

Evaluation of the National Aspiring Principals Project Pilot (NAPP)

2008-2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Inspired to Aspire!”

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N Z Action Research and Review



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Methodology

The National Aspiring Principals Pilot (NAPP) programme was designed to strengthen professional leadership in schools. The results of the evaluation of the pilot programme were intended to inform future work aimed at developing aspiring principals.

The Ministry of Education developed three key research questions that guided the evaluation. These were:

1. Is the NAPP programme effective professional development for aspirant principals?
2. At the conclusion of the programme are the aspirants confident and do they have the skills and knowledge required for first time principalship?
3. At the conclusion of the programme are the aspirants prepared for recruitment?

The key outcomes intended from the evaluation were the production of:

- A report on the quality of the aspiring pilot curriculum and its delivery;
- A report on the effectiveness of the recruitment to, and retention in, the aspiring principals' programme;
- A report on the readiness and success of aspirants in gaining principalships in a variety of school contexts; and
- Recommendations for the establishment of further effective national aspiring principal programmes.

A mixed method approach design was employed in the evaluation of the NAPP programme where both qualitative and quantitative data were collected almost simultaneously, and compared and contrasted. Broad scale electronic questionnaires, focus groups, one-to-one phone interviews, documentary analysis, and observation were used as data collection tools.

The Findings Summarised

The findings are summarised under subheadings derived from statements of intent outlined in the original plan for the NAPP programme.

Governance/Overview

Regional Steering Groups (SGs) were a successful approach to engaging local communities and enhancing ownership of the programme. The national co-ordination and regional interpretation approach was also considered to have been a success.

Recruitment and Selection

Good recruitment and selection approaches were adopted by SGs. However, considerable dissatisfaction was evident over the speed with which this occurred. The importance of engaging support from principals (and indirectly the Board) was underestimated in the pilot. A significant relationship between 'success' of the aspirant on the programme and their principal's support was revealed in the research (including host principal feedback), highlighting the importance of principal engagement and involvement early on.

Early Communication

The importance of extensive early communication to successful aspirants, host principals and Boards about the programme and its expectations cannot be underestimated. Given the timeframe for implementation for the pilot, this was done as well as possible but such haste cannot be replicated for future programmes.

Self Analysis/Needs Analysis

This was poorly utilised (possibly due to time constraints again) but potentially could have enabled planning to provide for valuable extension learning for many individuals.

Design of Programme

All but the last curriculum strand (the management role of the principal) were considered to have been highly relevant. Excellent feedback on the 'residential' format and the overall design was provided (eg 68 Mid-Point questionnaire qualitative comments were positive about the design: 9 were negative and mainly about not enough time). There was an increase in the mean response (3.35 to 3.80 from continuum responses where 1 is negative and 5 positive) from participants completing the Mid and End-Point questionnaires with respect to the relevance of the curriculum as preparation for principalship. This reflected an overall satisfaction with the content. Any recommendations therefore are offered as improvements to a good design, rather than criticisms.

Facilitation

Extensive appreciation of the quality of facilitation (catering for learning styles, variation of teaching techniques, quality of presenters etc.) was provided by aspirants. There is

evidence to suggest that the delivery of the curriculum significantly improved based on a comparison of aspirant mean responses. For example, the mean for delivery in a wide variety of formats increased from 3.19 to 3.64 between the Mid and End-Point questionnaires, from 3.26 to 3.55 for learning styles being catered for, and from 3.14 to 3.57 for delivery of the curriculum in a logical and linked manner.

By far the majority of qualitative comments in the questionnaires were also positive. For example, 24 Mid-Point questionnaire qualitative comments were positive about the facilitation: 7 were negative, with 2 of those noting that too many facilitators were sometimes present. Short workshops covering the management (Role of the Principal) strand of the curriculum were successful in some areas, as were sessions involving group interactions, and facilitation and/or input from existing principals. Once again any recommendations are linked to 'making better best'.

Support and Networking Between Aspirants

An environment was created where excellent support and networking was achieved. The Professional Learning Group (PLG), Professional Learning Community (PLC), element of the curriculum design and the mentor/coach support was strongly appreciated.

