



## Inducting School Principals: Principles and Dilemmas

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### INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the effectiveness of the First-time Principals Programme (FTPP), an induction programme funded by the Ministry of Education (MOE) since 2002. It is based on a research report I wrote in 2004 to complete a masters degree. The research project focused on my induction, covering the first 12 months (October 2003 until September 2004) in my present role as principal of Rosehill College. Rosehill College has a roll of some 1900 students and 160 staff, and is situated in the Papakura District about 30 kilometres south of the centre of Auckland. This research covers my first twelve months in the position of principal, and thus only considers my participation in the FTPP over this period. I did attend a third residential FTPP course, which fell outside the timeframe of the original research. It is worth noting, though, that nothing occurred at the third residential course to alter the conclusions below.

Induction is defined as 'a process for developing among new members of an organisation the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values essential to carrying out their roles effectively' (Daresh & Playko, 1992: 147). I had a particular interest in understanding the approaches in the formal induction programme to relationships between teachers and principals. What I was looking for was advocacy of relationships that would empower teachers as well as principals, and theories which would underpin such relationships. This I did not find.

There is a significant literature available that purports to record the work of principals too, but little of it is reliable (Gronn, 2003). With particular relevance to this study, Gronn notes that those who presume to design specifications for the production of education leaders do so in the context of 'a dearth of naturalistic studies of day-to-day administration, and of the structuring, flow and pace of the work they do' (p. 22). He specifically notes the inadequacy of the HayGroup's methodology, citing their work in Australia and in the United Kingdom. That comment is particularly apt given the MOE's dependence on the HayGroup's documentation of New Zealand principals' 'competencies' prior to the setting up of the FTPP.

The neo-liberal reforms in the New Zealand education system from the late 1980s legitimated a 'culture of distrust' (Codd, 1999: 45) which led to teachers' professionalism being reduced to a 'set of predetermined skills or competencies' (Codd, 1997: 140) in a climate where self-interested behaviour was seen to be inevitable (Hazeldine, 1998: 81). I looked for ideas akin to these to be acknowledged in the official programme to induct school principals, but in vain. They were not there.

Agreeing with Snook's assertion (2003: 13) that 'teaching is an activity in which ethical issues are central' I looked for references to that dimension of our work, but also in vain. Fullan (2003) suggests that moral purpose should lie at

the heart of discussion about the role of public/state schools. He argues for educational leaders' actions being informed by *collective*, professional judgement (p. 7). Again, both considerations received scant acknowledgement in the FTTP.

Conclusions drawn from my study include a concern about the lack of any explicit ideology underpinning the programme, inadequate focus on the relationships between the work of principals and the work of teachers, and insufficient discrimination used to select mentors.

## THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION PREPARES FOR THE FTTP

In April 2000 the Ministry of Education's School Labour Market Policy Unit completed *A Literature Review of Principals' Leadership and Management Capabilities*. This document, marked 'Internal Use Only', was a precursor to the HayGroup's report *Identifying the Skill, Knowledge, Attributes and Competencies for First-Time Principals: Shaping the Next Generation of Principals* which was completed in August 2001. Both directly shaped the FTTP.

What is remarkable about the Ministry's literature review is that it makes no attempt to specify what "Principals' Leadership" ought to consist of, despite the term being in its title. It is not until page 9 that the review grapples with leadership theory. That discussion takes less than two pages in what is a 41 page document (excluding the bibliography). There is no recognition that educational leadership is ideologically contested. There are no references to the educational theorists New Zealand principals might have expected to see cited, such as Sergiovanni, Fullan, Hargreaves or Barth. Under the heading *Characteristics of Effective Principals*, most of the references are to officially produced documents, (e.g., the Education Review Office), and the references in this part are very thin. For example, the review has a one sentence statement about the values of a 'good' principal, and that is referenced to a four page magazine article (Edwards, 1999). There are only two references to teachers in the entire review.

Similar deficiencies are apparent in the MOE commissioned HayGroup Report (2001). The report's authors acknowledged the MOE's literature review discussed above, which they describe as 'extensive' and 'wide-ranging' (p. 13). In the report, competencies are defined as 'any *measurable* characteristic of a person that differentiates the level of *performance* in a given *job, role, organisation* or *culture*' (p. 13, italics in original). The key competencies, the report argues, can be clustered together as vision and leadership, building community relationships, self-efficacy and striving for excellence (p. 5).

