Adult literacy provision in Aotearoa New Zealand: Some tensions
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Introduction
This paper examines tensions between official adult literacy policy in Aotearoa New Zealand and the philosophies and mission of one specialized post school institution, Wānanga A, an institution focused on the education of Māori, Aotearoa New Zealand’s indigenous people. The paper is divided into three sections. The first sets the scene by summarizing the mission of Wānanga and the current adult literacy policy context. The second introduces the tensions that have arisen between government policy and the Wānanga over the introduction of adult literacy provision. To illustrate the tension the paper uses interview data gathered from a funded project investigating the provision of embedded literacy in a number of different institutions. The third section further discusses tensions and uses the emergence construct of complexity thinking to explore them.

Setting the scene
In its Tertiary Education Strategy 2010-2015, the National-led government is very focused on improving Aotearoa/New Zealand’s economic performance. Among seven priorities to achieve this is one focusing on improving literacy, numeracy and language skills outcomes for learners studying at vocational foundation levels. Literacy is seen as the written and oral language people use in their everyday life and work. It includes reading, writing, speaking and listening. Skills in this area are seen as essential for good communication, critical thinking and problem-solving in the workforce (Ministry of Education, 2009). International literacy surveys in 1996 and 2006 showed that a large proportion of adult New Zealanders are not literate and numerate at a level needed to meet the challenges of changing technologies, globalisation, a shift to knowledge based industries and an increased focus on quality. They are not functionally literate as they have difficulty coping with the demands of modern workplaces. The 2006 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey, for example, found that approximately 43 percent of adults aged 16 to 65 have literacy levels below those needed to participate fully in a knowledge society (Tertiary Education Commission, 2008). The 2006 survey also found that for all reported age groups, more than 50 per cent of Māori adults had lower literacy skills than are needed to function in a knowledge society (Satherly and Lawes, 2009).

The Tertiary Education Strategy does not lay down a specific pedagogic approach to literacy. Other policy documents, however, for example those published by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), claim strong research evidence in favour of embedding literacy in a context relevant to learners so that they may understand the literacy requirements of a particular industry or area of study (Tertiary Education Commission, 2008).
Commission, 2008). TEC promotes embedded literacy and numeracy in vocational training as ‘the most effective and efficient way to provide direct, purposeful instruction …’ (Tertiary Education Commission, 2009, p. 4, emphasis added). While research reports often show that embedding literacy in vocational programmes and workplaces is an effective strategy (The Skills for Life Development Centre, 2006; Casey, Cara, Eldred, Grief, et al., 2006), support for literacy for economic development is not supported so strongly in the literature. Indeed, there is a strong research tradition that critiques functional literacy and recognizes literacy as much wider than the technical skills involved in reading, writing and numeracy for employment. It emphasises literacies as social practice (Derbyshire, O’Riordan, & Phillipps, 2005). Such powerful literacies recognise the deficit power relations inherent in functional literacy and a consequent absence of democratic practices and relationships (Crowther, Hamilton & Tett, 2003; Tett & Maclachlan, 2008).

Te Whare Wānanga have long lived as higher places of learning in traditional Māori society. In describing one such traditional place of learning, Cracknell and Knight (2005) suggest that they were localized and highly selective, both in what knowledge was studied and who was able to study it. They are only distantly comparable to the three modern institutions called Wānanga in policy documents and enabled in a 1990 amendment to the 1989 Education Amendment Act. The Act states (1989 s162:2) ‘(a) wānanga is characterised by teaching and research that maintains, advances, and disseminates knowledge and develops intellectual independence, and assists the application of knowledge regarding āhuatanga Māori (Māori tradition) according to tikanga Māori (Māori custom)’. Three Wānanga exist to help meet these goals. In addition to sharing the name, the three Wānanga have a number of similarities. They have the same mission for serving the educational interests of Māori while at the same time complying with government systems in the same way as any other tertiary institution. They are also very different - in size, orientation to iwi (tribes), programming, and willingness to serve government educational agenda. Wānanga A is a large institution and although it offers degrees and diplomas in vocational disciplines, it has also chosen to focus on second-chance and other foundation learners.

The current Tertiary Education Strategy assigns all Wānanga three core roles: increase the number of Māori young people enrolled in adult education programmes; provide quality programmes in accordance with Māori philosophies, customs and world views; and enable Māori to live as Māori. Wānanga A supports the policy priority of preparing its students to function well in the workplace using embedded literacy approaches. But it sees it as only one facet in a more holistic vision for adult literacy. Given its official mission to foster Māori philosophies, customs and world views and to enable Māori to live as Māori, it proposes to add two further facets to literacy provision. The first it labels “critical literacy”, a powerful literacy, a literacy that would enable its students to critique the status quo and help equip them to work for change in society. The second is “cultural literacy”, a literacy to enable its graduates to function appropriately in the Māori world. However, Wānanga A’s perspective is that the Tertiary Education Commission opposes the idea of a cultural literacy and does not want the Wānanga to use the term ‘functional literacy’ to describe government policy. Here lies the tension investigated in this paper. Wānanga A sees the Tertiary Education Commission’s opposition to its use of the
term functional literacy and its wish to develop cultural literacy as a potential ‘deal breaker’.

