Action Research Initiatives:

THE WANGANUI ADULT LITERACY AND EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMME

Franco Vaccarino  •  Margie Comrie
Niki Culligan  •  Frank Sligo

Massey University
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Franco Vaccarino
Margie Comrie
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Frank Sligo

http://literacy.massey.ac.nz/

Department of Communication and Journalism
Massey University

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This report is dedicated to the memory of the late Dr Su Olsson (1942–2005), friend, colleague, and objective leader in the Literacy and Employment Programme.
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Introduction

Individuals who decide to carry out action research want to find ways to understand their situations better, and ascertain what changes can be made to improve both their own situations and that of others. A positive feature of action research is that it starts in practice, and individuals generate their own theories out of that practice. As McNiff (2000, p. 26) points out, “action researchers are real people in real situations.” An action researcher asks the question “how can I improve or change what I am doing?” This implies the investigation explores what the researcher is currently doing in order to make changes or improve what is being done, thus allowing the researcher to understand the situation more fully. This, in turn, assists researchers/practitioners to evaluate their own work and make relevant changes, if necessary. In other words, individuals reflect on their own work. This self-reflection is a key element within action research and allows researchers to plan what changes can be made, implement these changes, and then reflect once again. Action researchers not only enquire into others’ lives, but also simultaneously address their own function as researchers and practitioners.

The action research projects within the Literacy and Employment Project feature a mix of types of action research, arising from collaborations with Wanganui community members that have identified areas in need of research. The projects below represent areas in which community members would like to see change or development. In our projects, we employ the term process consultation where, as researchers, we manage the process by which information is gained, and work alongside participants to set goals, develop and implement plans, and interpret resulting information.

The action research projects discussed in this report include:

1. *Stepping Through the Looking Glass: Action Research at Training For You*

This is a pilot study of an action research programme based at Training For You, an adult literacy training provider in Wanganui. The action research was conceived and designed by Training For You’s Learning Centre Supervisor in consultation with the Adult Literacy and Employment team, and management and tutors at Training For You. The purpose of this action research project is to enhance self-reflective practices among students as to their learning, and concurrently, among tutors as to their tutoring, to improve the learning and teaching experience.

2. *Establishing a Family Learning Project at Castlecliff School in Wanganui*

The home is a child’s first school and the parent or caregiver the child’s first and most important teacher. The concept of family learning builds on this natural learning
bond. Family learning comprises the different ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy during their day-to-day tasks and activities at home and in their communities. In Year 1, parents or caregivers play a crucial role in assisting their children consolidate emerging literacy skills that ease their subsequent acquisition of language, literacy, and cognitive skills, which form the basis for success in the learning context. This action research project involves Year 1 children and their parents at Castlecliff School. The intention is for the School to implement an ongoing family learning project for all Year 1 children entering the school. The primary research intention is to ascertain how well a family learning intervention assists and addresses learning goals within a school context.

3. Workplace Literacy Provision: A Formative Evaluation of an Emerging Workplace Literacy Provider

Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui) was approached by local businesses interested in learning more about how to support their staff to up-skill their literacy needs. The opportunity not only to develop a workplace literacy programme, but also to document and evaluate this process of development was recognised as a valuable learning tool. In acknowledgment of the value in sharing information and learning throughout the adult literacy sector and cross sectorally, Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui) approached the Adult Literacy and Employment team, offering the opportunity to document this through a formative evaluation process. While this project is still in its initial design stages, an outline of the proposed method, approach, and future direction is given.
**Action Research: A Review of the Literature**

Many of the research projects in the larger Wanganui Literacy and Employment project have an action research component to them. In this report we discuss the initial findings of the action research projects undertaken thus far. In order to position these projects within an action research theoretical framework, a brief overview of action research is provided, before describing each project in more detail.

**Action research through the ages**

Action research was born when social scientists and practitioners, “concerned not only with the generation of scientific knowledge but also with its usefulness in solving practical problems, worked to bridge the gap between theory and practice” (Selzer, 1997, p. 58). The exact origins of action research are not very clear, though. Some authors, such as Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), Zuber-Skerrit (1992), Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) maintain that action research originated with the American social psychologist and educator, Kurt Lewin. McKernan, however, points out that action research as a method of inquiry "is a root derivative of the scientific method reaching back to the Science in Education movement of the late nineteenth century" (McKernan, 1991, p. 8). McKernan (1991) continues that action research had been undertaken by social reformers such as Collier in 1945, Lippitt and Radke in 1946, and Corey in 1953, all prior to Lewin. McTaggart (1992) cites work by Gstettner and Altricher using group participation in 1913 in a community development initiative in Vienna.

Regardless of the exact beginnings of action research, Kurt Lewin’s work is generally taken as the starting point, when he wanted to use “research in a ‘natural’ setting to change the way that the researcher interacts with that setting” (Ferrance, 2000, p. 7). He recognised the important role of participation in planned changed processes, and constructed an action research theory, describing action research as "proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 8).

This spiral or cyclical process involved a “non-linear pattern of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting on the changes in the social situations” (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995, p. 2). Lewin argued that to “understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social world in all phases of inquiry” (McKernan, 1991, p. 10). McFarland and Stansell (1993, p. 14) argue that “Lewin is credited with coining the term ‘action research’ to describe work that did not separate investigation from the action needed to solve the problem”, and thus, by constructing this action research theory, Lewin paved the way to make action research a method of acceptable inquiry (McKernan 1991, p. 9).
Lewin’s (1946) model, amalgamating research and action to enhance understanding and generate change, highlights that the introduction of action into the scientific model “by no means implies that the research needed is in any respect less scientific or ‘lower’ than would be required for pure science” (Lewin, 1946, p. 35).

Masters (2000) provides an overview of the movements that have had historical and philosophical influences on action research. These are:

- The Science in Education Movement of the 19th and early 20th centuries in which the scientific method was applied to education, particularly in the work of Boone (1904) and Buckingham (1926) (McKernan, 1991, p. 8).
- The Experimentalist and Progressive educational work, especially of John Dewey, “who applied the inductive scientific method of problem solving as a logic for the solution of problems in such fields as aesthetics, philosophy, psychology and education” (McKernan, 1991, p. 8).
- The Group Dynamics movement in social psychology and human relations training used in the 19th century to address the social problems of this period through qualitative social enquiry (McKernan, 1991, p. 9). It was used again in the 1940s, such as by Kurt Lewin. According to McKernan (1991, p. 9), “Lewin argued that social problems should serve as the locus of social science research. Basic to Lewin’s model is a view of research composed of action cycles including analysis, fact-finding, conceptualisation, planning, implementation and evaluation of action”.
- Post-war Reconstructionist Curriculum Development Activity. McKernan (1991, p. 10) points out that action research in education was used during this period as “a general strategy for designing curricula and attacking complex problems, such as inter-group relations and prejudice through large curriculum development projects”. However, by the end of the 1950s, action research was being attacked and in decline. Sanford (1970, cited in McKernan, 1991, p. 10) suggests this decline was related directly to the split between science and practice. However, there were also cultural, political and economic changes during the time that could have undermined the credibility of action research.
- The teacher-researcher movement, which started in the United Kingdom, mainly with the work of Lawrence Stenhouse (1971) who directed the Humanities Curriculum Project. McNiff (2002) points out that Stenhouse maintained curricula should be organised in schools so they were significant and pertinent to the experience of students, who should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. He also endorsed the concept of the teacher being a researcher as well.

Discussions on action research tend to fall into two groups. One is the British tradition, which is inclined to regard action research as research oriented towards the improvement of direct practice, and is generally linked to education. The other tradi-
tion, more prevalent in the United States, and probably more widely used in the social welfare field, is of action research as “the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 223).

Academics, particularly in higher education, further developed action research. They viewed it as a helpful and practical way of working in professional education, mainly teacher education. “They began studying and clarifying the steps involved, and also the principles underpinning action research, such as the need for democratic practices, care and respect for the individual, and the need for disciplined enquiry” (McNiff, 2000, p. 8). Nowadays, action research is also well-known in other professional learning contexts such as management education, organisation studies, and social and health care work. Gabel (1995, p. 1) points out that “action research has been described as an informal, qualitative, formative, subjective, interpretive, reflective and experiential model of inquiry in which all individuals involved in the study are knowing and contributing participants”. This means action research is a course of action devised to empower all individuals concerned with the intention of improving the practices carried out within the educational experience. McNiff (2002, p. 9) emphasizes that “no one tells another what to do in action enquiry; we all share and value one another’s learning”. It is important to view action research as an individual, or a group of individuals, working together collaboratively to explore given areas of concern, acknowledge what they know, and then generate new knowledge. Aguinis (1994, p. 419) adds to this by stating that action research can be seen as the “application of the scientific method to problem solving and fact finding in organizations, with the difference that there is an active participation not only by the researcher but also by the members of the organization”.

**Defining action research**

From an educational perspective, McNiff (2002, p. 6) states that the term “action research” refers to “a practical way of looking at your own work to check that it is as you would like it to be”. It is often referred to as practitioner-based research as it involves practitioners, and is also known as self-reflective practice as it involves individuals or practitioners reflecting on their own work. This self-reflection is a key element within action research. Action researchers do not enquire solely into others’ lives, but also simultaneously address their own functioning as researchers. McNiff (2000 p. 6) captures this aptly in her statement that “action research is an enquiry conducted by the self into the self”.

Action research is known by many other names too – participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, action learning, and contextual action research. These are all, however, variations on a principle. O’Brien (2001, p. 1) states that “put simply, action research is ‘learning by doing’ – a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, try again”.
As action research is open-ended research in which techniques are examined systematically and scientifically, it starts with a concept, perception, or idea that has been developed, rather than starting with a fixed hypothesis. Central to this is the developmental process of following through the perception or idea, seeing how it is progressing, and constantly checking its development. Seen in this way, action research is a form of self-evaluation.

Ferrance (2000, p. 2) maintains that implicit in the term action research is the notion that the researcher or practitioner “will begin a cycle of posing questions, gathering data, reflection, and deciding on a course of action”. Gilmore, Krantz, and Ramirez (1986, p. 161) state that

action research ... aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to further the goals of social science simultaneously. Thus, there is a dual commitment in action research to study a system and concurrently to collaborate with members of the system in changing it in what is together regarded as a desirable direction. Accomplishing this twin goal requires the active collaboration of researcher and client, and thus it stresses the importance of co-learning as a primary aspect of the research process.

Widely accepted definitions of action research include:

*A systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry.* (McCutcheon & Jung 1990, p. 148)

*Action research] ... aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.* (Rapoport, cited in Hopkins, 1985)

*Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out.* (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162)

*Action research] ... seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities.* (Reason & Bradbury, n.d., p. 1)

According to Ferrance (2000, p. 9), four basic themes emerge from these definitions:

1. empowerment of participants
2. collaboration through participation
3. acquisition of knowledge, and
4. social change.

The procedure through which researchers go to attain these themes is a spiral of action research cycles consisting of major phases that will be discussed later.

