Leadership learning: Aspiring principals developing the dispositions that count

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Abstract

This article outlines a research study into the leadership learning of over 200 aspiring principals, looking specifically at how they learned some of the key concepts and dispositions that underpin effective educational leadership: the disposition to learn; the moral purpose for addressing inequity; cultural responsiveness; the efficacy and agency to lead transformative change; and the multi-faceted role of the principal in effecting change and building capacity for change in self and others. This study took advantage of reflective data collected from the participants about their learning, by looking across these data sets and engaging in the reflective process. The data offered a window into the thinking of the participants, as a vehicle for gaining insights about the ways in which they were changing and growing in relation to the assumptions and intended outcomes outlined in the New Zealand Aspiring Principals’ Programme’s theory of action. This theory of action was used to identify themes for coding and analysis to inform understanding of these themes, through how they were being understood and enacted by the participants. Once the codes were established, they were used to code the guided self-reflections to validate and refine the codes to ensure that they could be applied to the open-ended responses. The article provides insight into how leaders learn these six educational concepts and provides four key messages about leadership learning.

Keywords: Leadership; learning; moral purpose; building capacity; equity

Introduction and background

Over the past 20 years, New Zealand has increasingly invested in school leadership development. Addressing the inequities in the New Zealand education system, particularly for Māori and Pacific peoples, has been the focus of current policy documents, such as Ka Hikitia, Tu Rangatira and Success for All, and The Pacific Education Plan, as well as professional learning and development for teachers and school principals through Te Kotahitanga and He Kākano in particular. The importance of the role of the principal in developing a learning culture for adults and students is indisputable and it is the dispositions of these leaders that have the most effect on their being able to build such learning communities. This article outlines a research study into the leadership learning of over 200 aspiring principals, looking specifically at how they learned some of the key concepts and dispositions that underpin effective educational leadership: the disposition to learn; the moral purpose for addressing inequity; cultural responsiveness; the efficacy and agency to lead transformative change; the multi-faceted role of the principal in effecting change and building capacity for change in self and others.

Developing leaders to step up into principalship was a key issue for the New Zealand government in the early part of this decade. In an effort to address this, as well as to develop middle leaders for principalship, a pilot regional programme was delivered by the University of Waikato for the Ministry of Education in 2003 and 2004 with 20 aspiring and potential leaders in each cohort each year (Robertson & Leckie, 2005). Aspiring principals’ development programmes were then run regionally throughout New Zealand by the school support services attached to the Universities in each region. The first Ministry of Education Professional Leadership
Plan, published in 2009, highlighted the importance of continuing aspiring and first-time principal leadership development to ensure that Ministry of Education priorities were met. In 2010, the Ministry of Education called for tenders for the design and delivery of a National Aspiring Principals’ Programme, for which the professional learning consortium Te Toi Tupu (made up of CORE Education, The University of Waikato, Cognition Education, the Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development, with the New Zealand Council for Education Research providing evaluative support) won the contract and developed a comprehensive programme that it has delivered nationwide since 2011, through a range of mediums: online discussions and forums, professional learning groups, online and face-to-face hui and coaching with peers and with an expert, experienced kaiārahi.

The National Aspiring Principals’ Programme was built around the five main themes of curriculum that the Ministry of Education tendered for: Developing self; Leading change; Leading learning; 21st-century learning environments; and The role of the principal. Drawing on the international knowledge base, the academic director, Jan Robertson, designed the aspiring principal learning experience on four key principles of professional learning:

- Personalised, self-regulated, reflective meta-cognitive learning.
- Connected and networked leaders sharing and creating knowledge.
- Coaching leadership capacity in self and others.
- Inquiry-focused leadership and learning, informed by research and evidence.

These principles and how they are embedded in the programme’s learning experiences are outlined more fully in the full research report (Earl & Robertson, 2013).

Methodology
The National Aspiring Principals’ Programme (NAPP) is built on a strong theory of action which describes how the programme was rooted in the New Zealand context, founded on a set of assumptions and created around the concepts and principles described above. It goes on to highlight the intended immediate and long term outcomes, as they are envisioned by the Te Toi Tupu planning team.

For the research study, particular concepts, as stated above, were identified from the theory of action. These were then used for coding and analysis to inform the understanding of these concepts, through how they were being understood and enacted by the participants of NAPP. This study took advantage of the data collected from the participants at three different times in the year. The concepts cover a wide range of material, are supported by the assumptions and theories of learning and change in the Theory of Action, and are embedded in the NAPP programme in multiple ways.

Once the concepts were established, they were used to code the guided self-reflections and to validate and refine the codes to ensure that they could be applied to the open-ended responses. The refined and expanded descriptions were then used to code the qualitative data from: (1) the September self-assessment ‘other comments’ section for each question asked; and (2) the December inquiry summary reports, with attention to the nature of the concept and its development.

