

RESEARCH BRIEF

# **Aspirations for principalship—The role of school culture and teaching beliefs**

Findings from National Survey  
of Primary Schools Uiuinga  
ā-Motu o ngā Kura

**Mengnan Li, Jessie Dong, and Jo MacDonald**



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2025





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# He ihirangi | Contents

<b>Key messages</b>	1
<b>1. Background</b>	2
Leadership aspirations in schools	2
Influence on leadership aspirations	3
<b>2. What we wanted to find out</b>	5
<b>3. What we did</b>	6
Who we asked	6
What we asked	6
How we analysed the data	7
<b>4. What we found</b>	8
Just under one-fifth of teachers were interested in becoming a principal	8
Relations between school culture, teacher beliefs and working experiences, and their principalship aspirations	8
Teaching beliefs matter	10
<b>Key messages and implications</b>	11
<b>References</b>	12
<b>Appendix</b>	13
<b>He tūtohi   Tables</b>	
Table 1. Factors and sample items	6
Table 2. Correlations between different factors	9
Table A1 Descriptive statistics by school culture factor and item	13
Table A2 Descriptive statistics by teaching beliefs and working experiences factor and item	14
<b>He hoahoa whakamārama   Figures</b>	
Figure 1. Theoretical framework	7
Figure 2. Our model showing statistically significant paths	10





## Key messages

This study draws on data from the 2024 National Survey of Primary Schools teachers to examine how school leadership practices indirectly shape teachers' interest in becoming a principal.

Findings from the 2024 National Survey show that early-career teachers are more open to leadership roles. This highlights the need to understand what school-level conditions might help sustain leadership aspirations throughout a teacher's career.

Using structural equation modelling, the analysis shows that strong leadership practices (reflected in school culture, collaborative relationships, and professional learning and development) positively predict teachers' autonomy, job satisfaction, and confidence in teaching the updated New Zealand Curriculum and about diversity. These two confidence-related beliefs, in turn, statistically significantly predict teachers' interest in principalship.

The model illustrates a meaningful pathway: a positive school culture shaped by effective school leadership, can enhance teachers' professional beliefs and experiences, ultimately supporting their leadership aspirations. These findings underscore the importance of school conditions and teacher capability building in fostering sustainable leadership aspirations.



# 1 Background

The National Survey of Schools is part of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's (NZCER's) Te Pae Tawhiti programme of research. NZCER has run a National Survey of Primary Schools regularly since 1989, with the last survey of primary school principals and teachers taking place from October to December 2024. A complete report of the latest 2024 National Survey can be accessed here: [Uiuinga ā-Motu o ngā Kura; National Survey of Schools | New Zealand Council for Educational Research<sup>1</sup>](https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/national-survey-2024-primary-teachers)

This research brief is part of the National Survey's series of topic-based publications, which present findings of interest to policymakers and school leaders, and highlight areas worthy of further exploration.

## Leadership aspirations in schools

The importance of preparing and growing the leadership workforce is highlighted in the *Strategic Intentions 2025–2029* (Ministry of Education, 2024), which identifies “Improved teacher training: Developing the workforce of the future, including leadership development pathways” (p. 11) as one of six priorities to lift student achievement. However, despite the vital role of school leaders in fostering equity and excellence, the leadership pipeline in Aotearoa New Zealand schools is currently under strain. In June 2023, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) warned of “an imminent problem with a shortage of school leadership” in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> This concern is echoed by findings from the Education Review Office (2023), which reported that “not all those teachers who have the potential to be principals are encouraged into or aware of the pathways to become principals” (p. 4), with many principals stating that future leaders are often identified by chance rather than through a structured development process.

Results from the 2024 NZCER National Survey data<sup>3</sup> show that only 18% of teacher participants expressed some level of interest in becoming a principal in the future (Li et al., 2025a). In addition, teachers' interest in principalship was statistically significantly related to years of teaching experience, with the highest interest among early-career teachers and a steady decline as experience increased.

