Sustainable Improvement
Building Learning Communities that Endure

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Drawing on two decades of research into the nature of schools as learning communities, the authors build on a prior model of learning communities that integrated three domains of capacity: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. In this text, the authors move the capacity-building model into practice and elaborate a theory of learning communities.

This book situates learning communities in living systems and ecological perspectives. The fundamental premise is that all of human life and human activity is part of a deep planetary ecology of which mutuality and interdependence are cornerstone properties, learning and renewal are key processes, and emergent networks are foundational structures. The text juxtaposes these conceptions with educational practices in order to understand what makes practice different in learning community schools. The authors argue that sustainable educational improvement emerges from a reciprocal process of building people who are constantly learning, building commitments to authentic learning, and building schools with a relentless focus on learning. The authors conclude that building a sustainable learning community requires a profound shift in how learning is understood, discussed, valued, enabled, and expressed. This shift, they argue, is essential as schools face the challenges and opportunities in the knowledge society.

The book will be of interest to educators at all levels: leaders who want to build learning-focused schools, teachers who want to improve the learning experiences of their students, parents who want their children to succeed in school, and professors of education who support and educate the professional cadre.
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DEDICATION

Because this book speaks to the future of education, because it holds the promise for lives lived well in schools, we dedicate it to our children and grandchildren.

Coral’s children:
Kelvin and Renata Mag-atas

Coral’s grandchildren:
Riley Mag-atas and Hunter Blair

Larry’s children:
Blair, Karine, and Leanne Sackney

Larry’s grandchildren:
Mathieu and Claudie Sackney
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PREFACE

For close to two decades, our academic careers have been dedicated to a journey of discovery about schools as learning communities. We were launched into the journey by reading Peter Senge’s (1990) book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Journey*, in which we saw what organizations could look like if they put authentic, meaningful, purposeful learning at the centre of every activity. As educators, we found this to be a compelling image, and we set out to investigate the ways in which schools could be built to fulfil that promise.

Our first forays explored what schools as learning communities might look like, which culminated in the publication of *Profound Improvement: Building Capacity for Schools as Learning Communities* (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). In that text, we argued for an integrated set of personal, interpersonal, and organizational capacities upon which educators could rely as they sought to change educational practices to support profound improvements in teaching and learning. At the time, our perspective was rooted in Bohm’s (1980) view of a whole, integrated, deeply connected universe, and we positioned ecological concepts with respect to the inherent wholeness of individual elements and the deep connections among seemingly disparate parts. From that perspective, we constructed a model to show what kinds of capacity could be built; how the various elements of each kind of capacity constituted a functional whole; and how the different capacities flowed in and through one another as educators set out to explain, enrich, enhance, and advance their professional lives and the lives of their students.

That model shone the spotlight on the contents of capacity but gave only brief glimpses into the actions behind the content. On the second leg of our journey, therefore, we were interested in exploring the activities and processes by which capacity is built, and we found the need to push our ecological understandings in new directions. Capra’s (1996) distinction between holism and deep ecology describes the shift our thinking took:

The two terms “holistic” and “ecological” differ slightly in their meanings, and it seems that “holistic” is somewhat less appropriate to describe the new paradigm. A holistic view of, say, a bicycle means to see the bicycle as a functional whole and to understand the interdependence of its parts accordingly. An ecological view of the bicycle includes that, but it adds to it the perception of how the bicycle is embedded in its natural and social environment—where the raw materials that went into it came from, how it was manufactured, how
its use affects the natural environment and the community by which it is used, and so on. (pp. 6–7)

This description shifts wholeness and interdependence past specific elements and connections into an entire history of actions, interactions, transactions, and transformations that bring forth, at certain times and places, a particular set of conditions that shape human lives in particular ways. From that perspective, we were engaged not just in discovering what schools, teaching, and learning looked like, but in exploring the totality of mutual influences, interconnections, reciprocal relationships, and active processes by which they came to be as they were—and the consequential effects they had on the lives of students, educators, and other members of the school community.

The shift in our perspective on ecology moved us from the what of learning communities to how, why, and to what effect considerations, consequently pushing us into what Capra (1996, p. 8) calls the profound questions of deep ecology. As we worked at repositioning the original model with these considerations in mind, and as we attempted to sort out what the reality of schooling looked like, how it came to be this way, and how it could be constructed differently, we realized that we were moving past model building into a process of theory building.

A model is a representation of social reality, a mental picture that helps us to make sense of a given construct or to understand something we cannot see or experience directly. It is typically not used to explain a complicated process; rather, it is used to simplify the process and to make it more understandable. Theory, on the other hand, is a way of thinking differently about life in schools and classrooms; it enables us to see and analyze teaching and learning more broadly and deeply than we could with a model. Theories push past mere understanding to serve as a basis for thinking systematically about an array of complex and interconnected matters (such as effective ways to lead in a learning community). They allow us to (a) describe events and behaviours, (b) understand and explain events and behaviours, (c) anticipate future events and behaviours, and (d) plan for future events under particular circumstances (see Owens, 2001).

No theory can be established beyond all doubt, and a theory may be modified on the basis of further insights. Whether a theory is maintained, revised, or abandoned is determined by the outcome of research generated by the theory, which is to say that the relationships among theory, research, and practice are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing in character. Our research on learning communities took us into the action-world of learning community practice, which led us to develop a theory of the construct that
is rooted in living systems conceptions, primarily as articulated by Capra (1996, 2002). His theories helped us to understand and explain how certain practitioners built schools that became life-enhancing rather than life-destroying. His theories also shed light on how this process is likely to unfold over time or in other places, and what subsequent effects it is likely to have for the people in the learning community. The figures we have generated represent the models through which we expect the process to unfold. They provide a frame to show what the conceptual elements are, but they do not explain how the elements work. The explanation, as theorized from Capra’s perspective on living systems, is that the process is powered by disturbances that capture the attention of certain people at certain places and times, and by responses that are meaningful and purposeful in and for that particular context.

Deep ecology serves as the philosophical foundation of our theory of learning communities. This philosophy is rooted in an appreciation of the totality of patterns, relationships, actions, interactions, and mutual influences that emerge among and between people and the natural and constructed environments in which they live. It is supported by discoveries in the physical world, wherein the theories of quantum physics, nonlinear dynamics, and biological self-regeneration (among others) show that all human life and human activity is intimately connected, and that it is deeply affected by and affecting all aspects of the world. These theoretical insights teach that ecology is an elemental aspect of all living systems, including educational systems, and that all human life, including life in schools, is part of a deep planetary ecology of which mutuality and interdependency are key properties, learning and renewal are key processes, and emergent networks are foundational structures. Under this philosophical canopy, our theory of schools and learning communities rejects Newtonian images of the universe and embraces “the science of our times” (Wheatley, 1992, p. 6).

The discussions and stories in this text stand as testaments to the value of looking at schools as living systems and of looking at education, teaching, and learning as deeply embedded ecologies. We open the book with a chapter that sets out our philosophical stance and theoretical orientation. The second chapter situates the work in conceptual understandings of organizational learning and in common elements of learning community schools. The remaining chapters show how the philosophy, theory, and concepts played out in high-capacity learning community schools. In Chapter 3, the stories tell of how the educators went about building the people in the learning community; chapter 4 offers stories of how they built commitments, and in chapter 5, we move to stories of school-building. Chapter 6 shows what effects these building processes had on teachers and
students in the classrooms of high-capacity learning community schools. In each of these chapters, we have interpreted the activities we observed in the schools through contemporary understandings about strong teaching and learning as well as through the theoretical and philosophical lenses we brought to the work. In the final chapter, we return to the lessons of ecological philosophy, living systems theory, and learning community practices for constructing schools that can support and sustain real, authentic, energizing, life-enhancing learning for the long term.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Many people have accompanied us on our journey of discovery into sustainable learning community schools, and we want to take this opportunity to thank them. First, we were warmly welcomed into the spaces of teachers, students, administrators, and parents in a number of schools in Ontario and Saskatchewan, Canada. These people showed great courage and enormous trust as they opened their practices to our scrutiny, and we are privileged to be able to bear witness to their lives. Our entry to the schools was accommodated and enabled by central office administrators, and we are grateful for their willingness to grant us unfettered access to the schools for which they were responsible – even though they were unsure of what we would discover or what uses we would make of the discoveries. Again, we are privileged to have been so trusted and supported. We have worked hard in this text to honour the trust shown by all members of the schools and the educational systems to which our journey took us.

Second, our colleagues and graduate students have been integral to the research process. Keith Walker, a colleague from the University of Saskatchewan, was a member of the research team from the inception of the second leg of the research journey through three years of data collection. A strong team of graduate students joined us at various stages of the research to assist in data collection, data recording and summarizing, statistical analyses, report generation, and project management: Dave Burgess, Alison Dollar, Heather Duncan, Randy Duncan, Paul Humbart, Ben Kutsyuruba, Paul Newton, James Propp, and Vicki Squires in Saskatchewan; and Tom Cieslak, Sangita Gandotra, Gary Kovaks, Nadine Litwin, Nicola Simmons, Cathy Vandervliet, and Donia Zhang in Ontario. We would also be remiss if we failed to acknowledge how our thinking and learning have been influenced over many years of discussions and interactions with colleagues in our home universities and across our broader educational networks. We take this opportunity to thank all our colleagues.
for their many contributions to this research and also to our more general understandings.

We wish to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, whose generous research funding enabled us to visit many schools and to meet many educators, students, and parents. We also extend deep gratitude and appreciation to Rahul Kumar and Kelly Powick-Kumar for their most thorough attention to editing and formatting the document. Their fine eye for detail and their expertise with technology brought forth a text that is remarkably error-free and visually appealing. Any errors that remain are our fault, alone.

