Are School Visions Sustainable? Assessing the Relevance of Senge's Notion of Shared Visions

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Abstract

Contemporary schools, in the pursuit of developing community, will seek to build statements of vision based on values that focus action and become the impetus for the daily renewal of commitment by those bound to these statements. In New Zealand, a current focal point for Education Review Office reviews is the ability of schools to maintain sustainable performance.

This paper reports on a small-scale pilot study undertaken at an establishment (new) school that has strong foundation statements of vision, mission and values. The question at the centre of this investigation is how this new, and rapidly expanding, school will maintain and sustain its visionary focus, in particular, its particular concept of community, through the growth cycle.

A concept of shared vision is proposed by Peter Senge as one of his 'five disciplines of learning organisations'. Senge's theorisation includes notions of the genesis, development, anchoring, advocacy and long-term sustainability of visions. This pilot study seeks to establish the relevance of Senge's model to the question of vision sustainability in the case study school. The design is based on a series of semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders associated with the early establishment of the case study school.

Keywords: community, learning organisation, Senge, sustainability, values, vision.

Introduction

The concept of community has very different meanings for schools that are well-established, often with long traditions and deep links to their supporting communities than it does for newly-established schools. The concept of community evokes notions of shared values, norms and commitments, sense of unified purpose, and solidarity experienced by individual members (Strike, 1999), high levels of collaboration and a willingness to be critically introspective (Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). This paper reports on a pilot study into the question of vision sustainability carried out with an establishment school that has successfully created a creative learning and caring community around precisely such characteristics. The leadership provided by its Establishment Committee, Board of Trustees, Principal and Senior Leadership Team (SLT), has played a significant role in that creation, guided by very clear statements of purpose, notably its vision. The answers this school provides to the question of vision sustainability may serve to guide established schools in their efforts to develop and sustain community.

A vision defines a desired end-point, which in school terms, may be a statement about the ideal 'student in the future'. Sustainability refers to the capacity to endure over the long-term, and has acquired currency in environmental or ecological matters, where it refers to efforts use natural resources in ways that will conserve them for future generations. This concept of sustainability is one of four themes in the future focussed principle of *The New Zealand Curriculum*

(Ministry of Education, 2007). There is, however, another sense in which sustainability pertains to New Zealand schools, and this is the use developed by the Education Review Office (ERO), the legislated school inspection organisation that reviews the performance of early childhood centres and schools.

For ERO, the issue is whether a school can maintain its performance, which means a "school's capacity to sustain a cycle of ongoing improvement" (2011b, 'Sustainability'). As ERO officers specifically seek information that gives them a sense of this capacity, school leaders must consider what this capacity constitutes. This enquiry seeks to understand ways that a unified sense of shared visionary purpose can contribute to the establishment of a creative learning and caring community. Further, it seeks to understand how holding that unified purpose may also contribute to the capacity of schools to enhance their approach to teaching and learning.

This paper will proceed by firstly referring to, and discussing the notion of shared vision suggested by Peter Senge in his seminal work, *The fifth discipline* (1992). The case study will be introduced, and key themes discussed. The paper will conclude by drawing tentative conclusions and indicate the direction of further research.

Senge[i]

Peter Senge (1992) links shared visions closely to his concept of the learning organisation, which is one characterised by "generative learning" rather than

"adaptive learning". The latter is a feature of organisations that respond in ad hoc ways and such organisations do not require a vision, whereas those that are characterised by 'generative learning' are constantly seeking improvement through the deepening of capability and capacity. In such organisations, individuals care sufficiently to identify with the vision and translate it into a practice of continual improvement. An organisation cannot learn effectively, nor can it avoid inevitable organisational error, without a shared vision. He also regards shared visions as a sign of the commitment of individuals in the organisation.

Members of an organisation must each have their own vision if the organisation is to develop a shared vision, and moreover they must seek "personal mastery", or the ability to remain focused on the future vision while not losing grasp of the current reality. Motivated by their personal passion to overcome the limitations of the present, they continue to strive for the imagined future (Senge, 1992; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). Such persons are therefore lifelong learners, capable of critical self-reflection, the very attributes advocated by *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007).

