

## Capacity Building for School Improvement: A Case Study of a New Zealand Primary School

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### ABSTRACT

*Capacity building is now mentioned synonymously with school improvement in much of the literature with an absence of debate on the implications of political, social and economic trends. The paper explores capacity building in one low decile, multicultural, New Zealand primary school. From an interpretivist paradigm, a case study and grounded theory approach are used to explore four aspects: 1. the processes that enhance improvement; 2. the internal and external influences on capacity building; 3. the wider societal factors that influence the development of capacity; and 4. the links between capacity building and improvement that were evident.*

*The paper will suggest that capacity building for school improvement is time and context dependent and is unique to the setting. It occurs in response to individual, collective and systemic needs in ways that sustain equilibrium while moving towards improvement. The paper will further explore key attributes: vision, stakeholders as change agents, school culture and professional development. Practices that are examined include knowledge production and utilisation, division of roles and responsibilities and a switching-on mentality. Both groups of factors will be examined as four important themes in the capacity building and school improvement process: situated activity; connectedness; leadership, governance and management; and outcomes. The paper will conclude that the confluence of these contributing factors enables tensions and needs to be managed while ensuring the equilibrium of people, school and system necessary for moving in the direction of improvement.*

### Introduction:

In New Zealand, much emphasis has and continues to be directed towards school improvement in pursuit of raising student achievement and reducing disparity (Ministry of Education, 1999, 2004; Alton-Lee, 2003). The government's agenda is on enhancing New Zealand's social and economic well being and adaptability to technological advancements, addressing diversity and a push for lifelong learning. Despite a mass of legislation, policies and research, contemporary literature suggests school improvement is accompanied by tensions, such as:

- Funding shortages that limit strategic capabilities of schools to have an impact on capacity building for improvement (Dalin, 2005; Hawk & Hill, 1997).
- Tensions surrounding accountability. Recent legislative changes to governance aspects of schooling have increased school boards' responsibilities in monitoring student achievement and reviewing effectiveness of teaching and learning in relation to expectations set. However, as Timperley, Smith, Parr, Portway, Mirams, Clark, Allen and Page (2004) claim, in *Analysis and Use of Student Achievement Data*, boards do not have direct involvement with students and programmes at the classroom level; these responsibilities are inevitably exercised through accountability links with professionals and, are, at best, tenuous for parent board members. Timperley et al.'s (2004) claim that lack of knowledge of governance and limited participation in educational matters mean

boards of trustees are unlikely to exercise their accountability roles effectively. Issues of board contribution towards capacity building for improvement are raised.

- Socio-economic challenges facing schools in low decile areas are acknowledged as limiting school improvement by the Ministry of Education, educators / researchers (Hawk & Hill, 1997; McCauley & Roddick, 2001) and Education Review officials (ERO) as outlined in reports such as, *Multi-cultural Schools in New Zealand* (ERO, 2000). Changing community dynamics, for example, result in a range of challenges, problems and opportunities as schools become more multi-cultural. Raising achievement levels of Maori and Pacific Island students, for example, is a concern raised in the report, *The Achievement of Maori Students* (ERO, 2006a)<sup>1</sup>. Data on 321 schools showed that 13 percent were considered effective or highly effective across all areas evaluated, over half (57 percent) were effective in some areas and needed to improve in other areas and 30 percent needed to improve across all areas. The weakest area concerned monitoring the impact of policy interventions targeted at improving Maori student achievement. Only a quarter of schools were using achievement data to improve the learning opportunities of Maori students and, while nearly 40 percent could demonstrate they were improving the achievement of Maori students, 44 percent provided limited evidence and the remainder could provide no evidence. In *The Achievement of Pacific Students*, ERO (2006b) found only 17 percent of schools were collecting and analysing information on the achievement of Pacific students and 21 percent were collecting and analysing information on attendance and suspension rates. Failing to engage effectively with families and communities to improve educational outcomes of students was also raised as a concern;
- Ongoing reform agendas and the push for continuous change leave some schools struggling to cope. Elmore (1995) makes the point that schools, in their quest to keep up with change demands, end up altering structures and ‘adding-on’ programmes which strain their ability to operate strategically.

Tensions of context have implications for stakeholders faced with building capacity for school improvement. In addition, a paucity of literature on the topic fails to advance thought in this field. This research project was, subsequently, framed by four aims: 1) to undertake an investigation on processes that enhance improvement, namely, capacity building for school improvement; 2) to define capacity building; 3) to conduct an in-depth study of influences (external and internal) on capacity building for school improvement; and 4) to record the journey one multicultural<sup>2</sup>, low decile<sup>3</sup>, state primary school undertook in the building of capacity for improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Measures of effectiveness were: teachers’ engagement of students in learning, schools collation and analysis of Maori student achievement data, use of achievement data and monitoring the impact of policy initiatives designed to improve Maori student achievement.

<sup>2</sup> Assuming that the dominant culture in most New Zealand schools is usually European/Pakeha, a multicultural school is defined by ERO (2000) as “A school in which students from at least two other ethnic groups comprise at least 20 percent of the school’s population. The 20 percent threshold is low enough to capture all schools with a significant population of students of other cultures, yet not so low that the definition loses its value and meaning” (p. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Every state school in New Zealand is allocated a decile (10 percent grouping) by which to target funding based on the degree of socio-economic disadvantage the community from which the students are drawn. “Low decile schools (1-3) draw from communities with the highest degree of disadvantage while high decile schools (8-10) draw from communities with the lowest degree of socio-economic disadvantage. A school’s decile ranking is calculated using six dimensions: equivalent household income; parental occupation; household crowding; parent’s educational qualifications; income support payments received by parents; and the portion of students of Maori or Pacific ethnicity” (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 8).

In this paper the following are examined: 1. processes that enhance improvement; 2. the internal and external influences on capacity building; 3. wider societal factors that influence the development of capacity; and 4. links between capacity building and school improvement.

### **The Research Project**

In what follows, an outline of the nature of the research design is summarised before results and some of the major implications of the research discussed. The research was positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, employed a case study approach and grounded theory methods for data analysis.

### ***Interpretivist paradigm***

There are two essential elements which dictated an interpretivist approach. First, it was important to investigate capacity building for school improvement through the eyes of participants; that is, to examine the phenomena, “as consisting of the intrinsic meanings shared by members of a social group which are sustained by the actions and interactions of the members” (Clark, 1997, p. 37). Ontological<sup>4</sup> questions pertained to perceptions of how stakeholder activity, professional development, school culture and vision contributed to capacity building for school improvement; how external factors influenced the building of capacity; and perceived links between capacity and school improvement. Epistemologically<sup>5</sup>, the need for personal renditions, albeit subject to change and reconfiguration, required joint (researcher / participants) construction of meaning to achieve understanding of processes, motives, desires, beliefs, values and attitudes of individuals and groups in the capacity building process. Subjective meaning, understood within a social context of shared concepts and common language, means there was no one ‘correct’ way of perceiving reality, nor is there an absolute truth. The research design required a methodology<sup>6</sup> that was participative and collaborative – an interpretivist approach.

The second justification for using the interpretivist paradigm reasoned human actions affect perceived reality. As Clark (1997) argues, “meaning is internal to action, it is what makes an act an act rather than just being behaviour; it gives it intelligibility” (p. 38). This research required an interpretivist paradigm as it concerned perceptions of people; human action as an essential component of capacity building for school improvement.