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Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney
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CHAPTER 1

A SHIFTING PARADIGM IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

Learning communities have sprung up on the educational landscape like crocuses on a prairie meadow. Just as crocuses hold the promise of new life that comes with the spring, learning communities hold the promise of new energy that comes with learning. Because of this promise, we have devoted the past 15 years to an intensive exploration of schools as learning communities. Our early investigations focused on defining the concept and building a model for development, which led us to position learning community schools in relation to three interdependent domains of capacity for learning: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. We described that work in *Profound Improvement: Building Capacity for a Learning Community* (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

In our subsequent research, we have been concerned with moving learning community models into practice. As we observed the ways in which teaching and learning are facilitated and practiced in schools that operate as learning communities, we gained a deeper understanding of some underlying principles and values that make educational practice quite different in learning community schools as compared to traditional schools. In this book, we present the reconceptualization of learning communities that has emerged from that work. Our explorations over the past few years have convinced us that building sustainable learning communities does not mean tinkering at the edges of educational practice; instead, it requires a profound shift in how we think about, talk about, and value learning. Before we present the practical expressions, therefore, we see a need to situate them in a philosophical and theoretical home, which is the purpose of this chapter.

ECOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Our philosophical perspective on learning communities for the 21st century is rooted in living systems and ecological conceptions and understandings, primarily as delineated by Fritjof Capra. Capra is a theoretical physicist whose work on physical systems gradually led him to an awareness that all aspects of our world are interconnected, reciprocal, and relational. In an early work, *The Turning Point* (1982), as he articulated the connections and
relationships among the natural sciences, he came to see that life is at the centre of all reality. In *The Web of Life* (1996), he pursued this line of thought in a presentation of the key characteristics of living systems and deep ecology. His most recent work, *The Hidden Connections* (2002), moves the understandings and practices of living systems and deep ecology into the cognitive and social world. His work has been deeply consequential in shaping our philosophy of education in general and of learning communities in particular. We have been particularly struck by his argument that a living systems perspective is not simply a metaphor for organizational life but is a literal description of the communities of people who come together to do the work of an organization. That is, in that organizations are populated by people, they are, in fact, living systems. The challenge he poses is for organizations to embrace their humanity and to become life-enhancing rather than life-destroying. This is our hope for contemporary schools and the dream on which we situate learning communities.

An assumption of schools as learning communities is that the people in them learn and grow as they confront the challenges, successes, and mysteries of teaching and learning. The living systems perspective sheds light on how this process might unfold. Capra (2002) contends that “human beings, like all living systems, cannot be directed but can only be disturbed” (p. 154). He argues that different disturbances catch people’s attention differently, and that, once our attention has been caught, we respond when we see compelling reasons to do so, and in ways that are personally meaningful. For many years, we have been disturbed by the focus in school systems on production, activity, and achievement rather than on learning, a condition that has been exacerbated by the current practice of accounting for achievement through high-stakes testing. In spite of the rhetoric that links test results to learning outcomes, we believe that a climate where outcomes are made public does not accommodate learning, no matter how wide or how limited the publication. Instead, it fosters a desire to look good, it focuses learning on externally imposed outcomes, and it encourages the practice of teaching to the test. As Nichols and Berliner (2008) have discovered, these conditions suck the life out of learning and turn schooling into a burden rather than a joy, for students and teachers alike. We see these as compelling reasons to respond, and we are joined by many people in schools, classrooms, school systems, and the academy who have noticed the same thing, who also have compelling reasons to respond, and who are sowing the seeds of what could be a revolution in education: a revolution that puts real, joyful, human learning at the centre of educational activity. From our standpoint, this is what lies at the heart of the learning community movement.
In *Profound Improvement* (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000), we positioned the learning community in an ecological metaphor that saw learning as an inherent quality of life and that placed it in a holistic view of human processes. Looking at learning from this perspective signifies that people learn all the time, but they might not be learning what someone else thinks they should learn. Their learning is enmeshed in the entire constellation of influences and conditions impinging on them and in the entire system of their personal histories, dispositions, and capacities. They learn what they want to know, when they want to know it, and in a way that has meaning for them. We contended that any learning expectations standing outside this personally determined and directed process must be brought to life for the learners before they will invest time and energy in the learning process. To use Capra’s (2002) terms, it means that people learn according to the conditions that disturb them and the reasons that are compelling to them, and they learn in ways that make sense to them. This implies that learning is likely to be personal, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. It does not imply that learners cannot or will not learn material that is presented to them by a teacher, but it does mean that they will learn when the material has personal meaning for them and when the reasons to learn it are compelling to them. In short, their learning cannot be directed and controlled, but it can be shaped and influenced. In the years since the publication of *Profound Improvement*, our experiences with school people have given us an even stronger commitment to this view of learning, and it stands as the theoretical cornerstone upon which we develop the ideas in this text.

In *Profound Improvement* (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000), we spoke of ecology as an alternative metaphor with which to understand and view teaching and learning, but in the intervening years, we have come to appreciate ecology as much more than a simple metaphoric lens. We now see it as a foundational concept that historically has been neglected in educational practice and discourse but that must now come to centre stage if education is to fulfill its promise for the 21st century. In general terms, the Webster dictionary defines ecology as “a branch of science concerned with the interrelationship of organisms and their environments, especially as manifested by natural cycles and rhythms, community development and structure, interaction between different kinds of organisms, geographic distributions, and population alterations.” Under this definition, ecology refers to the totality of patterns, connections, relationships, interactions, and mutual influences that emerge among people, between people and their environments, and between people and the forces impinging on them. In this way, it is more than a metaphor; it is an elemental process of all living systems, including educational systems.
In theoretical terms, ecology is framed in 20th century scientific discoveries, including quantum physics, nonlinear dynamics (a.k.a. complexity theory), and biological self-regeneration. Our engagement with these and other emergent scientific perspectives has unfolded over the past three decades, and we cannot, in this text, narrate that journey. We can, however, point readers to Margaret Wheatley’s (1992) ground-breaking text entitled *Leadership and the New Sciences*, in which she provides an exquisite map of the terrain that links 20th century sciences to leadership theory. The fundamental linking premise is that all of human life and human activity is deeply and intimately connected to everything else on the planet. Our world is not a world of distinct parts and separate events but is, instead, a world of connections, interrelationships, interdependencies, systems, and mutual influences. It is a world that, according to Capra (2002), cannot be determined and directed but can be informed and influenced; it emerges naturally as living beings respond meaningfully to environmental shifts that have caught their attention. It is a world that, according to Bohm (1980), must be viewed holistically because what appears to be separate and distinct at one level becomes unified at another level. The views of Capra and Bohm, although couched in different terms and derived from different scientific orientations, are really presenting the same philosophical view of the world: that all human life is part of a deep planetary ecology, of which mutuality and interdependency are the cornerstone properties, learning and renewal are the key processes, and emergent networks are the foundational structures.

ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATION

The notion of deep ecology, when applied to teaching, learning, and educational systems, calls forth a new set of educational images and requires a new language. The ecological perspective implies an appreciation of the dynamic connections, relationships, and mutual influences that impinge on teaching and learning, a view that is markedly different from the more usual linear conceptions of cause and effect. If, for example, concerns are raised over student behaviour, an ecological perspective requires a shift in practice from dealing with specific behaviours to gathering information about the connections between a child’s behaviour and that child’s other life and school issues, histories, and experiences. It requires taking into consideration the totality of the child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical history and makeup as well as the context of the current situation. It requires a search for patterns of responses that situate a specific problematic behaviour within a history (or current condition) of unfulfilled
promise, untapped energy, or unhappy experience. This perspective implies that a different language should be used when dealing with learning or behaviour issues: instead of speaking about problems, solutions, or punishments, the language should be about meaning, patterns, and purpose. If the teacher can understand the reasons and histories beneath the behaviour, then not only does the behaviour make sense, but also a potential path to more appropriate behaviour can become apparent.

Nor is it enough to shift focus and language only when dealing with problematic issues or events. An ecological perspective requires a more general shift in language so that meaning, patterns, purposes, influences, and relationships become the primary terms and first questions in all educational conversations, regardless of whether the conversations take place in the classroom, staff room, school, university, home, or elsewhere. From this perspective, one might ask, “What does this learning experience mean to these learners? How does it connect to their lives? How have they responded to similar experiences in the past?” This type of language values the learners and honours the deep connection between life and learning, both of which are cornerstone concepts of the ecological perspective.

An ecological perspective shifts the focus from looking at distinct parts of an educational event or system to thinking about holistic representations within an educational space. This shift in focus acknowledges, for example, that individuals are not islands unto themselves, regardless of how seldom they come into physical contact with one another. Instead, people mutually influence one another: what we do deeply affects the people around us, and what they do affects us. Of course, saying that others affect us is no surprise. We are all well aware of how other people support, limit, encourage, confuse, irritate, please, anger, help, and hurt us. What is less obvious, however, is that the effects work both ways. We, too, have an impact on the people who share our space, even if we are unaware of or do not acknowledge those impacts. Everything we do is a move in the games we play with the folks in our community; if we refuse to play a certain game, that decision in itself is a move that affects the other players. The ecological perspective appreciates this mutuality and holism of experience whereby events that seem chaotic or confusing at one level become meaningful and ordered when the focus shifts to a different level, a different set of assumptions, or a different person’s meaning.

Deep ecology implies that shifts in language and focus must be accompanied by a fundamental perceptual change. Capra (2002) noted that, as he gradually became aware of the deep connections between physical systems and living systems, he underwent a profound change of perception whereby “the physics paradigm had to be replaced by a broader conceptual
framework, a vision of reality in which life was at the very center” (p. xvi). We believe that an ecological perspective of education requires a similar perceptual shift. It requires a perception of learning as the centre of everything. This might seem obvious to most readers: of course learning is at the centre of all that we do in education. But although this truth seems obvious, it does not necessarily translate into practice. If, as suggested by an ecological perspective, learning emerges in response to mutual influences operating at all levels of the system, then it is fundamentally shaped by the structures, functions, and roles that have been developed to contain the learning and to house the learners. In traditional schools, these influences on learning are seldom articulated and are certainly not analyzed or critiqued. In most schools, people work and study in isolation, are unaware of the effects of their own actions on others around them, and are expected to comply with specified processes and outcomes that might have little to do with the challenges and interests of their own world. In many cases, schooling seems to be more about producing than it is about learning. The required perceptual shift is to recognize that, under such conditions, learning is not central to everything. It is so seriously constrained by pre-determined structures, rules, processes, objectives, and curricular expectations that it loses personal meaning for individual learners, and true learning, if it happens at all, emerges from the margins rather than the centre of the educational enterprise. The required perceptual shift is to recognize that, in spite of all the rhetoric about learning, educators and students do not really see learning as a life process that breathes energy and excitement into schools and classrooms.