While Senge acknowledges that visions sometimes originate with the leader, they could however come from anywhere in the organisation. Process is thus more important than the origin, Senge suggesting that the vision ought to be open for debate and questioning. However, the typical brief afternoon staff meeting to consult with the staff, or the weekend brainstorm facilitated by a consultant will not do, even if it results

in a statement, for usually such statements quickly stale and become forgotten (1992). Therefore visions should emerge from extended on-going processes that build on the visions of individuals themselves (Senge, et al. 2000).

Senge outlines levels of commitment in organisations: apathy; non compliance; grudging compliance; formal compliance; genuine compliance; enrolment; commitment. He suggests that most organisations are characterised by compliance, not commitment, and that perhaps the best an organisation can hope for is genuine compliance, those Senge has termed "good soldiers" (p. 219). Those who have enrolled are proactive in relation to the vision, but not absorbed by it, whereas those who are committed live and breathe the vision. For Senge, an enrolled or committed person *wants* the vision, whereas genuinely compliant people only accept the vision. A key to the accomplishment of enrolment or commitment is the passion of the leader to the vision, keeping the message honest and simple, and the absence of manipulation.

Other features of visions include their placement within a framework of a larger set of guiding statements, notably the mission and values of the organisation. Of particular interest to the present pilot study is Senge's contention that values be translatable into daily action: "In building a shared vision, a group of people build a sense of commitment together. They develop images of "the future we want to create together," along with the values that will be important in getting there" (Senge, et al. 2000, p. 72).

Senge suggests that increasing staff size and diversity may threaten the focus of the vision. On-going critical enquiry is a solution, allowing the opportunity for new persons to take ownership and so "harmonise" diversity (1992, p. 228). Further problems arise when the current reality becomes disconnected from the vision, or when people in the organisation become disconnected from each other. Here too, the solution is on-going critical enquiry and introspection that unseats negative and erroneous assumptions (Senge refers to these as the disciplines of "team learning" and "mental models").

Senge's account of the learning organisation is an alluring one given the pressure applied to contemporary New Zealand schooling, where *The New Zealand Curriculum* presents 'Teaching as Inquiry' as a characteristic of effective pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2007), demanding enhanced practitioner self- and communal knowledge, leading to enhanced student achievement through altered teacher practice. Furthermore, Senge appeals to those leaders wishing to identify as transformational (Caldwell, 2011). However, as Caldwell shows, the problem of power is inadequately resolved, as there is not the likelihood of enhanced teacher agency (autonomous individual action) without direction from the leader, thus leading to an uncritical concept of consensus (2011).

The case study and research design

'Angelus School' is a new Catholic school established in a subdivision of a new town in a larger urban New

Zealand metropolitan area that is experiencing burgeoning population growth, particularly of immigrant families. The school also draws on a significant population of New Zealand Pakeha families, and to some extent on Māori and Pasifika families. The school's roll lists in excess of fifteen various ethnic groups. It is an upper decile[ii] primary school.

"Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). A qualitative research design was chosen for its ability to support a critical theoretical framework, thus this research is not presented as some kind of quasi-experimental research activity. Nevertheless, the research task was not strictly inductive, as the starting-point was to assess whether Senge's notion of shared visions is able to answer the question of whether school visions are sustainable.

Seeking this answer required researcher insertion into the world of the case study school and the interpretation of documentary material and interview transcripts. Underpinning this analysis is a critical approach to discourse which recognises that the "language user is not a detached communicator...but is always *located***...** struggling to take her or his own social and cultural positioning into account." (Taylor, 2001, p. 9. Emphasis in original). This theoretical position allows meaning to be drawn from the inflection in words and the hand and facial gestures of those being interviewed.

The research design was based on semi-structured interviews of four key staff members at the school, and followed the approval of an ethics application made to

the school's Board of Trustees. Openness and transparency in decision-making characterised the approach to ethics—the BOT involvement, the open invitation to the chosen teachers to decline the invitation, the sharing of transcripts and allowing the participants to provide feedback and confirmation of interpretation.

