Adult Literacy and Employment in Wanganui: An Initial Exploration of the Dimensions

Margie Comrie, Franco Vaccarino, Frank Sligo, Niki Culligan, Elspeth Tilley

Abstract

In the 90s, New Zealand participated in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which aimed at measuring literacy proficiency levels. While New Zealand performed relatively well in the IALS, 48% of the population was estimated as at literacy levels one and two, out of a range of one to five. These findings gave impetus to the government’s Adult Literacy Strategy which, in keeping with current education reforms in the tertiary sector, stresses the link between literacy and employment. In the light of these findings and developing government strategies, a group of concerned community representatives from Wanganui contacted researchers at Massey University, who obtained a grant to investigate adult literacy and employment in Wanganui. This paper describes the first stages of this community-based project. It focuses on some initial results and their implications for teaching adult literacy, especially in relation to employment.

Introduction

In the 1990s, New Zealand, along with 23 other countries, participated in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) which aimed at measuring literacy proficiency levels. The results, as Isaacs (2005) claims, put adult literacy onto the political agenda. While New Zealand performed relatively well in the IALS, with scores on all three literacy areas (prose, document and quantitative literacy) slightly above average (Statistics NZ, 2003), 48% of the population was estimated as at literacy levels one and two, out of a range of one to five. The Ministry of Education (2001) therefore concluded: “there are large numbers of people whose poor literacy severely restricts their choices in life and work” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p.4).

The findings gave impetus to the government’s Adult Literacy Strategy which, in keeping with current education reforms in the tertiary sector, stresses the link between literacy and employment and emphasises measurement and employment outcomes. While IALS limitations are recognised (for instance Isaacs (2005) notes its focus on text and English language skills and neglect of oracy and new technology literacies) the results continue to drive policy and research. The Ministry of Education’s Skills and Education Discussion Paper (2002) states that 40% of employed and 70% of unemployed New Zealanders
exhibit poor literacy skills (as determined by the IALS, 1996). Literacy skills such as reading, writing, and numeracy are essential for coping in today’s labour market and provide a foundation for further learning and training (Ministry of Education, 2002).

In the light of these findings and developing government strategies a group of concerned community representatives from Wanganui contacted researchers at Massey University. Together the University and the Wanganui community obtained a three and a half year grant by the New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology (FRST) to investigate adult literacy and employment in Wanganui. This paper describes the first stages of this community-based project, which began in early 2004. It focuses on a community survey, employer interviews, a survey of adult literacy providers and interviews with participants in adult literacy programmes.

**Outline of the project**

The research project arose from concerns from several Wanganui stakeholders about the local impacts of low literacy levels. The Wanganui District Library served as a facilitator for a central network of concerned groups ranging from representatives of local employers and iwi, the Wanganui District Council, Police, Corrections, the Whanganui Health Board, local branches of UCOL (Universal College of Learning), Work and Income, and Literacy Aotearoa. The Library approached researchers at Massey University, initiating the research partnership. A series of meetings with local stakeholders resulted.

Along with the team from Massey University’s Department of Communication and Journalism, and under the Library’s leadership, four key local groups became researchers and partners or subcontractors in the project: The District Library as partner and community coordinator, Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), Te Puna Mātauranga o Whanganui (an iwi education authority that represents Whanganui River Iwi), and the Whanganui Community Foundation (a major funder of civic projects).

The group was funded to deliver four objectives:

1. To establish adult literacy needs of both employed and unemployed in the Wanganui and Districts region.
2. To identify the social, attitudinal, and economic barriers to adult literacy, numeracy and analytical thinking skills of both employed and unemployed in Wanganui and Districts.
3. To evaluate how effectively adult literacy programmes secure employment outcomes.
4. To examine adult literacy learning processes and their relationship to employment.

After substantial discussion, the community groups developed their own objectives which included developing a plan of action through to 2015, establishing a local information database, developing collaboration among agencies in the Wanganui region, and building local research capacity.

The project and contested definitions of literacy
There are of course a large and growing number of definitions of literacy within the policy and academic communities (OECD, 2000; UNESCO, 2005). It became increasingly obvious that stakeholders in the community (including providers of training, various social and funding agencies, and representatives from the Police, Health Board, District Council and employers) had varying perspectives on literacy.

