



## **PRINCIPALSHIP – DOES NPQH MAKE A DIFFERENCE? A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article discusses a personal reflection of my own experiences in assuming the post of a secondary school principal. Reflecting on the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) programme, I evaluate how well-prepared I was for the post of school principal after going through the one-year training. This self reflection is based on the investigation data by Male (2001) who has conducted a national survey on the preparedness or readiness of new Principals after undergoing the NPQH programme in England. I also counter-check my work and actions with the Standards of Principalship Competencies of Malaysian Schools set by Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), Ministry of Education, Malaysia. While analysing my own situation, I attribute my readiness on taking up the post as a school principal to a combination of experience and training. Some suggestions are made to further enhance the training for new Principals.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sharing experiences with colleagues in the same field will enable us to look at issues at a wider perspective and thus, enhance our skills and knowledge in our work. I believe that while teachers are always encouraged to seek the best practices in teaching, leaders or managers in schools should also be doing the same. Since there is little or no research had been undertaken to examine how NPQH trained Principals in Malaysia are performing, I hope to enlighten readers the kind of impact the NPQH has on me. In this article, firstly I write about some background about the NPQH programme in Malaysia. Then, I discuss the findings by Male (2001) on NPQH in England. Using the themes suggested by Male (2001), I relate the findings to my own experience and NPQH training. Through the comparison and contrast process, I give my views about the impact of NPQH programme on me. I discuss areas that NPQH programme could not provide through theoretical learning. Finally, I suggest some ways to enable aspiring Principals to be prepared for the job.

### **AN OVERVIEW OF NPQH PROGRAMME (IAB, 2000)**

In line with the country's aspirations to create a world class education and to create a high quality workforce in the civil service, there was a need to improve the quality of headship and school management at the grass root level. Hence, IAB embarked into the NPQH programme, a professional qualification programme adopted and adapted from the NPQH United Kingdom's (UK) model. The initial proposal was for NPQH diploma to become mandatory in the appointment of new principals in Malaysia. However, this proposal was not implemented.

IAB also known as the National Educational Management and Leadership Institute, established in 1979 aims at improving educational quality and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system through human resource development in educational



management and leadership at all levels in the education system. IAB aims at building and developing leadership and educational management professionalism among leaders in schools. It is believed that through professional training, leaders will play their roles effectively in developing the nation through education.

The NPQH programme which awards a Diploma in NPQH to successful candidates began in 1998. The course was designed upon the following assumptions:

- i. That educational managers (including Principals, Headmasters, Senior Assistants) once given quality and systematic training shall be able to develop an educational institution well.
- ii. That the new generation of school managers should have confidence and high competency in their jobs in order to ensure that our education system will achieve world class standard. Leaders in schools must possess the ability to compete with managers in the private sectors.
- iii. That school managers need exposure to the latest knowledge about the world around them to enable them to manage their organizations effectively.
- iv. That competency to manage effectively is a crucial factor to ensure the success of any educational institution.

(IAB, 2000)

Based on the above assumptions, the NPQH programme was designed with the rationale that with the well-planned training programmes, school managers will have the opportunity to be the 'prime movers and leaders' in the Malaysian education service. Through the NPQH programme the school managers are given the opportunity to review their knowledge on latest government policies and educational management. They will also be able to build up a professional network for continuous improvement in management and education leadership. The experience gained through the training will allow them to reflect on their own practices and thus, improve themselves in their work. With all the trainings and knowledge gained, the NPQH programme will be able to develop a generation of leaders who are learned and skilled in managing change in line with the country's growing demands and aspirations.

The NPQH course that I attended in year 2000 consists of two phases:

1. The first phase is the Diploma Programme in Management and Leadership that involves six months of lectures conducted in IAB, Genting Highlands and three weeks of practicum carried out in selected schools.
2. The second phase is a School Attachment Programme conducted in the candidate's own school.