The view of learning as an inherent quality of life gives it a power and a presence that often gets lost in educational discussions that view learning within a deficiency model. In deficiency discourses, many children (and teachers) are described as being unable to learn, unwilling to learn, or too disruptive to learn. Teachers agonize over the students who fail to meet grade-level and content-specific learning outcomes, and administrators lament over the teachers who fail to learn new strategies for curriculum, instruction, assessment, or classroom management. An ecological discourse is fundamentally different insofar as it recognizes that children and adults learn all the time. We cannot help it because, as Capra (2002) points out, “choosing what to notice and how to respond is the very essence of being alive” (p. 154). The ecological perspective shines the spotlight on what the children and teachers are noticing and how they are responding. Instead of asking, “Are they learning this?” we should ask, “What are they learning?” This question honours the presence of learning as a life process and reinforces the power of the learner to attend and respond in ways that make
personal sense. This does not imply that every response meaningful to a learner is appropriate for a given time and place, but it does take the heat out of difficult situations. By asking the second question, teachers and administrators honour the integrity of the learner’s process and open the door for constructive conversations rather than destructive confrontations between the learner and the teacher or between the teacher and the administrator.

Within traditional conceptions of schooling, students do and produce rather than learn at school. This assertion can be borne out by asking children, “What did you learn in school today?” Typically the answer will be, “Nothing.” They can, however, provide long answers to the question, “What did you do in school today?” In spite of this emphasis on doing and producing, students do learn; the catch is that it is impossible to control what they actually learn. Coral offers the following personal example:

I remember, when I was in Grade 3, being confused about the meaning of the word puzzled as an adjective and a verb. I had come across that word several times in a book I was reading but only understood puzzle as a noun, an object, and couldn’t transfer the meaning to other forms. One day my teacher, Mrs. O’Byrne, was teaching a mathematics concept I didn’t understand. She said to me, “Coral, you’re looking puzzled. What don’t you understand?” At that moment, I learned what puzzled as an adjective and a verb meant. To this day, I don’t remember the math concept, but I still remember the excitement of learning the broader meaning of that one pesky word. I remember the excitement of rushing home to tell my father what I had learned. For the first time, I could answer his daily question, “What did you learn today?” Mrs. O’Byrne thought she was teaching a math lesson. She had no idea that she had just taught me one of the most memorable language lessons of my life.

It is exactly this kind of excitement that is the test of true learning. If classrooms and lessons do not bring forth similar energy and excitement, then learning is probably not happening. Students might be doing things and generating products, but if they are not excited, there is a good chance they are not learning. Even using the term student is problematic for learning because it conjures up all the hidden socio-cultural assumptions of school children as dependent, passive recipients of an education that matters to someone else. Notice, for example, how familiar it feels to speak about my students but how odd it feels to say my learners. The former term carries a seemingly natural assumption of ownership and possession whereas the second term disturbs those assumptions through its connotation.
of superiority, entitlement, and arrogance. Would anyone dare to assume that s/he could own a learner? If we would not own learners, then how dare we assume to control or restrict their learning?

To sum up: in spite of all our attempts to entice students to learn certain ideas in certain ways, they learn what they want, when they see compelling reasons to do so, and in ways that have personal meaning for them. This is when they become active learners rather than passive students, and this is what breathe life, energy, and excitement into classrooms. To make this kind of learning the norm rather than the exception, we believe that it is essential for educators to make an associated cognitive leap wherein they see themselves not as teachers of students but as co-learners with the children (and the adults) who share their educational spaces. From this perspective, teaching and learning are deeply integrated processes, and it makes no sense to think of one without also thinking of the other. If learning has not taken place, then teaching has not happened, regardless of what the teacher thinks s/he has done. If learning has taken place, then teaching of some kind has happened, regardless of whether anyone was explicitly doing so. This signifies that educators and students are both learners and teachers because the learning of one spills over and inspires the learning of the other. When educators and students learn something new, especially when they learn it together, life in classrooms is exciting, indeed.

SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLING

Unfortunately, schools built on traditional assumptions of schooling are organized, structured, and operated not to foster learning but rather to cultivate compliance. Students’ learning, for example, is timed by school schedules: day plans, period lengths, weekly timetables, semester schedules, assessment periods, and reporting dates, to name just a few. The bell and the timetable are two powerful organizing mechanisms by which students are brought into compliance with the many structures that contain their school experiences. Their learning is similarly controlled and aligned through two powerful structuring mechanisms: the curriculum guide and the examination. In most schools, students are expected to learn material that has been determined by a Ministry, a school board, or a teacher to be important, and they demonstrate their compliance with the expectations by attending assigned classes at specified times and by completing defined activities, products, and examinations. In cases where students are given an opportunity to explore, investigate, question, or critique, they do so under tight curricular and time restrictions, and if their explorations take them into
unexpected territory, they are likely to be brought back in line with a reminder that “this isn’t in the curriculum.”

In schools operating under traditional assumptions and expectations, instruction is typically configured in a transmission mode (Watkins, 2005). In this mode, teachers present to the students the knowledge, skills, and/or attitudes that have been outlined in a curriculum guide; teachers instruct the students concerning the learning activities the students will undertake and the products they will complete to demonstrate knowledge attainment or skill/attitude development; and teachers grade the products and/or test the students to ensure that successful learning has occurred. In this mode, students are seldom invited to determine learning goals, to develop learning pathways, or to shape learning outcomes. The learning objectives may or may not be connected to their lives or aligned with their interests, but the pressure of covering the curriculum and preparing for the test militates against reconstructing educational moments so that topics and materials have personal meaning or relevance for the students.

This state of affairs is not conducive to learning, and although it is the tradition that has been in place for a long time, current conditions suggest that it is no longer sustainable. The impacts of global connectivity, new technologies, environmental degradation, and societal pluralism, among others, have put relentless pressure on existing human and planetary systems. As Homer-Dixon (2000) contends, to deal effectively with such deep challenges will require ingenuity and responsiveness at all socio-cultural and socio-political levels and in all human systems. Unfortunately, the traditional approach to schooling does not seem to be sufficiently responsive or appropriately grounded to meet the challenges of our time. Hargreaves (2003), for example, laments that, “instead of fostering creativity and ingenuity, more and more school systems have become obsessed with imposing and micromanaging curricular uniformity” (p. 1). He argues for “a high-investment, high-capacity educational system in which highly-skilled teachers are able to generate creativity and ingenuity among their students by experiencing creativity and flexibility themselves in how they are treated and developed as knowledge-society professionals” (p. 2). He contends that a knowledge society is actually a learning society in which deep cognition, ingenuity and invention, and creativity and responsiveness are the gold standards. He claims that,

Deep and broad learning for all students – and for all the adults who work with them – is learning for meaning, learning for understanding, learning for life. It is learning that engages students in every sense – intellectually, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. (p. 33).
His idea is reminiscent of Friere’s (2004) claim:

Children need to grow in the exercise of this ability to think, to question and question themselves, to doubt, to experiment with hypotheses for action, and to plan, rather than just following plans that, more than proposed, are imposed upon them. (p. 37)

For this kind of learning to be cultivated and sustained, the operating assumptions that underpin and drive educational systems will need to shift from the traditional deficit model to a capacity-building one. Under a deficit model, which emerged in response to a mechanistic clock-work worldview, knowledge or skill gaps were seen as problems to be overcome or deficiencies to be eliminated. Learning objectives were categorized into grade-specific and subject-specific units, and the objectives were expected to be obtained along a specific learning pathway and within a specified timeframe. Learners who struggled to march on the pathway or to learn within the time limits were seen as being “disabled” or “at-risk,” and “special education” strategies and structures were constructed to help realign these problem learners with the “learning-abled.” Similarly, teachers were held to specific standards of practice and were expected to implement “best practices” in their classrooms. Teachers who failed to meet the standards or who relied on non-approved instructional strategies were often labelled as “marginal” and could be subjected to intensive criticism from and scrutiny by their colleagues. In sum, the clock-work worldview of schooling assumed that there was one approved canon of knowledge to be learned, one best set of practices for teaching it, and one best learning path and timeline for acquiring it. Accordingly, the deficit model assumed that teachers or learners who failed to thrive at school would need interventions to shore up their weaknesses and reduce their deficiencies; if nothing worked, they would need to be removed from the school.

The capacity-building model, by contrast, takes a much more respectful view of learners and educators and a more sustainable view of learning and teaching. It assumes that everyone is a competent learner in his or her own right, that everyone has a rich foundation of experiences, information, and capacities with which they approach their world. It assumes that learning differences are not deficits or disabilities at all but are actually different pathways on which to learn and different ideas about what is important to be learned; it assumes that different approaches to teaching are personal responses to specific educational moments, challenges, or interests. From this perspective, knowledge or skill gaps are not problems at all but represent puzzles and mysteries that, when they attract the attention of the learner, impel the individual to learn, to grow, and to change, whether the
individual is a student, a teacher, an administrator, or another member of
the learning community. From this perspective, no one is a problem learner
or a marginal teacher and is actually differently abled rather than disabled.
This perspective assumes that everyone is learning and growing in ways
and at times that match their current capacity, that meet their purposes, and
that have meaning for them. The capacity-building model assumes that, as
long as learners appreciate the value of externally imposed outcomes or
standards, they will find personally appropriate ways and means for
learning them, an assumption that holds true for adults as well as children.
This description of capacity-building assumptions signals one inescapable
reality: learning and teaching are not standard, homogeneous processes, and
educational outcomes consequently should not be imposed, canonized,
standardized, or micromanaged.

At this point we must say that we are not naïve about or unaware of the
reality in 21st century schools. We are aware that many students come to
school having been damaged by life circumstances, emotional trauma, or
prior educational experiences and having lost self-esteem, confidence, or
willingness to learn. We are aware that these children, and at times their
families, present deeply troubling challenges for educators and school
systems. We are aware that there are no easy solutions for the issues faced
by these children and their teachers. One of our deepest concerns is that the
deficit model anchors these children’s learning difficulties in standardized
goals and expectations, and thereby reinforces their feelings of inadequacy,
incompetence, and alienation. It is not true to say that students such as these
cannot or do not learn. They certainly can and do, but what they learn often
perpetuates and exacerbates the damage. They learn, for example, that they
cannot succeed and therefore will not thrive at school; they learn that they
are problems to be solved rather than people to be respected; they learn that
they are at times seen as unwanted or disposable members of their school
community. Although these are not the messages that any teacher, school
administrator, or parent intends to send to students, they are the messages
often left in the minds and souls of students who find traditional learning
pathways difficult to travel and whose learning styles, experiences, and
outcomes are defined as problems. This is probably the most compelling
reason we see for shifting from a deficit to a capacity-building model of
schooling: our research has indicated that educators who make that shift
are better able to find life-enhancing ways to meet the challenges that these
children bring to their educational experiences. We have been privileged to
see many examples of fine teachers who bring healing back into the souls
of children who have been damaged by life or by school, who bring
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authentic learning into the lives of all their students, and who stay the course even when faced with relentless pressure to comply with a standardized system. We share some of their stories in subsequent chapters of this text.

