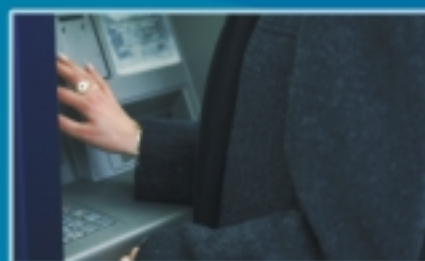




The Wider Voice:

WANGANUI COMMUNITY
PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT LITERACY
AND EMPLOYMENT 2005-2006

Margie Comrie ♦ Elspeth Tilley
Deborah Neilson ♦ Niki Culligan
Frank Sligo ♦ Franco Vaccarino



Massey University

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Wanganui Community Perspectives on Adult Literacy and
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This report is dedicated to the memory of the late Dr Su Olsson (1942–2005), friend, colleague, and objective leader in the Literacy and Employment Programme.

Executive summary

The Wanganui-based Adult Literacy and Employment Project is a major, longitudinal research programme that seeks to provide a more in-depth understanding of literacy and the impacts of low literacy on individuals, families, communities, workplaces, and indeed, the 'knowledge economy'. This report discusses one aspect of the study to date, the perceptions of non-participants (those who have never attended an adult literacy programme), and community stakeholders of literacy and employment issues in Wanganui and Districts. This information derives from a series of interviews conducted in late 2004 and early 2005 with non-participants, and with two focus groups with community stakeholders undertaken in early 2006. While, the findings from the non-participant interviews are interesting and valid findings on their own, they are also of interest in comparison with the adult literacy participant interview findings. This comparison is available as part of the Adult Literacy and Employment in Wanganui report series ISSN: 1176-9807 'Perceptions of Adult Literacy Learners 2004-2006: A Report from the Literacy and Employment Programme'.

This discussion is presented in two sections. First, the findings from the non-participant interviews are examined. The second section outlines the key initial findings from the community stakeholder focus groups.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	3
Non-participant Perspectives	4
Method	4
<i>Procedure</i>	4
<i>Analysis</i>	5
<i>Profile of non-participants</i>	6
Non-participants' perceptions of literacy needs	7
<i>Computer skills</i>	8
<i>Communication skills</i>	9
<i>Culture and whakapapa</i>	9
<i>Reading and/or writing</i>	10
<i>Maths</i>	11
<i>Life skills</i>	11
<i>Attitude, including confidence</i>	11
<i>Less frequently mentioned literacy needs</i>	12
<i>Grouping literacy needs</i>	12
Non-participants' perceptions of literacy needs for children	13
Non-participants' perceptions of barriers to literacy	14
<i>Economic barriers</i>	14
<i>Family environment</i>	15
<i>School not meeting needs</i>	15
<i>Health barriers</i>	16
<i>School teaching</i>	16
<i>Attitude or motivation</i>	17
<i>Family and community commitments</i>	17
<i>School streaming</i>	18
<i>Moving schools</i>	18
<i>Other barriers</i>	19
<i>Non-participants' perceived literacy barriers by cluster</i>	19
Non-participants' perceptions of conduits to literacy	21
Non-participants' perceived barriers to employment	22
Non-participants' perceptions of what literacy means	23
Conclusions	24
Community Stakeholder Perspectives on Literacy and Employment	27
Introduction	27
Method	27
<i>Participants</i>	27
Findings	28
<i>Definitions of literacy</i>	28

<i>Community stakeholder perceptions of literacy levels in Wanganui</i>	29
<i>Perceptions of awareness of literacy levels in Wanganui</i>	30
<i>Knowledge of local literacy providers and resources available</i>	30
<i>The links between literacy and employment</i>	31
<i>Barriers to achieving 'functional literacy'</i>	32
<i>Suggested interventions and initiatives for addressing literacy concerns</i>	35
<i>Suggestions for employers</i>	35
<i>Suggestions for schools</i>	36
<i>Suggestions for youth and school leavers</i>	36
<i>Suggestions for other community organizations</i>	36
<i>Suggestions for further research</i>	37
<i>Responsibility for addressing literacy concerns</i>	38
Future directions	38
References	41
Appendix A. Focus Group Questions	43

