

## Empowering an Indigenous Rural Community: Local Teachers for Local Schools

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POLO is the distance delivery of three year primary teacher training to students all over New Zealand who wish to train for teaching but are prevented from doing so because of where they live, or who wish to train without having to attend on-campus as a full-time face-to-face student. The innovative nature of this programme includes the establishment of a group of students, mainly indigenous New Zealanders, in the Hokianga, one of New Zealand's most isolated and economically disadvantaged areas. The three-year course, in which students will graduate at the end of 1999, uses mainly print-based courses combined with communications technologies. This paper explores how the course was adapted to meet specific local needs relating to Maori language and culture, and describes how particular features of the course have become a catalyst for the empowerment of individuals, local community, and beyond.

### Background: The development of POLO as a "Regional Initiative" in the Hokianga area

In 1995 the Christchurch College of Education began the distance delivery of its Diploma of Teaching programme for primary pre-service teacher training. This programme, called the Primary Open Learning Option (POLO), is essentially print-based with supplementary audiovisual resources. It involves attendance at campus-based residential schools and completion of periods of full-time work in schools known as professional practice.

In 1996 the College received a request from a group of schools to provide a pre-service teacher education for people in the Hokianga region, many of whom were already working in schools in various capacities, and most of whom were not able make the commitment to travel away from the area to a College of Education or other tertiary institution to complete the qualification. The main point of contact was Panguru Area School, and the history of approaches made to other institutions and to the Ministry is also acknowledged as originating there. There was strong support for this project from all levels, including senior officials in the Ministry of Education, and the local MP, Mr John Carter.

The response of the College was to offer the POLO programme as a way of addressing this need. The dialogue and negotiation which followed, involving the Christchurch College of Education, the Hokianga schools and the Ministry of Education, saw a further development of the POLO programme and which sought to address the following:

- (a) Schools in the Hokianga region had been experiencing a critical teacher supply and retention problem for some time. This is reflected well in the press statement prepared by Jill Paaka in June 1996:  
The schools have long recognised the potential of a number of people in this area to be excellent teachers. This exciting proposal will enable these people to make a valuable contribution as teachers in the local schools, while at the same time gaining satisfaction from a worthwhile place in the workforce. It is hoped that this local initiative may also help inspire other young people to have confidence to escape the insidious trap of unemployment endemic in Hokianga.
- (b) The majority of those for whom the course was to be targeted were mature students who had not studied at a tertiary level for a long time, if at all. It was seen as desirable that these students have support at a local level to assist them in their study and provide a certain level of "expert" input.
- (c) As there would be a cluster of students from the same geographic region involved, it meant that it would be possible for these people to meet together on a regular basis for support and guidance, rather than study in isolation.
- (d) A major need in the area is for teachers who are skilled in Te Reo and Tikanga Maori. Many local schools operate immersion or bi-lingual programmes, and there is a high percentage of Maori students in most of the local schools.

The Ministry of Education provided funding at a higher level for the programme, reflecting the percentages of 65% intra-mural and 35% extra-mural study. This allowed the College to appoint a locally based Professional Studies Coordinator on a part-time basis, and proceed with plans to send staff from the College to the Hokianga

to run the Residential Schools rather than require students from the Hokianga cluster to travel to Christchurch for these.

Late in 1996 a group of approx. 30 students were selected from a pool of applicants, and in February 1997 the programme began.

### **Differentiating Features**

Up until 1995 the Christchurch College of Education Diploma of Teaching was available only to students who attended face-to-face lectures on-campus in Christchurch. Following the recommendations of the 1994 report "Widening the Delivery" (Wenmoth and Mander) the course was translated for distance delivery, signalling a move towards a more open and flexible approach to pre-service teacher training in New Zealand: from mid 1995 an initial teaching qualification was available to students who for reasons of geographic location, financial viability, family commitments or preferred learning style wish to undertake teacher training without attending on-campus classes.