The 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) commented, to deficit approaches to policy development. The concern for functional literacy and the link between industry needs, employment skills, and literacy training clearly underpin the Skills and Education paper mentioned above. The Ministry of Education (2001, p.4), in its Adult Literacy Strategy uses the expanded definition of literacy provided by Workbase, the National Centre for Workplace Literacy and Language: “a complex web of abilities in reading, writing, speaking, listening, problem-solving, creative thinking and numeracy”.

In early discussions about literacy issues with local stakeholders, we noted that while their concerns were often expressed in terms of functional skill deficits, they often referred to the importance of (local) context and many of them were concerned about social justice. As communication scholars we were also interested in the links with communication study, including what we saw as blurring of the distinction between communication and literacy. Hunter (2004, p.248) argues that the key to social practice approaches is: “the interweaving of activities and modes of communication with reading and writing; the specialized knowledge and skills required for understanding the text; and the interpersonal roles and power relationships”.
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.

In recognition of varied, changing, and contested definitions of ‘literacy’ and the community-based approach of the Adult Literacy and Employment project and in line with the *foundation learning* definition presented above, we aimed to view literacy from a broad perspective, incorporating the traditional aspects of reading, writing, speaking and listening; yet also to include critical and creative thinking, understanding, problem-solving and decision-making; as well as other forms of receiving and imparting information. As much as possible, we sought to encourage participants to speak from their own perspective and perceptions of the term. We believe that this approach embraces literacy’s applicability at home, at work and within a community, without ignoring what individuals value as their own social, political, economic, cultural, emotional, and spiritual components.

**Method overview**

The research approach was primarily qualitative and the university researchers were concerned to maximise the community’s involvement in the project, although because of largely predetermined objectives and the specific outputs contractually required by FRST, the research could not be fully collaborative. However, ideas for investigation, along with preferred approaches, were discussed in detail in a series of meetings with concerned community personnel. Also, university researchers asked community representatives to set questions for inquiry, consulting them closely in elaborating then focusing these questions, as well as on matters of methodology. The result has been a
responsive and expanding research programme with 19 different methodologies (Sligo, Comrie, Olsson, Culligan, & Tilley, 2005).

In the first stage, team members initiated activities to gain literacy and employment views from the ‘general public’, employers, providers of literacy programmes, and participants and non-participants in adult literacy programmes. Alongside these investigations, Te Puna Mātauranga o Whanganui, which also had input in the broader project and served as a subcontractor in this FRST research programme, conducted its own research examining adult literacy issues for Whanganui River Iwi. This has resulted in a literature review from an indigenous research perspective (Rawiri, 2005), while a report, due in 2006, will explore the concept of ancestral literacies. The methods noted below were used to meet the first two objectives which are largely concerned with investigating adult literacy needs and the barriers to adult literacy development in Wanganui.

**Community survey**
Having become aware in early discussions with stakeholder groups of concerns about the impacts associated with low adult literacy, we wanted to see whether members of the wider community shared this awareness. In August 2004, 400 randomly selected local residents, aged 16 years and over, were interviewed by telephone. We aimed for a representative sample in relation to age, gender, ethnicity and employment status based on 2001 Wanganui census figures and, as much as practicable, sought a representative geographical spread across the city and district. The sample size of 400 delivered a confidence level of 95% (based on a district population of 43,266). The results are representative of the larger population at a margin of error of ± 3%. Initial questions, developed from the literature on literacy and employment, were reviewed and revised in consultation with community representatives. To ensure community input, questions were trialled and submitted for reconsideration several times. The survey consisted of nine (largely closed-ended) questions in addition to demographic data. It focused on what interviewees thought about local employment opportunities, barriers to employment, and important skills for job seekers. The aim was to elicit early unprompted responses before asking questions concerned with literacy and based on the IALS categories of prose, document, and quantitative literacy.

**Employer interviews**
With the support of Enterprise Wanganui approaches were made in 2004 and 2005 to gain the views of Wanganui employers about adult literacy, training, and employment. In April 2004 there was an initial meeting with the then
Managing Director of Enterprise Wanganui, a representative from the Wanganui Chamber of Commerce, and representative from two major companies in the city. This consisted of project team members outlining the project and the employers’ representatives discussing how low literacy levels impacted on them. In November 2004 an in-depth interview was conducted with the Managing Director of Enterprise Wanganui. In March, April, and May of the following year, 2005, three focus groups were conducted with employers. These focus groups were initially arranged through Enterprise Wanganui staff. An invitation to participate in the research project was sent out in an e-letter to 921 Wanganui businesses. Enterprise Wanganui then supplied the team with a list of names and companies who had indicated they were willing to participate. From this list two focus groups and two one-to-one interviews were arranged. A third focus group was created in response to a telephone invitation from the Massey research team. The third one-to-one interview was arranged similarly. The focus groups covered two distinctive groups: large employers and small employers. Cameron and Massey (2003) distinguish businesses according to size: “a micro business is defined as having five or fewer employees, a small business as having six to 49 employees, a medium-sized business as having between 50 and 99 employees, and a large business as having 100 or more employees” (p.1). However, the Managing Director of Enterprise Wanganui suggested focus groups for small and large businesses only would best reflect the Wanganui employment scene. The small business employers’ focus group was made up of six people: five women and one man representing five companies. The first large employers’ focus group consisted of four men representing three companies. The second was with two men representing two companies. The three in-depth interviews (all male) were with employers from each of a large, medium, and small business.