List of Tables

Table 1. Non-participants' Perceived Literacy Needs Ranked by Number of Respondents Mentioning That Need	p. 8
Table 2. Major Clusters of Non-participants' Perceived Literacy Needs	p. 13
Table 3. The "Top Ten" Perceived Barriers to Literacy of Non-participants	p. 14
Table 4. Non-participants' Perceived Literacy Barriers by Cluster	p. 20
Table 5. Non-participants' Perceived Barriers to Employment	p. 22

List of Figures

Figure 1. Non-participants' Age Group	p. 6
Figure 2. Non-participants' Educational Achievements	p. 6
Figure 3. Non-participants' Employment Status	p. 7

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We are indebted to many other friends and colleagues not named here for their insights and support to date in this research. However, all remaining errors and omissions in this discussion paper are of course the responsibility of the authors alone. Further, the points of view expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and are not necessarily endorsed by the community groups which, as is normal in a diverse society, will have their own perspectives on the issues covered here.

Introduction

Adult literacy and its impacts on employment are a focus of Government concern at this time, due in part to an International Adult Literacy Survey undertaken in 1996 that showed that 48% of working-age New Zealanders were below the literacy level required to be able to function adequately in today's workplace. The Foundation for Research, Science, and Technology (FRST) funded Literacy and Employment Programme is a 3½ year research study, based in the Wanganui and Districts region. The purpose of this research programme is to develop deeper insights into adult literacy and employment issues, with the aim to develop solutions for participants, practitioners, and policy-makers. The Literacy and Employment Programme makes use of strong relationships built between the University Research Team and Community Researchers to explore literacy and employment issues from a grounded perspective. This study not only seeks to investigate the needs and barriers to literacy and employment for participants in adult literacy programmes, but also the needs and barriers faced by employers, those who have never participated in a literacy programme (non-participants), adult literacy training providers, community stakeholders, and the wider community.

Four research objectives, indicated below, were determined via negotiation with the Foundation. All four objectives were designed to help policy makers, adult literacy practitioners, adult literacy participants, and employers better understand the issue's surrounding literacy, and the extent and significance of the impact of literacy on an individual, community, and nation. The objectives also were designed to help better prepare participants and practitioners for the challenges they face in addressing literacy issues. The four objectives are to:

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

This report discusses the perspectives of non-participants (those people who have never taken part in an adult literacy programme), and the perspectives of community stakeholder groups on literacy and employment. To obtain this information, forty non-participant in-depth interviews were held in late 2004 to early 2005. Two com-

munity stakeholder focus groups were also held in early 2006. The first section of this report outlines the non-participants experiences. It enlarges and updates the findings of the non-participant interviews that were initially covered in two earlier reports from the adult literacy and employment team¹. (For a comparison with results of interviews with 88 'participants', see Tilley, Comrie, Watson, Culligan, Sligo, Franklin, and Vaccarino (2006)). The second section presents initial findings from the two community stakeholder groups.

Non-participant Perspectives

Method

In-depth interviews with 88 participants in adult literacy training courses were a major part of the first phase of the Adult Literacy and Employment project. These were conducted in late 2004 and early 2005.

It became clear that a comparison group of 'non-participants' should also be interviewed. These were deliberately chosen to cover a wide spectrum. The majority of the non-participants were sourced through a number of concerned community agencies, through a multiple literacies approach. Some were more broadly representative of the community as a whole and were selected from among the 400 community members who had taken part in a community telephone survey conducted by the project team in August 2004, and who had expressed an interest in being further involved in the research. Forty non-participants took part in the interviews.

