

**Reaching for success:
building a sustainable learning community at Tiki High**

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with

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Introduction

Te maunga ko Parihaka	<i>Parihaka is our mountain</i>
Te awa ko Hatea	<i>Hatea is the river</i>
Ko te ropu e tu nei	<i>This group before you</i>
Ko Tukua o punga	<i>Is Tikipunga</i>
Te reo mihi	<i>Our greeting</i>
Ki nga ropu katoa	<i>Is to all of groups</i>
Kua tatu ki konei	<i>Who have come here</i>
Ki te huinga	<i>To this gathering</i>

This song proclaims the identity of the school of Tikipunga. Parihaka is the mountain that rises to the east and the Hatea rivers flows past into the harbour and the Pacific Ocean. The land identifies the people who live there and the school serves the community. It is they who, with me, pay their respects to this conference, to the land where it takes place and to the people who gather here. This paper is a report of a project of building a learning community in which we have been involved together. Christmas holiday timing and the probative costs of international travel mean that I am the only one who can physically attend and present. Nevertheless this is a collaborative account, and my colleagues stand beside me. With us, we hope, come whispers of our land and of our aspirations for our children to be able to stand tall upon it.

The project involved me as an experienced academic researcher working a group of teachers who gradually became researchers of their own practice. This report seeks to capture some of the process of the group members' evolution as practitioner researchers as well as the results of the project so far. Therefore it shares details of the developmental process, sharing insights from the participants, and seeks to open up a platform for further discussion on the role of teachers as collaborative learners.

The school and its goals

Tikipunga High School is classified as a low decile school, which means that on an average its students come from a very low socio-economic background. The

majority of students identify themselves as Maori, or indigenous. It is in Whangarei in the north of New Zealand.

Over the years of its history the school has often been adventurous in its approaches to curriculum and learning organisation. Nevertheless, the impact of low income, unemployment and the resultant sense of disenfranchisement in parts of its community mean that, after the first energy of an innovation, motivation, commitment and academic expectations have been seen to fall again.

The goal of the new principal, Peter, is to incrementally build a learning community within the school that is sustainable. In the long term the aim is to create an environment where each student will develop and commit to their own evolving learning plan. A first step is to develop a culture in which teachers see themselves as learners, and in which they explore strategies to support each other in their learning. In his words:

One of our goals is to make a difference in the students' learning and in their lives. We want to do that by having a great pedagogy and one of the key ways to do that is to have a sustainable and effective learning community, one in which teachers are learners as well.

We liked action research as the tool with which we could develop this community. So we sent out within the schools for volunteers to start our project and we got people who said this sounds interesting, we'll come along for the ride, and that created a cell of teaching staff who decided to take part.

We see action research as a never-ending way to develop our learning community. It's very much a work in progress and so far it been a really energising project to be in.

(Greenwood, Garelja, Eccleton, Davidson, Sutherlin, Wallace, Harris, Wellington, 2007)

Theoretical framework

The project is underpinned by a number of theoretical principles.

The first is a belief that teachers are professionals who, is encouraged, can and will take responsibility for growth of their awareness, knowledge, and skills in order to better meet the needs of their students.

The second is the choice of an investigative process that utilises participatory action research (Kemmis & Wilkinson 1998). The choice is guided by consideration of a number of key principles: participants are researchers, research and practice are combined, the exploration of literature serves to extend participants' experience and observation, participants together analyse data and draw conclusions, participants implement change and plan further cycles of research, and they share their discoveries to invite critical reflection and to further the knowledge of the wider educational community.

The third is a permission for each participant researcher to be a 'bricoleur' (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005), one who approaches research as an evolving design, identifying gaps and adopting further strategies as needed.

The fourth is a commitment to a community of learning. This involved exploring how to share power, with each other and with students.

The fifth is a recognition that for change to take place it may well be necessary to learn to unlearn and to think differently (Greenwood & Wilson 2006; Andreotti & DeSouza 2007).

Alongside these broad theoretical principles, and to an extent embedded in them are a range of other conceptualisations that I am still in the process of theorising, such as the importance of working ‘in the body’ and the value of ‘confident uncertainty’.