While (see below) there were common themes arising from the focus groups and interviews, we recognised they represented only a limited number of presumably concerned employers willing to take part. The team has therefore developed an e-survey which has been sent to 256 employers in the area.

**Adult literacy provider survey**

Twelve local literacy providers took part in the first part of a two-phase investigation. Every effort was made to include all adult literacy providers in the region fitting the definition of “providing adult literacy training services as a programme or part of a programme (including those that contract such services, but not referral agencies)”. We believe the sample to represent at least 90% of the known literacy providers in Wanganui. In-depth interviews took place in August and September 2004, exploring the types of literacy
programmes offered, number of clients, funding channels available to literacy organisations, staffing issues, and any general comments about the challenges literacy providers face.

**Participant interviews**

Between late 2004 and early 2005, researchers also undertook in-depth interviews with 88 participants in adult literacy programmes aimed at capturing their experiences. The interview structure was developed by community partners/subcontractors and Massey University collaborating to prepare open-ended questions. After initial discussions with community stakeholders a series of broad question areas were developed in line with the relevant literature. Questions were further refined in a series of consultations with community representatives, including those with experience in literacy training. We were particularly concerned that participants were free to tell their story and that interviews should not spring from a ‘deficit model’ of literacy. The interviews covered nine areas from the literature thought likely to affect literacy outcomes and to be affected by literacy training. These were: socioeconomic background; schooling history; perspectives of their learning environment; motivation; resistance; persistence; power dynamics; employment; and barriers to both employment and literacy.

Participants were sought from as many literacy providers as possible. Adult literacy providers in the Wanganui and Districts region were contacted by a community subcontractor and informed of the project and why we wished to undertake interviews. Twelve of the estimated thirteen providers at the time took part in the study. Providers were invited to assist the project team in identifying potential participants. On some occasions participants self-identified from a direct presentation of the project and interview invitations to a group of potential interviewees. The adult literacy providers then approached potential participants on the project’s behalf; interviewees were offered the opportunity to have a support person present.

While some providers were specialist literacy providers, others concentrated on vocational training. All participants, however, were taking part in literacy courses or additional one-on-one literacy training, and were selected to reflect the range of clients on these courses. Because of the collaborative nature of the project and the sensitive nature of the issues to be disclosed, working with the providers to identify interviewees and to gain their trust involved time. Interviews were audio-taped where the interviewee gave permission for this to occur and the tapes sent back to Massey University for transcribing and analysis.
Findings

We present here findings from the community survey, the various employer interviews and the adult literacy provider survey, along with some key themes from participant interviews. As the project is on-going and results from initial research being fed into the next round of the investigation, we regard these findings as preliminary.

Community survey

While a majority of the 400 people surveyed said work was easy to find in Wanganui, a substantial minority (40%) felt it was hard to find a job (even though this was a time when unemployment was at a low of 2.9%). Both 16–19 year-olds and the over-65s were more likely than any other groups to perceive difficulties in gaining employment.

A key finding of the community survey was the “taken for granted” nature of literacy and numeracy skills. When asked the open-ended question ‘What do you consider to be the most important skills for people currently looking for employment?’ respondents gave over 40 different responses. The most frequent single response (18.3%) was computer skills, followed by training/education (14.5%), communication skills (12.0%) and a further communication skill “getting on with people”. These were followed by experience (9%).