The interview and interview structures were identical to those described for the participants in adult literacy programmes with the exception of the questions on participants' learning and their course, which were removed from the interview. The eight theme areas covered in these interviews were: socioeconomic context; schooling; employment; motivation; persistence; resistance; barriers; and power dynamics.

Procedure

The procedure consisted of several steps. First, ethics approval for the interview process was obtained from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. To ensure informed consent, an explanation and presentation of an Information Sheet to

¹ Initial findings of the non-participants' perceptions of literacy and learning needs can be found in Comrie, Olsson, Sligo, Culligan, Tilley, Vaccarino, and Franklin (2005). Initial findings of non-participants' perceived barriers to literacy and employment are discussed within Sligo, Comrie, Olsson, Culligan, and Tilley (2005).

the potential non-participant were required, together with the signing of a Consent Form, or the audio-recording of verbal consent.

Community groups, agencies, and employers in the Wanganui and Districts region were then contacted by a community subcontractor and informed of the project, informed of why we wished to undertake interviews, and were invited to assist the project team identify potential non-participants. (Sometimes, non-participants would self-identify as a result of a direct presentation of the project or interview invitations to a group of potential interviewees). The community groups/agencies and employers then approached potential non-participants on the project's behalf, explaining the project and handing potential non-participants the Information Sheet. If a potential non-participant was willing to be interviewed, an interview time was then set up. The non-participant was offered the opportunity to have a support person present for the interview.

Consent to participate in the interview was undertaken at the beginning of the meeting. Time was taken to ensure the non-participant was comfortable before, during, and after the interview process. The interview was audio-taped where the interviewee gave permission for this to occur and the tapes were then sent back to Massey University for transcribing and analysis.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted in a similar manner to that of the participant interviews. The written transcripts of the interviews were examined line by line using grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992), to allow categories and constructs, collapsed into codes, to surface from the respondents' own words. By this means we aimed to establish codes well based in interviewees' statements. The intention was to ensure that each code could be supported by comments within the transcripts comprising "extensive amounts of rich data with thick description" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 514). Examination of emergent codes was supported via use of the HyperResearch data analysis package (ResearchWare: Simply powerful, n.d.).

The coding analysis comes from a study of a total of 35 interviews that were able to be transcribed. We stress that the data are qualitative and categories are often inter-related. However, we have used some quantitative descriptors where appropriate, for example, the number of respondents who mentioned a particular 'theme' and the number of comments made about the theme. The number of comments may be taken as some indication of 'intensity'. Coding was conducted without reference to any respondent's demographics in order to allow the words to speak for themselves. However, for the purposes of this report, a brief summary of demographic details provided by the interviewees follows.

Profile of non-participants

The sample included 40 interviewees, of whom all were at least 16 years of age or over. The non-participants were sourced from places of employment and community groups or agencies in the Wanganui and Districts region. All non-participants filled in demographic questionnaires.

The demographic data show that 42.5% of the sample was male, and 57.5% female. In turn, 90% reported English as their first language, and 32.5% of the sample stated they were affiliated with an iwi; 38.5% of those affiliated with an iwi reported they were either Whanganui iwi or Te Atihaunui-a-Paparangi.

Figure 6 shows the age grouping of the sample, while Figures 7 and 8 show the educational achievements and employment status of the non-participants, respectively.