The establishment of a "Regional Initiative" was a further step along the path of developing flexible delivery options that account first and foremost for the needs of students rather than the traditional conscious or sub-conscious priority given to the needs of the institution itself. A significant aim of flexible delivery is the removal of physical, economic and institutional barriers to learning. In the case of Hokianga it was recognised that even the provision of the newly developed POLO option would not necessarily achieve this aim. A more effective solution was to identify the characteristics and needs of this particular group of potential students and adapt the delivery model accordingly.

Important to the credibility and quality assurance of the POLO programme is the fact that it is fully integrated within the Primary Programme of the Christchurch College of Education. POLO is not a different course; it is the same course that all pre-service teacher trainees of the College undertake but is delivered flexibly.

Thus while the course in Hokianga remains the Christchurch College of Education Diploma of Teaching, delivered using the POLO model of distance delivery, various features have been adapted to best meet regional needs specific to this group of students.

These features, or points of difference that distinguish the regional initiative from both POLO and on-campus delivery, are expanded in the remainder of this paper. They have contributed markedly to the success of the programme, and while they have provided the catalyst for the empowerment of individuals as well as a whole community, they have also been the source of considerable tension.

### **Attention to the student profile**

Essential to the development of a regional initiative that could claim to address the needs of its students is a thorough understanding of the students themselves, their motivation to become teachers, and the culture within which they are immersed.

Current critiques of distance education systems commonly draw attention to the need to focus on the instructional needs of students in terms of age, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, interests and experiences, educational levels, and familiarity with distance education methods and delivery (Sherry 1996). Evans (1994) identifies the importance of "knowing" our students, and the difficulty of generalising about the "typical" student due to the diversity of personalities, previous experience, abilities and personal circumstances. Previous research with POLO students supports the view that they exhibit needs, characteristics and motivations that are different from those of on-campus students, and that courses and support systems need to be developed with this in mind. (Delany 1998).

The scattered communities surrounding the Hokianga harbour are amongst the most geographically isolated and socio-economically depressed in New Zealand. From the settlement of Panguru where the regional initiative is centred, it is a one and a half hour drive on hilly, unsealed roads to the nearest town, Kaitiaki (population approx. 5000), which acts as a service centre for the Far North region. The early post-European settlement economy of the Hokianga revolved around the extraction of native timber. With the end of this non-

sustainable industry in the first half of this century, and the more recent decline of the exotic timber industry, the mainly indigenous Maori population is left with very few local employment opportunities. Many depend on a lifestyle of subsistence farming and fishing. Family income rates are amongst the lowest, and unemployment rates amongst the highest figures in the country, and a number of reports identify the region as problematic in terms of housing, health and education. ("Factors Influencing School Effectiveness", ERO, 1998; "Don't Blame it all on Teachers", Turner 1998; "Food and Nutrition Education for Maori and Pacific Islanders in the Auckland Area", King 1989). In particular, the 1999 report of the Educational Review Office (ERO), "Good Practice in Far North Schools", highlights major educational issues to do with standards of teaching and availability of qualified teachers.

The students in the Hokianga initiative are predominantly Maori and predominantly female. Of the fifteen students who have progressed to the third year of their teacher training, only one identifies herself as being of European ethnic origin, and only one is a male. Their professional studies lecturer (Jill Paaka) describes them as

...women who did not graduate with any qualifications when they left school. They have raised families and most of them have children that have finished school. A lot of them still have some children at school and there is no way they could have left their families and gone to town for three years.

Their ages range from mid twenties to mid fifties, and despite the rural isolation of the Hokianga community there is quite a breadth of life experience within the group, one describing herself as having '...travelled all around the world and then returned to settle in the Hokianga and marry the boy down the road.'

Another emigrated to New Zealand from the Philippines. More characteristically however they tend to be people who have been born and bred in the Hokianga and while they may have spent varying lengths of time seeking employment in the nearest city, Auckland, some five hours drive to the south, their experience of the rest of the world is limited.

As might be expected therefore, most have little experience of study beyond the secondary school level, and none had experienced study by distance. Two have gained degrees through previous on-campus tertiary study, qualifications that enabled their Diploma of Teaching course to be shortened by one year.

Of significance however is the amount of time most of these students were spending in schools prior to commencing the course, employed as teacher aides, relieving teachers, and even as full-time or part-time (but unqualified) classroom teachers.