My own position within the research

I have already identified myself as an academic researcher. In the context of some aspects of the work we undertook, it is also relevant to identify myself as someone who often works with drama processes as tools for change. However, I also have a more personal identification with the school and with the region. My family home is on the outskirts of Whangarei. The well-being of my children and grandchildren is interconnected with the well-being of the district. In addition I was a teacher at Tikipunga a little over twenty years ago, and I have a daughter-in-law who teaches there now. So I have an emotional and spiritual investment in the improvement of learning opportunities in the region, and I am seen as a partner in the project rather than simply as an external facilitator. The trust offered me by the participants was identified by several of them as a significant reason for their engagement, especially in the early stages of the project.

Education and social construction

Increasingly through the project we came to understand that there is no straight forward recipe for student success in a low decile school. At the end of the first year of the project the Education Review Office which audits the administration and management of all New Zealand schools, gave the school a fairly positive report. It stated that while the school’s results in NCEA (National Certificate in Education Achievement) were lower than the New Zealand average, they were significantly higher than the scores in other low decile schools (ERO 2008). The statement is particularly chilling because it is intended as encouragement, at the same time as it prosaically affirms a co-relation between socio-economic status and academic motivation and achievement.

Several of the team were a little familiar with Bishop’s Te Kotahitanga programme (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai & Richardson 2003), and its basic rejection of “deficit theorising”, whereby Maori underachievement is construed as the result of deficits within the students that can be remedied by. They were ready to warn themselves and each other against slips into deficit theorising. Nevertheless, the gaps between their own educational and career attitudes and those of their students kept steering them in the face. One member of the team, Michelle, challenged the rest of us to stop thinking of cultural capital simply in terms of Maori and western knowledge bases and to consider it in terms of the students’ life experiences. How many of us, she asked, could claim any congruence between our out-of-school life learning and that of the students we interacted with? She articulated a challenge that underpinned the project as a whole: what did we have to learn about ourselves and our ways of doing in order to interact with our students with ways that were genuinely empowering for them? What structures of thinking and behaviour had we each been unconsciously moulded into that got in the way of genuine and effective interactions?

Methodological approach and setting up the project

We set up the project as participatory action research. Within that overall methodological approach of a number of important strategic steps might be identified.

The first negotiations took place ‘in the boardroom’, involving the principal, Peter and me, the academic researcher. We spent a number of hours not only clarifying aims for the project and also in the long term for the students, but also working through the ownership of the scheme, ensuring that the participating teachers’ energy was not captured for external research purposes.

This was followed by a first extended meeting with the group of teachers who responded to the request to join the pilot core group. It took place off campus, beginning an hour or so before the end of the school day and finishing in the early evening. The teachers came to the meeting with a great deal of willingness to both learn more about research and to work for the well-being of their students. They also came with positivist and relatively narrow concepts of research, looking for ready-made tools for measuring the problems that they tended to locate within the behaviours, attitudes and aptitudes of the students.

In this meeting we worked to reconceptualise research as something that involved exploration of ‘us’, teachers, as well as ‘them’, students. We spent much of session successively reframing our questions to find starting points at we could collectively acknowledge as useful and authentic. By the end each member of the group had formulated a personal mini-cycle of investigation that involved some aspect of their engagement with their own students. We began with coffee and finished with wine and food.

The downtown venue, the timing, and the food became a regular pattern for our physical meetings, and they reflected the participants invested their own time into the project as well as being resourced by the school. The pattern also reflected the nature of the research process: we were building a community with social and interpersonal dimensions as well as intellectual ones. Peter, the principal, was an active participant in our meetings, working as one of the team rather than as the boss,

As the shape of the overall project evolved, each participant worked with their own students within their selected mini-cycle of investigation and the group came together regularly to share reflections and critical evaluate their findings and re-shape their goals and strategies. At each of these sessions I would also offer a further framework for re-examining our goals and understandings.

Gradually we developed an on-line platform for sharing ideas, reporting progress and eventually sharing readings. We all wrestled at times with the structure of the on-line platform, but it was a necessary tool as my university is a couple of thousand kilometers south of the school and the teachers own workloads made regular face to face meetings difficult. We also used Skype, phone and email. The firewall precautions within the school made the use of Skype difficult, but it was a particularly useful tool when we needed to all come together for focused preparation, such as for two national conferences at which we presented progress reports.