**Characteristics and principles of action research**

A number of characteristics and principles set action research apart from other traditional forms of research. These include: collaboration between researcher and practitioner; solution of practical problems; practical experience; change in practice; reflexive critique; theory development; and publicizing the results of the inquiry (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992; Reason, 2001; Winter 1989).

**Collaboration**

The focal point of collaboration requires interaction between a researcher or a research team and a practitioner or a group of practitioners. These practitioners are individuals who know their particular field from an internal perspective and know how things are done. The researcher is an outsider who has expertise in theory and research. The collaboration between these two parties can fluctuate from intermittent to continuous collaboration throughout a project (Hart & Bond, 1995; Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). The researcher is often seen as a co-worker researching with the practitioners. This group may be expanded to include all individuals who will be affected by the practices (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Sankar, Bailey, and Williams (2005, p. 5) emphasise that “the role of the researcher is not that of an expert who does the research, but that of a resource person. He or she becomes a facilitator or critical friend who acts as a catalyst to assist stakeholders in defining their problems clearly and to support them as they work towards effective solutions to the issues that concern them”.

Reason (2001, p. 2) points out that an essential value of action research strategies is to increase the involvement and participation of individuals in creating and applying knowledge about themselves and about their worlds. He continues:

…it is no longer possible to do research on persons. It is only possible to do research with persons, including them both in the questioning and sense making that informs the research, and in the action which is the focus of the research.

These collaborative relationships need time to develop successfully.
Furthermore, a collaborative component presupposes that each individual’s ideas and views are equally important as potential resources for generating interpretive categories of analysis, negotiated among the participants (Winter, 1989).

**Problem solving**
One of the key purposes of action research is as a tool to solve practical problems individuals may experience in their professional or private lives, or within their community. A problem is defined relative to a particular setting or situation which has been decided by the group, organisation, or community. Various data collection methods such as observations, interviews, and questionnaires can be used to identify the problem (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993).

**Practical experience**
Reason (2001, p. 2) mentions that while most forms of academic research detach “the knower from what it is to be known, and conduct their research from a distance (through surveys and questionnaires, for example), action research is rooted in each participant’s in-depth, critical and practical experience of the situation to be understood and acted in”.

**Change in practice**
The outcomes and insight achieved through action research should lead to practical changes and improvement in the problem areas identified. The outcomes should not only be of theoretical importance (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). The change in practice depends on the type of problem which was identified (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). Reason (2001, p. 2) states that possibly the primary purpose of action research is “to develop practical knowing embodied moment-to-moment action by research/practitioner, and the development of learning organizations -communities of inquiry rooted in communities of practice”.

**Reflexive critique**
Reflexive critique ensures that individuals reflect on issues and processes and make explicit the interpretations, biases, assumptions and concerns upon which judgments are made. As a result, practical accounts can give rise to theoretical considerations (Winter, 1989).

**Theory development**
A significant objective of action research is that the results help the researcher expand current theories and develop new ones (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). Through the process of action research, practitioners are able to develop a logical and consistent justification for their work. All the evidence collected and the critical reflection that takes place help create a “developed, tested and critically-examined rationale” for the practitioner’s area of practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 25). O’Brien (2001) states that “for action researchers, theory informs practice, practice refines theory, in a continuous transformation”.

Reason (2001, p. 3) points out that action research endeavours to develop theory which is not merely abstract and descriptive but rather is a guide to inquiry. He states that “a good theory arises out of practical experience, articulates qualities of practice to which we aspire, and challenges us”. In addition, the change process brought about by action research potentially threatens all previously established ways of doing things, thus there is also an element of risk in conducting action research.

**Public results**

The theories and solutions produced from the action research should be made public to other participants and also to the wider community who may have an interest in that particular setting or situation (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p. 14). The characteristics of action research are succinctly presented in the CRASP model developed by Zuber-Skerritt (1992, p.15). Action research is:

- Critical collaborative enquiry by
- Reflective practitioners being
- Accountable and making the results of their enquiry public,
- Self-evaluating their practice and engaged in
- Participative problem-solving and continuing professional development.

**Action research design**

A number of models and different approaches with diverse and multiple interpretations of action research have developed over the years; as is true of scientific enquiry on the whole. Some individuals highlight technical aspects, while others focus on the values that inform action research. The different perspective of the nature and focus of action research, who does it, why, and how it is done, often create energetic deliberations, heated debates, and even valid disagreements. Ultimately, as McNiff (2000, p. 8) emphasises, “there is no one ‘correct’ way; you must decide what is right for you, and develop your own views”.

Stringer (1999) maintains that action research operates within three basic phases:

- **Look** – constructing a picture and collecting information. When evaluating, one outlines and describes the problem to be investigated and the context in which it is set. One also describes what all the participants have been doing.
- **Think** – interpreting and explaining. When evaluating, one analyses and interprets the situation, and reflects on what the participants have been doing.
- **Act** – resolving issues and problems. When evaluating, one judges the worth, effectiveness, appropriateness, and outcomes of those activities. One takes action to devise solutions to any problems identified.
Elliott (cited in Hopkins, 1985), however, adds an additional step or phase and suggests that the essentials of action research design are:

- **Reconnaissance and General Plan** – where an understanding of a problem or issue is developed, and plans are put together for some type of intervention.
- **Action** – where the intervention is implemented.
- **Observation** – where, throughout the intervention, relevant and important observations are gathered in a variety of forms. Basically, this is monitoring the implementation by observation.
- **Reflection and Revision** – where the new strategies are implemented, and the cyclic process repeats, continuing until a satisfactory understanding of the problem or issue is accomplished.

Regardless of the terminology used to typify action research, the basic principle underpinning it is that this research involves “identifying a problematic area, imagining a possible solution, trying it out, evaluating it (did it work?), and changing practice in the light of the evaluation” (McNiff, 2000, p. 7). This is a basic problem-solving process. However, to turn it into an action research process, researchers need to state why they want to examine or explore a particular issue and collect information or data to show the process. Such information or data act as evidence in terms of whether the researchers believed they were moving in the direction they were anticipating reaching in the first place. Essentially, the methodology of action research is that researchers need to evaluate what they are researching, and continually ensure that what they are researching is actually working and reaching the desired objective/s. Action research cannot be conducted on a once-off basis, but is rather a continuous process – hence its cyclical or spiral nature.

Stringer (1999, p. xvi) comments that general themes that emerge from the diverse approaches to action research “all acknowledge fundamental investment in processes that:

- are rigorously empirical and reflective (or interpretative)
- engage people who have traditionally been called ‘subjects’ as active participants in the research process and
- result in some practical outcome related to the lives or work of the participants”.

### The cyclical nature of action research

McNiff (2002, p.11) provides a very clear and succinct procedural overview of the cyclical nature of action research where the basic steps of an action research process constitute an action plan. These basic steps are that we:
• review our current practice,
• identify an aspect that we want to investigate,
• imagine a way forward,
• try it out,
• take stock of what happens,
• modify what we are doing in the light of what we have found, and continue working in this new way (try another option if the new way of working is not right),
• monitor what we do,
• review and evaluate the modified action, and so on …

McNiff (2002) states that fundamentally there are two processes at work: firstly the researchers’ systematic actions as they work their way through these steps, and secondly, their learning. She (2002, p. 11) says that “your actions embody your learning, and your learning is informed by your reflections on your actions”. The action research cycle can thus develop into new action research cycles, as additional areas of investigation materialize. Clearly, action research does not proceed in an orderly linear way as conventional research often does, starting with a hypothesis and proceeding to a conclusion (depicted in Figure 1 below):

![Figure 1. Conventional Research Process (adapted from Wadsworth, 1998).](image)

Instead of a linear model, action research advances through cycles, ‘starting’ with reflection on action, and proceeding round to new action which is then further researched. It is worth noting that the new actions differ from the old actions, in that they are literally in different places. This is clearly illustrated in Figure 2 below.

![Figure 2. Action research cycles (from Wadsworth, 1998).](image)

Hughes (2000, p. 1) states that “some action research projects start off with fuzzy questions. The first action research cycle may provide fuzzy answers to lead to less
fuzzy questions, less fuzzy answers and so on, until later cycles are able to provide precise answers to specific questions”. Dick (2003, p. 4) maintains that the “cyclic process confers a valuable flexibility. It isn’t necessary for the researcher to have a precise research question or a precise research methodology before beginning a research study. Both the research process and the understanding it yields can be refined gradually over time. In other words action research is an emergent process with a dual cycle: an action cycle integrated with a research cycle”.

**Action planning**

Although there are several action plans available, the one highlighted here, developed by Jack Whitehead, has become popular around the world, that is, the one (McNiff, 2002). The aim of creating a plan is for researchers to ask critical questions about their own practice, and find the answers for themselves. The actual process of asking questions is as important as finding the answers. Whitehead’s modified version of an action plan is presented by McNiff (2002, p. 14):

- What issue am I interested in researching?
- Why do I want to research this issue?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show why I am interested in this issue?
- What can I do? What will I do?
- What kind of evidence can I gather to show that I am having an influence?
- How can I explain that influence?
- How can I ensure any judgements I might make are reasonably fair and accurate?
- How will I change my practice in the light of my evaluation?

Although this is not meant to be prescriptive but is rather a suggested approach, it is important to bear in mind that everyone is responsible for their own practice and therefore for asking their own questions.

**Action research protocol**

The protocol for action research is iterative and cyclical in nature. Its intention is to cultivate a deeper understanding of a particular situation, starting with the conceptualization of a problem or issue and progressing through several interventions and evaluations. Kemmis (in Hopkins, 1985) provides a diagrammatic representation of an action research protocol (Figure 3), with each cycle comprising four steps: plan, action, observe, and reflect.
Figure 3. Kemmis’ action research protocol (cited in Hopkins, 1985).

Later protocols manifest changes in the goal as determined by experience during reflections on earlier iterations of action research. However, the protocol used in the action research projects within the Literacy and Employment project discussed in this report, is the one depicted in Figure 3. Specific details of the stages will be explained in the individual sections reporting on the action research projects undertaken.

Dick (2003, p. 1) states that being iterative, “action research is an emergent methodology – it accumulates understanding gradually. It can begin with very loose ideas about what is happening in the relevant system”. As seen in Figure 3, the iterative nature of action research is displayed along with the major steps of planning, action, observation and reflection. Gabel (1995, p. 2) states, “this may be thought of as similar in nature to the numerical computing technique known as successive approximation – the idea is to close in upon a final goal or outcome by repeated iterations”. 
Types of action research

O’Brien (2001) explains that by the mid-1970s four main types of action research had emerged: traditional; contextual (action learning); radical; and educational action research.

1. **Traditional Action Research**

Traditional action research originated from Lewin’s work and incorporates the concepts and practices of field theory, group dynamics, T-groups, and the clinical model. This traditional approach leans towards the conservative, and typically preserves the status quo regarding organisational power structures.

2. **Contextural Action Research (Action Learning)**

Contextural action research, also known as action learning, is an approach derived from Trist’s work on relations between organizations. Eric Trist, a key contributor to the field from the immediate post-war era, was a social psychiatrist whose group at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London participated in applied social research, initially for the civil repatriation of German prisoners of war. Contextural action research involves reconstituting the structural relations among individuals in a social environment; is domain-based, in that it attempts to engage all affected parties and stakeholders; is holographic, as each participant comprehends the working of the whole; and emphasizes that participant’s act as project designers and co-researchers.