This is an indication of the extent of pride and commitment to their Maori culture and language – a belief that they have a role to play in the betterment of their region through addressing the educational needs of their children as Maori and as locals, rather than continuing to rely on intervention from outside the region, a strategy that has proved unsuccessful in the past. This is the belief that has motivated these students to undertake the course and which drives them to succeed in a community that has a proud history of proactive change to improve the lives of New Zealand's indigenous people: Dame Whina Cooper, respected for her leadership in the land rights campaigns of the 1970s – 1980s was born, bred, lived and is buried in Panguru.

The students themselves articulate this motivation clearly:

Who better to teach our own Maori children than ourselves? I know where I come from, who I am descended from. I have always had that identity. That is a normal thing for a lot of Maori people here. But young people I met down in the city were so lost. I said to them where do you come from? They said I don't know, I just live in Auckland. For me its important, having that identity, to be able to teach a Maori child who they are, where they belong, and find they actually enjoy and take it on board as part of their own life skills.

The reason I am on this course is because in this community 99% of the population are unemployed and I don't think that's a good environment to bring up our children. I enjoy being with children and I just didn't realise that. I believe I have a lot to offer them and to offer in a professional way. That's what keeps me going. (Maria – edited from interview transcript)

Participation in the course has contributed powerfully to the students' own sense of "who they are" and their role in their community, and in many cases has been the catalyst for their own personal empowerment as individuals. Personal self-esteem has been enlivened and horizons have been expanded:

I have been there. I have seen the bottom. I want to go to the top now, and I want to get on and do what I really want to do. People like ourselves, who have worked hard for what we have got, can make it into schools and teach children, and be enlightened as to what can happen along the way. (Mary-Anne – from interview transcript)

If it were not for this course there were no options. Unless I wanted to remain on the marae, or spend my life looking at the beach. (Maria)

I would just be relieving at my local school and not thinking about my future. I would probably have been happy to stay home by the beach. At the end of it there would be not much at all but to be on the dole. I always wanted to do something and I guess this is it. (Jean)

Furthermore, students who began the course with a strong commitment and motivation to contribute to their local community, were within a year realising they were studying for a nationally recognised qualification and seeing themselves as potentially having a contribution well beyond the Hokianga region:

I would like to be teaching in three or four years time. I am not quite sure where, but I would like to teach in the schools that we are going to at the moment .... But then, because I will be certificated I could go anywhere in New Zealand!

I could go anywhere! ... But I would rather be with my own people.

Participation in the course has contributed to the breaking down of sex-role stereotypes and provided a catalyst for social change. Sherry (1996) notes that adult learners 'have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing learning at a distance: constraints of time, distance and finances, the opportunity to take courses or hear outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable, and the ability to come in contact with other students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds (Willis, 1993). As a result, they gain not only new knowledge but also new social skills'. (Sherry, 1996:337-365.)

In the Hokianga, mothers' traditional role of childcare has been challenged as women undertaking full time study are forced to relinquish a significant proportion of that role to their male partners. Indeed they have in many cases demanded the support of their partners in what has become a change of lifestyle necessary to meet the commitments of the course.

Such a challenge does not come without a price, and while individual empowerment is a significant outcome of the regional initiative, the tensions created are of equal significance. The feelings of guilt at "neglecting" one's own children, the demands made on family and whanau for support, and the financial sacrifice of being unable to earn an income while committed to full time study all mean that there is considerable family and community expectation to succeed. This pressure, combined with the need to adapt to a form of study that is not only at a higher level than any undertaken previously, but also comes in the form of "distance education", makes it likely that only the very committed and well supported students will complete the course.