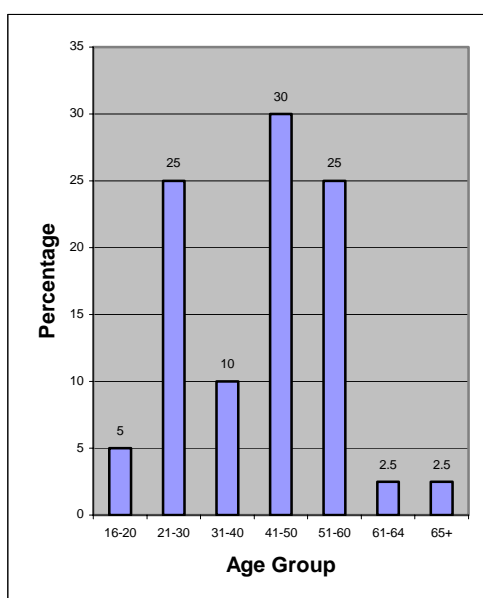


Figure 1. Non-participants' Age Group

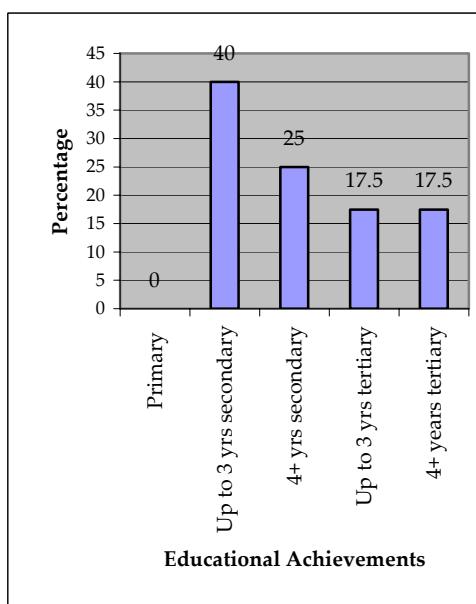


Figure 2. Non-participants' Educational Achievements

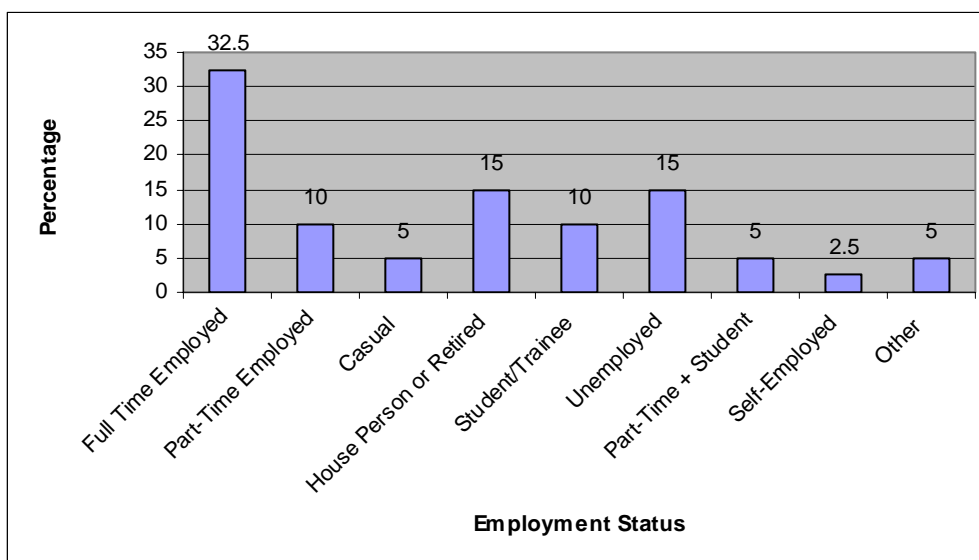


Figure 3. Non-participants' Employment Status

A greater number of non-participants than participants were in full-time employment (32.5% versus 3.6%) and in part-time employment (15% versus 10.8%); however, 65.1% of participants were full-time student/trainees, while only 10% of non-participants identified in this way. Non-participants came from across all age groups, with a peak in the 41–50 years of age category (30%); and while participants also came from all age groups, they were most strongly represented in the 16–20 years of age group (47%). Educational achievements were also higher in the non-participant group.