“Willingness to work hard”, part of what employers described as a basic foundation skill, had an 8.8% response. When the 552 responses were grouped, the order changed. Foundation skills (which included work ethic, willingness to work, motivation, reliability, flexibility and loyalty) made up the largest group of responses, at 25%. Training/education, combined with ‘basic level of education’, ‘qualifications’ and ‘trade qualifications’, accounted for 22.6% of responses. Communication skills (along with the related attributes of speaking well, getting on with people, presentation and ability to follow instructions) had 20.3% of responses. Experience and personal qualities such as looking good, initiative, being healthy, honesty and commonsense had 18.8%, compared with computer skills at 13.2%.

Equally significant was that few respondents mentioned literacy skills as important for employment. Only 5.5% of the responses referred to specific traditional literacy skills: 12 responses mentioned ‘reading skills’, 14 ‘writing skills’, and 12 ‘adding skills’. Because people gave multiple responses, several said that more than one of the “three Rs” was important; however, in total only 21 respondents mentioned any of the major literacy skills without prompting.

Yet this finding was reversed when respondents were prompted. We asked four questions relating to specific employment skills; three based on the IALS
categories of prose, document, and quantitative literacy, and a fourth on computer skills. Respondents agreed overwhelmingly these skills were needed to gain employment: basic reading (87.5%); basic writing (86.3%); and number skills (86.1%). A smaller majority (59.2%) agreed on the importance of computer skills. So, while the vast majority of respondents agreed that ‘traditional’ literacy skills are needed to gain employment, few thought to mention these skills unless they were prompted.

This lack of awareness of literacy issues is further reflected in answers to an open-ended question asking where people could get help who had difficulties with reading, writing, and number skills. The wide-ranging responses revealed no clear understanding about who delivers literacy support or how to access literacy training, whilst the vast majority believed that the stigma of being identified as not being literate would be likely to stop people from taking training. Almost a third of the responses mentioned secondary school courses (not a delivery mechanism in Wanganui), with a similar number suggesting “Polytech” or “university”, while 55 respondents (13.8%) did not know. Few respondents thought of specialist literacy providers. Fifty-four people (13.5%) mentioned unspecified literacy providers. Even less specific were those who mentioned “teachers”, “private tutors”, or “courses, special classes of education”. A total of only 42 respondents (10.5%) identified - not always accurately - specific providers of literacy and numeracy services.

Respondents were asked if they knew of any adults, family and friends in the Wanganui area, who struggled with reading. More than three-quarters of the sample (78.3%) answered ‘No’. Of the 87 respondents who knew family or friends struggling with reading, 36 (41.4%) knew one person and, a surprisingly large proportion, 26.4% (23 people), knew five or more people with reading difficulties. Fewer respondents (18.3%) knew people with basic numeracy problems.

Respondents who knew people struggling with reading said they had difficulties undertaking four key tasks: problems understanding documents such as insurance claims (92%); difficulties filling out forms such as job applications (85%); difficulties reading medical information such as prescriptions (76%); and difficulties reading the road code (75%). When asked what might prevent those with literacy difficulties seeking help 57.8% referred to embarrassment or stigma in seeking help and a further 18.8% mentioned pride.

We asked community members what might make them personally decide to take further training or education. Over half the responses (52%) were related
to getting or keeping a job or earning more money. A further 28% of the responses, however, were connected with personal growth, such as for interest, self improvement, or a desire to learn. A large majority of the community believe that learning continues after people leave school. Almost 85% of the sample either strongly disagreed (71%) or disagreed (14%) with the statement, "Learning ends when you leave school", and only 5% strongly agreed. Younger people (16-24 year olds) – perhaps because many were still in education or training institutions and were looking forward to leaving them – were less supportive of lifelong learning ideals than the rest of the sample.

**Employer interviews**

Enterprise Wanganui (which represents local employers) acknowledged adult literacy, including numeracy, to be a major problem, with the Managing Director reporting on an earlier survey indicating that large Wanganui companies found that 30 to 50% of applicants were failing to meet basic entry criteria. In general, Wanganui employers we spoke to reported experiencing a local skills shortage and a lack of applicants as a result of a tight labour market. This skills shortage was across the board, from management or supervisory positions to secretarial or administrative staff. Employers in large-sized organisations generally imported people nationally and internationally, and contracted out trades work. Small businesses aimed to attract school leavers, but maintained there were problems because the community benefit is nearly equivalent to entry-level wages. Only the employer at the medium-sized business said there was a range of good applicants when advertising for staff.

Both small and large employers reported being affected by the transient nature of the youthful workforce in a provincial economy. Small business employers described a lack of return on the investment they put into training school leavers who tended to stay for a limited time, then move elsewhere, often to a larger city. A large employer indicated that his organisation regarded its training and career-path planning as a good investment in creating a loyal and motivated workforce, but agreed that young graduates tended to leave after only a few years for further career opportunities.

