadership that offers a supportive emotional climate that is most likely to encourage others to follow is *invitational*<sup>15</sup>. It communicates messages informing people they are able, responsible and worthwhile, and enables them to build and act on the shared and evolving learning vision.

## 3. Become learning experts: build an inclusive learning community

Studies of restructuring are clear that structural change without change in the ways teachers work with pupils brings about little real change<sup>16</sup>. Teachers need the opportunity to gain, practise, be able to apply and develop a more detailed understanding of the process of learning, including:

- what learners bring to their learning, including the growing knowledge base from brain research, more inclusive concepts of a range of intelligences, and a wide range of theories about learning styles. In short, learners do not all learn in the same way.
- what motivates learning

- what constitutes effective learning, how the process of learning takes place, and how teaching and new technologies and tools of learning are best harnessed to support effective learning
- the different locations where the process of learning takes place (for example, in school, in out-of-school organised learning centres, at home, and in the wider social environment)

The expression ‘teaching and learning’ is often used in a throwaway sense, like ‘fish and chips’. What if we were to turn the phrase around: ‘learning and teaching’? Then we might have a sense that without understanding the learner and how learning takes place, it is extremely difficult to determine what kind of teaching is appropriate.

Providing a range of opportunities for teachers to become more expert in pupil learning and the consequences for teaching is an essential feature of leadership for learning<sup>17</sup>. This means understanding the importance of the workplace for teachers’ learning – especially in providing time, opportunities for collaboration and other supportive social and structural conditions. Teacher learning isn’t just a set of activities, but can be a state of mind if the workplace conditions are right<sup>18</sup>. It also means paying attention to any differences in what motivates adults’ rather than children’s and adolescents’ learning, considering their stage of career, drawing on their experiences, and involving them in determining what can best meet their needs, as well as those of the school<sup>19</sup>. Learning opportunities may be as diverse as reading and writing, team teaching, peer coaching, mentoring, mutual classroom observation and feedback, action research, doing further degrees, professional discussions, creative problem-solving of whole-school issues that impinge on the learning and teaching process, self-review, attending subject or skills workshops, visiting other schools, and many more.

Fundamentally, if leaders want teachers to learn, they too must learn – continuous and ongoing learning for leadership. For example, they may choose to be engaged in:

- **recognising:** knowing themselves well and their own mental models, understanding what they want to achieve while having a clear sense of current reality
- **regenerating:** keeping their lives in balance through attention to the physical, intellectual, social, emotional and spiritual, so they can get the best out of their professional life
- **reading:** there are many sources of good writing on leadership and improvement, covering the spectrum from the deeply theoretical to the thoroughly practical (not that the two need be mutually exclusive)
- **(w)riting:** keeping a journal is a powerful way to chart progress as a leader, and writing for professional journals offers an opportunity to share ideas with others
- **relating:** studying and collaborating with networks of colleagues, in and beyond school provides a source of moral and professional support, made increasingly easier by online opportunities to connect with those long distances away; shadowing a colleague in another school is one form
- **reflecting:** this is when leaders analyse their actions, decisions or the outcomes of their work by focusing on the process of achieving them, and by asking such questions as: “What did I do and why?”, “What happened, and why?”, “What have I learnt from this?”,

“How would I do it differently next time in the same situation?”, and “How might I apply what I have learnt to different situations?”

- **researching:** a powerful form of modelling, engaging in small-scale school and classroom research, collecting and analysing evidence. This, in turn, might be accredited and lead to other further study.
- **risk-taking:** leadership is about taking risks and being fearless to mobilise others. But leaders also need to learn when to be courageous and when it's appropriate to be cautious<sup>20</sup>.

More than anything, they need to be seen to learn, and to model the kind of learning they expect to take place as leaders *of* learning and leaders *for* learning.

Roland Barth says adults need to “reveal themselves” to pupils as learners<sup>21</sup>. Offering opportunities for parents and governors to join them in collaborative learning opportunities is also more likely to create and build an inclusive learning community, one in which there is a collective commitment to supporting and enhancing pupils' learning. Opening the school up to the community as a location of learning, and inviting them to school learning forums, helps them to understand better the learning vision and work of their local school.

