

# Pathways to Literacy

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What are the pathways by which people with low functional literacy in English find their way into improved competency? In one-to-one interviews we asked 90 people undertaking literacy training courses to tell us what pathways or conduits had been important for them in improving their literacy.

This research programme was initiated by the Wanganui District Library in collaboration with the Department of Communication and Journalism, later joined by the Whanganui Community Foundation, Literacy Aotearoa (Wanganui), and Te Puna Mātauranga O Whanganui.

This poster displays actual quotations from interviews with people of low functional literacy in English. All were taking part in adult literacy training courses and were volunteer participants in this research into adult literacy and employment. Each quotation occurs within an illustration showing people and photographic backgrounds of Wanganui. The illustrator, Kerry Ann Lee, developed these depicted persons following the actual demographics of our interviewees: ages, gender, ethnicity, etc., though, for reasons of privacy, without knowing the specifics of the individuals originally making the comments.

## Objectives

1. to document interviewees' experiences in a vivid manner
2. to seek ways to keep interviewees' words in a prominent place in the forefront of the research
3. to find ways in which interviewees' own words might have an appropriate influence in debate about national literacy and employment policy
4. later to provide feedback to interviewees on what they and others had said in a supportive and accessible manner.



account broader perspectives from possibly better-informed people outside one's own personal network (bridging capital) (Putnam, 2000).



## 1. Family/ Support Environment

Support for a person's educational aspirations comes most directly from the people who are closest in one's life. These comprise our bonding or relational social capital. The importance of social capital is reinforced by the recent Growth & Innovation Advisory Board study (2004) which found that New Zealanders' personal networks are the most critical. However, a person's reliance on those closest to him or her (bonding capital) may fail to take into

## 2. How You Found This Course

Our interviewees described many different pathways into learning but most often interpersonal contact with others was the crucial factor in a person's decision to undertake a particular course. If adult literacy policy is to be truly inclusive, it needs to contain the wherewithal to market courses to potential participants in ways that that they find attractive and engaging.

## 3. Support from Teacher or Other Key Person

The influence of a sympathetic teacher was especially important if other aspects of a person's life had not been going well. This research strongly reinforces the importance of students completing their secondary schooling as a means of attempting to break cycles of disadvantage.



## 4. Goal Orientation

For many of our interviewees, an impetus for engaging in literacy learning was when some goal orientation kicked in for them. Sources of such a goal were diverse, ranging from a newly identified desirable career or occupation, rejection of continued low income, or a sense of family obligation or wish to serve others' needs.

## 5. Personal Recommendation

Word of mouth was the most important means whereby interviewees found out about literacy learning and started to comprehend its benefits. This information tended to come from a person's most trusted friends. However major mismatches existed between what individuals originally thought literacy comprised, and the actual personal development that they realised was entailed once learning was underway.

## 6. Work Experience

Adult literacy is one facet of human capital, complemented by interactional skills, self-confidence in decision-making and identifying workplace improvements. Yet human capital needs to be seen within a context of organisational capital, being the application of human competencies within workplace environments.

## 7. Wish to Assist Others

People take many, varied pathways into literacy learning, and their motivations for such learning and for persistence in it are diverse. For example, "literacy programmes for Māori are not only about reading and writing ... they are also about outcomes, which show that people have increased cultural and political knowledge" (*Te Kāwai Ora*, 2001, p. 35).

## 8. Need for a Qualification

Human development needs inherent in the globalising, technologically-dependent workplace are complex and demand a highly skilled workforce. In order to achieve this outcome, lifelong learning, as an approach that values wider skills and continual learning (rather than just funding for functional skills to obtain employment) needs to be emphasised and valued in policy.

## References

Growth & Innovation Advisory Board (2004). *Research summary: Research on growth and innovation*. Accessed on July 4, 2006, from <http://www.giab.govt.nz/work-programme/growth/research-summary/research-summary.pdf>

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone; The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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