What we have learned
This research was designed explicitly to add to the knowledge base about the six leadership dispositions described above and to provide examples and images of what they might look like in practice as they are learned. It was clear during the analysis that the themes are inextricably inter-related. It is instructive, however, to consider them as separate entities before discussing the connectedness.

Moral purpose
The majority of people who enter the profession do so with the moral purpose of making a positive difference to people’s lives through education. Moral purpose in the National Aspiring Principals’ Programme goes deeper. It
builds on this sense of moral purpose, by engendering the shared values of equity and social justice through the values of culturally responsive leadership and pedagogy, honouring the Treaty of Waitangi and the dual cultural heritage of New Zealand, and stepping up to actively address the under-achievement of particular groups who have not been well-served by the education system. This involves the realisation that leaders with moral purpose are not just involved in doing for or on behalf of Māori; it means leaders working with Māori and ensuring that the school is a positive place for success for Māori, as Māori.

The quantitative data in the self-assessment survey, in September, showed that the participants felt that they were more focused on moral purpose and on the target student groups. Consideration of the quantitative data through this lens produced four facets of moral purpose for aspiring principals as they travelled through the experiences of NAPP:

- focussed awareness of the equity issues that define New Zealand education;
- self-awareness and examination of personal moral purpose;
- challenging, reinforcing or strengthening of beliefs and/or convictions; and,
- acting with moral purpose.

Awareness of the pervasive inequity in New Zealand education is the starting point for developing moral purpose to address inequities. Within the New Zealand context of inequity there has been specific government determination to develop schools that enable success for all students, especially those who are currently underserved. This issue was highlighted by the ākonga as they reflected on the complexity and importance of shared moral purpose with colleagues to move this agenda forward in their school and nationally. (The quotes used in this paper are not comprehensive. The data from the various data sets were analysed and organised to determine the themes and to highlight salient ideas. The paper was written with these themes and ideas as guideposts and quotes were selected to exemplify them.) As one ākonga stated:

> It has been critical to retain the moral commitment to students achieving academic success and keep them at the fore. You cannot move the waka on your own but need everyone on board paddling in unison to get up speed and win the race.

Self-awareness and examination of personal moral purpose was highlighted in much of the data. Sometimes, the idea of moral purpose as the driver of practice is a new and revolutionary idea that refocuses thinking and practices. Reflection and consideration about moral purpose “made them stop in their tracks and think” or “opened my eyes to becoming far more moral in my dealings with students and colleagues.” The greater awareness of moral purpose is connected to a sense of personal leadership identity, as this leader highlighted: “This process and my entire inquiry have been not really about my project at all. It has been about my understanding of myself, my leadership and leading with moral purpose.”

Coming to grips with one’s personal sense of moral purpose is not straightforward as we see in comments like: “It has been quite a challenge to refocus my moral purpose in education”; “I am still wrestling with moral purpose”; and “The process is ‘helping’ me develop and communicate a stronger moral purpose, but that I personally have not yet fully developed that”. This challenging, reinforcing or strengthening of beliefs or convictions is an important part of the process of developing a moral purpose for equity. Although it opens a new view of the role of leaders in education, the attention to a personal moral imperative also reinforces convictions that moral purpose is an essential component of quality leadership, as stated here: “I have been able to re-frame my leadership approach toward addressing under achievement of these learners and develop a stronger moral purpose in my leadership for change.”

People who already have a strong sense of moral purpose can also use reflection and challenge to reinforce existing beliefs. Comments like “moral imperative”, “holding moral purpose a little closer” and “reinforcing the importance of leading and communicating with strong moral purpose” show the intensity of their conviction.
Having a moral purpose may already be part of the leadership practice but the opportunity for reflection and a willingness to persist can lead to deeper and stronger convictions. The stronger conviction about moral purpose is also related to sharing leadership to move forward.

Moral purpose, in these data, was not just a way of thinking, but a way of acting, at times requiring courage and determination. There is a sense of urgency about what needs to be done and being intentional in doing it:

*I am more urgent in developing shared pedagogies within our school and ensuring we are all on the same page and that the children get the best deal possible. I am not prepared to compromise on high quality teaching and learning.*

Moral purpose is a foundation for educational leadership for equity and social justice. It is active every day and it is deeply connected to the people.

**Cultural responsiveness**

Culturally responsive practice is enacted when leaders acknowledge that culture, language and identity are at the heart of the learning relationship and that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. An understanding of different cultural worlds and a willingness by leaders to respond and connect to students’ culture leads to practices that are culturally responsive. “The Māori language and culture, epistemology and pedagogies, and what counts as knowledge (including how it is preserved, transmitted, utilised and evaluated) all qualify as tāonga, to be protected and promoted under the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi” (Macfarlane, 2012, p. 208). All students will gain from culturally responsive practice that honours the dual cultural heritage of New Zealand and its multicultural population, and hence educates for diversity. In the self-assessment survey in September the majority of respondents indicated increased understanding and attention to cultural responsiveness. Considering cultural responsiveness through these data sets shows its complexity and its centrality in understanding educational change in New Zealand. It is a mix of paying attention, doing things differently and rethinking or reframing beliefs. The presentation of the analysis is organised around four ideas:

- culturally responsive practices in schools and classrooms;
- changing dispositions about cultural responsiveness;
- leading for cultural responsiveness;
- learning about cultural responsiveness.