The core questions developed for the interviews were based on chapter eleven ('Shared visions') of Senge's *The fifth discipline* (1992). The key concepts the interviews aimed to elicit were: Origin of the vision; Focus of the vision; Guiding ideas underpinning the vision; The relationship between the school vision and the vision of individual staff members; Shared vision; The importance of relationships; Commitment; Dealing with divergence; and Challenges to the vision. One interview of approximately twenty minutes was conducted with each participant, at the school.

Transcripts were initially coded thematically, and on a second pass were pattern coded, following Miles & Huberman (1984). Codes were developed in relation to patterns, rules, explanations and themes. The findings and conclusions suggested here are based on this meta analysis. Only data that could be triangulated was retained, thus comments that were made by only one or two participants were rejected, apart from specific questions in relation to the initial establishment of the school, which predated the staff appointments. Certain relevant documentation related to the school was included in the analysis, although its use is problematic owing to the requirement to maintain confidentiality.

Purposive sampling led to the inclusion of the principal (the foundation principal), a foundation senior leadership staff member, who had also been directly involved as a member of the Establishment Committee, a foundation staff member, and a new staff member who had arrived at the school a year after it first opened. The Principal is an established principal and long-experienced teacher, and enjoyed previous success in a Catholic primary school; all four of the interview participants are Catholic (as is the vast majority of the staff). The foundation staff member is a long-experienced teacher, while the senior leadership person was new to her role on the leadership team. The new staff member is also a Beginning Teacher. When quoted, the participants will be tagged as **P** (Principal); **S** (foundation senior leader); **FT** (foundation teacher); and **NT** (new teacher)[iii].

Analysis: leadership for creative learning and caring communities

It pays to ask what evidence the case study school has been able to yield of its own leadership, and whether it is the kind of leadership that is able to produce, generate, add to or support a creative learning and caring community.

The Establishment Committee consisted of volunteers who came forward in response to a request from their parish for individuals to participate in the establishment of a new state-integrated primary school to serve the educational needs of children of the parish [iv]. An important motivator for the Establishment Committee

was to attend to the needs of a largely immigrant community.

S: And, we [asked], "what makes you happy and settled, what makes the children happy and settled?" and it was a nurturing, caring, inclusive environment. So that became a central point…"

P: "We wanted the school to be a home from home, because … if you're an immigrant family, the school will be a place where you would be meeting new people and making ties".

This early leadership by the Establishment Committee was characterised by **S** in terms of 'passion' and 'love'. This translated to one of the major focal points of the vision (aside from Special Character, which will be considered later), namely the children. For **P,** "the vision needs to grow out of the needs of the children", and it must be respected and maintained, "because…the Establishment Committee wanted that for our children". **S** recalled that the vision came "from parishioners' hearts, educators' hearts, and parents' hearts, in terms of what they wanted for their children." Scholastic excellence shapes the vision too, **S** noting that the Establishment Committee had high standards and excellence in common. Both **P** and **NT** echo the sentiment that the school is about attaining high scholastic standards, **P** adding that she wants the students "to taste the success, to feel good about themselves, to know they can do it".

The principal is regarded as the lead advocate of the vision, a role she relishes and accepts without

equivocation. **S** acknowledges that the Principal is "bringing to life the vision", while **FT** expects to see "the principal leading by example". **P** meanwhile has an expectation not only of her leadership team, but indeed the entire staff, as "they're accountable as well for keeping the vision, keeping true to the vision and where we're going to". While mindful of the impact the departure of a principal could have on a school's vision, **S** suggests that such impact would be limited at Angelus School by the "strong leadership team, with the same vision".

The Education Review Office, in its first review of the school confirms these points in its summation in relation to sustainability: "All staff, including support staff, show commitment to implementing strategies to achieve the school's vision" (2011a, p. 3). Similarly, the Catholic Schools Office, in its review of the school notes: "The Principal has formed a strong Senior Management team who are united…[and] their love and enthusiasm for the school was apparent to the Reviewers" (2011, p. 4). Further analysis will consider whether a vision—even one that is evidently so strongly focused on care and achievement—can sustain itself and continue to provide high levels of care and achievement.