I introduced the concepts of Participatory Action Research gradually over the first sessions. Because PAR is an accepted research methodology and because Peter and I had already agreed that it was an appropriate one for this project, I had naively presumed I could simply present it as our core methodological approach. It took me some time to realise that because the teachers were so new to formal research and so willing to follow my instructions, we needed to work more gradually for them to each position themselves as active and reflective participants in the evolving design of the research as well as to accept their own learning (together with their students) as a strategic goal. Coming to understand the theoretical principles of Action Research itself took on a cyclic nature, but by the time we presented at the NZARE (New Zealand Association for Research in Education) Conference at the end of the year, the teachers had taken ownership of the concepts, were doing their own further reading in field and assumed charge of explaining the theoretical basis of our project. I learned that effective methodology for a project like this needs to lift off the page and become part of the embodied practice of the team, in much of the way that script needs to be incrementally lifted off the page to become meaningful performance.

Throughout the project there was a twofold focus. The group worked together to better understand and fulfill the collective responsibility of the school to its students. At the same time each participant worked on an issue she or he identified as important within their own immediate teaching practice. These individual points of focus evolved and shifted over time. After a couple of months we mapped our personal projects as series of separate cogs within the overall project of improving outcomes for students, and summed up each of our current goals in the following way:

Nicola, a homeroom teacher at Year 8 level, wanted to find ways to help her students identify their own needs and take more ownership of own learning in literacy.

Jim, the music specialist, looked for ways to engage his Year 10 students who he identified as his most challenging group, and for ways of integrate digital technology into quality music programmes.

Bob, head of English, wanted to find how his Year 13 students construed success. In the process he began to explore with them ideas about procrastination and flow.

Michelle, another Year 8 homeroom teacher, set out to help her students move from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. She also wanted to further explore the implications of the Maori concept of *ako*, a term which denotes both teaching and learning.

Geoff, part of the management team and in charge of curriculum development, wanted to help staff engage more with ICT as a teaching tool.

Maran, the drama and dance specialist, wanted to develop a classroom environment where laughter and passion were evident and where students expected to find success.

Peter, the principal, aimed to support his teachers in critically shaping own professional development.

And I, as facilitator of the project, stated my focus leading the group to find what we could collectively or individually change in order to create the change we wanted.

Of course the two aspects of the project merged. Each participants' risks and discoveries in their own project informed the whole group's understanding of learning and teaching, and the shared reflections within the group supported each participants' individual exploration into their own classroom relationships and processes.

Some steps on the way: learning to think and act differently

Many of the provocations I brought to our discussions were intended to help the participants unpack some of the less useful mindsets that they unconsciously held. Inevitably this involved some venturing into unmapped areas for all of us. I found I drew on my experience in improvisation to quickly, and to some extent instinctively, check out potential tensions and contractions, offer provocations that extended the action and continuously refine them according to the participant's responses. When these were productive it was as much because of their contextual appositeness as their intrinsic merit. Nevertheless, it might be useful to briefly review some of the range.

In one session, Bob, who was interested in talking to his students about how they view success, reported his disappointment about their apparent disengagement. This led to an informal discussion about how each of us in the project viewed success and I challenged the participants to each make a pie graph of what would constitute success for them. Bob surprised himself by wanting to make three separate charts: in life, in the project, in teaching, and by the way that the components and proportions were different in each. He provided a stimulus for all of us to look at our own drives and he went back to his class more ready to see himself as a player than as someone who stood outside the action.

In one of our sessions we had access to a wide empty space exhibition room next to our own small meeting room. I asked the group to 'work in the body'. We used Boal's (1979) process of creating physical images, for problem, idealised solution, point of open possibility and first step. Then I suggested that we each find success and its opposite within our bodies, and slowly move through the transition on five beats. To my pleased surprise everyone found their own space and fully entered into the physical exploration. And afterwards all but one were keen to share their transform. Initially Nicola resisted, but when asked if she would show just her success she did, then she agreed to show frustration. Then she decided to perform the sequence. "I needed help to allow myself to do it," she said. Previously we had been talking about listening to our students and how sometimes students claimed when they were not being listened to, when the teacher had been consciously listening. "It's like that," said another participant after Nicola's performance. "listening is more than just hearing the words."

Working physically prompted a later discussion of Mason Durie's (1982) well-known 'whare tapawha', the model of wellness that involves the four corner stones of mind, body, spirit, and community. We explored how each of these might be applied to research, in general and to our project in particular.

