

The Work of the Accent Advisers

A "success case" evaluation

Report prepared for Accent Learning,
a Division of Victoria Link Ltd

Rosemary Hipkins with Lorraine Spiller



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1. Introduction to this study

This project is a continuation of contract work the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) completed for Accent Learning in 2009. In the first stage of the project, carried out across the year in 2009, Vic-Link's school support advisers (called Accent advisers) were supported to build a sound evaluation component into their work so that they could improve their reporting to the Ministry of Education (MOE) and be in a better position to substantiate claims about the impact of their work in influencing school and teacher change. While this advisory support from NZCER was well received, there remained a feeling that external input into their evaluation process would strengthen their work and hopefully provide additional robust evidence of effectiveness to be used in milestone reports to MOE.

In primary schools, Accent's support work has typically followed a "whole-school" model of professional learning in which the advisers work with the school to establish learning needs and develop an appropriate programme of advice and support. The work of the secondary advisers may also entail some whole-school work but their current contract with MOE also requires them to deliver cross-school workshops that provide support for middle managers.

Early in 2011 NZCER carried out an external evaluation for Vic-Link with the following questions in mind:

- What sorts of positive changes do participants describe as a result of working with Accent advisers?
- How do they link these changes to the support provided by the adviser(s)?
- What could the advisers do to enhance the impact and effectiveness of their work with primary schools/middle managers of secondary schools?

Methodology

In 2010 it was decided that an appropriate way to build on the work we had already done together would be to carry out some "success case" impact evaluations (Brinkerhoff, 2003). In such evaluations, participants are carefully selected on the basis of evidence that they have demonstrated identified success indicators in response to the support provided to them (i.e., via the programme to be evaluated). The next step of the evaluation is to work with those participants identified as successful to develop rich descriptions of actions they have taken as a result of the support offered, factors that contributed to their success and so on. The overall aim is to strengthen the ongoing provision of support and advice by learning from what has worked well.

The success criteria we could use to identify potential participants had already been clearly identified during the 2009 phase of the work and are shown in Table 1 below. While this list is clearly focused at the level of classroom practice, it also has broader relevance to whole-school change when placed in the context of teachers' own professional learning.

Table 1 **“Success criteria” that indicate effective pedagogy is being employed**

The teacher creates a learning culture where there are opportunities for interactive conversations about:	
Learning to learn	The “how” of learning is discussed (personal challenges, strategies used, other “split screen” thinking etc.).
Learning transfer	It is clear how this learning builds on past learning and points to possible future learning.
Learning purpose	The “so what” (purpose and direction of learning and why it matters) is evident.
Goal setting	Learners are supported to develop next learning steps and intermediate goals.
Intellectual challenge	Ideas are explored as ideas.
Data literacy/Assessment for Learning	Evidence of progress and achievement is noticed, documented where appropriate and used to inform ongoing learning and progress.
Authenticity	Learners are encouraged to build links between learning and their lives (e.g., relevant contexts). Teaching takes account of diversity of learners and is an evident partnership between teacher and learners.
Student voice	Students are supported to make choices and provide input to learning directions (personal and collective).
Metacognition	Learners are supported to surface beliefs, values, dispositions, attitudes etc.—to think about their thinking and ways of “being” and how these influence their learning.

During an extended whole-team meeting in 2010 potential participants were nominated by the advisers on the basis of these success criteria. In the judgement of the Accent primary and secondary advisory teams the invited participants had demonstrated these success indicators in response to the support provided to them.

Data gathering challenges

The project was initially designed to use the “mediated conversations” workshop methodology designed and refined in the Curriculum Implementation Exploratory Studies (CIES) project (Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, in press). The plan was to bring a sample of successful school professionals together in one place to have interactive conversations about their experiences in working with the advisers, including a discussion of specific changes they had made, and of ways they thought advisers might further enhance the effectiveness of their work with teachers and schools. These are called mediated conversations because the first audience for

the presentation is a group of peers, whose interactions and feedback potentially provide enriched insights for the researchers who are observing.

There was to be one workshop for seven primary schools and another one for up to 12 or 14 secondary middle and senior school managers from different schools, with two from some schools where relevant. In the event, recruiting sufficient participants proved to be very challenging and two planned sets of workshops dates—one late in 2010 and one early in 2011—had to be abandoned. We had not anticipated this difficulty, especially as participants had been invited to come and discuss their *successes*. Timing, pressure of work, general erosion of goodwill in the school sector and simply having moved on to new areas of challenge were all mentioned as reasons for turning down invitations. Those who agreed to come typically said they did so out of a sense of gratitude for the support they had received from one or more advisers. They saw this as a way they could reciprocate.

We maintained our contact with those people who had said they would come but modified the planned approach and went to visit them at their schools. This meant that the sample was much smaller than we had anticipated but we honoured our commitment to Accent and also to those school leaders and teachers who had already taken the trouble to prepare for the mediated conversations workshops. Interviews typically lasted between an hour and 90 minutes.

The achieved sample included:

- a primary school where the principal had been supported to make structural changes to curriculum delivery
- another primary school that took part in the school-wide numeracy professional learning programme
- a secondary school head of department (HOD) of a special needs unit
- a secondary school HOD of a curriculum learning area
- a deputy principal (DP) of a secondary school with responsibility for managing the school-wide professional learning programme.

Analysis and reporting of case studies

During each interview we each took notes which we then turned into the short case study vignettes presented as appendices to this report. These were returned to schools for clarification and confirmation before being presented here.

As we conducted the interviews and shaped the vignettes we listened for common themes and together used these to shape preliminary notes for feedback to Accent as the first audience and to MOE as the second audience for the evaluation.¹ These notes were then used to shape the next section and the overall conclusion to this report.