Cultural responsiveness was a point of focus for many of the aspiring leaders in their own inquiries and in their schools, with intentional data collection and input from the community and from students, to support planning and thinking about how to support Maori and Pasifika students in different ways, more successfully: “*Whilst the data says they are achieving ‘at the national average’, when you look deeper, most of our Maori students, and under-performing boys are in our alternative English programmes.*”

Working beyond the school is an important dimension of cultural responsiveness. Decisions about the school or inquiry focus were often made with involvement from and consideration of the perspectives of family/whānau, community and students.

*We have taken heed of what our Pasifika parents have informed us of their priorities for their children and what is important to them to ensure that their children are at their best to learn and learn best. We have viewed and revised our practice in the classroom in accordance to what issues our Pasifika students have identified ‘what helps me learn at school?’ and ‘what does not help me learn at school?’ from the student questionnaire.*

The core of cultural responsiveness requires active embedding of culture, language, history and traditions, as part of the regular work of schools. There were many examples where language, in particular, provides a vehicle for recognising culture and for developing shared understanding and respect, illustrated with comments like:
“PD around second language acquisition pedagogies, and strategies for teaching a second language”; “The development of Te Reo in school” being important features of the change process.

Equally important is building professional knowledge about culture through things like “[taking] HoDs to our nearest marae”; “Kapa haka performance in the school”; “track Pasifika students through their learning journey”; “teachers share their students’ successes, converse about and share ideas and resources, reflect on their own practice; reflect on and share their own successes with their Pasifika students”; “upskilling my Māori language skills and becoming more fluent with my mihi.”

Perhaps the most powerful understanding that emerged was that, although cultural responsiveness is enacted in a wide range of activities and approaches, activities are not enough. Changing dispositions about cultural responsiveness is an evolving and deepening process that is embedded in ways of thinking about culture and situating it in a larger framework. What is needed is an understanding that knowledge is culturally and socially constructed, and that schools’ ways of working have been developed on one culture’s social and cultural norms. This process is not singular but involves ongoing personal and collective activity as was typified by these types of comments: “develop a deeper understanding of Māori”; “progress with my knowledge and understanding of Māori culture”; “begun to permeate what I do and I am becoming a go-to person with cultural matters”; “I definitely think I need to learn more about the Treaty and how it can impact my leadership”. Changing dispositions, therefore, requires challenging, reframing and changing thinking.

These aspiring leaders talked about their heightened and reinforced awareness of why school leaders needed to initiate change to respond more effectively to the needs of Māori and Pasifika learners.

I have learned that I hadn’t ever reflected on my life of privilege as a pākehā New Zealander. I have learned that I can only empathise, but never truly understand, losing language, land, culture, and identity ... I have been made [aware of] ... the importance of Māori achieving as Māori. Knowing the value of respecting tikanga, te reo and context to give Māori the value in education in my class and school that is due.

For Māori leaders, cultural responsiveness requires other frames for reflection, as one ākonga reminds us:

As Māori, I find it difficult to understand why Māori are underachieving as it is a priority wherever I am. It has increased my understanding, though, of how strong moral purpose and communication is valued. I understand how success is achieved because it is what we demand and expect.

Leadership plays a central role in building capacity for cultural responsiveness within schools and for building confidence and competence of educators to work and act in culturally responsive ways. Changing dispositions is based on recognising the constant need for leadership for new professional learning. As a lead learner, a culturally responsive leader is involved in personal learning and constantly challenging his/her own perspectives and behaviours.

**Agency and efficacy as change agents**

In the National Aspiring Principals’ Programme there is an emphasis on building agency, defined as increasing participants’ readiness and capacity to act, to lead, and to respond to policy directions with moral purpose. Above all, the work is about developing participants to the state where they feel efficacious and autonomous and have the willingness to act as agents of change to make a difference to the current situation of inequity in New Zealand education. That is, leaders who will unrelentingly step up to that challenge of equity in their leadership.

One item in the self-assessment survey in September showed that 96% of NAPP participants felt that they were developing a strong sense of efficacy.
Leadership learning

There were three themes in the data related to agency/efficacy:

- belief in one’s efficacy and authenticity as a change agent;
- networks to provide support;
- personal responsibility for the learning journey.

