



Pathways Research Series:
Understanding Effective School Improvement

Capacity Building

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About the authors

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What do we mean by capacity building?

“Building the capacity for school improvement necessitates that change is carefully planned and managed. It also requires monitoring the extent of change and its impact. An important role for those leading change is to manage and control overload.”¹

If the main goal of school improvement is to raise students' attainment and progress, research indicates this can be achieved by schools “extending their own capacity for development.”² Capacity in this context refers to the ability to enable all students to achieve higher standards.³ It has been stated that “a critical measure of school improvement is the capacity of teachers to be leaders and shapers of education,”⁴ but there are also other ways, like the enhancement of materials and resources and the reconfiguration of how tasks are undertaken in a given activity.⁵

Essentially, part of capacity building is to generate experiences and opportunities for practitioners to learn

how to do things in a shared community. Here we bring in the role played by ‘communities of practice’, where capacity is built among teachers who are then potentially able to make informed decisions on school improvement processes⁶ and focus those facilities onto students' learning experiences.⁷ Even within one community of practice, there may be differing views on what is ‘good’ or ‘best’. Research suggests, however, that approaches seen as more negotiative and less directive are generally more favourable. Notions of ‘parallel leadership’ emerge here, requiring a delicate balance among learning communities built on mutual trust, a sense of shared purpose and allowances for individual expression.⁸

“The metaphor of the learning community encapsulates the importance of fostering and harnessing the learning of all individuals: parents, students, governors and teachers ... While it is possible for schools to improve themselves, it is also important to recognise that building the capacity for learning is enhanced through external support and drive.”⁹

Potential contributions of internal and external support roles

Internal		External
Research supports the idea that school improvement should be ‘owned’ by the individual school, its teachers and students. The school ‘climate’ and ‘culture’ are vital to attitudes, beliefs and values during the school improvement cycle.	→ ←	The ‘external change agent’ could be well placed to assist schools in diagnosing strengths and weaknesses. External support may include other schools, school improvement partners (informal and formal), educational organisations or a local authority.
Professional development for teachers is a crucial contributor to the concept of a ‘learning organisation’.	→ ←	Can provide expertise related to data analysis and interpretation.
Teachers should feel able to experiment and conduct joint enquiries.	→ ←	‘Critical friendship’ including reflection, reformulating concepts and challenging accepted norms.
Emphasis on ‘professionalism’, knowledge and making connections.	→ ←	Training and continuous professional development.
Potential for substantial gains when students become active participants in the improvement cycle, and are able to contribute to the change process.	→ ←	Evaluative feedback: providing the means and tools to support the school improvement cycle.
Students are a source of ‘data’ and intelligence; ‘school improvement groups’ made up of teachers and students may act as a catalyst for change and develop alternative communities of practice.	→ ←	Opportunities for networking, sharing knowledge and forming alternative learning communities.
A range of support provided by internal and external stakeholders during the school improvement cycle. ¹⁰		

Teacher professional development

So what do we mean by 'teacher professional development'? Research indicates that highly effective school improvement initiatives incorporate teacher development that seeks to advance teachers' skills, knowledge and competency, including the exploration of different approaches to teaching and learning.¹¹ Professional development encompasses knowledge from a variety of research, external information such as inspections, and teachers' personal experiences and understanding as individuals and as a group.¹²

A recent report that synthesised data from 35 evidence-based studies on teacher professional development over the last 10 years, showed that, while effective teaching makes a difference to learning, certain kinds of professional development can influence the enhancement of teachers' skills and students' learning experiences.¹³ Seven characteristics of professional development that made a difference to teachers' practice were identified.¹⁴

Professional development:

- 1 is concrete and classroom-based
- 2 uses external expertise
- 3 incorporates teacher participation in the choice of areas to develop, and activities in which to take part
- 4 enables collaborative working with peers
- 5 involves opportunities for mentoring and coaching
- 6 continues and is sustained over time
- 7 is reinforced and supported by effective leadership.

Indeed, these features correspond quite closely to four elements associated with teacher development and school improvement:¹⁵

- collaboration built on sharing, communication, some degree of 'risk-taking', the exploration of more diverse teaching methods and an 'improved sense of efficacy' among teachers
- reflection and the analysis of practice within a 'feedback loop' or process of critical engagement

- action enquiry led by teachers that draws data using different techniques and from various research or philosophical positions
- classroom observation that links the practice of reflection and collaborative working.

While there are many benefits to continuous professional development (CPD), there are also some possible downsides:

- CPD may, for many teachers, be restricted to courses of a more traditional nature, conferences and INSET days.
- Take-up and degree of participation in CPD opportunities may be influenced by cost, distance, teacher workload, coordination and management and the availability of suitable cover.
- School development needs and national priorities may take precedence over individual needs and 'rebalancing' is sometimes required.

Just as school improvement processes generally require periods of self-evaluation at a more global level, CPD too benefits from a similar, regular form of self-review.

“There is clearly a need to follow-up and follow-through CPD interventions so that clear links are established between CPD provision for teachers leading to enhanced teacher quality and the attainment and achievement of students.”¹⁶

Participant feedback plays an integral role in the evaluation of any activity, and should be embedded within school processes.¹⁷ CPD for educational practitioners should ensure “enduring change in their attitudes and perceptions, along with how they use the new knowledge and skills they have acquired.”¹⁸

“Individuals are to be welcomed, appreciated, and fostered for their own sakes, but also for the mutual enrichment which comes from diversity. Similarly, interdependence is valued because it celebrates both the group and the team. The culture also embodies beliefs about means. Interdependence leads to mutual constraint, and it is the resulting security which encourages members of the culture to be open with one another in the expression of disagreement and emotion.”¹⁹

Key elements in educational change

In contemporary contexts, these potential elements can be listed as follows: “curriculum and instruction, organisational development and the decentralisation of decision making,”²⁰ the synergy and integration of which form a vital component of the improvement process.²¹ The late 1980s saw the inception of the International School Improvement Project (ISIP) by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which appeared to take a more “holistic and systemic” view of educational improvement and change.²² Their rhetoric was seen as fairly revolutionary, at a time when school strategies leaned more towards the ‘top-down’ or ‘outside-in’ cluster of approaches. ISIP proposed the following conditions for change:²³

- the school is at the centre of change: external initiatives should ideally take into account the individual settings and contexts of schools and classrooms and not look to apply a ‘one-size-fits-all’ template across the board

- a systemic approach to change: planning at a macro-level and coordination are key aspects of any proposed change and should seek a more long-term view
- ‘internal conditions’ of schools are vital: these include the more micro-level practices; teaching and learning, school rules and procedures and allocation of roles, responsibilities and resources
- adopting a multi-level perspective: schools are embedded within an ‘educational system’ where different stakeholders could potentially work collaboratively, e.g. parents, governors and external stimuli such as partner organisations and policy makers
- integrative implementation strategies: indicates a potential link between the inevitable ‘top-down’ approaches with the ‘bottom-up’ approaches
- the drive towards institutionalisation: where change evolves into natural practice and becomes ‘second-nature’ at all levels of the school.

Endnotes

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