ACHIEVING AND SUSTAINING AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING CULTURE IN A SCHOOL

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In putting this paper together I am drawing on ten years of research and development work in hundreds of New Zealand primary, intermediate and secondary schools. As well as participation, observations, formal evaluations, interviews, discussions, surveys and many other sources of data, I am relying heavily on the views and experiences of students as they have described them to us. It has been our experience that students are very aware of, knowledgeable about and willing to articulate their educational needs and the extent to which they feel these needs are being met.

I have experienced schools that are wonderfully stimulating and happy places to be in, schools that are fragile and vulnerable and schools that have lost the ability to provide an effective learning culture for their staff or students. Detailed discussion of characteristics of an effective learning culture simplifies very complex situations and each school will present its own unique blend of factors.

I am going to build my discussion around two underpinning concepts that I believe are pivotal to an effective learning culture. These are *honesty and enthusiasm.*

Enthusiastic passion for learning

In schools that have an effective learning culture, the active love of learning is evident throughout the organisation. I will begin with the students and work through to the teachers, support staff, the Principal, the Board and the parents. Each plays a vital role in, and has responsibility for, the overall goal of achieving an effective learning culture in the school.

Students

Learning opportunities will be maximised when the teacher, the class and the student work cooperatively. Students are more actively involved in their learning when they have self-efficacy, the belief that they can make an significant contribution to their own learning and development. This is fostered by teachers who do not wish to be controlling and who work actively to move the locus of control from the teacher to the individual student and to the class as a whole. When this is successful, the student takes more responsibility for their learning, has more confidence and is more likely to experience success. Success motivates and motivation leads to success.

Motivation

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Success

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Self-efficacy

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Locus of Control
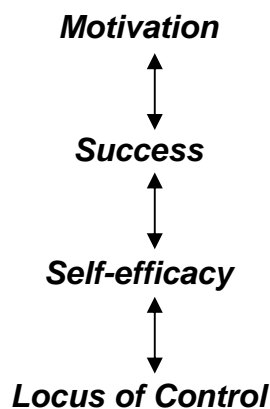
The love of learning develops when the learning experiences are stimulating, fulfilling and help the student to make sense of their world. Textbooks are full of pedagogical guidelines for good practice. Unless the student feels a full participant, their experience will be less than ideal. Our latest research[1] explores the critical importance of the relationship between the teacher and the student. In low decile schools, for many students the right sort of relationship with the teacher is not only important, it is a pre-requisite for learning to take place. There are important implications, therefore, for the selection, induction and professional development of teachers in these schools.

Teachers

Students want a teacher who loves their job, loves the school, loves their learning area(s) and who cares about them. A teacher, who loves learning, will inspire that love of learning in the students. However, students will learn as much from what they see teachers do as from what the teachers say. Students make ongoing judgements about the validity of what their teacher says and what they really believe from watching their behaviour, body language and from the tone of their voice.

Students need teachers who do not stop learning but who are active in ongoing study, professional reading and self-reflection. They need to seek and use feedback from colleagues and particularly from their students.

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[1] Hill and Hawk (2000) *Making a Difference in the Classroom: Effective Teaching Practice in Low Decile, Multi-cultural Schools,* Wellington: Ministry of Education

It is important that teachers *tell* their students that they love learning as well as demonstrate that love. Students appreciate and want to hear about the learning their teacher is doing through professional development, wider life experiences and from working with them. Teachers who learn from their students have more to give in return.

Teachers who participate actively in the classroom learning experiences are modeling the value they place on learning and their enjoyment of it.

Students need teachers to help them relate the learning activities to their lives and to the future. This means that teachers need to understand the worlds that their students live in and this differs greatly from school to school and area to area.

Some of these things can be enhanced by a school climate in which there are high expectations of teachers and appropriate support for them. Some, however, are mainly a result of the attitudes of a teacher and the relationship they are able to form with their students.

Support staff

In my experience, schools are getting better at including support staff as a valued part of the staff. They also need to model learning and be supported to receive appropriate professional development. Support staff often play a very active role with students and an important public relations role for the school. A school, that will remain nameless, had a receptionist known to all as 'the taniwha'. Her negativity adversely affected relationships in the school and interrupted and interfered with the classroom climate on a daily basis. In another school that our own children went to, the caretaker was one of the most loved people in the school and he daily provided wonderful wider learning experiences for the students.

