

# **Leadership Matters**

## **Listening to First-time Principals**

### **Marg Lees**

***‘Effective educational leadership makes a difference in improving learning..... Leadership not only matters, it is second only to teaching among school-related factors in its impact on student learning.’***  
***(Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahistrom (2004)).***

#### **Why the Concern?**

If effective leadership does make a difference for student learning there is a school leadership time bomb about to explode in our New Zealand primary schools and impact on our students - our future NZ citizens. Urgency is required if it is to be averted (Brooking 2006). A shortage of applicants for principal positions is compounded by the retirement of a large number of school principals. (OECD NZ Country Report on Leadership 2007). The challenge is also about ensuring our schools are equipped with quality principals. Unlike countries such as the UK, New Zealand does not require principals to be trained before taking up the role, and once in the role, training is not mandatory. (OECD NZ Country Report on Leadership 2007). This raises concerns about both the capacity and capability of our future school leadership and the policies in place to attract teachers to school leadership. The Professional Leadership Strategy was launched early in August may provide a way forward. The National Aspiring Principals Pilot (NAPP) is underway this year and increased opportunities for leadership will be available through additional management units. But what real impact will these initiatives have and is it too late?

#### **My Study**

Having been involved in the development of the UC Education Plus Aspiring Principal programme for 3 years, I was keen to find out:

- what helps First Time Principals be prepared for principalship?
- what could be done to attract more teachers to become principals?

Who better to ask than First Time Principals (FTP) who had participated in an Aspiring Principals programme?

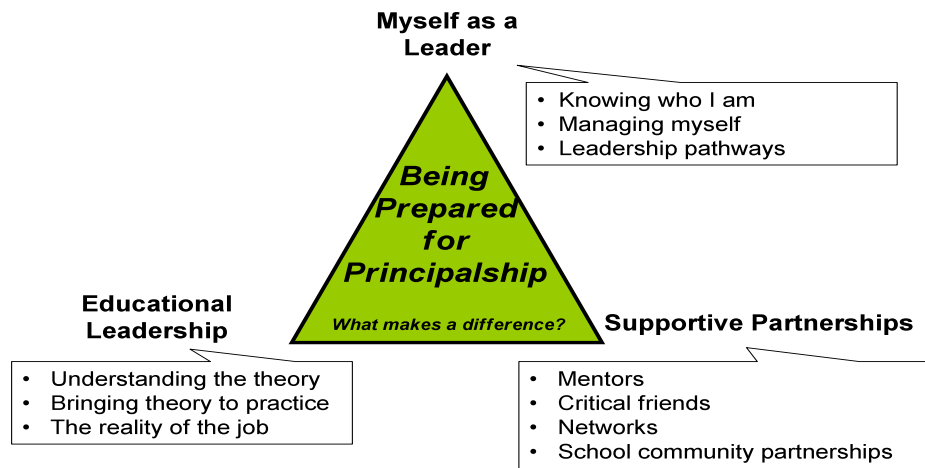
Seven primary school principals who participated in the UC Education Plus Aspiring Principal Programmes were involved in the study. Their principal experience ranged from 8 – 20 months. The cohort represented a range of ethnicities and gender, and size, decile and location of schools.

The principals were interviewed. Each interview took 1 – 1 1/2 hours with guided questions being used as the catalyst for discussion.

## Here's what I found out

Figure 3 illustrates the themes that emerged.

**Figure 3. What helps in being prepared for principalship?**



### A. What helps in being prepared for principalship?

In the following section the voices of the seven FTPs are used to illustrate each of the three key themes and their sub themes in more depth.

#### Myself as a Leader

##### Knowing who I am

*Knowing and staying true to their values and knowing who they are* was identified by six principals as having a significant impact on them in their professional role. One principal said, 'It's about knowing and being yourself; knowing the leader you want to be.' Two principals felt it was helpful on the APP to be asked to articulate what was important to them; something they had never previously been asked to do.

