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Unravelling Mysteries of  
The Great Learning  
Divide:  
Barriers to Learning

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

At Massey University, Palmerston North,  
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## Section A

## Abstract

This thesis was motivated by a personal determination to alter my own beliefs about what I, as a learner, was capable of achieving and, in the process, unravel some of the mysteries surrounding students who leave school with low, or no, educational attainment.

My own limited school achievements, and subsequent success as an adult learner, have led me to question the appropriateness and relevance of our formal learning and teaching systems, particularly at school, but also in the adult sector. By looking deeply into the human mechanisms of learning and other influential factors I began to understand why my school experience had been so inadequate and gained some insight into why it is that our school learning systems are destined to fail a great number of its students.

My investigation aimed to identify why some of us appear to fail to discover our learning potential whilst others around us seem to excel. How is it that so many young people (approximately 40%) leave their schooling without gaining even the most basic skills required to enable them to manage many of the critical applications of living? Is this a reflection of ability, or does this indicate something else? What blocks or barriers have these individuals met/faced? What limitations have been imposed or imagined? How can the educators support the kind of education that enables all children grow into complete and fulfilled adults able to contribute something (positive) to their society?

Looking at Adult Learning Theories what strikes me is how these theories seem so perfectly applicable across all learning and teaching situations. They are not 'rocket science', as the saying goes, but perfectly logical and reasonable assumptions about the needs, motivations and goals of the majority of learners. Why are they not more widely employed? Memories of my own secondary school learning suggest that these theories have not been a feature of our formal school systems. Had they been I believe some of us might have achieved different outcomes.

## Preface

Within the following pages is the culmination of thoughts, reflections, questions and ideas that have nagged at me for many years. The fact that this document has finally made it to print is no less than a miracle.

With myself as a case study I began my inquiry with the belief that school attainment, mine and others, was not necessarily reflective of our innate individual possibilities (potential). My inquiry was not established to prove or disprove my theory but rather to investigate the factors that may lead to some of us not reaching our educational aspirations at school.

When the journey began in 2004 I had no idea of the challenges ahead of me, and I don't mean the endless hours of reading and data review. Considering my topic it is highly appropriate that, in undertaking a study of "barriers" to learning and achievement, I should, during the creation of my thesis, have to meet and overcome a significant number of personal challenges or barriers – and I have.

## Acknowledgements

Regular interactions with my supervisors provided invaluable advice, feedback, support, and encouragement, without which this marathon may never have been concluded. My appreciation and gratitude to them both; Dr. Linda Leach who has been with me throughout this prolonged journey and helped me to maintain a tangible hold on my goals and Associate Professor Nick Zepke whose particular style of feedback has surprised, challenged and encouraged me in my endeavours. My learning has been enhanced by their input. The end result is testament to the power of self-belief and determination.

To my friend, Dianne, a special thank you for taking time out of your weekend to proof read some of my work.

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## Glossary

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Syndrome: abr. ADHD** is a common cause of learning difficulties in children. It is generally agreed among the scientific community that ADHD is a biological condition resulting from dysfunction in the brain.

**Decile Rating:** The Ministry of Education gives each secondary school a Decile rating between one and 10. This rating is based on census information regarding the socio-economic status of the community it operates in. Decile One schools are the 10% of schools with the highest level of enrolment from low socio-economic communities, whilst Decile 10 have the lowest number of such students.

**Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand: abr. DFNZ.** The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand is a registered Charitable Trust that was established in October 2006, to provide a voice for and services to all dyslexic people in NZ and those supporting them.

**Dyslexia:** Dyslexia is a spectrum of specific learning difficulties and is evident when accurate and/or fluent reading and writing skills, particularly phonological awareness, develop incompletely or with great difficulty. This may include difficulties with one or more of reading, writing, spelling, numeracy or musical notation. These difficulties are persistent despite access to learning opportunities that are effective and appropriate for most other children. (MOE, 2007, working definition)

**Education:** The Collins English Dictionary describes 'education' as "the act or process of acquiring knowledge, especially systematically during childhood and adolescence, the knowledge or training acquired by this process, the act or process of imparting knowledge, especially at school, college or university, the theory of teaching and learning, a particular kind of instruction (e.g. a university education)". (Collins, 1994) For the purposes of this research and the discussions within it, 'education' describes the formal process from which learning for life and employment is gained.

Achievement, in the context of education and learning, refers to the acquisition of recognised educational accomplishments; for example School Certificate or NCEA Level One, University Entrance or NCEA Level Two, Bursary or NCEA Level Three, National Certificate in Business Administration and Computing Level Three)

**Education Review Office: abr. ERO.** ERO reviews schools and early childhood education services every three years, and publishes national reports on current education practice.

**Evidence Based Practices:** According to MOE (2005) this means “a combination of research, which links actions and behaviours to students’ academic and social outcomes; data and information about student learning progress (from assessments, teacher observations, student work samples, and feedback from students families and whanau); and information about students and their lives outside school.” (MOE, 2005)

**Ministry of Education: abr. MOE.** The Ministry of Education works directly for the Minister and Associate Minister of Education, and the Minister and Associate Ministers for Tertiary Education. They are primarily involved in policy development and review.

**National Certificate in Educational Achievement: abr. NCEA.** NCEA is New Zealand's main national qualification for secondary school students and part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It has replaced School Certificate and University Entrance as secondary school qualifications.

**New Zealand Qualifications Authority: abr. NZQA.** The New Zealand Qualifications Authority is the National Body that co-ordinates qualifications in secondary schools and in post-school education and training.

**Tertiary Education Commission: abr. TEC.** TEC is the government agency responsible for administering funding to tertiary institutions on behalf of the Government.

## Section B

# Chapter One - Introduction

## Background

Whilst researching information for a study on 'Intelligence' I recall reading about the development of the early intelligence (IQ) tests; and how their main purpose was to identify those children who, the teachers believed, were most likely to succeed (academically), and, by default, those who were least likely to succeed in the (academic) school system. The assumption here was that IQ tests accurately measure (intellectual) ability.

Not surprisingly there was an element of the self-fulfilling prophecy whereby those who performed poorly in the IQ tests (for whatever reason) were given little help or encouragement from the teachers (to do anything educationally significant) and so fell out into the cavernous gap the system had created.

Thank goodness things have changed! Or, have they? The 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALs) Report indicated that a large number of New Zealanders lack the literacy and numeracy capabilities to, independently, manage many of the expectations of everyday life. From the analysis of the IALs test results it became clear that, amongst our New Zealand adult population, approximately 40% had left school with inadequate skills. Currently around 20% of young New Zealanders reportedly leave school with minimal or no educational qualifications. Approximately 12% of these are recorded as having achieved "little or no formal attainment". (MOE, 2005, Education Counts > Statistics: Schooling > School Leavers <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/statistics/>)

Recent Ministry of Education Statistics tell us that around 25% of school leavers have gained no or low qualifications whilst at secondary school and many of these have markedly low levels of literacy. (Statistical Information about students leaving secondary schools during 2003, [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)) In 2003 15.3% of school leavers (8195 students) left with no qualifications, whilst a further 9.3% (4983 students) achieved only a few credits (14+) at Level 1. The same report reveals that a further

8.2% (4398 students) left school having achieved NCEA at Level 1 only. In 2005 and 2006 evidence suggests the low or non achievement figure has dropped slightly to around 18-20%.

Some educationalists might have us believe we are in the midst of a learning revolution where schools and teachers recognise and make due consideration of students' differing and very individual needs. These results do not assure us of this. A more individualised approach is one of the intended revisions to current policy. In July 2005 The Minister of Education said, in support of the 2005-2010 Schooling Strategy, that he believes "we can aspire to a schooling system which challenges and supports all students to achieve their full potential..." Two years into this new strategy I wonder, are we on the right track?

Standardised testing (particularly the old IQ tests) is reportedly out of fashion and there is agreement that every person has an equitable right to and opportunity for quality education opportunities. These statistics suggest that there are still a significant number of us for whom the traditional education system is not working. Are the new policies likely to positively impact on the lost 25% of 2003?

My own schooling could be described a 'traditional' in the Western European sense. Class placement at secondary school was determined by ones achievement in a series of standardised pre-entry tests. Classes were streamed from A (highest) to F (lowest). My class of 3B (as with 3A) was filled with bright-eyed individuals exuding an abundance of potential and the expectation of high academic achievement. I wonder how many fulfilled that expectation. The system may claim to have given them the best opportunities to do so, but I for one failed to meet those high expectations in many areas.

Why do some of us fail discover our potential whilst others around us seem to excel? How do so many (25- 30%) come out of their schooling without gaining even the most basic skills required to enable them to manage many of the critical applications of living? What blocks or barriers have these individuals met/faced? What limitations

have been imposed or imagined? How can we, the educators, trainers, teachers support the development of a true 'knowledge society' where all our children grow into complete and fulfilled adults able to contribute something (positive) to their society? What can we do differently to better support those for whom the system appears to be failing?

This is not about to evolve into a teacher-bashing session, yet, inevitably asking these questions leads us to search deeply into the education and training systems that we all experience for at least ten years of our lives, and possibly as many as fifteen or even twenty, and the principles and beliefs upon which those systems are based.

### My Story

"Why are you wasting your time on that study rubbish?" my husband enquired one day "What use will it be?" *"I am doing it because I now know I can!"* I replied. "Why don't you do something more useful like cooking my dinner?" he responded, dismissively. I felt another failure looming.

#### First Impressions:

In accordance with New Zealand's socially expected norm, at the age of five I was marched off to my first school. And marching I did, for two miles down the road to the local country school. Here I was initiated into the wonderful world of learning, a world with four specialist subjects; comparison, competition, assimilation and normalisation. I learned to read and to write. I learned that it is important to be the best. I learned to run and play sport. I learned that it is important to win. I learned to judge myself against others. I learned to wear labels.

My early memories of primary school are sketchy, but I do remember being very excited for my first school. I did enjoy the learning. I was extremely shy and remember, on my first day, being too frightened to ask permission to leave to go to the toilet. The discomfort I bore for the rest of that day was a damp reminder of my stupidity. At that age, for me, teacher's approval was paramount, and the teacher was pretty close to 'God'.

I believe I was mentally well equipped for reading and writing; my father's influence. I loved reading and writing and, apparently, performed at a reading age two years ahead of my actual age, progressing to Year 2 level within six months of starting school. By year 7 and 8 (then form one and two) reports reveal that I had settled to a more average performance overall, but continued to demonstrate strong ability in language.

#### Changing Impressions:

Changing schools may not impact seriously on the academic learning in the early years, but it certainly challenges one's social skills. By the time I was eleven I had attended four different schools. My parents were share-milkers; dairy farmers who contracted to manage another's farm and dairy herd and received a share of the profits. These contracts were normally short term, most frequently one or two seasons (years). I was lucky to spend four years at my third school and it was here that I won prizes at agricultural day and made two life-long friends. On reflection, my departure from this school marked a decline in my motivation and performance. But despite the moves, once I had overcome the initial first day or first week nervousness I relished most days I spent at each of my primary schools. In my country schools I had the same teacher for almost every subject and the same classmates. It made for continuity in learning. This could be a serious disadvantage if one developed a bad relationship with one's teacher, but my ingrained need to please probably ensured that never happened.

#### Second Impressions:

School days are supposed to be the best of our lives, but, from the age of thirteen, I hated them! I worked conscientiously, attended regularly and, for the most part, kept up with my work expectations. My school reports, whilst never 'bad' usually contained some comments indicating that teachers felt that my achievements did not accurately reflect my potential. I made a genuine attempt to make some sense of the copious quantity of notes and references presented by each of my teachers but struggled to see how it was in any way relevant to my future. Doing well at secondary school was always my goal, but in the end, 'successful' is not how I describe my secondary school years.

Amongst my most vivid school day memories are those times spent with friends, English lessons with Miss Newton, school musical productions, and those disgustingly unattractive 'bloomers' we had to wear for PE.

#### Parental Impressions:

I am aware of the powerful influence parental attitudes had on my behaviour and my achievements during my secondary school years. Both saw value in education and wanted us to do well. My father held high expectations for us, particularly for linguistic correctness, and for broad general knowledge. I constantly aspired to be good enough to receive his praise but rarely did. When I ventured to seek information from him I was frequently asked, "Don't you know that? What do they teach you at school?" His responses left me feeling deflated and stupid. Over time questions to my father ceased.

My mother was more encouraging, although, her confession that she too had never had much success at mathematics only supported my developing view that I had little hope in that subject! Her own memories of school were not entirely positive. My mother did show some interest in my work and generally appeared happy if she felt I was doing my best, but I was left with the clear impression that it was up to me to just get on with it.

#### Positive Impressions:

Secondary school was definitely a low point in my educational experience, but it was not all bad. Some of my favourite memories from secondary school are of my times in the school choir. We were fortunate to have an inspiring music teacher and choir master who produced some exceptional school performances. The benefits (social, personal and educational) gained from participating in these extraordinary events were immeasurable.

Music gave me a buzz; still does. I especially loved to sing. I was never going to be a Hayley Westenra but once produced my own unique rendition of House of the Rising

Sun to our entire school at morning assembly. This unexpected performance from one of their most unassuming students must have been a huge shock for my teachers, and peers. I recall that it was a particular source of amusement for my geography teacher who compared me to the then famous folk-rock singer, Janis Joplin. At the time I was not sure whether to be flattered or insulted; it briefly put me at the centre of attention. From the perspective of a fifteen year old it seemed that fame could be a guaranteed ticket to popularity and I was hoping for a bit of that.

#### Relevant Impressions:

When I reflect on my time in secondary school I recall an overall feeling of confusion. I wanted to do well but could not come to terms with the endless learning and memorising of information, much of which was of minimal or no interest to me at the time. I had no aspirations to be a scientist of any kind, yet it was compulsory to study at least one of Biology, Chemistry or Physics. If I had been able to choose I would have studied only English, French, Music and Drama, and perhaps another language. I was interested in learning German but I discovered that French and German were considered alternatives rather than choices. Music and Art also clashed on the timetable.

Somehow I never managed to find any real sense of meaning and purpose from anything at secondary school and by the fifth form (year 11) I was beginning to feel less than competent. Actually I considered myself a very 'average' student. A few years later, having completed a three year primary teacher training certificate, it was this deep seated image of mediocrity, coupled with an anxiety about failure that led me to decide against enrolling for a further year, as many of my associates did. I believed that I did not possess the capability to complete a Bachelor of Education degree; no-one explained to me that I had already completed some of the papers. University was only for the highly intelligent and academically capable and I had no reason to believe I belonged in that category.

#### Strong Impressions:

From an early age I appeared to have a natural aptitude for English and became quite an expert in the particulars of spelling and grammar. Creative writing too was an area

of achievement for me. It was also an area for escape from an increasing sense of being a failure. A natural writer and competent reader, I found English lessons enjoyable and rewarding. Music was another area of pleasure and I managed to achieve average results in French. I felt an affinity with things French and an interest that the teacher managed to hold, so I enjoyed those classes too. Unfortunately, success at secondary school was dependent on more than one or two subjects. There was also Geography, Biology, Science, and of course, the dreaded Mathematics to conquer!

#### Weak Impressions:

Mathematics was another thing altogether. Algebra had me totally beaten from the start and, when my third form (year 9) teacher was not able to adequately explain the mysteries of it I slowly faded into the background. With another 35 pupils to attend to I guess he cannot be held completely accountable for my mathematical ineptitudes, but the experience of repeated failure certainly reinforced my own quickly developing view that I was never going to master mathematics.

I entered the fourth form programmed for ultimate failure in mathematics. Along with two friends, both equally disheartened and wanting to focus on something more positive, we set up 'the failure challenge'. The challenge was to achieve the lowest possible marks in any test. The criteria for entry into this challenge included fully attempting every question to the best of our ability. The teacher simply accepted our proven ineptitude and largely ignored us for the rest of the year. Nothing was done to improve the quality or achievement of our time allocated to mathematics. No one seemed to care. Possibly they were overwhelmed – it was a large class. We amused ourselves quietly with various activities but few of them were mathematical.

#### Insurmountable Impressions:

Fifth form was School Certificate year, now NCEA level one. My greatest challenge was staying awake long enough to complete my endless mountain of homework. I was up at 6.30 every morning, left the house at 7.15, cycled twenty minutes to catch the bus, arriving at school at 8.30 a.m. The school day ended at 3.35, buses left 10 minutes later and at 4.30 I was on my bicycle again making my way home, mostly

uphill! It was a long and tiring day and I would far rather have gone out and helped my father with the animals than stayed in my room studying for a science test.

On reflection I think I was suffering a sort of depression for much of my fifth and sixth form years. There were so many subjects, so much to do and all of it involved copying endless notes and diagrams, learning masses of facts and figures, many of which I had little real understanding, in order to be able to regurgitate them in some meaningful order in an examination or test. Perhaps that was the critical factor, it all lacked meaning – for me. It became too hard; a struggle against perpetual tiredness and lack of focus. I closeted myself away in my form room most lunch times, doing what I loved – writing. I produced stories and poetry and held conversations with my then favourite teacher. She was a major ray of sunshine in an otherwise meaningless and exhausting routine.

Teachers were always hugely important to me and I consider myself fortunate to have had two very good ones – both of them English teachers. What made one teacher so special was her ability to really take an interest in each of us as individuals. She would always make time to listen. She also shared her own life, which made her a real human being, rather than a font of all knowledge. The other fostered my particular talent and interest in reading and language and lent me books from her personal collection. She was probably most influential in my choice to go ahead with my interview for teacher training.

#### Future Choices:

It was clear to me that both my parents considered schooling important and wanted me to do well, particularly in the academic side of it. I was more interested in the arts and fantasised about being an actress, or a writer. My mother made it clear that, in her view, acting was not a 'real' career option. She expressed her views emphatically and, probably because her approval was still important to me, I became a primary teacher. One interview, three years of study and one year classroom teaching and I received my Diploma. As I recall, in addition to my English teacher's encouragement, this career choice was prompted by the fact that several of my classmates and good friends were

going on to teachers college. Ironically, since Teachers College, I have lost touch with all of them.

### Third Impressions:

It was a very young and naive sixteen and a half year old who left secondary school to enter Teachers Training College. I was articulate, well presented and interviewed well. I was told I had done well to be accepted at such a young age, yet felt ashamed of my school achievements. I had achieved only two School Certificate passes, English and French, obtained Sixth Form Certificate in five subjects, but failed to achieve consistently enough to be accredited with University Entrance. I had struggled to prepare for the University Entrance examinations, finding them extremely stressful and failed to 'cut the mustard'.

At Teachers College I did well in my course work, especially English, yet failed my first end-of-year examinations and had to re-sit. I found it difficult to concentrate for long periods and struggled to organise my thoughts under the pressure of examination conditions; I actually expected to fail. I can recall sitting in one examination and breaking out into a cold sweat as I strained to recall the information I had attempted to cram into my exhausted brain the previous day.

Again, music became a major attraction. Our tutorials were usually quite formal but whenever I could I escaped to the music room and composed simple tunes. Most of our work was assessed in groups and as one who was not good at putting 'me' forward, I generally took a back seat, quietly offering ideas, but never taking the lead. I passed my music option, but achieved only a 'C'.

Meeting assignment deadlines too were often an insurmountable challenge; under the pressure of high expectations I found it difficult to transfer my thoughts to a logical and coherent written presentation. Frequently I scraped in at the last minute with something that was at best mediocre. I passed, but was rarely proud of my work. I always felt I should be able to do better but failed at the last post.

On reflection I believe the struggle was predominantly to do with confidence, or rather the lack of it. All my 'failures' were flavoured by an inherent lack of self-belief; I simply wasn't clever enough. My anxieties were ultimately my undoing. They interfered with my concentration so much that even an average achievement under examination conditions involved extreme mental and emotional conflict. The results only confirmed my beliefs about my ability.

#### The Burning Question:

What happened to transform the bright inquisitive five-year old into the hesitant and unconfident young adult who later emerged from secondary school? How did this struggling student with apparently average ability manage to later meet the requirements for Masters level study, and receive 'A' grade results for assignments?

#### Competing Impressions:

Right from the beginning, school was an intensely competitive environment. At primary school reading and writing groups were determined by (academic) 'ability', as assessed through Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs). These tests are still being used in New Zealand schools as a guide for teachers setting up groups of children for effective instruction. They provide an estimate of student ability and also provide a guide the teacher can use in selecting suitable instructional materials and exercises. Teachers can also convert Level Scores to an equivalent reading age level.

At secondary school our classes were streamed according to (tested) academic ability at the time we enrolled, 'A' being the highest stream. The focus was on the academic (science, math, physics, history, geography), rather than practical or business subjects (typing, book-keeping, home science). I was shocked when two of my classmates were removed from the 'B' to the 'E' stream class because they chose to study Book-keeping and typing rather than languages. The clear message was that such practical (technical) skills were held in lower esteem within the school system.

School reports included “place in class” as an indicator of success. Teachers frequently used other students work as benchmarks for the rest of us, which may have built the esteem of the owner of that work but often left me feeling inadequate.

On reflection, with a different approach and possibly in a less competitive and more individually focused environment I now believe I could have achieved much better results and even mastered the basic requirements for secondary school mathematics. At the time I interpreted my results as indicators of at the most very average competence overall and total incompetence in mathematics. From then forward anything mathematical filled me with trepidation. I was forced to face those fears head on at Teachers College and was proud and shocked at how easily I managed to do so.