Effective leaders have a sense of efficacy, or a belief that they have the power or capacity to do what is required to effect change. In other words, they see themselves as agents of change. This is shown through a growing belief in personal worth and confidence: “The experience for me has been life changing and affirming of my self-belief. I know why I have to lead change in education more now, than I ever have.” Sometimes this growing self-belief involves the affirmation of knowledge and expertise already gained in one’s career, but not previously recognised. This efficacy is often coupled with a sense of authenticity as a person and in one’s identity as a leader:

I have learned that I am capable of leading people. I was starting to question where I was at and what was I doing because I had questioned my moral purpose. I have rediscovered [it] this year and because of it I have a better understanding of self. I believe I am more authentic as a leader.

Agency and efficacy also entail a growing recognition that leadership itself is about change and that agency is acting with confidence to bring about change – to take responsibility and have ongoing influence in leadership roles. This is a strengthening of leadership identity.

I have learned that I am a significant agent for change within a school. I have also reflected on previous experiences of what I called leadership and that they were more likely to be called management as they were certainly reactive.

A high level of agency entails confidence to challenge others, by asking the questions that challenge and problematise practice and having the conversations necessary to lead the change, as stated here: “I have developed more confidence in my leadership and I’m not afraid to have the hard conversations with staff now.”

Being an agent of change in transformative practices is supported through networks of other leaders experiencing the same or similar change challenges. There were comments about colleagues providing: “a constant source of inspiration”; “online learning communities”; and “[a] national support network”. Sharing and creating new knowledge between leaders from different schools helps build a sense of what is possible and strengthens agency at the individual leadership and school level.

Although feeling a sense of agency and efficacy is buttressed by such shared learning, as is gained through professional networks, it is also embedded in a sense of personal responsibility for one’s individual learning. Building agency and efficacy comes from stepping up and accepting responsibility for making a difference, even when it is tough:

I learned that I had lost the moral purpose of education. The important thing I have learned is that by being honest about myself and where I fit in NZ education, I can make a difference. I am therefore more confident and able to challenge.

This sense of personal efficacy is a dynamic quality that is vulnerable and ever-changing, through an ongoing process of reflection and risk-taking. Ultimately, agency and efficacy mean having the confidence to take on a greater sphere of influence, such as the principalship: “I have gone from thinking that principalship is something I may do in the future to actually wanting to get into it NOW!”

Agency and efficacy are dynamic and evolving elements of leadership. As confidence and authenticity develop, leaders are able to take responsibility for their actions, more intentionally challenge the status quo and thus be more proactive in leading transformative change.
Disposition to learn

The Best Evidence Synthesis on Professional Development and Professional Learning (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar, & Fung, 2008) makes it very clear that developing as an educational professional is a continuous cycle of learning. Hattie (2009) said that key to improving learning outcomes for students were teachers “planning and talking about teaching, and ensuring the teacher constantly seeks feedback information as to the success of his or her teaching on the students” (p. 36) and changing their teaching accordingly. Key to both of these outcomes is the disposition to learn – that leaders see that learning in leadership and therefore leadership as learning is paramount to the effective leadership of change. Therefore, leaders need opportunities to examine why they think in the way that they do, and what values, beliefs and assumptions underpin this thinking and why. Deeply reflective practice is key to this learning disposition. Most importantly in the work with the aspiring principals was that they did not see this leadership development as a ‘programme being delivered to them’ but as a leadership learning journey that would help develop the skills, structures and dispositions for them to continue on through their leadership careers as learning leaders.

In the self-assessment survey in September, a large percentage of the participants indicated that their thinking about their leadership was being challenged. The qualitative data draw attention to the complex intrapersonal and interpersonal nature of learning for leaders. The disposition to learn encompasses:

- self-awareness
- autonomous learning
- learning that is collective and social
- problematizing practice

Leader as learner, as a disposition and mindset, is firstly a journey of self-awareness – a recognition that leadership is personal and that learning leadership is ‘about me’ and evolutionary. Learning in leadership was described through metaphors like ‘platform for growth’ and a ‘journey’:

\[ \text{NAPP has provided me significant opportunity to reflect and develop self-awareness of my leadership style, capacity. I have developed greater confidence as a leader. I have also been significantly challenged as a leader and can recognise many of my inadequacies as a leader. This has at times given me much doubt, yet has also provided a platform for growth.} \]

The challenge of new learning is welcomed. Leaders with a disposition to learn are not daunted by the fact that learning is sometimes difficult, and often challenging. They embrace the challenge and find it stimulating and energising to be a learner.

\[ \text{I have learned the need to ask why? If teachers aren’t responding well, or as expected, or ‘beyond expectations’, I am asking why ... I have seen the need to go deeper; this does take time and open thinking, preferably with others and feedback. How can my eyes be opened to the ‘blind spots’ of my learning and practice?} \]