¹ Accent is required by the terms of the contract with MOE to include feedback from external evaluation of the Accent advisers' work.

Limitations

This is a success case evaluation. By definition and design we contacted and worked with school professionals whom the Accent advisers believed to have made substantial shifts in practice. The focus is thus on “what works”, not on what may not have worked so well. Nevertheless it is possible to infer conditions in which professional learning would not be as effective.

What we cannot say is the extent to which *all* of Accent’s advisers worked as effectively as those whose work is discussed here. What we can say is that, despite the small participant sample, recurring themes suggested to us that the advisers shared strong features of their professional practice in common: these practices seemed to be how this advisory team is expected to work, and indeed is supported to work.

2. Common themes in the schools' stories

Across the vignettes (see appendices) some clear themes emerged. The success case method of evaluation has highlighted the complex and demanding nature of the advisers' work. Five recurrent interrelated themes are outlined next.

Personalisation of support

Each participant in this success case evaluation had a clear picture of what they hoped to achieve. The change they wanted to make mattered to them, both personally and professionally. As systems change theorist Michael Fullan would put it, their intended learning was energised by a clear moral purpose (Fullan, 2010). However, being leaders of change in their schools, the participants were also aware of potential obstacles to success. They had thought strategically about how support from the Accent adviser(s) could help them work towards achieving their goals.

Against this background of clear expectations, a key ingredient of successful support was that the advisers were highly skilled at ensuring that they worked to the change agenda that mattered to the recipients of their support. They were able to do this notwithstanding the constraints of their service delivery contract with MOE such as the specific requirement that the secondary school advisers deliver some support via generic workshops. We heard this so consistently that it appears to be one of the most important predictors of a successful support encounter. That all the advisers whose work was discussed were able to work in this way suggests that it is a well-established feature of Accent's ways of working.²

The advisers could personalise support because of their careful listening for what would be of most benefit, and because they had deep knowledge from which to deploy their own expertise flexibly and responsively. School leaders were aware of the efforts made by the Accent leaders to match their needs with a suitable mentor from amongst the wider advisory team. Again we heard this so consistently that it appears to be a well-embedded way of working. On those (fortunately rare) occasions when advisers did need to work outside their own areas of deep expertise this personalisation appeared not to be quite as effective. There are implications here for the manner in which expertise is retained and deployed within the contractual models used to purchase advisory support.

² The caveat here is that we cannot say it extends to all advisers because we did not discuss the work of all advisers.

Capabilities for the role

The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) key competencies define capabilities to act appropriately in different life and work contexts as being underpinned by actionable combinations of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12). Taking these as a reference point, the deep expertise of successful advisers can be seen to have the following characteristics:

Deep knowledge: It was clear that the teachers and school leaders greatly valued the up-to-date *knowledge* that advisers shared with them. This could be knowledge of policy matters such as supporting schools to deepen their understanding of the *NZC* principles, or more pragmatic matters such as the requirements for provisionally registered teachers to gain full registration. For many of the advisers, deep knowledge and metaknowledge of a specific curriculum area, including the challenges that the “content” might pose for students’ learning, allowed them to respond flexibly to teachers’ questions and concerns. They also brought theoretical knowledge of the ideas and concepts that underpinned change initiatives and they knew how to make these ideas accessible for teachers.

Pedagogical skills: At the intersection of knowledge and skills the advisers had a rich repertoire of *pedagogical content knowledge*. They knew how to translate this pedagogical content knowledge into responsive ways of working with teachers. They could read the signals that indicated where participants’ next learning steps might reside, and they knew how to move teachers-as-learners on to new ground in ways that challenged and extended without unduly threatening them. In this way, the advisers had the confidence to model good practice as they facilitated professional learning interactions and when relevant they could also model effective pedagogy when working with students. The advisers’ strong *people skills* are discussed under the next subheading “Better than perfect”.

Attitudes and values: The participants in this research appreciated the passion and commitment the advisers brought to their work. It was clear from comments made that their willingness to go the extra mile, and the sense of moral purpose (e.g., expecting the very best achievement of which they were capable from every student) they conveyed through their work had earned them loyalty and respect. Successful advisers must be seen as genuine and authentic in their dealings with schools.

“Better than perfect”

Another clear theme is the level of intense scrutiny to which advisers’ personal pedagogical practice is subjected by the teachers with whom they work. As one leader put it, they must be “better than perfect”. In the words of another, they had to “earn their stripes”. Any hint of failure on their part to do in person what they recommended for others could be seized upon by sceptical teachers. It was clear that all these advisers sometimes needed to display considerable fortitude and personal courage in the face of this level of sometimes challenging personal scrutiny.

A courageous disposition is necessary but not sufficient to satisfy teachers' pedagogical scrutiny of the advisers' work. As already outlined, advisers need to be able to model sophisticated pedagogical capabilities, including having sufficient explicit awareness of these to unpack and discuss their own and others' practice in the moment and to do so with sufficient clarity that the "mirror" they hold up reflects a clear picture of practice back to the teachers with whom they are working. In addition to deep knowledge and skills a great deal of self-awareness and ability to reflect in-the-moment is called for here. Again, an implication is that these deep capabilities would take time to build and could not be replaced quickly or easily should the advisers' roles be redeployed.

Trust in the team

Reading between the lines of the interviews, another clear theme is that advisers are successful in supporting complex school change when they act as a team, acknowledging and trusting in the specific expertise of their peers. They do not try to "go it alone" when the nature of the support needed changes or takes on new dimensions, as it did in four of the five cases outlined in the body of the report.