Non-participants' perceptions of literacy needs

An important point to note when considering and comparing the findings of non-participants with other groups is that responses to interview questions were framed by the knowledge that the project was about adult literacy and employment. Since both participants and non-participants understood the research concerned adult literacy and employment needs, (as they were given an overview of the research programme aims through the Information Sheet) the findings below retain their discussion of all learning and workplace needs under the overall heading of literacy needs. We suggest, for example, that whereas other groups spoke of computer skills, interviewees were more likely to talk about computer literacy because of the frame of literacy established in their minds. This framing also reflects the multiple literacies approach, where differing forms of learning needs are considered to be differing forms of literacies, for example, workplace literacies, technological literacies, and functional literacies.

Non-participants' perceptions of literacy needs were identified according to 22 codes. Twenty-one of these are ranked in Table 1 by the number of respondents that endorsed each literacy need. Following the table, the 'top seven' needs are identified and discussed. The needs are then grouped into three more general categories and a brief comment follows. Finally, an outline of respondents' perceptions about children's literacy needs is provided.

Table 1. Non-participants' Perceived Literacy Needs Ranked by Number of Respondents Mentioning that Need

Perceived Literacy Needs	Number of Respondents	Number of Responses
Computer Skills	28	55
Communication Skills	24	56
Cultural Literacy or Whakapapa	23	33
Reading or Writing	22	50
Maths	21	33
Life Skills	20	31
Attitude Including Confidence	16	29
Other Literacy Needs	12	13
Other Training Needs	8	14
Bilingualism or Te Reo	6	10
Specific Knowledge Set or Skills	6	7
Training Need: One-to-One	6	6
Thinking and Understanding	6	6
Training Need: Group Work	5	6
English	4	6
Research Skills	4	4
Training Need: Learning how to Learn	4	4
Training in Own Community	4	4
Academic Qualifications or Credits	3	5
Driver's Licence and Form Filling	3	3
Training Need: Feedback	3	4

Computer skills

The most commonly mentioned need is computer skills. (It should be noted that although one interviewer imposed his personal views on interviewees as to the importance of computer skills, pushing them until they acquiesced with a 'yes' answer when in fact their initial tendency was often not to mention computers or even to argue that they were not important to them, this bias was corrected by careful reading of the context of answers and coding only answers that had not been excessively prompted. The corrected data should be fairly indicative of respondents' own views). Despite the few respondents who argued against the need for computing skills, computer skills are obviously of high importance to the majority of respon-

dents, with around four-fifths of respondents suggesting their importance. Illustrative comments on the importance of computers included:

I think computer skills are an absolute must.

Anybody looking, and I, I say this almost unequivocally, anybody looking for employment in today's market had better be computer literate, or, or skill up because there're just not gonna be that many jobs, besides maybe ceramic under-water technologies or something, that you can get in without having, you know, some computer skills, whether it be a keyboard on a terminal as in a bank teller, or a cash register in retail or, network support, or whatever it is.

There's no fighting it now. The internet is certainly taking hold. It connects everyone, anything you do. Say if you were a painter, you could have your work online. You could sell it online. If you...if you're a contractor, you have yourself online.

Communication skills

The second most frequently cited need (cited by over half the non-participants and the highest number of comments) was communication skills. This included interpersonal skills such as teamwork, listening skills, people skills, assertiveness, leadership, and social skills. Most respondents felt being able to understand and communicate was more important than traditional literacy. Illustrative comments included:

Social skills are crucial. I mean, I know I should be saying reading, writing, and arithmetic, but social skills, confidence and dealing with other people, it's becoming essential in a lot of ways for getting work.

It's about making people feel at ease, making people feel comfortable, making people take that extra step that they might not.

I think it's really important to be able to communicate, to be able to speak in an articulate and intelligent way.

Literacy is about understanding and them being able to relay that understanding back where appropriate to the world, to your family, to your friends, your job.