Our understandings of and frameworks for building capacity were thoroughly explicated in Profound Improvement (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000), and we will not cover that territory again in this text. We have presented the contrasting assumptions of the deficit and capacity-building models here so as to position our current work in a theoretical home. We are not leaving behind the concept of building capacity for learning and growth. Rather, that foundation continues to inform and underpin our work as we have extended it into an exploration of sustainability in educational systems. Our definition of sustainability is grounded in Capra’s (2002) contention that a sustainable community “is designed so that its ways of life, businesses, economy, physical structures, and technologies do not interfere with nature’s inherent ability to sustain life” (pp. 214–215). To parallel his thesis, we define sustainable educational systems as those in which the structures, programs, expectations, and practices do not interfere with but actively support people’s inherent ability to learn. This definition positions sustainability as a precursor to as well as evidence of authentic learning. It takes into consideration the entire ecology of a school: the structures, functions, artefacts, resources, principles, people, relationships, processes, practices, goals, expectations, values, beliefs, assumptions, and other influences. We contend that, if the excitement of learning is not evident in a school, classroom, or other educational space, then the system is unsustainable. If true learning is evident on a regular basis, then it can be assumed that the system was constructed under sustainability principles. This is not a tautology. It is an example of the dynamic and reciprocal character of educational constructions and the mutually reinforcing interplay among principles, structures, and outcomes.

In recent years, the question of sustainability has attracted the attention of such well-known educational scholars as Friere (2004), Fullan (2005), and Hargreaves and Fink (2006). These scholars each connect educational health with sustainability principles, albeit somewhat differently. Friere, for example, offers a critical analysis:

Radical, critical education must never lack a lucid perception of change, which itself reveals the intervening presence of human beings in the world. Part of this lucid perception of change is the political and ideological nature of our stance toward it, regardless of whether we are aware of that fact or not. (p. 6)
He goes on to say,

Thus, it follows that our presence in the world, which implies choice and decision, is not a neutral presence. . . . If my presence in history is not neutral, I must accept its political nature as critically as possible. . . . I must make use of every possibility there is not only to speak about my utopia, but also to engage in practices consistent with it. (p. 7)

By contrast, Fullan takes an institutional approach: “Sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (p. ix). Hargreaves and Fink are the ones who align their discourse most closely with an ecological perspective:

The environmental movement and its commitment to sustainability teach vital lessons for achieving sustainability in educational organizations and other organizations, too: the value of rich diversity over soulless standardization, the necessity of taking the long view, the wisdom of being prudent about conserving and renewing human and financial resources, the moral obligation to consider the effects of our improvement efforts on others in the environment around us, the importance of acting urgently for change while waiting patiently for the results, and the proof that each of us can be an activist and that all of us can make a difference. (p. 4)

Our work entails yet another approach. With our persistent focus on learning, we position sustainability as a rather simple concept: it is the evidence of authentic learning that emerges naturally when people attend to conditions in their environment and respond in ways that have personal meaning for them. To say it is a simple concept, however, does not imply that it is easy to attain. Friere (2004) warns that, “while change is difficult, it is possible” (p. 33), and the shifts required by sustainability principles are profound changes, not incremental tweaks. To paraphrase Friere, building sustainable educational systems will be difficult, but it is possible.

To assess the degree of sustainability in an educational system, educators can conduct what we call an ecological assessment. We have modelled this strategy on what Hargreaves and Fink (2006, p. 153) call an ecological footprint, which is a description of human impacts on a particular physical environment. An ecological assessment entails examining the drains and restorative impacts that various educational activities exert on the system. The long-term sustainability of an educational system can be deduced from the relationship between the removal and addition of learning capacity: if the drains exceed the restorative impacts, then sustainability can be
enhanced by reducing drains and/or by adding capacity to the system. Incidentally, drains and restorative impacts do not relate simply to material resources. They are implicated in a broad constellation of learning capacities, including cognitive, affective, social, and physical contexts, and an ecological assessment must examine the totality of resources that are being removed from and added to a system.

Although we have written this section in terms of general educational sustainability, in this text we are specifically concerned with educational practices that generate and sustain school development and educational improvement, which has been the focus of our current research. Unfortunately, as Fullan (2005) points out, school improvement does not have a history of long-term success, and our research certainly confirms this pattern. In our studies, we have found some schools that have been able to generate but not sustain improvement, others that have been unsuccessful in both aspects, and a precious few that have been able to build improvement principles, strategies, and systems that have lasted for quite some time. We are aware of the fragility of these latter schools over the long term. Giles and Hargreaves (2006), for example, point out that some of their research schools with a long history of success as learning communities have started to succumb to pressures from external curricular expectations and accountability measures, internal personnel and leadership changes, intensified workloads, and resource depletion and are starting to revert to traditional norms and operating structures. We are not naive enough to think that, even if educators do generate exciting and energizing learning spaces, they will be able to sustain that level of excitement and energy when faced with the pressure to comply with objectives, practices, procedures, and strategies that do not cultivate true learning. Sustainable improvement, from an ecological perspective, is not a property of an individual classroom, school, or school division. It is, as Capra (2002, p. 215) argues, a property of the entire system that impinges on life and learning in classrooms and schools. This does not imply that individual teachers and administrators are helpless in the face of an unsustainable external environment. It does imply, however, that they will need repeatedly to identify and articulate their own compelling reasons to sustain appropriate educational practice in the face of the relentless pressure to do otherwise. This, to repeat Friere (2004), is difficult but not impossible.

CONSTRUCTIONS AND CO-CONSTRUCTIONS OF EDUCATION

The ecological perspective signifies that educational systems are not naturally occurring phenomena but are constructed by human beings and, as human constructions, they reflect the kind of education that people in
specific places and times believe to be natural or important. In the early stages of development, the processes of construction might be visible, but over time they disappear into the background, and the constructed system appears to be the only construction possible. The familiar has become the correct, and it is remarkably resistant to change or critique. In spite of this tacit protection, however, constructed products can be deconstructed and reconstructed, if there is sufficient disturbance in the system and if members of the community see compelling reasons to change. The concept of personally and collectively constructed systems is one of the most promising notions to emerge from an ecological perspective: if we recognize the existing educational system as a personally and collectively constructed reality, we are then free to imagine other realities and, once imagined, the new image can nudge us in different directions and toward different constructions that have greater meaning and that make more sense for current conditions. It is this concept that holds the greatest promise for reconstructing educational systems so that the excitement and joy of learning can become the norm rather than the exception for all children and adults working in the schools and so that educational improvement becomes a way of life rather than an initiative.

Personal and collective constructions are not limited to discussions about systems and structures but also have implications for teaching and learning. Constructivist learning theory (Foote, Vermette, & Battaglia, 2001) positions knowledge as emerging from a complex, dynamic interplay between personal and interpersonal sense-making processes. As individuals confront mysteries, puzzles, and challenges in their educational world, they consider how these conundrums map onto existing mental frameworks and previous understandings. To state it rather simplistically, learning happens as people reject the new concept, incorporate it into their existing schema, or redraw their mental maps. This process of personal knowledge construction occurs within a network of cherished collective understandings and culturally derived limits about what information can be noticed, what questions can be asked, and what answers can be supported (Capra, 2002, p. 87). Personal constructions can be extended and enriched by comparing information, questions, and answers with other members of the learning community. As people discuss the similarities and differences of their personal understandings and as the various personal conceptions are reshaped, reconfigured, and refined in the light of the discourse, tacit knowledge and new insights, previously unavailable to members of the community, come into view and are converted to explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Our work in schools has shown that, as knowledge emerges through this dynamic process of discovery and recovery of personal and collective constructions,
it makes much more sense to the learners than knowledge that is handed to them and learned intact. Constructed knowledge connects back to the learners’ real world, it is meaningful within their culture and experience, and, even when shaped by collective constructions, it is different for each learner. This is authentic learning, and it is this kind of learning that emerges when education honours an ecological perspective.

Situating learning within an ecological perspective seems, at first blush, to imply that there is little role for teachers, curricula, or a priori expectations. We do not believe this to be at all true. Instead, we see the importance of constructing a wide array of learning opportunities and a broad set of learning resources, goals, expectations, and content. Teachers provide some of these learning possibilities, as do government educational agencies, school board administrators and consultants, school administrators and teacher leaders, educational researchers and academics, and various other members of the attentive public. All of these sources add richness and diversity to the students’ school experiences. All of them add depth and breadth to what students are personally interested in and excited about. We believe that no teacher, no child, no school, and no school board should be faced with the daunting task of crafting entire curricula and resource materials alone. This is not a sustainable or desirable practice on any level. But externally prepared curricula, materials, and expectations should be considered as part of the menu rather than the full meal. The learning packages coming from outside the school or the classroom have several benefits. They can provide continuity across schools and classrooms, serve as focal points for teacher learning, and ignite the curiosity of students and teachers alike. The tasks, from an ecological perspective, are first to ensure that external resources do not take over the entire program of study and second to find ways to relate them to the lives and interests of the children and adults who work with them. If these essential tasks are properly completed, then externally developed programs are neither drudgery nor an imposition: they are rich sources of learning that have shifted the children’s understandings, enriched their lives, and offered new insights into their world.