Together, these findings highlight opportunities to make school leadership pathways more visible, accessible, and appealing to teachers across all career stages. Targeted strategies to inspire and equip potential leaders could strengthen the leadership pipeline and support smoother transitions to principalship. A more deliberate approach to identifying and developing talent, alongside efforts to maintain interest throughout a teaching career, will help sustain the vitality and effectiveness of school leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1 <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/projects/national-survey>

2 See <https://www.nzei.org.nz/about-us/media-releases/schools-face-leadership-crisis-over-next-five-years>

3 <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/national-survey-2024-primary-teachers>



## Influence on leadership aspirations

### The role of school culture in shaping leadership aspirations

The literature is replete with empirical evidence showing the importance of school leadership practices in shaping school culture, which in turn influences teachers' beliefs and aspirations (Li et al., 2025b). Particularly, teachers' journey toward school leadership begins not only with individual ambition but also within the social and cultural fabric of the school itself (Szeto, 2022). In Aotearoa New Zealand, teachers' aspirations to take on leadership roles are profoundly influenced by the everyday experiences they have in their professional environment (for example, see Brown, 2019; Morrison et al., 2024). A school's culture, shaped largely by its leadership, plays a pivotal role in either encouraging or constraining these aspirations. For instance, when teachers operate in environments that foster collaboration, shared values, and professional growth, they are more likely to view leadership as a natural and attainable extension of their work (Cheng & Szeto, 2016). Understanding how such a culture is created, maintained, and experienced is therefore crucial to any effort aimed at strengthening the leadership pipeline across the education sector.

Staessens' (1991) framework, based on Schein's (1985) theory of organisational culture, outlines four domains that provide insight into how school culture influences leadership aspirations: 1) Principal as builder and carrier of culture; 2) Degree of goal consensus; 3) Professional relationships among teachers; and 4) Lack/availability of an internal network of professional support. These domains align closely with several measures in the 2024 National Survey of Primary School teachers (for example, "Inclusive school culture" and "Shared vision and professional culture" touch on the first two domains; "Teachers' collaborations" and "PLD experience" align with the latter two), offering a useful lens for examining how aspects of school culture relate to teachers' leadership aspirations.

### The impact of teaching beliefs and experiences

Leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand is grounded in a relational, culturally responsive ethos that sets it apart from leadership practices in many other education systems (Education Council New Zealand, 2018). As defined by the Education Council New Zealand (2018, p. 8), New Zealand educators are "relationally and culturally adept and committed to diversity and social justice".

Within New Zealand's complex educational landscape, teachers' leadership aspirations are also influenced by their confidence and teaching beliefs. For example, the studies of Morrison et al. (2024) in Aotearoa New Zealand found that a strong sense of self-belief, openness to new opportunities, a personal desire for challenge, and a willingness to embrace new experiences were key enablers for teachers progressing in their leadership careers. Similarly, Durie et al. (2023) found that a lack of confidence was one of the main barriers preventing wāhine Māori from pursuing leadership, a concern raised by nearly all of those interviewed.

In this research brief, teachers' professional beliefs and confidence are reflected in two measured factors:

- perceptions and confidence about the updated New Zealand Curriculum
- confidence to teach about diversity.



Additionally, teachers' working experiences, such as workload, morale, job satisfaction, and perceived autonomy explored in this study, are central to teachers' motivation to step into leadership roles. Teachers experiencing high workload or insufficient support may be discouraged from seeking leadership (Durie et al., 2023), while professional trust, adequate resourcing, and recognition can make leadership feel both achievable and worthwhile.

In sum, leadership aspirations among teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand are shaped by a complex interplay of school culture, personal confidence, and working experiences. While current system priorities emphasise the development of future leaders, teachers' leadership interest remains relatively low. Exploring how factors such as professional culture, perception of updated curriculum, and professional experiences influence leadership aspirations is essential to understanding and addressing Aotearoa New Zealand's principal pipeline challenge.