### ***Case Study Approach***

The research adopted a case study design that was both instrumental (Stake, 2003) – it sought deeper insights of the concept capacity building for school improvement in one school site – and explanatory (Yin, 1994; 2003) – it had to answer “how” and “why” process related operational questions in the building of capacity for improvement. The study sought explanations of the “phenomenon within its real-life context”; a situated, localised boundary of space and time (Yin, 2003, p. 13).

A range of data gathering tools were utilised to gain rich data. Data gathered from observations, interviews and document analysis helped construct a worthwhile story; a substantive theory of

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<sup>4</sup> The ontological question: “What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108).

<sup>5</sup> The epistemological question: “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be-knower and what can be known?” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> The methodological question: “How can the inquirer (would-be-knower) go about finding out what ever he or she believes can be known?” (ibid.).

capacity building for improvement. Research rigour was ensured by meticulous use of grounded theory methods in data analysis and interpretation.

### ***Grounded Theory Methods for Data Analysis- A personal choice***

Grounded theory is “a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273). The intention is to generate theory reflective of the interplay between analysis and data collection and further analysis, the constant comparative method<sup>7</sup> (Glaser, 1992). As Charmaz (2003) explains, “Throughout the research process, grounded theorists develop analytic interpretations of their data to focus further data collection, which they use in turn to inform and refine their developing theoretical analyses” (p. 250).

Use of grounded theory methods suited this inquiry as capacity building for school improvement is an area which has had little or no prior investigation and where applicable conceptual frameworks are unavailable within which to investigate the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) stance on theory building, that is, ‘construction’ of theory through discovery, was considered particularly apt.

Glaser and Strauss promote two types of theory using a grounded approach. The first is substantive theory that emerges, “from the study of a phenomenon situated in one particular situation context” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 174). The substantive theory, in this inquiry, concerned capacity building for school improvement in one school setting. The second type of theory is formal theory<sup>8</sup> developed, “for a formal, or conceptual, area of sociological inquiry” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 32). Such theories are less specific to a group or place and are usually derived from studying the phenomena under a variety of conditions. In this inquiry, use of Strauss and Corbin’s approach (1990) produced a substantive theory on the phenomenon with potential for extension to a more formal theory applicable to ‘other’ sites.

Grounded theory methods, noted for their rigour, provide a systematic way of constructing theory. Achieving methodological thoroughness in this inquiry meant developing a range of relevant conceptual categories<sup>9</sup>, saturating those categories, and successively peeling back the layers to reveal the substantive theory. Rigours of process meant constant recourse to data collection and analysis as part of ongoing field work. Constant comparison of data and development of codes ensured a “match between scientific categories and participant reality” (LeCompte and Goetz, 1988, p. 43).

### ***Selection of the Case***

This inquiry is a qualitative study. It focused on achieving depth of understanding of capacity building in a single case purposefully selected. Patton (1990) explains, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information rich

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<sup>7</sup> Constant comparison method: “generate concepts: categories and their properties to extend and saturate the theory” (Glaser, 2001, p. 40).

<sup>8</sup> Formal Theory: “More formal theories are less specific to a group and place, and as such, apply to a wider range of disciplinary concerns and problems. Formal theories usually are derived from studying phenomena under a variety of conditions such as researching disclosure/nondisclosure under conditions of people acting as spies, engaged in illicit relationships, carrying out illegal activities such as theft, belonging to secret societies and groups, or picking up on someone in a bar or on a street corner” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 23).

<sup>9</sup> Categories: “Concepts that stand for phenomena” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101).

cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful sampling*” (p. 169 italics in the original).

In this research, intensity sampling, snowball or chain sampling, criterion sampling and opportunistic sampling were utilised in site selection. For example, talks with groups such as Resource Teachers for Learning and Behaviour (RTLBs) and TEAM Solutions<sup>10</sup> and observations at school events, identified this school as *information-rich* because of practices such as: a strong drive for organisational change based on the school’s vision, professional leadership exercised at all levels of the school, an emphasis on student achievement, teaching and learning, a supportive school culture and well supported, on-going professional development associated with staff development and student learning.

### ***A Brief Description of the School***

This is a state primary school located in Auckland, New Zealand. It is a contributing (Year 1-6) school with a decile two ranking. The roll generated entitlement is approximately 16 teachers. Combined with other staffing entitlements, the school has just over 20 teachers. At the time of data collection in 2004, the roll was approximately 330.

It is a multicultural school that serves a diverse community. Its ethnic composition includes: New Zealand European/Pakeha, 16%; Samoan, 14%; Tongan, 11%; Indian, 11%; Maori, 10%; Ethiopian, 6%; Somalian, 5%; Niuean, 4%; Cook Island, 4% and “other”, 19% (ERO report, 2005). The low socio-economic background of many students, combined with the influx of refugee migrant families, presents this school with many challenges in, for example, curriculum delivery and meeting the needs of a diverse student / community population. The local community continues to exercise influence on capacity building for improvement.

The school has been acknowledged by the educational community as having achieved a remarkable turnaround over a short time span of two years. The latest ERO (2005) report claims students express pride in their school, meet high expectations set for them, benefit from a wide range of learning and cultural experiences, engage in positive student-staff relationships and take advantage of opportunities to participate in school-wide decision making. Of interest are ERO’s comments on professional learning, leadership, and school and community partnerships. The school is acknowledged as having a professional learning culture aimed at improving teaching and learning. Extensive professional development and teaching practices, aligned to the school’s strategic and annual plans, make for effective teaching and learning. Staff work collaboratively and collegially in ensuring development of high quality teaching and learning practices. The principal’s open, collaborative and consultative leadership style is said to empower others to develop their leadership skills. Senior managers are acknowledged for their expertise and knowledge. Members of the board of trustees are clear about their governance roles. They ensure the school is well governed with clear policies and procedures underpinning systemic operations. All school stakeholders are involved in strengthening home-school partnerships. A strong focus on developing community is evident in efforts to promote parental involvement in school life.

### **Results**

Results from interviews, observations and document analysis can be organised around the four research questions. In what follows, diagrams summarising answers precede the written

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<sup>10</sup> TEAM Solutions is an external agency that offers assistance to schools. TEAM Solutions is government subsidised.

explanation to the second question. Responses to questions three and four are combined to paint a more holistic picture of capacity building for school improvement.

- How is capacity for school improvement defined – what are its features?
- How do internal school factors – vision, stakeholder activity, culture and professional development – evolve capacity?
- In what ways do external wider societal factors influence the development of capacity?
- What links exist between capacity building and improvement as evidenced in this school setting?

***How is capacity for school improvement defined – what are its features?***

Data from this study suggests that capacity building for school improvement is time and context dependent. Its conceptualisation is unique to setting. Capacity building for school improvement is a response to meeting individual, collective and systemic needs in ways that sustain equilibrium while moving in the direction of improvement. Attributes inherent in its construction are vision, stakeholders as change agents, school culture and professional development. The main practices are: knowledge production and utilisation; switching-on mentality; and division of labour: roles and responsibilities. Underpinning attributes and practices are four themes: situated activity; connectedness; leadership, governance and management; and outcomes. Attributes, practices and themes explain capacity building for school improvement in one setting. In the words of an outside agency representative interviewed, capacity building for school improvement “*is the ability to recognise that there is a situation and then to access the resources to meet the needs that that situation has exposed*”. The capacity of an organisation, to manage tensions and address need, ensures individual, collective and systemic equilibrium while moving in the direction of improvement.