#### Adult Impressions:

Reflecting on my adult learning experiences I have identified three things that have supported my achievements; developing good time management skills, being interested in the subject matter and being able to see the direct relevance of that learning to my life and my work. Ultimately end what has made a positive difference for me is people; those who believed in me enough to give me the opportunity. Low self opinion is persistently difficult to overcome but success in one area does open the door for success in other areas.

Twenty years later I found myself in a fulfilling job, not teaching, but still in education. I achieved my new position by merit of (assessed) ability. My interview took an entire day. It involved a series of grueling aptitude tests, report writing, statistical reckoning and behavioural questioning. Out of ten applicants I was one of two chosen. Apparently I passed the tests! I wanted the job desperately and I believed I could do it. I wonder, did it make a difference that I had visualised myself in the job?

With my new found success came new understanding of my potential. I looked back and wondered “why did I do so poorly at school?” Why was my ability so sadly unapparent throughout secondary school years? As a five year old I had been considered exceptional and thrived at school, as a fifteen year old I was suffering from

nervous eczema and headaches, having a great deal of difficulty concentrating on my studies and frequently struggling to find any real understanding of what I was doing and why.

#### Lasting Impressions:

Despite current 'success' I have carried a sense of disappointment and shame at my mediocre school achievements with me to this day. It is in part due to my desire to better understand what led to such an outcome accompanied by a determination to prove to myself that I could have been a better than 'average' student that have motivated me to carry on with my studies.

"Does failure at school necessarily mean failure at life?" Ruth Laugeson (2003) explores this question in a Sunday Star Times feature. Reading her report of the experiences of several prominent and apparently successful New Zealanders confirms for me that there are no simple answers. For example, Peter Johnston, now a university professor and expert in reading and literacy, the purpose of school was a mystery. Teachers' reports suggest Johnston put little effort into his work. Why did someone with so much ability fail to demonstrate his true potential at school?

There are many published examples of New Zealanders who have performed poorly at school and gone on to become successful. None that I have read has suggested that their success was easy to achieve, nor that success at school would *not* have aided or accelerated their progress. One time Prime Minister, Jenny Shipley is quoted as saying "had I had my time again I would have been more diligent." (Laugeson, 2003, np) There continues to be a significant number for whom time at school is largely unproductive and negative attitudes toward formal education prevail. I believe it is worthwhile exploring possible reasons for this.

## Thesis

Experience with a wide range of learners, learning situations and institutions over a number of years has led me to consider the existence of specific causal factors that have the potential to either block or enhance an individual's learning opportunities, to

promote or diminish their chance of achievement in an education and training system that claims to offer “equal opportunities for all New Zealanders”. From an educational provider’s perspective many of these will be exogenous factors, largely outside the control of a school or tertiary institution, however their impact is such that I believe they cannot be ignored if we are serious in our quest for equitable learning opportunities. Such issues must be acknowledged and managed with view to minimising their negative impact on learning outcomes.

Government legislation has required, since 1990, that school boards of trustees ‘identify, analyse and address *“barriers to learning”*. (Education Review Office, 1995, p4) The schools’ response to this legislative requirement is the subject of two reports completed by The New Zealand Education Review Office, over the period 1995-1996. The first hurdle was to develop an understanding of the concept ‘barriers to learning’; identify the barriers relevant to their learners, how might these barriers impact on students’ achievements and what the school might do to minimise or eliminate these barriers? Agreement on the interpretation of barriers was the first challenge to schools.

In July 2005 The Ministry of Education (MOE) published their new Schooling Strategy 2005-2010. In his forward the Minister of Education acknowledges that “as a nation we want each student to be well equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and sense of identity they need to give them the best chances in life.” (MOE, 2005, np) This view of education is reflected in the Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-2012, which promotes the development of “a broad and inclusive system that provides access to quality, relevant tertiary education for all.” (MOE, 2007, np) For both strategies the value of “effective teaching” is recognised as one of the critical factor to success.

### Capability

Entering into discussions about ‘ability’ and ‘potential’ as it relates to schooling and learning is tantamount to entering a minefield. It is not so much the term (ability, capability, aptitude or potential) but the assumption that anyone or any process can accurately assess the innate potential of an individual that is up for debate. The concept of unrealised potential or capability has some significance in my research; it was from the discovery that earlier perceptions of my own capability (with regard to

university study in particular) were erroneous that this project evolved. I have opted for the term 'capability', believing it to be less emotive than other terms. Capability in this sense is not only about current knowledge, abilities or performance but also about individual growth and potential. Capability is about what an individual can achieve given the motivation, tools and opportunity. Stephenson suggested, "Capability is a holistic concept, an integration of knowledge, skills and personal qualities used effectively and appropriately in unfamiliar as well as familiar situations." (Stephenson, 1997, p9-10)

Over the past ten or twelve years there has been an attempt to move our educational focus, particularly in the area of vocational learning, from pure skill and knowledge acquisition to developing *capability*. This change of thinking reflects an understanding that skills learned in school or work can be transferrable into other areas of our lives and between different jobs and workplaces. Through this thinking evolved the revolutionary idea that, rather than a university degree, what individuals most need in order to be prepared for the workforce is "confidence in their ability to master different working environments and to become more effective in them, the capability to develop their skills and knowledge on a regular and routine basis and the commitment to drive their learning forward". (Stephenson, 1997, p9-10) Current acceptance of this philosophy is reflected in The Tertiary Education Strategy where it states "the government recognises that a significant amount of learning occurs in families, communities and the workplace." (TEC, 2007, pp 4:3)

### My Research

Reflection upon my personal learning experiences, and the awareness that they are not unique, has inspired me to explore, and attempt to unravel, some mysteries of the great learning divide: the gap between ability (potential) and achievement.

Reading the Adult Literacy Strategy, *More than Words* (2001) I learned that, amongst our New Zealand adult population, as many as 40% of New Zealanders leave school with inadequate skills. The 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALs) Report indicated that a large number lack the literacy and numeracy capabilities to, independently, manage many of the expectations of everyday life. Each year, around

20% of young New Zealanders leave school with minimal or no educational qualifications. Approximately 12% of these are recorded as having achieved “little or no formal attainment”. This research was driven by a desire to better understand what factors are most likely to be contributing to the low, or lack of, achievement of many (15-20%) school leavers. It follows that one should also be concerned at how this lack of achievement impacts on their future; how have early experiences influenced their attitude and approach to further learning opportunities as adult learners?

The results of the IAL Survey indicate approximately 40% of NZ adults have not achieved success through their schooling and have entered the community with limited skills in the foundational elements. This unavoidably has a flow down effect with their children missing out on support with school and homework, starting with not being read to as youngsters and often leading to disinterest and ultimately disengagement resulting in poor educational achievement. This is a serious issue and should be of concern to every New Zealander.

Over a period of almost seven years I facilitated vocational and educational learning opportunities for adults, who presented with no or low school achievements and usually had a low expectation of their abilities. Low educational achievement was one key entry criterion for these programmes. What struck me was how many of these students, although educationally unsuccessful thus far, presented with obvious (unrealised) potential. From my experiences teaching and working with these “second chance” adult learners, plus the recollections of my own educational journey, I came to make the following **assumptions**:

- Poor educational achievement is not determined by student ability and is often the result of social, emotional, family or other issues or influences. In other words, educational achievement does not always reflect capability or potential.
- Our educational systems, our learning and teaching processes, including curricula design, are themselves critical factors in the disengagement and ultimate non-achievement of some students.
- By creating a more flexible, accessible and responsive learning environment, as well as developing more contextually relevant curricula, educators can improve educational achievements for most low achieving students.

My research is founded upon the belief that, unless we can identify the specific nature of these barriers and how they impact on student learning it is unlikely we will be able to begin to effectively address the issues they present and large numbers of New Zealanders may unnecessarily be denied the equal opportunity for education that the Government policies promote but historically proves to be so difficult to attain.

This inquiry began by considering the following questions:

- What are some of the key factors that ultimately determine individual educational achievement (success)?
- To what degree does educational achievement reflect an individual's actual achievement potential, or capability?
- To what degree do our institutional learning systems and processes (appear to) support, or limit, individual educational performance and achievement? Specifically, which factors tend to support individual educational achievement and which factors tend to limit individual educational achievement?
- What positive/practical changes could be made to teaching environments, processes and methodologies in order to maximise the effectiveness of the education opportunities that are available?
  - How best can educators encourage and support New Zealanders to continue their education and training and develop the skills they will require to participate in and contribute to our future economy?
  - What changes could be made to systems and processes to enable more New Zealanders to participate (successfully) in education and training to higher levels?

### Research Questions

Believing that for many of us, educational achievement is not always a reflection of our actual capability and that, as a result of multiple extraneous factors, many of us fail to achieve our educational potential I set out to explore, through questionnaires and interviews the following:

What are some of the factors that lead to many of us failing to achieve the desired (positive) results at school, despite apparent capability?

**Barriers inside the system:** what barriers (inside or within the educational institution) seem to have contributed to some individuals not reaching their (educational) potential at school?

**Barriers outside the system:** what external factors (factors outside the educational institution) seem to have contributed to the apparent failure of some individuals to reach their educational potential?

**Positive/Supportive influences outside and inside:** What factors (internal and external) appear to have *supported* individuals to achieve their educational potential?

The main focus of this study is to investigate a number of factors, which may contribute to the apparent failure of many New Zealanders to achieve their potential at school, and in their adult years, and some consideration of how we may be able to alter the trends.

## Chapter Two - Literary Review

### Considering Our Education System

In April 2007 National Party leader, John Key, said

*“The status quo in education is no longer appropriate for New Zealand’s future social and economic well-being. Why? Because although a lot of young New Zealanders do very well at school, there is a tail of kids who are slipping behind and leaving without even the most basic skills. The Education Review Office (ERO) said in its 2005 annual report that New Zealand’s best students perform with the best in other countries but there is a group at the bottom, as large as one in five kids, who are currently not succeeding in our education system. One in five students is about 150,000 kids. It’s a staggering number – the equivalent of all the kids in Hamilton, Wellington and Christchurch combined. Come secondary school, more than half of Maori boys are failing to achieve even NCEA Level One. Around one in four students are failing basic NCEA literacy standards. At some schools as many as two out of three kids don’t earn a qualification before they leave.”* (Key, 2007)

We appear to have an education system where as many as 25-30% of young people reportedly leave school without a qualification. Not only is this unacceptable but these results are negatively impacting on our economy. John Key asserts that, if we are to effect any change to these statistics “we have to blow the whistle on educational failure well before kids leave school.” We need to support that 20-30% to achieve learning success and refuse “to accept that some kids can’t learn”.

How much of their apparent ‘failure’ at school was to do with learning capability and how much was due to other factors? What might these other factors be? If we can identify them, are these ‘barriers’ to learning able to be overcome? John Key is one who believes they can.

If we are to make any progress toward reducing or removing the non-achieving percentile we need to understand the barriers some learners face. What influences

one student to disengage from a learning environment where another apparently finds stimulation and success?

### Barriers to Learning

*“All failure in learning, in work or life, results, I claim from one of three and only three causes: lack of clarity of aims, no true determination to succeed and inability or unwillingness to learn.”* (Ball, 2003, p7) The first of these, Ball claims, is true for approximately 60% of cases.

“In various policy documents over the past five years the Government has drawn attention to the fact there are students whose learning is impeded by what are commonly referred to as “barriers to learning”. (Aitken, 1995, np) It was deemed useful for schools in particular to identify those specific factors or circumstances that may influence the achievement of our young learners. Before school boards could attempt this immense project it was necessary for them to develop an understanding of the concept ‘barriers to learning’; identify the barriers relevant to their learners, how might these barriers impact on students’ achievements and what the school might do to minimise or eliminate these barriers? Perhaps the greatest challenge to this was that “no official definition of the phrase (barriers to learning) exists”. (ERO, 1996) Principal of St. Josephs School in Waitara enquired at that time, “Does anyone know exactly what these barriers are? Are they traits inherent in the students themselves? Are they traits caused by sociological factors? Do these barriers exist or are they exacerbated by the way we teach or organise our schools?” (Martin, 2000, p18) As Martin intimates, unless we can identify the specific nature of these barriers and how they impact on student learning it is unlikely we will be able to begin to effectively address the issues they present and large numbers of New Zealanders may unnecessarily be denied the equal opportunity for education that the Government policies promote but historically proves to be so difficult to attain. Goal 2 of the National Education Strategy seeks “Equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, by identifying and removing barriers to achievement” (MOE, 2004) “Increasing educational success for young New Zealanders” is a key goal in the Tertiary Education Strategy, 2007-2012. Learning barriers are likely to be a combination of factors that combine to inhibit learning. Haggis (2006) warns that “naming barriers can appear to identify concrete impediments which can then be systematically removed.” (Haggis, 2006, p525)

There have been a number of professional inquiries undertaken regarding barriers to learning across different parts of the sector, although most focus on participation. Some include Benseman (adult literacy), Cross (adult learners), Fa'afio and Fletcher (Pacifika trainee teachers), Zepke et al (adult) and The Ministry of Education, (primary and pre-school). Nash (1997 and 1999) has written much about school learning and the impact (challenges) of socio economics and family on achievements and Bishop and Glynn (1999) have discussed cultural barriers to education.

In the search for reference points for this research I was drawn to Cross. In her book *Adults as Learners* (Cross, 1981, p97-108), Cross presents data from research on adult learners, including barriers for participation. Johnston and Riviera (1965) identified two barriers; External or situational barriers and Internal or dispositional barriers. Developing these ideas, Cross suggests three categories of barriers; Institutional barriers (practices and procedures), Situational barriers (arising from life situation), and Dispositional barriers (personal attitude about self and learning). (Cross *ibid*) Darkenwald and Merriam added a further dimension, that of Informational barriers (lack of knowledge regarding educational opportunities). (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991, p86-90) Cross's classification of barriers fits so well with my research that I have used it as a framework for my thesis.

### Institutional Barriers

"Institutional barriers consist of all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage..." (Cross, 1981, p98)

In their recent research into student retention Zepke, Leach and Prebble (2006) found that institutional culture was a barrier to participation for some students. They suggest that "institutional culture is experienced at several levels – social, academic, and organisational." (Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2006, p590) There appear to be two distinct institutional approaches to learners; integration, whereby "institutions seek to integrate learners into existing institutional and pedagogic norms, values and practices and adaptation, where "they attempt to recognise, value and accept learners' diverse

cultural capital by adapting their processes to meet diverse learner needs.” (Zepke et al, *ibid*)

### The Teachers

The role of the teacher in their learners’ levels of engagement and ultimate ‘success’ is undoubtedly a significant one. There is growing agreement in adult education circles that the tutor or facilitator is critical to the success or otherwise of the learners they teach (Benseman, 2001). Peachey (2005) is adamant that “teacher quality is much more important than class size, how much the government spends on education or – for that matter – how much parents spend on education.” (Peachey, 2005, p72,73)

Traditional learning environments have done little to accommodate differing individual preferences for learning. Additionally, school learning is a contrived and systematic process, not a natural one. (Milne, 2006) Traditional teaching is concerned with the teacher being the controller of the learning environment. Power and responsibility are held by the teacher as they play the role of instructor (in the form of lectures) and decision maker (regarding curriculum content and learning outcomes). They regard students as having 'knowledge holes' that need to be filled with information. In short, the traditional teacher views that it is the teacher that causes learning to occur (Novak, 1998)

The Tomorrow’s Schools reforms of 1989 advocated a revised view on the traditional approach encouraging a transition from knowledge based teaching to ‘process teaching’. Peachey’s belief that “learning should always be primarily knowledge based, and that young people need to know things – including how to read, write and do mathematics” is at odds with this approach. (Peachey, 2005, p61) “Miro Martin (2000) is concerned that the changes have been prescriptive without being practical; that teachers are not readily adapting their methodologies to suit their different audiences. “We teachers blindly accept what is handed down to us from above. We are at the mercy of self-serving politicians and academics caught up in an idealistic pedagogy.” (Martin, 2000, p19) Bishop and Glynn (1999) worked with teachers to grow their awareness of the cultural inequities in education. They challenged the teachers to be aware of the power of their position and the potential impact of their own values and

attitudes on their students; teachers need be aware that the learning material young students are exposed to will likely help shape their cultural identity.

Milne (2006) is adamant that a successful and inclusive education programme needs to value and accommodate student's cultural identity as critical link between the individual and the knowledge. A recent study (Neville-Tisdall and Milne, 2002) revealed that numbers of Maori and Polynesian students who had at primary school been confident and articulate failed to make progress at secondary. Neville-Tisdall interviewed the students and uncovered a common theme. Almost all felt that no one (at school) cared what happened to them. "There was no incentive to work, they were just a number, teachers didn't know their names, there was nothing which valued their Maori knowledge and ability in the school, when they started to fall behind no-one noticed them struggling, they felt stupid, there was no-one to talk to, they felt lost." (Milne, 2006, p6)

Cuban, at a presentation to principals and senior teachers at Auckland University in November 2003, suggested that the essential ingredient for effective teaching and learning is the teacher's level of 'passion' for their work. Enthusiasm is contagious and students respond positively when confronted with a teacher who displays genuine interest in their achievements. Television presenter, Judy Bailey confides, "If you're lucky, at some time through your education you come across an inspirational teacher. Mine was Margaret Morton. She taught English – not the excruciatingly dull stuff, grinding relentlessly over the same novel till everyone's heartily sick of it. She loved her subject, and her enthusiasm was infectious." (Bailey, 2006, p9)

Knowles (1970, 1980) in considering the nature of Adult Education expressed the view that human relationships were fundamental to creating or solving problems in learning. For effective learning to take place there needs to be an effective relationship with the teacher. Peachey (2005) considers that quality of teaching is affected by two critical issues. First is the relationship between "a teacher's communication skills, especially their verbal skills, and what students learn." (Peachey, 2005, p73) The second issue he raises is classroom management.

Claxton of Bristol University, England promotes the value of creating the right learning environment and asserts that “Learning power can be developed and dissolved and the right conditions.” (Claxton, 1999, p10) Claxton believes that the learning culture, which includes attitudes, views and teaching practices, has a far greater impact on the actual learning than the programme or learning materials. Our learning culture is largely created by others, our parents and our teachers in particular.

Benseman (2001) was commissioned to research the depths of tutor qualities, styles and approaches and how these may contribute to their being an “effective” tutor (of adult vocational education). The tutors’ reported responses indicate that they believe learners need to be motivated (interested), challenged, feel supported and see relevance in their learning. Individual (different) needs must be recognised and catered to and tutors need to be prepared to adopt a variety of approaches to cater to different learning styles. It is this individualised approach that seems to be critical to the engagement of some learners.

Prashnig agrees with this principle. She quotes Dunn as saying: “There are no learning disabilities – only teaching disabilities.” (Prashnig, 1998, p.91) Prashnig goes on to comment, “if educators continue to disregard human diversity in their classrooms and are not prepared to teach groups with individual styles, too many students will continue to underachieve and many more will believe they are learning failures.” (Prashnig, 1998, p.91) Alton Lee (2003) “Diversity encompasses many characteristics including ethnicity, socio-economic background, home language, gender, special needs, disability, and giftedness. Teaching needs to be responsive...” (Alton-Lee, 2003, pv)

‘Good Practice’ in adult education advocates the use of multiple teaching styles and the accommodation of differences in students learning preferences in the planning and design of teaching activities. Teachers need to acknowledge and address the diversities in their classrooms. “People are different, act differently and therefore ‘know’ differently.” (Kalantzis, 2003) Whilst acknowledging the inherent value of teachers employing a “wider range of approaches and methods” in order to “challenge and add important variety to experiences of learning and teaching”, Haggis (2006, p524) suggests that “methods themselves do not necessarily have to be changed in

order to make higher education more accessible. She adds that “how teaching is done may be more important than the use of an ‘innovative’ method. (Haggis *ibid*)

Classroom practice itself can be a barrier to learning. Teachers who are too prescriptive in their approach, demanding students perform or achieve in a particular way, can stifle creativity and discourage originality of thought. Stephenson (1997) believes that the most effective learning occurs when students are given permission to fail. Much of our most valuable learning comes from mistakes. The teacher’s role is even more critical in such learning. Stephenson emphasises the importance of being able to respond ‘genuinely to the student’s work without attacking their personal integrity.

Grose believes that “perfectionism is a modern curse in many of our schools.” (Grose, 2003, p51) In discussing the limitations some learners have put upon themselves and how this relates to their fear of getting it wrong he suggests that the “fear of making mistakes holds back more children and is a greater impediment to children reaching their full potential than any school-funding issue that tends to make front-page news from time to time.” (Grose, 2003, p51) Grose warns that many of our teachers are in fact leading their students to believe that ‘perfection’ is their goal, rather than ‘excellence’. This approach tends to discourage independent thinking and limit problem solving capability.