Adult literacy, including numeracy, was acknowledged to be a major problem. Our employers agreed that whereas people could once perform adequately at work with limited literacy skills, this was no longer the case as higher levels of literacy and numeracy skills were now required for reasons such as ability to understand basic compliance issues. However, an acknowledgement of literacy problems in the community did not necessarily extend to some interviewees’ awareness of literacy issues in their workplaces. Employers
from the big organisations along with the employer from the medium-size business were able to screen out those with lower literacy levels – either by various forms of testing such as getting them to fill out application forms on the spot or because the skills and qualifications required automatically disqualified those with low literacy and they did not apply. In contrast, small business employers mentioned difficulties finding people who could take down phone messages, do basic maths and bookkeeping. As one said “If you happen to be a couple of centimetres out, you’ve got 5,000 stickers and $1,000 worth of work up the spout.”

The Wanganui employers we spoke to lacked awareness of what is offered by education providers, particularly literacy providers, although they knew more than most community members. Employers stated that where they actually knew of literacy programmes, they did not know how to select from the providers. Experiences with providers had been both positive and negative, with employers stressing the importance of practical skills. Employers saw a primary need to identify the ‘right’ provider and to work with a provider who would carry through training with the individual to the workplace.

Among small employers, adult literacy skills were seen as the basis of effective communication including giving and receiving instructions, messages and information, interpersonal customer relations, and both following and providing correct information about measurement and volume. These small businesses expected people to already have such skills. The medium-sized business employer was adamant that literacy and numeracy skills were essential and he simply would not employ people who lacked such skills.

Significantly, most employers suggested that literacy problems are systemic; a sign of the failure of family and school systems to address basic needs. They advocated that schools take a much more directive approach in preparing students for the workforce. Linked to this was the claim by the Managing Director of Enterprise Wanganui that the education system has done a disservice to young people by pushing them towards university rather than preparing them for trades or other forms of work that might better suit their abilities. It was further noted that current apprenticeship schemes were too theoretical and too complex to meet the needs of the declining trades’ workforce. Among employers, there was also some scepticism and perhaps lack of understanding of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). In the small business focus group, laughter greeted the question, “Does NZQA understand the needs of the business situation?” In general while all employers we spoke to thought that providing training was a valuable
investment they believed they should not be responsible for the teaching of literacy and foundation skills.

**Adult literacy provider survey**
The general lack of providers' visibility was borne out by the fact that, at the beginning of the research, experienced community agencies had difficulty identifying who provided adult literacy services locally. National databases and resources were not helpful and in the first phase of the provider survey, considerable time was taken to discover providers, using a combination of networking and 'snowballing' techniques. This was partly because the number of providers fluctuated as funding regimes changed.

Literacy courses were taught in a wide variety of ways. Few providers were specialist literacy providers. A number were focused on vocational training and provided literacy through integrated literacy in the courses, and back up specialist support generally in-house, but also from other specialist providers. Others focused on special segments of the ‘market’, such as migrants, Māori and those with learning problems. All were accredited, by the NZQA, or had accreditation pending in August 2004. The length of time providers had been operating in Wanganui ranged from two months to twenty years. Client numbers varied from five to 500. Most providers said clients stayed one to two years, for others the stay was 6 to 12 months, and the shortest reported stay was under five weeks.

It was difficult to describe a ‘typical’ literacy client, but we noted the following. The ratio of males to female clients varied widely among providers, though across the board 58% were female. Only 15% of clients had English as second language. The client demographics reflected the emphasis of government funding in the area with two thirds being either unemployed or taking part in unpaid work and only 4.5% in full time work. Further, over a third of the clients were between 16 and 19 years old and just over a quarter were 20-29 with numbers tailing off fairly rapidly so that only one percent were aged over 60.

A number of providers reported that the vast majority of their clients’ literacy needs had been identified by other agencies. Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) referrals accounted for a quarter of all clients, although a further quarter was ‘self referred. Seventy-one percent of students were funded by external agencies; about two-thirds of those were funded by the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).
Providers used a wide variety of assessment tools. The majority were well-established and carefully structured but often specific to requirements of the organisations and their clients. We note this in regard to the government’s strategic goal of establishing a presumably limited number of nationally accepted assessment processes.