In yet another session we looked at the resources of our classrooms in terms of social, intellectual, economic and spiritual capital, carefully differentiating between 'current operating accounts' and 'inaccessible deposits'. We had interesting discussions when particular members of the group claimed a particular academic or emotional resource and others challenged them about whether it was freely accessible, or locked away in a safe deposit.

We also examined the Ministry of Education's newly launched Strategic Plan for Maori Education, Ka Hikitia (2008), and critically examined not just our intentions but the active knowledge we had that would help realise those intentions. We devised structural charts of what we could change and what we couldn't change in our classrooms, in the school and in the community.

While some of these interventions could be planned between meetings or as response to participants' reports on-line, many of them evolved in the context of a particular meeting. In both cases, there was something of "let's try this to see where it takes us", an increasing confidence in working in uncertainty and without maps. I became aware I was modelling the way I hoped the participants would read and react to what they found in their own classrooms. At the end of the first year, Geoff, the associate principal in charge of curriculum, won a new job. In his report on the project he listed the things he thought would happen and didn't and the things that happened that he didn't expect. Among the first he listed: 'a model for professional development that could be rolled out to all staff'; among the second: "questioning habitual ways of working, collaborative contributions from each member, open-ended research with the process of inquiry being the value rather than definitive solutions".

Progress with individual projects

As the one looking on, I'd say that the common change in the participants' practice that each of them incrementally developed more confidence and more strategies for interacting spontaneously, and purposefully, with their students (or in Peter's case with his staff). They developed the confidence to become embodied and active leaders in their classroom, and they searched actively for the knowledge and skills they found they needed to lead better.

For example, Jim, the music specialist, initially reported that he had relatively few problems in his classes. His personality and 'street creds' worked for him: he is a big physical generous man, with an offbeat sense of humour and he plays in a known band. In addition, students enjoy the access to instruments and music software packages in his room. However, a few weeks in he reported how his many of his Year 10 students (14-15 year olds) would only engage with a music task for a few minutes and then would drift off into their own worlds. He started to switch his focus on what his students were learning rather than on what he was teaching. First he posted a questionnaire on-line asking them about their tastes in music, the technology packages they liked, and sneaked in "some general curriculum-type questions that would help me understand if and why they don't engage in school programmes at the moment". He found he had set himself "a big picture question: how music education, technology and the kids' own ideologies relate".

To his own slight surprise he started reading some of the literature that other participants (particularly Peter) posted on the website, and began to use it to back up what he was finding as he related to his students. He appreciated the degree of autonomy that the new curriculum and the national assessment process allows

teachers over their programmes, and he began to search for units that he thought would match, as he put it, his “students’ intellectual capital”.

In one of our sessions, Bob became very interested in Csikszentmihaly’s concept of *flow* (1993), and Jim picked up on it. It was something he recognised from his own practice as a musician, and he was recognising what he saw as its opposite when his students seemed to be shutting down. At the end of the first year, he stated his goal as finding ways to “enable the *flow* as much as possible”.

Of course, there were frustrations and disappointments as well as the excitement of breakthroughs. At the end of the first year Maran reported a euphoric sense of success with her drama students. She explained: “Initially I wanted to sharpen up my teaching skills, and to be part of something revolutionary. I learned that times I thought I was failing were actually opportunities, and that as my students started owning the work they also took more care and enjoyed the work. Together we found that in drama and dance we can tackle the big social issues.” A full report of her project is reported elsewhere (Sutherlin & Greenwood 2008).

But when the new year began she found a whole new set of challenges. “My seniors are backing away from leadership, and don’t like working with juniors. They’re not wanting to contribute ideas. It’s like they burnt out all their creative urges last year. I often have to bring in the ideas and take charge.” She went through a brief period of alternatively blaming herself and her students. Then she started to re-examine the experience in terms of the complex of emotional and spiritual engagement, and began to realise she had to work with where they students were now, not where they had arrived together at the end of the previous year. “I’m learning there’s always more to learn,” she said.

Emergent theorisations by the participants

By the end of the first stage of the project the core group of teacher researchers reported a growth of confidence in leading effective learning, an increased sense of personal motivation, and an improvement in their relationship with their students.