Austrian psychologist, Dreikurs, talked about the “courage to be imperfect”. (Dreikurs, 1962) He suggested that human misbehaviour is the result of not having one of four basic human needs met: power, attention, revenge and avoidance of failure. Indubitably classroom misbehaviour is an indication that a learner has a problem or problems. This could be because they believe that they are unable to meet the learning expectations and so afraid of failure that they ‘avoid’ the activity completely. Dreikurs believes that we are each motivated by either one of two powerful forces: the need to be superior or better than others, or the need to contribute or be useful. He points out that those motivated by the first desire can never be content because they will continually be in competition with others. Their learning ability will be limited by their obsession to do a ‘perfect’ job. According to Dreikurs, those learners motivated by the second desire, the need to contribute, will find more contentment and

satisfaction in their lives because they are not afraid to make mistakes and are focused on helping rather than personal achievement. Grose is strongly supportive of Dreikurs view and suggests that the 'contribution' focused individual will not only be happier and more fulfilled than their achievement focused peers, but will learn better and develop into more capable individuals.

### The Curriculum (subjects)

*"Where I grew up learning was a collective activity. But when I got to school and tried to share learning with other students that was called cheating. The curriculum sent the clear message to me that learning was a highly individualistic, almost secretive, endeavour. My working-class experience didn't count. Not only did it not count, it was disparaged." – Giroux in Border Crossing (1993)*

In traditional schooling the lesson's content and delivery are considered to be most important and students master their knowledge through drill and practice (such as rote learning). Content need not be learned in context. (Johnson and Johnson 1991) Biggs (1994) presents two 'implicit theories of learning', qualitative and quantitative. Driven by predominantly quantitative assessment practices, the curriculum becomes discrete units of content, such as facts, skills and competencies, the learned material losing its relevance. Biggs suggests "a qualitative outlook", whereby "it is assumed that students learn cumulatively, interpreting and incorporating new material with what they already know..." is more desirable. (Biggs, 1994, p4)

The acquisition of knowledge is an expected result of schooling. Teachers are rated on the successes of their students. Teachers may be ineffective because they lack subject knowledge and students "are not provided with in-depth coverage of the curriculum" (ERO, 1996)

Research into curriculum implementation (MOE, 2003) found that "teachers placed considerable importance upon the New Zealand Curriculum Framework - primary teachers slightly more so than secondary teachers." It appears that key learning is

designed around the curriculum statements and that these take priority over foundational skills.

The curriculum statements (for Mathematics and Technology) were seen by teachers as “less helpful in meeting the needs of Maori students”. (MOE, 2003) Bishop and Glynn (1999) believe teaching content must be adapted to meet the learners, particularly accommodating cultural differences of understanding.

### Testing and Assessment

*“There is a wealth of research evidence that the everyday practice of assessment in classrooms is beset with problems and shortcomings...” (Black and William, 1998, p2)*

The most common assessments are externally created, formally conducted and marked by the teacher with the results compared against a norm; for example, PAT tests. In fact assessment conducted in this way is in antipathy to its true purpose. Assessment is derived from *assidere* to sit with or beside. (Collins) It is something we do with and for a student, not something we do to them. (Wiggins, 1998, np)

Students are subjected to regular assessments from the day they enter school. Initially the focus is on class placement and identification of any ‘special’ learning needs. Later the focus is more specifically on educational achievement. Traditional teaching (Biggs, 1994) is based on a quantitative approach whereby the teacher is the transmitter of knowledge; assessments involve tests which aim to show how well students can correctly reproduce the transmitted knowledge, within a specified timeframe. Whilst it is appropriate to apply some measure to student performance (learning outcomes) too much emphasis on outcomes without attention to the processes of self development can be detrimental.

“The alienation of indigenous and ethnic minority students from mainstream school systems is endemic in New Zealand and internationally.” (Milne, 2004, np) Milne asserts that school assessments have been, and are still, used more to determine how

well a student had been able to 'fit' the expected behavioural and educational mould, rather than an indication of learning need. Educational outcomes suggest that for many, especially those from non-European cultural backgrounds, this is too frequently a miss-fit. Whilst policies may speak of equal opportunities, the reality is that most schools reflect the principles and practices of the dominant culture, thus by default placing all those from other groups at some disadvantage.

In the wake of the latest Education Review Office Report (ERO, 2007) it has been suggested that institutions need to improve the way they use assessment. As John Key iterates, "kids who have been struggling at school have most likely been struggling for some time. It doesn't come suddenly out of the blue". (Key, 2007, np) Black and William (1998) are critical of school assessment; they suggest that assessment is not being used appropriately, that it too often leads the teachers and the students to focus on the achievement outcomes (grades) rather than the learning outcomes. In other words, teachers teach for grades rather than learning. Black and William (1998) cite three key issues connected with assessment. The first, 'effective learning', is concerning the superficial (rote) learning that is encouraged by many forms of testing. The second, 'negative impact', is concerned with the amount of emphasis placed on marks and grades at the expense of specific performance feedback. The third issue, the 'managerial role' of assessments, relates to the demands of quality management, whereby greater importance is given to teachers maintaining students' assessment records than interpreting them.

The latest ERO report seems to support Black and Williams' concern when it states "most teachers do a lot of testing and most schools collect up this data" yet it is apparent that many of these 'at risk' students are either not being identified, or if they are, there is inadequate process to address their needs.

Research (Black and William, 1998) undertaken with various groups of school children tested their learning improvements over a period of time using different methods of teaching and assessment. They found that the greater the interaction (discussion and problem solving) the more real learning took place. Traditional assessment, they concluded leads teachers and students to focus more on outcomes (grades) than on real learning. The results of this research led Black and William to suggest that "the

capacity of children is under-developed in conventional teaching so that many are 'put down' unnecessarily and so have their futures prejudiced." (Black and Wiliam, 1998, p7:3)

In her March press release, commenting about the 2007 ERO report, MP Katherine Rich remarked that "Testing is not about collecting large chunks of aggregated data, it's about determining where a student is in their learning, and using that information to inform teaching in the classroom." (Rich, 2007, np) The type of assessment Rich is describing and, by implication, suggesting teachers should practice is 'formative assessment'.

Essentially there are two types of assessment, formative and summative. Formative "...refers to all those activities undertaken by teachers, and by the students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Assessments become formative when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching to meet the needs." (Black and Wiliam, 1998, np) Both kinds of assessment, to be effective, should include interactive feedback between teacher and student. Wiggins talks of two kinds of feedback: that provided after the performance, and that provided during (concurrent with) the assessment activities. (Wiggins 1998)

### Situational Barriers

*"Situational barriers are those arising from one's situation in life at a given time."*  
(Cross, 1981, p98)

### Family, Culture and Social Influences

Bird (2003) suggests "To close the gap between high and low performing children may require more attention to out-of-school influences on pupil attainment." (Bird, 2003, p7) Retired principal, Campbell, recognised a link between children's home life experiences and their school performance. "Some pupils had great difficulty even getting to experience the fullness of the meaning of the word love." (Campbell, 2005, p2)

There are two relevant and contrary schools of thought influencing teaching and learning practices. On one hand there are those who believe that culture and ethnicity are significantly correlated with learning achievement. Vygotsky, in his theory of social cognition, believed that culture is the first determinant of an individual's development and that learning development is directly affected by the culture, family and environment in which that individual grows up. (Cole et al, 1978) The family, home, cultural and social circumstances, including personal and family attitudes to education, have long been viewed as powerful influences on educational achievement. When considering potential barriers to learning health and nutrition, transience and family income have also been implicated. King (1997) believes these factors have a significant influence on learning outcomes. Parents and family are, for most, the primary role models and as such their attitude to education is critical. (King 1997 in Martin 2000, p19)

Traditionally the family is the centre of knowledge and experience, the place that connects us to our personal history and our identity as an individual. Milne (2006) sees the destabilisation of these connections as young people progress through our education system. She blames the system, which she describes as being "a pervasive white lens and an academic hegemony that not only negates the non-white child's heritage – it damages it, sometimes beyond repair". (Milne, 2004, np)

The 1960 Hunn Report published statistics and data, which clearly identified the extent of educational disadvantage amongst Maori. (Hunn, 1960) Subsequently, some new methods and practices were introduced to the classrooms. Deemed to be a 'multi-cultural approach, it was based upon the following assertions; that ethnic minority groups benefit from their culture being recognised (included) in the curriculum, learning about one's culture will enhance self esteem and lead to improved learning achievement, and learning about other cultures will build understanding and reduce discrimination within, and eventually outside the classroom. This new multi cultural approach reflected a positive intention; it did at least acknowledge there were problems but applied some largely unfounded assumptions as to the reasons for the disparities between the groups. Maori viewed such measures as tokenism and, as Bishop and Glynn suggest, such changes have been largely ineffective, being framed within the boundaries of a European dominated system. May (1992) suggests that the idea of multi-culturism is not necessarily itself unsound, but rather, the application of it has not

been perfected. He is outspoken in his criticism of educational policies and practices and the manner in which they model “a monocultural elite”.

In his consideration of how multiculturalism might work (May, 2002), reiterates the thinking of Henry Giroux (Giroux 1983) when he talks about schools perpetuating the different class and social groups that form the basis for our society. He supports the view that New Zealand Maori especially have been marginalised by our systems of testing and assessing educational capability and potential.

New Zealand statistics confirm the concerns iterated by May, Bishop and Glynn are justified. Maori and Pacific people form a greater percentage of our unemployed and achieve fewer qualifications at school. The 2005 Education Review Office (ERO) report reveals that “more than half of Maori boys are failing to achieve even NCEA Level One”. The concerns expressed by Milne (2003,2006) are borne out in recent statistics reveal that 40% of Maori boys and 35% of Maori girls leave school before they are 16 years old. (MOE, 2006) Not counted in these statistics are those who obtain an early leaving exemption. (Early leaving exemptions are granted to 15 year olds who are assessed as unlikely to benefit further from attending school.) In 2005 1,533 of early exemptions were Maori under 16. (MOE, 2006)

Pacific people face similar issues. “In 1996, of all the students in tertiary education, just over 3 percent were Pacific Island people, and the proportion of Pacific Island school leavers continuing to tertiary education was only 38 percent compared to 51 percent of other school leavers.” (Fa’aoi and Fletcher, 2002, p25) For Pacific students “the pressure from family, church and the community impacted strongly on Pacific Island students. The amount of time that was given ... and the flow-on-effect it had in limiting time for study was a common barrier.” (Fa’aoi and Fletcher, 2002, p25)

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the family socio-economic factors feature more significantly as potential determinants of educational performance. Nash (1997, p71) states that “the evidence available to sociologists suggests that the

reasons for differential attainment associated with class and ethnicity are a product of environmental rather than genetic causes.” Nash quotes Bourdieu:

“The family indeed plays a determining role in the maintenance of the social order in the reproduction – not only biological but social – that is to say, in the reproduction of the structure of the social space and of social relationships. The family is one of the best places for the accumulation of capital under its different guises and of its transmission through the generations: it safeguards its unity through the process of transmission in order to be able to transmit and because it is in a position to transmit. The family is the principal ‘subject’ of strategies of reproduction.” (Bourdieu 1994, p141 in Nash, 1997, front piece)

“If culture is a barrier it needs to be addressed”, “I don’t think a child’s home circumstances – be they from a poor family, a single-parent family or any other sort of family – should determine our expectations of how they will do at school.” (Key, 2007) Key is contesting the ‘Deficit theory’, which presumes that students of social, ethnic or other minority groups can be expected to perform less well than their (white) middle class peers. Their poor educational achievement can be attributed to a lack of “certain values and skills” that are considered to be the norm. (Nash, 1997, p69) Government policy (e.g. Closing the Gaps, 1999) was based on the expectation that a percentage of our young people, especially those from minority cultures or ethnicities, will fail.

Teachers are unavoidably caught up in some of the social and emotional consequences of dysfunctional family life as they seek to address the special learning needs of some of their students yet the support our system provides teachers in this is both physically and fiscally inadequate. Anderson, in her 2004 article, explains “the job of educating has been constrained by the increasing number of emotional stressors that children face and bring with them to school” (Anderson, 2004, p1).

The attitudes, actions and behaviours of our family role models are frequently perpetuated through the succeeding generations. Poor family relationships, unstable home life and lack of appropriate physical mental or emotional support are likely to affect an individual’s level of participation, commitment and achievement. Maslow (1968) recognised the important relationship between psycho-social factors and learning, considering education as a pathway to the development of ‘self’. In his

hierarchy of human needs he presents his view of the critical balance between physiological wellbeing, personal safety, love and belonging, self esteem and self actualisation as they relate to personal development through education. Campbell (2005) believed that explicit parental support and approval improved children's learning and established the Home Liaison Scheme to encourage parents "to recognise the value of their child's success". (Campbell, 2005, p4) "When children are raised in a home that nurtures a sense of self-worth, competence, autonomy, and self-efficacy, they will be more apt to accept the risks inherent in learning. Conversely, when children do not view themselves as basically competent and able, their freedom to engage in academically challenging pursuits and capacity to tolerate and cope with failure is greatly diminished." (Lumsden, 2007, p2)

Family influences do not stand-alone but are exacerbated by such issues as drugs, crime and unemployment, social ailments commonly associated with poverty. Lashlie, New Zealand's first female prison officer, is outspoken in her passionate plea for us to learn to recognise those children in danger of falling prey to such influences and provide help early enough to make a difference. "There are children in this country who have been enrolled in excess of 15 primary schools before their tenth birthday because their parents need to keep on the move, keep away from official attention and go where cannabis is easy to access. There are children who come to primary school on a Monday morning stoned and unable to take in any information being presented by the teacher because they have spent the weekend inhaling cannabis smoke in the family home as an all-weekend party went on around them." (Lashlie, 2002, p82)

Those without education may feel threatened by it but statistics largely support the fact that these are the people most likely to be unemployed, live in poor housing, suffer poor health and have children with low educational attainment and learning difficulties. In Biddulph (2003) the "data clearly show that, overall, low SES (socio-economic status) children have significantly lower achievement than middle and high SES children." (Biddulph, 2003, piii)

Hodge, principal of Tamaki College ('the school of no excuses') takes a different stance. He rejects the deficit theory and refuses to accept culture or social status as reasons for non-achievement. Tamaki College, with its 65% Pacific, 27% Maori and

3% Pakeha students, is situated in one of the poorest areas of, Auckland, New Zealand's most populated city. Whilst experience and statistics support the common view that low socio-economic communities produce lower educational achievements than their wealthier counterparts, Hodge firmly believes that poverty is not an automatic barrier to success. At this Decile 1a school 45% of 2004 graduands moved on to university, whilst 25% began other tertiary studies. There is legitimate support (Bishop and Glynn, Milne) for the argument that cultural background has some bearing on individual attitudes to education as well as their interpretation of the learning material, as there is for the impact of socio-economic factors (Nash) but, considering the example Tamaki College provides, should either be accepted as a reason for failure?

In 2003 The Education Review Office (ERO) reports that "all curriculum statements now incorporate reference to Māori perspectives and the expectation that schools will provide students with an understanding of Māori perspectives and New Zealand's dual cultural heritage". (ERO 2003) It would be foolish to ignore culture, but Hodge is not alone in determining that culture alone cannot account for the enormous disparity of results between New Zealand Maori and Pacific students and their counterparts?

Nash sits firmly in the socio-economic camp. His interpretation of available evidence leads him to believe that differences in educational attainment are predominantly influenced by environmental factors rather than any genetic predisposition. (Nash, 1997, p.71) Family, culture and social factors count as significant environmental influences. Buck (1999) once mayor of Christchurch similarly expressed the view that our educational institutions still appear to perpetuate a system that is aimed toward the white middle class population, supporting the kind of educational achievement that leads students to progress into university or some further tertiary education. In her 1999 address Buck asks, "Where's the real choice in education? Given that the industrial revolution has gone way by, why do we persist with the same system of education that was spawned by it?" (Buck 1999, np)

Having acknowledged the inherent differences amongst our populace it is ironic that the system still seems to ask that we, the individual learner, must adapt to "fit" that system, the very system that is apparently so unforgiving to so many. This is the key issue Milne addresses in her thesis. (Milne 2004) Although arguing from different

campus Milne similarly observes teachers perpetuating a system that is irrelevant and outdated. She suggests that “most of us fit the experience of schooling into a framework and structure we can recognise, a mental picture from our own school days, yet there is nothing natural or “given” about the way schools are organised.” Milne sees merit in considering that schools are politically driven. She concurs with the view espoused by Tyack and Cuban (1994), that schools are outdated institutions built upon the values of particular groups with particular interests and values at particular times. The implication being that those from different groups are disadvantaged. (Milne 2004)

### Literacy and Language and Learning

*“Common sense would suggest that literacy is treated as a cultural given for all the adults in OECD societies.”* (Belanger and Tuijnman, ed, 1997)

Foundation Skills, language and literacy, are viewed as fundamental learning prerequisites. Statistical data has highlighted the impact on individuals and society when these basic skills are inadequate. “People with low literacy, numeracy and language competencies generally have fewer employment options and are less able to adapt to changes in their employment environment” (Tertiary Education Strategy, 2007-12, p33).

Vygotsky viewed learning as a ‘social process’ wherein language and dialogue were critical elements in the learning event. (Cole et al, 1978) “In most societies literacy is generally seen as the most essential learning tool for today’s young people – the vital foundation for successful lifelong learning. A tremendous amount of money and concern is being dedicated, worldwide, to ensuring that this tool is acquired.” (Claxton, 1999, p274) With an allocation of more than 50 million dollars over recent years New Zealand too is recognising the link between economic success and the literacy of its population. It is relevant to consider that “working class and certain cultural minority families, largely because of their location in the division of labour, typically differ in the degree of recognition and respect they give to literacy-based practices.” (Nash, 1993, p33)

The results of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), carried out in 1996, indicate approximately 40% of NZ adults have limited literacy skills and were assessed as operating at level 2 or below in the survey scale (appendix 1). Ten years later we have the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), which essentially tested the same skills as IALS therefore, is largely comparable. Early data reports indicate that, although the results for the lowest level of literacy have reduced by approximately 4%, the overall percentage with an assessed functional literacy level of level 1 or 2 has not altered significantly. This unavoidably has a flow down effect in our families and communities with children missing out on support with school and homework, starting with not being read to as youngsters and often leading to disinterest and ultimately disengagement resulting in poor educational achievement.

A study aimed at isolating the particular factors that bear on literacy, or 'skill readiness' found a strong link between schooling level or educational attainment and literacy. (Belanger and Tuijnman, ed, 1997) They conclude that "the skills and competencies required for effective life transitions are critically dependent on the completion of upper secondary education at a minimum". (ibid, p168)

Miro Martin has, through experience, developed an opinion of the critical significance parent literacy has on child achievement. "(Those) children whose parents and caregivers spend time reading, talking, going on family outings, etc., do far better socially and academically than those whose parents don't." (Martin, 2000, p2) He supports the view that a home filled with books, where reading is encouraged and where the family regularly talk together, is more likely to inspire a love of learning and generate learning success. This view is supported in a report by Benseman and Tobias, researching learning issues with Adult learners attending an adult literacy programme. They reported that "many of the participant's children have also experienced literacy difficulties." (Benseman and Tobias, 2004, p 152) So ingrained is the pattern of failure and consequent low self-esteem that very particular approaches and strategies need to be actively employed to reach these individuals.

Literacy (Language, Literacy and Numeracy) has been identified as a critical determinant of the level of educational engagement. Evidence also points to a link between literacy and self esteem.

## Dispositional Effects

*“Dispositional barriers are those related to attitudes, and self perceptions about oneself as a learner.”* (Cross, 1981, p98)

### Self Belief and Ability

Lack of confidence and poor self-esteem has been cited as critical to achievement in any area of life. Yorke has suggested that a key factor in student success is the student's psychological approach to study. (Yorke, 2004) For adult learners one common dispositional barrier uncovered was that they believed they were “too old to learn”. (Cross, 1981, p98) For youth many leave believing they are not ‘smart’ enough. A UK schools council enquiry into young school leavers reported that “appreciable numbers said humbly that really nothing could be done to help them; the fault lay in their own lack of ability” (Schools Council, 1968, p240) Students had somehow come to believe that they were not capable of achieving. In essence they had no confidence in their ability.

Theoretical conceptions, particularly of the relationship between development and learning, are not clearly understood. In one view “learning is considered a purely external process that is not actively involved in development”. (Cole et al ed. 1978, p80) This view does not accommodate the idea that some individual development might occur as a result of the learning. Reflex theory, on the other hand, asserts that the learning process is inextricably linked to the development process, whilst a third common theoretical position considers all aspects (maturation and learning) as one developmental process. (Cole et al, ibid) Vygotsky constructed a more complex analysis of learning and development, ‘the zone of proximal development’, which allows for multiple levels of learning through stages of development and facilitates a measure of ‘potential’, or ability.

A lack of confidence in personal ability can usually be attributed to previous poor school achievements which have been converted into an indelible negative self belief about their potential. What is meant by ‘ability’ and where did they get this idea?