We had this course planned so well, very exciting. But halfway through there are changes we have to make. Like changing my husband, George, to go shopping and teach him how to pay bills ... Halfway through the course I thought no I can't hack this because money is always a problem, and the kids are here and I would come home from professional practice and this one needs something and this one needs something else, and I would feel that I was letting them down. I was feeling guilty because they had to sacrifice a lot. They had to give up a lot of things. (Gloria)

For me the course has meant a whole change of lifestyle. My whole lifestyle including giving up time with my children, especially my baby. Giving up work, having a husband working away from home – like we're just sort of eyes passing. You have to work it out between your family and yourself. The main pressure for me was financial, but because it's what I want to do you have to work it out and find ways to overcome these things. I have one hundred per cent support from my husband – with a finger behind pushing me all the way out the door and saying how are you coping, and what do you have to do today,

and have you posted this assignment and have you posted that assignment. That's what keeps me going. (Richalene)

## A local initiative

The drive for the development of a pre-service primary teacher education programme in the Hokianga was an internal one rather than something imposed from outside the region. This local ownership of the regional initiative has been an important factor in the way in which the programme was set up, the major local factors being a "Local Management Group" of Principals and other representatives of local schools, and the employment of a local identity as the group coordinator responsible for the face-to-face delivery of the professional studies course and oversight of school practicums. (This person has lived in the Hokianga for over thirty years and is a respected ex-principal of Panguru Area School).

The educational community in the Hokianga was well aware of the shortage of qualified teachers in the region and the compounding effect of this shortage on teaching standards in general. There was a strong motivation to find a solution this problem even before the \* ERO Report highlighted the issues publicly.

We realised that we had around us the answer to our problem. We had suffered from a shortage of quality teachers for some years. We had been employing untrained relief teachers who seemed to us to have the skills necessary to become good teachers. We couldn't see why we couldn't somehow train those people to become teachers. That's how our quest to find some sort of local teacher training started. (John McKenzie, Co-Principal Panguru Area School)

Representatives of Hokianga schools proactively set about finding a way to address the need they had recognised to train local teachers for local schools. Christchurch College of Education is situated a thousand kilometres south and on a different island to Hokianga; there are many closer institutions that offer pre-service teacher training. The approach to Christchurch was initiated by the people of Hokianga themselves following up their own research indicating the POLO programme could meet their needs.

Community initiative and on-going support means the success of the regional initiative has contributed to the empowerment of the community as a whole.

Like many other rural schools we have a great deal of difficulty attracting and retaining teachers in this area ... This gives access to local people to work in our local schools. It's been a great local initiative. (Terry Rogers, Principal Opononi School).

The theme of "local teachers for local schools" goes deeper than simply meeting the need to fill teaching vacancies. Those doing the course see it as an empowering factor that reaches beyond their own personal circumstances and into the whole community:

We've had teachers who were highly qualified but insensitive to our culture. It's imperative that our people qualify because they see the needs of our children. Teachers from outside the area cannot cater - I've seen it - I've seen it as a parent. They don't last - they're here two months - they're gone. They are so far apart from our children, from the way we live, from our culture. (Maria)

There is general recognition of the wide-ranging benefits the regional initiative can bring to community motivation and self esteem:

It's not just the teacher trainees that benefit. Our school benefits immensely while the training is taking place. Our teachers are being refreshed, the community is upskilling itself. In a community like ours, to have six or seven people training for the Diploma of Teaching is a tremendous bonus. With teacher training happening successfully this way the community may see other things as possible. We may see a resurgence of post-school training occurring here. (John McKenzie)

Internal ownership and motivation for the teacher training programme also comes with a price: there is the tension created by the fact that the funding for such a programme is external. While the imposition of funding is not likely to be questioned, there is the danger that along with external funding come imposed attitudes as well, such as the potential institutional attitude of "we know what's best for you".

However, a strength of the regional initiative is the fact that regional students are completing the same course as any other Christchurch College of Education student studying for the Diploma of Teaching, whether on-campus or by distance. On graduation these students will be qualified to teach in any primary school in New Zealand, not just in the Hokianga. The regional students are studying for a nationally recognised qualification, not a watered down version allowing them restricted teaching opportunities under supervision. Thus the course is not just training local teachers for local schools, and the academic standards "imposed" need to be seen to be the same standards as those required of Christchurch College of Education students anywhere in the country: this realisation of the value of their course has been an important motivation to students who have had to work hard to reach the academic standards being asked of them.