## What we wanted to find out

This research brief explores how various dimensions of the school environment and teaching experience shape teachers' leadership aspirations in the unique context of Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, it investigates the enabling conditions, such as an inclusive school culture, that support primary teachers to have more positive experiences and beliefs in their roles, and whether these conditions contribute to a stronger interest in pursuing principalship.

While some international studies examine factors related to teacher workload and morale, there is limited quantitative research that connects these with school-level influences such as leadership practices and the broader teaching context in Aotearoa New Zealand. This brief aims to address that gap by examining how school-wide leadership practices intersect with teacher beliefs and leadership aspirations.

### **Research questions**

- What school- and teacher-level factors are associated with teachers' interest in becoming a principal?
- How do school leadership practices predict teachers' leadership aspirations through their impact on teaching experiences and beliefs?

Building on the literature discussed earlier, this study focuses on two sets of factors to understand how the professional environment and individual experiences contribute to shaping teachers' aspirations to be a principal in future.

### **Scale A: School leadership practices**

- Factor 1: Shared vision and professional culture
- Factor 2: Inclusive school culture
- Factor 3: PLD experience
- Factor 4: Teachers' collaborations

### **Scale B: Teaching beliefs and working experiences**

- Factor 1: Confidence to teach about diversity
- Factor 2: Perceptions and confidence about the updated New Zealand Curriculum
- Factor 3: Workload, morale, and job satisfaction
- Factor 4: Perceived autonomy



## 3 What we did

The 2024 National Survey engaged principals and teachers from a nationally representative sample of all English-medium full primary, contributing, and intermediate schools in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research brief draws on data from the teacher survey only.

### Who we asked

Data collection took place from 16 October to 5 December 2024. Of the 324 schools invited, 49% ( $n = 158$ ) returned at least one teacher response. After data cleaning, we obtained 639 valid teacher responses from 148 schools, resulting in a 46% school response rate. The responses are nationally representative by School Equity Index (EQI) Groups and broadly representative by area and region. All technical information, including a full demographic breakdown of teacher responses, is reported in the full report<sup>4</sup> (Li et al., 2025a).

This research brief draws on responses from 425 teachers who completed all questions that were included in the factors we explored below.

### What we asked

In addition to the question “Are you interested in becoming a principal in the future?”, we analysed teacher responses to survey questions that fall within the areas in Table 1 (see Appendix for the full list of items).

TABLE 1. Factors and sample items

Scale	Factor	Sample items
School leadership practices	1. Shared vision and professional culture	“Messages about the overall vision/values of the school are consistent.”
	2. Inclusive school culture	“We have school-wide support to understand and address biases we may have as teachers.”
	3. PLD experience	“I have been able to easily access helpful specialist advice outside the school when I need it.”
	4. Teachers’ collaborations	“Sharing of ideas for how to help students improve their performance.”

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/national-survey-2024-primary-teachers>

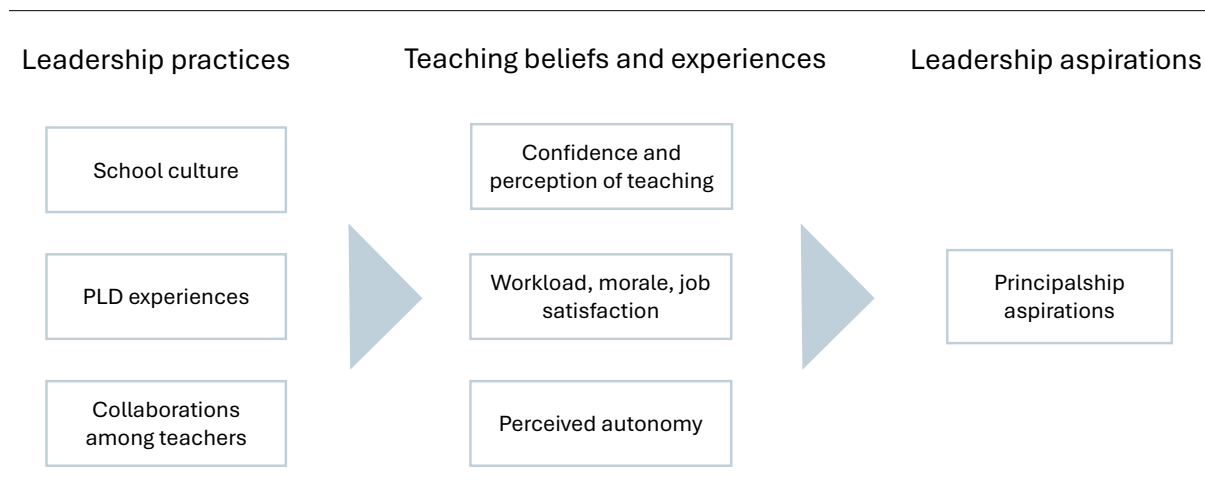
Scale	Factor	Sample items
Teaching beliefs and working experiences	1. Confidence to teach about diversity	"I have the knowledge and resources to teach students about cultural diversity, including language and identity."
	2. Perceptions and confidence about the updated New Zealand Curriculum	"The updated New Zealand Curriculum changes are going in the right direction."
	3. Workload, morale, and job satisfaction	"I enjoy my job."
	4. Perceived autonomy	"I have enough autonomy over how I plan, teach, and assess learning."