Attendance Rates

Excellent attendance rates were recorded throughout the programme.

Leadership Projects

A mixed response to projects was evident. Some aspirants appreciated the worth of them: some did not. Regardless of perception of relevancy, clearer expectations and outcomes associated with projects needed to be articulated.

Shadowing

This element of the programme was rarely mentioned by aspirants but where conducted, shadowing was seen positively. Host principals also commented on this experience favourably.

On-line Learning

This was the most negatively reported upon element of the programme (eg 7 Mid-Point questionnaire qualitative comments were positive: 47 were negative). It is not, however,

recommended that this element is eliminated. Rather, the recommendations suggest ways to improve its utilisation.

Reflective Journals

This area was not strongly referred to in aspirant feedback probably because it was an optional component of the programme. Of interest, however, was the fact that aspirants rated 'reflection' as the area they had made the most transformation in during the programme.

Retention of Aspirants

Excellent retention rates were recorded for the programme and exemplify its worth to busy aspirants.

Aspirant Confidence and Preparation for Principalship

Aspirant growing confidence in the curriculum content and its application to principalship occurred throughout the programme, as did confidence in conducting the role of principal itself. The increase for the mean rating (3.29 to 3.95) for the area of the programme enabling aspirants to apply new knowledge to their practice was the largest significant difference evident in the data generated between the Q1 Mid and End-Point questionnaires. This suggests that in the latter half of the year participants were more able to apply knowledge accumulated from NAPP to their practice.

The NAPP significantly enhanced aspirants' likelihood of entering into a career of principalship (at the 0.05 level of significance). In July the group provided a mean rating of 3.58: four months later, this mean rating had increased to 4.21.

Aspirant Preparation/Readiness for Principal Recruitment

Overall, the programme was seen as good preparation for principal recruitment, but a stronger emphasis needed to be placed on the 'management' roles of the principal in the curriculum.

Success of Aspirants in Gaining Principalship

A steady stream of principal appointments was reported throughout the programme (eight by July, 20 by December, 26 by March 2009).

Recommendations

As noted earlier, the programme overall was considered by aspirants, facilitators, and Regional Co-ordinators to have been largely successful. Therefore, many of the following are suggestions for improvements to this programme.

- Retain structure of local SGs and national co-ordination – that latter to ensure a level of consistency and networked interactions.
- A national moderating body (that must have Māori and Pasifika representation) is set up to ensure overall national consistency in the programme whilst allowing regional variation.
- Consideration be given to paying SG members for attendance at meetings.
- For future iterations of NAPP, applications should be sought and received in sufficient time to allow for thorough, unpressured, consideration by SG members.
- A consistent selection rating process should be developed across the country for future iterations of NAPP in order to provide equity in the selection process.
- Greater engagement of the aspirant principal's (and Board) support needs to be secured and maintained throughout the programme.
- For future residential courses, if possible, regions should provide relevant material in advance to assist: (a) shared travel and local connections; and (b) perusal and comprehension of materials in advance. This specific material should also include a detailed outline of the curriculum and programme expectations (on-line, PLGs, projects etc.).
- Extensive, early communication should include the host principal (and indirectly the Board Chair) in order to engage their support for the aspirant.
- An initial meeting with aspirants should include host principals to promote the development of a shared understanding of the programme, expectations and roles. Host principals should be invited to attend at least one residential session.
- The needs and self-analysis material should be issued and returned to facilitators prior to Residential 1 workshops so that planning can be mapped around the results, particularly informing the level to pitch content at, areas for extension, and focusing of projects.
- A question could be included in the needs analysis to check aspirants' experience of Māori protocol, and if common deficiencies are evident, arrange an optional session on this during Residential 1.
- On-going reference needs to be made to the objectives and activities outlined in regional plans to ensure alignment between the plan and workshops in residential courses. A national plan developed in co-operation with Regional Co-ordinators could form the template for regional variation.
- Future iterations of the NAPP programme should build in more input on the specifics of 'Managing Change' (specifically dealing with resistance) and coverage of the management and compliance areas of the 'Role of the Principal' strand. As novices, the aspirants strongly suggest they need some practical skills in management roles in order to feel confidently prepared for principalship. Wider coverage of the latter could be achieved via self-selection workshops.

