

Barriers to Literacy

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What are the major barriers for people with low functional literacy in English that have prevented them finding their way into improved competency? In one to one interviews we asked 90 people undertaking literacy training courses to tell us what they perceived as their most significant barriers. 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 featured against photographic backgrounds of Wanganui. The illustrator, Kerry Ann Lee, developed these depicted persons following the 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.



1. Health-related or Physical

The most frequently mentioned individual barrier to literacy was health-related or physical problems. Next most significant was schooling not meeting people's needs, then what interviewees saw as low personal goal orientation or inability to attain a personal goal. Respondents described these three barriers of health, schooling and goals very frequently, indicating them as the barriers to literacy about which they were most passionate or troubled.



2. Problems at School

Interviewees often stated that they found it difficult to relate to forms of teaching, such as ways in which material was presented in the classroom. Many found themselves unable to access academic ways of knowing, and would often comment on how they learned best via activities of some kind. Schools might observe that they are not well resourced to meet a variety of students' differing learning styles in the one classroom.



3. Goal Orientation

Goal orientation is linked to many other factors including family income, learning resources at home, isolation, transport difficulties, self-confidence, self-esteem, support networks, plus encouragement at school and barriers such as health or negative peer pressure. Before a young person can become strongly goal oriented, interventions are needed to diminish barriers and align personal supports in systematic and persisting ways.



4. Attitude or Motivation

Self-esteem, self-belief, self-confidence and motivation to learn are all linked. Achieving higher standards of literacy does not seem especially relevant to people who have written themselves off as potential learners. But motivation to learn may increase when a person takes stock of their life, often following positive influence from a trusted person such as a family member or respected school teacher.



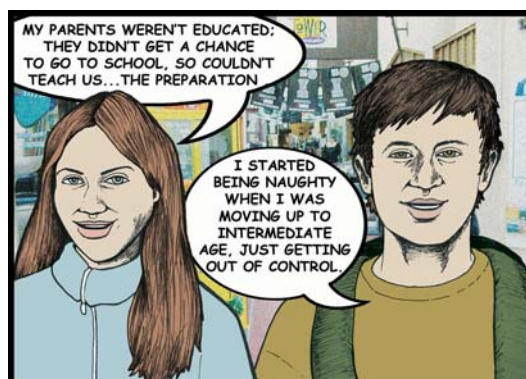
5. Lack of Confidence

Many support factors are needed before people can advance in their learning. If severe limitations exist on income, security, health, or many other supports that underpin a young person's readiness to learn, then the early steps towards a profession or trade may indeed be too big an ask.



6. Economic Barrier

In a condition of very low income, attending adult literacy classes is especially difficult. An urgent focus for literacy policy must be how to keep children in school. NZ research has demonstrated that level of educational attainment is the "strongest predictor of subsequent adult literacy proficiency" (Culligan et al., 2004, p. 53). That is, once students have prematurely given up on school, or vice versa, their likelihood of ever achieving a high level of literacy is slender.



7. Family Environment

Urgent efforts are needed to engage people of low functional literacy in on-going training. OECD (2000) and NZ (Culligan et al., 2004) research demonstrates that participation in adult literacy training increases as literacy proficiency increases, while those at the lowest levels participate least. This suggests a kind of "Matthew effect" (Sligo, 1997) whereby "to those that hath, it shall be given; from those that hath not, it shall be taken away."



8. Lack of Transport; Isolation

Multiple disadvantages such as poverty, transport difficulties, and a family need to shift locations compound to undermine literacy attainment. Achievements such as sporting success are potentially of great transformational importance in a young person's life, and may comprise a conduit into success. But a young person who feels cheated out of some opportunity might or might not be able to rise above such a challenge in the short to medium term.

References

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