### **The "Specialism"**

While the Hokianga students are completing a nationally consistent qualification, the regional initiative was established to address identified local needs, and is differentiated by the part of the course known as the "Specialism", locally mentored, and delivered face-to-face.

Moon (1997) identifies the need to cater for local conditions and circumstances when developing a framework for delivering teacher education programmes (rather than simply "borrowing" resources developed in a different context). Perraton (1993) discusses the importance of sensitivity to the needs of students and responding to particular conditions they may be working under, including social and cultural contexts.

The specialism is a customised part of the regional course designed to account for the learning styles traditionally found within the predominantly indigenous Maori culture of the group, and address the need for graduates intending to teach in the Hokianga to be well versed in that culture and language: there is a high likelihood of teaching bilingual children in Hokianga schools, and in some schools specially designed bilingual or full immersion Maori language programmes are in operation.

The specialism is delivered in face-to-face sessions and raises the amount of the whole course delivered in this way to 35 per cent. The content is designed to address identified local needs to do with equipping these locally trained teachers to teach in local schools with their characteristically high proportion of indigenous bi-lingual students well versed in the customs and traditions of the Maori Far-North. The mode of delivery (face-to-face) takes account of a need to mediate the distance delivery of the majority of the course with opportunities for cooperative and collaborative learning, perceived as being more characteristic of traditional modes of learning in the Maori culture, especially when the facilitators of these sessions are held in high regard for their knowledge of Tikanga Maori.

Research into factors influencing the success of distance education programmes indicates the importance of student support, including teacher mediation, to enable students to make the transition from traditional classroom learning to a more self-directed mode:

An important variable in learning effectiveness is the preference of the student for a particular mode of learning, ie, cooperative, competitive, or individualised (Johnson and Johnson 1974). Many current distance education projects incorporate cooperative learning, collaborative projects, and interactivity within groups of students. (Sherry 1996).

Owens & Straton (1980) developed the idea of a 'local instructional theory' which would recognise the alternate learning styles of students and match these to the content to be learned with 'a greater prospect of success than a general instructional theory intended to function satisfactorily in a variety of settings'.

The specialism, with its melding of local learning styles and local content into an instructional theory designed to address the particular needs of children in Hokianga schools, culminated in a three day waka trip around the Hokianga Harbour that was initiated, planned and implemented by the students themselves. In addition to being a further boost to their self-esteem, this venture served to highlight to the students how far they had come in two and a half years, and was seen by many of them as an allegory of their progress through the teacher training course so far.

There is increasing recognition by distance educators of the significance of developing independent learners in evaluating the effectiveness of a distance learning programme. While distance programmes need to provide effective conditions for independent study and break down barriers to learning, they also need to develop each

student's capacity to identify and address their own learning needs (Paul 1990). The specialism, with its locally developed but institutionally approved learning outcomes and content, provides the conditions necessary for this to occur, and prevents the course from becoming simply an external set of resources developed in a context well removed from the needs of local teacher trainees and local schools.

## **Systems for Student Support**

The recognition of the need for empowerment of independent learners creates a tension between the role of the learner and the role of the institution, or course provider. In the Hokianga the empowerment of individuals and the community as a whole has come about through opportunities to initiate and participate in a nationally recognised teacher training programme that has the potential to improve the educational opportunities available in local schools. For the training provider there is a fine balance between providing a student support structure that underpins and enhances this empowerment, and one which detracts from it. The aim must be to support students in independent learning and involve them as active participants in the learning process. Support systems that work for on-campus students do not necessarily take account of the needs of distance students, and the needs of distance students may differ from one location to another. Finding the balance between support that empowers by removing genuine barriers to learning, and support that covertly reinforces them, has been a major challenge faced by academic and administrative personnel working at a distance with students in the Hokianga. Support that empowers includes

- supplementing print-based courses delivered at a distance with face-to-face lecturer contact for negotiated course components.
- ease of access to communication – provision of communication technologies including Internet access, e-mail, fax, polycom, and 0800 number.
- integration of local educational community through participation in tutoring of students, associate teacher training, student practicums, "home-school" relationships and use of school resources.
- emphasis on quality written feedback with marked assignments.
- an understanding of the specific personal circumstances of the students – the student who has no telephone at home, the student whose home is destroyed by flooding, the student who travels two hours each way to attend weekly group sessions, or whose daily travel to professional practice placement includes crossing the Hokianga harbour by car ferry, the student for whom near full-time employment in addition to full-time study is an economic necessity.
- recognition of local cultural context as previously described.