Ten of around 30 advisers employed by Accent at the time of the evaluation were specifically named by one or more of the participants, and described as playing a specific and helpful role in the change they discussed. Between the team, expertise in all of the following areas was successfully deployed: principal leadership; leading change more generally; pedagogy, including inquiry learning; literacy; numeracy; two other curriculum learning areas; and NZC implementation more generally.

As is the case with building deep personal expertise, trust in the team and building a strong working knowledge of each other's areas of strength would take time to build.

Readiness and sustainability

Although not quite so obvious in the five success cases documented in the appendices, our interviews led us to reflect on issues of readiness for change and on the time it takes for profound cultural change to become embedded. We heard several variants of earlier, seemingly unsuccessful encounters with advisers (not necessarily from Accent) where, notwithstanding resistance at the time, conditions were actually seeded that did lead to change at later encounters with the same ideas.

Looking back, a typical comment might be "now we know what they were on about". From one perspective this could be seen as reflecting the resistance implied in the above discussion of advisers' personal fortitude. From another perspective it highlights the complex and recursive nature of professional learning. The weight of ideas seems to accumulate until they come together

in a whole that illuminates practice through new eyes. Patience and strategy are attributes advisers need in these circumstances and, again, we heard how skilled they were in these areas.

Although advisers aimed to bring schools or teachers to the point where their support would no longer be needed, the recursive nature of professional learning, and the sheer time it takes for change to embed, point to the likelihood that opportunities could be missed once schools are left to go it alone once more. Some lower level of “maintenance” support would seem to be advisable but it is not clear that the service delivery model allows for this. We got the distinct impression that these highly successful advisers put a lot of their personal time into supporting the teachers and schools with whom they worked so that contact could be ongoing.

In summary

This short report is based on the thoughts and comments of just five school professionals, each of them a leader of innovations in their own area of school and curriculum change. The participants were identified on the basis of their successful interactions with one or more members of the Accent advisory team. Between them they spoke directly about the work of 10 members of that team. Behind those members of the Accent team there doubtless stand others with whom the individual advisers interact and whom they turn to for support. We can make no overall evaluative comment about the work of the entire team but what we can say is that the approaches used really did work well in these identified *success cases*. They had sufficient elements in common to suggest to us that we heard about “best practice” ways of working to which the whole Accent team aspires. These include:

- listening to and responding to school and teacher needs and change agendas
- carefully matching available expertise to these needs once identified—allocating the best person for each learning challenge and context
- working as a tight team who know each other’s strengths and who are willing to stand aside when someone else is a better match to a specific “next step” needed to support the intended professional learning
- modelling best practice—“walking the talk” in their interactions with school leaders and teachers
- sustaining personal and team-level professional learning to keep advice current and to keep on developing their own expertise
- proactively developing and maintaining support networks and other strategies that could help sustain change beyond their advisory involvement.

3. Thoughts on sustainable change

The five school leaders at the centre of the cases presented as appendices to this report share a clarity of vision and a drive for change that comes in the first instance from schools but is supported and enabled by the strategic support and advice offered by one or more members of the Accent team. These committed school professionals knew where they wanted to go and why, but they also knew they needed outside help in one form or another to achieve their learning and change goals.

A common theme woven through these interviews was the dynamic nature of the *learning journeys* that individuals and schools must undertake when they work for change. The learning can take considerable time and change may not come easily. A *change in culture* is often at stake—sometimes for a whole staff but sometimes just for a team, embedded of course within an overall school culture. We heard about complex, multifaceted changes and helping schools address them requires advisers to have deep yet broadly connected knowledge. The capabilities needed to do the job well are unlikely to be acquired quickly, or indeed easily. Experience obviously helps but as we have seen it also takes a special sort of person to constructively and professionally rise above the robust challenges that come with the role.

An important marker of successful journeying is that change is sustained and does not slip away when the support is removed. A change in school culture is one marker of this shift to sustainability. Another marker is a certain sense of *personal commitment*—the new way of working comes to be held in such high esteem that there are good reasons to strive to keep changes moving forward. The sense of loyalty to the advisers, of wanting to take part in the evaluation to “give something back” to those who had given them so much, was arguably an indicator of the advisers’ ability to foster this commitment that was at once personal *and* professional.

We could of course apply the same lens to the advisers’ own ways of working. They, too, are deeply committed, both personally and professionally, to the job of working with schools to support more effective learning for students.

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Appendix 1: Supporting successful whole-school change

Hillside School³ is a large suburban intermediate school in the mid- to high-decile range. Several years ago the school needed a new principal. The board of trustees appointed a new leader who knew he would need to lead the implementation of *NZC* and that some big changes might be implicated as this happened. Coming into a new role to be a change-manager is challenging for any school leader, and even more so for a first-time principal. The Accent advisory service provided invaluable support and backup as the change process unfolded.

The nature of the school's change journey

For some years prior to the principal's arrival the Hillside timetable had been run on a secondary school model. School days were divided into separate episodes of learning, each less than an hour long. Students moved from teacher to teacher through the day and each teacher taught only a small number of types of lessons, so they could specialise. The principal was aware that a majority of teachers, and many parents, greatly valued this model and saw it as excellent preparation for the move to secondary school. He had his doubts that the model was allowing teachers to build strong learning relationships with students but decided to make no changes until he had become well immersed in his new role, and had personally spoken with every member of staff. He did, however, begin discussing the issues, as he was beginning to understand them, and the challenges he could see in the school's existing achievement patterns, with the adviser who supported the first-time principals. Together with another highly experienced adviser they began planning for whole-school change.