The Principal

A principal who wants to lead the development of an effective learning culture needs to begin by walking the talk. Roland Barth says –

> *It is interesting … to consider the common instructions given by flight attendants to airline passengers: 'For those of you travelling with small children, in the event of an oxygen failure, first place the oxygen mask on your own face and then – and only then- place the mask on your child's face.' The fact of the matter is, of course that the adult must be alive in order to help the child. In schools we spend a great deal of time placing oxygen masks on other peoples faces while we ourselves are suffocating. Principals, preoccupied with expected outcomes, desperately want teachers to breathe in new ideas, yet do not themselves engage in visible serious learning. (*Barth, 1990:42)[2]

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[2] Barth, Roland (1990) *Improving Schools from Within,* San Francisco : Jossey Bass

What constitutes effective learning for Principals is debatable. It is my view that conferences and principals' geographic cluster meetings are not enough. Networking is an important function but it should not be confused with learning or development. Principals need a forum where they can openly and honestly discuss their greatest concerns and work with others to explore options and solutions. Mentoring or supervision are options. A small professional group brings the added benefit of a range of ideas.

It is primarily, although not only, the Principal who has the time and responsibility to seek out new ideas, to be aware of national and international trends, to visit other schools and to seek out and share professional readings and opportunities.

At the same time, fads and fashions come and go, and it is primarily up to the Principal to ensure the school has a planned development path and does not get easily sidetracked or overloaded. To know when to keep the pressure and momentum for change going, and to know when to pull back and consolidate is an important judgement for a change manager.

Parents

There is a great deal of national and international research evidence that parental involvement in their children's education has motivational, behavioural and cognitive benefits for children's learning. The CRISSP[3] research prior to, and at the beginning of, 'Tomorrows Schools' gave us valuable knowledge about how to achieve collaboration between teachers and parents. In low socio-economic communities this is difficult to achieve and our recent AIMHI[4] research demonstrates that this has not got any easier. It is still important however, and the school should provide opportunities to educate parents about, and to involve them in, their child's education.

The Board

An effective Board will be knowledgeable and independent enough to ensure it is pro-active about its own development. It can then make an active contribution to the life of the school and does not rely totally on the Principal and school professionals to carry it. Trustees also need their 'oxygen'. While a few of you may have Boards that overstep their governance role, those of you who have active and supportive Boards will appreciate the extra benefits and energy they bring to the school.

As well as modeling effective learning, Boards need to be kept well informed about the effectiveness of the learning taking place in all parts of the school so they want to support its continuance.

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3   Curriculum Review Research In Schools Project. The findings are summarised in a book that most schools have a copy of. Ramsay et al (1993) *Developing Partnerships: Collaboration between Teachers and Parents* , Wellington: Ministry of Education

4   Achievement in Multicultural High Schools

When all of these school groups are individually and collectively enthusiastic and passionate about learning, the momentum will be there to build and foster the type of school culture we are discussing today. There are, however, potential problems and blocks to achieving that goal if the relationships in the school are less than ideal, which takes me to the second major underpinning concept: honesty.

Honesty

Having the will and the skills to be honest is the best way of preventing problems from occurring and for dealing effectively with them if they do occur. Looking at the reasons behind the dysfunction of ineffective learning cultures, it is frequently a lack of honesty or an inability to deliver honest messages that allows problems to occur and prevents their resolution. Let's look at some examples –

➢ Professional development is the lifeblood of a healthy school. Without a good 'oxygen flow'[5] to our own brains, we are of little use to our students or staff. If we believe this, then it is going to be important that **all** staff benefit from effective professional development. Yet many schools allow individuals to determine what they participate in and how often they participate. There will be some teachers who do not make the effort to access development opportunities or who select 'safe' and 'comfortable' topics.

➢ A school should have an effective system of identifying development needs, a means of ensuring the development takes place and a system of monitoring changes so that progress can be assured. Many senior personnel find it difficult to front a teacher on such issues. There should also be a link between the needs identified by the performance management system and access to the appropriate professional development. This requires a rigorous appraisal process in which the appraisers have the necessary knowledge and skills and give their appraisees honest feedback.

➢ We frequently see schools change a programme or system because it is 'not working'. A careful analysis of the situation will sometimes show that a small number of people are not consistent, complying or cooperating to make the programme/system work. It is not always intentional but the outcomes are just as problematic as when it is. Changing the whole system is a bit like punishing the whole class for the behaviour of one or two students. Most school personnel know this is the case and can name the people involved but are reluctant to front the issue because it would probably result in an uncomfortable situation. It is often an easier short-term solution to change the system. Of concern, however, is that it will probably be the same people who will put pressure on the new programme/system.