3. **Radical Action Research**

The radical stream, with its roots in Marxian dialectical materialism and the praxis orientations of Antonio Gramsci, focuses on emancipation and addressing power imbalances. Gramsci, an Italian political activist jailed by Mussolini, advocated the “renovation” and the “making critical” of the workers’ common sense (Selener, 1997, p. 13). Participatory Action Research, often found in liberationist movements and international development circles, and Feminist Action Research, both aspire to social transformation through an advocacy course of action to strengthen peripheral groups in society. Participatory Action Research will be dealt with later in a separate section.

4. **Educational Action Research**

Educational action research has its beginnings in the writings of John Dewey, the American educational philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed all professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving. Its practitioners operate largely out of educational institutions, and concentrate on developing curricula, professional development, and applying learning within a social context.
The role of reflection

Possibly the major factor involved in action research is the concept of praxis. Schön (1983) describes using reflection to create models from a body of previous knowledge. These models are used to reframe a problem or issue; then interventions are carried out which lead to outcomes which are analyzed further. This reflection-in-action model concedes there is very little or no separation of research from practice, and little or no separation of knowing and doing. Schön’s model enhances the iterative and investigative nature of action research. McNiff (2002, p. 6) points out that in traditional forms of research “researchers do research on other people”. However, with action research, researchers do research on themselves, and enquire into their own lives. This involves researchers asking themselves why they do the things they do, and why they are the way that they are. An action research report demonstrates how researchers have carried out a systematic investigation into their own behaviours and the reasons for those behaviours.

Roberts (n.d.) points out that with action research in organisations, “the researcher(s) tries to directly improve the participating organisation(s) and, at the same time, to generate scientific knowledge”. He goes on to say that “this means that genuine action research projects should search for organisational improvements “during the research, rather than after the research”. Although the term ‘scientific’ is not always clearly definable, Roberts states that research projects without “systematic reflection and learning” cannot be considered genuine action research projects. Reflection is therefore a critical component of action research.

According to action research theory, “change does not come about as a result of spontaneous acts, but through reflection on and understanding of specific problems within their social, political, and historical contexts” (Selener, 1997, p. 105). There is, therefore, interplay between understanding and change: understanding is motivated by interest in change. In addition, change leads to a clearer understanding of a particular situation (Usher & Bryant, 1989).

Reflection is a tool for promoting actions, and as Selener (1997, p. 105) points out, “action research is intended to lead to actions which promote improved educational practices”. Ideally, action research as conceived by Lewin is an ongoing process of reflection and action. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) reiterate that action research involves a self-reflective spiral of activities: planning; action; observation; reflection; re-planning; and action.

Sankar, Bailey and Williams (2005, p. 4) point out that “critical reflection is a form of analysis that not only explores how and why things happened but identifies the assumptions underpinning the analysis”. They add that an action research approach “places much greater demands on those responsible for ‘action’ in the ‘research’ to be
involved in the ‘critical reflection’ processes, than is common with many research approaches, where the responsibilities for action and research are separated”. As a result of this, action research approaches are generally very collaborative.

Reflection in participatory action research is that moment where the research participants examine and construct, then evaluate and reconstruct their concerns (Grundy, 1986, p. 28). Reflection includes the pre-emptive discussion of participants where they identify a shared concern or problem.

**Participatory action research**

Although there does not always seem to be a clear distinction between *action research* and *participatory action research* (PAR), and in fact it is at times used interchangeably, we have felt it necessary to differentiate between the two. Reason (2001) talks about action research, participatory research, action learning, action science, action enquiry and co-operative enquiry, which in fact are “all contemporary forms of action oriented research which place emphasis on a full integration of action and reflection, so that the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studies”.

Huizer (1997, p. 2) points out that

...in grassroots work in Third World countries a form of action research has emerged which tried to utilize the research itself as well as knowledge acquired through it, to enhance the grip of the local people, the participants on their own communities. From research objects they became research subjects...

defined as participatory action research. Seymour-Rolls and Hughes (1995) state that participatory action research is “a method of research where creating a positive social change is the predominant driving force”. Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993, p. 177) capture the essence of participatory action research by stating that it “is a form of action research in which professional social researchers operate as full collaborators with members of organizations in studying and transforming those organizations”. It is a research approach that highlights ongoing co-learning, participation and transformation.

Greenwood *et al*, (ibid) continue by reasoning that participatory action research “enhances problem formulation, hypothesis formulation, data acquisition, data analysis, synthesis, and application”. Thus, conducting participatory action research is a very collaborative process between researchers and members of a group or organization. Participatory action research has as its main aim the finding of solutions to tangible and concrete problems and disagreements. The results of such research, though, if performed systematically and consistently, also contribute to a greater knowledge of
conflict-solving methods as such, which can be applied to a range of concrete situations. This is essential for the replication elsewhere of general theoretical knowledge in this area, from which grassroots groups in different circumstances can benefit (Huizer, 1997).

Elder and Chisholm (1993, p. 123) state that

...participation in the sense of co-researcher status for participation is .... one of the main characteristics of the emerging forms of action research .... Participants are truly co-researchers whose insider 'local knowledge' is as necessary for valid scientific sense-making as the outsider researchers' technical expertise and abstract general knowledge.

This is what distinguishes participatory action research from more traditional approaches, and as Bartunek (1993, p. 1222) points out, this “implies that participants contribute to the scholarly, as well as practical, outcomes of interventions”. Participatory research combines three key activities: research, education, and action. Selener (1997, p. 17) adds that “it is a research method in which people are actively involved in conducting a systematic assessment of a social phenomenon by identifying a specific problem for the purpose of solving it”.

The distinctive features of participatory research are, first, the group or community’s participation in the whole research activity which, second, is a process in which research is directly related to transformative actions (Selener, 1997). Dick (2003, p. 2) states that “participation, by building shared understanding and shared commitment, increases the motivation for collective and collaborative action”. Wadsworth (1988) stresses that such research “is not participation followed by research and then hopefully action. Instead there are countless tiny cycles of participatory reflection on action, learning about action and then new informed action which is in turn the subject of further reflection”.

Selener (1997) provides participatory action research approaches which have been developed and applied in four broad areas:

1. Participatory research in community development has its roots in Latin America where it developed into its present form and where its main ideology evolved in the early 1960s. Liberation theology and the sociology of liberation were two participator research approaches that showed the commitment of Latin American social scientists to become active participants in the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Participatory research has been inspired by Paulo Freire, critical consciousness, conscientization, and empowerment. Freire introduced the concept of conscientization, meaning “the identification and critical analysis of social, political, and economic contradictions, leading to organized action to solve immediate problems and to counter the oppres-
sive aspects of society” (Selener, 1997, p. 14). Empowerment in participatory action research allows individuals to construct and use their own knowledge. Furthermore, Reason (2001, p. 1) points out that Freire emphasized “the importance of helping disadvantaged people develop critical thinking so that they could understand the ways in which they were disadvantaged by the political and economic conditions of their lives and could develop their own organized action in order to address these issues”.

Thus the traditional role of the researcher has changed from an ‘objective’ external role to a ‘committed’ co-investigating one. This approach is mainly applied in community-based rural and urban developments in Latin American, African and Asian countries, and is generally applied by educators, community organizers, and facilitators. Members of an oppressed or exploited community or group collaborate actively in identifying problems, collecting data, and analyzing their own situation in order to improve it. “A major goal of participatory research is to solve practical problems at the community level” (Selener, 1997, p. 12). This area of participatory research will be explored further after the description of the four broad areas.

2. **Action research in organizations** “is an enquiry process intended to solve practical problems and generate new knowledge through collaborative efforts by researcher(s) and client(s)” (Selener, 1997, p. 8). Kurt Lewin recommended learning about social systems by seeking to change them through action research.

3. **Action research in schools** has been carried out by teachers, principals, supervisors and administrators.

4. **Farmer participatory research** was developed mainly by agricultural researchers and other rural development workers, and emphasizes the participation of farmers in the “generation, testing, and evaluation of technology to increase or promote sustainable agricultural production” (Selener, 1997, p. 10).

In participatory research there needs to be a balance between the knowledge, skills and experience provided by the researcher and that provided by the group or community. Maguire (1987, p. 37) argues that

…participatory researchers caution against either dichotomy: “They know, I don’t know” or “They don’t know, I know”. Instead participatory research offers a partnership: “We both know some things; neither of us knows everything. Working together we will know more, and we will both learn more about how to know”. Participatory research requires that both the researcher and the members of a group be open to personal transformation and consci-
entization. Participatory research assumes that both parties have knowledge and experience to contribute.

Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy (1993, p. 177, footnote) clarify the need to add the term *participatory* to *action research*:

> It is interesting to note that many of our Scandinavian colleagues are surprised by the American insistence on adding the term “participatory” to “action research”. From their perspective, action research is impossible without participation. However, there are enough examples of non-participatory action research in the United States to make the distinction meaningful to us.
Action Research in the Literacy and Employment Project

Our projects feature a mix of types, arising from collaboration with Wanganui community members which has identified areas needing research. These are not necessarily problems per se, but represent areas in which community members would like to see change or development. Community members in concert with university personnel identify problem areas, collect the data then analyse the situation in order to suggest desirable forms of change. Our Wanganui projects are certainly enquiry-based in that researchers and community members are actively involved in researching various specified areas. An important intention is to generate new knowledge to be disseminated throughout the community, then to be used by other organisations or groups who are in similar fields. We see this as participatory action research (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993) in that we are professional social researchers in collaboration with members of Wanganui training institutions, organizations or schools. Although our research projects do not engage the oppressed in the same sense as might happen in Latin America, for example, they are nonetheless community-based.

As Selener (1997, p. 111) points out, action research is methodologically eclectic and innovative and “does not follow any specific research methodology. The nature of problems to be solved, the conditions in which they exist, and the action researcher’s preferences and criteria will determine the appropriateness of the method to be used”. That is, each project or study is unique and needs to be treated independently, not forced into a particular framework. Our projects can be categorized under the action research umbrella, but each is unique, with its own context, aims, characteristics, unique problems and solutions. Thus we seek to apply eclectic and creative methodologies within each project. We agree with Dick (2003, p. 2) that “the actual research methodology can also be adjusted and improved as understanding grows”.

Dick (2002) comments on participation, saying it is not an “all-or-none” affair. Instead it comprises a continuum, ranging from much contact to a situation where the community organizations do the research themselves with little or no assistance. Dick (2002) states that some individuals would argue that it is not possible to have action research with low levels of participation; however, opinions vary. Dick (2002, p. 4) describes this continuum by distinguishing among non-involvement, representation, and participation. In non-involvement the researcher does it all; representation uses a small group of individuals who may speak on behalf of a bigger group; and participation implies that all the stakeholders in a particular project are involved.
In our projects, we employ the term *process consultation*, which as Dick (2002, p. 5) points out, “describes an approach which offers greater involvement to participants”. As researchers, we manage the process by which the information is gained, work alongside the participants to set the goals, develop and implement the plans, and interpret the resulting information. We agree with Uhlmann’s (1995) comment that: for “real change to occur, participation by the people actually in the situation under research or affected by the outcomes (stakeholders) also has to occur”. She emphasizes that participation by the stakeholders is essential because:

- they are familiar with the situation under research so they are able to identify the initial issues very clearly
- they know the history and can tell the researchers what has been tried, and what might be culturally acceptable
- they are able to act themselves and to evaluate solutions intimately as to their suitability for their particular environment, and
- they will be there after our involvement in the research is complete and will be able to progress the actions because they will have learnt about the issues along the way.