The objectives of the NPQH programme are as follows, that the candidates would be able to:

- i. realize their own strengths and weaknesses in school management and leadership;
- ii. show effective management and leadership in schools based on the experience gained;
- iii. carry out the projects as stipulated in the programme based on the specified criteria;
- iv. practice characteristics of school effectiveness concepts and leadership qualities;



- v. gain practical experience in identifying (through observation) management practice aspects that could be used in improving, planning new strategies (innovations) and implementing the new strategies and evaluating the effectiveness of the strategies (innovations).  
(IAB, 2000)

## **BACKGROUND OF HEADSHIP APPOINTMENT IN SABAH**

Headship appointment in Malaysia is based on the Civil Servants Legislation that government officers will only be promoted according to their seniority in the post. Besides this basic criterion, the officers' job performance and qualifications are also taken into account. However, back in the 1980s, young DG3 university graduate officers with less than five years of teaching experience were appointed to carry out the duties as a principal in secondary schools in the rural areas or in the interior parts of Sabah. Another particular feature is that the secondary schools were divided into grade 'A' and 'B' schools, whereby grade 'A' schools were managed by DG2 officers, a promotional post. Grade 'B' schools were managed by graduate teachers with an extra allowance of RM150.00 only. The appointment of principals was made through recommendations of the local education department to the Federal Ministry of Education. In Sabah, the zoning exercise for promotion of qualified officers to become principals in grade 'A' schools were carried out approximately once in every five years. In many cases, once after assuming the post, the new principals were recommended to be sent for training in IAB. Normally, the training of new principals was carried out in stages in order to accommodate the pool of principals in Sabah.

Nevertheless, this system of appointment of school principals was slightly changed in recent years. Aspiring principals who fulfilled the criteria in terms of years in service were encouraged to apply to be a principal. Until recent times, NPQH qualification is not taken into consideration for the post of a principal.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: NPQH IN UK**

Male (2001) conducted a survey in schools in England to find out the perceptions of the headteachers on the training and experience and the impact of the NPQH programme on their preparation for headship in England. From the analysis of the findings, only a small percentage of principals who have undergone the NPQH programme perceived training to be the major factor in the development of skills, formation of attitudes and values and increase of knowledge. Generally, the principals find themselves to be better prepared in certain skills after the NPQH training. Four of the skills identified are:

- 1.1 Putting vision into words.
- 1.2 Applying educational law.
- 1.3 Assuming responsibility for school management.
- 1.4 Organising school administration.

The survey reveals that a majority of the principals attributed a mixture of experience and training that contributed to their preparedness in their headship role. Bright and Ware (2003) reported that the core finding in the national survey of headteachers in England is that headteachers have a strong need for support and mentoring from their experienced colleagues.

## MY OWN EXPERIENCE

In Malaysia, the selection of candidates for the NPQH programme is conducted by IAB. The number of candidates selected for each cohort is approximately 150 trained teachers with at least five years of teaching experience. The mode of selection has changed since 2001. In my case, I had to go through three stages of assessment carried out over a period of one year comprising of four objective multiple choice examination, physical tests, computer competency test and an oral test to evaluate one's confidence and competency in school management as well as his/her interpersonal skills and a personality test. My colleagues in this programme consist of Senior Assistants, Heads of Departments, Subject Panel Headteachers, and teachers. Most of them aspire to be a principal one day but there are many who applied for the course are to take a break from the routine work in school for the sake of their professional development. For others, it is an opportunity for them to further their studies at the Masters level in University of Malaya which offers a Masters Degree in Principalship.

As in my case, before embarking into the NPQH course, I have already obtained a Masters Degree in Education specializing in School Management and Language Teaching. In order for me to discuss my own experience in this area, I wish to give a brief summary of my career in the education service as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Career in Education Service

YEAR	POST HELD
1984 – 1986	Geography, English and Mathematics teacher in Papar (Form 4-6)
1986 – 1997	Geography teacher in Kota Kinabalu
1987 – 1993	Head of the Disciplinary Unit in Kota Kinabalu
1993	Senior Assistant in Students Affairs
1994 – 1997	Senior Assistant in Curriculum & Administration
1997-1998	Study leave for Masters in Education (M.Ed)
1998 – 1999	Head of Humanities Department
2000 – 2001	Senior Assistant in Curriculum & Administration
2000 (May- Dec)	Study Leave for Diploma NPQH
2001 – 2003	Principal in Sandakan
2009 until now	Principal in Kota Kinabalu

From the exposure in carrying out my duties as an administrator and the knowledge I gained from the Masters programme as well as the NPQH courses, I would attribute my readiness to assume the headship post to the two prominent factors: experience and training.

## IMPACT OF NPQH

Using the themes identified by Male (2001) in the questionnaire which was designed based on Daresh et al.(1998)'s works and the national standards for headteachers in England, I shall reflect on and analyse my personal experience and NPQH training in relation to my preparedness in assuming my headship post in Sandakan.



There were 18 items under the Development skills category. In my case, the NPQH programme has prepared me in the following aspects:

A1: Putting vision into words

A2: Ensuring that all people with an interest in school are involved in the school mission.

