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Faculty of Education
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton 3240.
email: wmier@waikato.ac.nz

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A RESEARCH NOTE: A REGIONAL RESPONSE TO NATIONAL CONCERNS IN TEACHER EDUCATION

ANNE-MARIE HUNT

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

ABSTRACT

How can tertiary education in regions respond innovatively and collaboratively to issues regarding teacher supply and quality, especially in regions of teacher shortages? This research report focuses on one response. The Rotorua regional primary teaching flexible learning option was established by the Christchurch College of Education (CCE) in late 1996 and based at Waiariki Institute of Technology (Waiariki). It is an example of how one region in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) responded to two identified national concerns; first, a teacher shortage and second, the provision of a pre-service teacher education programme that prepares teachers with particular skills to teach Māori children, who make up a substantial proportion of students in that region. This report is of a stocktake of the programme after 10 years of operation.

INTRODUCTION

This research note describes two national concerns that continue to be issues within Aotearoa New Zealand in 2011 and summarizes a collaborative and ongoing response to these issues in the Rotorua region. It shares some primary principals' feedback regarding teacher supply and Māori student achievement within the context of this regional initiative, which began in association with Christchurch College of Education and now, since a merger in 2007, the University of Canterbury (UC) College of Education (CoEd).

TEACHER SHORTAGE

A shortage of quality applicants for primary teaching positions in the region, as reflected in data collected in the mid 1990s (Woon, personal communication, October, 2001) helped to bolster a case for a pre-service teacher education option to be delivered in Rotorua. Over the past fifteen years this Rotorua-Christchurch regional initiative has supplied 250 beginning teachers, 93% of whom are employed in the Rotorua region.

There is an ongoing need for new teachers in the Rotorua region. There have been higher birth numbers since 2007 (Statistics New Zealand, 2009) and the Bay of Plenty is one of the regions that will be affected significantly by this increase. Also, the average age of primary teachers is in the mid fifties. Rotorua primary principals and UC are working proactively to attract local people to teacher education to prevent a possible teacher shortage, a situation that has occurred in the past.

MĀORI ACHIEVEMENT

Delivering a quality pre-service teacher education programme to prepare teachers to teach Māori children effectively has been an ongoing national concern, with long-term evidence that "Māori children are not achieving as well academically as non-Māori" (Education Review Office [ERO], 2004, p. 3). A 2010 ERO evaluation "indicates that not all educators have yet recognised their professional responsibility to provide a learning environment that promotes success for Māori students" (ERO, 2010). In the Bay of Plenty region 44.3% of the school population identify as Māori (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2010) with indications that the population of children of Māori and Pacific descent is increasing in primary schools within Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2009). Preparing primary teaching graduates who are able to provide quality learning experiences for all children and for Māori children in particular was identified by stakeholders in 1996 as an especially important requirement for a Rotorua initial teacher education option.

A REGIONAL RESPONSE

In 1996 a Rotorua programme, based locally at the Waiariki Institute of Technology, was the favoured option of the Principals' Association and of those people who were keen to enter the teaching profession in the Rotorua region. It is understood that the Rotorua Principals' Association, with Waiariki Institute of Technology support, approached all New Zealand Colleges (or Schools) of Education to consider the opportunity to bring a primary pre-service programme to Rotorua (Woon, personal communication, October, 2001). It was the Christchurch College of Education (CCE) management who showed interest, had a programme approved for national implementation, and met to negotiate with Waiariki and the representatives of the region's Principal Associations to collaboratively form the CCE Rotorua regional initiative and a partnership with Waiariki.

A memorandum of understanding with Waiariki formalised this partnership, and is reviewed annually. Waiariki supplies classroom space, computing and other agreed student services to support students' learning and teaching. Although principals were not included as formal partners in this agreement, their initiative, participation, and the locally identified need to improve teaching and learning for Māori undoubtedly formed an essential part of the motivation to establish this Rotorua regional initiative.

NOHO MARAE WĀNANGA

A commitment to regional Māori was evident with the establishment of a compulsory Māori specialism programme, known locally as Matauranga Māori, firstly within the structure of the existing Diploma of Teaching and Learning and, from the year 2000–2010, the Bachelor of Teaching and Learning (BTchLn) degree. Records kept by the Rotorua coordinator show that on average, two-thirds of successful applicants for this Rotorua regional option are non-Māori. Because most of the graduates teach in schools in the same region, most Māori children in mainstream classrooms will continue to have a non-Māori teacher. Preparing all student teachers to teach Māori children effectively is a major goal of this regional programme, in line with national Graduating Teacher Standards (NZ Teachers Council, 2007).

In response to this need and goal, wānanga were developed locally. In this context wānanga are defined by Peter Moeau, who designed and delivered these wānanga from 1999–2010, as “[providing] experiential learning in a Māori context, operating under Māori structures, according to Māori cultural values and beliefs” (Hunt, 2004, p. 2). Each wānanga was for two days and one night on a marae and supported and integrated such aspects of the professional studies curriculum as designing appropriate learning experiences for all children.

All Rotorua regional student teachers from 1997–2010 were required to participate in six wānanga on the Tangatarua Marae, Waiariki, during their three-year teacher education programme. Professional studies has been delivered, face-to-face, one half day a week at Waiariki. With the restructuring of UC CoEd courses between 2008 and 2010, there is now only one compulsory marae stay within the UC BTchLn (Primary) degree with increased integration and depth of Māori content across the programme. Any implications of this policy for the UC Rotorua graduates could possibly emerge from 2011 onwards, and needs to be studied in future research projects.