Because the action research projects undertaken in this Literacy and Employment project do not follow an identical model, the rationale and method used in each will be explained separately.

**Concluding remarks**

Linking the terms “action” and “research” emphasizes the central features of this methodology. Action research is appropriately named as it does just that: it pursues action and research outcomes. As Dick (2000, p. 5) states, “action research is a family of research processes whose flexibility allows learning and responsiveness. Vague beginnings can move towards better understanding and practical improvement through the critical analysis of the information, the interpretation of it, and the methods used”. Hart and Bond (1995, p. 46) state that an action research project is not necessarily fixed in any one approach, that is “during the life of an action research project it may shift from one type to another as it moves through the spiral of cycles”.

Wadsworth (1997, p. 78) provides a very apt overview of action research stating that it “is not merely research which it is hoped will be followed by action! It is action which is *intentionally* researched and modified, leading to the next stage of action which is then again *intentionally* examined for further change and so on as *part of the research itself*”. Action research is not a problem-solving method *per se* in that it does not try to find out what is wrong, but as Ferrance (2000, p. 2) points out, it is “a quest for knowledge about how to improve”.

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As shown, action research is cyclical, participative, qualitative, and reflective. It is cyclical, in that certain similar steps recur in a similar order at different stages of the research, thus enhancing responsiveness by all the parties involved. It is participative, in that researchers and other parties are active participants in the research. It is qualitative, in that it deals more frequently with language rather than numbers, it may be more time-efficient and it is also easier to be flexible and responsive to whatever situation. It is reflective, in that critical reflection on the process and outcomes are crucial aspects of each cycle.

McNiff (2002, p. 13) provides a vivid description of the quality of action research: it “is judged rather as ballroom dancing or ice skating: specific steps are executed in a specific sequence with anticipated outcomes”. Building on this metaphor, let’s put on our dance shoes and ice skates and glide into the presentation of the action research projects we have undertaken.
Stepping through the Looking Glass: Action Research at Training For You

When you have a student... you want to give them a voice in their world ... and also be able to read that world. So it’s being able to see that world fully and also to have a voice about that world. You have to be able to ask the right question to actually help them to read their world and voice what makes them unique. (Margot Syder)

This section of the report describes the pilot study (in Kemmis’s terminology, Cycle 1) and the first stages of a wider follow-up (Cycle 2) of an action research programme based at Training For You (TFY). The action research was conceived and designed by Margot Syder, Learning Centre Supervisor at TFY, in consultation with the Adult Literacy and Employment team, along with management and tutors at the training provider. The role of the project team was largely facilitation, helping Margot develop her ideas in a series of discussions. We also produced and printed the materials required and conducted an analysis of the initial results for feedback and further reflection. The aim was for the action research project to spring essentially from the needs and interests of the training provider and to be conducted, interpreted, redesigned, and owned by Margot and Training For You.

Developing the research idea

Training For You is one of the twelve adult literacy providers in Wanganui that worked with the Adult Literacy and Employment team during the first phase of the project in 2004 and 2005. Training For You management and staff had taken part in interviews about their work as part of the first provider survey (Neilson & Culligan, 2005). Also, 17 Training For You students, along with participants from other adult literacy providers, had shared life and learning experiences during interview sessions conducted between November 2004 and January 2005 (Comrie, Olsson, Sligo, Culligan, Tilley, Vaccarino, & Franklin, 2005).

In early 2005, project team members gave a presentation to Wanganui adult literacy providers about the concept of action research, describing how it might be applicable in the local community. Margot Syder, the Learning Centre Supervisor at Training For You, was extremely enthusiastic, recognising that working with researchers from the project would give her a chance to explore various ways to improve teaching outcomes.
Margot has been teaching in the adult literacy field for 8 years. She has training and experience with Literacy Aotearoa and Speld, has studied for her Adult Teaching Certificate and for a number of Adult Education papers. Like most teachers, she had a number of ideas for changing and developing teaching methods, several of which sprang from a concern to give students at Training For You the skills to take them on to further education if they wished. In particular, she had become interested in how students perceived their own literacy, how they were assessed, and whether an accurate understanding of their skills and learning might be related to continued improvement of their skills.

This research interest came from observing that beginning students often had little idea of their own skills and of the literacy skills required to obtain the jobs or further training they aspired to. Pre-assessment, planning and goal setting along with training appeared to encourage self reflection on students’ knowing and learning. Margot had related these observations to theory about metacognition that she had encountered while studying for her academic papers.

She said her initial concern was

Whether students reflect upon the progress they make, what reflections they do make, and how we can help them reflect upon their learning so that they can become more effective communicators and become more ‘literate’... in the fullest sense of the word.

Margot describes herself as a practical person, adding that action research attracted her as a way of combining theory and practice:

Sometimes as a literacy tutor I feel like I’ve got a can opener and I’m trying to peer inside their head and work out how their brain thinks, so I can actually help them. It’s as if you have to get down to actually understanding how they learn and how they think and what they think about literacy before you can actually help them. I do think that in that sense it’s imperative to understand the whole area of cognition and metacognition.

She added that it was crucial for students to work out what strategies work for them. Clearly, strategies have to be specific for students and different from those that have been tried before: “Otherwise these students who have done ten years of school surely would have progressed more. If it’s just been a matter of giving them the opportunity, they would have learned.”

While as a tutor Margot teaches students specific skills that work, she believes that if students are to take these skills and use them in other contexts they need to be taught strategies: “Then I think they have to think about what those strategies are and whether they work for them.” Her belief from observation was that giving students a
chance to analyse their learning will simultaneously give them the opportunity to become more autonomous learners.

**The research site**

Training For You Ltd began in 1995 operating equine courses (horse care and knowledge) in the Wanganui region. Since then the company has grown into a training provider offering Teacher Aide, Childcare, and Equine courses in the Taranaki and Manawatu. It also offers equine and childcare courses for all secondary schools in the Wanganui region through Gateway and STAR (Strategic Tertiary Alignment Resource) courses.

![Training For You students enjoying their courses](image)

The organisation is NZQA-approved to deliver:

- National Certificate in Equine Level 2 and 3 courses – 48 weeks.
- Certificate in Teacher Aiding (Level 4), developed by Training For You – 45 weeks.

The project centres on the organisation’s headquarters at the Wanganui Racecourse and involves the courses taught there: equine studies (up to 2 students); early childcare (up to 17 students); and teacher aide (up to 12 students).
Students hear about the course from advertising and all students meet the criteria of being either Training Opportunities (TOPS) or Youth Students (as defined by Work and Income).

When students begin these year-long courses in late January they receive an initial assessment of their skills and learning, involving self-assessment where students assess themselves against vocational, literacy, and numeracy expectations; formal assessments in vocational literacy in reading, writing, and numeracy; tutors also assess oral and listening skills during the interview process. As a result, students’ individual goals are ‘scored’ on a matrix. The matrices form the basis of one-on-one pathway planning sessions where students and tutors discuss learning strategies and set individual goals for the course, learning, and literacy. These pathway plans are revised each term. At the end of the course, in an individual exit assessment, students’ plans and goals are reviewed and their achievements discussed.

The action research design builds on these practices which are already in place, adding a further process to encourage greater and more frequent reflection in students. As will be seen, the process also has encouraged reflection on teaching and assessment practice among the tutors.

**Cycle One - The pilot**

**Initial planning**

The planning process took place over about 3 months. Margot met with the team in March 2005 where she described how TFY worked and the areas she was interested in researching. Over the following weeks she gradually narrowed down to her central research question: *Does incorporating metacognitive skills [into a training programme] aid literacy achievement?*

Her challenge then became how to incorporate such skills into the teaching programme. The team discussed with Margot ways in which students could be encouraged to reflect on their learning processes more regularly during the course of their training. It was eventually decided that this could be accomplished by adding an initial questionnaire, using regular diaries or logbook questionnaires and adding a final questionnaire to the exit interviews. The processes would be incorporated into the already established process of initial assessment, regular appointments with literacy tutors, and exit interviews.

The logbooks would be filled in by students on a weekly basis. If students did not keep their diaries they would be asked to record their week during the regular meeting with their tutor and the tutor would record the answers.
At the same time, the tutors would also fill in a weekly logbook questionnaire, designed as a mirror image of the one that students were completing. Additionally, tutors would take part in regular half-hour focus groups to reflect on literacy teaching strategies and strategies used to encourage reflection.

The flowchart created by Margot is reproduced on the following page and illustrates the steps in the process. At this stage the plan was for Cycle One to be conducted over terms three and four to allow for an interim review and a chance to adapt any questions in the diaries.
Information & Consent forms developed.
Ethics approval gained.

Collate historical Initial Assessment information onto matrices.

Have an interim review of data and a series of discussions at staff meetings at the beginning of term 4, to reflect on the group on strategies used and determine if any changes to the process/programme need to be made.
Continue with amended questions, if any, as per 3rd term.

Participants: Students taught literacy and encouraged to incorporate metacognitive strategies through reflections, in weekly journal entries. Where students have not kept a journal they will be asked to recall their week orally, and the literacy tutor then records this. Photocopies of entries collected.
Questions to be formulated into individual booklets: set 1 to be answered, using a 4 point scale, at commencement only; set 2 to be asked weekly during literacy one-on-one sessions; and set 3 answered as a written or oral response at commencement and once again later (recorded by literacy tutor).

Tutors: ½ hour focus groups used to reflect upon literacy and metacognitive strategies used throughout the week, as per set 1 of questions; notes to be recorded.
Questions from set 2 formulated into individual booklets, answered using a 4-point scale, and answered on a weekly basis.
A simple tick box record to be kept of the range of metacognitive strategies and form of literacy instruction used across each programme.

Collate course outcomes
Analyse the effectiveness of the programme and assessment process
Final evaluation

Redesign assessment process and literacy programme

Information discussed with students and exit questions and evaluations to proceed
**Questionnaire development**
Margot was asked for initial ideas for the questionnaires, which the team then wrote up as a draft. This went back to Training For You and further changes and amendments were suggested in discussions and emails. This cycle was repeated several times revising and refining the questions and logbooks until Training For You was satisfied with the results.

The action research project then went through the formal process of the Massey University Ethics Committee and approval was granted on 15 September 2005.

Logbooks and questionnaire and booklets (see appendix A) were printed at Massey University in early October ready for the final term of 2005.