Some of the insights that they reported were about the value of an on-going action research project within their own classrooms. Their comments included:

- “my own observations have merit for me & my kids, just because I didn’t read about an idea in a book doesn’t mean it isn’t research, just because I don’t collate data on a spreadsheet doesn’t mean there are no results”,
- “knowledge we can access practically is the most valuable”,
- “theory and practice can evolve simultaneously”,
- “I appreciated exposure to multiple strategies rather than single solution”,
- “action Research allows us to reflect in an on-going way on practice – with feedback”,
- “it’s okay to modify or change goals mid-way through research”.

There were other insights about the value of the group. These included:

- “having other minds to bounce off is very empowering”,
- “the relationships have spilled over into everyday school life enhancing the professional atmosphere”,

- “regular professional discussions help validate the hows and whys of what I’m doing and give me courage”,
- “working on improving relationships with colleagues has spin off with students”.
- “people are willing to help when I reach out - every one is stretching like yogi”,
- “there’s been a breaking down hierarchical relationships between staff”,
- “my colleagues are fun to work with”.

There were insights about relationships with students, including:

- “our life experiences are often different to our students”,
- “listening to students means more than hearing the words”.
- “our students’ are able to identify learning opportunities for themselves”,
- “listening to students means more than hearing the words”,
- “we are learning together about learning”.

They talked about their engagement with professional knowledge, including:

- “I’m reading a wider range of research material”,
- “once you get interested in something, door open that you never knew were there”.

And about liberatory pedagogy:

- “both students and teachers are caught in a system - but we can break the cycle”,
- “we are as scared of making mistakes as our students are- I’m beginning to understand why some students prefer to copy off the board”,
- “we may not have a foolproof script but we can learn the skills and art of improvisation”,
- “education is competitive, teachers are competitive, regular re-examination of my motives for teaching is healthy”,
- “it’s about social justice”,
- “I’m beginning to understand the idea of *Ako* - we teach best when we are learners”.

They talked about the way they were developing an ability to respond to complexity:

- “our work is in the physical, spiritual and communal dimensions as well as the academic”,
- “sometimes it’s hit and miss - classroom dynamics change and you feel you have to start all over again”.

And about developing a personal *learner* orientation:

- “my left brain overwhelms my right brain, which makes a project like this a challenge for me”,
- “I’m learning to maintain health despite overwhelming workload”

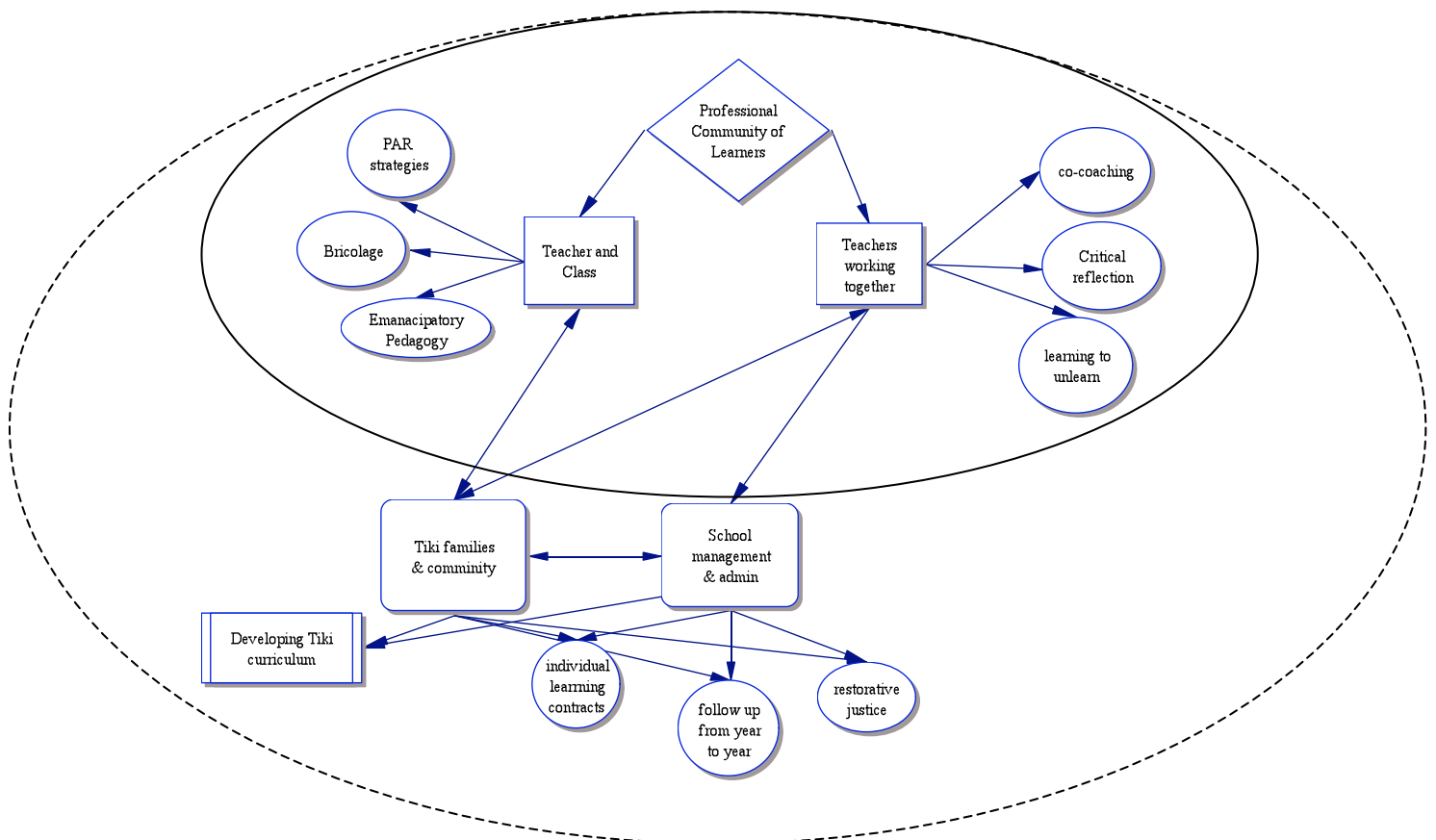
- “I’m taking more ‘wait time’ during discussions”,
- “the research applies to me as much as to them”,
- “I have learned there were areas I hadn’t thought about – I keep finding new issues for me.”