Binet believed there was such a thing as 'native intelligence and that a certain level of this was necessary for school learning. Historically schools have tested for (academic) 'ability' because it was believed that it was "a functional cause of school learning". (Nash, 1990) This process was based upon the belief that it was possible to assess functional capability of students and that this was an advantage to both student and teacher in ensuring they received the education they needed or were best suited to. The resultant ability rating became a label which determined future opportunities. Nash (1993) is outspoken in his criticism of traditional school testing, not least of all because he recognised the socio-economic bias. He questions the validity of such testing given that "it has been shown that differences in curriculum and teaching styles (at school) may affect (student's) test scores." (Nash, 1976, p33) Nash cites research by Jackson, Goodacre and Pidgeon (Nash, 1976, p32) which revealed that teachers apply different attitudes and expectations to those students assessed as 'less able' academically, thus ensuring their expectations of lesser performance are met. "Teachers probably behave in more or less subtly different ways towards children they perceive as 'bright'", writes Nash (1997, p72) but there is evidence that points to factors other than innate 'ability' influencing learning and achievement.

In the long standing 'genetics versus environment' argument Flynn is a strong advocate of the environmentalist view. Whilst accepting that each of us is born with differing levels of intellectual ability Flynn asserts that the greatest determinant of achievement is effort. (Flynn 1999) Put simplistically, what we don't use we lose. Flynn believes that effort can compensate for lack of ability, but what if we believe our lack of ability so implicitly that we chose not to make the effort rather than face inevitable failure? If we believe, as Marat (2005) suggests, that "A crucial factor in achievement is self efficacy" then we must accept that such lowered performance expectations may have detrimental effects on a student's future choices. Self efficacy is the belief in one's ability to achieve goals. She quotes Bandura saying "people who have high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided". (Marat 2005, p58)

Australian youth worker, Thompson, has a passion for helping the young develop their potential. Thompson had conducted a study of Australian youth and discovered how

powerful a determinant of individual achievement low self-esteem could be.

Thompson's study also revealed some clear links between self esteem and physical and emotional development. He discovered a powerful interrelationship between self-esteem and achievement and observed that low self esteem has the potential to limit personal and educational achievement. (Thompson, 1994)

### Learning Styles

Learning styles are *“characteristic cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment”* (Keefe, 1979, np)

The concept of learning styles has been applied to a wide variety of student attributes and differences, such as why some students appear more comfortable with theories and abstract concepts, while others feel much more at home with facts and observable phenomena. It has been found that some students clearly prefer practical learning activities while others enjoy reflection, and when it comes to presentation of new information, some prefer visual and others prefer verbal explanations. One learning style is neither preferable nor inferior to another, but is simply different, with different characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Gardener (1983) devised his theory of seven intelligences, later to become eight, to explain individual learning preferences or strengths. He was arguing consideration for multiple layers of intelligence or learning abilities, rather than the traditional view.

Barbara Prashnig believes that “every student has a uniquely different learning style: they learn, concentrate and process information in different ways.” (Prashnig, 1998, intro) Prashnig has developed a “Learning Styles Pyramid” which is inspired by Gardener's work. Teaching styles and approaches also vary. Zinn (1990) identified five philosophically different approaches to teaching; the Classical transmitter of knowledge, the Behavioural director of learning, the Progressive organiser of learning experiences, the Humanistic facilitator/helper, and the Radical coordinator. “When mismatches exist between learning styles of most students in a class and the teaching style of the teacher, the students may become bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the subject, and themselves” (Felder and Brent, 2005, p58) and in some cases change to other subject or drop out of school.

Learning style is the total way "a learner perceives, interacts with and responds to the learning environment," (Keefe, 1979 in Griggs, 1991) "The process of learning is critical and understanding the way we learn is key to educational improvement."  
(Kingsbury, ny)

### Summary

This thesis evolved from my determination to explore student perspectives on their learning experiences in order to identify reasons for their minimal or non-existent school achievements. What factors determine each individual learning experience? Are they the same for all students? What interpretational differences are there between child and adult learners? The review has considered issues of family, cultural and social influence as well teaching and learning practices. It also invites consideration of the concept of individual 'ability' or aptitude as perceived by the student, and the impact of this perception on their learning achievements. Each of these ideas has been explored in my research, and discussed in chapter five.

In the next chapter I discuss methodologies and explain the process I used.

## Chapter Three - Methodology

### Introduction

In considering the complexity of the research questions and the issues they raise it became apparent that I needed to limit the scope of this thesis. The main focus of this study is to investigate a number of specific factors, which may contribute to the apparent failure of many New Zealanders to achieve their potential at school, and in their adult years, with view to offering some consideration to how we may be able to alter the trends.

### Research Methodology

“...research is concerned with understanding the world...” [Cohen, L Manion and K Morrison (2000)]

To undertake research is to investigate with some intensity, some aspect of our world or our life within it. Behind each investigation should be a specific purpose, clearly understood and communicated by the researcher and requiring detailed exploration and reporting for public consideration. The researcher may seek to prove or disprove a particular theory, critically analyse a view or perspective, resolve a particular problem, increase understanding or find answers to particular questions. In undertaking the research project the challenge for the researcher is to choose and employ the most appropriate methods for the investigation.

The nature and detail of the inquiry will determine the approach (Singleton and Straits 1999) and the kinds of data collected. Davidson and Tolich (1999) suggest three main roles of research being to explore, to describe or to explain. Research strategies might be categorised in the following ways:

**Experimental** research, the strategy employed to investigate a particular occurrence or phenomena, possibly through systematic manipulation of an environment and then observing whether a systematic change occurs. To be valid this approach requires that

a situation can be repeatedly recreated by the researcher so that they can carry out the experiment on various subjects.

**Exploratory** research, commonly a survey, may seek to identify the frequency of certain outcomes or characteristics amongst groups or populations. It allows a researcher to relate various characteristics to explain a phenomenon. The aim is often to generalise the data to the whole group but this can be very difficult to prove with confidence. Exploratory research falls into the category of 'pure' or 'basic' research. [Davidson and Tolich, 1999]

**Descriptive research**, a strategy through which we seek to understand a situation or phenomenon. The researcher immerses themselves into a naturally occurring set of events to gain firsthand knowledge. The aim here is to gather information without changing or influencing the environment. The difficulty with this is determining when and what observations to record. Also an opportunity has to be available and accessible to conduct the observations.

**Action research**' (Kock, McQueen et al. 1997; Kock 2003) is often identified by its dual goal of improving the organisation participating in the research, and at the same time rigorously generating valid and consistent knowledge. The action research practitioner is expected to apply positive intervention to this environment and observe the changes in the environment and the researcher themselves. This strategy is frequently favoured in educational research.

In the educational context research is predominantly a scientific process by and through which we examine and analyse particular aspects of our social reality in order to make sense of it. Historically research approaches to evidence gathering fall into three broad categories; those focused on formal logical *reasoning*, those focusing on human *experience*, and those based upon *hypothetical* propositions. It is common for researchers to use a combination of these approaches and thus explore a variety of evidence sources.

Nineteenth Century French philosopher, Comte, was inspirational in his abandonment of the traditional logical reasoning approach in favour of an experiential approach to empirical investigation, which he labeled 'positivism'. This approach "held that all genuine knowledge is based on sense experience and can only be advanced by

means of observation and experiment.” [Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000, p8]  
According to modern ideology ‘positivism’ is described as “a philosophy of science that asserts that only certain kinds of propositions can count as knowledge” [McIntyre, 1996, p.3] Comte’s positivist approach fits more closely with the ‘empirical’ ideology McIntyre defines as “the tradition that holds that knowledge is secured through sense data e.g. observation (not mere disputation) of behaviourism.” [McIntyre, 1996, p.3.] This methodology fits well within an educational research context.

Action research methodology supports the empirical view most directly and was strongly favoured by Carr and Kemmis (1986) for educational enquiry because of its requirement to involve those most able to act directly on the results of their own research, the teachers. In an educational setting this approach requires the teacher, as the researcher, to become part of the research whilst remaining immersed in the context of their teaching and learning practice. When applied in this way Action research is seen to “improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out.” (Kemmis 1988, p.42)

The two main categories of research data are *quantitative and qualitative*. As was the case with this investigation, many researchers opt to combine both, finding them generally complementary. The use of quantitative data alone requires that one identify specific aspects or variables in relation to the question stated. The aim is to isolate the variables and then see their effect on the system being investigated. A measurement scale could be developed so that all results could be compared. Then measurements could be carried out on an experimental subject, and repeated if required or compared to other experimental subjects. This has the benefit of being clearly able to see numbers and statistics of results. However, because the measurement tool has to have a scale and certain limits it cannot take into account factors outside of the scale created.

Alternatively, a qualitative approach allows one to examine the situation from a more open-ended perspective. A qualitative approach will commonly include interviews, *focus groups* or other methods to gather information directly from the experimental subject(s). In the analysis the researcher would attempt to isolate the factors within

that system. This approach has the ability to capture unexpected outcomes during the analysis that might have otherwise been missed, but is far more time consuming in both the collection and the analysis. “Qualitative research, then, has the aim of understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it.” (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p.7)

A more recent discussion on research perspectives (McIntyre, 1996) focuses our thoughts on the broader frameworks (paradigms) of adult education research, placing them above the ideologies that sit within them. In McIntyre’s view the researcher’s perspective on the investigation is largely predetermined by the paradigm or model they adopt. He discusses three that are seen to be most influential in educational research. The first is ‘Empirical-Analytic’, an analytical approach based on experiment. The researcher tests and evaluates their hypotheses by means of controlled observation. The second is the ‘Interpretive’ paradigm. With this model the researcher uses interviews to gain understanding of their subjects’ perspective on the problem. Third is the ‘Critical’ paradigm, commonly action research, whereby the researcher becomes “an agent acting to solve problems in their own situation as a means to bettering both understanding and action”. (McIntyre, 1996, P.15)

### Method and Approach

In this thesis I have worked within an *interpretive* paradigm to explore some of the intricacies of education and learning. The aim was to understand what factors may impact on the ability of an individual to achieve within an educational institution. With view to gaining both information and understanding the researcher has collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data, which includes such detail as age, gender, ethnicity, provides information on the demographics of the respondents. Qualitative data collected from interviews as well as the open questions in the questionnaire enabled the researcher to explore individual perspectives for deeper understanding. The interviews provided the rich data. Although guided by a set of questions, the interviewer did not direct or limit the responses but instead facilitated a discussion around the questions. Interview subjects had the opportunity to explain or qualify their answers and offer considerations not previously anticipated by the researcher.

Through this investigation I, as the researcher, have sought to better understand the diversities of learning and achievement and the factors that influence and impact on learners' experiences. This thesis follows the conventions of sociology of education in that it invites the reader to become involved in the process as the researcher has. The methodology here employed was designed to allow the researcher to get close to the subjects educational reality by supporting them individually and anonymously to reflect upon and share their experiences. The use of written questionnaires provided anonymity and a freedom to share honestly in a way that *focus groups* would not. By allowing room within the research for individuals to comment freely within the questionnaire the researcher obtained insights that would not necessarily emerge through direct questioning. The quantitative data paints a picture of the subjects for the reader. Through these questions their similarities, differences, their educational, familial, cultural and social influences can be considered as a background to the thesis question, thus setting a framework for the research. In the exploration of individual experiences, beliefs and attitudes about learning the use of qualitative data is preferable in that it allows and encourages free flow of thought from which can emerge ideas that I, as the researcher, had not previously considered. The qualitative data, when viewed alongside suggests the possibility of relationships, or links, between the identified factors and the individual's learning experiences, without actually giving us definitive answers. I invite readers to reflect deeply upon their own learning experiences as they consider the data I have collected.

In the consideration of barriers to learning it was appropriate and valuable to review the views of a range of individuals, whilst also efficacious to limit the selection in a way that provides some definitive framework to the study so that it may be completed within the expected timeframe. In this study the focus is on the individuals' recalled reflections of their experiences of school and learning. Whilst the goal was to extract spontaneous and honest responses it was also necessary to frame the study in order that the final report fit within the restrictions of the thesis. I have drawn on some of my own experiences as a starting point; my own story, as told in chapter one (introduction), provided the basis for the questions in the questionnaire.

### Conceptual Design:

Experience with a wide range of learners, learning situations and institutions over a number of years has led me to consider the existence of specific causal factors that have the potential to either block or enhance an individual's learning opportunities, to promote or diminish their chance of achievement in an education and training system that aims to be inclusive and equitable for New Zealanders no matter what their ethnic or socio-economic origins. (MOE, 2002) From the educational provider's perspective it is likely many of these 'barriers' will be exogenous factors, largely outside the control of the school or tertiary institution, however their impact is such that I believe they cannot be ignored if we are serious in our quest for equitable learning opportunities. Such issues must be acknowledged and managed with view to minimising their negative impact on learning outcomes.

Believing that an understanding of these (potential) barriers, along with a greater understanding of the mechanisms of learning, could lead to effective changes in the education system, which could mean increased participation and greater achievement of higher level qualifications, I have attempted to draw some helpful conclusions from this research, which may be used to inform change.

### The Population Group:

The decision regarding *who* to target for this research was influenced by my most recent experiences and the ultimate choice became a simple one when I reflected on the questions driving the research. I needed to connect with those students who had experienced low educational achievement. Experience suggested to me that I was most likely to find my sample group within Private Training Establishments (PTEs) or Adult Community Education (ACE) Centres offering 'second chance' learning for adults. These included the government funded Training Opportunities and Youth Training programmes.

The primary target audience for my questionnaire was adults between the ages of 16 and 55. A prerequisite was that all individuals in my sample group should be currently attending or have recently (within the last 5 years) attended an adult education programme. The majority (estimated 90%) of my convenience sample was collected

from students attending adult education programmes in the Greater Auckland area. My questionnaires, along with a brief description of my research project, were sent out to three large multi-sited PTEs, two smaller PTEs (one also a school), one University and one Polytechnic. My research catchment was divided into four broad areas, West Auckland, East Auckland, Central Auckland and North Auckland, although, in the final analysis it was not always possible to identify the institution of origin for returned questionnaires. I linked in with a Youth transitions research project being undertaken by one of my colleagues in the Rodney District and extended my field of enquiry to include six providers of 'targeted education' and Adult and Community Education in the Rodney District.

These criteria were set because it seemed likely they would offer a significant quantity of relevant data from a relatively small sample group. Eligibility for some (free) adult education programmes includes low or no academic qualifications. This research investigates the view that, for many, their lack of academic achievement is *not* a result of lack of ability, but may be the result of circumstances or barriers (in the system) that they have been unable to overcome. The investigation aimed to uncover those barriers.

In order to collect the maximum data within a comparatively brief timeframe it was logical to target directly those who were likely to be most readily available to offer comment and who had thus far achieved few or no educational qualifications. There were two important **characteristics** (criterion) that set the sample group aside from others. Respondents must have completed their secondary schooling in New Zealand and have exited secondary school with low or no qualifications. They may have achieved secondary or tertiary qualifications since leaving school. By low qualifications we mean no more than two School Certificate passes or 40 NCEA (National Certificate of Education) credits at level one or two.

The **mechanism** by which I located my sample group was by convenience sampling; questionnaires were distributed to a number of tertiary training organisations who offered foundational or vocational programmes for adult learners with no or low school qualifications. Participants were selected on a voluntary referral basis whereby manager, tutors or team leaders from the institutions involved, agreed to distribute

questionnaires, on my behalf, to those students who, understanding the purpose of the research, expressed an interest in participating. My aim was to select individuals from a range of age, culture, gender and vocational interest. Interview participants were also selected by voluntary referral; those completing questionnaires were invited to submit an *interview consent form* (appendix 3) and from those who consented, six participants were selected by draw and interviews arranged and conducted face-to-face. One interviewee subsequently was unable to complete the interview face-to-face, but agreed to answer some questions over the telephone. The five face-to-face interviews were, with the respondent's permission, recorded to enable me to refer to them later.

#### The Research Instruments:

The research was carried out by means of individual questionnaires, using the structured written response questionnaire (appendix 4). Additionally individual interviews, using twelve structured questions (appendix 5) were conducted with six respondents.

The purpose of the research was to provide information that would help to identify specific factors that impacted upon their school performance in particular and their learning successes or failures. The research asks respondents to provide feedback and comment on those aspects of schooling that have, in their view, contributed to their performance, either positively or negatively. Information on barriers and limitations to learning was collected through (confidential) questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. These questionnaires were designed to promote discussion and feedback from a range of adult respondents.

Further information on barriers, supported by personal stories about learning experiences, was collated from the interview data. These personal stories, or narratives, have, along with my own story, formed the framework of my thesis.

The questions were designed to provide some information on trends and guide the development of interview questions. It was intended that, from these interviews there

would develop at least one and possibly two detailed case studies or in depth personal stories. In the end this was not possible, mainly due to the time available for interviews, the availability of subjects and also because of the restricted time frame for completing this work. Since beginning this research project I have faced a number of significant personal, work and life challenges that have significantly impinged upon the time available for this work. It is entirely due to these challenges that it has taken three years to complete.

#### Data Collection Method:

The aim was to collect a minimum of 35 questionnaires and conduct five or six interviews. In the end 40 questionnaires were collected and six interviews undertaken. One interview was conducted over the telephone. Two of the questionnaires were incomplete with the respondent having omitted to respond to several questions in the final section and one respondent had answered only the first section of the questionnaire. This has not significantly impacted upon the data analysis.

Data was collected on individual questionnaire forms and summarised in one document for analysis. Results have also been translated into tabled data format for comparison purposes and included in the data analysis (chapter four). The forms included nominal data, such as gender, age group and ethnicity for purpose of building a profile of the respondent group. Question design used the ordinal response range, for example 'strongly agree – strongly disagree', whilst the interview questions provided scope for the interviewer to probe for more information. Prepaid addressed envelopes were provided for the return of questionnaires, but there were two issues that emerged. First, because I was not directly facilitating the questionnaire completions I had no control over how they were managed and whether or not the subjects answered all questions. Considering this we did well to have only two of forty returned incomplete. Second, the voluntary referral sampling method did not allow the researcher to determine the balance of age groups and gender represented in the research. In the end the subjects were predominantly female (64%) and in the 15-19 year age group (58%). This appeared to impact on the quality and quantity of additional or quantitative data gathered through the questionnaires. Generally the older subjects were more articulate and offered more additional data through their unsolicited comments, whilst younger subjects were less articulate and offered views candidly but with limited explanation.

Six interviews were undertaken. The interview respondents had all completed questionnaires and were selected by draw from those who had returned an Interview consent form. (Appendix 3) four interview respondents were in the 15-19 year age group, one 20-29 and one 40-54.

#### Importance and Limitations:

This project was designed to seek and examine the possible reasons for low educational achievement. The results of this analysis are likely to be of particular interest to educators in both the secondary and tertiary sector, and anyone concerned about the reported underachievement of approximately 25% of school leavers, many of whom end up unemployed. This inquiry should interest all who are passionate about ensuring all have the opportunity to contribute fully to their community personally, socially and economically.

The findings from this inquiry offer significant insight into the reasons why some of us have not achieved what we might have been capable of had these reasons not been. Whilst this study is likely to offer some relevant consideration regarding the factors that impact on learner achievement, because of the small sample group, the findings will not be definitive. The data does, however, offer relevant insights into some of the real issues many students struggle with. The possibility that our school system may not serve all our students equally is a popular debate and the consideration of alternative approaches to learning is not new. With the recent publication of the new school curriculum teachers are being asked to reconsider the nature of what they teach and how, and this is a positive thing. Tertiary establishments are filling the gaps with foundational programmes for adult students who lack basic skills. The most effective changes will come as a result of continual self evaluation on the part of the teachers and their institutions.

Small scale projects such as this have their inherent limitations. With only 40 subjects (40 questionnaires and six interviews) this research is only touching the surface of the issue it explores. The data analysis represents the views expressed by the

participants' regarding the issues being explored but these results cannot be generalised to other groups due to the particular criteria applied. Evidence from the distributed questionnaires enabled the researcher to gather data from a range of subjects but my distance from the questionnaire process meant I had no control over the quantity or quality of the responses. Additionally the age, gender and ethnicity balance was not controlled and is not representative of other student groups.

With their anonymity assured, subjects were not impeded or influenced by others and were able to offer candid and honest answers. The interviews provided greater detail to support the identification of the most commonly shared factors of influence (barriers). The researcher was able to get closer to the subjects, gain their trust and facilitate some discussion around the structured questions via their personal stories and perceptions.

Some of the questionnaires returned contained limited written content. As I analysed the data I became aware that this was likely due to the limited literacy and language skills of the respondents.

#### Data Analysis Procedure:

The returned questionnaires were coded and collated according to the broad areas they had been returned from in order to provide an identification reference. The questionnaire data was analysed and reported according to questions or groups of questions that related to one another. On a master sheet I collated all the responses and summarised them according to descriptive statistics, numbers and percentages. This enabled me to analyse and compare the responses in an orderly manner so that I could identify key ideas or common themes, from which I have developed my discussion in chapter five. The findings were interpreted as to their relevance to the key research question, what are some of the factors that lead to many of us failing to achieve the desired (positive) results at school, despite apparent capability?

The qualitative data within questionnaires was valuable in that it provided the additional detail and information to support individual responses. Initially common themes were

identified and the data was categorised accordingly, then I went through each questionnaire again and noted which of these themes had come up and the individual perspectives on it.

Interview data was analysed directly from the taped recordings, with reference to my interview notes. As with the questionnaires I compared responses, listened for common themes, and then listened to each interview once more to capture the rich data.

I have presented simple interrelationships in table form (in chapter four) for easier reader understanding and to highlight possible correlations between variables; for example specific causal factors that have the potential to either block or enhance an individual's learning. This visual interpretation of the data made it easier to identify the key considerations provided by the respondents.