A TEN-YEAR STOCKTAKE

At the end of the tenth year of the CCE-Rotorua partnership, and as a merger with the University of Canterbury (UC) neared, it was timely to review this regional initiative with some Rotorua principals who have been actively involved. The review was carried out as part of a Master’s qualification research project (Hunt, 2007). The scope of the project meant that it was only possible to get four principals to voice their perspectives of this regional pre-service teacher education programme ten years on and share what they perceived needed to be considered with the pending merger with UC in 2007. It was hoped that UC, as the new provider, would value this employer feedback and that the findings could inform future institutional practice and policy within the UC CoEd. Since 1997 I have been the coordinator and a lecturer in Professional Studies and Practice for this Rotorua regional programme. It is acknowledged that being an “insider” in this programme could have resulted in an element of bias within this research project. In an attempt to minimise any bias, the CCE ethical guideline principles were considered and delivered to participants.

METHODS

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

Initially an open-ended interview strategy was used so that each participant was able to express his/her thoughts and opinions freely regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the Rotorua-CCE pre-service teacher education programme ten years on, and what future needs they may foresee for teacher education provider consideration.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the individual interviews were used to prepare a small number of open-ended questions for a focus group discussion. It was anticipated that a focus group interview would stimulate the production of rich data, because participants’ voices would prompt and encourage others to share their perceptions.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Four members of the Rotorua Principals’ Association, who had hosted CCE Rotorua regional student teachers in their schools on practicum for each of the last ten years and who had also employed more than one beginning teacher from this programme, were invited to participate. For the purpose of this paper the principals will be named Mep, Olivia, Paul, and Ric.

FINDINGS

Principals’ perspectives on the regional response to national concerns about teacher shortages and Māori achievement emerged through an analysis of individual and focus group interview transcripts.

Teacher shortage has, at times, been an issue in this region. Ric’s immediate response in opening his individual interview was, “I see it [Regional initiative] as meeting a need ... it certainly helped with the shortage of teachers in Rotorua”. Teacher supply was obviously at the forefront for these principals, as shown by this comment at the closure of a focus group discussion: “We are still struggling to find teachers come the winter term so despite the number of graduates there is obviously a great need here and they’re snapped up.”

Māori achievement is another issue, as indicated earlier. Principals’ perspectives on how to raise Māori achievement included remarks such as the following:

They [regional graduates] are committed to the local area, particularly committed to furthering the achievement for our Māori students ... they have got that extra bit of commitment there. (Ric, Focus discussion)

The two male principals highlighted the cultural qualities of both the Rotorua regional initiative CCE students and beginning teachers working in their schools.

They just seem to have an openness to the Treaty of Waitangi and they’re predominately Pakeha students ... they seem to be very open to things Māori and perhaps have an affinity to things Māori ... they just seem accepting of ... Māori students. (Paul, Individual interview)

However the limited use of Te Reo (Māori language) by CCE-educated beginning teachers emerged clearly in the following comment:

I think their Te Reo is very basic. Maybe that is something that could be looked at lifting a little bit ... not coming out feeling particularly confident using Te Reo ... but it is something to think about especially in a region like this. (Mep, Individual interview)

This is an ongoing issue that through the restructuring and redesign of UC courses is being aspired to and still requires further discussion regionally and nationally within teacher education contexts.

DISCUSSION

It is vital that Waiariki Institute of Technology and the University of Canterbury decision makers listen to such feedback when the current Memorandum of Understanding and degree programme are reviewed. While we should celebrate the success of the first fifteen years of this

regional response, we must still continue to strive to address ongoing issues and respond to changing and emerging knowledge on effective practice.

Corresponding with continuing growth in the Māori population in New Zealand and this region, since the introduction of this regional pre-service teacher education option in 1997, there have been a number projects, initiatives, and strategies designed to raise Māori achievement. Responding to these recent initiatives such as Ka Hikitia, Te Kōtahitanga and Te Kāhua has been important in the development of a new UC primary teaching degree to be ready for delivery in 2012.

Principals who were interviewed expressed a need for an ongoing supply of Rotorua regional graduates to staff their schools. All four believed that the CCE beginning teachers showed the commitment and an ability to connect and relate effectively with Māori children (Hunt & Macfarlane, 2011). However with the constraints of this Master's project research being limited to just four principals' perspectives, no generalisations can and should be made from it. More extensive further work is needed. Nevertheless, the views of the four principals raise important issues that probably reflect the views of a wider group.

An added limitation could be that all research participants were non-Māori principals in mainstream schools. No Māori principals in Rotorua in 2006 met this project's criteria for selection. Future research is, therefore, needed to seek Māori principals' perceptions of Rotorua's regional response to such national concerns as teacher supply and teacher preparedness to teach Māori children. Such research could additionally provide feedback on the needs specific to the bilingual, immersion, and Kura Kaupapa school contexts.

Although employment of graduates as beginning teachers is high, Rotorua BTchLn enrolment numbers from 2006 to 2009 have declined. At the programme's enrolment peak in 2001, there were over 100 Rotorua regional students. In 2011 the number is closer to 60. Will this number be sufficient to meet future teacher supply needs given the average age of teachers is in the mid fifties, and the recent rise in the number of babies born per year in the region since 2007 (Statistics New Zealand, 2009)? This question needs further research.

CONCLUSION

Principals sharing their perceptions of this Rotorua pre-service teacher education initiative, ten years on, enabled the documentation of some feedback on a regional response to two national concerns. The need to continue supplying committed

beginning teachers who choose to remain in the region to meet teacher supply needs, and who are able to relate and connect with Māori children and who must strive to improve their Te Reo Māori was clearly voiced by these Principals. Through such collaborative initiatives and ongoing research, New Zealand regions can respond innovatively and successfully to national issues of teacher supply, as shown in the case study discussed in this report.

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