Senge's relevance to the case study

The earlier analysis of Senge will be related to Angelus School by considering three questions: Is there a shared vision based on individuals of vision who associate with the school vision and collectively seek to enquire into it? Is the vision located within broader guiding ideas

that are translatable into daily action? Is the vision sustainable?

- *Commitment to creating and maintaining a shared vision*

As Senge believes that visions "create the spark, the excitement that lifts an organization out of the mundane." (p. 208), he argues that individuals must connect to the larger purpose of the organisation. This point is deeply emphasised by each of the participants, **FT** suggesting that the Angelus vision reinforced ideas she already held. For **NT,** the school vision "has to tie in, otherwise I wouldn't be able to follow the vision of the school". These views support Senge's contention that "people with a strong sense of personal direction can join together to create a powerful synergy" (1992, p. 211). The potential for this synergy was recognised by **P,** who believes that the foundation staff relished the prospect of creating something new. Indeed, recruitment, a recurring theme, was based on finding people "who fit the vision" **(S).**

Significantly, however, and diverting from Senge, it is not enough for individuals in a school to just be people of vision—they have to have the capacity to share *this* vision. **P** notes: "Because you can get somebody that's full of vision, and they're going to go off on a tangent, on something else". What may be questionable, however, is whether this level of alignment translates into mere compliance, a question not answered satisfactorily by Senge.

Senge argues that shared visions cannot be built unless one can "give up traditional notions that visions are

always announced from "on high" or come from an organization's institutionalized planning processes" (1992, p. 213). A considerable weight of interview evidence in this case study pointed to collaboration, sharing and openness in contributing towards building a shared vision, or what **P** refers to as "a group effort", not the effort of a principal working alone. **FT** claims the vision for the foundation staff and describes the process as leaving her to "feel as if we all had ownership of it." Collaboration has spread well beyond the staff. **P** alluded to the student learning charter, an important document within the Angelus School curriculum, and to the regular and on-going consultations with its community. Of itself, this latter point is not especially extraordinary. Comments by one of the participants suggested that such consultations sometimes revealed that families are less interested in visionary matters, and more interested in daily practicalities. Nevertheless, remarks by **FT** pointed to the "key role [for families] in running the school, the fundraising, and parent helps, coming into the classroom…so it's like a triangle, we've got the church, the school, the community, all working together". These comments are evidence of collaboration across a wide front in advancing the vision, but also its potential for building community.

Developing a shared understanding of the vision is seen to be critical to building a shared vision. **FT** frequently highlighted the role of professional development in building the knowledge base and permitting open discussion, while **S** recalled how "...the Senior Leadership Team… unpicked [the vision] and unpacked it, we really bought into it as a team, and understood it,

and knew what it was about". Later, when discussing the Principal's desire to enquire into the vision, **S** reported that "we [leadership team] looked at it [the vision], we looked at what the key words were, and then got a shared understanding of...what we understood that they meant".

An important vehicle for translating the vision into daily understanding for the teaching staff was their collaborative process of implementing *The New Zealand Curriculum*. **P** is of the view that "part of the vision is the curriculum", and while **FT** and **NT** both made the same connection, it was **S** who articulated this link at some length: "building the school curriculum early on, helped people to contribute [by] unpacking the vision [which] was at the centre of the school curriculum that we built".

This implementation process will have assisted the staff and teachers to meet one of Senge's important requirements, namely that there be a commitment to engage in on-going learning through enquiry into the vision. "In effect, the visioning process is a special type of inquiry process…into the future we truly seek to create. If it becomes a pure advocacy process, it will result in compliance…" (1992, p. 228). Interview data supported an argument for recursive examination of the vision, although **NT** was least inclined to subject the vision to critical scrutiny:

> **LB**: So it's not up for debate, but it is up for constant revision, or constant re-visioning, or what?

NT: [Chuckles] *Revising*. If you don't have something coming to you all the time, you forget about it.