### Ethical Considerations

Prior to embarking on this research project I submitted a Low Risk Notification which was approved by S V Rumball, Chair Assistant to the Vice-Chancellor (Ethics and Equity). The approval contained the proviso that, should I wish to publish this thesis a full ethics application would be required to be submitted to a Campus Human Ethics Committee.

The delegated authority was given validity for three years from 5 March 2004. Because I have not been able to complete this work within that time I applied to The Ethics Committee and received approval for an extension, with the following comment; "Re your enquiry, we note that you have not completed your research within three years and this will be recorded on your file. We are happy for you to continue your work, however, we ask you to please confirm that the original ethical analysis you undertook is still appropriate and that no other changes have taken place with regard to the project since that time." I responded to confirm no changes had been made.

The process through which the subjects were selected for this research included informed consent, provided by means of an information sheet (Appendix 2) written for participants and a consent form for interview respondents.

Any potential risk to the participants was prevented or eliminated by designing questionnaires in such a fashion that no identifying features were contained in them and by ensuring that only I would handle the completed questionnaires. I provided self sealing (postage pre-paid) addressed envelopes for the anonymous return of questionnaires.

There were no conflict of interest issues. None of the participants was personally known to me.

### Summary

In this chapter I have discussed some of the methodologies that might be employed in educational research, described my chosen approach and the justifications for that choice.

The currency and relevance of the inquiry has been affirmed within the framework of educational achievement and the audience of interest identified.

In the next chapter I present my full analysis of the data.

## Chapter Four – Data Report and Analysis

### Process

In this chapter data from both the forty questionnaires and the six interviews has been collated and presented in three broad areas: background on the respondents, respondents learning experiences and general or other comments that were volunteered by the respondents about their learning experiences.

The questionnaires sought both qualitative and quantitative data and were presented in three sections. The first, 'personal information' includes quantitative data on age, gender, cultural background, years at school and educational achievements, the second, 'personal learning experiences', includes qualitative data such as attitudes and opinions about respondents' school experiences, and teachers. The third section, 'general comments', allowed respondents to comment freely on any aspect of their learning experiences.

### The Respondents - Personal Information

**Table 1 – section 'A', tabled responses of respondents' personal information**

<b>Gender &amp; age groups</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>female</b>	<b>Not declared</b>			
	14	25	1			
<b>Age group</b>	<b>15-19yrs</b>	<b>20-29yrs</b>	<b>30-39yrs</b>	<b>40-54yrs</b>	<b>55+</b>	
	24	5	5	6	0	
<b>Cultural Group</b>	<b>NZE</b>	<b>NZM</b>	<b>Samoaan</b>	<b>CIM</b>	<b>Niuean</b>	<b>Mixed</b>
	25	15	3	3	1	7
<b>School</b>	<b>Left school at</b>	<b>Fewer than two S.C.</b>	<b>Two S.C.</b>	<b>6<sup>th</sup> form (year</b>	<b>7<sup>th</sup> form</b>	

achievement	age 15	passes	passes	12)	(year 13)	
	23	12	5	(5)	0	
School leaving destination	F.E.	Full time Employment	Part time Employment	APP	UNM	
	24	11	1	0	5	
Influences on choices	Family	Teachers	Work experience	Friends	Other	
	13	10	5	4	9	
Tertiary Qualifications	None	Trade cert.	National Cert.	National Dip.	Other	
	23	4	8	3	2	
Current situation	Study FT	Study PT	Study PT / EMP FT	Study PT / EMP PT	Study FT / EMP PT	Study FT/casual work
	34	2	1	1	5	2

Table Key:			
NZE	New Zealand European	F.E.	Further Education or training
NZM	New Zealand Maori	UNM	Unemployed
CIM	Cook Island Maori	APP	Apprenticeship
S.C.	School Certificate (NCEA Level 1)	EMP	employed
PT	Part time	FT	Full time

Table 1 covers section A, the first seven questions in the questionnaire. The next paragraphs provide more detailed explanation and analysis of this information.

**Gender and Age groups:** Twenty-five (approximately 62%) of respondents identified as female and fourteen as male. One questionnaire respondent did not identify their gender. The data was collected from forty individuals between the ages of 15 and 55, each of whom was engaged in or had recently completed a tertiary (adult) education

programme. Twenty-four (58%) respondents were aged 15-19, five (12%) respondents were aged 20-29, five (12%) were aged 30-39 and seven (17%) were aged 40-54. None of the respondents was in the 55+ age group.

Respondents self identified their **cultural affiliations**. Twenty-five (62%) of respondents identified as New Zealand or European, fifteen (37%) identified as New Zealand Maori, three (7%) as Samoan, three (7%) Cook Island Maori and one respondent (2%) was Niuean. Seven respondents identified with more than one cultural affiliation.

Looking at **school achievements**, twenty-three (56%) respondents left school at age 15 having achieved no formal qualifications. One respondent gave pregnancy as the sole reason and explained that she was otherwise enjoying school. Three respondents (7%) commented that they left school because of pressure from family to find employment and earn money. Twelve respondents (30%) left school having achieved fewer than two School Certificate passes, with the majority of these expressing an overall negative impression of school as their reason for leaving. One respondent recalled that the negativity began early in her secondary career. "I began to hate school at 3<sup>rd</sup> form". (BLT1/15] Five respondents (12%) had achieved two School Certificate passes or more, and each of these also went on to complete sixth form (year 12).

**Destinations on leaving School:** Twenty-four (60%) of respondents moved directly from school into further training or education and twelve (29%) went directly from school into employment. Five (13%) of respondents said they "did nothing" or were "unemployed" after leaving school. One respondent cited pregnancy as the main reason for this, whilst another respondent said they had drug dependency issues.

Respondents were asked to comment on what most **influenced their school leaving choice**: thirteen respondents, (31%) cited family influences as being most influential on their choice when leaving school with ten (24%) claiming their school teachers had the greatest influence. One remembered feeling that there was no point in being at school. "Teachers didn't have time and pushed me aside." "(The teacher) says I was a

waste of time so I left.” [BLE3/10] Nine (21%) respondents cited “other” influences, with personal reasons, school exclusion and ‘boredom at school’ being specified. Work experience accounted for destination choice in five (12%) cases and information from friends influenced a further four (9%) in their choices. Two respondents did not complete this question.

Respondents were asked if they held any **Tertiary qualifications**: Two respondents failed to answer this question. Eighteen (42%) of 38 respondents stated that they had completed at least one tertiary qualification since leaving school. Of these eight (20%) were National Certificates, four (10%) held Trade Certificates, two (4%) held ‘other’ qualifications and three (8%) of respondents had completed a National Diploma. Twenty-three (56%) respondents had not completed any tertiary qualifications at the time they completed the questionnaire.

At the time of completing the questionnaire the majority of my respondents (95% or 38 of 40) were enrolled on a foundation programme, two were employed; one of these was on an apprenticeship. Further analysis revealed that thirty-four (83%) respondents were **currently** engaged in full time study. Two of these were combining study with being full time parents; five were working part time while two were employed on a casual basis. Three (7%) respondents studied part time, one of these combined study with full time work whilst one other worked part time. One respondent was unemployed and two respondents did not complete this question.

### The Respondents – Personal Learning Experiences

**Table 2 – Personal ratings of school experiences**

Remember school days as:	A really good time	Mostly good times	Some good and some not so good	A totally negative experience	
	1	11	16	11	
Achievements/performance at school	Did well at everything	Did well at most things	Did well at some things and badly at others	Did badly at most things	

	1	9	19	8	
<b>Attendance</b> at school	Almost never missed	Missed occasionally	Frequently missed	Hardly ever attended	
	15	10	7	6	
<b>Attitude</b> to school	Always enjoyed	Mostly enjoyed	Did not like many aspects of school	Strongly disliked school	
	2	15	9	14	

Table 2 covers section B, questions 8,9,10 and 11. These questions ask the respondents to reflect on their feelings about their experiences of school. The following paragraphs provide more details and analysis of their responses.

When asked to **remember their school** days and comment on how they felt about them, sixteen of the respondents (41%) described school as a mixture of 'some good and some not so good times'. One commented "I did learn a lot, but I felt unsettled in my third year of (high) school" (BLW3/3). Of the remaining respondents eleven (28%) felt school was 'mostly good times' whilst another eleven felt school had been 'a totally negative experience'. One respondent reflected on the 'one-size-fits-all approach and suggested that "teachers need to tutor people as individuals, rather than expecting everyone to be on the same level" (RBL/H2/12). A female respondent commented, "I got bullied and I was in the 'badest' class" (RBL/MW/18). Another said she "didn't enjoy being in a classroom and being made to learn things that I didn't like or care about" (BLT1/15). Just one respondent felt that school was overall 'a really good time'. "I really liked school as it gave me a sense of belonging." (BLW6/6) This respondent explained that her reason for leaving was because "I got pregnant at 15 so I had to leave school to look after him."

Considering their **school achievements**, one person considered they had done well at everything and nine respondents (22%) felt they had done well at most things. Nineteen (47%) respondents felt they had done well at some things and badly at others, while eight (20%) felt they had done badly at most things.

Looking at **attitudes** to school, twenty-three (58%) respondents expressed some negative attitudes toward their schooling. Within this group fourteen (60%) strongly disliked school whilst the remaining nine (23%) did not like many aspects of school. One respondent considered that his social skills let him down saying that he “got into trouble” and that “(I) *don't* get on with people. (RBLM/9) seventeen respondents expressed some positive attitudes to school. Fifteen (37%) of these said they ‘mostly’ enjoyed school, with two (5%) indicating that they had ‘always’ enjoyed it.

From the data it appears that **attendance** was not always a reflection of student’s *attitudes* to school. Several respondents commented that they went to school to “be with their mates” (BL6/13), and (BLW2/2) said “I like school because I can meet my friends”. Some preferred school to being at home because of the social aspects; “I basically got bored of staying (at) home” (BLW1/1) and “(I) got to play and see my mates” (BLE6/13). Another commented that “being at home ‘sucked’” (BLW7/7). Although twenty-three (58%) of respondents had admitted to not liking school only thirteen (32%) said they frequently or regularly missed school. One respondent admitted to missing a lot of school. “(I) didn’t go to school – ‘wagged’ - stayed home”. (BLE3/10) Of the remainder, fifteen (37%) ‘Almost never’ missed and ten (25%) ‘Missed occasionally’.

Respondents were asked to reflect on what things **helped** them do well at school and what things had **made it more difficult** to do well.

### Exploring the Barriers

**Table 3 – factors that supported or didn’t support school achievement**

Aspects respondents considered important	Supported them to do well	Did not support them to do well	Notes
<b>Teachers</b>	13 (32.5%)	9 (22.5%)	Relationships – liking or not liking the teacher. Good teachers, bad personalities, special teachers, helpful, intimidating. Attitudes - treating all the same, or accommodating differences in ability, learning style etc. Treating individuals with respect (avoid autocratic approach). Clear communications - instructions or explanations.

			"it took me a while to understand things"
<b>Friends</b>	9 (22.5%)	3 (7.5%)	Having friends in class can be helpful or not. help to explain or be distracting
<b>Peers</b> (other students)	0	6 (15%)	Bullies x 3 & others bad behaviour x3 – help explain things – noise distractions  ("all the 'dumb' people)
<b>Family</b>	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)	Having to take care of siblings, parental disharmony, and language (e.g. parents ESL). Unsupportive or supportive attitude to school & learning – how valued. [BLW6/6-"my family was not supportive at all..." Culture and social values and attitudes.
<b>Subjects</b> (curriculum)	5 (12.5%)	5 (12.5%)	*interest, or ability [BLW3/3], or lack of - difficulty understanding *relevance of material – context that is interesting & makes sense. Dealing with feelings of being "forced" to work at subjects that are not of interest or for which relevance is not understood. E.g. "doing irrelevant matter like algebra". [RBLH3/13] Having a 'learning difficulty' e.g. dyslexia [RBL/MW/20]
<b>School environment</b> (including learning options)	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	Class groups too large. Noisy classes, inflexible systems (e.g. timetables, set number of subjects). Preference for small group learning with some 1-1. Not enough practical work that is relevant to life. Require lots of opportunities to practice the learning. Too much writing and bookwork is a 'turn off' to many. The stress/pressure of timeframes and restrictions on how when and where learning has to happen. "(I) started going backwards as I went up in years. It was also very stressful & I was always uptight." [RBLMW/19]

Table 3 is a compilation of responses to the questionnaire, section B, questions 9a and 9b. These questions ask the respondents to reflect specifically on what they feel helped them to do well at school and what they feel did not help them do well. These were open undirected questions and received a range of responses. The following paragraphs provide more details and analysis of these responses.

It is clear from the questionnaires that, for just over half the respondents, their **teachers** had a significant influence on their attitude and performance. Twenty-two (55%) respondents indicated that teachers had influenced their achievements either positively or negatively. For some a "special" or particular teacher had made a real and positive difference to their students, whilst other teachers had apparently been unable to create a positive learning environment for some students and impacted negatively

on their overall experience of school and learning. One respondent remembered his work being compared to others in a public manner and described this as “intimidating”. “when you did ask a question the teacher made you look like an idiot or stupid and would tell you off in front of the class” (BL/W7/7) Two respondents made particular mention of the importance of patience in a teacher as well as the ability to listen to their students. The way the teachers related to students and how they treated them in or outside the class could either turn them on or off learning. “When I don’t like the teacher I don’t want to ask questions” said one. (RBL/H4/14) Other comments included, (the teacher is) “very important – needs to be attentive and help you”, pretty important – their attitude makes a difference” while another student felt that teachers were “not very important”.

**Classroom** management was another teaching skill that made a difference for many students. The ability of the teacher to organise the learning and control the class so that disruptive behaviour did not impact on others is seen to be critical. One respondent commented “other students not working as they should” made it more difficult to do well, while several mentioned “noisy classes”. Equally, the teachers who allowed for different student learning preferences were appreciated. Some students prefer to work in complete silence whilst others prefer to study with a bit of noise in the background. Teachers generally were not able to accommodate those who liked some background noise (e.g. mp3s). One interview respondent commented that “studying for tests – the teacher makes us do this in silence - doesn’t suit me”. (IBL/A) Teacher’s approaches to differing performances were also critical. Public comparisons between students were not seen as positive teaching practice and generally a demotivator.

Twelve respondents made specific mention of **friends** and six commented on peers with regard to their performance at school. For example, “we help each other out and work together” (RBL/A) and “my friends – them being there – supported (me)” (RBL/B) The presence of friends was a powerful influence for some and could be both positive and negative. Nine respondents (23%) indicated that having their friends there had helped them to do well, three (8%) indicated that the influence of friends had challenged their achievements in a negative way. Some respondents admitted to having been distracted by friends from applying themselves at school. Two respondents reported that the main reason they had chosen to attend their current

programme was a recommendation from their friends and that was a positive thing. Other comments included, “it makes it easier with friends’ support”, “yes, we help each other out and work together” and “friends can influence me quite a lot – if they’re not into it that puts me off”. For six respondents (15%) bad behaviour, including bullying, from other students (not friends) had significantly impacted on their school performance.

Ten respondents felt that their **family**, or a particular family member, had in some way impacted on their school achievements. Much as for friends and peers the family could be either supportive or non-supportive. How strong their influence seems to depend upon the relationships and family dynamics. Seven (17%) respondents believed that family support had in some way made it easier for them to do well at school, while three (7%) commented that family issues had made it more difficult for them to do well at school. There was not one specific issue relating to families but it was clear that parental attitudes to learning and employment combined with family stability generally impacted on students. Many respondents commented that family support was important. For example “really great to have family support” (RBL/W1), “parents want me to do well – supported me to leave school and go into my chosen course” (RBL/W2) and “family first – their support is very important” (RBL/W3). Specific examples of families impacting negatively on learning achievement included language (one respondent commented that her parents’ English was not advanced enough to be able to support her at secondary school), dysfunctional relationships (parents splitting up was a principal issue for another respondent (BLT/1/15) and having to take care of younger siblings and a sick parent significantly impacted on the achievements of a third respondent (BLE/3/10).

Respondents made reference to their (school) **learning environment** and the impressions of it. Thirty-five of forty respondents (88%) had mainly experienced ‘classroom’ learning at school. For three of these (7%) small tutorial lessons had been available for some school subjects, while two (5%) had experienced some 1-1 learning. Two respondents have identified ‘distance learning’ as primary mode of learning but in following up it transpired that they had ‘hardly ever attended’ due to truancy and, in one case, being stood down.

Respondents were asked to identify their *preferred learning* situation. There emerged strong support for small tutorial group type learning situations, with twenty (50%) respondents identifying this as their preferred mode of learning. This is one aspect of the current training programme that respondents appreciated, with most classes numbering no more than twelve. Additionally some 1-1 time with the teacher was considered important with thirteen (34%) respondents stating a preference for this learning option. Two of the interview respondents said that what they liked about their current learning programme was that the teacher gave them each some individual time. It is interesting to note that while five (12%) respondents identified 'classroom' learning as their preferred learning delivery mode, half (50%) of these liked to have some small group or individual tutorials. There was general agreement that the class environment was important to varying degrees.

One of the 'turn-offs' at school was the perception that the **subject matter** was not useful. One interview respondent commented about their current vocational programme that "the best thing (about it) is the specific useful information" (IBL/B). Another respondent (IBL/A) was clear in their opinion that the apparent relevance of their current course work to a specific job or workplace made the learning activities worthwhile. Another agreed, saying that what they enjoyed about this programme was that "here this is focused on one main subject and it's the one I want to learn – not like school" (IBL/C).

Amongst the respondents there was an opinion that too much time was spent on learning from books. One respondent commented "I hated sit down classes, such as English and Social Studies, where work was based on book work rather than practical activities" (BLT1/15). Many of the respondents felt that greater support and encouragement had been given to the more academically able students. One commented that "at high school teachers mainly spent more time teaching people who were good at a certain subject, than people who struggled" (BL/W/7) The attitude towards those who performed at a lower academic level left them feeling less important than those other students. They felt that their current tutor treated them all as equally important and supported them to learn in their own time. One said they liked "being treated like adults" (IBL/B).

**Table 4 – Personal perceptions or how students see themselves (as learners)**

Aspects respondents considered important	Supported them to do well	Did not support them to do well	Notes
Personal <b>Interest</b> , ability/ <b>capability</b> (perception of) & self belief	6 (15%)	8 (20%)	Strength areas/talent, concentration issues - 2 cited learning difficulties (dyslexia & ADHD) "I didn't know nothing" (I had) "no motivation". Like or not like the subject (level of interest) Feel capable or not to achieve. "(My) ability". [RBLM6/6] Feeling that one is not up with the rest of the class – negative impact "when everyone knows what they are doing and I don't". [RBLH4/14] Did well because "I wanted to, or I was just good at it." [RBLMW/17]
Self <b>determination</b> (motivation)	2	3 (7.5%)	It was "my choice" (to do badly) "My own laziness".[BLW5/5] "I chose to" [RBLM4/4]
Self <b>Image</b> /Self belief - confidence		5 (12.5%)	Feeling less able than others – low self esteem, confidence, shyness

Table 4 covers further areas of influence identified by the respondents in the questionnaire, section B, questions 9a and 9b. In this table I have identified responses that relate to personal perceptions.

Ten respondents made specific reference to their own role in achieving or not achieving at school. Two believed that their own motivation was a major factor and that when they achieved it was because "I wanted to do it" (RBL/M4/4 & BLE4/11) and they felt driven or determined. Four respondents admitted to having very low self-esteem or confidence and felt that this had limited their ability to achieve at school. "I was too shy to bother to ask the teacher to help me." (RBL/H4/14) "People judged me for my dyslexia – this took away my confidence." (RBL/MW/20) Although ten respondents had felt they had done well at some of their school learning, none suggested that confidence or self-esteem had been a factor in this. One interview respondent (IBL/B) told me about being the leader of the Kapa Haka group at school. He told me that he was not a confident person at school but he felt "proud and confident when he was doing it (Kapa Haka)".

**Table 5 – personal beliefs about ability to learn**

Ability to learn – personal rating	Easy to learn new things	Have to work hard to learn new things	other	Did not answer this question
Responses	13	24	2 suggested depended on subject	1

Table 5 collates the responses relating to personal beliefs about learning ability - questionnaire section B, question 13a. Respondents were asked to rate their own ability to learn and whether they generally found it easy or hard to learn new things. Twenty-four respondents (60%) believed that they had to work hard to learn new things, whilst fourteen (35%) said that they found it easy to learn new things. Two respondents felt that it was hard for them to learn some new things and easier to learn others – that it depended on other factors such as the subject, the size of the class or the teacher.