Before the NPQH training, throughout my experience as an administrator, I was not exposed to formal training on these two important aspects. A vision to me seemed to be something so abstract and unachievable. I did not know where I should begin with. Furthermore, I assumed that my school principal should be thinking of what he wished for the school to become of one day.

A10: Using effective communication techniques

A11: Conducting meetings

A12: Forming and working in teams

The NPQH programme which consisted of six months of theory and course work and another six months of practicum and carrying out projects, had allowed me to apply my theoretical knowledge on effective communication techniques and forming and working in teams during my practicum period. The effective way to conduct meetings was very helpful and I realized the shortcomings we had been through in school, such as time management.

A13: Applying educational law to specific situations

The experience in applying educational law I had was rather specific and limited in my own area of work. During the NPQH programme, the exposure to the multiple educational laws enabled me to be aware of the wider scope of Government policies specifically, the Malaysian education policies and standing orders. This aspect includes managing the school finance which is abided by the Treasury Standing Orders. The skills in managing the school accounts acquired through the NPQH programme were indeed very helpful because this is one area that I did not have the opportunity to learn during my term as a Senior Assistant in school.

A16: Organising school administration

A14: Planning for future needs and growth

The NPQH programme has further enhanced my skills in these two aspects that I learned during the Masters in School Management and through my own reading in this area. Consequently, as soon as I assumed the Principal post I did not face any difficulties to re-organise the school administration to suit my management style and the school needs.

My experience over the years has enabled me to acquire other skills identified by Male (2001). The following section explains why I personally feel that these skills will be more realistically acquired in practice than being taught in theory.

A3: Building community/parental involvement



The experience I had in my previous school which has a very close link with the local Chinese community through its Board of Directors, has given me a better edge to learn to build up community and parental relationships. The first week when I reported duty as a Principal in my new school, I called up to talk to and later met with significant people who have vested interest in the welfare of the school: the Chairperson of the School Board and the Chairperson of the School's Alumni Association.

- A4: Working effectively with adults
- A5: Working with under-performing teacher
- A9: Resolving conflict/handling confrontation

From my point of view, these three aspects cannot be learned or acquired through theory alone. The experience and the observation I made on these issues have indeed prepared me to handle unpleasant situations as mentioned. Both of my former Principals have their respective ways of dealing with adults and under-performing teachers. Different kinds of approaches like counseling, confrontation, warning and even taking disciplinary actions were applied to different people depending on the situation.

The two weeks practicum in another school during the NPQH programme has also allowed me to gain further insight to these aspects. I remembered how the Principal had to deal with some unreasonable reports in the newspaper and the committee members of the Parent and Teachers Association. The opportunities to observe and to discuss with the Principals have given me a stronger platform to begin my career as a Principal in a school 360 km away from my family.

- A6: Identifying children with special needs

The NPQH programme enlightened us on children with special needs. However, nearly all cases of children with special needs would have been identified at the primary school level.

- A15: Assuming responsibility for school management

Again, I feel that this skill is something one has within oneself and it cannot be taught. NPQH programme may have raised the participants' conscience in this aspect but if the individual is not committed and refuse to be responsible, the good intention to develop this attitude will just remain as an undeveloped skill.

- A17: Constructing timetable
- A18: Using information technology and other tools in the management process

I developed these two skills through my own experience in performing my duties as a senior assistant and also learning from my colleagues. Sadly, the skill to construct timetable was not taught effectively during the NPQH programme, but nonetheless, I have six years of experience constructing timetable using a computer programme.

Using information technology and other tools were taught in the NPQH programme but again, unfortunately there was limited hands-on experience owing to the fact that the computer lab was being used for some other programmes at that time.



The next category in the questionnaire is to determine whether the formation of values and attitudes is attributed to the training or experience gained. Generally, the training programme does instill a sense of awareness in us but as mentioned earlier, the formation of values and attitudes of a person is concerned with that which comes from within a person.

- B1: Behaving in ways consistent with your values and attitudes and beliefs
- B2: Promoting ethical practices in the school

The NPQH programme did instill a sense of good values throughout its coursework and also by putting emphasis on government circulars and standing orders.

- B3: Encouraging respect for life-long learning
- B4: Creating a community of learners

Inevitably, the NPQH programme broadens our perspective, especially with new input in education and further discussions with colleagues who comes from all over the country. With a wider scope of knowledge, it is easier to encourage teachers in school to move towards a life-long learning culture.