***How do internal school factors – vision, stakeholder activity, culture and professional development – evolve capacity?***

In this section, diagrams and corresponding explanations conceptualise this school’s journey towards building capacity for improvement. Attributes are discussed first followed by descriptions of practices.

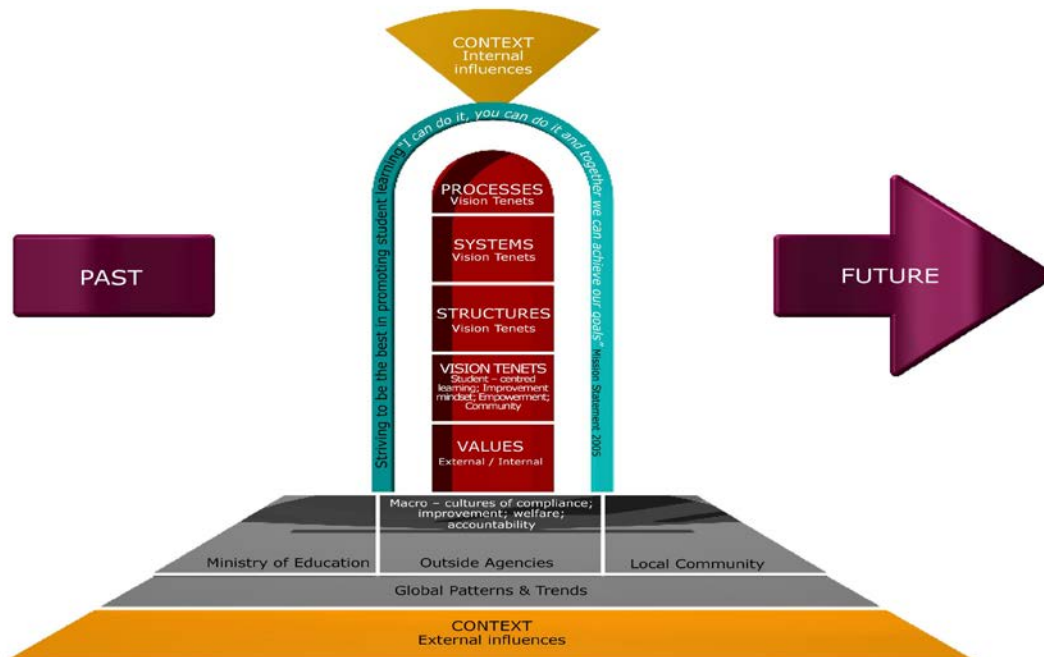


Figure 1

The research demonstrated clearly that vision was the core category enhancing capacity building for school improvement. In brief, the school’s vision is shared, aligned with legislative requirements and staff, students’ and parents’ / caregivers’ needs and aspirations. As captured by Figure 1, its four main tenets of student centred learning, empowerment, community and improvement underpin structures, systems and processes and are evident in the school. Collective purpose and passion for goal achievement are expressed and enacted in accordance with the four tenets. School participants describe the vision as contagious, “*people catch on*”. The vision creates a groundswell of support that ignites commitment to the ‘striving to be the best in promoting student learning’ vision ideal.

Purpose, accompanied by shared language, promotes common messages and shared meanings. People talk about the vision, use the same language in conversations and believe in the same ideals, “*It’s not about having messages but ensuring that everyone is getting that same message. Everyone is working towards those goals*”. From a position of common messages and shared meaning, coherence ensues. Coherence, witnessed as ways of working together, agreed expectations and practice consistency, facilitates a unified approach to building capacity for school improvement.

Working towards vision involves translating the vision ideal into a workable blueprint as recorded in strategic plans. Such documents draw on collective stakeholder input towards setting goals and action steps towards their achievement. A strong focus on expectations and detailing what this means in practice makes improvement easier to manage. It promotes efficiency and effectiveness in working towards vision – important attributes of capacity building.

Practices that support vision implementation also promote its buy-in. For example, strategic plans not only record future directions but also are accountability tools that attest to progress made. They generate professional dialogue around key tenets: student centred learning, an improvement

mindset, empowerment and community. Such engagement affirms and increases stakeholder commitment to overall vision direction.

Stakeholders' role in vision conceptualisation, transmission and evolution engenders collective activity around doing the best for this school and its stakeholders. External and internal sources of influence impact on vision conceptualisation. In vision transmission and evolution, school stakeholders, “regularly re-look at it” and “re-looking” at vision leads to its modification in line with changing internal and external conditions. For example: “Well whenever we plan we think about how appropriate it is for other cultures. Camp is a prime example really. In some cultures, camp is not appropriate and so it is about recognising that that’s OK”; and “Well last year we did a literacy review. We discussed the results at a staff meeting... We looked at those results. We discussed the positives and the negatives. Where we needed to pick up and where our focus needed to be for the future”. Processes of evolution keep the vision alive and current. A ‘readiness’ or ‘preparedness’ for change ensures school processes, systems and structures are primed to meet new demands. Such qualities are crucial in building capacity for improvement.

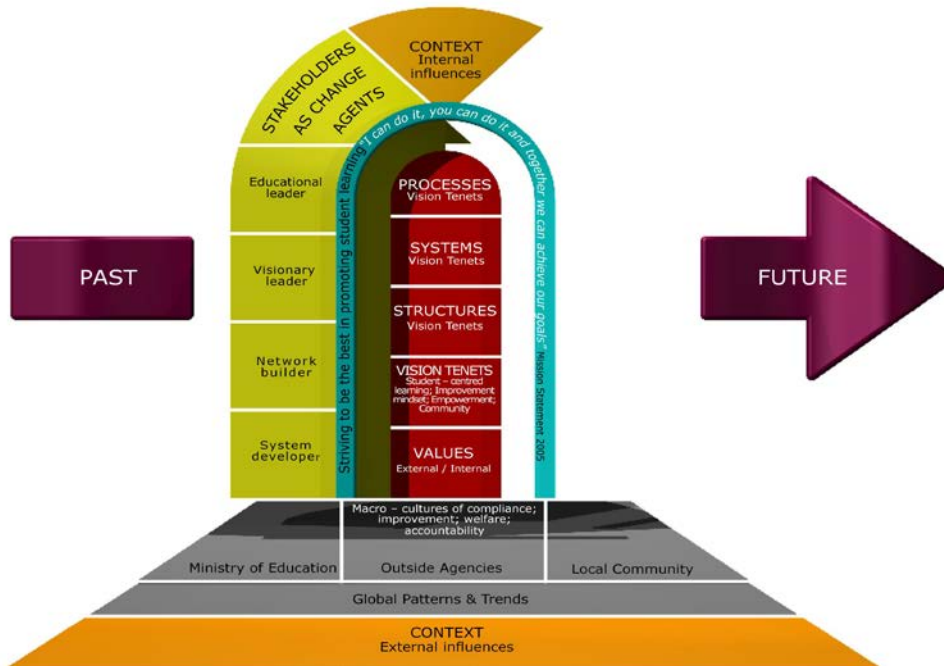


Figure 2

Capacity building for school improvement is concerned with change and management of change. All change has a tendency to disestablish equilibrium and increase uncertainty as new ways of doing things are required. Here the concept of school stakeholders as change agents becomes important. Data from this study suggest that this school’s ability to manage change necessitates all its stakeholders working as change agents. As captured by Figure 2, stakeholders serve as educational and visionary leaders, network builders and system developers. The stance taken by school stakeholders as change agents is best explained as appreciating what someone else has to offer and working in ways that consider individual, collective and systemic needs. In addition, frequent displays of sensitivity among stakeholders facilitate change as captured by this senior teacher’s comment, “I like to think that because I am in the classroom I know what the teachers are going through. I know what has to be done and I have to do it as well”. As change agents, stakeholders work in teams to build individual, collective and systemic capacity:



*I think organisational learning is working together as a team...everybody from the hierarchy down to the Scale A teachers. It is also helping each other to make sure we organise our planning and our resources for each lesson. If we need help we ask other people around us like teachers and parents. If we need somebody from the community to help our school we ask.*

Stakeholders are not prepared to adopt a reactive stance to external / internal challenges of change. Their actions and mindset suggest they scan the environment for signs of change and consider ways to make systemic adjustment and modifications in line with vision. Responses are not knee-jerk reactions but strategically implemented through plans, allowing time for communication which brings all stakeholders on board. In all forms of systemic development, challenges at the internal / external interface receive considerable attention. Change is ever present but seen as managed to build capacity for school improvement.

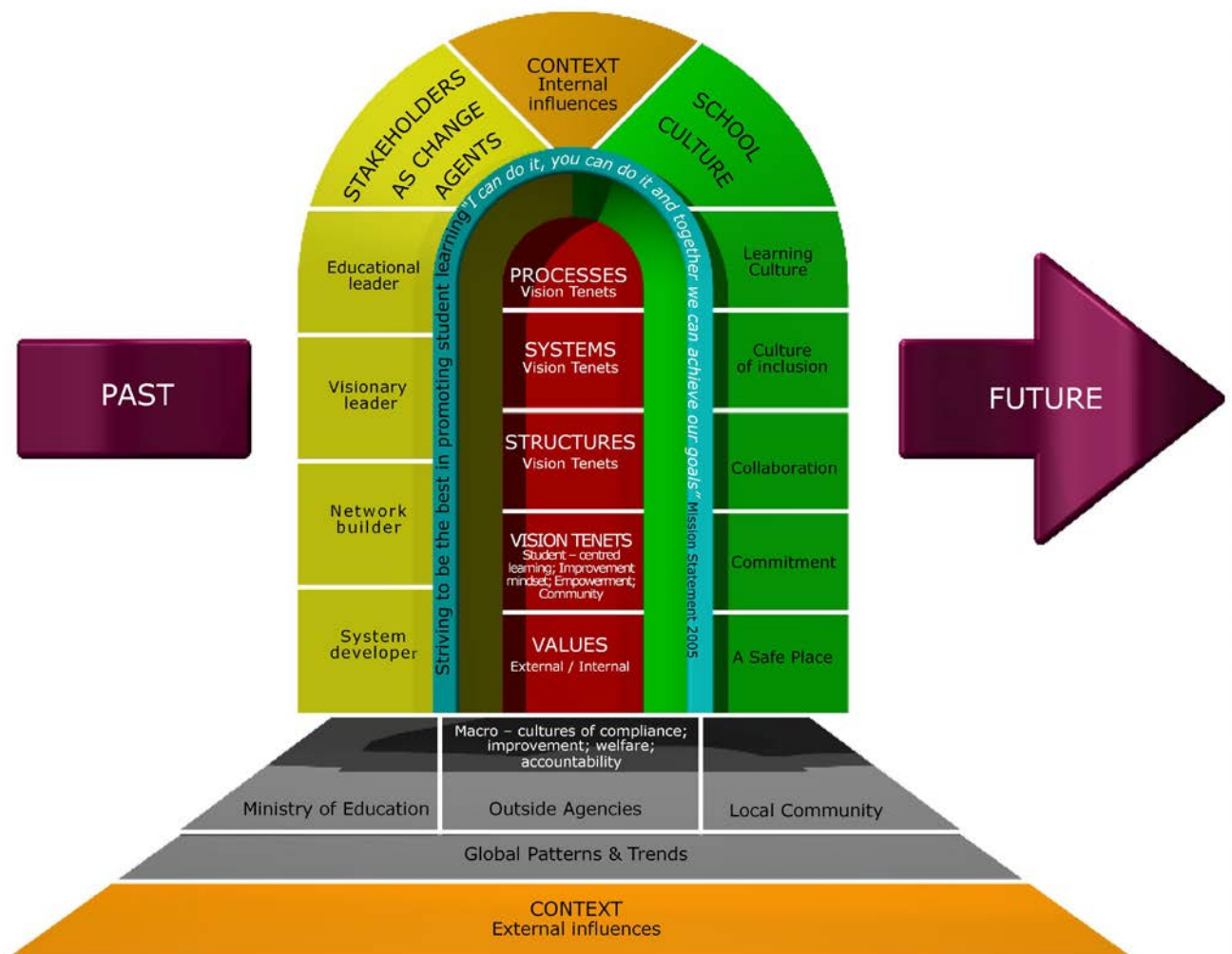


Figure 3

Culture has a major impact on people and school related activities. In this school, there is acknowledgement of diversity and a willingness to incorporate all stakeholders in creating an inclusive, professional learning community. Here, being part of a 'family' means the school is considered supportive, inclusive and empowering of all stakeholders. Cultural hallmarks such as:

a learning culture, inclusion, collaboration, commitment and safe place, reduce anxiety often associated with change. The potential for conflict and misunderstanding is minimised because of the stance taken in collectively maximising curriculum delivery, building relationships and encouraging home-school partnerships. Working towards greater parent / caregiver involvement in school life is an attempt to counteract some of the barriers ethnic minority groups face. This school's culture is influenced by macro and micro cultural norms, school practices, history and people associated with the school. A blending of all creates a fertile ground within which to construct and enact processes that build capacity for school improvement.

Figure 3 captures the essential hallmarks of this school's culture. School culture, as an attribute of capacity building, is added on to the central component of vision, denoting a strong correspondence to it. Linkage to stakeholders as change agents is also enforced in positioning school culture on the other side of vision. The diagram identifies key cultural hallmarks and the embedded nature of stakeholders as change agents and school culture in connection with vision.

Professional development is situated at the external / internal interface of the capacity building analytical framework as shown in the next diagram, Figure 4. Its main components are: collaborative interchange of information, reflective practice, openness to new ideas, flexibility, relevance and scaffolded learning. The position at the interface is justified by data indicating that professional development is both internally and externally sourced. The result of internal / external connections translates to knowledge production and utilisation processes that enhance capacity building for school improvement. Professional development is layered, continuous, complex, and intricately interwoven into school culture. It is inclusive of all school stakeholders. As part of the very essence of what happens in this school, professional development facilitates the development of a community of learners and leaders and helps build individual, collective and systemic learning capacities.

Professional development is the final attribute to be added to the vision, stakeholders as change agents and school culture mix. As a causal attribute of capacity building, professional development is necessary in increasing school stakeholders' capacities to manage change.