## How we analysed the data

Figure 1 shows the hypothesised model that presents the possible relations between school-level and individual teacher-level factors. This model explores whether school leadership practices (reflected through school culture, collaborative relationships, and PLD) can predict teachers' working beliefs and experiences (autonomy, job satisfaction, and confidence in teaching both the updated New Zealand Curriculum and diversity). In turn, these individual factors are examined for their potential to predict teachers' interest in becoming a principal.

Quantitative data analysis included descriptive statistics (see Appendix for details), factor analysis, and path analysis. These methods allowed us to examine whether and how school leadership practices may shape teachers' leadership aspirations via their work-related beliefs and experiences. However, it is important to note that causation cannot be inferred.

FIGURE 1. Theoretical framework



## 4 What we found

### Just under one-fifth of teachers were interested in becoming a principal

In response to the question “Are you interested in becoming a principal in the future?” ( $n = 425$ ), the majority of participants expressed low interest in principalship, with 50% selecting “Definitely not”, and an additional 32% choosing “Probably not”. In contrast, only 18% expressed some level of aspiration (5% selected “Yes, definitely”, and 13% selected “Yes, probably”). These results suggest a relatively limited pipeline of teachers currently interested in future principalship.

### Relations between school culture, teacher beliefs and working experiences, and their principalship aspirations

Table 2 shows the correlations between different factors. The three strongest statistically significant associations observed across the different scales were:

- **PLD experience** and **Perceived autonomy** ( $r = .51$ )
- **Shared vision and professional culture** and **Perceived autonomy** ( $r = .50$ )
- **Shared vision and professional culture** and **Workload, morale, and job satisfaction** ( $r = .46$ ).

Teachers’ interest in principalship was found to be statistically significant related to their PLD experience in schools ( $r = .26$ ), their Confidence to teach about diversity ( $r = .20$ ), and their Perceptions and confidence about the updated New Zealand Curriculum ( $r = .15$ ).



TABLE 2. Correlations between different factors (*n* = 425)

Scale	School leadership practices				Teaching beliefs and working experiences				Interest in principalship
	1.Shared vision and professional culture	2.Inclusive school culture	3.PLD experience	4.Teachers' collaborations	1.Confidence to teach about diversity	2.Perceptions and confidence about the updated New Zealand Curriculum	3.Workload, morale, and job satisfaction	4.Perceived autonomy	
<b>School leadership practices</b>									
Factor 1	1								
Factor 2	0.69***	1							
Factor 3	0.67***	0.51***	1						
Factor 4	0.51***	0.44***	0.45***	1					
<b>Teaching beliefs and working experiences</b>									
Factor 1	0.16*	0.28**	0.30***	0.19**	1				
Factor 2	0.25**	0.24***	0.40***	0.14*	0.27***	1			
Factor 3	0.46***	0.32***	0.43***	0.33***	0.03	0.23**	1		
Factor 4	0.50***	0.35***	0.51***	0.35***	0.14*	0.28***	0.43***	1	
<b>Interest in principalship</b>	0.06	0.01	0.26***	0.05	0.20***	0.15**	0.07	0.10	1

Note: \*\*\**p* < .001, \*\**p* < .01, \**p* < .05.