➢ New innovative programmes and projects are driven by people who are committed to their success. It is their enthusiasm and energy that gets

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[5] Barth, Roland (1990) *Improving Schools From Within,* San Francisco: Jossey Bass

them up and going and sustains them. It is very unusual for any new development to be problem free. An open mind and some good data will ensure problems are identified and changes are made to strengthen the initiative. Unfortunately sometimes the initiating person or group feels their credibility and reputation is on the line to the extent that they are unable to admit (even to themselves sometimes) that things are not working as planned. I frequently see initiatives written up or publicised in such a way as to make them misleading to the reader. This means that if another school attempts to replicate the initiative, they make the same mistakes or have the same problems. They then assume that the problem is their fault. I can think of many initiatives that have a reputation that is unrealistic or inaccurate. This lack of honesty is a real block to effective practice being developed and shared.

➢ When an individual or a school receives feedback that is critical, one or more of a range of responses occur.[6] These include denial, rejection, anger and being critical of the messenger. ERO reports are often examples of this. I hasten to add that I am not saying ERO reports are always accurate or balanced but they often include important feedback that a school could and should accept and use to make improvements. Parents and students sometimes give a teacher or school important feedback that is rejected. Important opportunities to redress, improve and grow are lost if we are not open to accepting thoughtful feedback and prepared to be honest about weaknesses or failings.

➢ Many parents are shocked when their child fails to do well with NCEA qualifications. They have years of school reports, oral and written, that have omitted to honestly and accurately inform them about their child's achievement. Parents, and often teachers and schools, confuse effort, progress and achievement. Student report wording and grades provide plenty of evidence of this. The reason is usually that teachers want to say only positive things on a child's report. Unfortunately the truth comes at a stage in the student's education when it is difficult for them to accept it and retain self-efficacy.

➢ An effective learning environment requires the adults to model behaviours they want students to emulate. They need to model these behaviours with both students and with the other adults in the school. I have worked in schools where this has not been the case for many years and where the culture of the school is one in which problematic adult behaviours and relationships have been allowed to continue unchallenged. If left unchecked it can result in a self-sustaining situation and result in high staff turnover because people avoid the discomfort rather than change it. If each adult had the will and the skills to front unacceptable behaviour, this type of situation would not develop in the first place, and would not continue if already in existence.

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[6] Hawk and Hill (1999) "Schools at Risk: Dilemmas and Solutions", Paper to AARE-NZARE Conference, Melbourne. Dec. 1999.

We have learned from our work with intermediate and secondary students that they are aware of the adult issues in their schools and it does impact adversely on their day to day learning environment. Adults in the same schools usually think that students are unaware of the problems.

Honesty alone is not a sufficient condition to promote and foster an effective learning culture in a school although, if we include the practice of honest analysis and use of data and dealing with feedback, it will go a long way towards it. The combination of an honest approach with the active enthusiasm for learning is what, in my experience, is the best combination for a sustained learning culture.

The only thing that can seriously interfere is a lack of efficient systems or ineffective communication. These may not stop an effective culture being developed but they will slow it down.

Systems and Organisation

I will finish by talking briefly about the value in being well organised and having efficient systems. These things do not, in themselves, result in an effective learning culture but they are important in supporting one to grow and be sustained.

When I work in a school over a period of months facilitating a development, the difference is noticeable between a school that struggles with systems and communications and one which -

-       remembers I am coming, has the necessary documents ready to use, has an agenda for the meeting, begins the meeting on time, keeps a record of progress and decisions, is not interrupted or distracted by day to day situations and works purposefully towards to next stage of the development.

It does not matter whether the minutes are typed up or hand written, being organised does not mean the sessions have to be boring or humourless and even the most organised school will have the occasional unpreventable interruption. If such things happen often however, they are time wasting and frustrating for the participants. It does not take long for people to arrive late if it becomes the norm for the meeting not to begin on time. High standards and consistency in the school systems provide the foundation needed on which an effective learning environment can be based.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an effective learning culture is one in which school personnel love learning, are pro-active and enthusiastic about continuing their own learning, participate in the learning activities and work cooperatively to create a "community of learners". It is one in which people are honest in their self reflection and in their reviewing of school practices and programmes, they front

and resolve difficult issues and genuinely model the behaviours they would like in their students.

In spite of the impression one might gain from the media from time to time, most of the schools I work in are energetic, inspirational and committed organisations. Most of the professionals I work with truly want to make a difference to children's learning and lives and work hard towards that goal. We can all continue to reflect on and improve our practice, however, and I hope some of the ideas in this discussion contribute to that.