An example of tensions in literacy provision
The paper now turns to demonstrate the tensions surfacing at the time of interviews between Wānanga A and the Tertiary Education Commission over the provision of embedded literacy. It illustrates the difficulty perceived by Wānanga A to progress Māori knowledge, customs and practices as required by legislation while having to implement a policy that in parts prevents these requirements being achieved. Conversely, the Commission, in trying to implement the government’s literacy policy, is challenged to honour the requirements of the 1989 Education Amendment Act. This examination is grounded in research funded by the Ministry of Education to investigate how embedded literacy was delivered in five different Tertiary Education Organizations (TEOs), of which Wānanga A was one (Leach, Zepke, Haworth and Isaacs, in press, 2010). Staff members responsible for the implementation for the embedding of literacy programmes were interviewed. These included an executive director, the project leader charged with implementing embedding literacy, a number of managers and tutors. Evidence for the tensions was twofold. It became clear that interviewees were angry with some aspects of the policy and the way the Commission interpreted it. Equally clear was that Ministry of Education and Tertiary Education Commission staff were uncomfortable with the Wānanga’s approach. This was evident in the way they queried the Wānanga’s interpretation of events and requested changes on a number of drafts. Of the five case studies only this one attracted requests for change.

The vision for the Wānanga’s literacy programme was stated by one participant:

We want to ensure that our programme provision encompasses three things, cultural literacy, critical literacy and functional literacy and they are interlocked and linked. They all support each other in the emancipation and conscientisation of our students so that we can improve the lot of others and they can experience higher levels of wellbeing and freedom...

According to Wānanga A participants getting agreement with the Tertiary Education Commission has been difficult.

We got to a stage that we were very slow in designing our strategy. We wanted a deeper understanding of what we were going to be placing in our communities for this generation and the next and so we were what TEC would call slow, but we might call it ... discerning, so TEC became frustrated with the pace that we wouldn’t just pick it up and run.

A number of participants expressed their view that TEC was uncomfortable with the Wānanga’s vision of a holistic literacy education comprising cultural, critical and functional literacies. Both functional and cultural literacy sit outside the [government’s] policy direction and they don’t want us to focus on them. [Yet] if we can’t learn to read, write, speak and listen through our culture, whose culture are we supposed to do it through’?
Drawing on statute and Waitangi Tribunal findings, one respondent worried that TECs position may be a ‘deal breaker’. ‘If TEC won’t allow us to advance our cultural paradigms in embedded literacy, then we don’t have a strategy that we can support. If we don’t own the strategy, then how likely are we to honour it’?

Comments made on the draft reports rebutted that the Commission’s literacy policy was about “functional literacy” and that “cultural literacy” was appropriate within a literacy policy that focused on language and numeracy skills for the workplace. It is not a purpose of this paper to pass judgement on who is correct, merely to establish that there is a tension.

**Tensions, the future and complexity thinking**

These tensions arise out of complex circumstances. On the one hand, New Zealand governments have responded over time to increasing pressure by Māori to recognize them as a people with their own culture, interests and needs. From 1987 the principles underpinning the Treaty of Waitangi were incorporated in many statutes thereby re-establishing a legal partnership between Māori and other New Zealanders. Increasingly Māori interests have been recognized both in law and in the way government policies are framed and implemented. While Māori continue to be under represented in tertiary education and over represented on prison and welfare lists, initiatives like Māori language schooling and the establishment of Wānanga, have attempted to mitigate negative social and economic indicators by encouraging the development of a strong Māori identity. The Tertiary Education Strategy states (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 7. Translations added):

> Māori have a unique place as tangata whenua (people of the land) and partners to the Treaty of Waitangi. Tertiary education has a particular responsibility to maintain and develop Māori language and culture to support Māori living as Māori in both Te Ao Māori (Māori world) and in wider society.

and that the government expects tertiary institutions to enable “Māori to enjoy education success as Māori” (p.7).

On the other hand, while modern Wānanga are expected to reflect Māori knowledge, custom and traditions, conceptually they are framed in the western tradition of a modern tertiary institution with comparable qualification structures, operating requirements, funding arrangements and accountability regimes to other institutions in the New Zealand tertiary landscape. They, along with other post-school institutions, are expected to meet priority outcomes. In short, statements in the Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education 2009,) repeatedly reflect this dual focus:

> The Government has identified six main structural policy drivers that will improve our economic performance and support more sustainable growth in future. These are improving the regulatory environment for business, lifting the performance of the public sector, supporting innovation and business, ensuring New Zealand has the skills it needs, improving infrastructure, and making the tax system as fair and efficient as possible. The tertiary system will play a key role in the skills driver, which is focused on improving literacy and numeracy, youth achievement, and tertiary system performance (p.3).
We expect the entire sector to supply skills that are relevant to the labour market. Tertiary providers need to make better connections with industry and ensure they are aware of the likely demand for skills. They should draw on work undertaken by ITOs (Industry Training Organizations) to identify industry skill demands as part of their industry leadership role (p.18).