## Teaching beliefs matter

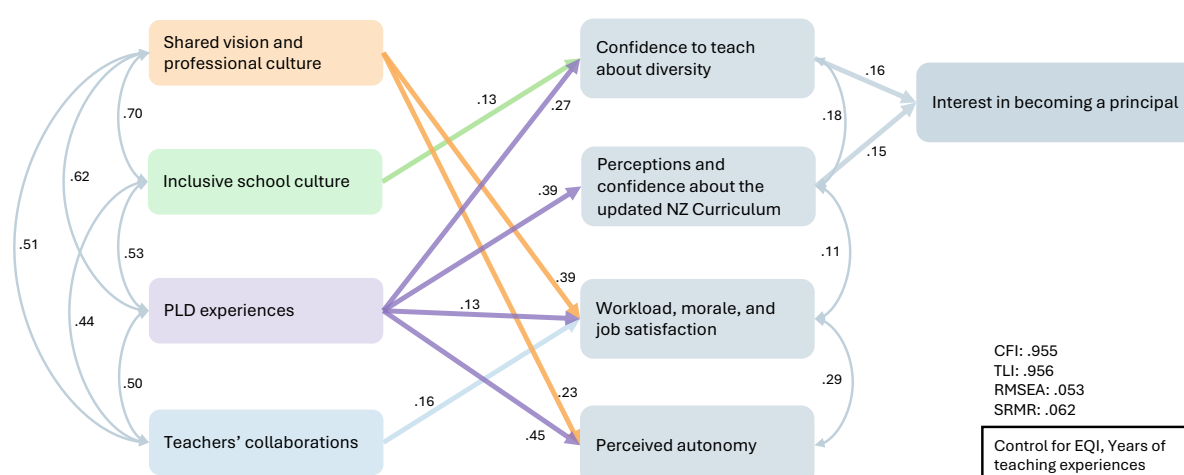
Figure 2 visualises hypothesised relations among various school-level and teacher-level factors, with a particular focus on possible predictors of teachers' interest in becoming a principal. The structural equation model highlights the central role of PLD experiences, which predict all teaching beliefs and working experiences explored in this brief. These, in turn, contribute to teachers' future leadership aspirations.

Key findings include:

- **Teachers' confidence in teaching about diversity** and their **perceptions of and confidence in the updated New Zealand Curriculum** both emerged as weak-to-moderate predictors of their **interest in becoming a principal**. This suggests that, when teachers feel equipped and aligned with current curriculum goals and inclusive practices, they may be more open to stepping into leadership roles.
- An **inclusive school culture** was positively linked to teachers' **confidence to teach about diversity**.
- A **shared vision and professional culture** within the school was a moderate predictor of both **teachers' working experiences** (morale, workload, and job satisfaction) and their **sense of professional autonomy**.
- **Positive PLD experiences** was a strong predictor of teachers' sense of autonomy, a moderate-to-strong predictor of increased confidence to teach about diversity and the updated curriculum, and a weak predictor of teachers' working experiences.
- A strong **culture of collaboration among teachers** was a weak-to-moderate predictor of better **working experiences** (morale, workload, and job satisfaction).

Interestingly, teachers' working experiences and their perceived autonomy were not directly linked to their interest in becoming a principal. However, the model suggests these factors still matter given their association with teachers' confidence and perceptions in teaching, which are themselves predictors of principalship interest. In other words, while job satisfaction and autonomy may not independently drive leadership aspirations, they play an important indirect role by shaping the beliefs that do.

FIGURE 2. Our model showing statistically significant paths ( $n = 425$ )



Note: .1 = weak, .3 = moderate, .5 = strong.