Learning, ultimately, is an autonomous undertaking. Having a disposition to learn includes taking responsibility for learning and accepting that it is something that individuals decide and do that involves being motivated and engaged, welcoming the fact that there will always be new learning, and looking ahead and intentionally planning for continued learning: “NAPP has demanded that I sort and sift ideas in my own head around my beliefs and values with regard to school leadership. This is a very difficult thing to do!” Having a disposition to learn also involves taking personal responsibility for engaging (or not) with the opportunities to learn and being able to be diagnostic about one’s level of input to the process, as this leader reflected: “I’m disappointed in myself having not fully engaging with the online forums, discussions and use of My Portfolio.”
Although learning is personal, it is also social and cultural, involving the co-construction of knowledge that occurs in collaborative work and engagement with ideas. Social support and motivation can arise from having a collegial network. Interacting face to face and online with colleagues and coaches creates the forums for open and honest discussion, sharing perspectives, and challenging ideas in a safe context. Networks and partnerships (Robertson, 2011) have the potential to be sustained over time.

My leadership skills and knowledge have doubled if not more this year by being part of this group and meeting some fantastic people who have supported me. Also by building my bank of associates I have gained a lot of advice and resources to ensure my leadership qualities continue this year and in the years to come.

The cultural and social diversity within networks provide the different perspectives and questioning ground for new learning to occur. New learning is not a simple addition of ideas. It involves rethinking, reframing and moving ideas forward and building on ideas. The work and disposition to learning requires serious consideration of existing beliefs and practices – the ability to problematise practice. Becoming a leader is a learning process that involves personal and social learning that never ends. As one ākonga stated:

Through this year I have become aware that leadership is the work and I feel quite excited and inspired to be embarking on this journey. I know that this will be an ongoing process which through reflection and action will bring about more changes in me.

Having a learning disposition is at the basis of the type of transformative leadership necessary to confront the complex challenges facing leaders internationally. It involves a high level of self-awareness and the ability to confront and question one’s own practice. It requires not only a belief that one’s practice is personal and open to challenge but also a recognition that different perspectives are essential to the process of learning in leadership to enable one to approach the zone of not only knowing there is more to learn, but also looking forward to the new places of not-knowing that are inevitable in changing professional practice.

Building capacity of others
The challenges facing schools, and the sustainability of ongoing changed practice needed to address the challenges, necessitate shared leadership from teachers, leaders, students, whānau and community members. Leaders in this context are engaged in building and reinforcing capacity in all parts of the school community, including themselves, to address the underachievement of priority student groups.

Building capacity for change in schools and between schools in New Zealand’s education communities is a key focus for leadership development in the National Aspiring Principals’ Programme. These descriptions of building the capacity of others can be organised under the following six themes:

• negotiating the change;
• learning together;
• using research, resources and expertise;
• fostering self-awareness;
• establishing and fostering relationships;
• multiple opportunities for learning.

Building capacity for change is developing and negotiating the desired change with those who are likely to be affected by the change, not something that is planned by leaders and presented to others for agreement or ‘buy in’. As one ākonga aptly said: “If you want to build a ship, don’t herd people together to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

Change comes from having a vision of the possible, of building capacity ‘for what might be’. Then, the journey of learning that is likely to produce results and sustain them is co-constructed and negotiated along
the way, with leaders acting as experts, coaches and lead learners. Feedback, time and dialogue are essential dimensions of the process, as this ākonga statement highlights:

_I wanted to facilitate an environment where teachers would share what they are currently doing (or more importantly what they are currently TRYING) with the hope that they would spur each other on and learn from one another. ... The topic of discussion was based around “What are we doing? What are we trying? What is working well? What could I share that could help my colleagues?” Dialogue was, for the first time, based around the potential to support deep learning, which was really exciting._

This journey of learning, included leaders providing “scaffold for staff”, “co-construction – listening to their feedback building this into their journey” and practical ‘how to’ issues, like connecting electronically through “VLN [Virtual Learning Network] ipod/iPad group, keeping a google doc record pmi and sharing resources through ichat and email”.

It is often tempting to have a vision and try to ‘sell’ it to others. Negotiation, however, is an iterative process of building ideas collectively, negotiating the power positions and finding a productive balance. These types of comments illustrate this point of learning through one’s own self-awareness about building the capacity of others:

_My first realisation about my own leadership in this project was that I was wrong about andragogy. I had not negotiated the process enough, or – if I was really honest – at all. I knew what shape the answer would be in, and was looking for something unconsciously known to me but consciously unknown to everyone else. Even the fact that I was probably using the term ‘answer’ or ‘solution’ was wrong. I was so far from coaching these people; I was ushering and hustling them onto a train that was heading north, but I didn’t know what was beyond the next few kilometres. I was pushing north and talking about north and singing songs about north all the way but not listening to the people who were trained drivers, but sitting on seats in the back carriage of the train._

Negotiating the change includes valuing the expertise that exists in the school already – and being willing to listen and to use the knowledge and skill of others. It also means trying to understand someone else’s perspective and changing directions to respond to the realities of the situation and of the importance of engaging others in the process of change. When this occurs, “Staff feel valued, more appreciated, want to be part of the decision making process.”