Providers were asked to identify what they saw as the most frequently seen literacy needs of clients. Maths was reported by 11 of the 12 providers and nine mentioned reading, writing and spelling. Communication skills and needs to build confidence were also mentioned. In response to an open-ended question, five of the providers mentioned that training for a job was a main motivation for students to improve their literacy, with four talking about the importance of tutor support and expertise. Other ‘motivators’ mentioned by several providers were ‘peer influence’, ‘self awareness’, ‘a desire to better themselves’ and ‘to help family members’. More than 80% of students finished their courses and the most frequently mentioned reason for non-completion was ‘personal reasons’. About 30% did not finish the course because they had reached the goal of a job. One theme that came out of the interviews was that Government funders need to recognise that many literacy students require further training, rather than moving straight into employment as an outcome of their course.

The providers reported a number of funding and resourcing issues. Of those funded on the basis of client numbers, half saw their funding as insufficient. A quarter of the providers felt they were not able to see their clients as frequently as necessary. A lack of funding was seen as the major challenge for the majority (60%) of providers with resources, programmes and staff training seen as the key areas needing more money. There was a great variety of specific responses to this question, which not only outlines the expanse of the problem, but also highlights the differing needs and range of needs of the providers. A range of other challenges were referred to, including the need to address multicultural needs, the need for standard assessment tools, and the changing nature of literacy in terms of technology. Some providers said that involvement and acknowledgement from the community could help improve adult literacy provision.

Providers also commented that full funding was needed, as were funds to recognise the complexity of the work and the additional social support that was often required, and the need for funding contracts to be more transparent and to last longer than one year. The volatility of funding is reflected in one organisation reporting that a staff member left in the last year because “[Work and Income] pulled funding for the position”. However, most providers
reported that new staff had joined because of new job opportunities (with one reporting a position “specifically funded by [Work and Income]”.

**Participant interviews**
The interviews produced much rich data and analysis is ongoing. Here we present some information on participants’ perceptions about learning needs, barriers to literacy and impressions about their courses. Written transcripts were examined line by line using grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992), to allow categories and constructs collapsed into codes, to surface from the participants’ own words. By this means we aimed to establish codes which were well based in participants’ statements. The intention was to ensure that each code could be supported by comments within the transcripts comprising “extensive amounts of rich data with thick description” (Charmaz 2000, p. 514). Examination of emergent codes was supported via use of the HyperResearch data analysis package. We stress that the data are qualitative and categories are often inter-related. Further, the students and the differing emphasis of their training makes generalisation fraught. However, we have used some quantitative descriptors where appropriate - the number of respondents who mentioned a particular ‘theme’ and the number of comments made about the theme. The number of comments can be regarded as some indication of the intensity of the participants’ view.

While coding was conducted without reference to any respondent’s demographics, a brief summary of demographics of the 83 participants who provided data follows. There were 43 females, slightly outnumbering the 38 males. Just over half (42) identified themselves as New Zealand European and 3 as New Zealanders. Twenty four interviewees (28.9%) identified themselves as Māori and a further ten as Māori and NZ European. Two identified as Pacific people, one Asian and one Dutch. English was the first language of 87%; Māori the first language of three respondents and another three answered English and Māori. Twenty eight percent reported Iwi affiliations. Over half the sample had had up to three years of secondary schooling (43 interviewees) or (3) primary schooling only. Another 30% reported four-plus years of secondary education, while 9% had some level of tertiary education. About 75% of the sample indicated they were students/trainees (57) or unemployed (7). Four interviewees were full-time employed (more than 30 hours a week). Eleven were part-time or casual work and six described themselves as ‘houseperson’ or retired. Forty-seven percent of the participants were between 16 and 20 and another 19% between 21 and 30, only two participants were over 60.
When discussing learning 'needs' in the framework of literacy and employment, there were 19 themed areas. Computer skills were mentioned by most participants (36) and came up 51 times. Close behind was communication skills; 34 participants mentioned these a total of 59 times. Reading and writing were mentioned by 25 participants and maths by 25. Other major needs (mentioned by more than a quarter of the participants) were one-on-one training, life skills, and 'attitude' (including confidence).

When these 19 themes were clustered into four related groups of learning needs, most comments were linked to non-traditional literacies, namely computer skills, communication skills, life skills, attitude and confidence, cultural literacy, and Te Reo. The traditional literacies (reading and or writing, maths, English and science) came next followed by a number of training needs, while other literacy needs (including academic credits, specific skills and the need for understanding) made up the final cluster.