#### **4. Practise organisational learning**

It is argued that organisations facing uncertain or changing conditions must be able to learn, and that even if individuals in organisations learn, this doesn't add up to collective learning. For a school to keep ahead of the changing world, it needs to have productive responses, not only to current initiatives in the environment but also to inevitable future initiatives<sup>22</sup>. Consequently, it needs continuously to scan its environment, and accommodate external ideas creatively within its own context and needs. This often means examining and, where appropriate adapting its existing cultural norms about the way people go about their business<sup>23</sup>. This means looking back at the past as well as looking forward to the future<sup>24</sup>.

Self-evaluation is part of organisational learning. Studies of school improvement increasingly have found that inquiry and reflection are central to success<sup>25</sup>. This means that not only should leaders ensure that schools collect, analyse and use a range of hard and soft data to monitor and evaluate the process, progress and outcomes of their improvement efforts, but also that their very approach to learning needs to be underpinned by reflective self-analysis and “inquiry-mindedness”<sup>26</sup>. This involves ongoing audits of the influences on internal capacity by networks of educators who search for potential issues or blocks to the learning process and come up with creative solutions. Often they will work together with community members and other critical friends, who help by bringing a supportive but external eye to the situation, offer challenging questions to stimulate new thinking, while at the same time asking themselves what John MacBeath describes as a “touchstone question” for any critical friend: “Will this help to develop independence, the capacity to learn and apply learning more effectively over time?”<sup>27</sup>

For any leader, understanding the balance of the various influences on internal capacity and how they work together is central. This means not seeing any one activity or intervention as discrete, but considering how it fits within the whole dynamic of the school, looking for interrelationships and connections, engaging in systems thinking. More fundamentally, Peter Senge argues, systems thinking exists when those in organisations understand how their actions shape their reality, as well as the reverse<sup>28</sup>. The emergence in different countries of school improvement design programmes appears to be an attempt to take a more holistic approach to change rather than just emphasising a specific change focus, for example literacy

or technology. Many, however, do not take into account the influences on internal capacity or explore how the different design elements interact with each other and the influences. Leaders can encourage and work with their colleagues to look at their situation through different lenses and come up with creative solutions to capacity issues and other complex problems<sup>29</sup>. They can also look at outsiders offering programmes and packages, and ask themselves: “What will our school learn from this?” and, more importantly: “If we get involved, what do we need to do ourselves to be sure that we learn from this?”

In essence, a school engaged in organisational learning works systematically to develop its learning capacity and therefore its ability to keep adapting and changing as and when necessary.

## **Conclusion**

There are so many demands on leaders these days. In many ways it would be easy to interpret this as saying that leaders need to be all things to all people. In doing so, however, it would be easy to lose the plot! Rather, learning needs to underpin every aspect of school leadership. In times of rapid change and, indeed, in a future that is not entirely predictable, the leaders best placed to help their schools adapt to and deal with changing needs and demands are, and will be, ones that focus on and sustain continuous learning of their teachers, themselves, their communities, and the school itself as an organisation. Only then can they really realise the potential they have to achieve their ultimate purpose: pupil learning of the highest quality.

## **Questions for reflection and discussion**

I have included some questions below that arise out of this paper. You may want to think about them individually. Equally, you may want to discuss them with a peer or group of colleagues. Of course, there may be other questions that come in to your mind as you read the paper.

1. What are the particular implications of the change forces for learning in my school?
2. Which of the influences on internal capacity support change and learning in my school? Which ones currently inhibit change and learning? What needs to be done to turn inhibiting influences into supportive influences?
3. Are there any influences on my school’s internal capacity that don’t appear to be in this model? What are they and how do they influence the school’s internal capacity?
4. How clear is my vision for this school? Is it a learning vision? Is my vision shared by others? How do I know? How can I work to achieve a shared vision?
5. Are our expectations for learning sufficiently challenging?
6. Is there a sense of emotional well-being among the adults in this school? Do people trust me? Do they feel valued? Do they believe that I care? Do I listen to them as individuals?
7. Is this school as a workplace conducive to pupils’, teachers’, leaders’ and community learning?
8. What do I know about my own learning? What helps me to learn? What prevents me from learning?

9. What examples can I think of where this school is engaged in organisational learning?
10. Is this really a learning school? If yes, what evidence do I have? Would others agree? If no, what do I personally and we collectively need to do to make it one?

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