- Emphasis could be given to a 'Leading People' thread/underpinning that runs through the entire curriculum. In the pilot, issues such as tackling problems, working in non-defensive ways with people (including Boards), and the resultant trust development, were barely addressed and yet such facets of organisational learning are considered by many to be at the core of effectiveness.
- External facilitators should be briefed to link content strongly to the school principalship context. This is a tight programme in terms of time so there is a need to ensure that context specific material is presented.
- Regional Co-ordinators and facilitators could use their sound knowledge of the FTP programme to make links to NAPP.
- Regional 'experts', or guest facilitators, who have expertise in the one or two specific areas could contribute across all regions, rather than just one. One 'expert' could provide a keynote per curriculum strand and the Regional Co-ordinators and facilitators could link sessions to that.
- Greater use of short workshop sessions should be considered (on a participant selection basis) to cover multiple aspects of the curriculum (particularly noted for the 'Role of the Principal' strand of the curriculum).
- Facilitators should draw together the key themes at the end of each session/day in order to show aspirants the connections between messages (eg links between the BES findings on Leading Learning and Emotional Intelligence) and to aid their own summary reflections.
- If articles/readings are discussed, that some drawing together of conclusions from discussion occurs to ensure that both the aspirant opinions are shared and links to the curriculum are made.
- Where the needs analysis reveals that there is considerable understanding on a topic, facilitators should feel comfortable in taking the courage to challenge the aspirants with some of the deeper, research-based, material.
- Close attention should be paid to the sequencing of sessions so that aspirants have a cohesive perception of the links between topics under the strands of the curriculum.
- NAPP designers/facilitators across the country could swap suggestions of presenters who have really 'hit the spot' in residential, with a view to sharing expertise.
- Early information should be provided on the nature and extent of project work, and a first meeting between coach/mentor, principal and aspirant on the project should occur prior to the first residential. Sending out a list of project topics explored satisfactorily in the pilot could help new aspirants to get a grasp of the size of topic expected.
- Clearer expectations and outcomes associated with projects need to be articulated. Participants also suggested that the projects should not be made to sound too complicated at the beginning, models of projects should be provided as a guide, and robust check points and accountability should be included along the way from the coach.
- Aspirants should be encouraged to advise programme organisers if they have changed school, or if their principal has changed while the programme is running in case liaison with the new school or principal about aspirant participation or the research project is needed.

- A consistent 'evaluative process' should be considered for the leadership projects, so that aspirants are clear about how their work should be presented and evaluated.
- An outline, or 'case studies' of successful leadership projects from this pilot could be made available on-line to assist future aspirants to determine accurately the size of the task and the benefits that can be gained from this aspect of the programme.
- Continuation of choice over who might be shadowed continues.
- If possible, in a future iteration of the programme, build in day release time to enable shadowing of principals in aspirants' own or other schools.
- Consider the construction and maintenance of a 'register' of highly competent principals in various sectors who are prepared to be shadowed as part of aspirants' developmental processes.
- That the on-line component is sufficiently tailored to meet aspirant individual needs and used as the basis of extending learning for those aspirants who had considerable existing NAPP content knowledge.
- A clear purpose for on-line usage needs to be made evident to aspirants and guided activities/questions developed to ensure that the purpose is maintained.
- That investigation be undertaken to determine whether 'small group' (rather than whole-group) participation in the on-line exchange aspect of the programme would be beneficial. An on-line leader should be appointed for both aspirant PLGs and the facilitator group.
- Ensure that the formal 'capturing' of reflection, if that is a required part of the programme, includes tools that suit different learning styles (such as use of digital voice recorders for those who prefer to talk, or email dialogue, or use of blog contributions).
- Engage facilitators in deeper understanding of approaches to reflective journaling, reflection at a double-loop-learning level, and dialogue processes associated with reflection.
- Provide an extensive outline of the programme to Boards so that they have awareness of the curriculum when interviewing potential principal candidates.
- Continuation of the programme.