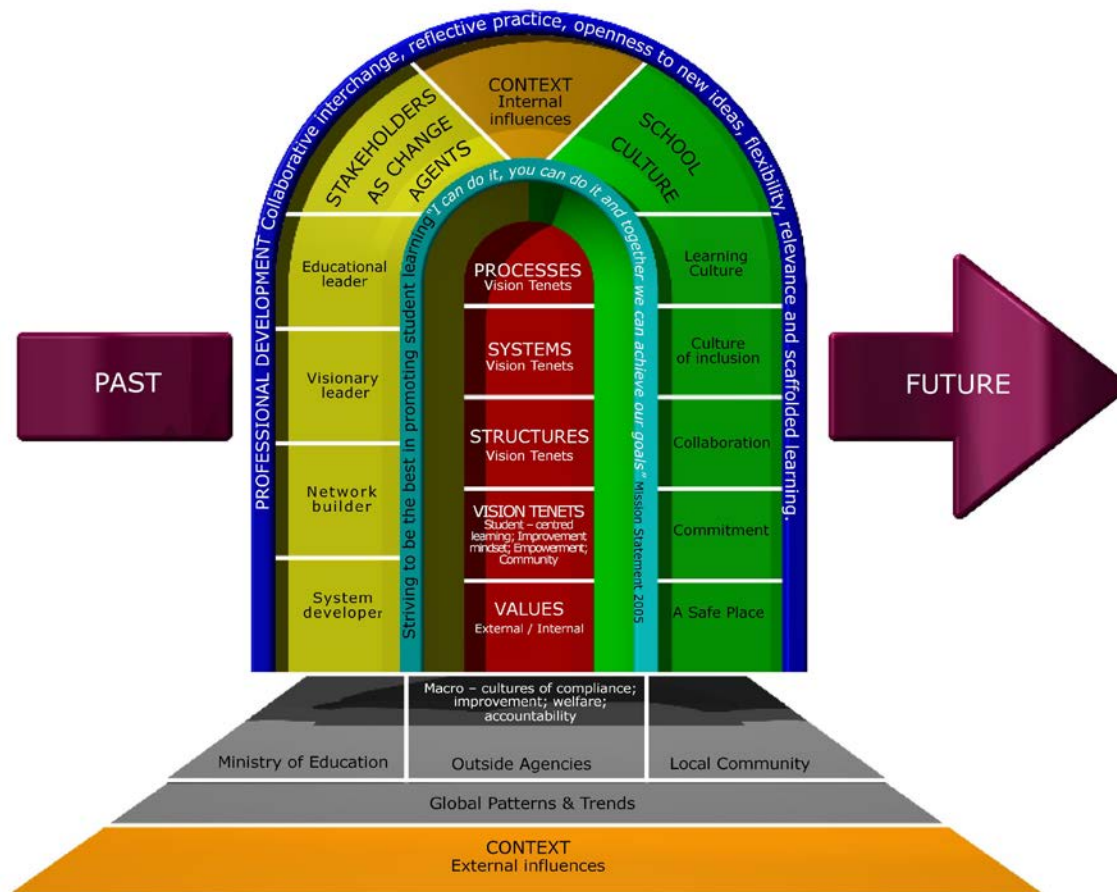


Figure 4

Data on practices that contribute to capacity building have established links to attributes. As the diagram on page 12, Figure 5, captures, the three main practices of knowledge production and utilisation, division of labour into shared roles and responsibilities and ‘switching on’ mentality are situated at the hub of the conceptual building framework establishing centrality and importance to process. Each practice portrays a particular dimension that builds capacity. Although the decision was made to highlight and present the evidence on each practice separately, it must be noted that their synergistic qualities are essential in building capacity. All three practices ensure connectedness not only among stakeholders but also at the systemic level of practice. Practices of knowledge production and utilisation engender connectedness through learning. Division of labour: roles and responsibilities focus on workplace structures that encourage team work. ‘Switching on’ mentality is what builds this school’s ‘heart’. ‘Switching on’ practices highlight the interpersonal mode of relationships.

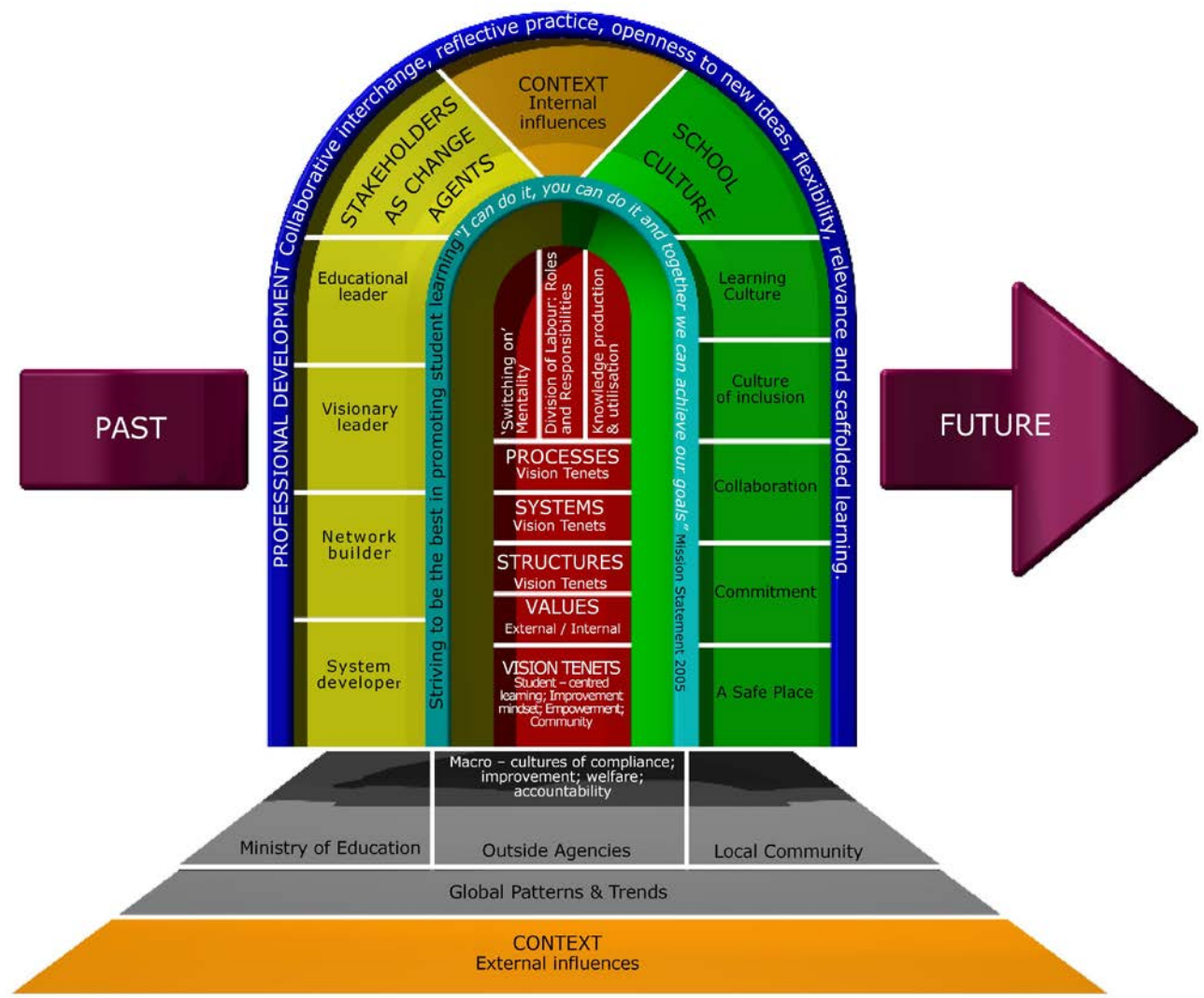


Figure 5

In this site, knowledge<sup>11</sup> is perpetually being created and utilised in the generation of new ways of doing things that meets stakeholder and school needs better. Knowledge production and utilisation serves a predictive purpose<sup>12</sup>. Knowledge production and utilisation systems, processes and structures are created on the basis of vision that secures a sense of direction and purpose; school culture which provides a suitable platform for enacting performance; professional development that facilitates learning; and stakeholder activity that promotes knowledge acquisition, distribution, adaptation and usage. Knowledge production and utilisation has individual, collective and systemic dimensions which enhance learning, goal achievement and capacity building.