All principals acknowledged *the influence of a range of personal and professional experiences and significant others in their lives* in understanding 'who I am'. The principals mentioned the influence of family, religious and ethnic beliefs. e.g. 'I guess the way I was brought up...the social responsibility...yeah, that all counts.' One principal said 'One of my teachers kept an eye out for me at high school and talked to my parents about me going to university..... I was the first in my family to go to university.'

##### Managing Myself

Understanding and practising a range of effective intrapersonal and interpersonal strategies on the APP was valued by all principals. Key aspects of Managing Self that principals found important now they are in the 'hot seat' were:

*Identifying stressors and strategies to help:* One principal said 'Knowing me, so I can manage myself is important. Knowing my stressors and panic buttons helps. Discussing and practising helpful strategies was great'. She went on to say that strategies practised gave her more confidence.

*Time management* was identified as a challenge by most principals. One principal said he used to get stressed because he never felt the job was done. 'I've come to the realisation that that's just the way it is. It took about two terms. But now I like the job a lot more because of that now....' One principal, with 18 months experience said 'I've learnt to shut the door when necessary.' and 'I've learnt to say 'no'.'

Delegation was another strategy from the APP that three principals said was very helpful, especially after they had been in the job a few months. 'Knowing that I don't have to be the one to do everything' was a significant statement from one of the principals

*Reflective practice* was identified by four principals as being very useful in making them less reactive. One principal said that she continued to use the reflective journal and reflective process started on the APP. 'It makes me less reactive. I used to shoot from the hip. Now I take time to think things through.'

*Relationships:* Managing themselves with people was identified as the greatest challenge by all the principals. One principal said that on the APP she 'started to be aware of the challenge of people management and sustaining it – and appreciating how stressful and draining it could be.' All principals found working through dilemmas and practising strategies on the APP had given them strategies that they continue to find useful in their principal roles. One principal, challenged by an uncooperative teacher said 'I used those skills in managing people. It was a hard conversation, but I was pro-active. I broached the subject. I was pleased I had those skills to do it. I was glad that we had practised those skills.'

## **Leadership Pathways**

Lack of clear leadership pathways was seen as a concern.

*The need for support in seeing a way forward was seen as important.* The principals said that there was no longer a clear pathway from Scale A to Senior Teacher to AP to DP or to Principal in small rural school to Principal in a large urban primary school. Three rural principals talked about the perception of getting 'stuck' in a small rural school.

*Time for leadership professional development for teachers.* All seven principals identified this as a need. They appreciated how the APP provided this. One principal commented 'It (the APP) was the first time I had had the time and opportunity to read, reflect and have dialogue around leadership'. This was reiterated by most principals. Three principals thought that leadership learning pathways need to start with teachers.

*Preparation for the next step:* Transition stages through the leadership pathway were identified by two of the principals as being a time when extra support and guidance was crucial and helpful e.g. Transition to Principalship: 'X (my principal) was really good like that. He would take me to the principal meetings. Sometimes I was the only DP there. But X thought it was important for me to be known out there...I also got to know a bit more about being a principal I guess.' Three principals said the APP sessions on CV, interviews and presentations had prepared them for the next step by providing 'practice for the real thing.' Transition to principalship in another region brought additional challenges: 'Advisers did a damn good job of putting networks around people.' (rural principal)

## **EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

### **Understanding the Theory**

*The focus on the complexity of Educational Leadership was worthwhile.* e.g. understanding about leadership and management. For one FTP, the readings brought about a shift in thinking, 'It made me think there's more to this than the 'nuts and bolts'(Management). Management v Leadership discussions throughout the programme provided participants with a better understanding of Educational Leadership. 'They (advisers) opened your mind to think about, what this role entails for you..'

*Knowing more about the principal's role* was seen by all FTPs as significant preparation. One said 'As a teacher or a DP, you do not actually see everything that the principal is doing. It is important to get a sense of what goes on in the principal's thinking, the conversations they have with others and to unwrap the 'unseen' to gain a greater insight into the role.'