Some of the existing staff left soon after the principal's appointment, seemingly anticipating changes they did not want to be part of. There was a period of staff turnover to cope with, including settling new teachers into the school. The principal wanted to work alongside the teachers, sending a powerful message that they were all learning together. He used the advisers in strategic ways that left him free to be a creative problem solver alongside his team, once the problems had been surfaced by the advisers and framed in critical ways they could all debate. He could see that the structure of the learning day was giving students a somewhat disconnected experience of school, and it was his view that learning relationships between the teachers and students could be made stronger if a different timetable model was put in place. To help get the teachers thinking along the same lines the advisers interviewed a number of students, separately and in focus groups, then prepared a summary of key messages to report back to the staff. Their

³ A pseudonym.

voices had a very powerful effect in convincing teachers of the need for change and together they worked out what to do next.

After 18 months the school moved to a “home room” model of organisation. Teachers now spend the whole morning with their own class, teaching them the core literacy and numeracy components of the curriculum. This was very challenging initially for some teachers because they had been teaching mainly in other areas and needed support to develop new pedagogical approaches and knowledge. Another Accent adviser joined the team working in the school at this point. She was a literacy specialist and helped with the professional learning that was needed right then. Looking to sustain change beyond the life of the advisory support, the principal found ways to free up the two DPs—one with literacy and one with numeracy expertise—to work alongside the classroom teachers. Every morning they can be found in one class or another, working with students to model effective pedagogy themselves, observing and coaching the teacher and generally making sure everyone is up to speed. The lift in achievement records testifies to the success of this change.

Afternoons are a little more diverse in their organisation. As is common in many primary schools in response to *NZC* there is some curriculum integration across subjects other than literacy and numeracy (Cowie et al., 2009). Vestiges of the former specialist timetable remain in place too. However, whatever the learning context, the *NZC* focus is firmly on the Effective Pedagogy section of *NZC* (Ministry of Education, 2007, pp. 34–35), especially being aware of students’ *learning* gains and needs. This year the school is experimenting with the “classroom walk through”⁴ as a means of monitoring whether good intentions are matched by the actual pedagogical strategies in use. The principal is reserving judgement about this innovation until he sees for himself how well it works.

With the successful timetable change behind them, staff are now engaged in the challenge of learning how best to support students to take appropriate opportunities to become more independent in their learning. Remodelling of learning spaces is underway. The intention is to make classrooms bigger and to provide for shared learning areas with good IT access. This time around the principal is leading the challenges for staff learning himself. In this school, the work of the advisers is over for now because the learning community model of ongoing professional change is so well embedded and accepted.

Change that counts

Asked how he knew the changes had been successful, the principal was able to outline multiple sources of evidence:

⁴ See <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-resources/NZC-resource-bank/Leading-change/Digital-stories/EDtalk-Cheryl-Doig-Learning-walks>

- By the second year of the new structure the school was seeing a marked upward shift in asTTle⁵ results. In both literacy and numeracy, overall achievement patterns are well above the national norms for students of this age. This applies to all the students in the school, including Māori and Pasifika students who tend to be overrepresented nationally in underachievement statistics.
- The school had now used NZCER's Me and My School student survey tool for three consecutive years. Across this time they can track a sharp lift in overall student engagement with school. This is not to say that there are no challenges. One disturbing trend in the 2010 patterns is the trend to disengagement of some Māori students who are actually achieving very well. The teachers are currently exploring why this might be so.
- Telling a similar story to Me and My School, suspensions and stand-downs are trending down, and where they do happen they tend to be for different types of misdemeanors. The principal keeps an episode log that shows there are fewer incidences of violent behaviour. He attributes lifts in engagement and positive behaviours to closer relationships between teachers and students than was the case in the past.

What the advisers contributed to the change process

The principal commented on how fortunate the school had been to work through such big changes with knowledgeable and wise support. The advisers had given a lot of time to the school. They had supported 10 whole-school professional sessions in one year and eight more sessions in the following year. On top of this they had met with him and his leadership team regularly. He listed several ways the advisers worked as key to supporting him to succeed in the demanding change context he had come into:

- They were good listeners who supported him with his agenda rather than coming in with one of their own. They understood his goals and they guided him in the pursuit of these but they were also willing to challenge him where they thought there was more to be considered.
- When he was ready they were happy to extend these leadership conversations to include all of the senior management team. The advisers helped the leadership team plan next steps strategically.
- The advisers had a thorough knowledge of *NZC*, as the principal also did. They helped him to use *NZC* effectively as a tool for school self-review.
- The advisers were very good at reading the mood of the staff during shared professional learning meetings and responding accordingly. They were also very good communicators and could deliver tough messages without alienating people. When the going got tough—as it did when the advisers reached the point of introducing the formative assessment idea of “success criteria” for learning—the advisers persisted until the issues had been worked through.

⁵ Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning

- The skilful way in which the advisers collated and reported back the conversations with students really helped highlight the issues students were facing with their learning. One example was the need to make learning purposes more visible for students. Another was the need to make better contextual links between their school learning and wider lives. The principal said that hearing these critical challenges was less personal for staff than it would have been if he had been making them.
- With the advisers in the role of posing the challenges, the principal was able to work alongside staff to work out how to solve these. He said he could model his own professional learning in a way that would not have been possible if he had also had to be thinking about leading the conversation. He notes that one of the Best Evidence Syntheses had highlighted such modelling by school leaders as an important component of effective professional learning (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).
- The advisers gave very useful help for devising observation, data gathering and feedback protocols that could be used to appraisal and mentoring purposes. They supported the school's literacy and numeracy leaders (the DPs) in this classroom-based professional learning work.
- One adviser had been a principal himself and was responsible for maintaining a learning network of first-time principals. In this role he acted as a key link for the principal to networks of support *outside* the school community. The principal noted that the school had been somewhat insular in the past and he really valued the wider links he had been supported to establish.