The interviews explored aspects of the participants' life, work and school experiences and from these emerged a number of barriers to literacy learning coded according to 31 themes. These were later grouped into four clusters representing the dominant emphasis in a particular comment (self; community/family/life world; school; and training). Again, clusters are for ease of description and should not be taken to indicate the areas of concern are discrete.

The 'top seven' barriers to literacy – mentioned by most participants - are summarised here, followed by a few comments on the 'clusters'. The biggest single barrier to literacy was health-related: 42 participants mentioned a wide range of physical and mental health problems. Various aspects of the family environment (including lack of support for learning at home, family violence, a parent dying, divorce and being removed from school by a parent) were mentioned as a barrier by 39 respondents, while 38 respondents mentioned goal orientation (lack of goals, feeling disempowered, having no role models). School not meeting their needs (ranging from finding it boring, not fitting in, to lack of pastoral care) was mentioned by 33 respondents; 27 mentioned poor teaching (including racism, refusing to answer questions, putting students down, and using physical punishment); and 25 commented on peer pressure at school (being with the 'wrong crowd', distraction in class, or bullying). Twenty-two participants commented that struggling to balance work commitments with study or having to give up study to take on work was a barrier.
When the barriers to literacy are clustered, poor experiences at school emerges as significant. As well as the barriers described above, 16 participants commented that moving schools had created a problem; 15 said that school had not catered for their learning style; 12 mentioned their own behaviour at school; 9 mentioned truancy; 4 commented that school streaming had adversely affected them; and 2 mentioned problems with overcrowding.

However, participants clearly faced a number of formidable personal and family/community/life world issues. In terms of 'self', as reported above, nearly half of the respondents mentioned health barriers. We note, though, that this was frequently a socio-economic barrier because a lack of resources for dealing with health problems contributed to the barrier to learning. Again as above, 38 respondents commented on a lack of goals or feeling unable to meet or set goals. Further, 17 participants mentioned attitude or motivation levels as a barrier; comments from 10 suggested lack of confidence held them back; and nine respondents did not see literacy as necessary. We note too that this may not be strictly a 'self' factor as these respondents may not have been exposed to the experiences that construct literacy either as a means to an end or a goal in itself.

In terms of family/community/life world barriers, as reported above, nearly half the participants (39) identified a literacy barrier in their family situation and 22 had difficulty juggling work and study. Additionally, 18 participants mentioned difficulty juggling family or community commitments or these commitments making them give up study; 16 mentioned economic barriers (such as cost of courses, the need to work and economic factors in the family background that limited learning opportunities); 13 mentioned the lack of support or negativity from family, friends, colleagues or others in the community which held them back in their literacy learning. Lack of transport or geographic isolation was a past or present barrier for 12, and two mentioned not having been taught Te Reo, as a barrier.

Training barriers were mentioned by relatively few. Five commented on the stigma of using literacy services as a barrier; 5 that training was at the wrong level (mainly, it was too easy); 4 mentioned difficulties with others on their course; 4, the lack of availability of training; 2, the lack of awareness of training; and one, a specific issue with management of an earlier course.

Participants were also asked about their course. Perception of benefits from courses typically related to the whole person and their life world rather than to just literacy mechanics. The stand-out benefit, mentioned by 36 participants, was confidence, achievement and motivation (including an improved sense of
wellbeing, an increased sense of empowerment and ability to reach goals). This was followed by employment (being offered a job, or improving employment chances through work experience) mentioned by 20. Nineteen said communication with their partner or family had improved; 16 mentioned life skills; 10 the qualification; and 9 the social contact through the course or social networks formed as a result. Other course benefits included reading, writing and maths (8), and computer and learning skills (6 respondents each).

Participants were positive about their courses often contrasting their experience with earlier negative ones. The greatest number (19) mentioned good teaching (especially approachable tutors). Twelve respondents nominated the positive aspects of small group learning; 6 mentioned individually-paced learning; 5 one-on-one learning; 4 a positive relaxed atmosphere; and 4 encouragement and constructive support.

**Implications**

Our project has allowed us the privilege of meeting and learning from a wide variety of Wanganui people who discussed their needs and aspirations. Yet it has only begun to illuminate the complexities of the many literacies for individuals and their communities. This section, however, outlines some implications for policy and practice in the light of findings so far.