**Conducting the pilot study**
As mentioned above, the pilot was conducted during Term 4, 2005 (from mid-October to mid-December). Eleven students from the teacher aide and early childhood courses participated, and the process for these students included:

- Completion of the pathway plan and literacy review feedback form. They were asked whether they could understand the process and whether they found the process helpful.
- Completion of weekly log books. Initially, time was spent explaining some of the questions, so the students had a good understanding of what was expected from them. Students completed the weekly log books when they visited the staff at Training For You for their normal one-on-one literacy meetings. Students reflected back on the whole previous week or the end of the week that had just finished.
- Completion of the self-appraisal form at the end of the programme. This was designed to indicate whether students’ metacognitive abilities had improved across the duration of the course.

Five tutors participated in this pilot study. They were asked to complete questionnaires and participate in meetings to discuss their perception of the effectiveness of the metacognitive strategies employed and to reflect on how they tutor literacy with the aim of making their teaching more responsive to students’ needs. The intention was that this in turn should enable students to fulfil individual goals in employment and/or going onto further study. The process for tutors included:

- Completing weekly log books.
- Completing weekly feedback and appraisal results forms which looked at methods used to teach literacy skills; methods they thought students found most helpful; literacy skills identified as a requirement for students to progress onto higher learning; measurement of progress in developing these literacy skills; methods of evaluation to assess the success of the lit-
eracy programme; and how students perceived the effectiveness of the literacy programme.

**Analysing the pilot**

The project team analysed the results in January 2006, sending a detailed 36-page report back to Training For You at the end of the month. Some of the main results are summarised below.

*Students’ Pathway plan and literacy review feedback:* The pathway plan and literacy review feedback form was completed by all the students at the beginning of the study (in the first week of Term 4). The results showed that this initial process is helpful in building understanding of skills and self reflection. Nine of the eleven students said their literacy skills had been assessed in a way they understood, and nine said they had understood the goal-setting process. All the students reported finding the process helpful in planning their goals and all said they were now better able to reflect on their skills and those required to meet their goals.

*Students’ Weekly Log Books:* Students were requested to complete weekly log books. These log books consisted of nine questions with a Likert scale in which students ticked a block; and four open-ended questions looking at issues such as helpful literacy skills, helpful methods in improving literacy, the usefulness of the literacy programme, and any suggested changes to the literacy programme.

Perhaps the key finding was that the number of students filling in the log books dropped off after the first 4 weeks. By the final week – week 7 – only two of the eleven students were still filling them in. This led to Training For You reducing the number of times log books were used in Cycle Two.

Bearing this drop off of responses in mind, we present some general results from the logbook analysis below.

In the first 2 weeks, half the students sometimes figured out what they needed to know. By the third week and beyond, students said they often or very often figured out what they needed to know. This is a positive shift in that the teaching and learning is helping students take the responsibility and initiative of working out what they need to know. Another positive aspect of the study reveals that while students initially tried to memorize everything they might need to learn, over the course there was a gradual move towards memorizing only on certain occasions. It is possible students had come to realise that memorizing everything was not very beneficial.

The logbooks, however, showed that only occasionally did students check to see whether they remembered what they had learnt, indicating that tutors could possibly build in activities to encourage students to stop more often and think about what they remember from a particular session or week’s work.
While students were inclined to continue to try to memorise new material as the term progressed, the inclination to look for additional sources of information if they did not understand something they had learned did increase. They appeared very often to try to relate new material to things they had previously learned and to try to figure out how the skills and information they were learning might be useful in real life situations. In an open-ended question students identified maths and writing as the most useful skills to achieve course objectives. However, this could be because maths and writing are the skills students struggled with, rather than being the most important literacy skills required. Reading, speaking, computer skills, understanding, research, and creative skills received comparatively few mentions.

Students also commented on what methods they found most helpful in improving their literacy and how useful the programme was to them – with the majority indicating the programme was very useful. This was reinforced by suggestions they made for improvement: the need for more literacy work; more maths work, including ‘hands on’ practice of measurement; more one-on-one sessions; and more challenge in terms of deadlines and expectations.

*Students’ Exit Process Feedback Form:* Ten students completed this between 9 and 16 December. The Likert scale responses showed the students felt they had achieved those personal and literacy goals that had been identified at the beginning of the course; they felt they had achieved their modified goals; and that this had affected the way they approach their learning.

In responses to open-ended questions about skills they intended using in the future, half the students mentioned writing, maths and skills to help understanding. Three mentioned learning to study. Two mentioned both computer skills and reading skills. Other comments included listening, speaking skills, CV writing, and shopping and budgeting.

Students also commented on the impact of the difference between their goals and their literacy assessment. Most of these comments centred on the fact that this helped them focus and change their learning, that it had increased their understanding, and showed them what they needed to do. Two students said the process had given them confidence to achieve more than they thought.

*Tutors’ Weekly Logbooks:* Five tutors took part in the pilot and were asked to fill in log books consisting of nine questions where tutors checked a block on a Likert scale and provided any additional comments. While all five filled in their logbooks in the first 3 weeks, their participation dropped off after that. This again raises questions about the overall data reported here, and about the best method of collecting data in the main project.
Tutors reflected on their students’ learning in a series of questions that paralleled those questions filled in by individual students. The results generally revealed that tutors were less sanguine about students’ learning than the students themselves. Compared with their students, tutors rarely ticked the ‘very often’ box.

The tutors believed that when learning, students ‘sometimes’ figured out what they needed to know. Across the 6 weeks of logbook records tutors overall thought students forced themselves to check to see if they remembered what they had learnt ‘on occasion’. Some tutors said that students did this often, while one tutor said that they almost never did this. Tutors gave mixed responses when asked if they felt students tried to figure out which concepts they had not understood, but it appears that generally, tutors felt students did attempt to do this. Tutors felt generally students remembered main points and tried to relate new material to things they had previously learnt. However, tutors believed that students almost never or only sometimes looked for additional information when they did not understand concepts.

More positively, although there were mixed responses, it appears tutors thought their students tried to work out how the information or skills they were learning might be useful in real life situations they might face.

Across the weeks, there were 23 comments from tutors on what factors helped determine the success of the literacy programme. Five of these related to the importance of one-on-one tutoring. Relating course content to real life in various ways was also mentioned five times. Tutors’ own preparation and planning was mentioned several times, as were student motivation, use of different strategies, and links to different learning styles. Other comments included: recognising the teaching moment, involving everyone in group work, reviewing goals, and students developing self-evaluation and self-monitoring strategies.

The most common methods used to teach literacy included, in order of frequency, relating or comparing real life or prior knowledge; mind maps or graphic organisers; activities structured to learning style; games; class, group discussions, brainstorming, questions etc; goal setting and planning; one-one teaching; handouts, worksheets or checklists.

Methods tutors thought students found most helpful or were most responsive to included: those structured to learning style; those relating to or comparing with real life or prior knowledge; games; and class or group discussions, brainstorming or questions. The literacy skills tutors identified as a requirement for students to progress onto higher learning included (in order of most frequent mention): maths; writing; reading; speaking; and understanding. Tutors felt the teaching of literacy skills was successful and listed a variety of methods they used to assess individual progress and the success of the programme.
Overall, tutors believed the literacy programme was effective. Their comments reflected the range of student ability and motivation, that students were enjoying the work, or gaining confidence, and that the programme was working for most students.

**Reflection and revision of research following the pilot study**

The full results from the pilot study were discussed by Training For You tutors in February 2006, and their responses fed back to the team to plan the next cycle. The initial analysis contained comments and interpretations from the Massey team which were discussed and frequently questioned by the staff at Training For You. While tutors had found the process valuable, they also made clear their concerns about the large amount of time the process was taking.

A number of changes and refinements to questions for students and tutors were discussed with the Massey team and it was also suggested that questions in the logbooks should be reduced. The reflection task for tutors was clarified. It was further decided that logbooks would be filled in less frequently and this should be done at times connected to key parts of each course – for instance, following a practicum.

**The second cycle of action research**

The second cycle of action research at Training For You is currently underway. Questionnaires and logbooks were redesigned and the new versions were presented to the Massey University Ethics Committee for approval in March 2006. Training For You tutors decided on ten critical dates for logbook reflections, which followed times when crucial ‘chunks’ of learning would have been completed in the courses.

The second cycle started in April 2006 with students filling in the pathway plan and literacy review feedback forms. The reflection process will continue across the whole year with students and tutors from all three major certificate courses in the Wanganui campus (Equine Skills, Early Childhood Education and Teacher Aiding) taking part.

It is planned to collate the first stage of data in August, which will provide an opportunity for feedback into some practices for the second half of the year. Training For You hopes that, following a final collecting and analysis of data at the end of the year, the amended process of reflective logbooks will become incorporated as a regular part of the teaching process in the organisation.
**Wider benefits of the pilot study**

It became clear that the research project was also having an effect on the tutors and their teaching. Two aspects became obvious: the pilot study, as discussed above, helped the organisation assess whether logbook processes and other forms of reflection were ‘working’ for students and tutors and how to incorporate these processes more effectively; the process helped tutors assess the effectiveness of the initial assessment and pathway process and reflect on parts of their literacy teaching.

In reflecting on the success of the pilot study, Margot Syder commented that tutors regularly discussed their logbook responses with her and during these sessions ideas were produced and help offered and asked for where necessary. When tutors were asked in the logbooks what had succeeded in their teaching, they began to analyse why. “Sometimes they’ve talked about the factors around what has helped the students. Sometimes they’ve talked about for themselves, what worked… So they talked about the methods that they used and it was really interesting because what we found is that some tutors just kind of wrote ‘worksheets’ down. And I said, ‘Yes, but how did you actually teach it?’ So they found that they had to really think about it.”

Most important, tutors began to question their assumptions about students’ literacy learning, which in class is blended seamlessly with the knowledge needed for their specialty, for example, the concept of volume is taught as part of mixing baby feeding formulae, and so on. When asked how progress in literacy/numeracy was measured in such situations, tutors were sometimes vague. The pilot process combined with their talks with Margot had helped them recognise this:

In fact, as a result from those sorts of comments, we’ve now decided that in each unit and each module that we do, we’re going to start with some particular integrated literacy component that we will concentrate on and we will have some form formative assessment – not necessarily formal – in there. Then we can actually see whether they’ve actually learnt, whether it was adding time or something like that…that they can actually do that. We currently do that in the learning centre, one-on-one, but not in the class.

The pilot study had a double effect – influencing teaching and assessment strategies and shaping the study for the second cycle.
Establishing a Family Learning Project at Castlecliff School in Wanganui

Introduction

The home is a child’s first school and the parent or caregiver the child’s first and most important teacher. The concept of family learning builds on this natural learning bond. Family learning comprises the different ways parents, children and extended family members use literacy during their day-to-day tasks and activities at home and in their communities. In Year 1, parents or caregivers play a crucial role in helping their children consolidate emerging literacy skills. These literacy skills ease their subsequent acquisition of language, literacy and cognitive skills, which form the basis for success in the learning context. Sharing books and literacy activities with children helps them develop those essential emergent reading skills needed before learning to read (for example, how pages are turned, how pictures work, and how the story is structured).

A family learning project with Year 1 children at Castlecliff School in Wanganui began in early 2006. Parents or caregivers attend fortnightly workshops to learn how to share books and literacy activities with their children. The method includes questionnaires given to the children and their parents or caregivers; the project will be closely monitored and observations documented; and final interviews with all stakeholders (children, parents or caregivers, teachers, principal) will take place.