Formal workplace structures and networks promote division of labour: roles and responsibilities. Their link to the school's vision enhances collaborative decision-making, value debates, vision implementation, monitoring of quality, accountability and a working community ethos. Power structures of a flat management type mean senior managers, board,

<sup>11</sup> Knowledge is defined as information gleaned from professional input external or internal in source. External input is generally associated with course attendance or outside agency / Ministry of Education association. Internal input is associated with collecting and analysing evidence of stakeholder and system need gained from systems such as reviews and appraisals.

<sup>12</sup> Predictive purpose is taken to mean the ability to determine future pathways of action from evidential data and processed information gathered, analysed and modified to site specification.

teaching staff, support staff and parents / caregivers work together for the betterment of the school and its stakeholders. School systems and ways of working encourage shared roles and responsibilities whereby, “*channels of communication and procedures are in place and people know exactly where they stand and what’s expected...clarity, expectation, follow through are expected*”.

A ‘switching on’ mentality, so prominent in this school, endorses collaboration and collegiality. This school is seen as a place with a ‘heart’ that beats strong. It is a place where people want to be as this comment implies, “*I personally have found this to be one great place to be. It would probably take me a long time before I left*”; “*It’s just this living breathing thing that occupies a space in my heart*”. Reasons for ‘wanting to be here’ result from:

- People feel they are listened to, their voices are heard. The atmosphere builds trusting relationships, “*you are allowed to say what you want to say or say how you feel and they’re not going to shout you down*”;
- The stance adopted is action orientated with openness to new ideas, “*We were talking about the old hall and saying it is really small. So it took some time. They were planning it for twelve years. But it is happening now*” ;
- Collaboration is endorsed, “*The thing is all the leaders, the team leaders what they do is they try to ask other teachers their opinion for example about books that they need to buy*” ;
- Open, transparent communication is practised, “*When things are happening they do tell us and so all of us know the same thing*” ; and
- Integrity is valued, “*I have found that the (principal) and (deputy principal) take things on board...so its lots of practise before they say things and they do it and they show us and they say see this is how it can be done*”.

From a detailed examination of attributes and practices, four main themes emerge that underscore capacity building for school improvement evident in this site. The four themes (situated activity; connectedness; governance, leadership and management; and capacity outcomes) are discussed in line with the third and fourth research questions.

***In what ways do external wider societal factors influence the development of capacity? What links exist between capacity building and improvement as evidenced in this school setting?***

#### *Situated Activity*

Literature suggests schools are nested within layers of society (Dantley, 2005). They are interconnected (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006) and operate as open systems (Lam & Punch, 2001; Pristine & Nelson, 2005) influenced by macro and micro cultural norms. In New Zealand, macro cultural norms of accountability, compliance and improvement align with Ministry of Education’s aims of raising student achievement and reducing disparity (MOE, 1999, 2004; Alton-Lee, 2003). Key forces underpinning the aims are: responsiveness to diverse cultures and a wide range of needs and aspirations, globalisation, the impact of technology and information and development of a knowledge-based economy. The Ministry’s emphasis on achievement is targeted at: effective teaching for all students; family and community engagement in education; and development of quality providers (MOE, 2004). A wide range of legislative mandates<sup>13</sup> ensure aims are met in practice. Government policy demands of schools accountability, compliance and improvement. Alongside socio-economic factors, such requirements influence what happens in practice.

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<sup>13</sup> See for example *The National Education Guidelines* (1990) and *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (1993).

Data from this research suggest the school complies with Ministry and local community requirements. Capacity building for school improvement is a considered response to macro and micro calls for accountability, compliance and improvement. Macro and micro contexts are not static states of 'being' but they change in relation to acts of 'doing'. Shifting tensions and opportunities for growth and development impact on the work of stakeholders; capacity building results from minimisation of limitations and maximisation of opportunities to benefit the school and its stakeholders. The importance of situatedness in enhancing capacity cannot be dismissed.

Data indicate the following characteristics of 'situatedness' as important. First, vision construction, implementation and renewal underpin all capacity building for school improvement activity. Furthermore, vision construction is an act of 'deliberate choice' in response to macro and micro cultural values and challenges of context. In this setting, a socially constructed vision is articulated as 'striving to be the best in promoting student learning'. It is supported by four tenets of student centred learning, improvement mindset, empowerment and community. The vision balances external demands with needs of the school / stakeholders. Second, vision espousal and enactment set parameters for managing tensions; that is, minimisation of limitations and maximisation of opportunities benefit the school and its stakeholders. Third, capacity building for improvement has historical connections, current applicability and a futuristic outlook. The construct is unique and situated in context.

School stakeholders define capacity building for improvement as a situated activity with corresponding outcomes. For example, at the time the school was reported to be in crisis, outside agencies worked alongside the principal to ensure organisational stability. Capacity building, in this early phase of improvement, necessitated:

- The principal prioritising and enacting systemic solutions in response to need;
- Utilisation of outside 'experts' to improve practice;
- Creation and reflection of an evidence base for inquiry into practice;
- Construction and implementation of school vision;
- Creation of opportunities to engage in professional talk; and
- Openness to new ideas with growing motivation to learn and stay current.

External agency input in capacity building related to:

- Input of content knowledge and pedagogical skills;
- Initiation of reflective practice through professional dialogue;
- Collective sharing of information and generation of a 'working' team ethos; and
- Establishment of consistency of practice through:
  - Focused attention on vision;
  - Systemic modification and adaptation to situational need; and
  - Development of infrastructures to support the work of staff.

Capacity building outcomes related to achieving organisational stability through: buy-in to a common sense of direction, development of a positive, working school culture and creation of a safe learning environment. Outside agency representatives were change agents as site-based knowledge, expertise and skills were lacking. As signalled previously, capacity building for school improvement reflects action at a particular time and in response to unique political, cultural and socio-economic drivers. With continued drive for school improvement from the principal and newly appointed deputy principal, an internal capacity for self-governance and self-management strengthened. This was largely due to senior managers' knowledge, skills, expertise, collaborative strategies and networks of support in advancing the work previously accomplished by outside agencies. A working culture, opportunities for professional development and staff enthusiasm for change altered school conditions. Capacity building measures expanded to include:

- Building teacher confidence to take risks;
- Pushing the boundaries of practice through engagement in new learning;
- Raised teaching and learning expectations;
- Participation in collective pursuit of capacity building;
- Increased responsiveness to demands for change (external and internal);
- Development of a collaborative, working and learning environment inclusive of parents / caregivers;
- Ongoing systemic support in response to altered school / stakeholder need; and
- Sustainment of a positive school image.