**Table 6 – Considering factors that made learning easier or more difficult**

Factors	Made learning easier	Made learning more difficult	Number of respondents
Teachers	Patient, clear instructions, make learning 'fun', listen, help, encourage, 1-1 time, allow time to practice (12)	Unclear instructions, not listening or checking for understanding, rush through, lots of reading & writing (10)	22
Subjects (learning material)	Like, enjoy, interested, want to do it (10)	Boring, not interested, not fun, too much writing, not enough practical (7)	10 Some used subject as answer for both questions
Friends & peers	Support, having them in class (3)	Distracting, talking, interrupting, bullies (3)	6
Class/learning environment	smaller classes, more teacher time, (1)	Class too large, too noisy, distractions & interruptions, the classroom, boredom of 'sitting in classroom' (5)	6
Ability	Having extra help, being able to go over work again (1)	Learning issues such as Dyslexia, ADHD, being a slow learner (2)	3

Other factors	Self determination – desire to achieve (1)	Stress, time pressures, 'my own laziness', poor concentration (2)	3
Confidence /self-image		Image: Important to look good in front of mates, shyness (2)	2

Table 6 collates the responses relating to personal beliefs about factors that made learning easier or more difficult, questionnaire, section B, 13b & 13c.

Respondents were asked to reflect on their past learning experiences and identify what had made learning easier for them and what made it more difficult for them to learn. Table 7 summarises the responses to these questions in order of significance. These were open questions and some respondents offered more than one idea. Overall the *teachers* came out as the strongest factor with 22 (55%) believing that their enjoyment or lack of could be attributed to some aspect of teacher personality, behaviour or approach. Learning is difficult when “the teacher is boring” said one (BLT1/15) and “Teachers didn’t have time” commented another. (BL/E3/10) Having to adjust to different teachers was mentioned as a negative in five cases. Boredom or lack of interest in the *subject* was a factor for ten (25%), with one commenting “school is boring and needs to be hands-on” (RBL/M8/8) and another “hated sitting in (the) classroom and having to listen when bored and not interested” (BLT1/15) Six respondents (15%) considered friends or peers important. Three felt that having their friends in class was a positive influence on their learning, whilst, for the other three their fellow students were often responsible for distracting and disturbing the learning. Two mentioned being subjected to class bullying. The classroom *learning environment* was identified as a negative factor for five (12%) respondents, with one reflecting that “classes (were) too large – teachers had no time to help individual students”. (BL/W2/2) Personal aspects of confidence, shyness and self image were brought up by several respondents, although only two noted this with respect to these questions. “(I) lacked positivity and confidence, (I was) very shy” (BLE5/12) Perceptions of personal learning ability were considered by three respondents and one said that developing study skills had helped.

Question 14 asked respondents to consider their current or recent (adult) learning experiences and rate them according to how enjoyable they found them.

**Table 7 – Learning enjoyment**

How much do you enjoy learning now?	Very Enjoyable	Enjoyable sometimes	Not enjoyable at all	Did not answer this question
	15	19	2	4

Table 7 collates the responses relating to current learning enjoyment, that is how well they enjoy learning now; as presented in the questionnaire section B, question 14a.

Thirty-four (85%) of respondents currently found their learning experiences positive, fifteen (37%) responded that it was 'very enjoyable & stimulating'. "I like learning what I am learning – it's what I want to do" said one. (RBL/M4/4) Nineteen (47%) felt the learning was 'sometimes enjoyable' while two answered that learning was not at all enjoyable for them. Four respondents did not provide an answer to this question.

Questions 14b and 14c asked respondents to identify specific factors that made learning more enjoyable for them.

**Table 8 – considering specific factors that affect learning enjoyment**

Factors influencing <i>enjoyment</i> of learning	More	Positive Comments	Less	Negative Comments
The subject	10	Relevance, interest, 'fun', 'liking' it, practical	10	Disinterest, no fun, boring classroom work, too much writing, not practical
Teachers	4	Patience, humour,	3	No 1-1 time, judgmental,
Success/achievement	3	Doing well, being able to repeat , small groups	3	Not being able to understand, finding things too hard
Noise & peer distractions	0		5	Other kids, noise, bullying
Stress & working in tight timeframes	0		4	Being rushed, stressed, tired

Table 8 collates the responses regarding specific factors that, in the view of the respondents, affected current learning enjoyment; questionnaire section B, questions 14b & 14c. Responses indicated that some respondents felt these questions were too similar to 13b & 13c and many answers reflected this. The questions were designed to elicit more feelings based responses but they worked better in the interview situation where the interviewer could facilitate the questions. I did get some different answers. One said, "Now I am older I am interested in keeping up with the kids." (BLE6/13) The most commonly expressed view indicated that the subject matter, and how it was presented to them, was of huge significance when considering both ease and enjoyment of learning. Stress, particularly that associated with working within limited timeframes, noisy classes, and peer distractions were important factors for others.

Responses to these questions had three common factors, the *subject* being studied, the *teachers*, and sense of *achievement* or success, in other words, how well students *felt* they were doing. Ten comments supported 'subject' as a positive factor in learning enjoyment and ten considered it negative. It was evident from the responses that most viewed it as both a positive and a negative factor. For some it was simply expressed as "liking the subject" or "when I enjoy what I am learning" (BLE1/8), or "Having heaps of

fun while learning" (BLE2/9) others were more specific. "When it is to do with cars or engineering" made learning enjoyable for one. (RBL/M10/10)

Seven respondents said that teachers were a factor in their learning enjoyment. Attribute or behaviours that were appreciated included patience, humour, good listening and class control. Teaching approaches that were enjoyed included less writing, more practical, and having success. "Learning (is) more enjoyable when I achieve" (BL/W2/2) In the less enjoyable category, "Having to do writing all the time" took the enjoyment out of learning for one respondent (RBL/M7/7) while another cited "no friends, too much stress and no breaks" (RBL/MW/20) as key factors in learning enjoyment, or lack of.

Table 9, below, collates the responses to questionnaire section B, question 15, which asked respondents to consider what or who most influenced their choices on what to do after leaving school.

**Table 9 – Influences on school leaving (destinational) choices**

Influences	Responses	Comments
Family	8	"my parents told me to get a job and earn and save money" [BL/E1/8]
Personal	8	Personal choice, hated school, pregnancy
Work or Course	7	Found job or course they liked, based on interests
School	7	Exclusion, careers advisor, not liking school. "hated school" [RBL/H/2]
Teachers	3	Individual teacher advised or supported "my teacher must have known...he knew I can do it" [BL/E2/9]
Friends	2	Followed their example – not always good example
Don't know	1	When I left school "I did correspondence because I wanted to keep doing something academic" [RBLM5/5]
No response	4	Four respondents did not answer this question

Ten respondents (25%) mentioned school or a specific teacher as having significantly influenced their choice on leaving school. This influence could be either positive or

negative, for example, one respondent recalled feeling de-motivated by one teacher's attitude. "Teacher says I (was) a waste of time so I left" (BLE/3/10). Another was grateful for one teacher's apparent perceptiveness and understanding and recognised that this teacher's support had helped direct a more positive pathway. "My teacher must have known I wasn't gonna make it out there. He knew I can do it if I put my mind to it" (BL/E2/9). Two respondents claimed to have left because they didn't like school, but did not give details. Family was a significant factor in the destination choices of eight (20%) respondents. One said, "I did what I wanted with my parent's support" (RBL/MW/20), while another said "my dad made me (leave) because I needed to pay board" (RBL/H3/13). Finding a job or course that interested them was a factor for seven (17%) respondents. "(I) looked after two old people" (BLW3/3), "I wanted to know more about horse(s) because I always liked them" (RBL/MW/17) and "I really liked computers" (RBL/H1/11).

### General Comments

At the end of the questionnaire, and in the final part of the interviews, respondents were invited to make further comments about their school and adult learning experiences.

Two interview respondents mentioned school disciplinary practices. They did not generally like the way discipline was administered by the teachers and felt they were too often treated like (young) children. One said he felt that they were "picked on for nothing". He expressed a view that the demeanors were petty and the punishments inappropriate. For example, he had to attend detention for having his shirt un-tucked. He suggested that an un-tucked shirt was a natural outcome from generally 'rushing about' and punishment for this was unreasonable and the detention a waste of time. One student commented that at this course "they are treated differently – have adult choices, like I can smoke. At school I was suspended for this". (IBL/D)

There were comments that reflected on the way school, in the respondent's experience, appeared to cater for the average or better than average students. The implication that all students should learn in the same way (one-size-fits-all) was noted and several respondents commented that they wished they had been treated more as

individuals during their schooling. They felt that was happening more for them at their current training course and they learned better because of it. At school there had been little opportunity to develop their personal skills and attributes if those particular skills did not “fit” within the ‘normal’ curriculum. These young people had the impression that school primarily supported academic achievement, “at high school teachers mainly spent time teaching people who were good at a certain subject” [BL/W7/7], and that any practical or vocational applications were treated as less important than the academic subjects. (I recall an incident from my own entry to secondary schooling where two girls who wanted to study bookkeeping & typing were removed from the academic stream and placed within a lower stream class)

### Summary

From all the questionnaires and interview there is a range of issues that appear to have impacted on individual learning to some extent. Most of these have featured in the data analysis, either as question answers or as general comments. There is not the time or capacity to deeply explore all of these issues in this thesis but I feel it might be interesting to take these back to a student focus group.

At school the issues were many. Different teachers and their different approaches (teaching and learning styles) were commented on by most respondents in and some provided examples of judgmental or discriminatory practices. The perceived relevance of the subject matter was a factor for most. As adult students most respondents were positive about the relevance of what they were doing now. Bullying could occur in the classroom or outside and may be from peers or from teachers. In our highly technological age a new type of bullying has evolved - by text. Peer pressure along with noisy and disruptive behaviour from classmates, factors related to (poor) classroom management, influenced several. Some students felt that they could have done better if they had received more one on one support, especially where learning difficulties were a factor, and recalled the impression that teachers tended to give more time to those who did well.

At a personal level, several respondents mentioned “ability” or learning difficulties as being a factor in their struggle at school and for some, an ongoing struggle. Stress was

a factor for many respondents with comments made about not having enough time to complete one set of work before new work was introduced. Deadlines did not take account of different learning styles and abilities, which led to loss of motivation. Finding work difficult to understand, insufficient explanations from teachers and specific learning difficulties such as Dyslexia could be stress inducing factors. When achievement or success was too much of a struggle the battle was all too frequently conceded.

Transience had been a factor for a few. For one in particular, the multiple changes of school had seen them lose their way as they left friends and other familiar securities behind.

In the next chapter I will discuss in detail the factors that have emerged as being influential on student performance and achievement and relate these findings to current literature, both academic and popular.

# Chapter Five – Discussing the research findings

## The Framework: Extracting the Main Ideas

From the analysis of the research data (questionnaires and interviews) there emerged a number of factors that appear to have significance when considering potential 'barriers' or inhibitors to learning and educational achievement. It became apparent that many of these are inter-related. With this in mind I initially grouped these factors into three key areas; the **Learning Environment** (includes learning institutions, systems and processes, environment, assessment and *teachers* – their personalities, teaching and learning styles and classroom practices), the **Inter-Personal Family, Social and Life Environment** (includes family values and attitudes, culture and gender expectations, the learner's *social* connections and interactions, including the influence of friends and peers) and the **Intra-Personal** (includes personal interests, skills, learning styles and preferences, 'self image' and 'personal perceptions', particularly of their own ability to achieve.) These groups coincide exactly with Cross's three categories, **Institutional, Situational** and **Dispositional**. (Cross, 1981) In line with my literature review, I have opted to organise the body of my discussion under these headings.

## Institutional Barriers

### Learning Environment - An Overview

*"School is a drill for the battle of life. If you fail in the drill you will fail in the battle."* Karl G. Maeser

"The schools that youngsters attend, and what their teachers know and do, have much more influence on student achievement than family characteristics and ethnicity." (Peachey, 2005, p72) My daughter's teacher once commented that "you only get one chance at school". We were discussing our choice of secondary school and the pros and cons of the institutions available to us. From my daughter's perspective at the

time, the most important factor was that there should be no boys. In her recent experience of school boys were the greatest cause of noise and disruptions which had challenged her concentration and spoilt her learning enjoyment.

From age five to fifteen the majority of us spend between 30 and 35 hours each week for about 40 weeks of each year attending school. That is almost 50% of our waking day. During these years our experiences at school and our interpretation of those experiences provide the foundations for our development as a learner. It is over this time that we formulate beliefs about ourselves and our strengths and weaknesses. We are constantly testing our limitations and seeking feedback on our performance. What we each aspire to is “success”.

The educational **institution** impacts on learners in a number of ways and its systems and procedures can impact positively or negatively on learner participation and achievement. Many of the adult learners I spoke with have unhappy school memories and, as adults, appreciated the opportunity to discover their potential in a non-threatening learning environment. Zepke et al (2006) found that the two most influential factors in student withdrawal from Tertiary study were that programmes “did not suit the way I learn” or the student “felt I did not belong”. (Zepke, Leach and Prebble, 2006, p597) One female (IBL/B) described her school days as “living hell”. She explained that she had a learning disability and felt that this had been used against her. She remembered school as being a “horrible experience”, apart from one much smaller school where she recalled that staff had provided her some individual support and encouragement and fostered her special interest and talent in Art. She admitted that she had attended several schools, evidently due to ‘exclusions’. Another reflected how she “hated sit down classes, such as English and Social Studies, where work was based on book work rather than practical activities”. (IBL/A)

Assessments, curricula, timetables, teachers and the physical learning environment are some aspects common to all educational institutions but the characteristics and applications of each of these will be particular to each institution. These differences can account for differing impressions as was the case for one respondent who had to change schools part-way through secondary. “My first secondary school was good and cool but we moved and I went to a new school and it was not good.” (RBL/MW/17)

Another grew such a negative impression of their school environment that, at age 15, they abandoned their schooling entirely. “(I) hated the school I was going to” (RBL/H/21) Another recalled the one smaller school she attended where the teachers were helpful and said she got very close to achieving School Certificate there because of their help. She did at least pass School Certificate Art, which she was proud of. (IBL/D)

Most institutions use assessments as tools for grouping students with similar learning needs. Assessments can also be responsible for directing future opportunities, both social and educational. It is a criticism of many assessments that they do not take account of individual abilities and learning styles. Additionally, particularly when time restrictions are enforced, these tests may reflect students' knowledge and abilities inaccurately. For me examinations were a particularly distressing time and my inability to master them impacted on my school and tertiary attainments, and my self-belief. The time limitations of the test, my intense fear of failure, often combined with a tenuous grasp of the relevance of the material led to results that clearly did not reflect my learning abilities. I discuss assessment later in this chapter.

Research in the United Kingdom found “a large number of respondents did not feel that their schooling prepared them well for life. They felt that much of the content was not relevant or needed.” (Ball, 1995, in Claxton, 1999, p274) The school curriculum is set nationally but subject choices and approaches will vary from school to school, depending on qualifications and knowledge of staff and school priorities. Many of my respondents mentioned ‘boring’ and/or irrelevant subjects as concerns for them at school, one of the positive aspects of their current learning programme, they told me, was the flexibility of structure and content, allowing them opportunity to develop their own learning interests. My recollection of secondary school days was that “it involved copying endless notes and diagram’s, learning masses of facts and figures, many of which I had little real understanding...” (Introduction, p7) Students admitted to being more motivated when studying a subject or vocation that they held a particular interest in.

Timetables are a fact of life in all institutions and can be barriers. If students had some input on these I wonder if we might see some changes. Reflecting on secondary

school, many respondents found the changes of classroom and teacher disruptive to their flow of learning; frequently the schedule meant leaving part way through a piece of work and created difficulty for those needing more time or explanation. My teenage daughter has found that correspondence school works for her because she can set her own timetable. Commonly she prefers to focus on one subject per day for the week.

In the minds of many students, teachers bear enormous responsibility for their achievements or failures. Uninteresting material, uninspiring teachers, poorly managed classes all featured as negatives for a number of my research respondents. For this reason I have dedicated a section of this discussion to teachers.

The adult learners in my study had chosen their current courses because they judged them to meet their needs. For tertiary institutions quality is largely determined by the knowledge that, should the programme fail in this respect students may choose to withdraw their enrolment. This option is not usually available to the school student, the legal attendance requirements over-ruling. For secondary students faced with an uninspiring and de-motivating learning programme their only option is to withdraw effort and tune out, which is what many respondents admitted to doing.

## Teachers

*“Quality teaching is identified as a key influence on high quality outcomes for diverse students. The evidence reveals that up to 59% of variance in student performance is attributable to differences between teachers and classes, while up to almost 21%, but generally less, is attributable to school level variables.”* (Alton-Lee, 2003,pv)

From the student’s perspective teachers have a considerable amount of power and influence over the ultimate outcome of our labours; after all, they both teach and assess it. My own experiences have led me to believe that the **teacher** is a critical factor in the learner’s experience and research generally supports this view. (Benseman, 2001 and Benseman and Tobias, 2003 and Alton-Lee, 2003) My third form mathematics teacher (introduction, p6) was certainly challenged by the size of his classes, but I have revised my view on his level of accountability. The fear of being considered ‘stupid’ eventually stopped me asking questions. The loss of confidence

and my poor test results left me disadvantaged both mathematically and emotionally. Had he been more supportive and encouraging the outcome may have been different.

Peachey (2005) believes that good teachers need “the professional and personal attributes necessary to make students learn”; he clearly puts the responsibility for students learning onto the teachers. (Peachey, 2005, p54) Comments on my school reports indicate that some teachers took no such responsibility; for example, from my science teacher, “... has not made sufficient effort to learn the work” and, from my fifth form geography teacher, “needs to pay more careful attention to learning the work”.

More than 50% of respondents in this research indicated that a teacher (or teachers) had to some degree influenced or affected their learning achievements. Teachers alone scored more highly than any other factor in my research. The majority of comments about teachers were positive; for example, one recalled that she was bullied “and was in the ‘*baddest*’ class” but that “a nice teacher had helped to make learning more enjoyable”. (RBL/MW/18) Sadly, almost half the comments made about teachers were negative ones. Comments from respondents suggested that the negative views they held regarding their own scholastic ability may, in some way, be attributable to one of their teachers. Respondent BLE3/10 blames his early departure from school on a particular teacher who reportedly gave him the impression he was “a waste of time”. Now a retired school principal, Campbell left school at fifteen without attempting School Certificate because his principal had told him “can’t see you having much success, Campbell. You’re certainly not capable of getting your School Certificate.” (Campbell, 1999, p10) Campbell goes on to comment that, until that moment, he had not seen himself as a failure. Some did recall positive things about their teachers, but this was not specifically for their teaching skills but for their personal skills, such as patience and support. Students commonly valued feeling “accepted and recognised by good teachers”. (Benseman and Tobias, 2003, p51)

All teachers bring with them attitudes and behaviours particular to the culture and experience that has framed their life view. “When the adult educator engages in the practice of education, certain beliefs about life in general are applied to the practice.”(Zinn, L.M, 1990,np) A teacher is in a powerful position of influence with regard to their students and need to be aware how their attitudes, values and beliefs,

discriminations or judgments may impact on their learners. Bishop and Glynn consider that, for many teachers “their understanding of what is best for (their students) is determined within their own Eurocentric world view which incorporates their own particular cultural perspectives...” (Bishop and Glynn, 1999, p134); the implication being that what the teacher considers best for their students is not necessarily so.

Based on the andragogy, pedagogy comparison our secondary schooling is characteristically more teacher-centred than adult education and our psychological state more sensitive to the judgments and influences of authority figures. “Teacher quality is the single most important factor influencing student achievement” says the principal of one of New Zealand’s largest secondary schools. (Peachey, 2005)

The value of a good teacher is unlikely to be disputed but what particular skills, knowledge and aptitudes make a teacher ‘good’? There are converse schools of thought on this, which I will discuss, but it is my belief that good teaching is not simply about imparting knowledge. This is the philosophy behind the new schools curriculum, which “places more emphasis on themes relevant to today’s society”. (MOE, 2005,np) Teachers need to be helping their students develop the skills to seek out the knowledge for themselves. By talking about teaching and learning jointly we are supporting the concept that it is two way a cooperative activity between the teacher and the learners. Vygotsky (1978) believes interaction is the most effective situation for learning and that any curricula should be designed to maximise interaction between the learners and the learning material.

Essentially we have two conflicting views on the primary role of a teacher; on one hand the teacher is a subject expert and purveyor of knowledge and on the other a facilitator guiding their students through the learning process. This conflict is most evident within the secondary system where ‘old school’ meets new. A current principal who sees teachers first and foremost as ‘communicators of knowledge’ says “there is a fundamental and almost philosophical split between some principals and others (like me) who still believe that knowledge is the basis of a good education.” (Peachey, 2005, p61)

Personal teaching styles and approaches will vary as do personalities but it is how teachers communicate with and relate to their learners that makes the difference. If they had a positive relationship with their teacher students generally enjoyed the learning more and performed better. "To do well at a subject they (students) need a teacher they can respect." (Peachey, 2005, p149) Respect between teacher and student is imperative. Generally students feel that teachers do not automatically deserve respect, they need to earn it. One respondent indicated that such mutual respect was not her experience when she said of her teachers, "man they suck. We never really asked for help because they always ended up getting angry or we end up in detention!" (BLW1/1)

A teacher can earn some respect by knowing their subject well, by presenting an interesting lesson, but by far the most respect is offered to the teacher who indicates that they care about the learner and genuinely want to see them achieve. "My teacher helped direct me because he must of known I wasn't gonna make it out there. He knew I can do it if I put my mind to it." (BL/E2/9) From one with learning difficulties: "If I didn't get along with (the teacher) I guess I couldn't be bothered" (Benseman and Tobias, 2003, p51). Evidence supports a clear link between learning enjoyment and positive feelings toward a teacher.