The presence of external programs of study demonstrates the key role of the context in shaping responses to learning moments. Capra (2002) positions the influence in this way: “The autonomy of living systems must not be confused with independence. Living organisms are not isolated from their environment. They interact with it continually, but the environment does not determine their organization” (p. 85). His point is that the makeup of the context places certain limits on the capacity to act and that, although people always have choice, they do not have unfettered license or free rein.
The dynamic character of the impacts of context can be seen, for example, in the mutual influences of cognitive and affective climates in a school. If students have good relationships with teachers, they tend to learn better, and if teachers have good relationships with students, colleagues, administrators, and parents, they tend to teach better. Teachers who feel supported and cared for by colleagues and administrators are more likely to experiment with new ideas or new practices than are teachers who feel threatened or vulnerable in their school, and experiments by teachers often translate into interesting learning opportunities for students. Furthermore, teachers who feel comfortable in the school have an easier time building comfortable classroom environments for the students. These examples show that the ecology of a school can be partially situated by describing the mutual influences of the affective and cognitive climates on teaching and learning. To provide a fuller description of the ecology of a school requires an examination of a host of other contextual conditions that exert influences on learning, of the various responses emerging from the influences, and of the interplay between influence and response. Incidentally, the key role of context should signal that school ecologies will look quite different from school to school: there is no one template and no one set of best practices for building sustainable schools and school systems.

Constructing educational systems from an ecological perspective, therefore, requires careful and persistent attention to “the processes and patterns of organization of living systems – on the ‘hidden connections between phenomena’” (Capra, 2002, p. xvii). Deep ecology positions human systems as part of a planetary network of systems that are connected structurally, energetically, and cognitively. Healthy systems are self-renewing and self-regenerating: they eliminate that which no longer sustains them and import that which will help them to live and to grow. Process and structure are thereby inextricably linked (Capra, p. 38), and the dynamic interplay between process and structure is one of the constituents of learning within the system. Because educational systems are human systems, they are mediated by the same dynamics as any living system, and there is reason, therefore, to consider the extent to which the relationships between process, structure, and outcomes in the existing system support learning, build people, and sustain activity. Our contention is that, in most cases, educational systems require considerable reconstruction, and the learning community is an approach that we believe to hold great promise for the type of reconstruction that will breathe life and energy into classrooms.
CHAPTER 1

FROM ECOLOGY TO LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In this chapter we have developed a set of understandings that situate the learning community movement in a philosophical home. Much of this chapter has been rather theoretical and, at times, debatable. For example, when we discussed the conceptual differences between *marginal teachers* and *differently abled teachers*, we could hear our school colleagues saying, “But I do work with some marginal teachers. And they’re not just differently abled. They simply can’t teach and shouldn’t be around children.” This criticism is not without merit, and our philosophy is not a laissez-faire one. We certainly do not believe that “anything goes” in schools and classrooms, and we too have been disturbed by teachers whose practice is unacceptable. Our point is that, from an ecological perspective, such teachers would not stay in the system, especially if their practice damages children or colleagues. The self-renewing mechanism would force them either to grow or to go. In our work in school systems, we have seen this mechanism at work, and the teachers who do not or cannot learn to deal appropriately with students and colleagues usually leave the school on their own or, in some cases, are pushed out by pressures from administrators, colleagues, or parents.

We also believe, however, that the system itself can undermine or destroy people’s ability to teach or to learn, and marginal teachers or challenging learners might have been made rather than born. Just as some students have been damaged by their school experiences, some teachers have been damaged by their professional experiences. If people feel blamed or shamed in their schools or classrooms, it is a signal that they are working in an unsustainable environment, and there is a good chance that their learning will be stilted, stifled, or stalled. Under traditional assumptions, professional knowledge, identities, and reputations are built on the ability to perform best practice and to maximize student achievement, and professional relationships can be strained or conflicted when colleagues do not measure up to expected practice. By contrast, if people feel valued for who they are, what they know, and what they can do, then their professional knowledge, identity, and reputation develop in an environment that sustains, supports, and promotes their learning as they grow into new insights, capacities, and attitudes. In a learning system, teachers who struggle with teaching assignments or instructional challenges have the support they need either to build relevant professional capacity or to recognize the limits of their ability and the associated need to change assignments or careers.

The arguments we have presented in this chapter are not simply academic musings. We have come to them as we have watched teachers,
students, administrators, and parents struggle in traditional schools and thrive in learning community schools. For the past decade, our research has taken us into a number of schools that stand on both sides of this philosophic divide and that represent a wide array of school types: secondary and elementary; public, Catholic, and First Nations; large, medium, and small; urban, suburban, and rural; and low, medium, and high socio-economic communities. We have conducted our research by observing in classrooms, staffrooms, and meeting rooms, and by speaking with as many different teachers, students, administrators, parents, and other community members as possible. Our observations indicate that school context influences but does not determine the educational lives and learning patterns of the educators and students in the school.

In all types of settings, we have found great schools with a host of excellent teachers, interesting students, and exceptional learning structures and strategies. We have also found small pockets of excellence flourishing in some schools where other teachers and students do not thrive. (Incidentally, our research has convinced us that it is more common to find excellent teachers in struggling schools than to find struggling teachers in excellent schools.) We have observed many good teachers who are finding exciting, creative, ingenious methods for making a difference in the lives of the students in their classrooms and the colleagues in their schools and for whom the desire to experiment with new professional ideas and strategies is a way of life. In the high-capacity learning community schools, such teachers are the norm rather than the exception, and we have felt the excitement in these schools from the moment we entered the doors.

Our research has demonstrated that blame and shame have no place in learning community schools. Instead, these schools exude a spirit of encouragement and support, and they are sites of lively conversations about broad and deep aspects of teaching and learning. This construction of schooling, however, does not happen overnight. In many cases, it has required a fundamental shift in the philosophy by which people understand and construct their roles as educators and students. The philosophy of education underpinning many learning community schools enshrines a type of professional identity and a set of relationships that place learning at the centre of every activity, structure, plan, function, decision, interaction, conflict, objective, or outcome. It values each individual as a person with capacities, histories, and interests to be respected and honoured. It empowers people to undertake the hard work of constructing exciting, authentic, and supportive learning moments. It takes into account the entire ecology of a learning environment. This philosophy is not an easy one to develop or to follow, but we have found it to be possible.
We positioned this chapter in philosophical and theoretical terms so as to describe the values and beliefs that underlie our work with schools as learning communities. In subsequent chapters, we offer principles, strategies, and examples that will put some practical flesh onto the philosophical bones. We will return often to the concepts presented in this chapter as a scaffold for developing sustainable practices. It is important to emphasize, however, that we will not provide a template or a set of best practices for building sustainable learning communities. The best we can do is to offer strategies by which people might develop informed practice in their search for effective teaching and learning. As Capra (2002) warns,

Emergent solutions are created within the context of a particular organizational culture and generally cannot be transferred to another organization with a different culture. . . . What [organizational leaders] tend to do is replicate a new structure that has been successful without transferring the tacit knowledge and context of meaning from which the new structure emerged. (p. 119)

Because each school and school system begins the building process under different conditions, in different contexts, and with different people, we have not found nor can we offer any readily transferable structures or solutions or any easily followed recipes. Instead, we have found each learning pathway to be unique and each learning community to look different. In the chapters that follow, we will share many of these stories in the expectation that they will help to illuminate the path of others who are walking toward sustainable improvement.
CONSTRUCTIONS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

To think of constructions of learning communities is to confront the connection between human action and social reality. Since at least the middle of the 20th century, the question of constructed realities has been of interest to scholars as they have attempted to tease out the deep structures and enabling mechanisms through which people bring forth the world in which they live. Much of this work has taken a sociological approach, with one of the most compelling explications of the topic being Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) seminal text, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Their main thesis is that, as people live out their lives in a particular social milieu and draw meaning from their personal and collective experiences, there emerges a set of tacitly agreed-upon assumptions about what is real, what is right, and what is appropriate within that society. As the assumptions become anchored in people’s minds, they put context-specific boundaries around what is possible to be seen and what is seen to be possible. This containment of perception thus limits personal choice and shapes individual and collective behaviour. Berger and Luckmann’s concluding point is instructive in viewing the issue from an ecological perspective:

Man is biologically predestined to construct and to inhabit a world with others. This world becomes for him the dominant and definite reality. Its limits are set by nature, but, once constructed, this world acts back upon nature. In the dialectic between nature and the socially constructed world . . . man produces reality and thereby produces himself. (p. 204)

The concept of socially constructed realities has implications for how social institutions are built. Douglas (1986) broadly defines social institutions as any “legitimized social grouping” (p. 46) which might be “a family, a game, or a ceremony” (p. 46) and which would certainly include schools and other similar organizations. She contends that a certain “thought world” grows in an institution as information is encoded, categorized, and legitimized through implicit analogies with nature. In the process of codifying human experience according to these analogies, Douglas argues, the thought world constitutes a particular set of institutional rules and expectations that confer sameness or difference (p. 59), reinforce particular patterns of activity (p. 65),
and, as they fade into the backdrop of experience, regulate thought and behaviour (p. 70). We understand Douglas’s thought worlds, along with their constituted institutions, to form a dominant organizational narrative that not only defines choices and governs behaviour but also actively scripts lives in particular ways, with different scripts being written for differently placed people. The scripts are not only difficult to resist, but they are equally difficult to name or even to see because, as their constructed character falls out of conscious awareness, the organizing scripts take over much of the thinking work for the people of the institution, and individuals, unless sufficiently disturbed, do not expend energy working on or working out alternatives to the accepted patterns of action.

The character of the dominant organizational narrative and its associated life scripts generates a peculiar set of what Senge (1990) calls deep and surface structures or what Sergiovanni (2000) calls the lifeworld and the systemsworld. The deep structures (the lifeworld) are the tacit beliefs, values, and assumptions that underpin the lived experiences of the people, and the surface structures (the systemsworld) are the observable rules, policies, procedures, and processes that define and contain organizational activity. Together, the deep and surface structures exert a specific type of conforming pressure on individuals that yields a particular category of organization. To understand the structural differences between high-capacity and low-capacity schools, we have found it helpful to distinguish between two categories of organization: those that are designed as managed systems and those designed to accommodate living systems.