The descriptions of these so-called competencies are such that they are no more than clichés. For example, on page 20 we are told that: 'Informed by educational theory and best practice, highly effective principals use big picture thinking and reflection...'. There is no explanation regarding which theories might be useful (or for what ends), or which so-called 'best practices' might be worthy of consideration. In other words, the complex issues embedded in their language are not problematised. The report's lack of a sense of context is best summed up in a classic HayGroup analogy – 'you can teach a squirrel and a turkey to climb a tree, but it is easier to start with a squirrel' which is quoted with obvious approval (p.8). What makes for a good 'squirrel' principal, however, is not at all clear from this report.

Teachers are invisible in the report. Thus, the nature of principals' relationships with teachers is ignored.

Such deficiencies would be surprising if it were not for the fact that official documentation on the roles of secondary school principals, which preceded this report, was similarly lacking. The MOE's *Principal Performance Management* (MOE, 1998), for example, barely mentions teachers and teaching at all. So it is with relevant ERO publications (1995, 1997). In that organisation's report on what it calls 'core competencies' for school principals, for example, teachers are mentioned once only in the 12 pages which describe the 'competencies' (1995: 7-19).

## **THE FIRST-TIME PRINCIPALS PROGRAMME (FTPP)**

The most notable omission in the FTPP was that no attempt was made to provide a coherent description of the job that the programme was intended to induct people into. Moreover, while there were different keynote addresses on managing teaching and learning, appraisal, conducting 'learning conversations' and the like in the first 12 months of the programme, it was disappointing that there was no overarching vision about how principals could manage their relationships with teachers in a way that would empower both.

There were three components of this induction programme: three residential courses of four days duration each, mentoring, and New Principals Online, an online learning and professional development facility. I did not use the online learning facility, thus it will not be discussed.

### **Residential courses**

Two residential courses were held in the 12 months under discussion, during 19-22 April, 2004 and 21-24 September, 2004. There were ten keynote addresses in total. Each of the residential courses provided workshops as well, focusing on what was termed 'compliance, practice, research' issues.

I noted above that there was no attempt to define the position we were being inducted into. There was a partial exception to this, and it was a keynote address on the third day of the first residential course entitled 'Leading the Learning School'. It was a partial exception because although it was declared to be the FTPP vision of educational leadership, the exposition of that view lasted about 30 minutes only, followed by an example of it in practice from a local school. Its lack of prominence in the programme belied the expectations placed on it. The author of the address argued that there had been a radical shift in how school leadership was to be viewed, in broad terms from leaders having a vision regardless of its content, to leaders having a vision which focused on improving learning and teaching. At the heart of this was the notion of principals overseeing the gathering of credible evidence of student achievement.

There is no doubt that focusing on student outcomes has a 'powerful logic', well capable of dominating political discourse about standards in education (Siskin, 2004: 167). That focus, however, provides a crucial dilemma for principals and schools which was insufficiently discussed in the FTPP. There is considerable debate in the school sector and beyond about how student outcomes can be described validly and consistently. There has been an upsurge in interest in learning outcomes in recent years – witness the structure of The New Zealand Curriculum Framework and the National

Certificate of Educational Achievement. However, there is considerable controversy surrounding this model of describing student achievement, and that was not acknowledged at all in the FPHP.

It has been argued, for example, that outcomes models 'accommodate and emphasise technical knowledge, conventions, rules and procedures, but they trivialise learning and education' (Lee, O'Neill & McKenzie, 2004: 60). It is not certain that it is possible to describe a straightforward progression of students' knowledge and skills in the form of outcomes. Elley (2004: 94), for example, argues that it is not, except in limited circumstances. In the same vein, Elmore (2004) argues that there is no 'defensible theory about how much it is feasible to expect students to learn over a given period of time or what types of instruction have to be in place in order for students to meet expected rates of improvement' (p. 278).

If oversight by principals of the gathering and use of data about student achievement really was the central vision of the FPHP's residential courses, then there needed to be much more focus on how that might be achieved, along with recognition of the difficulties involved in doing it reliably.