This is an action research project, and the intention is for Castlecliff School to implement an ongoing family learning project with all Year 1 children entering the school. The primary research intention is to ascertain how well family learning intervention helps address learning goals within a school context; and to establish high-quality family learning practice in New Zealand.

School background

Castlecliff Primary School is a co-ed school, with years 1 to 6, situated in Polson Street, Castlecliff, Wanganui. It is ranked at Decile 1 on a ten-point scale: Decile 1 schools draw their students from areas of greatest socio-economic disadvantage, while Decile 10 schools are in areas of least disadvantage. The school has been part of the Castlecliff community for more than 125 years, and works to reflect the highest values and aspirations of the parent community in its education programme, which is aimed at helping all students find and develop their talents. The school’s mission
statement is 'Learning for life in a supportive environment' and its motto is 'deeds not words'. Castlecliff Kids have PRIDE, and the following values are promoted:

- **P** Peacefulness *Maungarongo*
- **R** Respect *Taumatatanga*
- **I** Integrity *Rangatiratanga*
- **D** Determination *Manawanui*
- **E** Excellence *Taumatatanga*

To provide a professional and expert overview of the school, the following summary of the April 2003 Education Review Office (ERO) evaluation (Education Review Office, 2003) is provided:

Castlecliff School is a medium sized Wanganui primary school with two partial immersion classes. Students benefit from the extensive playgrounds and considerable extra classroom space available to support learning programmes. A large, newly remodelled library and modern computer suite provide students with high quality information and communication technology learning experiences.

Students and teachers work together in an environment that focuses on positive behaviour. Students participate in a wide range of activities in multi-level class groups. They are friendly, well mannered and generally interact positively with each other. All teachers use an effective range of teaching strategies and classroom management skills to encourage positive outcomes for students. They provide appropriate learning experiences, outline well-defined expectations and give clear guidelines to encourage students’ independence. Students are on-task and enthusiastic about learning.

Self-review information collected indicates that many students need considerable extra support in their learning. The curriculum is effectively arranged to give extra emphasis on developing students’ literacy, numeracy and social skills. New achievement indicators were developed across these areas as a result of an assessment contract with Massey University. The indicators now give a high level of coherence to focused planning, assessment and evaluation. They focus teaching by identifying the next steps for learning for each student, class and year group. Teachers are continuing this development in 2003 to encourage more student goal setting and self-assessment.

Teachers and trustees are successfully achieving their mission: to promote learning for life in a supportive environment. A whole-family focus within the school links health, behaviour and learning needs. The board gives priority to providing extra support personnel, funding extra teachers to reduce class sizes and ensuring the staff has access to school-based specialists.
Teachers effectively work with and assist community agencies to benefit students. A well-established, community based Tu Tangata programme provides extra support for students in classrooms and the playground.

Extensive professional development promotes ongoing teaching improvement. All students receive instruction in the new numeracy teaching strategies. Castlecliff School is the lead school in a cluster of six currently participating in an information and communication technology (ICT) contract. Students benefit from the modern programmes developed as a consequence of this professional development.

The highly professional principal focuses on continuous, whole-school improvement. Considerable emphasis is placed on his leadership of pastoral care for students and on keeping the school community involved and informed. He encourages the board and the parents to question achievement results in order to increase the discussion on how to improve learning. Castlecliff School benefits from a stable staff where teachers, teacher aides and Tu Tangata personnel are well supported by their principal and students enjoy a secure environment.

Trustees are enthusiastic, well-informed, and highly visible in the school. They place a high priority on community consultation and developing goals by this process. The board has effective self-review strategies in place and reports outcomes from review to the school community. The board recently developed a new charter, and is using achievement plans and targets in readiness for Ministry of Education reporting requirements in 2004.

Aims of the family learning project

The overall aim of this project was to establish family learning time to promote the development of literacy, numeracy and communication skills in Year 1 children at Castlecliff School. The goal was to determine what a successful school-based family learning project can achieve.

Other aims include:

- To improve quality family time together, and also improve parent or caregiver-child relationships
- To provide children with opportunities to enjoy books, and literacy in general, with their parents or caregivers
- To show parents or caregivers the important role they can play in supporting their children’s learning and literacy development
• To show parents or caregivers the importance of spending quality time with their children
• To have a broader knowledge of activities to share with their children, e.g., games, art

As noted, a research goal is to demonstrate what high-quality practice comprises in family learning, especially in a low decile school. Also desirable is to evaluate the effects of a family learning project set within a community environment.

**Methodology**

Once approval was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, the principal and Year 1 teachers invited parents of all Year 1 children to take part in an information session in which the family learning project was discussed. Some parents could not, for various reasons, participate. The Year 1 teacher was asked to spend additional reading time with those children whose parents could not participate.

**Information sheets and consent forms**

Once the appropriate information sheets had been distributed to the parents, consent forms were given to those who could participate. The project was explained to the child by both the parents and the teacher. When the children had been asked by their parents if they were happy to be part of the project, the parents signed the consent form stating that their child could participate. The children also signed a consent form. The Year 1 teacher and the principal also received information sheets and signed consent forms.

**Questionnaires**

As the Year 1 children were not ready to complete a questionnaire, the researchers asked the Year 1 teacher to interview the children and complete the questionnaire.

The parents’ questionnaire was distributed to those parents who had agreed to take part before they attended the workshop.

**Parent and child time**

Parents were requested to spend 10 minutes a day, at least three times a week, sharing books and literacy activities with their children.

**Family learning sessions**

The parents and children who were able to attend the Family Learning Sessions every fortnight were observed by one of the researchers (to see how the parent and child interacted; how they shared books; what questions were asked; etc.).
**Interviews**

Interviews, about 30 minutes long, will take place at the end of the project. Participants involved in interviews include:

- the children
- the parents
- the Year 1 teacher, and
- the principal.

**Action research component**

In this action research project we are using Kemmis' action research protocol as outlined in Figure 4.

![Figure 4. Kemmis' Action Research Protocol (cited in Hopkins, 1985).](image)

In establishing the context for the action research intervention, namely setting up this Castlecliff family learning project, it was important for us to identify the key issues correctly, hence the focus for action. Very often parents, particularly of children with emerging literacy, do not realise the important role they play in helping their children
learn and acquire literacy skills. Learning is not confined to formal schooling, but, to a great extent, also takes place outside the school. By regularly sharing books with children, parents become involved in their children’s learning and as a result the children feel their parents are interested in their achievements. Children and parents often develop a special bond when they spend quality time together sharing books and literacy activities.

Our planning included the need for the researchers to monitor the fortnightly family learning sessions, intervening whenever necessary, and being ready to provide parents with additional information or suggestions.

In the final stage, not yet reached, the researchers, principal, Year 1 teacher, parents or caregivers and children will all have the opportunity to focus on the outcomes of the intervention. Outcomes will be evaluated to ascertain whether goals were achieved, whether the original diagnosis was correct, and whether the action taken was appropriate. The review in this stage leads to the revised plan of the following cycle, thus creating the spiral characteristic of action research.

Workshop
The first Castlecliff School workshop, began at 3.15 pm, and was attended by 11 parents/caregivers, namely four mothers, four fathers, a couple, and a grandfather, and all were responsive and positive about reading to their children. The presence of the principal and the enthusiastic class teacher was a great bonus as they comprised a local, accessible link with the project’s aims. Their support was visible and appeared to encourage parents.

While the children were free to come and go, which created a relaxed atmosphere, and parents could leave when they needed, we will need to determine another more convenient time as ending at 4.30 pm appeared too late for people anxious to attend but at the same time needing to return home reasonably early.

After the introduction and the distribution of the handouts, parents were asked what benefits they believed might come from sharing books with children. During these discussions parents offered ideas about how such reading might help their children. They were then asked to discuss with the group or with a partner how they share books with their child.

The presenter then asked the parents whether they felt there were any right or wrong ways to read books with children. It was emphasised that it is not just the act of reading a story to a child that is important, but particularly the nature of interaction between the adult and the child. We then focused on how to share books with children.
Next we looked at the importance of pictures in story books, and that “a picture paints a thousand words”. Pictures extend a child’s imagination, and there are so many things a picture can “say”. Parents compared the sentence “this is a cow” to a picture of a cow. The picture of the cow enables children to talk about different aspects of the cow. Parents looked at the picture of a cow provided in their handouts, and were asked to say what questions they could ask their children about this picture. The purpose of this activity was to show parents how much information can be “read” and developed from a picture of a cow.

Parents were very responsive and participative in this workshop. They asked many questions and were very keen to try new ways of sharing books with their children.

Parents who attended the workshop were given a children’s storybook where the words had been masked. To demonstrate the importance of “reading” the pictures as well as focussing on the words, parents were asked to look at the pictures and create their own stories.
**Questionnaires**

The parents completed an initial questionnaire on their family’s reading habits. At the time of this report, the Year 1 teacher is still in the process of “interviewing” each child who is participating in order to complete the questionnaire. Results from the parents’ questionnaire are presented below:

**Parent questionnaires**

Ten parents completed the questionnaire. They were asked to state the activities their children enjoying doing at home. The usual children’s activities such as games, riding bikes, drawing, and watching movies, were reported. Three parents mentioned that their children enjoy reading. In the next question (the questionnaire is attached as Appendix A) nine parents wrote that their children enjoy reading, whilst one parent responded “yes” and “no”, possibly because the child might not be interested at this stage. This parent went on to say that the child does, however, enjoying reading a poem book. Other parents said their children enjoyed reading *King Kong* books, adventure books, and books with bright pictures. Others said that the favourite books are the ones “*she brings home*” or the books “*she’s got at home*”.

The parents were asked whether they read with their children. Only one parent responded negatively; one said “*most nights*”; one said “*sometimes, otherwise her mom or grandmother reads to her*”; and one said “*when he’s in the mood*”. And this is a real challenge – getting a child to be “in the mood to read”!

Parents were asked whether they enjoyed reading. Four responded “*yes*”; one said “*yes, if I have the time*”; two answered “*sometimes*”; two said “*not really*”; whilst one did not respond. When they were asked what they enjoy reading, the range was from children’s books, to military style books, to “all sorts” of books. Four parents read the newspapers, and most read a variety of magazines.

Parents were asked whether they use the library. Seven responded “*no*”; one said “*I don’t get time to go there*”; one said not often, 3 times per year”; and one said “*yes, once a month*”.

They were asked whether they believed that reading with children is important, and seven said “*yes*”; one said “*definitely*”; and two said “*very important*”. Those parents who replied ‘yes’, were asked why they believed reading with children was important. Some of their responses included:

- To help them with their learning
- They learn a lot about different things
- So they can learn
- It is part of their learning
- For the child to learn that reading is important for learning and skills
- Good spending time learning together
Because you both can get some time together in reading
Because kids copy their parents.

Clearly, these parents believe that reading with their children is important as it can help them with their learning; and reading together means spending time together.