Capacity-building is an ongoing process of learning, for everyone involved. When people are actively involved in the process and living the change in their own contexts, they develop a shared understanding and take collective responsibility for moving forward. Learning together, they are also able to see issues from others’ perspectives. This often means confirming existing knowledge and creating new knowledge, as a group. In order to build the capacity of others, leaders draw on knowledge that is outside the realm of the specific context. This can be from research: ‘have a research base and be able to articulate it’, policy documents, data or evidence, as well as from external experts.

Capacity building is not a ‘paint by numbers’ activity of telling people what to do and expecting them to change. Instead, it involves creating the conditions where people can look at themselves – what they believe and what they do – thereby fostering self-assessment and self-awareness. Relationships and the building of trust are at the core of any attempt to build capacity and facilitate change in schools – relationships with staff, with students and with family/whānau.

_This project was not about eLearning. It was not about the teachers in my group. It was not about student learning, technology, school networks or accessibility. It was not about pedagogy or_
planning or school-wide trends. It was about people, my relationship with them, my leadership style, habits, mistakes and shortcomings.

According to Timperley (2011), one of the fundamental principles of professional learning is having multiple opportunities to learn and apply information. This process of ongoing reflection and discussion is particularly valuable when it involves challenging existing thinking and building new practices. Mentoring, coaching and modelling practice is a powerful vehicle for influencing practice and building capacity for change, as highlighted by this leader:

I have been surprised how willing our staff have been to take on this coaching mode, how enthusiastic they all are about being part of this, how reflection and asking reflective questions has empowered not only our staff but our students, how this has inadvertently affected staff morale, motivation and teaching practice, how all our talk is about the whys, hows, instead of the whats … learning doesn’t happen in the doing, it happens in the reflection.

The study of leaders undertaking an inquiry in their own context provides some valuable insights into the challenges they face as they try to build the capacity of others in their schools. Although a leader may have a clear vision of why it is important to build capacity, this vision is not always shared or it is not seen as important enough to produce changes in others’ practice. Building capacity for change includes building the disposition and commitment to action. The existing power relations between teachers in schools or the differences in years of experience can be a factor influencing building the capacity of others in the education community. It is difficult to move forward and build the capacity of others in one area when the change initiative is overshadowed by other priorities and school leaders are always confronted with small ‘p’ politics of working in schools. Building capacity in others is a personalised undertaking that is always being grown in relation to the unique needs of the individuals and the context.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL – WHAT YOU SEE IS NOT WHAT YOU GET. This would be the greatest mind shift for me. I have learned that I cannot expect everyone to be on my page at the same time and the way in which I deal with one member of my team can be vastly different from another. I have learned people need absorption time and a clear understanding of where this is leading. I have also learned to work alongside the mumblers and disengaged and to strive to include them and recognise their individual contributions. I have learned the importance of ensuring everyone is involved in celebrations of team accomplishments.

Building the capacity of others necessitates a high level of self-awareness in order to be sufficiently open and adaptive enough to negotiate the desired change the enhanced capacity is required for. It means that leaders and the people they work with learn together using shared resources, expertise and the research literature. Fostering self-awareness in others helps to build the disposition and commitment to engage in the leadership practice. Learning with others requires strong and trusted learning relationships that will enable multiple opportunities for learning to be part of the building capacity process.

Understanding the role of the principal

Principals at all stages of experience are on a continual cycle of learning about school operating systems. For new principals this cycle offers sometimes daunting volumes of ‘infowhelm’ as they interact with resourcing and people systems. In the National Aspiring Principals’ Programme, ākonga engage in focussed learning about the principal’s roles in developing and using effective school operating systems to enhance student learning. Emphasis in the past has tended to be placed on leaders learning the ‘what’ of school systems. The NAPP emphasis is not only working with the what, but also knowing the ‘why’ and deepening thinking and learning
about school systems by asking ‘what if’ and ‘what might be’. During the NAPP, ākonga are challenged to use online platforms and develop their own Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) as they learn about school systems and leadership in an age when digital tools and communities offer learning opportunities that are flexible, personalised, collaborative and connected. In the self-assessment survey a large majority of respondents found the online modules valuable in their learning about the role of the school principal and had influenced their leadership.

The analysis of the qualitative data identified five dimensions of this process:

- seeing the complexity of the principalship;
- technology as an enabler;
- practice-based knowledge, expert knowledge;
- deep engagement with ideas;
- building identity as a leader.

Although teachers observe principals and their work every day, they are not always aware of the range and complexity of the role. These data show that the awareness of the complex and multi-faceted nature of the principal’s role is an important part of development in understanding the role for aspiring principals. Being exposed to the intricacies and amount of information available (through NAPP) gives aspiring principals insight into the complexity of the role.