To frame the discussion within an ecological perspective, the peculiar ecology of the school, whether it is designed as a managed system or a living system, embeds teaching and learning in a context of events, experiences, activities, structures, networks, knowledge, people, histories, interests, resources, artefacts, understandings, and commitments that exert a particular mediating influence on teaching and learning processes. This perspective signals deep and intimate connections among process, structure, and outcome, and it challenges the people in a school system to think carefully about the type of organizational narrative they have constructed and/or continue to perpetuate, and to interrogate the ways in which that narrative shapes thinking and learning and moulds professional practice and discourse. Most traditional schools are designed as managed systems, in which the narrative is typically hierarchical and mechanistic, and learning is controlled, prescribed, and standardized. By contrast, learning community schools can be thought of as accommodating living systems, in which the narrative is expected to be collaborative and organic, and learning is
expected to be generative, meaningful, and individualized. This is a broad categorization that requires considerable development and definition before it can serve practical ends well. In this chapter, therefore, we describe the general constructions of learning communities as articulated in current literature, and we present a newly conceptualized model developed from our research with schools that function as high-capacity learning communities.

FOUNDATIONAL PERSPECTIVES OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Peter Senge’s (1990) book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, served as the initial launch pad for academic interest in learning communities and continues to be a foundational theory on which most subsequent contributions have been based. In his work as an organizational change consultant, Senge had detected some deep, structural learning dysfunctions in some of the organizations with which he consulted, dysfunctions that rendered change difficult, relatively ineffective, and usually unsustainable. He argued that, for organizations to embark on a pathway of continuous improvement and long-term growth, the people in the organization needed to understand how the deep and surface structures affected beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and practices and, on the basis of this awareness, to reconfigure the organization so that learning and knowledge flowed throughout the system and could be used to retool existing patterns of thought and work. His model for bringing forth this type of awareness and responsiveness consisted of what he called five learning disciplines: mental models, shared vision, personal mastery, team learning, and systems thinking. The time has long passed when we would need to explicate the five disciplines; they have become familiar constructs that form the basis of most people’s understandings of learning organizations and learning communities, even for those who do not associate them with Senge’s work. Without going into detail about each one, it is instructive to place the disciplines in three broad categories: personal disciplines of mental models and personal mastery, interpersonal disciplines of shared vision and team learning, and the perspectival discipline of systems thinking. This arrangement positions systems thinking as the foundational discipline upon which the personal and interpersonal disciplines rest, and it serves as the backdrop for our contention that Senge’s innovation of the learning organization depends on two dominant learning strategies: organizational learning and reflective practice.

The strategy of organizational learning was originally developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1978), who had long and distinguished
careers as organizational development consultants and scholars. This strategy has come under some fire over the years because of the difficulty with gaining consensus about its definition and the danger of giving human qualities to an organization (see Nicolini & Meznar, 1995). Both of these concerns are valid: we agree that the construct is a pesky one to define, and we agree that it is not desirable to erase people from the learning equation. In spite of these limitations, however, we see organizational learning as a useful construct on at least two counts. First, it signals a need to consider the impact of organizational cultures, structures, functions, goals, and strategies, inter alia, on the practices and cognitive processes of the people who work therein. Second, it serves as a metaphor for the learning that individuals do to advance organizational work and for the learning that emerges from collective discourse and activity. Nicolini and Meznar frame the contribution this way: “Organizational learning is a twofold phenomenon [individual processes of learning and organizational outcomes of learning] whose significance lies in the fact that, as a whole, it works as a structuring resource that helps shape organizational activity and identity” (p. 742). In other words, people learn in a context, and their learning is shaped, informed, contained, and directed by the organizational container of their context and by the other people who work and learn alongside. The learning that emerges in response to organizational and team influences is paradoxically both richer and more confined than individually driven learning. Paying attention to the payoffs and tradeoffs of organizational and group influences on learning, therefore, is an essential aspect of a learning organization or of schools that function as learning communities.

The second learning strategy, reflective practice (Schön, 1983), has emerged in recent years as the primary tool for professional growth, school and organizational development, and continuous improvement (Farrell, 2004). Over the years, educational scholars have reframed the original concept in various ways. Smyth (1992), for example, exposes the political character of reflective practice and contends that reflection should be constructed to yield four broad outcomes: to describe, inform, confront, and reconstruct existing practice. In an analysis of Smyth’s framework, Day (1993) argues that, to reach the level of confronting practice, educators need to engage in professional dialogue to help one another push past the perceptual blinders imposed by cultural conditions and existing pre-suppositions. Mitchell and Coltrinari (2001) suggest that these barriers can be breached by adding to Smyth’s list a fifth outcome: to develop meta-cognitive capacity. Osterman and Kottkamp (2004) contribute further by describing reflective practice as a process of professional learning that is performed in practice, informed by data, and transformed through
experience. Other scholars have further developed and refined the concept, but even with the various additions, Schön’s original framework has retained its energy, and it is difficult to find any professional learning textbook, article, event, or initiative that does not invite readers or participants to reflect on, in, and for action.

As Schön (1983) originally described the strategy, it is a four-part plan-act-observe-reflect processing cycle that is intended to highlight the positive and negative effects of personal practice on those in the practitioner’s world and to inform subsequent planning and action phases of practice. The goal of reflective practice is really to discover and articulate the relationship between one’s espoused theory and one’s theory in use (Argyris & Schön, 1978). According to Argyris and Schön, there is often a considerable gap between what we intend to do (espoused theory) and what we actually do (theory in use), and they contend that coming to an awareness of this gap is what can impel people toward deep, authentic learning that transforms practice and energizes organizations. For example, as practitioners become sensitive to how their colleagues, clients, and others respond to them, they discover which of their actions elicit desired responses and which yield undesirable outcomes. This knowledge can inform their subsequent learning goals and guide them in improving their practice. It is our contention that informed practice is a key driver of improvement in learning organizations and learning communities, and that reflective practice is a core learning strategy. We should point out that informed practice is markedly different from best practice. Whereas the current discourse on best practice assumes that there is one correct, best way that educators should follow, informed practice assumes that educators must seek out practices that will work in their context. As Capra (2002, p. 119) points out, transferring intact practices from place to place is often unsuccessful because the transfer of practice is not accompanied by a transfer of the contextual assumptions, knowledge, and meanings from which the new practice emerged.

EDUCATIONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The metaphor of the learning organization, as invented by Senge (1990), caught the attention of educational scholars and practitioners because of its challenge to put learning at the centre of everything that happens in an organization. After all, learning is the primary aim of educational practice and the primary measure of school effectiveness. The metaphor of a learning organization, however, appeared to be too mechanistic and instrumental to capture the essence of great schools, as opposed to merely good schools. Consequently, in educational circles the metaphor became
that of a learning community, which seemed to reflect more appropriately the types of learning relationships and shared spaces that constitute effective schools (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Educators are now in the process of moving the metaphor from conjecture into practice, and there is still a lack of clarity or agreement over appropriate models, processes, and timeframes for transforming schools into learning communities. In spite of the early stages of development, however, sufficient work has been done to generate agreement about some characteristics of schools that function as learning communities. The following presentation of some commonly identified elements shows the continuing influence of the disciplines and learning strategies originally articulated by Senge (1990), Argyris and Schön (1978), and Schön (1983).

The first characteristic is that learning communities have shared vision, values, and goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). This condition provides direction and alignment for educational activity to the extent that it contains a compelling image of the kind of learning environment the people in the school are trying to create. As DuFour and Eaker state, the vision must be “embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school” (p. 25). Although this statement has often been interpreted as referring to educators, our position is that the “people throughout the school” includes the students, parents, and other community members who work in the school. This position is reflected in Sergiovanni’s (2005) claim that “the vision of a school must reflect the hopes and dreams, the needs and interests, and the values and beliefs of teachers, parents, and students as well” (p. 8). From this perspective, everyone in the school has a voice in shaping the vision. Inclusive participation makes it more likely that the teaching and learning goals of everyone will be focused by the agreed-upon vision and values, and that the daily work and behaviour of all people, regardless of their position in the school, will bring the vision and values to life.

A second characteristic is that learning communities have a collaborative work culture (Barth, 1990; Hargreaves, 2003; Harris, 2002; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). In this type of culture, educators come together to discuss issues, sort out challenges, plan new learning opportunities, and/or discuss new instruction or curriculum ideas. Through such extensive collaboration, educators not only learn from one another, but they also enable the development of “socially distributed knowledge, whereby individual knowledge bases become part of the collective discourse and expand the professional capacity of the entire team” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 60). According to Sergiovanni (2005, p. 124), cultivating a collaborative culture is typically a top-down function because the school leaders are the ones who can garner the required
resources and provide the institutional space to bring people together. Although we see the sense in Sergiovanni’s argument, it is our contention that, although leaders might offer the structural supports, it is up to each individual to develop and perpetuate cultural norms that engage and energize teamwork.

The collaborative culture leads naturally to the third characteristic: that learning communities are places where collective learning and shared understanding exist (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Sackney, Mitchell, & Walker, 2005). This characteristic is instrumental in uncovering and critiquing mental models, which Senge (1990) positions as a hallmark discipline of organizational learning. According to Huffman and Hipp (2003), “Teachers within professional learning communities share their practices, study together, focus instructional strategies on student needs, and use data to make decisions about their teaching” (p. 10). As part of this process, people realize that there are many ways to construct teaching and learning, and this awareness opens spaces for them to experiment collectively and individually with various constructions. This kind of collegial learning not only yields common understandings about professional practice, but it also contributes to a shared belief that improving teaching and learning is a collective process (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001). These types of common understandings and shared beliefs build communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), in which “everyone in the school is part of a role that defines each individual’s obligations and everyone is part of a reciprocal role relationship that spells out mutual obligations” (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 119).

The generation of shared understandings and collective learning depends on the presence of the fourth characteristic: a focus on reflective practice and experimentation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves, 2003; Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2001; Stoll & Fink, 1996). In learning community schools, a tendency toward school-wide action research and experimentation is common (Sackney et al., 2005). This is an environment that invites educators to constantly examine and question their own practices, to seek out and experiment with new methods and educational alternatives, and to reflect on the outcomes of the experiments. If the outcomes do not yield the desired results, it sets off another round of planning, experimenting, reflecting, and searching as people constantly learn from their efforts. In learning community schools, this kind of activity becomes a way of life rather than a set of initiatives, and a culture of reflection, action research, and experimentation develops across the school. As DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) state, “It is an environment in which innovation and experimentation are not viewed as tasks to be accomplished or projects to
be completed; rather they become ways of conducting day-to-day business – *forever*” (p. 5). In essence, reflective practice and experimentation are the requisite strategies not only for developing a robust, flexible, and responsive repertoire of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and commitments, but also for cultivating a climate of ongoing renewal and improvement.