Appendix 2: Implementing a numeracy programme

Riverside School⁶ is a large Years 1–6 suburban primary school the mid- to high-decile range. This school was a late adopter of the numeracy project. Waiting until the programme was well established was a strategic choice. The principal noted that several of his colleagues had reported “not so good experiences” as the project got established. Riverside chose to wait until “the pitfalls had been ironed out” and they also specified which adviser they wanted to work with. The principal had heard that their preferred adviser was very effective and he wanted to ensure that such a big change would be a really positive learning experience for his large teaching team. Many of them were very experienced teachers and he knew they would be critical of anything that was not demonstrably robust yet flexible and responsive. In addition, teachers at earlier stages of their careers had already learnt something of the numeracy approaches during their teacher education and the principal wanted to ensure that their new learning would be able to integrate with these earlier experiences. Thus, meeting the diverse learning needs of the staff would require considerable skill and deep expertise.

After some negotiation with the Accent leaders the school was able to work with their preferred adviser. The numeracy project was well resourced by the time they took part and they got all the newly available resources for immediate use, in contrast to schools that had taken part before the resources had been fully developed. All in all, the principal said Riverside “got a good deal”.

School goals and how they were achieved

Up until they took part in the numeracy project the school had used a programme called “Wellsford Maths”. This programme tracked achievement using a system of pre- and post-testing and it had worked well for most students but some had continued to struggle. What the principal and the DP with responsibility for mathematics in the school hoped to achieve was a culture change to ensure that the needs of every learner were well met.

The first six months of contact with the adviser were spent establishing relationships and planning the programme implementation. In Term 3 of 2009 the professional learning programme began for the teachers of Years –3 classes and with a focus on addition and subtraction. The facilitator quickly established what the teachers already knew. (Some of them had encountered “bits and pieces” of the numeracy project while working at other schools.) This inclusive approach “got everyone on board”. It helped that students made noticeably rapid progress in those first six months. The data from their NumPA diagnostic interviews were entered on the national database

⁶ A pseudonym.

at the start of the programme and again at the end of the first six months so the evidence of effectiveness was clear for all to see. Given these successes, by the start of 2010 the teachers of the older children were “chomping at the bit” to begin the programme themselves.

The DP noted that, two years on, he had lots of strategies in place to use with his Year 3 class and that, for the younger students, problem-solving approaches and talking about their mathematical thinking are “what they know”. As these children move up the school that knowledge and confidence is moving with them, which is further helping the programme to “climb its way through the school”. The principal noted that the culture shift is in the process of becoming entrenched, which is important to stop teachers reverting to what they know in times of stress.

The skills of the adviser

The principal said that the way the adviser worked with the staff had been key to changing the attitude of some of the older, more sceptical teachers. All of the following were mentioned as strengths of the way she worked with the school:

- **Good communication:** The adviser responded promptly to email, listened carefully to what the school wanted and generally helped the school to focus on the needs of its own students. The staff came to see that “no question was too silly” and so they were relaxed about asking questions as necessary.
- **People skills:** The adviser worked well with the staff. She could diffuse tense situations if teachers became resistant or defensive and she did not become defensive herself when responding to critique or feedback. She could reframe situations—“Let’s have a think about this”—so that teachers came to see things differently. The principal saw this ability to foster reflection as a key point of difference to some advisers he had encountered.
- **Walking the talk:** The adviser showed how to make the numeracy approach work by planning lessons and then modelling with a class for teachers to observe. She would then support the teachers to do the same while she observed and gave feedback.
- **Practical support:** The adviser brought a wealth of knowledge about good approaches to use, resources and websites to access. She encouraged the lead teachers to access and take up further learning opportunities; for example, organising for some of them to take part in an “accelerating mathematics learning” programme in Wellington, with a focus on ways to lift the achievement of those making slower progress.
- **Highly organised:** Whether it was resources for a class of children or resources for a staff meeting, the adviser was always well prepared with everything she needed to hand.
- **Professional and diplomatic:** The principal noted that in 2010 the adviser had been put under huge pressure by the staff to answer their burning questions about the new National Standards when she herself was “only one page ahead of us” and sometimes through no fault of her own simply did not know the answer to a question. He said she never got defensive in these encounters and always followed up on unanswered questions.

Summing up this part of the conversation, the principal said that “connections and relationships” were the key factors in the adviser’s success with the staff and from their perspective she had “really earned her stripes”. The DP added that he was really looking forward to her imminent next visit.

The challenge of sustainability

The principal was keen to emphasise the centrally important role of the *right* facilitator in supporting school-wide culture change. An important measure of success was that the school could now continue on and keep “growing our own professional development” in numeracy, with the teachers working together. Nevertheless, sustainability was still an issue of concern. He noted that MOE-funded contracts “just end” and there is then an unrealistic expectation that schools can keep going without ongoing resourcing.

For this school, advisory support looks unlikely to be forthcoming once the numeracy contract officially ends. It has recently applied for assistance with asTTle writing but has been turned away because it does not qualify for free support. The principal said they had the data needed to demonstrate that the need was there but they now needed to use most of their own professional development budget for the year to pay for support from a private provider. Obviously this precluded any other use of these funds.

Appendix 3: Learning to be an effective HOD

Seaview Girls⁷ is a large urban secondary school for girls in the mid- to high-decile range. The school has a special needs unit attended by a number of girls and young women who need very high levels of educational and personal support. The HOD was appointed to lead the unit in mid-2009. Although she was already a very experienced special needs educator this was her first middle management role in a school.