Technology is increasingly a pervasive element in professional learning that can serve many purposes. In NAPP it was used as a medium for delivering information to the participants that they could utilise in their self-study and as a medium for conversations and inquiry and leadership development: “The influence of the online learning has enabled me to significantly increase my knowledge and has definitely grown me as a leader.”

Having a number and range of possible resources, all collected in one place can be immediately useful, and can serve as a knowledge bank for the future. Having resources available on line provided instant access for use on a ‘just-in-time’ basis and for sharing with others.

I appreciated having the hyperlinks – how many pages can one person have open? I am amazed at all the information, legal documentation and forms that are stored on line. I have read most of the references, and have made extra jottings on the Systems document that will help me go back to these pages in the future.

The great thing about the VLN is that it is like having a ‘Best Practice’ workshop there online accessible 24/7. How much more valuable are peoples’ actual experiences of situations? ‘Stories’ stay in my mind more easily and I learn more quickly.

Having a wealth of resources can provide the basis for deep and challenging reflection and discussion. Sharing and clarifying meaning and applications with colleagues and experts provides a forum for seeing multiple perspectives that can support, and sometimes challenge, ideas in ways that deepen understanding.

Using an online environment was challenging for some participants, highlighting the importance of using multiple avenues for engaging and processing information about the role of the principal.

I have found this side of the programme hard. I see the value and enjoyed reading some postings but did find the whole process difficult as it didn’t really suit my learning. I did gain a lot from readings and mainly talking to my principal about certain things I had no idea on (e.g. finance, budgeting).

Educational leaders are expected to integrate knowledge from a wide variety of places and relate it to the unique realities of their work environments. Professional learning, as we described it earlier, is an active, social and
demanding process. Having an online forum can support processing mountains of information and provide a place for critical challenge of ideas, as people engage in discussions about how it applies to them and see how ideas from the readings become real through the practice-based knowledge and experiences of colleagues.

*I love the reading and constant stimulation of the kōrero and the comments that are tracked through to my email inbox – not a moment goes by when I haven’t had to consider an issue or opinion in amongst my everyday business – it’s this I’ll miss more than anything.*

Processing and thinking with colleagues is a powerful way to learn that can be reinforced and buttressed by the expertise that is available from current principals, coaches, policy documents, research and other professionals.

*There were some incredible, high-level professionals in the group. We have been fortunate to have worked alongside these people. It’s also been a privilege to see these people making links in their learning that support mine and inspiring to know that some will be principals soon.*

*Once I got started with my ‘buddy’ we would read the articles and discuss them together. This was a very valuable exercise. I found the readings on the financial management of a school uncovered a wealth of resources. Discussing this with another principal also outlined the support available in financial management.*

Lack of access to expertise can be challenging as one aspiring principals shared: “I found this very difficult, as I needed time to talk to our principal to find out our own systems, to then understand the modules more fully. As my principal was not available for this, I felt disheartened.” Growing into and through the role of a leader is both intellectual and personal. Building an identity as a leader involves developing a mindset about who you are and being confident about having the knowledge, skills and dispositions to step up to the challenge.

*I liked to think that I knew a lot about leadership. I’ve been blown away by the depth of some of the discussions and the technical aspects that have come up. And I don’t think I know anywhere as much as I thought I did.*

The role of the principal is complex and multi-faceted and the journey towards it is a personal process of learning and growing, through engagement and connection with resources, ideas and people. Technology offers a sustaining and flexible, any-time, any-place learning community and resource repository.

**Conclusions**

The regular collection of data from aspiring principals in New Zealand offers a window into the thinking of the participants, as a vehicle for gaining insights about the ways in which they are learning leadership and changing and growing in relation to the assumptions and intended outcomes from the theory of action. This investigation has provided us with an opportunity to consider the process through their eyes in order to extend our understanding of what leadership learning means for individuals and for educational organisations. Although we often talk or write about such concepts as moral purpose, building leadership capacity and developing culturally responsive practice, for example, we are not always clear about what this means in leadership practice, and the learning of such educational leadership practice. We have come away from the work with four key messages:

- Learning leadership is complex and requires a combination of coordination and planning, with flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity.
Leadership learning is dynamic, evolutionary, and sometimes revolutionary.
Leadership learning is both personal and collective.
Leadership learning is driven by purpose – For What?

Perhaps the most compelling message from this work is that learning to be educational leaders who are equipped to support high quality and equitable education in New Zealand is a multi-faceted and complex process. Many of the components of NAPP (moral purpose, cultural responsiveness, building knowledge, electronic communities, coaching, using data, inquiry-mindedness) are well-recognised in the international literature, with their own knowledge base and processes. They are often treated as separate issues through their own distinct research projects, professional learning contracts and policies and have not often been considered together and investigated within leadership development and practices. Our analysis of these data sets makes it very clear that it is impossible to pull these components, such as moral purpose and cultural responsiveness, apart and treat them as separate entities. Instead, they are inextricably linked and need to be considered together in an ongoing process.