### **Bringing the Theory to Practice**

Developing a range of key leadership strategies on the APP proved worthwhile.

*Collegial dialogue had an impact.* One FTP said how 'Having the time to chew the fat with x about how the leadership might look in a school..... helped me to clarify my thinking.' Another FTP said 'It was quality time to read discuss, analyse and apply to my practice.' For another, 'I loved the readings. The collaborative dialogue, discussing issues with like-minded people was great. It helped to give direction.'

*Knowing and practising a range of strategies* helped all FTPs e.g. learning conversations, conversations with challenging people, questioning skills and active listening. One FTP said, 'they (the advisers) challenged us, but they also gave us a toolkit.'

*Scenarios were helpful.* Two principals said they appreciated the opportunity to prepare for presentation, a vision for the school they were (hypothetically) applying for. 'One thing I really disliked doing.....two hours to write a vision for a school and present it. I found that incredibly hard..... but the strength of the group that I got talking to.... set me in the right direction and that set me up for this job because it got me thinking about what I should be doing.'

All FTPs valued *connecting with principals 'on the job.'* One principal commented how 'shadowing' her mentor principal in her school was so relevant for her. At one stage when they were working together she thought 'This could be me!'

*The sustainability of APP processes and strategies* for some principals was significant e.g. 'Nowadays there are certain times when I've looked at some of my information from my Aspiring Principals course. Only two or three weeks ago I had a look at the readings and the little reflective book (reflective journal). There is stuff there you can fall back on' ....

### **The Reality of the Job**

*Good leaders of learning role models are needed in our schools.* This was identified by two FTPs. 'We need good role models who know about learning and teaching.' One continued, 'Some lock themselves away in their office and have nothing to do with kids and learning.' Both

said that principals who talk to staff about ‘how hard the job is’ and ‘let you know the long hours they are putting. – martyr to the cause’, are not encouraging teachers to be principals. One principal went on to say, ‘There are misconceptions about the job. It doesn’t have to be hard. It doesn’t have to be stressful. You don’t have to be the one to do everything; for example I get someone to do the finance. I know what is happening but I don’t do it all.’

The FTPs felt that *understanding that the principal is the leader of learning would help in attracting teachers to principalship*. Every principal identified that they were a principal because they wanted to lead learning and make a difference for students learning. They felt that if Principalship was marketed and perceived as making a difference for students more teachers would be attracted to the role.

## **SUPPORTIVE PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Mentors**

*Establishing and formalising the mentoring role of in-school principals* in the APP was recognised as being helpful. One of the rural principals said, ‘Setting up mentoring principals is probably one of the really positive things that has helped, as far as mentoring has gone.’ She went on to say ‘In actual fact the mentoring partnership from the APP has continued and I still have Y as one of my ports of call when I’m unsure about something.’ The trust developed in this relationship was significant. Another principal said ‘It formalised the relationship and roles. I mean there was a real purpose. It helped to make the meetings happen.’

*All mentoring principals in the APP committed to supporting other Aspiring Principals on the programme*. Five FTPs interviewed said they valued the range of other principals outside of their school who supported the programme. e.g. ‘I valued being able to talk to a woman principal.’ Another said ‘Both my principals when I was a DP were managers....and I wanted to see some other models of leadership.’

### **Critical Friends**

Principals appreciated *the impact of another Aspiring Principal and the adviser as Critical Friends*. Time was taken to understand the role of the Critical Friend and the role was formalised. One FTP said, ‘I liked the pairing with Z...We’ve continued to keep in contact...when I was applying for this job.....and this year on the FTP programme.’ Another principal commented, ‘Your Critical Friend was an impartial unbiased head.’ Three principals mentioned how valuable the adviser’s support had been not just on the APP but following on from the APP, especially in the transition to Principalship. ‘X was there building networks around me.’

