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# **Breaking Through The Dumb Barrier**

**An in-depth study of the signals  
the education system sends to  
adults in adult education**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Education  
(Adult Education)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores some of the aspects faced by students who return to learning after a number of years out of the education system in New Zealand.

It highlights issues which affect confidence, acceptance, access to information, ability to be heard, finances, workloads, family/friend relationships and the many realities of being an adult student. At the same time it rejoices in the strength, courage and determination shown by those who have dared to return to formal education.

A number of case studies and focus groups have been used to develop the critical analysis. Past and present literature has assisted in creating the anchor to the ideas that have emerged.

A combination qualitative and interpretive methodology was followed in the production of this thesis. The reality that unfolded was a recognition of also needing to develop a workable framework, as personal assumptions were left behind, new information was discovered and became an integral part of the environment and subsequent information sharing of the researcher and the study participants.

The experience of each and every one of this group provided both questions and answers to the usefulness of past and current systems in terms of positive facilitation into education. The failure of the system with its dependency on academic correctness and academic systems will require a more open and transparent re-culturing to enable equitable opportunity, encouragement and practice, or the changes will remain cosmetic and result in sameness.

Systems, while necessary, are not in themselves enabling. They can be useful tools to ensure enabling, but if they serve only to disable the very people who are left with no choices but to try to navigate them, then the quest for education can be lost.

Education is for people, it is about people, and only if it retains this focus will it continue to educate.

Each of the stories in this thesis has at the root of each individual's success, a thread of how "an enabling person" (or persons) made the difference to a system that was fraught with difficulties, that was often cold, inhuman and unbending. These were the lucky ones as, like me, they too came to realise that the system sends very mixed messages to some people. This is not the way it should be.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

In reflecting about why I did this work and about those who “enabled” me, and knowing how this made a difference to my life, I made the decision that my thesis would not be complete if I did not acknowledge them and dedicate my work to them.

I begin with my mother, who was the epitome of the way women don't give up and just get on with the job because there are no choices. The world is a better place because you were here. I thank you for the quiet, and sometimes not so quiet, determination you always exhibited in your life and for your influence in my love of words and reading, and most of all for knowing that there was goodness to be found in most people, it was just a matter of looking really hard sometimes.

I acknowledge the courage and strength of all those who participated with me and have allowed me to tell their stories. You have made my life so much richer for your giving and my hope is that your stories will also give strength to the others who come after us.

I acknowledge, with gratitude that while it may have taken me almost a lifetime to meet the “champion of enablers”, my journey has been made so much more worthwhile for finding that person in Marg Gilling. What happened to that mould? I hereby declare it a national treasure.

I would like to acknowledge with love, gratitude and respect my children, Catherine and Jonathan – my reason for being. You grew up with books and study and never ever went on holiday without mum's “school work”. I thank you for never complaining, and I thank you for your faith in me as your

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This thesis is for all those, who like me, stand on the brink of life and dare to question things that do not make the world a better place. I live in hope that your stories, your courage and your strength will open ears and get the attention of those in "academia" who have the power to make so much difference to so many people.

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