Seaview Girls has a strong professional learning culture. Every teacher is expected to undertake professional inquiry relevant to their own teaching and related to the school's strategic curriculum goals. There are processes in place to support this, including release time for whole-school professional learning in the first time block of one day of the week. Congruent with this professional learning culture, the principal invited and encouraged the new HOD to attend the leadership workshops run by the Accent advisory service for secondary school middle leaders. The process of personalised learning that unfolded from the first workshop onwards helped her to develop concrete plans for addressing some challenges she could see would need to be addressed, and then to put these plans into action.

In 2009 this HOD felt sufficiently confident in her new role to also apply for and take on leadership of the school's Learning Support department. She saw that there were overlaps in the work of the two units and hence efficiency gains to be achieved in managing both of them alongside each other.

Planning and enacting change leadership

The HOD came into a special needs unit with a culture of strong and appropriate practice but little in the way of documentation by which the team could be held accountable for that practice. As the holder of their own Group Special Education funding, and the funding for another school nearby, the new HOD was very aware that the unit will be audited at some point, and that currently she would have difficulty demonstrating their financial prudence and best practice processes. The unit needed policy and procedures documentation to complement those of the school overall, with their own specific details added. They need to show how they constructed and then worked to Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for each student in the unit. However, the actual day-to-day work was so busy that the thought of needing to do this job from scratch was simply overwhelming. Working with the Accent advisers helped the HOD get "a sense of perspective" on these challenges and to come to see herself as a person who really did have the professional autonomy, knowledge and leadership potential to make the changes needed.

⁷ A pseudonym.

At the outset of her professional learning journey, the HOD attended four workshops run the Accent advisory secondary team. The focus was on being an effective leader in a middle management role. In between workshops she was supported by the Accent team via a Moodle site set up for the participants to interact electronically with each other and with the advisers. Most of the workshop attendees were HODs of traditional subject teams. One participant worked in an activity centre in a role that had some similarities with—but, overall, more differences to—this HOD’s role leading a high-dependency special needs unit. In one sense she was “on her own” in the learning group and hence unsure whether the learning experiences would be relevant for her unique situation and needs. In the event, the programme offered quickly dispelled any concerns she initially held about relevance. The advisers ensured that the learning could be effectively yet manageably personalised to meet the needs each participant perceived for themselves. They did this by:

- using structured frameworks and processes for focusing and clarifying personal learning needs and goals. These were refined in small-group discussion and documented as the first step in a portfolio process to record the learning journey
- clarifying the scope of actions that could help address personal goals and then developing a plan of action and change based on these
- supporting participants to see how they could use this change and reflection model with their own teams
- regularly remixing small groups so that multiple perspectives could be elicited and debated
- matching each person to an adviser whose personal teaching background and expertise might offer the richest support to achieve the plan. (In 2010 the HOD received two school visits from the adviser to whom she had been “matched” and she was anticipating an imminent 2011 visit at the time of our interview.)
- matching each participant to a peer to be a “critical friend” with goals and challenges as similar as possible to their own. (This aspect was less successful for this HOD than for others because there was no really suitable match to be had.)
- coaching participants in skills all of them would need regardless of their individual plans. One example this HOD particularly valued was how to have difficult conversations with members of the team, especially where members of the team had different cultural backgrounds, with associated challenges for using appropriate communication processes. Another useful skill set was learning about time management and how to work out priorities when time was pressing.

Measures of success

In the working context outlined above, an important measure of success was completion of the relevant documentation to support any future audit of the special needs unit, but also to be used for staff induction, and to access guidance in building and maintaining IEPs and in nonroutine situations. The workshops had sparked the HOD’s thinking about possibilities for building a handbook of practice for the unit and helped her to see how to break up this overwhelming task into small manageable steps and carry them out. The HOD said that the advisers “gave us

permission to slow down: change is always a work in progress". The handbook is now nearing completion and the shared understanding of best practice that it communicates will be well used within the unit as well as communicating how the unit works to those beyond it.

For a HOD sitting outside the prevailing timetable structure of subject areas, but also trying to work within them, perceiving personal relevance in the programme is an important measure of success. The processes outlined above for personalising the learning ensured that the HOD did find relevance in the workshops, if not in her interactions with her assigned critical friend. The process of matching ensured that her Accent mentor was able to support her by prompting her own learning and by making judicious decisions about when to provide new input based on her (the adviser's) own deep experience in special needs education.

Arguably, another measure of success is that the professional learning offered within a structured external programme resonates with, or at least does not "get in the way" of, the school's internal professional inquiry programme. As the HOD showed us around the unit she discussed some pedagogical innovations the teaching team had been trying out with severely autistic girls. She also demonstrated how they knew these changes had successfully supported these learners to make progress with addressing highly specific learning goals. It was clear that this curriculum inquiry and the strengthened IEP processes were working to successfully reinforce each other.

Finally, confidence to *be* a leader is an important measure of success for those new to the role. The HOD described the powerful moment when it dawned on her that "you are the boss, you have to decide, providing you can justify your actions to the principal". The structured goal setting and problem solving in the workshops had supported this realisation and given her the confidence to take on a second leadership role just three school terms after taking up the first.

Challenges for advisers to consider

This HOD, like most of the other teachers and leaders we interviewed, had no specific advice for changing the support processes she had experienced. However, she did say she would like to see other special needs HODs have the same learning opportunities as she had. She wondered why they are not present in the workshops, and what it would take to get them there.