Although **FT** and **NT** did not perceive the need for dramatic overhaul, both thought there could be opportunities to bring new people into the current framework of thinking about the vision. At leadership level, however, there was a greater sense that the vision is not sheltered, that the vision is "open to interpretation [and likely] differing views on how to live the vision" **(S),** while **P** believes that the school "can't be sticking to a vision come hell or high water". Therefore she believed the Board of Trustees had to take time reflect on the vision again.

- ***The link between vision and values***

The second question deals with the matter of what Senge has called 'governing ideas', referred to in this study as 'guiding ideas'. These ideas he notes as the "vision, purpose or mission, and core values. A vision not consistent with values that people live day by day will…foster outright cynicism" (1992, p. 223). As a Catholic school, the Angelus School vision is underpinned by "the Catholic faith and teaching children about what it means to be Catholic" **(S).** While Catholicism is a unitary faith, a vast range of clerical orders support its work in areas such as health and education. Catholic schools model themselves on the unique missionary attributes (or 'charism') of the founder of the order. Diocesan schools that have no specific link to a founding order may choose, for example, a patron saint or other important figure in the life of the Church. In the case of Angelus School, it is

quite clear to **FT**, that what underpins the school vision is "the Catholic faith, really, and knowing that it's a Mary school, and the Mary values that we try to instil through the curriculum". Thus Angelus School has a Catholic Special Character, and takes as its charism certain unique attributes associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. These attributes have been denoted as the values the school now promotes.

For Senge, "values answer the question, "How do we want to act…toward achieving our vision?" (1992, p. 224). In this respect, **NT** echoes him precisely, when suggesting an element of greater significance than the vision: "What's underlying the vision, I think [is more important], because all those things that help us, like the values, virtues and the special character, are what lead us to our vision". **FT** agrees: "Yes, values of being compassionate, faithful, hopeful that I think underlies everything like the curriculum…". The Establishment Committee discussed these values carefully and at great length and they "were explicitly and very carefully shared all the time, shared with everybody" **(P).**

It is important to consider how these are translatable into daily action. The operational device introduced by the Principal to bring the values to life on a daily basis is *The virtues project* (Popov, 2000), a character education programme for schools. **FT** regards this programme to "like an umbrella" whose influence is "displayed around the school; [and which] we continually go back to that all the time [as a staff]". In its review, the Catholic Schools Office found that the values are articulated with clarity and are deeply understood by the school community (2011), and that

The virtues project "is linked seamlessly with the school's Mission, Vision, Values and Goals" (p. 9).

Character education programmes are not without contention, raising the spectre of conditioning, due to their directive nature and inclination to divide moral reasoning from moral conduct (Nash, 1997). Also significant is the concept of discourse, a recurrent pattern among all the participants. Responses demonstrated the extent to which the value-system is evident in the discourses of the school, namely what is said, what is published, what appears on the walls, and expectations of congruent conduct. Nevertheless, in this case study school such interpenetration of the value-system led the Education Review Office to the view that Angelus School has a "positive, nurturing, inclusive culture" (2011a, p. 1).

- *Is the vision sustainable?*

The final question to consider is whether this school can sustain its vision. The answer, it seems, lies in the preservation of the underpinning Special Character, particularly the charism, maintaining key personnel stability through recruitment, and finally reliance on the commitment of the teachers to exercise corporate pressure on those who stray from the vision. According to Senge, one of the important limiting factors facing organisations is their inability to harmonise increasing diversity in the organisation (1992). In light of the comments above regarding the underpinning, guiding ideas supporting the vision of Angelus School, all the participants agreed (**NT** somewhat reluctantly) that the vision could be subject to change. However, although the vision "will slightly *change* over the years…it needs

to still remain true to the charism of the school" **(P).** Retaining purchase on the idea of charism is thus critical and weakness in this area may lead some schools to confuse their charism with their historical narrative[v].