A major theme was low awareness of issues surrounding literacy. This was a striking finding from the community survey. With so few mentioning literacy skills as important for employment when not prompted, but the vast majority saying basic literacy was vital when prompted, we conclude that most community members take basic literacy skills for granted. There appears to be a gap between the general community and key community stakeholders (including those in social and health services, Police, Work and Income, Corrections, and employers’ representatives) who recognise negative social and economic outcomes related to a “shortage” of literacy skills.

Government concern is also based on the perception of a national “deficit” in terms of adult literacy being viewed as functional literacy skills to enhance economic well-being. Policy is geared to raising literacy standards by enhanced recognition of individual need, a more coherent delivery system, and better measurement of teaching success. However, relatively few community member (less than a quarter) knew anyone who had difficulties with basic traditional literacies; they had little awareness of how to access literacy training, and a majority thought that ‘stigma’ and embarrassment would stop people from taking training.
All this makes for a difficult environment in which to improve adult literacy. While raising awareness of support agencies and providers is an important first step, it is also vital not to put further pressure on vulnerable people who are already in danger of being stigmatised and may already have had negative experiences of education. In discussing Canadian awareness campaigns, Darville (1992) pointed to “the tendency of media coverage and advertisements to depict people with low literacy skills as social outcasts and incompetents”.

Interviews with course participants revealed their appreciation of wider benefits from training, and how they saw non-traditional literacies, especially whole person development, as the critical needs in employment. This aligns with employers’ emphases on life skills and communication. However, course participants are in a small minority of those in need, according to IALS. Many in our study have attended as a result of a push factor, such as pressure by Work and Income, or are learning literacy skills and gaining wider confidence about learning as an unexpected side effect of undertaking specific courses like computer training.

Our interviews made only a preliminary investigation of learning styles and, while participants clearly used multiple learning, most comments related to visual, auditory or kinaesthetic factors. With such a tentative exploration we can draw no conclusions, but difficulties of being able to employ a wide range of teaching approaches in the traditional classroom situation may have added to the bad sense of ‘fit’ that many of the participants reported in the schooling situation.

All this adds to challenges faced by providers. Tutors and providers we spoke to understood the needs of their students. They recognised the impact of context in motivational teaching and those delivering various vocational courses taught literacy as an integrated part of the course. Some providers are able to provide extra support from literacy specialist who can help tutors to construct lessons to incorporate literacy and numeracy and give extra support for students in need. This all requires extra funding. On top of this the ways in which our respondents have identified problems around their health as impeding their literacy, for example, suggest the need for literacy interventions to be built upon individualised plans that meet a person’s particular needs. Not all providers can do this. A number of providers raised, unprompted, the importance of the wider needs of the students, some speaking passionately about the need for social support.
In Wanganui, both course participants and literacy providers indicated that holistic approaches which could accommodate students' wider physical and social needs are not yet sufficiently catered for. The provider survey indicated funding is especially a limiting factor. Further, funding mechanisms do restrict the kinds of programmes offered, frequently tying them into employment outcomes. However, it has to be noted here that employment is a big 'carrot'. Participants frequently sought employment from their courses and for the majority of community members, employment demands would be the main reason they would consider further training.

Despite the funding emphasis on employment, employers generally feel their needs are not being met. Their hopes for a young person with foundation 'living' skills, the right attitude and sound functional literacy appear at odds with what can be 'produced' by providers with limited time and resources. When trainees do get a job their training generally ceases, as only larger companies can afford to offer on-the-job training for anything but immediately needed specific skills. Employers, however, did recognise the value of continuing training, not the least because need for literacy skills has grown in all varieties of employment.

Future directions could be perhaps forged by funding for a more flexible delivery of continued training, including some form of employer compensation. A number of the participants were for the first time experiencing the positive benefits of formal learning; and this could be built upon. Lifelong learning remains as a critical part of the solution to persisting low adult literacy, in our view. Lifelong learning has had its ups and downs in New Zealand, but as Benseman (2005:36) points out, "there have been a range of developments over the past few years that point to a greater acceptance of lifelong learning ideals".

Conclusions

Although the entire programme is still not much past its mid-way point, researchers in the university and community have already been able to identify the value of a holistic approach that incorporates multiple research methods, each of which has the potential to shed light on earlier findings. We have experienced what are perhaps the usual challenges of community-based research, with disparate needs and points of view, but our collective successes to date have been entirely dependent on strong and enduring community links. The investigation continues with further interviews with providers and participants and some action research projects. With ongoing, wholehearted community support for the programme, we believe that further insights into the
complex web of adult literacy and employment remain to be teased out progressively over time.

References


URL_ID=35939&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
Retrieved 15 December 2005