The classroom is the most common learning environment and the teacher is the creator of this environment. A teacher who demonstrates enthusiasm and passion for their work is more likely to engage their learners. It is reasonable to consider that the teacher and the attitudes and practices they apply to their teaching, is of greater importance than the subject material. (Claxton, 1999, Cuban, 2003) An excellent teacher, I suggest, could make lesson on changing a tyre fascinating and enjoyable.

Whilst the authoritarian teacher is not favoured, good classroom management skills, well organised sessions and clear expectations regarding behaviour and discipline are imperative for quality learning and teaching. Learner's preferences vary but most do not learn well in a disorganised, noisy and disruptive environment. Many students in my study admitted that they found their non-cooperative peers a regular source of frustration in the classroom situation and attributed some of their difficulties to this type of disruption. Most critically, the distractive behaviour meant the teacher had less time

to spend on the learning. One girl said she found it difficult learning and concentrating when people were talking in class (RBL/H1/11), while another only enjoyed class when there was “no-one shouting or yelling”. (RBL/MW/17) One young female recalled that “other people in my classes were totally out of control – hard to concentrate because of that”. (RBL/MW/19)

The manner in which discipline was administered could be a barrier to teacher-student relationships. One male did not like the way discipline was administered by his teachers. He felt that they were picked on for ‘nothing’. He expressed a view that the demeanors were petty and the punishments inappropriate. For example, he had to attend detention for having his shirt un-tucked. He suggested that an un-tucked shirt was a natural outcome from generally ‘rushing about’ and punishment for this was unreasonable and the detention a waste of time. (IBL/C)

#### Subject Matter (Curriculum)

Students do not usually perform well if they find the subject material uninspiring. They are inclined to blame their lack of achievement on either the subject matter (boring) or the teacher’s presentation of it (boring). I recall thoroughly enjoying Geography in the fourth form (year 10) only to become completely disinterested the following year. On one hand my fourth form teacher drew his teaching material from real and interesting contexts from which we became involved in fascinating class discussions. On the other hand my fifth form teacher demonstrated no passion for his subject and based all his lessons on material from a dull and uninspiring (black and white) text book.

Some specific knowledge will be important in particular vocational contexts but the presentation is everything. Not only should learning material be current, interesting and relevant but the effective teacher will be able to connect with students’ prior knowledge. There is undoubtedly a symbiotic relationship between the teacher and their teaching material which for some translates into stimulating learning and for others a tedious collection of verbatim. My fifth form geography teacher had tedium down to a fine art.

Learning should be inclusive, which means taking into account both the specific context of the learning subject and the broader context of the material as it relates to possible application. IBL/C said she enjoyed the knowledge she gained and the resources she had access to at school. She reflected on her love of poetry and how she enjoyed learning the history of the old poets. Other respondents commented that they had found some school subjects uninteresting because they could not see how the knowledge would ever be useful to them – they did not perceive any relevance. This was certainly true for me that at time “it all lacked meaning for me” as the “endless notes and masses of facts and figures” all became a great blur. (Introduction, p7)

A key goal of any teacher should be to create opportunities for their learners to achieve. One way to do this is to provide material for learners that is relevant and interesting; another is to find ways to link this new knowledge with what learners already know. Incorporating reflective learning processes (for example, Kolb, 1984, Shôn, 1987, Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985 and 1996) is one method of contextualising learning that has been found to be effective. Relevance “has to be discovered and is often only gradually realised as a result of further experience and reflection.” (Claxton, 1999, p13)

The respondents who felt their school subjects had lacked interest or relevance had felt paralysed by lack of choice. For me, with my love of languages, it was frustrating that I had been forced to choose between French and German. Milne (2006) believes a school curriculum should be ‘culturally responsive, integrative and critical’ and describes how her students are “fully involved in negotiating their topics and contexts with teachers”. (Milne, 2006, np)

## Assessment

There is much debate about the fairness and validity of various assessments, yet assessment is an integral part of education. Not only do assessments provide records of student achievements but also can demonstrate the success or otherwise of a programme, or even a teacher. A particular concern is that the impact of the increasing accountability demands placed on teachers leads them to focus more on ticking boxes than teaching. (Hill, 2000)

For the adult learner with negative memories of school programme entry requirements such as written tests may prevent their even applying, particularly if literacy is an issue. For this reason many tertiary institutions have developed less threatening methods of needs assessment. In the end, though, it is not the test but the analysis of it that counts.

For most of the older adult learners in my study School Certificate was the definitive school qualification. This was norm-referenced assessment, where individuals are compared to the norm of a group. This kind of assessment does not tell what an individual can or cannot do, only that they can do something better or less well than others. This means that the individual's final outcome depends on the performance of the whole group. In this system it is possible to pass the examination yet fail to achieve the qualification!

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is based on criterion-referenced assessment, which supposedly relates a student's performance to a well-defined objective. A cautionary note is that this can depend on the interpretation of that objective. In its favour it does allow students to demonstrate what they can do and to achieve credit for that, which is encouraging. For example, one year eleven student who achieved only 70 of the required 80 credits to complete NCEA Level One will return to school as a year 12 student and complete the missing credits. Under the old system he would likely have failed School Certificate with the option of either dropping out, or repeating the entire year of school. One female respondent was a victim of that system. "I would have achieved more had the system been more flexible" she said. "(For) School 'C' you had to pass at least five subjects. My best was shorthand. My friend was some 506 kms away doing the exam but she had my shorthand book. So I was disqualified from one of my best subjects." (BLW5/5)

## Situational Barriers

### The Inter-Personal Family, Social and Life Environment

*“The self then, - the self-conscious knowledge we all have of our personal history, our present existence, and our projected future – emerges as a result of social interaction.”*

(Nash, 1976, p8)

Our inter-personal social and life environment includes a multitude of people and situations which we have little or no control over, but which have a powerful influence over our early development. It is from our parents and immediate family that we develop our values and attitudes, culture and gender expectations. Later our sphere of influence expands to our wider *social* connections and interactions, including the influence of friends and peers.

Our **family** and associates influence our learning choices and our achievements. The meaning of family varies from culture to culture. In the New Zealand context it generally refers to the nuclear family; this is not always parents and their children, but might be grandparents or other relatives. Within Maori however, the basic family unit, and the essence of being Māori, is considered to be the whanau (Shivnan, 1999), which is usually kinship based and includes the extended family.

My research data confirmed that family can be a barrier to our educational achievement. One respondent recalled that family issues had made school more difficult, particularly “taking care of my Mum and siblings as Mum couldn’t.” (BLE/3/10) Another said “my family was not supportive at all...” (BLW6/6) They can also be a positive influence. “(My) parents want me to do well – supported me to leave school and go into my chosen course.” (RBLW2) Recent research has concluded that “the influences of families/whanau and communities are identified as key levers for high quality outcomes for diverse children. Outcomes include both social and academic achievement.” (Biddulph, 2003, piii) This research finds a strong correlation between family socio-economic status and learning achievement through all levels of schooling, but note that this is not a given and can be changed, particularly through appropriate early interventions. Culture and ethnicity are linked to achievement, but the extent of

this influence is difficult to measure given the complex relationship between culture and socio-economic status.

**Friends** and social connections are able to influence our educational choices. For almost half my respondents their friends were cited as having some impact on their learning performance. The majority of this group felt their friends were a positive factor, providing support and helping them do better, while the remainder of those recalled their friends being more of a distraction than a support. RBL/H4/14 recalled other students being a negative influence on her learning at school. She even referred to some as “enemies”. Biddulph reported that “Peer groups, especially at secondary school level, can profoundly influence children’s achievement. They can do so in positive ways, or in negative ways. Their influence can override parental expectations, and can also promote mediocre educational norms.” (Biddulph, 2003,pv)

Peer pressure – the need to achieve a sense of belonging and fitting in with the group is especially powerful throughout the teenage years. “Peer pressure is a big hassle” remembered one respondent. (BLE2/9) For a teenager the goal is to match the social values of their peer group – their sense of belonging mostly means imitation. It is not ‘cool’ to stand out or seem different (tall poppy syndrome) and those who do stand out from the crowd are frequently subjected to bullying and discrimination. Discrimination does not always stop at the school gates. Bullying is a common consequence of standing out being different. School was difficult for one young female “because I got bullied and did not have any friends”. (RBL/MW/18) Students report that bullying frequently carried on beyond the classroom and teachers were not able to prevent it. A young female, part Maori, admitted; “The occasional bully would distract me from wanting to go to school”. “School was as difficult outside the classroom as inside because of the social environment of their peers.” (Benseman and Tobias, 2003, p50)

The **society** we grow up in, its laws and expectations, influence our educational decisions and what we believe to be important, current trends – fashions and habits of the time. Nash (1997) puts forward that “the social structure, that is the set of social relations in which an individual student is embedded, affect his or her responses to school...” (Nash, 1997, p11) Societal norms and expectations largely determine the attitudes and behaviours that each of us will need to assume in order to ‘fit’ into the

wider community. For example, it is desirable for every able-bodied adult to work; to support the development and maintenance of a socially and economically healthy society. A young male respondent said he left school because “my dad made me because I needed to pay board,” (RBL/H3/13) another said he left because he “wanted to earn money” (BLW5/5) and a female left school because her “parents told me to get a job and earn (and save) my own money”. (BL/E1/8) What is most widely accepted in terms of education can make a positive difference to an individual; it can make a difference to their ability to obtain a job, manage their own lives and contribute to their community

Although we live in a more inclusive and equitable society than our parents, **gender** still has some influence on our learning and life decisions. Support with family is more likely to impact on girls. Female respondent (BL/E3/10) was often required to stay home taking care of her younger siblings for her Mother who was at work. Another (BL/W6/6) had her schooling interrupted by pregnancy. Boys statistically do less well at school. (MOE, 2006) Lashlie (2005) found that a key factor in school success for boys was linked to keeping them engaged at school until they are 17 or 18. Twelve of the fourteen male respondents in my research have left school at fifteen without formal school attainment.

Despite modern views and feminist influences, gender does still have bearing on subject and career choices. Options such as tourism, hairdressing and early childhood have been added to the traditional career options of nurse, teacher, retail assistant, and secretary. Nash (1997) in his study of seventh form students found that social expectations influence career choices. For example, one boy admitted he enjoyed cooking but in his social experience men don't cook so he would not consider becoming a chef. My research did not include detailed consideration of this aspect of influence. It would be an interesting line of enquiry to follow.

Our **culture** and ethnicity may be factors in our educational choices and achievements, and, for those who first language is not English there are additional challenges. Each of my respondents has minimal or no school attainment; twenty-two of forty (55%) have non-European origins, thirty-eight percent identifying as Maori. Bishop and Glynn (1999) are of the view that Maori in particular, but also other non-European students,

have been marginalised by our education system and that is a major factor in their school attainment. They suggest that “the idea that deficits in Maori home conditions were the prime contributors to academic underachievement was a major step forward” from previous theories that suggested “Maori were intellectually (genetically) inferior”. (Bishop and Glynn, 1999, p39) Whilst none of the respondents explicitly attributed their minimal educational outcomes to their cultural affiliations some relevant issues were raised. One interview respondent (IBL/B) found the success as the leader of a Kapa Haka group that he did not experience in other areas of school life. Another (BLE1/8) was denied the help she would have appreciated during her secondary schooling due to the poor English proficiency of her immigrant parents.

### Literacy and Language

*“Strengthening the literacy and numeracy components of teaching practice is a fundamental to raising the achievement of all students.” (MOE 2, 2004)*

The policy makers have long recognised that students with limited language and literacy are disadvantaged as learners, yet tertiary providers continue to report that large numbers of learners come to them with poor literacy skills. “It is widely accepted around the globe that schooling in general is very far from delivering the quality of education that is needed. Even in many industrialised nations, basic levels of literacy and numeracy are unacceptably low. Globally there are estimated to be nearly 900 million adult illiterates. In Britain almost 15% of school leavers and adults have limited literacy skills, while 20% of adults have limited numeracy skills.” (Claxton, 1999, p274) New Zealand statistics are similar. School leaving statistics, 2006, show that 13% of students left school with no formal attainment. This is a decrease of only 2% since 2003. (MOE, 2007)

Several respondents attributed their poor school achievements to a difficulty with learning. Two respondents self identified as being challenged by Dyslexia, a specific learning difficulty, and that this had been a factor in their non-achievement at school. “I had dyslexia and this made school difficult because I was not confident in large classes – and without help I couldn’t complete work properly.” (RBL/MW/20) Until 2007 Dyslexia was not officially recognised by government, which meant there was no specific training for teachers or funding to support those who were challenged by the

condition. Finding the support they needed was a matter of luck. For this respondent things improved when she went to a different school – “a special school who cared – special teachers and friends going through the same thing.” (RBL/MW/20) Dyslexia has been targeted for funded research along with a promise of resources for teachers with strategies for meeting the needs of students with dyslexia. Due to begin in 2008, it is hoped that such recognition will ultimately qualify dyslexic learners for funded extra assistance. (DFNZ, 2007) Previously this was only available to those who could afford to pay for a private tutor.

New Zealand’s increasingly multi-ethnic non-English speaking (ESL) population has led to an increase in English language classes (ESOL), but only in particular cases are these compulsory. Children with ESL parents can be disadvantaged, particularly when they reach secondary school, because of their parents’ inability to support their learning and associated reluctance to participate in school activities. Seven respondents identified with non-English speaking origins. One respondent felt that her parent’s limited English had been a disadvantage to her at secondary school – she had “limited parental guidance due to the language barrier”. (BL/E1/8) Language has been identified a barrier for many Pacific Island student teachers. “At times, this barrier affected students whose first language was English” particularly with regard to “understanding the terminology used in lectures, developing note-taking skills, and researching and writing assignments.” (Fa’foi and Fletcher, 2002, p24)

A number of young people leave school with ‘little or no formal attainment’ (MOE, 2006) and, as the 1996 IALs survey identified, many of these have inadequate levels of literacy. Of those attending the adult foundation level vocational programmes many require some literacy support; my sample group is testament to that. For example, *“when the kids be naughty the school is borrowing too but I like school because I can met my friend.”* (BLW2/2)

Adult literacy has, since the release of the Adult Literacy Strategy in 2001, been subject to substantial government funding and programmes have been set up to stop this bolting horse. Literacy projects have targeted both primary and secondary schools too. The impact of poor literacy is well documented. (Benseman and Tobias, 2003, Tobias, 1998, Quigley, 1990) There is a relationship between low literacy unemployment. The

IALs data from a national sample of 4,223 adults showed 48% of unemployed people operated at Level 1, the lowest literacy level. (Benseman and Tobias, 2003 and IALs, OECD, 1997) The more recent Adult Literacy and Language Survey (ALLs) is due to be released later in 2008; early indications are that the numbers of New Zealand adults operating at Level 1 has reduced by approximately 1% since the 1996 survey, possibly as a result of targeted programmes.

Literacy is inextricably linked to 'identity' and, in a world where reading and writing is a valued skill the non-literate are not only disadvantaged but also devalued. (Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic, 1994) One of the first effects of improved literacy is the increase in self confidence and self esteem.

## Dispositional Barriers

### The Intra-Personal Life Environment

Gardener's theory of seven intelligences (later 8) included linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial-visual, bodily kinesthetic, inter-personal and intra-personal. The Intra-personal is the concept of self-awareness, personal knowing, personal objectivity, the capability to understand oneself, one's relationship to others and the world, and one's own need for, and reaction to change. (Gardener, 1983) Cross (1981) offered a model for the adult learner suggesting three personal characteristics that form our self image; physiological, sociocultural and psychological. Over time as a result of experiences, changes occur in each area throughout life and this alters our image of self.

### Self Belief and Learning Ability

Henry Ford once said, and it rings true for me, "*Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you're right*". (Ford, nd)

Personal perceptions of oneself have powerful influence on our choices for education and career choices and how we view our opportunities and likelihood of being 'successful'. Personal 'ability' (capability or aptitude) rated next to teachers as the

second most influential factor to school achievements. RBL/M6/6 said “ability helped...” and RBL/MW/17 believed that her poor performance was because “I was just bad at it”. I am convinced that my own lack of self belief and fear of failure in my teenage years ultimately limited my achievements at school and beyond.

The word ‘ability’ was specifically used by several respondents, mainly from the negative perspective, to explain their (lack of) achievements. Respondents’ comments suggested that their negative views of their scholastic ability may have evolved directly from their earlier learning experiences, including attitudes and behaviours displayed by teachers. Dreikurs (1962) discusses the impact an innate ‘fear of failure’ can have on student performance. If learning is driven by the need to be better than others an individual who perceives themselves as incompetent is likely to give up the challenge.

In fact most references respondents made to (academic) ability was in the negative and was used to explain their lack of attainment. One respondent admitted that her “ability and confidence were lacking through (having) dyslexia”. (RBL/MW/20) The unspoken belief here is that they are not ‘intelligent’ enough to succeed at school. I do not plan to enter the intelligence debate here; intelligence is not the focus of this research, however, I am in support of the idea that any test claiming to accurately measure an individual’s cognitive capacity and make judgments about their future learning potential has been rightfully challenged. (Nash, 1990)

Self esteem develops from the feedback we receive from others and becomes the way we perceive ourselves in all areas of our lives. For example, my young niece told me recently that she didn’t like horses. I later learned that she had a nasty fall that had not been well managed by the supervisor, which had left her fearful and questioning her own ability. Assuming lack of interest avoided the problem and protected her from further failure. Self belief about ones ‘capability’ to achieve or be successful at a particular thing plays a key role in our choices – what subjects or activities we opt to work at and which ones we opt out of. Our self belief about our learning abilities, strengths and weaknesses grows from the way in which we perceive the results of our previous educational efforts – and the frequency with which we experience ‘positive’ results. The nature versus nurture argument (family culture versus social status) may

be less relevant if we accept students' perceptions regarding the influence of school and the teachers in it.

Maslow believed our ultimate success or completeness as an individual was a result of five essential human needs being met, as described in his Hierarchy of Needs.

(Maslow, 1968) In order to achieve our true potential in any area of life he asserted that we must satisfy each need in turn, starting with the first, which deals with the most basic requirements for survival itself. Maslow's hierarchy determined that only when the lower order needs of physical and emotional well-being are satisfied can we be concerned with the higher order needs of influence and personal development. Giving consideration 'barriers' to learning, Maslow would likely support a deficit theory of his own, that deficits of basic human needs preclude the development of the necessary esteem for achievement to occur. Where basic human needs are deemed to have been met he would be concerned about institutions' capacity to provide a learning environment that encourages and enables students to fulfill their own unique potential (self-actualisation). Maslow also reasoned that if our lower order needs were removed we would no longer be able to focus on the higher needs. So it follows, for example, that an individual caught up in the midst of a dysfunctional family is unlikely to be able to focus on their higher learning goals. A female respondent (BLT1/15) who had struggled with her secondary schooling reflected that her parents break up had probably been a factor in her inability to focus at school.

### Learning Styles

Many learners find it challenging adapting to the differing teaching styles and approaches of their various subject teachers. Different expectations of performance and behaviour can be confusing and how well they do or do not accommodate individual differences will be particularly significant for those with learning difficulties. One male respondent had suffered from ADHD and commented that he didn't enjoy "sitting in a classroom" and preferred "hands on" learning activities. (RBL/M3/3) My fondly remembered English teacher encouraged discussion and debate whilst my 'tedious' fifth form geography teacher based his lessons on notes copied from blackboard or text books. No prizes for guessing which I preferred!

Each one of us is a uniquely constructed human being with a unique personality and a unique set of interests, preferences and motivations. We don't all dress the same, drive the same cars or live in the same type of home, yet we are expected to learn in much the same way. Ann Milne (2004), a strong advocate for changes to schooling approaches, particularly more individualised learning, has been outspoken in her antipathy for a system where students are required to 'fit' rather than having their individuality recognised and catered for.

Understanding the complex mix of human variables in their classroom and the implications for teaching and learning, being flexible enough to accommodate these variables in practice with the skills to employ a variety of methods, and being able to create opportunities for their students to experience success, these, I believe, are the hallmarks of 'good' teaching practice. Several respondents indicated that aspects of school learning had not been a good 'fit' for them. One suggested teachers should "find a child's learning style and let them choose a career plan at a young age". (RBL/M10/10) Another said they had found school difficult where there was a requirement for "lots of reading and writing". (RBL/M7/7)

Students come with different attitudes, aptitudes, abilities, experiences, and prior knowledge consequently they clearly have individual needs and quite different ways of learning. Many teachers are familiar with the three learning styles, auditory, visual and kinesthetic. It is common to find individuals exhibiting preference for more than one style, but frequently one will emerge as dominant and this will influence the manner in which information is most effectively absorbed and recalled. An awareness of one's dominant learning style is helpful; for example, my daughter, as an auditory dominant learner, learns more effectively when written material is supported by aural interaction. My fourth form geography teacher was evidently unaware of the limitations of his unstimulating and unimaginative approach!

### Summarising

My research clearly indicates the teacher holds a critical position of influence in any educational institution. It is also evident that self belief has a critical impact on what we achieve, but even more on what we chose to attempt. Teachers particularly need to

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understand the power of self belief and its impact on student attainment. As Ball (2003) suggests, attitudes first, skills second and knowledge third.