Data indicate that no single definition captures the essence of capacity building for school improvement over time. A lack of uniformity is ascribed to uniqueness of individual perception, time, situational constraints / opportunities and multiplicity of tasks requiring attention. Capacity building is undoubtedly the result of situated activity; a response to site-based demands for change that involves:

- Construction of a grounded, shared, evolving vision;
- Vision informed practice; and
- Management of tensions – minimising limitations and maximising opportunities to benefit the school and its stakeholders.

### *Connectedness*

Connectedness is the development of meaningful relationships in pursuit of activities that ‘promote student learning’. Connectedness is a multi-dimensional concept that emerges when all stakeholders (Ministry of Education, outside agencies, businesses, parents / caregivers, staff and students) support the school’s vision. Internal connectedness is achieved through practices of knowledge production and utilisation that generate learning; a ‘switching on’ mentality that reinforces norms of how things are around here; and division of labour, shared roles and responsibilities that advances team work – collaboration in getting things done. Data reveal an inevitable connection to *The National Education Guidelines* because of statutory links that connect the school’s vision to inherent guidelines as per the National Education Goals (NEGs) and the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs). School documents, systems, processes and structures promote external / internal links that have beneficial flow-on effects in building capacity.

Connectedness at the external / internal interface occurs on several levels with benefits to the school and its stakeholders. First, addressing mandated requirements means the school meets health and safety standards (ERO, 2005). In addition, implementation of new legislation sustains a ‘safe place’ ethos that participants note is conducive to learning. Second, the Ministry of Education, outside agencies, tertiary institutions, schools and other community groups serve as catalysts for change through provision of new information. Opportunities to participate in Ministry contracts and buy-in of outside agency support for curriculum and pedagogical development is reported as advancing individual, collective and systemic ‘working’ knowledge capacities. Similar claims are made of association with professional networks. Participants claim outside knowledge raises standards of expectations, motivates learning and precipitates new, more effective ways of doing things. The value of outside connections in improving teacher content knowledge and pedagogical skills is acknowledged by various authors (see for example, Symes et al., 2001; Phillips et al., 2001). Third, connectedness with the Ministry, outside agencies and community groups bolsters the school’s ‘working’ resource base. For example: Ministry facilitators and outside agency representatives were observed assisting staff to develop systems, processes and structures to suit altered work arrangements; additional funds from the Ministry meant continuation of support structures such as the bi-lingual tutors’ initiative; and parents’ / caregivers’ ‘hands-on’ involvement in school life was seen to reduce work load.

In this site, internal / external connectedness achieve ‘crafted coherence’ (see Honig and Hatch, 2004) where, “ongoing investments in the institutional capacity of schools and district central offices to engage in practices...help schools manage multiple external demands productively” (p. 27). Crafting coherence is a connected, situated activity as the school seeks assistance and exercises control over its improvement trajectory. School stakeholders negotiate scope of support needed to achieve goals. In other words, connectedness and situatedness promotes meaningful relationships in activities that ‘promote student learning’.

#### *Governance, Leadership and Management*

Capacity building for school improvement requires effective governance, leadership and management. Governance, leadership and management inevitably means meeting accountability, compliance and improvement demands as stipulated in *The National Education Guidelines*. Observations and participants’ responses indicate stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities aligned to the NEGs and the NAGs and to each other. They manage calls for accountability, compliance and improvement as individuals and within a collective to maintain organisational equilibrium and advance improvement. Stakeholders work as change agents to build capacity for improvement. As change agents they exercise:

- Visionary leadership;
- Educational leadership;
- Network building; and
- Systemic development.

Stakeholders are guardians of the vision. As vision guardians, they perpetuate its construction. Their input keeps the vision alive and grounded in reality. Vision renewal is not imposed but created from practice; not isolated but part of everyday life; and planned in terms of initiating growth and development. The ‘*I can do it, you can do it and together we can achieve our goals*’ statement enhances collective buy-in to vision. Stakeholders are forever mindful of avoiding the ‘blunting of vision’ (Barth, 1990) effect with respect to tensions of context.

Blunting of vision is minimised by working towards vision in thoughtful, planned and collective ways. Stakeholders ensure that vision ideals permeate through all levels of practice to promote student learning. Vision is embedded in this school’s culture and its implementation monitored and reinforced through governance, management and leadership activities. Collective construction of vision raises communal consciousness to its implementation. Stakeholders’ espousal and enactment of values and beliefs create cultural hallmarks that assist in vision implementation. Internalisation and continued enactment of cultural hallmarks make stakeholders, in governance, leadership and management capacities, agents of change – recreating what they believe to be moral and ethical practice.

All stakeholders provide educational leadership. The board endorses professional development through allocation of funds in accordance with stated goals contained in strategic plans. Staff drive the professional development agenda. Their engagement in individual and systemic reviews creates base line data from which to construct learning trajectories – individual, collective and systemic. Staff engagement in monitoring of professional development increases their professionalism. The culture that emerges in this school is best described as a professional learning community. A community of educational leaders and learners enhances capacity for school improvement.

In this school, many forms of formal / informal and internal / external networks exist to support community life. Participants claim that a flat management structure promotes networking and team work. Observations of practice suggest that team arrangements serve as powerful structures to push for capacity building. Networking and team work in governance, leadership and management capacities offers:

- Access to information from which to engage in knowledge creation;



- Access to systemic and collegial support;
- Engagement in processes of participatory decision-making;
- Opportunities to consult and negotiate future plans as a collective;
- Engagement in value debates;
- Ability to meet accountability, compliance and improvement demands in effective, collective ways;
- Opportunities to attach meaning and purpose to work;
- Opportunities to solve problems and deal with conflict in creative ways; and
- Opportunities to build and sustain coherency in accordance with purpose – ‘striving to be the best in promoting student learning’.

All stakeholders with governance, leadership and management roles and responsibilities are system developers. Systemic development is achieved through participatory, distributed practice. This is a school where school structures are ‘regularised’ to promote sharing of practice (Gronn, 2002). The overall school structure promotes teamness as preferred ways of working but not at the expense of professional autonomy. Work here is, as Sayles (1964) describes it, “coordinated and undertaken interdependently” (p. 115). Individuals contribute to a collective knowledge base that is of pragmatic use in systemic development. A systemic approach values both individual and collective contribution to school capacity building for improvement.

Systemic development requires leadership qualities of governors, leaders and managers which are transformational (see for example, Northouse, 2004) and post-transformational (see for example, West et al., 2000; Day, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2006). In addition, distributed leadership practices, as defined by Gronn (2002), and management practices, as purported by Dalin (2005) and Hallinger & Snidvongs (2005), are required. The demand for inclusive approaches to governance, leadership and management (see for example, Furman & Shields, 2005; Shields & Sayani, 2005; Lindsey, Roberts & Cambell Jones, 2005) coupled with calls to develop a professional learning community (see for example, Barth, 1990; Bolman et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006) are also frequently raised. Observation of practice suggests that a systemic approach receives the attention of stakeholders in performing the multitude of tasks expected of them. School systems, processes and structures ensure decisions made collectively serve the best interest of the school and its stakeholders. A systemic approach offers best ‘fit’ with conditions of context (external and internal). Systemic development draws on all stakeholders’ support in sustaining school improvement. Collective input assists in the management of tensions and in the building of capacity for school improvement.