### **Networks**

*Support mechanisms with local ministry, STA, NZEI* were identified as key to being an effective principal. Two of the seven principals were in schools with Statutory Managers in place. One principal said, ‘So, on the APP you made good contact points as well. – Ministry, STA, NZEI. They’ve been key people for me. ...having mechanisms that make you feel as though you’ve always got support no matter what’

Another principal talked about ‘the importance of having support systems and strategies in place for when the unexpected knock-backs hit you. Through the APP I made 3 or 4 contacts and it’s your colleagues that you fall back on. Because of the conversations you’ve had prior to becoming a principal...the conversations were so personal...there was a lot of trust.’

*Establishing strong networks prior to principalship was seen to be valued.* Relationships established on the APP provided crucial support for rural principals. The loneliness of rural principalship was mentioned by the two rural principals. They both commented on the crucial support required for principals in their positions. 'I had relationships with Aspiring Principals...trusting relationships and some have continued. And trust continued with the adviser. I still get some information from others.'

*Dialogue to share and improve practice* was valued. One principal said that as a FTP in his local principal cluster, 'I've already got that mind shift (from APP) that, yeah, it's OK to talk to them (the other principals) about what's happening in my school.'

## **School Community Partnerships**

*A professional Board with the capability to effectively govern the school* was seen as a significant factor in the successful running of the school. Having a professional appointments process was seen as a significant start to developing a partnership between principal and the community. One principal said, 'It set the tone and it was professional'. A BOT who were supportive and showed they valued the principal made a difference, particularly when there was trouble in the community. A rural principal commented, 'I was lucky in that I had an incredibly supportive Board of Trustees. They showed they valued me and all staff.' The FTPs felt BOTs were generally supportive (though some lacked training) while the parent community could be challenging.

## **B. So what could be done to attract more teachers to become principals?**

It is encouraging to see the Ministry of Education, through the NAPP recognising the urgency required to address the looming leadership problem in NZ schools. However the NAPP on its own will not attract quality leaders to principalship and solve the challenge of having quality principals in all our schools.

If New Zealand is to recruit quality principals in our primary schools there are key points to be taken from this study:

1. The principal role must be 'talked up' so that the message to potential principals is positive
2. The Leading Learning aspect of the principal role has huge potential in attracting teachers to school leadership
3. Rather than have one clear pathway for leadership, establish a framework and a *clear process* for a range of leadership pathways. i.e. pathways that are personalised and reflect individual strengths / needs, contexts and aspirations.
4. Time for quality leadership professional development is required for existing and potential school leaders. (Financial rewards such as M units do not make quality leaders)
5. There needs to be a greater connectedness between school leadership and teachers as leaders.
6. Rural principalship must be more attractive
7. Reduction of administration workload

## **SUMMARY**

These 7 FTPs who took part in this project are part of a wave of pedagogical leaders who are taking up principal positions in our schools. If we are to retain them and attract future leaders, a well-resourced personalised leadership pathway needs to be developed. Principals need to be valued and supported and the principal role as the learning leader needs to be modelled, visible and alive in our schools.

Student learning and achievement is strongly influenced by the educational leadership in schools (Leithwood, Lois, Anderson and Wahistrom, 2004). Educational leadership *does* matter and is an urgent challenge for policy development in New Zealand.

## **References**

Brooking, K. J. (2007). *Summary of the New Zealand literature on recruitment and retention of school leaders: Issues, challenges, trends and strategies for succession planning*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Franks, G. & Giles, A. (2007) Get with the Programme. *New Zealand Principal*. March 2007, Vol 22 No 1.

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: Wallace Foundation.

OECD. (2007). *NZ Country Report on Improving School Leadership*. Paris: Author.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Marg Lees is a Leadership and Management Adviser at the University of Canterbury Education Plus Marg has a strong interest in the development of primary middle leaders and those aspiring to be principals.*