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Reclaiming and reframing
teacher education in Aotearoa New Zealand



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Special Interest Group report: Sustainability in initial teacher education

Jenny Ritchie

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Over twenty people attended the Sustainability Special Interest Group, which was facilitated by Jenny Ritchie. Jenny opened by outlining the broader definition of ‘sustainabilities’ as expressed in the UNESCO framework for the United Nations Decade for Sustainable Development. This involves “addressing interrelated issues such as poverty (economy), social inequality, peace and health risks (society), natural resource depletion, biodiversity loss and global climate change (environment) and culture” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 1). The UNESCO vision recognises the important role of initial teacher education in promoting sustainability values and approaches, and consequently has worked with teacher educators internationally to promote and document ongoing research and educational programme development (UNESCO, 2005; Wals, 2012).

As a way of gaining an overview of the various sustainability understandings and interests of those present, participants took it in turns to introduce themselves and their particular focus within the wider constructions of ‘sustainability’. The majority of those present were strongly focused on cultural sustainability. Some mentioned the need to model a commitment to sustaining te ao Māori conceptualisations and practices within the teacher education programmes. One contributor explained her focus as being “the preparation of teachers who are going to be able to sustain a high level of engagement with Māori learners and their whānau, and therefore all learners” and her concern was that this not necessarily happening. Another participant spoke as a grandparent of her concerns regarding her grandchildren, who are now into adulthood, that their experience has not always been healthy in terms of their mana and who they are as Māori. This reinforced the challenge for teacher educators as to how well we enable our students to contribute to helping build the mana of tamariki Māori.

In one institution, a Māori worldview is woven through every paper, which has proved to be challenging for some Pākehā lecturers, as well as for third-year students, some of whom are quite disconcerted by the idea of Pākehā lecturers helping them with te reo. Further, when on practicum visits, it is problematic that students are required to be using te reo and incorporating te ao Māori perspectives such as the knowledge of local legends, while the rest of the staff are doing nothing with regard to te reo me ōna tikanga. This poses a further challenge for initial teacher education (ITE) providers as to



how we might better support the environments in which we are placing our student teachers to ensure that they reflect the aspirations of our programmes, the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2008) and the New Zealand Teachers Council (Ministry of Education & New Zealand Teachers Council, 2011). The issue of cultural sustainability of te ao Māori has ongoing implications for ITE and needs to be central to our programmes.

Concern was expressed by several participants that while ‘sustainability’ is often mentioned in the documentation provided by ITE programmes, actual practices and initiatives often fall by the wayside, raising the challenge as to how we might ‘sustain’ sustainability by embedding it within our programmes in ways that enable our students to gain deeper understandings and thus generate within them an ongoing commitment to this kaupapa.

‘Sustainability’ was also seen as being aligned with a social justice and inclusion perspective involving anti-consumption and post-humanist theorising, and requiring a de-centring of ourselves from authoritarian hierarchical frames to one of ‘being with’. The example, observed on student visits, of children comparing lunchboxes and their contents as demonstrating the personal, embodied ways of excluding each other that are fostered by consumerist marketisation of plastic and foods. To what extent are we opening our students’ eyes to the ways these exclusionist processes are affecting children? Marketeers are so skilled at selling and hegemonic processes that there is often an unconscious, uncritical acceptance that ‘this is the way’, a normalisation of consumption. As teacher educators we are in a very powerful position—we can interject, we can critique, yet it can be really hard to deal with such issues in a teacher education programme while students are sitting in the back ‘facebooking’. We were alerted to recent theorising which may provoke us with new ways of thinking about community, asking us to think about both the human and more-than-human constituents of our world (Giugni, 2011; Taylor & Giugni, 2012).

The point was made that while students may come into our tertiary programmes with some background and interest in environmental sustainability, it would be useful to expand this focus to include other aspects, broader views, of sustainability. For example, one participant sees the sustainability of our built and cultural heritage as a source of vision, while for another sustainability is viewed as opening up spaces of both vision and hope. Finally, a contributor recommended that we read Gregory Cajete’s (1997) book, *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*.

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