This task falls primarily to the principal; unsurprisingly, the participants argued for ensuring that the principal was always a person able to stand by the vision and its guiding ideas, a view that was shaped for both **NT** and **S** by their experiences of other schools. In her turn, **P** suggested that it was equally important to "work really hard" at managing the transition of Board members, to ensure that new members quickly became aware and knowledgeable of the charism of the school.

Senge suggests that the committed person "is responsible for the game" (1992, p. 221), echoed by **NTs** resistance to suggestion that the vision could change: "we have a goal, something to achieve", demonstrating that the vision is attainable (and presumably sustainable) because "teachers are your greatest asset…committed teachers can achieve anything" **(P).** For **S,** "they're reinforcing the *primary* thing that we're about". This commitment extends to a corporate model of responsibility and accountability for vision maintenance. It applies to the students: "This is who we are at [Angelus] School; this is how we expect our children to be" **(P)**, and if future teachers were seriously out of step, **P** anticipates that "if…everybody else just sticks to what they want…you got to try to get that person…around to your ways".

FT relates the amusing tale of the consultant who

completely misjudged the mood and orientation of the staff. However, "that was worked through, and came to a conclusion that pleased us all". As a Beginning Teacher, **NT** appreciates the support of the peer collegiality and "the guidance from everybody, within the staff, [which] keeps you on track, keeps you on the right line", and she will "often check out what others are doing". These comments suggest not only corporate standard-setting and Foucauldian surveillance, but a surprising degree of self-governmentality and self-monitoring of conduct and practice.

Concluding comments

While visions that seek to achieve creative learning and caring communities are laudable, a deeper question to ask is whether they are sustainable. This case study illustrates that notions of passion, love and care drove the motivation to develop a nurturing and inclusive school. There is much to be gained from examining more closely how an ethics of care may inform such visions. Nel Noddings (2005) is attentive to the point that school is about more than just academic attainment. The challenge is to acknowledge that "the school cannot achieve its academic goals without providing caring and continuity for students" (2005, p. 14). Noddings thus reinforces the idea that teachers (and leaders) have a central role in shaping a more positive experience of school for students. "Teachers not only have to create caring relationships in which they are the carers, but that they also have a responsibility to help their students develop the capacity to care" (2005, p. 18).

The role of personal vision alignment is critical, and must go beyond Senge by stipulating that it is not enough to be a person of vision, but to be a person whose vision can accord with that of the school. On the related role of recruitment, it seems self-evident enough that a school only employ those who can align themselves to its vision. However, particularly for secondary schools, such considerations may be a luxury. What is clear, however, is the critical role played by the principal of a school in leading the vision.

Developing shared understandings derived from collegiality, collaboration and the deprivatisation of practice are important not just for their power to change teaching practice, but to assist schools to develop their capacity for self reflection, and to engage in organisational and individual 'double loop learning' (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1983), the kind of deep reflection on the values that underpin our actions, rather than the surface features of our actions.

Problematically, this research neglects an issue that is carefully analysed by Kenneth Strike (1999). For Strike, communities require constitution by specific values to exist. Constitutive values have the characteristics of a common, but exclusive end or purpose, and the inspiration provided by a shared project. This however, contradicts the principle by which state schools ought to exist, namely liberal inclusiveness, which assumes both free association and non-discrimination. Strike debated the inevitable, but unacceptable, conclusion that state schools could not be communities. This pilot study has taken place in a school whose vision is underpinned by constitutive values. The greater research challenge is to

explore how state schools may also develop as creative learning and caring communities, with sustainable visions and statements of purpose.

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Endnotes

[i] Senge is director of the Center for Organizational Learning at MIT's Sloan School of Management.

[ii] New Zealand schools are, for funding purposes, ranked by decile from 1 (low socio-economic) to 10 (high socio-economic), based on census data.

[iii] The sample and the school are well-known to the author, who has undertaken consultative work with the school staff and Board of Trustees in previous years.

[iv] Not all the students on the roll are parishioners, although most are, and these have first preference for enrolment.

[v] Telephone discussion with Neil Laurenson, Manager, Catholic Education Services, Catholic Schools Office, Diocese of Auckland, 31 Jan 2012.