Barriers to learning can be reinforced both by failing to recognise these features, and by overcompensating for them to the extent that student self-responsibility is removed.

## **Empowerment beyond the Hokianga – applying the lessons learned**

The empowerment of the indigenous rural community of the Hokianga through a pre-service teacher education course has itself been the catalyst for developments in other regions throughout New Zealand. The nation-wide shortage of qualified primary teachers of the mid 1990s has been largely addressed in the major urban centres apart from South Auckland. But it persists in many rural areas and smaller regional centres, and in some of these, schools or school clusters have grasped the opportunity to be involved with the training of local people as teachers for local schools in partnership with the Christchurch College of Education using a model of delivery similar to the regional initiative in Hokianga.

The establishment of the Hokianga Regional Initiative was closely followed in 1997 by regional initiatives in Rotorua, Gisborne, and Greymouth, all of which are centred in regional areas away from daily commuting distance of tertiary institutions offering pre-service teacher training, and where there were significant teacher shortages. A further regional group was established at Te Araroa in 1999, and the College is presently considering approaches from four other regions in addition to maintaining further intakes of students in the existing initiatives.

The key to the success of the Hokianga initiative lies in meeting the needs of a local region by meeting the needs of a group of local student teachers. It was recognised from the start that this would not be achieved by transplanting an on-campus course delivered in an urban environment to students who are in the majority Pakeha and aged less than twenty-five, to an isolated and economically depressed rural environment with

students who are mainly Maori, with little previous experience of tertiary study, and whose average age is forty.

Similarly, the regional initiative in Hokianga cannot simply be picked up and transplanted to another region. For the same expectations of success, the principle of identifying and meeting local needs must apply. While the regional initiative is not "transplantable" in this sense, the application of a set of important principles developed as a result of the Hokianga experience makes the regional initiative concept highly "transportable"; Successful establishment of a local group and the potential for student's academic success, are enhanced by the following characteristics which have proved as empowering for the institutional course provider as for the students themselves:

#### **1. Local initiative**

The impetus for the establishment of a regional group needs to come from within the region itself. In the Hokianga the approach to set up regional teacher training was a local initiative rather than an imposed one. The choice of partnership with Christchurch College of Education was a choice and was undertaken by the local management group.

#### **2. Local involvement and ownership**

There needs to be significant and real local input into the programme that is offered. In the Hokianga the face-to-face components of the course (professional studies and the specialism) are mentored by locals, and there is close cooperation and consultation with schools in the region who are represented on a local management committee.

#### **3. Identifying and addressing the needs of students**

There needs to be careful attention to the student profile which flows transparently into course design and delivery. The needs of students will be different from region to region, and within regions. The Hokianga specialism is designed to meet needs arising from local culture and circumstances, and there is a balance of modes of delivery, with print-based distance courses supported by regular face-to-face sessions in addition to communication technologies. Other specialism courses have been designed to specifically meet the needs of other regional groups.

#### **4. Developing independent learners**

Support structures need to reflect the student profile in a way that contributes to the development of strategies for self-management and life-long learning. In the Hokianga particular attention is directed at facilitating an appropriate balance of student-lecturer communication and overcoming reticence on the part of both without increasing learner dependence.

#### **5. Flexibility**

Flexible options need to reflect the fact that the student population is not static and that any needs assessment is a snapshot rather than a definitive description of a permanent situation. Hokianga students can continue their course anywhere in New Zealand, including on-campus in Christchurch, or with other regional groups. They also have the ability to transfer between full-time and part-time courses and to take temporary leave from their studies.

The application of these principles in Hokianga and in other regions around New Zealand shows that successful pre-service teacher education that is empowering for individual students, local communities, and indeed the institutional course provider, can be established regardless of geographic isolation or socio-economic conditions.



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