## Key messages and implications

This research brief pays attention to teachers' aspiration for principalship, exploring how it is shaped by the interplay between school-level leadership practices, individual beliefs, and professional experiences. This brief reinforces that career aspirations do not emerge in isolation. Rather, they are shaped by the broader professional ecosystem.

Our findings suggest that cultivating leadership interest among teachers requires more than just reducing workload or increasing autonomy. Instead, it hinges on fostering professional confidence and building teachers' positive beliefs in the curriculum. These teaching beliefs are most likely to thrive in school environments that: promote inclusive cultures; establish a shared professional vision; and allow meaningful professional learning and collaboration. By prioritising these conditions, schools are likely to create a climate that not only inspires leadership aspirations, but also actively supports the development of future school leaders.



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# Appendix

TABLE A1 Descriptive statistics by school culture factor and item ( $n = 425$ )

Factor 1 Shared vision and professional culture		Disagreement %	Neutral %	Agreement %
Messages about the overall vision/values of the school are consistent.		5	8	87
Te Tiriti o Waitangi is enacted in our school values and day-to-day activities.		2	12	86
This school has a real focus on the ongoing learning of teachers as adult professionals.		5	15	80
Teaching time is protected from unnecessary interruptions.		23	29	48
Factor 2 Inclusive school culture				
Our school sees all forms of student diversity as a resource and a strength, not as a difficulty.		7	19	75
All staff think it is possible to address the barriers to learning that are experienced by students who need learning support.		14	21	65
We have school-wide support to understand and address biases we may have as teachers.		13	29	57
Factor 3 PLD experience*				
My understanding of and ability to use culturally sustaining pedagogies has grown.		2	14	84
I have critically reflected on and changed school and teaching practices that perpetuate inequities.		5	24	73
I have been able to easily access helpful specialist advice outside the school when I need it.		27	32	41
I have had good opportunities to ...	see and discuss the work of teachers in my school when I want to do things differently	11	17	72
	deeply explore ideas and theory that underpin new approaches	16	27	56
	see and discuss the work of teachers in other schools whose work interests me.	30	33	37
Factor 4 Teachers' collaborations		Very poor/poor %	Satisfactory %	Very good / good %
Sharing of knowledge about individual students.		3	9	88
Sharing of assessment resources.		1	12	86
Sharing of teaching resources.		2	12	85
Sharing of ideas for how to help students improve their performance.		4	13	83
Sharing of lessons and planning.		4	20	76

\* One item in PLD experience factor was removed during factor analysis due to low factor loading ("I have been challenged to rethink some of my assumptions about what my students can do.")

**TABLE A2 Descriptive statistics by teaching beliefs and working experiences factor and item  
(*n* = 425)**

<b>Factor 1 Confidence to teach about diversity</b>		<b>Disagreement %</b>	<b>Neutral %</b>	<b>Agreement %</b>
I have the knowledge and resources to teach students about ...	cultural diversity, including language and identity	5	17	79
	diversity of abilities and disabilities (e.g., neurodiversity)	11	21	67
	religious diversity	26	28	47
	diversity in gender identity or sexual orientation.	34	37	29
<b>Factor 2 Perceptions and confidence about the updated New Zealand Curriculum</b>				
The updated New Zealand Curriculum changes are going in the right direction.		10	38	52
I feel confident about teaching the updated English learning area in 2025.		18	31	51
I feel confident about teaching the updated Mathematics and Statistics learning area in 2025.		23	28	50
<b>Factor 3 Workload, morale, and job satisfaction</b>				
I enjoy my job.		3	8	89
I get the support inside the school I need to do my job effectively.		12	14	75
My overall morale is good.		9	14	77
The level of work-related stress in my job is manageable.		29	27	44
My workload is manageable.		22	27	51
My workload is fair.		27	25	48
My workload is so high I am unable to do justice to the students I teach.		46	30	25
<b>Factor 4 Perceived autonomy</b>				
I feel confident about trying new practices in my teaching.		2	6	92
I have enough autonomy over how I plan, teach, and assess learning.		8	14	78