**Family learning sessions**

![Image](image1.jpg)

*Oh no, what is the pig going to do now?!!*

Three family learning sessions were planned for Term 2. However, these were not successful. At the first session, only one parent arrived with her daughter. Some of the children did not go to school that day as they were sick. Another parent sent her apologies. The observation of the parent who was there went well, and it was evident that some of the information from the workshop had been incorporated into this family’s reading repertoire. For the second and third sessions, no one arrived.

**Reflections**

At the workshop, the Year 1 teacher and the principal suggested the material handed to the parents might have been too difficult. As the principal is keen to make this project a compulsory component for all Year 1 children entering the school, the idea
is to simplify the workshop by producing a booklet with limited words and lots of photographs and illustrations (to cater for all or most adult literacy levels), for example:

As was noted above, only one parent attended the first monitoring session, while no parents attended the 2nd and 3rd sessions. The question is how to motivate parents to attend? This question will be discussed with the principal during the next term.

We could start in Term 3 by “reworking” the existing programme and testing it on the Year 1 entrants (thus starting the next cycle of action research), while maintaining the current parents on the “old” programme to obtain information on what is working, what isn’t, why, what to improve.

Another issue is one of timing: when is the ideal or most convenient time to run workshops and monitoring sessions? Some parents fetch their children from the school then go to another school to fetch other children; or they may have sports commitments and thus not be able to stay directly after school. However, evening sessions or Saturday morning sessions may be costly as parents need to come to the school solely for the family learning session.

A suggestion from the Year 1 teacher has been to use the last hour of school, i.e. from 2 pm to 3 pm every fortnight, for family learning sessions. Parents could come in any time between 2 pm and 3 pm, choose a book with their child, sit in an allotted area in the classroom and share the book. The researcher or monitor would then sit in the background and observe at a little distance. This way, parents might feel less threatened that the researcher might be watching them in a judgemental way.
Workplace Literacy: The Workplace of the 21st Century

Modernisation, dating from the late nineteenth century to the post-war boom, saw radical changes in the workplaces, for example, the change in production methods from coal and steam to new technologies using electricity. Mass production systems abounded, for example, the production systems of Henry Ford. During the so-called Fordist era, there was a sharp distinction between mental and manual aspects of jobs. Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996, p. 26) point out that “workers, hired from the neck down, had only to follow directions and mechanically carry out a rather meaningless piece of a process they did not need to understand as a whole, and certainly did not control”. In these work settings, management was typically hierarchical and centralised, and employees were generally regarded as interchangeable.

Since then, the workplace has undergone radical changes, and as Gould (2002, p. xv) points out, organisations have been “reinvented, downsized, streamlined, and reorganized. Technology has created an entirely new world of work, which requires employees with new skills and competencies. The flattening of the traditional management structure and the rapid pace of technological innovation and change has transformed the workplace into a rapidly evolving electronic setting in which people work together as teams to meet goals”. This is reinforced by Lonsdale and McCurry (2004, p. 21) who state that “older manufacturing industries which depended on physical capital – such as manual labour, the transportation of raw materials, factories and warehouses – have been displaced by industries that depend on intellectual assets”. Jobs have also been restructured and many involve complex data bases and shareware (Searle, 1999).

The world economy is changing significantly, “with an increasing emphasis on the creation and application of knowledge as the foundation for prosperity and social inclusion” (Ministry of Education’s Tertiary Education Strategy, 2002, p. 10). Rapid transformations in technology and communication systems have forced us to change the way we think and work. Peterson, Ott, and Wilson (2002, p. 1) believe “we must change the way we prepare for work, if we are going to remain competitive for the next 100 years”. This not only includes individuals entering the workforce, but also individuals who are already in the workforce. Mikulecky (1990, pp. 456–7) notes that “as new jobs are created and old jobs disappear, new levels and types of print-communication skills for employment are also created. In addition, a significant percentage of existing middle-level workers need to increase their skills as their jobs change or increase in difficulty”.

In the past, it was easier for many individuals to function effectively in the workplace with limited literacy and numeracy skills. However, restructuring associated with
the technological, economic and global demands of the 21st century, is causing many of these individuals to lose their jobs. In the current work environment most jobs require good basic literacy skills. Employees need a much broader set of skills than they did 20 or 30 years ago; and if they are to adapt and be part of the intense global workforce, they need to continually learn new skills. According to Verizon (n.d.), “basic skills include being literate in reading, writing, math and English language proficiency. But basic skills also include the ability to interpret instructions and make decisions. In today’s work environment, communicating effectively, solving problems, resolving conflicts and working with people from other cultures are basic skills”.

If they possess basic literacy skills, employees can access industry-specific training, boost their career prospects, and stand a better chance of remaining within an increasingly competitive job market. Comings, Sum, and Uvin (2000, p. v) point out that “our workers are what fuels the state’s economic engine. They are our competitive advantage”.

Current discourses on work, often labelled as a “new work order” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), indicate an important transformation from the traditional industry-based economy to the knowledge-based service and information economies of the 21st century. Castleton (2002, p. 559) states that “these discourses privilege a particular account of work that creates new social realities and identities in workplaces, delineating new ways of being a worker”. This “information revolution and new knowledge-based economy is reshaping how work is performed and where” (Ott, 2001, p. 1); and individuals need a concrete foundation of essential skills.

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (2003, p. 6) argues that “one result of the knowledge economy is that skills training in isolation is no longer sufficient. As technology evolves, the knowledge and personal competencies that provide the foundation for skills acquisition have become as important as the skills themselves”. Our current knowledge economy requires skilled workers in particular to have knowledge as well as personal competencies to gain new skills quickly, to perform individually, to work well in groups, as well as deal with change as a part of life. Johnson (2000, p. 7) points out that “in the workplace in particular, expectations of what people need to know and be able to do are continually increasing across occupations – and the stakes have never been higher for those with low skills”. The 21st century workplace therefore demands high-performance employees.

That is, in order to meet the needs of the new workplace, employees need to be multi-skilled and adaptable and, according to Lonsdale and McCurry (2004, p. 22), to ensure their ongoing employability, they “need to be receptive to lifelong learning”. Johnson (2000, p. 7) also comments that in order to survive and prosper in the constant changes in the workplace, “adults need to continuously improve their knowledge and skills through a lifetime of learning”. The phrase lifelong learning has be-
come an integral part of being a skilled worker in the new economy. Fischer (2000, p. 265) points out that “learning can no longer be dichotomized into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and a place and time to apply knowledge (the workplace). Today’s citizens are flooded with more information than they can handle, and tomorrow’s workers will need to know far more than any individual can retain”.

David Kearns, CEO of Xerox Corporation, stated that “literacy – real literacy - is the essential raw material of the information age. We are entering an era of lifelong learning that merges work and education” (cited in Peterson, Ott & Wilson, 2000, p. 1). Comings, Sum, and Uvin, (2000, p. ix) point out that “as we focus our efforts to tackle the twenty-first century skills challenge, it is important that we think in terms of the need for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is the expectation of continuous revising and upgrading of skills throughout a person’s life to keep pace with a changing economy”. The report ‘Highlights from the Second Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey: Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society’ (2003, p. 12) notes that

...although literacy is not the only determinant of employment levels, strong literacy rates make a labour force more productive and employable over the long run, providing incentives to attract capital investment and job creation. Continuously upgrading the skills of populations and workforces through strategies for lifelong learning should be part of the policy responses to tackle poor, low-wage jobs and persistent unemployment.

Mikulecky, Lloyd, Kirkley, and Oelker (1996, p. 64) state that “in an increasingly global economy, the demands on workplaces to serve customers and compete on a world level are growing all the time. As businesses face these challenges, literacy demands also continue to expand”. Peterson, Ott and Wilson (2000, p. 9) point out that “today’s employers demand more from their workers than basic reading, writing and math competencies. They want to employ individuals who are flexible, willing to learn technical skills and perform whatever functions are needed as the company grows and changes”. Searle (1999, p. 1), too, states that “many jobs that traditionally required minimal basic skills are becoming more complex, demanding higher-level reading and technological skills”.

Peterson et al. (2000, p. 12) also emphasise that “poor literacy skills have an economic cost”; they cost companies that employ the workers, and also the workers themselves. According to a report from the National Business Alliance (1996, p. 4), low levels of literacy and inadequate basic skills entail “a hidden cost, the drag on productivity and competitiveness”. Workers with low or inadequate basic skills have lower earnings, limited employment opportunities, and often depend more on public resources

Peterson et al. (2000, p. 7) provide a list of basic literacy skills that includes broad areas such as communication skills, decision-making skills, interpersonal skills, and
lifelong learning skills that “enable workers to not only be more effective and productive workers today, but they also help them adapt and change to the demands of a rapidly changing workplace”. Comings et al. (2000, p. viii) point out that “workers now need solid literacy and math skills just to get their foot in the door of today’s workplace, and over the next few decades, the expectations will only increase”. Searle (1999, p. 1) argues that a critical technological literacy is required in the workplace, implying “a meta-knowledge of the diverse meaning systems within the workplace as well as an understanding of the structures”, which Luke (1997, p. 11) refers to as the “new digital data sphere”. Birkerts (1994) indicates that currently we are in a ‘proto-electronic’ age, which is an era of rapid shift from print-based literacies to electronic literacies.

**Literacy in the workplace**

Although there are many definitions of literacy in the literature, it is clear that one can no longer refer to literacy as a singular entity, but rather we need to think in terms of literacies. The increase in these literacies are at times termed “new literacies”, although, as Lonsdale and McCurry (2004, p. 32) state, “it is not clear whether these literacies constitute ‘new’ sets of skills and understandings necessary for a transformed world, or involve the application and adaptation of ‘old’ skills (reading, writing, speaking)”.

Street (1984) provides a distinction between ‘autonomous’ and ‘ideological’ literacy models. In autonomous or ‘functional’ models, literacy is regarded as a measurable individual attribute, is considered separate from context, is largely print based, with its underlying purpose being “to imbue into individuals an acceptance of the dominant ideologies and its explicit purpose is to enhance the economic productivity of the nation” (Lonsdale & McCurry, 2004, p. 7). In contrast, the ideological or social practice models argue for multiple, learner-centred literacies in which critical thinking skills are important, to be assessed through ethnographic tools. These models have a strong focus on social context and “a consequent shift from narrow vocational outcomes for individual learners to more holistic outcomes related to empowerment and capacity-building for both individuals and communities” (2004, p. 8).

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) defines literacy skills as “the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential” (OECD, 2000, p. x). This, and the Government’s resulting Adult Literacy Strategy, are clearly rooted in an autonomous approach and lead, as Isaacs (2005) has commented, to deficit approaches to policy development, that is, addressing what people appear to lack in respect of functional literacy, rather than what they can do, in respect of literacies.
There is no clear universal definition of literacy, but rather the focus is increasingly on implications of what literacy entails within diverse contexts. Thus, when working within the literacy field, it is imperative to formulate a clear description or definition of what literacy entails within that specific context. As De Valenzuela (n.d.) states, “the definition of ‘literate’, depends on the skills needed within a particular environment”.