Some, like Peachey (2005) believe knowledge is at the forefront of good teaching, whilst those responsible for quality assurance place equal weight on both subject and pedagogical knowledge. Undoubtedly both are important, but from the student perspective knowledge is irrelevant when it is not anchored in their reality. For Milne (2006) and Bishop and Glynn (1999) culture is a critical component of that reality.

# Chapter Six - Conclusion and Recommendations

## My Thesis

My thesis is that there are numerous factors that can impact negatively on a student's educational achievement, but if these issues can be taken account of within schools and other educational institutions, the educational outcomes can be improved.

In order to identify these factors (barriers) I have explored the experiences and perspectives of forty New Zealand adults who have recently attended, or are currently enrolled in, a tertiary programme of study. All participants had left secondary school with minimal, or no, academic achievements. As the mystery unraveled it became clear that factors identified as barriers to learning and attainment could also become positive influences in different circumstances. The findings will be of interest to educators across secondary and tertiary sectors.

The barriers, as identified in this research, can (as per Cross, 1981) be comfortably bundled into three camps; institutional, situational and dispositional or personal.

## Summary of Findings

My research question is: what are some of the factors that lead to many of us failing to achieve the desired (positive) results at school, despite apparent capability?

### Institutional Barriers

My exploration of barriers *inside* the educational system revealed that teachers exerted considerable influence. When it came to school achievement the teachers were considered an important factor for more than half the respondents. Subject matter, friends and peers were also significant factors for many students. The critical position held by teachers and their pivotal role in student achievement is being recognised by

policy makers and reflected in the ERO Quality Teaching Process Indicators. Clearly the schools and other educational institutions need to be mindful of the impact teachers have on their students and their outcomes. Alton-Lee (2003) concludes that "... the most important factor affecting student achievement is the teacher. "...seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor." (p.63) [Wright, Horn and Saunders (1997) in Alton-Lee (2003, p4)]

There are conflicting views on educational priorities; the knowledge versus process debate. Peachey (2005) for example believes implicitly that (subject) knowledge precedes good practice, whilst Ball (2003) places 'attitude' above all else. Alton-Lee asserts that "teaching needs to be responsive to diversity" and presents ten research-based characteristics of quality teaching. The most desirable knowledge is the knowledge of "the nature of student learning processes". (Alton-Lee, 2003, p4) I believe that it is impossible to separate the content from the process. As Milne (2006) says, "what we teach and learn is just as important as how we deliver that training".

### Situational Barriers

A look at barriers *outside* the educational system revealed that family, social, cultural factors can have some bearing on school performance. Attitude is more critical than any other factor. When deciding on their future beyond school the family appears to have the greatest influence.

The majority of respondents (62%) self identified as being of New Zealand European origin. The next highest group (37%), identified as New Zealand Maori and seven were from another Pacific culture. All participants had left secondary school with minimal, or no, academic achievements. It was surprising to me that issues of culture or ethnicity did not, from the participants perspective, feature as significant barriers for educational achievement. When looking at situational barriers there are two strongly argued but contrary schools of thought. Bishop and his followers argue the issues of culture and ethnicity, whilst Nash and his supporters believe that, although sometimes related, the effects of socio-economic factors outweigh the cultural ones. Recognising that family circumstances, attitudes and values provide a critical foundation to students life and learning achievements, schools, agencies and communities, working proactively and collaboratively, can provide support where it is most needed.

It is clear that literacy is a factor in school attainment and appeared to be an issue for many of my research group, as evidenced by their questionnaires. The New Zealand statistics are well documented (IALS, 1996 and ALLs, 1997), but how it came to be a factor remains one of the mysteries, and subject of popular debate. Judging by preliminary findings of recent research the various fiscal investments (adult literacy programmes) of the last ten years have been of some value, but are we making significant changes where it counts, or simply filling the gaps? I, like Nash (1993, 1997), Milne (2004, 2006) and Bishop and Glynn (1999) have serious concerns that some of the barriers (cultural and socio-economic in particular) are not being addressed and that these will continue to impact on educational attainment.

### Dispositional Barriers

The intra-personal (dispositional) barriers centred on the individual's belief about themselves and their (perceived) ability or aptitude to achieve. Self belief was expressed as a factor in the lack of achievement of a number of respondents. This belief (negative or positive) was supported by teacher attitudes and behaviours, for example encouragement or criticism, and the student's impression of how well they performed compared to others in their group. Improving the educational outcomes for these learners may simply require connecting them with their strengths and setting meaningful and achievable goals. Removing the emphasis on competing with others is also imperative.

For many of the respondents a critical barrier was that the teaching and learning method did not match their own learning style or preferences. The concept of learning styles has been broadly interpreted and come dangerously close to being faddish, but I am convinced there are benefits to both teacher and learner in understanding how we learn most effectively and those factors that impact on that process. As Kingsbury (ny) suggested, "...understanding the way we learn is key to educational improvement".

## Recommendations

**Barriers inside the system:** It is imperative that

### Institutions

- Recognise the critical role their teachers/tutors play in the ultimate achievements of the students and support them to create opportunities for their student to experience success.
- Take the lead in building links with students, families and communities to 'close the gap' between school and home.
- Ensure their curriculum is not driven by the assessment process, and that assessment is more than ticking boxes – focus on 'successes' rather than achievement.

### Teachers

- Understand that education should be empowering learners
- Be aware and considerate of the delicate relationship between self belief and achievement.
- Be flexible; value the diversity of your students and respect their individuality.
- Encourage; knowing that barriers are simply challenges that can be met.
- Make learning real; knowledge is important but only when it is anchored in the student's reality – the most effective learning is drawn from real life experiences. Students need to see where and how the knowledge connects with their world.
- Recognise and respect diversities of culture, values, ethnicity and personality. Create a learning environment where talents are nurtured and students learn to view challenges as possibilities rather than limitations.

**Barriers outside the system:** the situations in which many of us grow and live are not always supportive to our educational ventures.

- Family/Whanau need to be involved; to actively share in the educational successes of their young people, to encourage and support them with their challenges
- Communities must support and be involved in the (lifelong) educational journey of their people, by influencing, challenging and contributing. If teachers and institutions are to accommodate the external influences that may become 'barriers' to student attainment effective "connections between education and other policy areas that support families and communities will be crucial" (Alton-Lee, 2003, p4)
- Students learning and achievement can be enhanced by knowing and understanding something of the mechanisms of learning and in particular their own 'style' or dominant ways of learning.

**Positive/Supportive influences, outside and inside:** From the students perspective positive input from the following areas can support them to achieve:

- Family/Whanau: Positive attitudes and values influence their young people to make positive choices; support them by sharing in their success and praising them for their achievements.
- Teachers with positive attitudes, personality and good teaching practices: taking time to listen, treat students with respect and acknowledge their individuality. Encourage them to develop their talents.
- Friends can provide an opportunity to experience a sense of belonging; they can offer support through sharing their goals and aspirations and be a springboard for the development of a healthy sense of self.

### Further Research

This study has only skimmed the surface and leaves many more questions than answers; there is merit in further investigation.

I would like to see this investigation taken out to a wider group (for example to include some of those who have been *academically successful* at school) in order to learn how common these barriers are and how some students have overcome them. In order to achieve some validity I would also increase the sample size.

As a parallel study I would like see further research into the learning process itself with view to exploring the impact of different pedagogies on barriers to learning.

## Section C

# Appendices

## *Appendix One*

### The Five Literacy Levels

How are an individual's skills measured by the ALL survey?

To each individual, and for each of the domains mentioned, a score from zero to 500 is assigned. Zero indicates extremely low proficiency and 500 extremely high. In addition, based upon this score, one of five "cognitive levels" is assigned. The following list provides descriptions of typical tasks associated with each cognitive level.

**Level 1 (0–225):** Tasks in this level require the ability to read simple documents, accomplish literal information-matching with no distractions, and perform simple one-step calculations.

**Level 2 (226–275):** This level includes tasks that demand the capacity to search a document and filter out some simple distracting information, achieve low-level inferences, and execute one- or two-step calculations and estimations.

**Level 3 (276–325):** Typical tasks at level 3 involve more complex information filtering, sometimes requiring inference, and the facility to manipulate mathematical symbols, perhaps in several stages.

**Level 4 (326–375):** A level 4 task might demand the integration of information from a long passage, the use of more complex inferences, and the completion of multiple-step calculations requiring some reasoning.

**Level 5 (376–500):** Level 5 tasks incorporate the capability to make high-level inferences or syntheses, use specialised knowledge, filter out multiple distracters, and to understand and use abstract mathematical ideas with justification.

## Appendix 2

# INFORMATION SHEET and CONSENT FORM

**Researcher Introduction:**

My name is Phillipa Eagle-Ashmore and I am researching to find out what issues or barriers may contribute to many of us not completing our school studies to the best of our ability.

I was one of those who did not achieve as well as I should have at school so I have a personal interest in this study as well as a professional one.

This research is being undertaken as part of my Master of Education (Adult Education), which I am completing, part-time, through Massey University in Wellington. The rest of my time is spent working at my full-time job of Advisor with the Tertiary Education Commission in Auckland City, or at home with my family.

If you decide to be part of my research I will ask you to fill in a questionnaire. This should take less than 30 minutes of your time because most of the questions ask you to tick boxes – although I would appreciate it if you can add some comments as well.

Completed questionnaires will be coded so that they cannot be identified as being yours. No one, other than me, will have access to the completed questionnaires.

You may request a copy of the summary of findings after the project is completed.



**Committee Approval Statement:**

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, WGTN Protocol March/2004. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Mr Jeremy Hubbard, Acting Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Wellington, Telephone 04 8012794 x6358, email [humanethicswn@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicswn@massey.ac.nz)

This message is to let you know what to do if you should hurt or injure yourself whilst participating in my study:

You should visit your doctor to make a claim to ACC as soon as possible. Your claim will be assessed by ACC as per the Injury Prevention, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 2001. If your claim is accepted, ACC must inform you of what help (compensation) you will be able to get, and they must help you get that compensation. Some examples of compensation you may be able to get are: treatment costs, travel costs for rehabilitation, loss of earnings, and/or lump sum if your injury was permanent. You may be able to receive compensation for mental trauma if this is caused by your injury.

If your ACC claim is not accepted you should immediately contact me, or my supervisor. We will make sure you receive compensation equivalent to that to which you would have been entitled had ACC accepted your claim.

## Appendix 3

## Unraveling Mysteries of the Great Learning Divide

## BARRIERS TO LEARNING

**STUDENT INTERVIEW: CONSENT FORM**

(This consent form will be held for a period of 5 years)

I have had full information about the research project Barriers to Learning. I understand the project and have had my questions answered.

I understand that:

- I can ask further questions at any time
- the purpose of the study is to find out what issues or barriers may lead to some of us not completing our school studies to the best of our ability
- the interview will take no more than an hour
- the interview will be tape recorded and the interviewer may take notes
- the interview will be transcribed and will be returned to me for comment
- I may withdraw from the project at any stage without penalty
- what I say may be used in research reports
- I will not be identified in any way in any reports written about the project

I agree to:

- be interviewed for this project
- have my interview tape recorded and transcribed
- have what I say included in research reports as long as I am not identified
- participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Name: .....

Signature: .....

Address: .....

Phone number: .....

Date: .....



## Appendix 4

## Questionnaire

Code: BL

# RESEARCHING

# BARRIERS TO LEARNING

This is a confidential questionnaire designed to explore **BARRIERS TO LEARNING** for the sole purpose of informing a thesis on this topic. No personal information shared in the process of answering this questionnaire will be divulged to any other person, without your express permission, or unless it has been disguised so as to completely protect your identity.

Participant criteria:

1. Must be New Zealand residents who have completed at least 3 years at secondary school in New Zealand
2. Must have achieved low, or no, qualifications at school. (May have since achieved qualifications as an adult learner)

\* Is this respondent willing to participate in a face-to-face interview?  YES  NO

(If you ✓'yes' please fill in an interview consent form and send it to me, in a separate envelope from your questionnaire to maintain confidentiality.)

## Guidelines for completing this questionnaire.

Thank you for agreeing to complete my questionnaire. Your answers will help me with my research about why some people do well and others do not do well at school.

**Your questionnaires will not be shown to anyone else and your names will not be given out or recorded in my final report.**

**Please read each question carefully.**

**Place a tick (✓) in the box next to your chosen answer. Sometimes you may need to tick more than one answer, for example question 2.**

**If you agree to participate in an interview you will have the opportunity to discuss some of your answers in more detail.**

## SECTION ONE

A: PERSONAL PROFILE		RESPONSES ✓	
* Please ✓ your gender		<input type="checkbox"/> male <input type="checkbox"/> female	
1.	Please tick to indicate the age group you belong to	<input type="checkbox"/> 15 – 19 <input type="checkbox"/> 20 – 29 <input type="checkbox"/> 30 – 39 <input type="checkbox"/> 40 – 54 <input type="checkbox"/> 55 +	
2	Which cultural group(s) do you most closely identify with? (You may choose more than one)	<input type="checkbox"/> NZ European <input type="checkbox"/> NZ Maori <input type="checkbox"/> Samoan <input type="checkbox"/> Cook Island Maori <input type="checkbox"/> Tongan <input type="checkbox"/> Niuean <input type="checkbox"/> Fijian <input type="checkbox"/> Tongan	<input type="checkbox"/> Tokelauan <input type="checkbox"/> other Pacific Island <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese <input type="checkbox"/> South-East Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Indian <input type="checkbox"/> other Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Other European <input type="checkbox"/> Other
3	Which of these best describes your school achievements?	<input type="checkbox"/> left school at 15 <input type="checkbox"/> achieved less than two School Cert. passes <input type="checkbox"/> achieved two SC passes or more <input type="checkbox"/> completed 6 <sup>th</sup> form (yr 12) <input type="checkbox"/> completed 7 <sup>th</sup> form (yr 13)	

4	<p>Which option best describes what you did when you finished or graduated from secondary school?</p> <p><b>When I left school I...</b></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> went directly into further training or education (e.g. Training Opportunities) <input type="checkbox"/> went straight into a job <input type="checkbox"/> went into an apprenticeship <input type="checkbox"/> other – please explain .....	
5	<p>Looking at your answer to 'question 4'...What or who was the greatest influence on your choices when you left school</p> <p><i>My choice was influenced by....</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Information from family <input type="checkbox"/> Information from friends <input type="checkbox"/> Information from teachers/school <input type="checkbox"/> Work experience <input type="checkbox"/> Websites	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please list)
6	<p>a) Have you attained any tertiary level qualifications? (e.g. Private Training, Polytechnic, Teachers College, University)</p>	<input type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	

	b) If you answered 'yes' to 6a please identify which ones	<input type="checkbox"/> Trade certificate <input type="checkbox"/> National certificate <input type="checkbox"/> National diploma <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching certificate <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching diploma <input type="checkbox"/> University degree <input type="checkbox"/> Other
7	Which of these options best describes your current situation? (you may choose more than one)  'Right now I am...	<input type="checkbox"/> studying full time <input type="checkbox"/> studying part-time <input type="checkbox"/> working full time <input type="checkbox"/> working part-time <input type="checkbox"/> doing casual work <input type="checkbox"/> Full time parent <input type="checkbox"/> Part time parent <input type="checkbox"/> unemployed <input type="checkbox"/> Other – please give details

## SECTION TWO

B: PERSONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES		RESPONSES ✓
8	<p>Remembering your <b>school</b> days, how would you best <b>describe</b> that time and your experience of it?</p> <p><i>‘School for me was .....’</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> A really good time <input type="checkbox"/> Mostly good times <input type="checkbox"/> Some good and some not so good times <input type="checkbox"/> a totally negative experience
	Write your comments here:	
9	<p>a) How would you best describe your <b>achievements</b> at school?</p> <p><i>‘At school I ....’</i></p>	<input type="checkbox"/> Did well at everything <input type="checkbox"/> Did well at most things <input type="checkbox"/> Did well at some things and badly at others <input type="checkbox"/> Did badly at most things

	<p>b) What things helped you to do well at school?</p> <p><i>“When I did well at something it was because.....”</i></p>	<p>(e.g. health, ability, school environment, a special teacher, friends or family)</p>
	<p>c) What things made it more difficult for you to do well at school?</p> <p><i>“When I did badly at something it was because.....”</i></p>	<p>(e.g. health, ability, school environment, a teacher, a friend, family)</p>
10	<p>Which of these best describes your attendance at school?</p> <p><i>“During my school days I.....”</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> almost never missed</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> missed school occasionally</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> frequently missed school</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> hardly ever attended</p>
11	<p>How would you describe your attitude to school?</p> <p><i>“When I was at school I .....”</i></p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> always enjoyed it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> mostly enjoyed it</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> did <i>not</i> like many aspects of school</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> strongly disliked school</p>

12	a) What type of learning situations or environments did you experience at school?  <i>“At school most of our learning happened in a .....situation.”</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> classroom <input type="checkbox"/> small group tutorial <input type="checkbox"/> one-to-one (individual learning) <input type="checkbox"/> distance learning	<input type="checkbox"/> computer /E-learning <input type="checkbox"/> other – please describe
	b) Which type of learning situation do you prefer? <i>“The learning situation I find best for me is the ..... situation.”</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> classroom <input type="checkbox"/> small group tutorial <input type="checkbox"/> one-to-one (individual learning) <input type="checkbox"/> distance learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Computer/E-learning <input type="checkbox"/> other – please describe
13	a) How do you rate your own ability to learn?	<input type="checkbox"/> find it easy to learn new things <input type="checkbox"/> have to work hard to learn something new	
	b) What makes learning easier for you?	Learning is easier for me when...	
	c) What makes learning more difficult for you?	Learning is more difficult for me when...	
14	a) How much do you enjoy learning (now)?  <i>“For me learning new things is.....”</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> very enjoyable and stimulating <input type="checkbox"/> enjoyable sometimes <input type="checkbox"/> not enjoyable at all	

	b) What makes learning more enjoyable for you?	<i>What makes learning enjoyable for me is.....</i>
	c) What makes learning less enjoyable for you?	<i>What makes learning less enjoyable for me is...</i>
15	Thinking about what you did when you first left school, what or who most influenced the choices you made?	When I left school I ...  because....
16	<i>Please use this space to write any comments or thoughts you would like to share with me about your school experiences.</i>	



Appendix 5

Code: BL

**RESEARCHING**

**BARRIERS TO LEARNING**

**INTERVIEW  
QUESTIONS**

## SECTION THREE

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS		RESPONSES
17	Thinking about your time at school, both primary and secondary, tell me what you remember most clearly about school.	
18	i. What did you <b>enjoy most</b> about your schooling?	<i>At school I most enjoyed...</i>
	ii. What did you <b>enjoy least</b> about your schooling?	<i>At school I least enjoyed...</i>
19	Think about things you did at school. What was your <b>greatest achievement</b> at school?  How did you feel about this achievement?	<i>At school my greatest achievement was...</i>  <i>This achievement made me feel...</i>
20	a) What things did you do <b>well</b> at school?	
	b) What did you <b>NOT</b> do well at school?	
	c) How much did this influence your choices since leaving school? (Q4)	
21	What type of learning situations to you prefer?	<i>The kind of learning situation I prefer is...</i>
	Give reasons for this	<i>I prefer this because...</i>
22	How easily can you apply yourself to learning new things?	<i>I find it ...</i> <input type="checkbox"/> easy <input type="checkbox"/> a little bit of a challenge <input type="checkbox"/> difficult <i>learning new things.</i>
23	What is your <b>most memorable</b> learning experience so far?	<i>My most memorable learning experience is...</i>
	What made it memorable?	<i>What made it memorable is...</i>
24	What conditions or circumstances make it easier for you to learn?	<i>I learn best when...</i>

	What conditions or circumstances make it more difficult for you to learn?	<i>I find it difficult to learn when...</i>
25	Did you enter tertiary studies directly when you left school? (eg. Training Opportunities, Trade Certificate or apprenticeship)	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>yes</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>'No'</b>
	If 'Yes' please say what you did.	
	For either answer above please describe: a) what did you do, and b) <i>what <b>influenced</b> your decision to do this?</i>	<i>When I left school I...</i>  <i>I did this because...</i>
26	Have you undertaken any studies (school or tertiary) as an adult learner?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
	a) <u>If YES</u> What influenced your decision to do this?	<i>I have taken up studying as an adult learner because...</i>
	b) <u>If NO</u> i. what are your reasons for not taking up any study?	<i>I have not done any study as an adult learner because...</i>
27	ii. Would you like to take up tertiary studies sometime in the future?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO
	iii. What might prevent this from happening?	<i>This might not happen because...</i>
	iv. What might help to make this happen?	<i>This is most likely to happen if...</i>
28	i. How do you feel about your earlier educational achievements? <i>e.g. pleased, disappointed...</i>	<i>I feel ...</i>
	ii. Do you feel you could have done better at school?	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO

	iii. If answering 'YES' please suggest reasons for this?	<i>I think I <b>could</b> have done better at school if....</i>
	iv. If answering 'NO', please suggest reasons for this.	<i>I do <b>not</b> think I could have done better at school because....</i>

OTHER COMMENTS or Interviewer's Notes

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