Appendix 4: Learning to lead a large curriculum team

Coastal College⁸ is a large coeducational secondary school in the mid-decile range. Over the course of 2010 the assistant HOD of one large curriculum team prepared to step up into the full leadership role when the long-serving HOD retired at the end of the school year. During 2010 she established a good relationship with one of the Accent advisers who had expertise in her subject area. The adviser supported her to fine tune the junior courses (Years 9 and 10) for which she already had responsibility. She had initially developed these with the support of another Accent adviser and was reassured in 2010 that she was “on the right track” with her interpretation of NZC. The adviser with whom she was now working assisted in the development of a Year 10 extension programme which included use of Level 1 achievement standards in the learning area. The adviser helped the whole curriculum team to clarify the focus and intent of extension programmes so that these allowed the best and most fulfilling learning opportunities to happen for students who needed to be stretched in their learning.

When the new HOD took over full leadership of the team in 2011 she requested professional learning in the areas of mentoring and coaching. The senior leader in charge of professional learning in the school recommended that she take part in a similar leadership programme to that described by the new HOD at Seaview Girls (see Appendix Three). The HOD mentioned many of the same features we had heard from the HOD at Seaview: the focus on her role as a middle manager; the modelling of the management inquiry model; and the usefulness of the workshop on “difficult conversations”. To these learning opportunities this HOD added that she had found the Best Evidence Synthesis focus on the power of “pedagogical leadership” (Robinson et al., 2009) a powerful and useful idea. She noted with some surprise that assessment for learning seemed to be a new concept for some of the participating HODs because this was already a well-established line of professional inquiry at Coastal College. She also mentioned that there had been a useful discussion of registered teacher criteria, which included a process of modelling the sort of reflective activities that the new HODs could introduce to teachers in their teams seeking full registration.

Building a learning culture; leading by example

At the time of the interview this HOD had attended three leadership workshops run the Accent advisory secondary team and was looking forward to the next school visit from her assigned mentor. In keeping with the careful matching process that Accent uses (see Appendix Three) the

⁸ A pseudonym.

adviser with whom she had previously worked on the junior units became her mentor. An older, more experienced HOD from a nearby large secondary school was assigned to be her critical friend. She mainly communicated with him by email and found this a useful source of a second opinion when she was unsure. Her relationship with the adviser was more dynamic and frequent. The HOD clearly valued her mentor's support and advice.

This HOD's goals for her own leadership inquiry were to clarify her role in the department, to put processes in place to keep curriculum implementation moving forward across her whole team and to successfully negotiate the challenges of aligning their assessment plans and tasks to the new National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) assessment standards (which were themselves intended to better align assessment in the senior secondary school with the new curriculum). As the assigned mentor the adviser had already visited the school once in 2011 to discuss how the leadership inquiry might unfold and was about to visit again. Together they had focused on the process for the HOD to use to carry out a self-review of their work with her team (an important new role for the HOD) and the adviser had coached her in practical approaches to actually undertaking the self-review of the team's work. The HOD said the focus was on finding leadership and communication options that would "work for me".

As well as these activities carried out in the mentor role, the adviser had also supported the HOD via a range of opportunities that strategically aligned the wider work demands and interests of both of them. Some of these were things that had happened *before* she became the full HOD but that had served to give her confidence that the adviser could offer her the grounded practical "multifaceted" curriculum support that she was seeking:

- The HOD had attended a workshop run by the adviser that focused on assessment in the learning area. The course addressed formative assessment and also varying assessment tasks to gather achievement evidence from other than traditional sources such as tests and essays. Both of these aspects provided useful insights for her NCEA alignment goal, and they could recall examples from the workshop when working on this goal.
- The adviser had been instrumental in setting up and supporting a network of local HODs in this learning area. They had already met face to face after school on several occasions, each time with a practical focus on some aspect of their learning area. Examples included giving each other feedback on newly designed units of work; and the use of portfolios of work for formative assessment purposes.
- The adviser had very recently run a whole-school workshop for the staff at Coastal College with a focus on the NZC principles and what they might look like in practice (see Appendix Five). Although this was not specifically for her team, it provided a useful shared foundation on which to build subject-specific detail. The adviser had brought along a "really practical" planning template that showed staff how they could integrate the three foundational Treaty of Waitangi principles with the NZC principles in ways that simplified rather than compounded the challenges of giving effect to NZC. There was an action plan to accompany the template. The template modelled a method of self-review ("what are we doing now?") and specification of possible next steps.

Through all these interactions the HOD said that “you never feel you are asking a stupid question”. She could email the adviser at any time and always got a prompt and practical response. She noted that the greatest indicator of the success of the adviser’s support was the shift in culture she had managed to achieve with the learning area team: “We’re all in it [professional learning] together now.” Her own personal upskilling had given her confidence to model new ways of working for her whole team—and in some cases to provide examples for a school-wide workbook of good practice. She also felt empowered to talk about the *why*, not just the what, of the changes they were working on.

Strengths the advisers brought to their roles

Although the focus of this vignette is mainly on the work of one specific adviser, a number of others were mentioned during the course of the conversation. The names of four advisers cropped up repeatedly. All seemed to have worked closely with this school. They had variously: run other whole-school sessions at Coastal College; organised one-off workshops some staff had attended; and taken part in the leadership workshops in their own areas of expertise. One of these other advisers had worked with the school to develop its own model of student inquiry learning and to help it pilot an integrated studies programme where two curriculum teams work together. These related activities have led to the establishment of an Inquiry Learning Group that continues to provide active leadership in this aspect of *NZC* implementation.

A number of general comments were made about the advisers’ manner of working and what makes this successful:

- The advisers habitually seek to clarify the school’s purposes for engaging with them. They listen carefully, paraphrase to ensure they have understood and develop a mutually agreed focus for the work.
- If a course of action is proposed but the school has reservations about some aspect, the advisers are willing to hear these reservations and to adapt their own plans. They do not get defensive about feedback, nor do they override the school’s wishes with their own agenda.
- This is not to say that the advisers do not have role constraints and work specifications they also have to meet. Rather, they are skilled at strategically aligning the school’s needs with their own work parameters.
- Similarly, the advisers are skilled at navigating their way through teachers’ concerns and objections without getting people offside. They know how to tailor their message to keep things practical and grounded, and they model good practice themselves.
- The advisers are very good at putting teachers at ease as learners. Their support bolsters confidence and when they need to challenge they do so in ways that turn critical questions back to teachers to reflect on, rather than overriding the situation with their own views. However, if asked a direct question, a direct answer will usually be forthcoming when appropriate.