### *Outcomes*

Outcomes are inherent in all capacity building activities. Outcomes are traceable to the vision statement – ‘striving to be the best in promoting student learning’ and invariably, to the NEGs and the NAGs. Participants’ comments indicate that being ‘the best’ is multi-dimensional. For example, it draws on:

- Working towards vision and support of the four tenets;
- Provision of a balanced curriculum that address the diverse needs of students;
- Development of a professional learning culture inclusive of all stakeholders;
- Creating practices in support of biculturalism and multiculturalism;
- Competing favourably with other schools in promoting roll growth;
- Effective management of tensions;
- Promotion of this school as ‘school of choice’;
- Productive partnerships between staff and parents / caregivers;
- Connectedness among all parties in doing what is best for the school; and
- Systemic coherence and consistency of practice.

Data indicate that capacity building has both process and product outcomes related to specific practices of knowledge production and utilisation, switching on mentality and division of labour into shared roles and responsibilities. Commonly associated outcomes for all practices include:

- Focused attention on promoting student learning;
- Reinforcement of the tenets in support of the vision ideal;
- Doing the ordinary things better;
- Maintaining a sense of equilibrium coupled with that of improvement;
- Building on past endeavours to meet current and future needs; and
- Promoting this school as a safe place.

Outcomes are a necessary part of organisational existence for both legislative and internal reasons. Findings from this study indicate that this school has robust systems, processes and structures that monitor, collate, analyse and utilise data in improving practice. Outcomes related to student progress are measured and reported in accordance with mandatory requirements. Results depict the school as complying with the NEGs and the NAGs and the Ministry's broad aims of raising achievement and reducing disparity. This school does, however, have outcomes that are more holistic in nature, as noted in successive strategic plans. The concern, therefore, is how to measure the effect of vision, culture and professional development to promote school improvement and specifically to building capacity.

This school's philosophy of 'promoting student learning' means that all aspects of organisational life are scrutinised in attempt to improve practice. To authenticate effectiveness of vision, school culture and professional development on improving practice that is more than just an account of 'feel', attention is paid to staff accounts of their personal and professional growth reflective of context. It is in the telling of stories and collaborative interchanges or dialogue that change of practice gets acknowledged. As sustainability of improvement is important, judgements calls, that record altered habits and beliefs and movement to more effective ways of doing things, are gained through talking to people and:

- Observation of practice (senior management and peers);
- Individual appraisals;
- Self-monitoring of practice; and
- Systemic reviews that generate a collective data base.

The final diagram, Figure 6, captures the attributes, practices and themes to explain capacity building for school improvement as it occurs in this site.

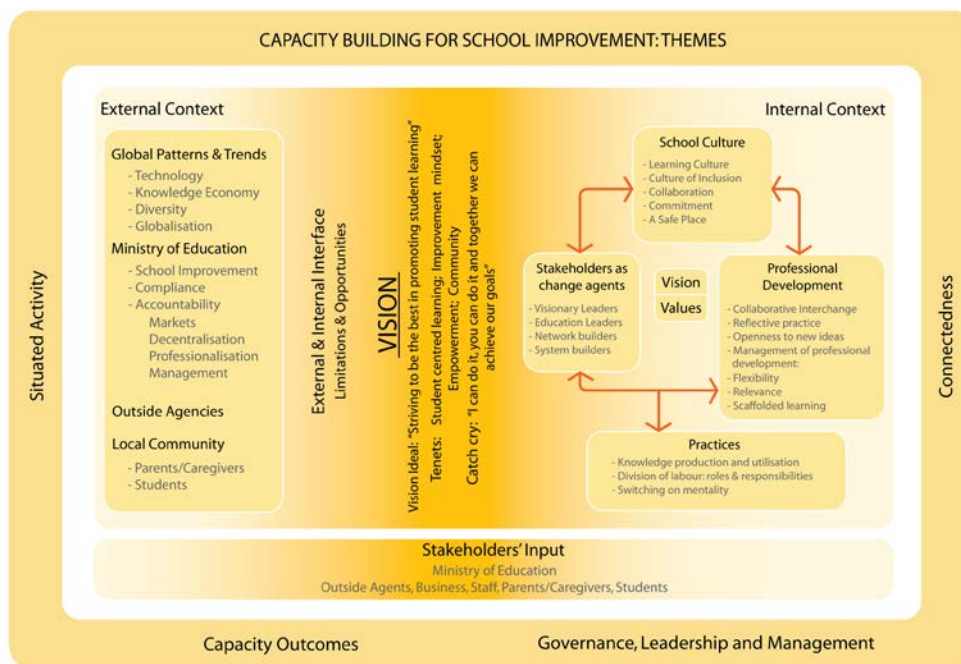


Figure 6

## Conclusion

Capacity building for school improvement is a difficult concept to define. Hopkins et al. (1998) define it as enabling conditions that allow process to affect product. Enabling conditions refer to staff development, enquiry and reflection on progress, involvement of students in the teaching and learning process, distributed leadership, collaborative planning and coordinated school-wide activity that establishes coherence. Fullan (2005) suggests the construct relates to development of collective ability to act together to bring about change. Stoll et al. (2006) link the construct to sustainable school improvement best achieved in professional learning communities. Stoll et al. (2006) define capacity building as a “complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organisational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support...(that) gives individuals, groups, whole school communities and school systems the power to get involved in and sustain learning over time” (p. 221).

These definitions do not fully position or capture the complexity of the construct in context. Context in itself is a multi-dimensional concept that requires deconstruction. Schools are embedded in external and internal contexts within which capacity building for school improvement eventuates. Both external and internal contexts exert influence on how the construct is conceived. Values, beliefs and norms of an external context, coupled with those of an internal context, influence a particular brand of capacity building with specific improvement outcomes. Capacity building, therefore, can be considered an act of making informed choices and being able to justify the choices made. Making choices in a landscape filled with competing values and beliefs create tensions for stakeholders’ intent on building capacity for school improvement.

New Zealand schools operate within external and internal contexts influenced by society and a national education system, in particular. Macro cultural norms of accountability, compliance and improvement and socio-economic location factors are influences and shape what happens in schools. They determine what is of value. Macro and micro values provide a framework

within which vision construction occurs. This school's vision is an act of deliberate choice. The school's vision is encapsulated in a powerful message – 'striving to be the best in promoting student learning'. The vision ideal is supported by four tenets: student centred learning, improvement mindset, empowerment and community. The particular way the school defines and works towards making vision a reality creates a distinctive brand of capacity building for school improvement.

A substantive theory of capacity building for improvement places vision as the core category. Vision is considered an attribute along with stakeholders as change agents, school culture and professional development. All four attributes determine the nature of practice. An examination of data reveals three key practices as important. These include knowledge production and utilisation, division of labour: roles and responsibilities and a 'switching on mentality'. Detailed examination of attributes and practices reveal four themes that underscore capacity building for school improvement. These are: situated activity; connectedness; governance leadership and management; and outcomes.

Capacity building for school improvement is a situated activity, embedded in context. It also requires connectedness explained as meaningful relationships in support of activities that 'promote student learning'. Stakeholders' governance, leadership and management attributes, skills, roles and responsibilities set the parameters for practice. All three are essential in ensuring the construct is well conceived and inclusive of all stakeholders. Outcomes reflect the situatedness of context and feedback into practice promotes ongoing cycles of capacity building for school improvement.

This paper has introduced attributes, practices and underpinning themes associated with the concept, capacity building for school improvement. This paper has emphasised that, because of the complexity and uniqueness of schools, the concept of capacity building for school improvement is not universal, context-free and for all occasions. Capacity building for school improvement is time and context dependent.

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