## **Mentoring**

The FPHP mentoring programme began with a surprise. I had expected that I would choose a suitably qualified and willing person from amongst experienced Auckland principals. In fact, those in charge of the programme chose a mentor for me. In preparation for my first meeting with my mentor I was to complete a 'self-evaluation questionnaire' with headings derived from the HayGroup's 'competencies'. I found the experience of responding to uncontextualised 'competencies' or 'standards' too unclear to be helpful. What my mentor made of my responses was not clear.

The programme provided for three face-to-face meetings between mentors and mentees during the 12 months under discussion. Each session lasted three hours. Contact by email or telephone between face-to-face meetings was possible, too.

By and large the mentoring part of the programme was the most useful part of the FPHP for me. It was useful to be able to discuss issues about my school with an experienced principal (my mentor had been a secondary principal in Auckland for several years) who was not associated with the school, and who was willing to both listen and provide useful responses to the ideas and dilemmas I was raising.

It needs to be noted that those in charge of the FPHP need to find credible criteria for the appointment of mentors. It should be axiomatic that people still applying for principals' positions, and thus potentially competing with the very people they are then invited to mentor, should be ruled out. That was not the case with one mentor at least; he had applied for the position I was successful in obtaining.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is important to keep in perspective what could have been achieved in 12 months of an induction programme consisting of two four day residential courses and three mentoring sessions of three hours each (Cameron *et al.*, 2004: x-xi). Nevertheless, I expected that the programme would grapple with the complex roles of principals, and acknowledge the social, political and

ideological context in which educational leadership is sited. That expectation was not met.

The lack of an explicit discussion regarding the ideological context of principals' work, and possible responses to that context, meant that the focus became technician and managerial, that is, how best was one to manage staff and the implementation of successful teaching programmes, along with coping with compliance issues.

How to produce data about students' academic progress that was credible, of use to teachers and HODs, and meaningful to the Board of Trustees and parents was an issue that was said to lie at the heart of the FTTP's vision of a principal's work. Yet, the keynote address that dealt with it provided no guidance regarding the nature of that data, apart from an oblique and slightly apologetic reference to Progressive Achievement Tests. The keynote address ignored ongoing controversy surrounding the reliability of assessment data.

Martin and Robertson (2002), who were part of the team which wrote the curriculum materials for the programme, expressed disquiet about the fragmented approach implicit in the MOE's contractual arrangements which had three separate groups develop the proposal, write the curriculum materials and implement them. They argued that the 'three very separate aspects of the research, design and delivery of the induction programme have worked against its coherence and credibility' (p. 7).

Roland Barth (in Thorpe, 1995: xi-xii) notes several paradoxes that operate within the principal's role: between control and chaos, isolation and collegiality, power and powerlessness, confidence and self-doubt, faith and fear, and stability and change. Since there is no explicit attempt in the FTTP to problematise the roles of principals, or to analyse how the changing context of their work might be understood, the programme met unnecessarily limited goals only: of providing some useful advice in a collegial environment regarding how to best manage oneself and the (undefined) job, and how to meet compliance requirements well.

The notion that education policy, both conception and implementation, is inevitably political was not acknowledged or addressed in the FTTP. There was no discussion or debate about the values that should underpin the work of principals.

The complexity of principals' relationships with teachers was not addressed, except in minimal and uncontested terms. There was no sense of the various types of trust that need to be established within schools – for example, competence, contractual and communication (Fullan, 2003: 43). Similarly, the possibilities of collaborative leadership were ignored, despite the extensive literature available (for example, Dewey, 1987; Foster, 1989; Sergiovanni, 2001; Smyth, 1991; Stewart and Prebble, 1993).

Principals' relationships with teachers lie at the heart of their work. Their relationships with teachers substantially determine the influence they can have on what and how students learn. These relationships have been the subject of intense political debate and struggle in recent times, much of it under the mantle of neo-liberalism. People new to the position of principal need to grapple with the implications of working in a 'culture of distrust'. The challenge for the FTTP is to clearly articulate a vision of educational leadership that empowers followers (Smyth, 2001: 240-241), and that encourages principals to work with teachers in ways that are open, respectful, collaborative and ethical, and which promote authentic opportunities for teachers, individually and collectively, to reflect on their practice and to improve it.

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