Cultivating renewal and improvement is facilitated by the fifth characteristic: the presence of knowledge systems and data-based decision making (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003). In learning community schools, data are collected on a wide array of measures that track student and teacher knowledge, skills, attitudes, dreams, and commitments. The data are used to inform collaborative inquiry and learning as school people seek to discover better ways of doing their work. However, the mere collection of data is not sufficient for the kind of inquiry that improves professional practice and student learning. According to Petrides and Guiney (2002), educators need also to convert the data into meaningful information about the ways in which teaching and learning are configured, constrained, encouraged, and/or limited within the school. This transformation of data into knowledge offers critical insights into the practices, structures, and conditions that impede learning and those that support it. Without data and its transformation into insightful knowledge, improvement is virtually impossible.

The sixth characteristic is that learning communities are also communities of leaders (Sackney & Mitchell, 2005; Speck, 1999). In a learning community, leadership is aimed at making teaching and learning happen; it “provides the sense of direction, coherence, and coordination to the actions and activities going on in the school” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 94). But it is by no means the sole right or responsibility of the designated leaders of the school. Instead, school principals are expected to cultivate conditions that bring forth leadership capacity throughout the school (Barth, 1990). Distributing leadership tasks and roles across the school supports the development of what Sergiovanni (2005) calls a *community of responsibility* wherein “authority . . . is embedded in ideas that connect us and encourage us to respond from within. Instead of following *someone*, the emphasis is on following commitments, promises, obligations, validated research, sound principles, agreed-upon standards” (p. 56). This configuration positions leadership as a form of collective learning and the shared construction of meaning. As Lambert (1998) claims,

It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon
and make sense of work in light of shared beliefs and new information;
and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings.
(pp. 5–6)

Within a community of leaders, many people share the tasks that shape
school direction; construct meaningful knowledge; and model appropriate
beliefs, values, and actions. Spreading this type of critical activity across
the school brings coherence to school activity and breathes life into the
school vision. This is not to say that the designated leaders do not play a
key role in the school. Our own work has demonstrated that, even in
schools where all people feel empowered to take action, most people still
attribute the success of the school to the school principal or administrative
team (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Sackney et al., 2005). This is at least
partly because of their central position as holders of the school vision and
stewards of the institutional resources.

Finally, in order for any of these characteristics to develop and flourish, a
culture of high trust has to exist. Elsewhere we have stated,

Trust is a critical factor in bringing about profound improvement to a
school. Without trust, people divert their energy into self-protection
and away from learning. Where trust is lacking, people will not take
the risks necessary to move the school forward. When distrust
pervades a school culture, it is unlikely that the school will be an
energetic, motivating place. (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 49)

Work by Rosenholtz (1989), Hopkins (2001), Hargreaves (1994), and Stoll
and Fink (1996) confirm that dysfunctional school cultures can prevent
school improvement from occurring. But to say that trust is an essential
quality in learning communities begs the question of how to build a
sufficient level of trust within a system that is fundamentally hierarchical
and bureaucratic. Bryk and Schneider (2003, p. 43) argue that school
principals can help to develop a climate of trust by acknowledging the
vulnerability of others, listening to their concerns, acting on the basis of
principles, aligning their words and actions, and competently managing the
school. These behaviours are probably essential ones for all people in the
school to follow if trust is to be established across and within groups.

In summary, schools that operate as learning communities have different
qualities and quite different teaching and learning conditions than do
traditional schools. The difference is especially important because, as
Hargreaves (2003) states, we are living in a knowledge society that requires
a fundamentally different approach to learning:
It involves developing deep cognitive learning, creativity, and ingenuity among students; drawing on research, working in networks and teams, and pursuing continuous professional learning as teachers; and promoting problem-solving, risk-taking, trust in the collaborative process, ability to cope with change and commitment to continuous improvement as organizations. (p. 3)

For this type of learning to become the norm rather than an exception, schools need to move from traditional to learning community constructions. This review of the literature does not do justice to the richness and texture of the contributions of the authors we have cited, but it does open a window to the nature of schools that function as learning communities. Sergiovanni (2005) sums up the current state-of-the-art in this way:

At the point where communities of practice bubble up and collaborative cultures trickle down, learning communities emerge. Learning communities are good at maximizing their learning. They learn from both successes and failures. They are good at continuous learning and at dispersing what they know, especially to places where it is most needed. Learning communities have faith in the craft knowledge and wisdom of those closest to the classroom. They are on constant lookout for new learning opportunities as ways to expand what they know and can do. They believe in collaboration and view learning as a professional obligation. (p. 131)

We find this image of learning communities to be both evocative and compelling, and although Sergiovanni’s description appears to be aimed at educators, it can equally be applied to parents, students, and other members of the community. This level of inclusiveness drives our current understandings about how to bring forth learning communities that endure over time.

CAPACITY-BUILDING MODEL FOR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In Profound Improvement, we defined a learning community as “a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 5). This definition continues to inform our understandings because we believe that it embodies the key elements of a learning community. In general, building a learning community means putting learning at the centre of everything; it means taking an active, reflective approach to the educational questions and challenges that people face. Viewing these questions and challenges as
problems positions learning as instrumental to finding a solution; viewing them as mysteries opens the door for learning to be an exciting journey of exploration, wonder, and amazement. We want to emphasize that distinction. We believe that the image of learning as confronting a mystery takes people to a deeper, more exciting motivational level than does the image of learning as finding a solution to a problem.

The model we presented in *Profound Improvement* was based on building capacity in three domains: personal, interpersonal, and organizational. The grounding premises of the capacity-building model were that knowledge is personally and socially negotiated, mediated, and constructed, and that learning flows naturally from the knowledge gaps, big questions, life interests, and embedded knowledge of individuals and groups of people. These premises position learning within a rich context of prior personal knowledge, shared understanding, and tacit agreements, and they view knowledge gaps not as problems to be solved but as states of uncertainty that inspire learning. Within the model, personal capacity is related to the ability and desire to reflect on, assess, and critique existing knowledge; to seek out new ideas and new understandings; and to reconstruct personal knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes as warranted by these analyses and explorations. Interpersonal capacity is concerned with the ability of groups of people to work together on shared purposes; to come to a set of shared understandings and agreements about their work; to generate effective group processes, expectations, and outcomes; and to operate in a spirit of mutual trust, respect, and psychological safety. These two sets of capacity are developed within a framework of organizational capacity that brings people into contact with one another; that invests heavily in professional learning and continual improvement; and that pays careful attention to leadership patterns, structural arrangements, communication and information pathways, and learning environments.

We argued in our first text that the three sets of capacity are mutually influencing and mutually reinforcing and that a learning community is unlikely to emerge unless capacity is built in all three domains. In the years since the publication of *Profound Improvement*, we have seen considerable evidence of that contention. We have discovered that building personal capacity without building interpersonal or organizational capacity breeds alienation because people learn new ideas but have no one to talk to about them and little space to experiment with them. Building interpersonal capacity without building organizational or personal capacity breeds stagnation because people must find their own spaces in which to talk, and they may have few new thoughts to share. Building organizational capacity without building interpersonal and personal capacity breeds frustration
because people are brought into contact with one another but they do not necessarily know how to work with one another nor do they have new ideas to consider. By contrast, we have found that the three capacities develop more naturally and fully when they do so in relation to one another. In brief, organizational capacity brings people together and provides the resources and compelling reasons to learn, experiment, and grow; interpersonal capacity provides a thoughtful, respectful community with which to think, to learn, and to develop; and personal capacity adds fresh ideas, insightful reflections, and new strategies to the mix.

RECONFIGURING THE MODEL FROM AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Our original model grew out of a decade of work with a host of schools that, for the most part, followed traditional constructions. That work had uncovered a large gulf between the espoused elements and models of learning communities and actual practice. The literature and our research had shown what a learning community school might look like and what outcomes and benefits could accrue from it, but we had no clear understanding of the processes, structures, interactions, and practices that brought forth learning communities, especially in schools that had a considerable distance to go. Consequently, we set out to find schools that functioned as high-capacity learning communities and to discover how these people had transformed their schools. We defined high-capacity schools in terms of seven broad characteristics: a) evidence of high energy and enthusiasm across the school; b) a reputation for high quality in teaching and learning; c) a collaborative culture among the staff; d) innovation, experimentation, and risk taking in pedagogy and curriculum; e) reflective practices among the professional staff; f) authentic community involvement; and g) a record of improved student learning outcomes (Sackney, Walker, Mitchell, & Duncan, 2004).

To find the schools, we asked district-level school leaders to nominate schools that had high levels of functioning on all seven characteristics. On the basis of survey questionnaires completed by staff and students in 144 of the nominated schools, we developed a learning community profile for each school and selected the top 15 schools for intensive case studies. Following the case study phase, we selected 4 schools that demonstrated the highest levels of learning community characteristics for an extensive ethnographic investigation, which took us into the 4 schools for a minimum of four weeks each, spread over a six-month period. At the same time as we were conducting the learning community research, we were involved in a number of school effectiveness reviews that gave us access to schools
with widely varying levels of capacity. These projects, which had been commissioned by school boards because of concerns over specific educational outcomes, gave us comparative data that shed light on what differentiates high-capacity and low-capacity schools. The various investigations, which took place over a five-year period, not only confirmed the assumptions beneath the original capacity-building model, but also provided practical details that helped us to refine and deepen the model.

In the original model, we identified a host of strategies and practices for building capacity in the three domains. Our subsequent work in high-capacity learning community schools showed that the strategies could be organized into a small set of categories. Specifically, building personal capacity consisted of two key strategies: reflecting on current practice and gaining access to new ideas. Interpersonal capacity grew from two additional strategies: developing shared understandings about teaching and learning, and generating inclusive opportunities for learning and growth. Organizational capacity depended on three sets of activities: developing a child-centred vision, cultivating a pedagogy-focused discourse, and building school-wide systems for key aspects of school life. Categorizing the key strategies in this way made the capacity-building process more manageable, focused, and coherent, and constituted a useful refinement of the original model.