The various aspects identified by Male (2001) are enlightened through both systematic training and individual's experience. From my point of view, at the end of every training programme, one shall attain a higher level of understanding of issues and deeper knowledge in the specific areas. However, as in any process of learning, the difference is the attainment level differs from one individual to another depending on the individual's own perceptions, beliefs, values and background experiences.

- C4: Knowing and understanding how educational trends and issues influence organizational change
- C5: How values and attitudes affect the way people view educational issues

There did not seem to have any special component that deals with these two aspects in the NPQH programme. Most of my knowledge and understanding on these two issues were obtained through the academic exposure during the one-year M.Ed. course through reading academic researches.

#### **OTHER ASPECTS NOT EMPHASIZED IN NPQH**

The NPQH programme provided me opportunities to learn and practice strategic planning and to carry out school improvement projects. Systematic reporting and sharing knowledge and experiences with the other colleagues in school have given me the advantage to focus on meaningful and developmental work for the well-being of the school. I have the opportunity to carry out five projects in the same school where I was also the Senior Assistant in Curriculum & Administration during my NPQH programme. The invaluable experience I gained is learning how to work under pressure. We read about the issues of teachers' burnout due to working under pressure or/and too much workload. However, based on my own experience, the work pressure I had to undergo has groomed me not only in organizing my work and managing my time effectively but also working under pressure.





In theory we learn about the different forces of change (Fullan, 1999) in educational settings. However, the actual dealing of these forces of change is in the real situation itself. The theory has given us the basic principles to realize that these forces of change do exist but to deal with these rapid changes one has to adjust and adapt to the different kinds of environment. To be able to do so, one has to approach the new challenges or changes with an open-mind. This issue of managing change was not addressed in the NPQH programme.

So, how did I manage change in my own experience? Having about 16 years of experience in a mainly co-educational Chinese school that holds a strong Chinese culture, it took me about four months or so to change my approach towards a different kind of culture from a convent school in a different locality. My first one and a half months in the new school were school holidays. So, the absence of the students gave me enough time to understand the school environment, to know the non-teaching staff and some senior local teachers better. Soon as the school re-opened, I took some two months to observe and reflect on the culture of the students, teachers and the community. I must admit my greatest fear was more towards my own security for if I was not sensitive and careful enough towards the local workers' feelings, I might be confronted in a rude manner. The NPQH qualifications do not guarantee or enable one to be free from possibilities such as this!

#### **DOES NPQH MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

The NPQH programme has indeed made an impact and prepared me to take up the School Principal post confidently. In my case, the experience I gained while carrying out my duties as a Senior Assistant has been further enhanced and strengthened by the NPQH training.

Getting to know the staff working under my leadership and to meet the students were not so difficult because the appointment explained in itself the authority given to me as their leader. NPQH serves to strengthen my position in terms of paper qualification and the authority that comes along with the title that I am "a qualified and trained Principal".

#### **SUGGESTIONS**

To make the NPQH programme more meaningful and practical, reflection of own experiences as school administrator should be encouraged to be written in journal and later to be shared among colleagues for discussion purposes and exchange of ideas. Experienced principals can be invited to share their case studies, telling their success stories or how they coped with challenges and failures. Course structure should include training on reading the legislations and law in Malaysia. A few special case studies that involve the law can be used as study materials for the NPQH course participants.

In the latest development in the recent years (since 2005), a group of self-initiated NPQH graduates managed to obtain the support from the Ministry of Education to sanction the programmes which were carefully tailored for the administrators of the school. These programmes were designed to help the nation-wide administrators particularly those who have not gone through the NPQH training in Malaysia. This initiative fulfils one of the





main thrusts in the Malaysian Education Development Master Plan (*PIPP*) (2006-2010), to uphold the teaching profession (*Memartabatkan Profesion Keguruan*).

## CONCLUSION

With the rapid growth in the economic, social and political arena in the globalization era, managing education and ensuring schools function effectively; principals have a major role to play. We are already in the era to ensure quality and excellence teaching and learning process is practiced continuously in schools. As the famous Fred M. Hechinger has written:

*Over the years, as a reporter, I have never seen a good school with a poor principal, or a poor school with a good principal. I have seen successful schools turned around into successful ones, and regrettably outstanding schools slide rapidly into decline. In each case, the rise and fall could be readily be traced to the quality of the Principal.*

(Source: IAB, Genting Highlands)

## REFERENCES

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