Appendix 5: Providing school-wide curriculum learning

This final vignette outlines the experiences of one of the deputy principals from Coastal College (see Appendix Four for brief school details). One of her responsibilities is organising the school-wide professional learning programme, to which a number of different contributions have been made by members of the Accent secondary team. Like many large secondary schools, Coastal College was facing challenges in moving all the teachers towards the learning directions and practices signalled in *NZC*. There were pockets of innovation and excellence but change had not been achieved consistently across the school. It decided to use a process of school-wide self-review to determine productive steps for moving forward with *NZC* implementation.

Some time before the school had reached this point one of the Accent advisers had run a whole-school session in which she directed attention to page 35 of *NZC* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and specifically the model of teacher inquiry shown there. The DP described this as something of a revelation: “it wasn’t on our radar”. They had since been working to systematise professional inquiry as a key component of curriculum implementation. Any self-review processes adopted needed to be coherent with these earlier efforts, and the connections between them needed to be apparent to staff.

How the self-review process unfolded

An Accent adviser worked with the DP to plan for and then assist with the processes needed for school self-review. Initially he worked with just the senior management team, then the frame was widened and he worked with the middle management team as well. The DP noted that the adviser played a very effective role as an informed *outsider* who could provide critical input about what would be needed and why: “It’s not just us saying these things.”

One specific input was the design of a template that the various curriculum teams could use for self-review. The adviser helped the DP to prepare this template and to develop the processes to use it. Another adviser with the relevant subject expertise then came in to the school to support the HOD chosen to trial it with his team (not the HOD who features in the previous vignette). This second adviser and the “new keen HOD” worked together to make some adjustments to the self-review template and “make it really practical for us”.

One particularly useful addition was clarification of the ways student input could be sought and used in teachers’ individual inquiries. This addition *enhanced* the preliminary planning the DP had done with the initial adviser. The modified interview process worked really well. Other teachers could see how useful the feedback to the pioneer subject team had been, and that it could

be used in “nonthreatening” ways. Another curriculum team subsequently tried the self-review process. The feedback they got from students led to the realisation that they needed to differentiate learning experiences to accommodate the range of students’ learning needs. The DP noted these successes enhanced “buy-in” so that self-review became a “real culture change” across the whole school. Ultimately she wanted self-review to become a part of each person’s appraisal process. Had she added student feedback as a mandatory component before this positive experience, there would have been certain resistance from some teachers.

Working with the curriculum principles

Coastal College’s most recent support had been a short compulsory workshop on the NZC principles, followed by a longer voluntary session for HODs and any other staff keen to dig deeper. The DP felt that there had been such a focus on the key competencies that the principles had been overlooked and the staff needed to revisit them. The adviser who was engaged to deliver these sessions discussed what might work with the senior management team in advance of the visit. While this conversation had been challenging for the senior team, the DP felt that a level of translation would be needed if the HODs and, via them, the wider staff were to be fully engaged. This had resulted in refinements to the planning templates that would be introduced and refinements made to the challenge questions that would be used.

The DP identified all of the following as attributes shown by the adviser that contributed to the overall success of this work:

- The adviser was very well prepared. She brought practical resources that enabled the HODs to “dig deeper” with their own teams.
- When planning for the workshops the adviser was not all defensive. She listened, paraphrased to check meanings and intentions, and then used this feedback constructively to modify approaches and materials.
- The adviser worked flexibly around the school’s timing challenges, delivering the workshops at times that worked best for them.
- Deep expertise was a feature of this and other advisers’ encounters with the school. Staff had confidence that they knew what they were talking about and that their advice was appropriate. The DP noted that they could “pick what is critical” so that attention was not needlessly spread over too many changes at once.

Challenges for the advisers’ work

One component of the DP’s own professional learning had been to participate in an Aspiring Principals programme run by the Accent team. She had not found all of this experience as helpful as the support outlined above. One problem, which she acknowledged to be beyond the adviser’s control, was that most course participants aspired to be principals of primary schools. She felt there were not enough secondary participants with whom to exchange ideas. A number of the mentors assigned, including her own, had not themselves been principals and she felt this impacted on their ability to offer sound advice and support. She noted that her mentor had

previously been “really good” when supporting her with developing programmes for provisionally registered teachers, and reflected on the important part played by authentic experience in underpinning the advisory role. There are implications here for the allocation of work within the wider advisory team. By contrast, the course had introduced the participants to Vivianne Robinson and her work on school leadership (Robinson et al., 2009) and this had been very well received.

Another challenge the DP and the HOD (Appendix Four) debated between them is the balancing of theory and practice, and of school self-determination with specific direct advice. As the DP put it, “sometimes you just want a practical example, something concrete to get the idea” (rather than working through a decision-making process to arrive at a model that the school owns). Again there are balancing issues for the advisers to keep in mind.

Finally, there was an interesting interchange about the use of “jargon” words such as “unpack” or “embed”. The DP said she tended to react negatively: “I’ve heard this before.” But the HOD responded that repeated use of key terms is “clever in a way” because it ensures that the meaning is clear and shared. She now did this with her own team. Perhaps the advisers could openly share any deliberate communication strategies that lie behind the use of key terms they all repeatedly use.