Although our observations confirmed the mutual influences among the three domains of capacity, they also showed somewhat of a hierarchy: the presence of enduring systems was a prior condition for transforming the schools because it was in the development of the systems that the school people came to a set of agreements about what was important to do, what they wanted to do, what they felt obligated to do, and what they would do. Furthermore, it was in the maintenance of the systems that these agreements and understandings continued to inform and energize professional practice, personal and interpersonal growth, and school development. We say “somewhat of a hierarchy” because we also found that the professional staff and administrators began with a certain level of capacity to ask critical questions about existing practice and school systems and with a certain level of capacity to work together on system-building. But the presence of key systems was what moved individual and group capacity beyond the individuals and the groups to transform the entire school. We came to realize that, in high-capacity learning community schools, the organizational elements of vision, discourse, and systems support, encourage, and sustain individual and group efforts to find new and better ways to teach, and the professional growth of individual teachers and teams of teachers support, encourage, and sustain student efforts and
achievements in the classrooms. It was at this point that we began to see school ecology not as a metaphor but as a literal description of the deep connections among people, structures, functions, and outcomes.

Our ecological awareness was further heightened as we saw the number of people who were considered to be essential partners in the schooling process. In many of the high-capacity learning community schools, for example, parents were welcomed and invited to participate in a wide array of school activities. Their involvement went far beyond the typical duties of fund-raising and problem-solving. They were consulted on a wide range of decisions and plans, were invited into classrooms and other learning sites, were kept informed about school life in general and about their children’s school experiences in particular, were encouraged to bring issues and information to the attention of teachers and school administrators, and were expected to be on the team and to take responsibility for cultivating a focus on learning and growth for all students. Furthermore, these schools were open to visits, input, and involvement from other members of the community and of ancillary agencies such as child and youth services, family support services, health services, and the justice system, to name a few. It was a rare day when the only people in the school were the staff who were assigned and the students who studied there.

In traditional schools, this level of involvement can take the focus off teaching and learning, distract the attention of teachers and students, and/or fragment the directions of school activities. We did not find this to be the case in the schools that function as high-capacity learning communities because a number of unspoken principles brought coherence and structure to individual activities. We have called these the principles of engagement (Mitchell & Sackney, 2007), and we found that, even if the principles were not openly articulated, they served as tacit agreements about why the people were in the school and what they were doing there. The five principles of engagement depend first on the generation of a school vision that puts people-building at the centre of educational activity, and in learning communities this means building up both children and adults. From that central cohering image, five principles emerged: (a) deep respect, (b) collective responsibility, (c) experimental orientation, (d) appreciation of diversity, and (e) positive role modelling.

The principle of deep respect honours all people, regardless of their position, disposition, or capacity. With this principle in play, no person – no student, no educator, no parent – goes unnoticed or untended in the school. People are not seen as having to earn respect; they are inherently deserving of respectful treatment because they are living, breathing, feeling human beings with all the histories, hopes, successes, failures, hurts, and
Joys that have made them who they are. The principle of deep respect does not assume that everyone will agree, will be pleasant, or will play well with others. It does, however, challenge people to treat others respectfully, even when they are acting in their own sometimes selfish interests. Under the canopy of deep respect, conflicts are handled immediately and appropriately rather than being left to fester or to poison the school. Even in the face of tensions, challenges, or conflicts, conversations are positive, interactions are collegial, and processes are constructive. Deep respect is the keystone principle, with all others resting on its belief in the inherent value of all people.

Collective responsibility brings every person to a sense of the duty owed to all other people in the school and to the overall health of classrooms, units, and the school itself. This principle puts educators, students, and parents on notice that they are in the business of building a particular kind of school, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, and whether they want to or not. It challenges them to build a school that supports life, growth, and learning for all the people who spend their days in the school. Coming to a sense of their collective responsibility does not require people to neglect their individual obligations, but it does ask them to view their primary duties within the framework of the entire school and to ensure that their work will support and sustain, rather than impede or counter, the work of others. Under the canopy of collective responsibility, people see that they are members of the entire school community, not just members of their classroom, teaching team, or friendship group, and that they are obligated to support the growth and learning of all people in the school. This principle is as relevant for students and parents as it is for teachers.

An experimental orientation reframes the way in which people confront the challenges, issues, and mysteries they encounter as they work in the school. Rather than seeing these conditions as problems to be solved, they see them as opportunities to learn and grow. This principle asks people not to lament or to lay blame for a difficult situation in which they find themselves, but to work through the situation thoughtfully and reflectively, trying out different pathways until they find the way to an elegant resolution. Even when life seems to be working well, the experimental orientation calls people to ask, “What could we do that would make this even better?” Under the canopy of an experimental orientation, people are not paralyzed by problems of practice nor are they content with what might appear to be “best practice.” Instead, they take initiative to regroup and reflect, to reach out and risk, to try out and try again, and to revitalize and renew.
Appreciation of diversity is accorded first (and certainly) to people but also to ideas, practices, and beliefs. This principle, which is a corollary of deep respect, is based on an understanding that diversity is the breath of life, without which the world as we know it would cease to exist. Diversity brings richness, newness, and vitality to the school, and it is appreciated no matter whether the richness comes from new people and novel ideas or from odd people and strange thoughts. This principle does not mean that all ideas (novel or strange) will move into the school repertoire, but it does mean that all people, no matter how new, how odd, or how different, will be honoured for who they are, what they know, and what they can do. Under the canopy of appreciation of diversity, each individual is free to grow in his or her own style, to contribute in his or her own way, and to shine in his or her own light.

The principle of positive role modelling positions every person as a role model for every other member of the school and at every moment in time. This principle requires people to recognize that, except in their most private moments, someone is watching them; someone is taking note of what they do, how they do it, and to what effect it is done. Role modelling is an inescapable aspect of life in a school community, and this principle reminds individuals that they have an obligation to be as positive a role model as they can be – not just for their friends and close colleagues but for every other person in the school, even people they might not know or particularly like. Under the canopy of positive role modelling, each moment is seen as both a teaching and a learning moment for every member of the school community.

Although most people could not articulate all of the five principles, we found them to be the main similarity across high-capacity learning community schools. Even in schools with vastly different systems, student bodies, professional cadres, educational challenges, leadership styles, sizes, and configurations, these principles could be seen to float over and protect the surface of day-to-day activity. We certainly did not find these principles to be operational all the time or with every individual, but they were the anchors that brought people back to a sense of their key role in shaping the school ethos and that helped them to figure out different ways of dealing with the challenges they faced. We are aware that this brief description of the principles offers only a glimpse at the fundamental values and beliefs that shaped and directed practices, decision making, planning, and other activity in the schools. Their character will become more evident in the details of subsequent chapters as we tell the stories of the people with whom we worked in the years of our research activities. Their presence in this chapter serves to highlight the connections between underlying values.
and beliefs and subsequent practice. This connection confirms yet again the importance of an ecological perspective for building sustainable teaching and learning environments.

The ecological perspective has led us to reposition the capacity-building model in terms of the active construction of enduring relationships, principles, processes, agreements, and systems. Whereas our original conceptualization spoke to capacity outcomes, we are concerned now with how these outcomes come to be. This concern has led us to take a more active approach to the construction of high-capacity learning community schools. Consequently, in our current model we have highlighted the building processes, with personal capacity positioned as a process of building people, interpersonal capacity as a process of building commitments, and organizational capacity as a process of building commitments, and organizational capacity as a process of building schools. In each of the building processes, a subset of the principles of engagement takes ascendance with the other principles moving into a less dominant (but still consequential) place in the protective canopy. All of this activity is embedded in a deep awareness that we are bound together as interconnected, mutually influencing parts of a living system. Figure 1 provides a graphic representation of how we see these processes merging into a coherent set of arrangements for high-capacity learning community schools. Although the various elements of the model are separated in the graphic representation, these are not “boundaries of separation but boundaries of identity” (Capra, 2002, p. 231). In other words, each aspect has its own unique purpose in the system but also has a deep and abiding connection to and communication with all other aspects of the system.

We have found that arrangements such as these put people and their learning at the centre of all activity, bring coherence and focus to individual and group activity, and highlight strategies for generating school improvement actions that can be sustained over time and across personnel. They also position the professional staff not as classroom teachers but as school teachers. Whereas in traditional schools teachers are mostly concerned with the students and subject areas that make up their primary professional portfolio, in high-capacity learning community schools the teachers are concerned not just with their classroom role but also with their staff and school role. They are aware that, if the school is to be an active, energetic, positive, life-enhancing, and growth-promoting place, then each individual – each teacher, each student, each administrator, each parent, and each community member – must take up the challenge of contributing effectively, responsibly, and responsively.
When we viewed the capacity-building model from the perspective of deep ecology, we came to see the complex array of influences impinging on people’s learning and thus on the construction of educational knowledge and practice. We realized that knowledge is wrapped up in and growing from a rich matrix of ideas, artefacts, materials, people, hopes, dreams, aspirations, and relationships, to name just a few of the contextual impingements. From all this richness, individuals pay attention to those elements for which they see a compelling reason to respond, and they build personal knowledge by coming to a personal sense of the meaning in the matter. But individual learning is not a straight line from idea to knowledge, nor is it solely an individually driven pursuit. Instead, it is a broadly mediated, richly textured, finely nuanced, deeply interconnected process by which individuals come to a sense of meaning with others in their community. As we thought about these deep connections for and
mutual influences on human learning, we saw them as fundamental elements in what Petrides and Guiney (2002) call knowledge ecology.

We conclude the chapter by noting that the ecological perspective has led us to see a more inclusive learning community, an expanded set of systems and relationships, deeper connections among seemingly separate elements and people, a larger set of mutual influences, and a more comprehensive understanding of cohering principles. We do not wish to romanticize the concept of community nor do we ignore the realities of power games, personality conflicts, and different opinions. Even in high-capacity learning community schools, tensions arise from such dynamics. We have discovered, however, that the people in these schools use the points of tension to spark learning. They are held together by a common commitment to the wellbeing of the children in their care, and they have learned effective ways to talk about and resolve problematic dynamics so that they move the community forward rather than blow it apart, fragment the process, or separate the people. We have found that, in these schools, difference is not a threat. It is a valued part of life. Similarly, school improvement is not an initiative, and professional learning is not an activity. They are a way of life. Together, these life processes bring forth schools in which children and adults are respected for who they are and what they can do, and they inspire school processes that support and sustain children and adults as they learn and grow.