Although we used the dimensions of the NAPP Theory of Action as lenses to analyse the same data, it was clear that they do not work in isolation from one another. Indeed, many of the themes that emerged in each section were repeated in others and comments could have been used across a number of themes. The themes of self-assessment and self-awareness came up over and over. So did the interplay of personal learning and reflection with challenge and support from others on the same journey and from the kaiārahi. Moral purpose was a foundational concept that permeated the rest, but was at the same time, developed by the rest. The development of agency and efficacy as change agents and principals, was influenced by all of the elements – moral purpose, cultural responsiveness, disposition to learn, building capacity and understanding the role of the principal.

It is clear from this study that leadership learning is complex and that different elements such as developing cultural responsiveness, for example, cannot be treated separately but need to be developed together with other key concepts of leadership that support it, develop it and maintain it. Having a Theory of Action in any leadership development is an essential component of consolidating the starting point, clarifying assumptions, making the expected outcomes explicit, and charting the journey in theory, as it is being planned and experienced. There will always be diversions along the way, but having the Theory of Action will provide a clear framework for adaptive leadership, while maintaining a solid core direction as a reference for making changes during the implementation.

The leadership journey described by the ākonga in the NAPP was one of constant learning and of challenge. As one leader said:

*What a journey so far – it’s been like hopping into a river in a canoe in the calm and then finding there are unanticipated white waters and rapids and falls ... thankfully finding others in canoes paddling as hard as I was, and crashing against the occasional rock wall, has helped and the national hui and connections with some amazing other aspiring leaders of learning has been supportive and affirming.*

Although the learning was sometimes challenging, the process evolved and moved forward in ways that were dynamic and evolutionary; sometimes even revolutionary, for leadership learners. Leadership learners do not move in a lock-step way, through a training programme, all together at the same time. Instead, they move at their own pace, perhaps forward then back, in circles and along unmarked paths. Each person follows a unique, personalised pathway for building new knowledge, dispositions and practices for themselves. Not only do developers and facilitators of leadership learning need to be cognisant of the non-linear nature of the journey, the participants themselves also need to be comfortable in multiple and uncertain learning environments as they negotiate the complexity and ambiguity of their own learning. This growing resilience came through in a number of ways in the data, with participants being willing to keep going and operate outside their comfort zones.
I am not sure I am more confident as a leader as I have learned so much about what I don’t know! My respect for my own leaders has increased immensely. I’ve done some things radically different as a result this year and the outcomes of that have been very positive.

I have grown in my leadership and am excited about the learning and getting into a Principal’s role. I feel I would be more confident now. It was the case of what you didn’t know and thinking you could do the job to now knowing what I have learned and realised wow! I really didn’t know! How scary is that!

Having a disposition to learn is certainly a key requirement for leadership learning. This learning is personal; it is social and it is emotional. It is linear and erratic. Leadership learning involves new learning in an unpredictable and changeable context where there are tensions that push and pull the learner in the process of grappling with new ideas and practices – reframing, connecting, reviewing and revisiting, as they go deeper in their thinking and in their subsequent practice. Being part of a professional learning network – with colleagues who are charged with the responsibility of being ‘critical friends’ who provide both support and challenge – creates the conditions for the tension, as well as the forum for different perspectives and moving forward to new learning.

Finally, the driving force behind forward thinking leadership learning is purpose – What Am I Doing This For? Back to the Theory of Action – what are the ultimate outcomes for New Zealand education and thus, for educational leadership capabilities and dispositions? Claxton (2006, para. 12) stated “Only if you tell me what your end is can I tell if your means are good or bad” and Starratt’s (2004) seminal statement “Leadership for what?” challenge us to be clear about purpose and outcomes for leadership as these must underpin the design of the leadership learning experiences.

Glossary of Maori terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maori term</th>
<th>English translation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ākonga</td>
<td>learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>He Kākano</td>
<td>professional development on cultural responsiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hui</td>
<td>meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ka Hikitia</td>
<td>(policy document) stepping up to address inequities</td>
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<tr>
<td>kaiārahi</td>
<td>experienced leader/coach</td>
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<tr>
<td>kapa haka</td>
<td>songs, dance and culture of Māori</td>
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<tr>
<td>kōrero</td>
<td>speech or speaking</td>
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<tr>
<td>marae</td>
<td>Māori community setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>mihi</td>
<td>greeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>pākehā</td>
<td>non-Māori, European New Zealander</td>
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<tr>
<td>tāonga</td>
<td>treasure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Te Kotahitanga</td>
<td>professional development on Māori achievement</td>
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<tr>
<td>te reo</td>
<td>the (Māori) language</td>
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<tr>
<td>tikanga</td>
<td>the cultural norms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tu Rangatira</td>
<td>(policy document) Māori leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td>waka</td>
<td>canoe</td>
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<td>whānau</td>
<td>extended family</td>
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References


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