Where to next?

We began the project a little unsure of how far we wanted to take it and how long we were prepared to continue. By midway through 2008 we seemed to have reached a point where we thought we had completed the first stage. In part the sense of completion came because we had just presented a report of our project at the national conference of the secondary teachers’ union, and all the participants experienced the affirmation of publicly explaining both the project as a whole and their individual component projects, and exhilaration of being cheered by their peers as they talked about the importance of teachers being leaders in learning. But it was also influenced by changes in the personal lives of several participants (winning a new job, maternity, study leave).

Peter affirmed that he saw this as a long-term project, with this a first step. He saw the group as a ‘revolutionary cell’, but wanted to find ways of involving more staff, and perhaps the community. He talked about a 5 year project. The others agreed it was a work in progress and wanted to grow the group and perhaps establish an on-line learning community. A number of other teachers on staff began to ask about how they could join the group.

So we have tentatively developed a model of the next stage(s) that looks something like this:



In the first week of this coming school year, we will present it to the whole staff and develop two further 'cells' of volunteers, with members of the current team as facilitators.

Conclusion

As we have continued to theorise the project among ourselves we see its importance as fourfold:

It positions teachers as resourceful agents in the process of successful student learning.

It shows the value of the learning community as an agency of provocation and support.

It positions students as potential owners of their own learning.

It focuses on growth and creativity rather than deficit theorising.

We live in a time when around the world teachers feel over-worked, over-pressured with assessment and other compliance procedures, beleaguered by external research and policy decisions, and sometimes marginalised in the educative process. Within this project the teachers incrementally positioned themselves as resourceful leaders of the learning within their classrooms. They achieved this by committing to their own learning journey (including a commitment to unlearn assumptions that might not be useful), and by involving their students as partners in the learning relationship. Power-sharing proved to be quite different from power-losing.

The development of a supportive group, of a cell of critical friends, or a learning community, was essential to the process. The group offered not only support and critical reflection it also provided a community of purpose, an framework of trust and opportunity for shared adventure and celebration. We found that there is an added acceleration to community learning.

As a team we are still in the process of reflecting on the relationship between creativity and learning. We are tempted to affirm that all libratory learning has to be creative and improvisatory, and that it has to involve the whole embodied person. We are also tempted to assert libratory learning is about our spiritual relationships to the land and its communities as well as about social justice. Perhaps a further paper will explore these theorisations further.

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