In the Ministry of Education’s Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) (2002, p. 37) literacy is incorporated within foundation skills, which are defined as “a bundle of skills such as literacy, numeracy technological literacy, communication skills, teamwork, ‘learning to learn’ and self-confidence skills”. The TES states that “these foundation skills are the same core skills that are described by other names in different nations, for example, ‘key skills’, ‘basic skills’, essential skills’, ‘literacy defined broadly’”.

The Ministry of Education’s Learning for Living (2005, p. 1) talks about ‘foundation learning’ which:

…”covers competencies in literacy, numeracy and language. In practice, foundation learning for adults may be defined as the application of a complex web of reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking, problem solving, numeracy skills and communication technology so that people can achieve their own goals in meaningful social, cultural, vocational and/or learning contexts. Foundation learning may be in English or Te Reo Māori.

Hull (2000, p. 650) points out that “it’s become customary to characterize literacy in the world of work as reading and writing to mediate action and to contrast that purpose for literacy with school-based ones”. Some researchers have categorized literacy at work as “reading to do” whilst school-based literacy is primarily “reading to know” (Diehl & Mikulecky, 1980).

Mikulecky, Lloyd, Kirkley, and Oelker (1996, p. 8) state that “the demands made on skills of workers are increasing all the time. As part of teamwork, planning, and quality control, workers need to be able to solve problems that often involve the application of several skills. Literacy in the workplace requires a combination of prose literacy, document literacy, and quantitative literacy”. Workers need prose literacy when accessing manuals, or reading or writing newsletters and memos. Document literacy includes tables, forms and charts, while quantitative literacy includes calculating, and solving problems with numbers. Mikulecky et al. (1996) continue by saying that very often in order to perform a workplace task, different types of skills are required together, for example, calculation, reading charts or technical material, handling data, and problem solving.

Most employers want to hire employees who can be productive from the minute they start a job. However, if basic skills are not in place, individuals are either not hired,
or employers need to make sure the employees who are hired receive the required basic skills training, which initially may slow down their productivity, but in the long term, the employers will benefit.

Verizon (n.d.) states that “literacy is the foundation for other basic skills, yet large numbers of people in the labour pool are tagged as illiterate. ... however, illiteracy probably is not the inability to read anything at all, but rather the inability to read well enough to fully understand important written material”. Similarly, illiteracy or innumeracy is not the inability to do maths, but rather an inability to do the level of maths required in the workplace.

**The importance of literacy skills in the workplace**

Verizon (n.d., p. 4) points out the benefits of investing in basic skills training:

- higher employee productivity
- lower employee turnover rate
- lower insurance costs due to fewer accidents
- employees better able to move into higher skilled jobs
- employees capable of performing a broader range of tasks
- better work climate due to improved ob satisfaction.

Hull and Grubb (1999, p. 311) note that the “growing concern is that many workers and prospective workers are not up to the task, having been poorly or insufficiently educated and having grown accustomed to jobs that do not expect much”. Comings et al. (2000, p. 6) state that “a person’s literacy skills and education almost always determine his or her success in the labour market”.

**Workplace skills**

The Association of Canadian Community Colleges (2003, p. 2) has adopted the following definition of Essential Workplace Skills:

> The generic set of skills, attitudes, and behaviours that are necessary in any career area and which are essential to any person aiming to be successful in obtaining and progressing in his or her job. The essential employability skills are the foundation skills to a fulfilling personal and work life. These include literacy, numeracy, and document use, inter-personal and intra-personal skills.

The United States Department of Labour convened The Secretary’s Commission for the Achievement of Necessary Skills (SCANS) (1992) to examine the demands of the
American workplace. This report described the needed know-how of the workplace, and defined two categories: foundation and competencies:

**Foundation:**
(a) basic skills (ability to read, write, perform arithmetic and mathematical operations, listen and speak);
(b) thinking skills (ability to think creatively, make decisions, solve problems, visualize, know how to learn, and reason); and
(c) personal qualities (ability to display responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self-management, integrity, and honesty).

**Competencies:**
(a) resources (ability to identify, organize, plan, and allocate resources, e.g. time, money, materials, space, staff);
(b) interpersonal skills (ability to work with others on teams, teaching others, serving customers, leading, negotiating, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds);
(c) information (ability to acquire and use information, acquiring and evaluating data, organising and maintaining files, interpreting and communicating, and using computers to process information);
(d) systems (ability to understand complex inter-relationships, understanding social, organisational and technological systems, monitoring and correcting performance, and designing or improving systems); and
(e) technology (ability to work with a variety of technologies, selecting equipment and tools, applying technology to specific tasks, and maintaining and troubleshooting technologies).

There is a considerable corpus of literature that provides lists of general skills that encompass many job categories and are necessary for success in the job market of the 21st century. From research findings presented by Savisaar (1998), Ledbury and Matheson (1998), and Wills (1995), employers require the following characteristics from employees: an ability to get along with others; communication skills; personality; generalist skills; and computer skills. In Cassel’s (1998) research, similar requirements were found in Fortune 500 companies, and he determined that large organisations were looking for potential employees with the following skills: team work; ability to solve problems; interpersonal skills; oral communication; listening; personal career development; creative thinking; leadership; goal setting/motivation; writing; organisational effectiveness; computation; and reading. In addition, McBride’s research (1999) identified the top ten characteristics employees look for in potential employees: honesty/integrity; motivation/initiative; communication skills; self-confidence; flexibility; interpersonal skills; strong work ethics; teamwork skills; leadership skills; and enthusiasm.
Workplace Literacy Provision: A Formative Evaluation of an Emerging Workplace Literacy Provider

Introduction

The report ‘Barriers to Adult Literacy: A Discussion Paper’ (Sligo, Comrie, Olsson, Culligan, & Tilley, 2005, p. 3) noted that in New Zealand “the success or otherwise of adult literacy initiatives and their impacts upon workplaces and communities in New Zealand is not yet well understood.” Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui), a subcontractor to the Literacy and Employment Project, has been approached by a number of businesses wanting to support staff to up-skill their basic literacy needs. Many of these approaches come from small business owners. Small businesses suffer as much from the negative aspects of low literacy and numeracy skills as do large organisations, but they have less capability to deal with it in-house. Regardless, employers are keen to support their staff and provide them with the essential skills they require, and, long term, the benefits of such a course of action would accrue to the wider community.

Management from Literacy Aotearoa recognise that while a number of New Zealand training organisations have developed workplace literacy services, the outcomes of development processes and practices are not widely reported. The opportunity to document and evaluate a development process from the outset is recognised as a valuable learning tool. Because of this, and in acknowledgment of the value in sharing information and learning throughout the adult literacy sector and cross sectorally, Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui) has approached the Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University, offering the opportunity to document the development process through a formative evaluation process.

The formative evaluation of the workplace literacy programme is currently in its initial design phase. Therefore, the following information regarding aims and involvement of key stakeholders is provisional in nature at this stage.

The research site - Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui)

Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui), is a community organization and a foundation skills training provider, and specializes in delivering services that meet the needs of the local community.

As a member of Literacy Aotearoa, the local branch works in accordance with the national mission statement and definition as follows:
Literacy Aotearoa is established to develop accessible, quality literacy services that ensure the people of Aotearoa are critically literate.

Literacy Aotearoa defines literacy as listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and critical thinking, interwoven with the knowledge of social and cultural practices.

Critical literacy enhances people’s ability to get their message across effectively, analyze and understand the implications of text and other forms of communication and actively participate within their families, communities and workplaces.

Critical literacy enhances people’s ability to contribute to and improves society, locally, nationally and internationally.

**Proposed methodology**

Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui) aims to develop a workplace literacy service that supports people with lower levels of literacy skills to perform workplace tasks. Formative Evaluation will be used as the research tool in this study, and will consist of documenting the processes involved in the development of a workplace literacy programme, so that other agencies wishing to develop similar programmes could potentially use this process as a model. Formative evaluation has been described as follows:

Formative evaluation is typically conducted during the development or improvement of a program or product (or person, and so on) and it is conducted, often more than once, for in-house staff of the program with the intent to improve. The reports normally remain in-house; but serious formative evaluation may be done by an internal or an external evaluator or preferably, a combination; of course, many program staff are, in an informal sense, constantly doing formative evaluation (Scriven, 1991, as cited on Northern Arizona University Web Server, para. 3).

This process will be linked to an action research participatory approach where stakeholders set the research/evaluation questions.

The evaluation will focus on the experiences of and outcomes for the agency as it markets and plans one or more workplace literacy programmes within companies in Wanganui.

**Areas of potential investigation**

Areas of potential investigation could include:

- The effectiveness of skills auditing in awareness raising and identification of need
• The range of need across workplaces and commonalities of need
• The resourcing required to develop programmes to cater for individual need and company needs
• The development of relationships and networking arrangements inclusive of the range of stakeholder engagement.
• The effectiveness of workplace interventions on employees attitude and ability to perform workplace tasks
• Approaches and effectiveness of marketing and promotion of workplace literacy services with a regional community.

Proposed key stakeholders
Within this development project Literacy Aotearoa (Whanganui) proposes to work closely with the following stakeholders and agencies:

• Workbase, the New Zealand Centre for Workforce Literacy Development
• The Department of Communication and Journalism, Massey University, Palmerston North, who will provide research support and mentoring throughout this project
• Local employers who require workplace literacy services and agree to be a part of the development process
• Workplace learners who will engage in learning and evaluative processes
• Unions
• Industry Training Organisations
• Private Training Providers in the region who have an interest with Workplace Literacy Developments
• Other community stakeholders

Future directions
The formative evaluation of a workplace literacy programme is planned to begin in August 2006. The research team has hired an experienced formative evaluator who will travel regularly to Wanganui to document the development of the programme. The evaluation process is proposed to continue for a 1 year period, with appropriate time for analysis and interpretation, with an end date proposed of 1 August 2007.
References


**Appendix A: Parents Questionnaire Training For You**

Please could you complete the following questionnaire about your child in Year 1 at Castlecliff School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your child (e.g. quiet, outgoing, etc.)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many children are there in your family?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does s/he get along with his/her brothers and sisters (if s/he has any)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does s/he get along with his/her other family members (e.g. cousins)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does s/he have many friends?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does s/he get along with these friends?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What activities does s/he enjoy doing at home?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Response</td>
</tr>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does s/he enjoy reading?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, what does s/he enjoy reading?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you read with your child?</td>
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<tr>
<td>If yes, how often per week? (circle) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And, what type of stories does your child like?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is his/her favourite book?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you enjoy reading?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What books or magazines do you read?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you use the library?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, how often do you use</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
the library?

Do you think reading with children is important?

If yes, why do you think it’s important?

For the next couple of questions, please circle whichever applies:

In the last week, how many times has your child looked at or read books or magazines?

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<tr>
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<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10+</th>
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</table>

In the last week, how many times has your child seen you reading or writing?

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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<th>10+</th>
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</table>

In the last week, how many times have you read/looked at books with your child or listened to him/her read?

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The Adult Literacy and Employment Programme contains an action research component. This report provides an introductory literature review, and reports on the initial stages of three action research programmes. One of these is based within an adult literacy training provider, a second within a local Wanganui primary school, and a third is a formative evaluation of the development of a workplace literacy programme.