What do Maori want from the education system? The same as everyone else, perhaps. Wings for their children to fly with. To be equipped to become the best, the most successful people they can.

Simple really. Like flying a kite. It just needs a steady current, an understanding of the kite’s potential, and the freedom to dance and soar and play with the wind.

And putting it just as simply, that is the job of our education systems: to make it possible for all of our students to fly as high and as freely as they can.

So when the challenge comes in New Zealand from Maori to meet our Treaty commitments in education, it is important to see it in simple as well as in socio-politically complex terms. In simple terms, meeting our Treaty obligations in education means doing justice to Maori students and to the families and communities they come from, and to the Pakeha (the term used for a non-indigenous New Zealander) students and their communities in terms of empowering them to be comfortable and effective in a country that has committed itself to acknowledging two official cultures. In more complex terms that task engages us in re-assessing what happens in our schools, in examining what needs to change, and in finding effective ways to bring about that change.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE – AND THE FOCUS OF THIS CHAPTER

The issue is one that occurs in different forms around the world. In Australia, the process of Reconciliation challenges the education system to significantly address the needs of Aboriginal communities, to find ways of meeting the goals they identify for their young people. Canada wrestles not only with the educational needs of its indigenous peoples, but also with the demands of two cultures who each claim sovereignty in different provinces. In the United States, education systems are
confronted by the needs and expectations of Native peoples, Latino/Latina and Blacks. Ireland and Wales have reclaimed a place for their Gaelic languages, but still grapple with political issues in their education systems. The postcolonial countries of Africa, and India too, have shrugged off colonial rule but they still struggle with making the systems they have been left with their own and with making them address different tribal needs. In New Zealand, the challenge is anchored in the Treaty of Waitangi, and centres around the promise of partnership. And the challenge comes from a history of Maori needs not being met.

Our purpose in this paper is to give an account of how the institution in which we work, the Christchurch College of Education, hears that challenge and of the process we have engaged in to meet it. We will briefly describe the College of Education and its relationship to nation-wide Maori claims for a systemic shift in the processes of education. Then we will examine the specific strategic goals the College has set, and the ways it seeks to implement them. Part of the College’s response has been to appoint us, the two writers of this paper, as Joint Co-ordinators of the Bicultural Project. We will, therefore, give an account of the experiences we have had and of the future developments that we plan.

Before examining the College’s goals and our work in more detail, we would like to draw out some of what we see as significant concepts in educational theory and research as they relate to our project.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Two concepts that are central to our work are decolonisation and capacity building. Decolonisation in broader terms refers to the process of deconstructing the external systems and internalised mental maps that are the product of colonisation on indigenous people (Smith, 1999; Tau, 2001). The external systems, social, economic and political, structure our society in ways that privilege certain backgrounds, connections, and kinds of knowledge (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1993; Walker, 1999). They determine who will have access to resources and what kinds of needs those resources will address. The internalised mental maps are products of what Gee (1992) calls Discourse: the systems of meanings that determine the ways in which we talk, act, interact, think, believe and value. They are specific to particular groups and they are social constructs. They are also intimately related to the distribution of social power and the hierarchical structure in society. Both the external structures and the internalised Discourses impact on education by making what happens in classrooms more relevant and accessible to certain groups of students than to others (Hooks, 1994; Lareau, 1997). The relative failure of Maori students within the education system has been attributed to both economic and social barriers (Waitangi Tribunal, 1986) and to ideological biases (Simon, 1986).

As analysis of the problem moves into a search for solutions and an advocacy of change, decolonisation becomes linked with capacity building: the development of skills, knowledge and resources within a particular community or group so that the people can become increasingly autonomous in determining their well-being. In the