Framed conceptually, this dual requirement to prepare students to live as Māori and meet economic goals expects Wānanga to serve both Māori particularism and economic universalism. While not necessarily contradictory, these requirements do bring with them considerable tensions. According to Openshaw (2006) policies supporting an essentialist ethnic particularism are firmly embedded in government policy frameworks. This policy setting has created difficulties for Wānanga, as it is increasingly challenged by academic and public antagonism to Māori particularism. According to Zepke (2008) ethnic particularism faces at least three challenges. The first holds that diversity is nothing more than political correctness impeding the transmission of western values, culture and progress. A second argues that ethnic particularism creates a relativistic identity politics that is undemocratic and ignores socio-economic factors in explaining growing inequities (Rata & Openshaw 2006). Both critiques wish to overwrite ethnic particularism with the universalising powers of the European Enlightenment. The third challenge does not question the value of ethnic particularism, but critiques the way it is used to surface a deficit discourse; where Māori are portrayed as needing to be brought up to Pakeha (European) standards (Bishop 2003). The first two critiques of Māori particularism are especially strongly supported emotionally in the public sphere. For example, the then leader of the political opposition, Don Brash (2004), triggered an avalanche of public feeling against Māori cultural particularism in his Orewa speech, titled Nationhood, with its overarching themes of Māori privilege and one law for all. One of the Wānanga was exposed to a series of very public disciplinary actions for perceived infractions of Western style approaches to financial management and conflicts of interest (Berry 2005).

When these political currents are considered in the light of universalising economic goals, then Wānanga face serious challenges in meeting expectations. The tension over the development of adult literacy provision is a good example. Wānanga A recognizes the vital contribution of literacy and numeracy for Māori success. It focuses on a holistic literacy inclusive of cultural, critical and functional literacies. As the Wānanga’ policy document He Whakapahuhu Kahukura (2008, p. 6) affirms

The importance of a culturally and critically literate workforce that is able to make powerful use of the elements of sound functional literacy to support consciousness and emancipation is an essential element of success.

Wānanga A, then, supports at least two literacy discourses – one technical and concerned with providing vocationally relevant literacy; the other critical and cultural to prepare its students for living as Māori. In the Tertiary Education Strategy (2009), the government expects tertiary education to supply the economy with people who have sufficient literacy to function in a global economy. In a policy paper on funding for literacy programmes, the Tertiary Education Commission (2009, p.1) states that ‘(l)iteracy, language and numeracy are defined for the purposes of government
funding as the competencies that are essential for effective participation in work and life’ and that contribute to workplace productivity through the provision and evaluation of literacy, language and numeracy learning programmes in a workplace context’. According to Wānanga A’s respondents, the Commission rejected the use of the term “functional literacy” and wanted the Wānanga to eliminate its focus on “cultural literacy on the grounds that this does not meet the expectations of a policy geared towards creating work ready workers.

These contrasting expectations could lead to conflict. To mitigate this, it is in the interests of both the Commission and Wānanga A to understand the complex issues involved and to work towards an understanding. One way of doing this is to employ an analytic tool to identify the complexities involved. Mason (2008) argues that complexity thinking provides such a tool, one that also enables the emergence of future possibilities and new constructs. Heylighen (1999) goes back to the original Latin word “complexus” meaning “entwined” to argue that complexity thinking focuses on closely connected parts which are at the same time distinct and connected. Heylighen (1999) goes on to claim that distinction and connection help understand the complexity of a system. Distinction refers to heterogeneity, aspects of the complex system that act differently from others. Connection relates to constraint and redundancy, those parts that are not independent at all. He suggests that distinction leads to disorder; connections to order. Together, distinction and connection lead to a high level non-lineal emergence (Richardson and Cilliers, 2001 p.8).

Adult literacy provision is a complex system in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is informed by connecting and distinctive phenomena, disciplines and discourses (Davis and Sumara, 2008). Connecting phenomena include the personal and institutional experiences involved in doing business, negotiating funding for adult literacy programmes, for example. Distinctive phenomena include the cultural experiences that impact on the negotiation process. Common disciplines connect the thinking of Commission and Wānanga. Management, accounting, policy studies, and philosophy are examples. But disciplines have different meanings for people. Philosophies, for example, are highly diverse and offer different perspectives. There is considerable commonality in the New Zealand tertiary setting in the way the embedded literacy discourse is valued and accepted. There is considerable distinction in how much other literacy discourses are favoured.

Davis and Sumara (2008) suggest emergence, a possible future for dealing with the tensions examined in this paper, requires both connection and distinction. Connection is continuity. It resides in the histories of entities; histories that contribute to maintaining a focus of purpose and identity, in this case embedded literacy. Retaining distinction in the network is equally important for emergence. Distinction enables diverse ideas to flourish, for change in the system to occur and for a decentralization of ideas. In the debate over adult literacy provision, distinction means that the differences between Commission and Wānanga are maintained in the expectation that innovative ways of developing literacy will emerge out of such debates.
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References


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