Culture and whakapapa

Almost as many non-participants (23) mentioned the need for learning about culture and whakapapa to be incorporated into literacy learning. This was a key motivator that some non-participants felt might have encouraged them to join literacy pro-

grammes, if they knew it was available (although some others mentioned that it was not important to them at all). Illustrative comments included:

I want to find my whakapapa, but I don't know how to go about it. I've always wondered... It would give me a cloak, I've always wanted to know what my roots were and I just feel I'm not a whole person without it.

...your family history is extremely important, because that's who you are and if you haven't got that rock of who you are, you're going to flounder in life as I've seen with a lot of people.

Reading and/or writing

Reading and/or writing was the next most frequently cited literacy need, again mentioned by over half the respondents. This was often simply given as a one-word or three-word response. More elaborative responses included:

...read my letters from the welfare, read the newspaper you know you can advance yourself.

I've definitely got into a lot more reading at the moment, and just...broaden my mind.

In almost any job now you've got a deluge of reading to do, in whatever form, electronic, or otherwise. You've got to be able to read. You've got to be able to absorb it. You've got to be able to either scan and read in detail and absorb what's in there – and it's necessary now, at all levels, somebody just joining as a call centre operator, through to somebody joining as an executive manager. The volume that you must be able to absorb, assess, and then regurgitate in some other form is just massive, and those who have difficulty with reading are just left way behind. They're soon pushed sideways and somewhere out the door, and end up in not in an appointment that's going to give them a true career option.

You've got to be able to read the...the compliance book, understanding the codes and all that sort of stuff.

I think if you have the ability to, to read, comprehend, explore, you, you have a great influence over your self-determination.

We have to do our notes after each shift. If we're assigned so many patients each shift and you have to do a report on how they presented in that eight hour shift and anything that's happened. So, yeah, there's writing. And you have to be precise and you can't be subjective. You have to be objective. So you've got to know how to word things.

Maths

Maths was mentioned next most frequently, at almost the same rate as reading and writing combined. Maths was also often given as a kind of 'rote' one-word answer to questions about literacy needs, almost an auto-response as it were, without an elaboration of how or why it might be useful. Some respondents also explored what maths might mean in their lives and workplaces. Of the latter types of more exploratory answers, some illustrative ones were:

reading a measuring tape

dealing with money

Maths, definitely, if you were working on the till

Actually, mathematics is in all sorts of different ways. It's in budgeting. It's quoting. It's working out what size canvasses to work on. Converting inches to millimetres.

Mathematics, I don't give much time for, as long as you can basically add up how much things cost.

Life skills

Next, mentioned by 20 non-participants, were life skills such as financial literacy, health literacy, emotional maturity, time management, practical day-to-day problem solving skills, and 'common sense'. Typical comments included:

Life skills, they should be taught more life...things...yeah, there's... No, some of the education system is good, but I can't see how having to learn...well, this tourism thing, longitudinal and latitudinal and how many minutes... How is that going to help...knowing that, how is that going to help a young person get a job and earn money and survive in the outside world?

Attitude, including confidence

Sixteen non-participants mentioned the 'right' attitude as an important literacy need. Often it was felt that the mechanics of traditional literacy could not be addressed until either a work ethic or a desire for literacy (or rather goals to which literacy was a pathway) were in place. This relates to the 'goal orientation' category identified as a common barrier by participants and non-participants alike.

Oh, basic...you know, time...turning up for work. Reliability. Attitude is the next biggest thing because it doesn't matter what people know. It doesn't matter what their intellectual ability is. It doesn't even matter if they can read or write. If they have the right attitude they can learn.

...general understanding, commonsense. I'd say that would be a form of literacy.

...you've got to be self motivated.

Well, you need a certain amount of numeracy of course. But you need to have attitude and attitude is such a...like, you need attitude in all sorts of different ways. It's something that is never taught at school and it's something that you acquire by being involved.

When you think about how kids relate to parents, the opportunity the parents or older people have...they have huge skill sets, huge knowledge base, huge wisdom, huge everything, and the child can turn off the tap to that resource instantly with bad manners. It sounds old fashioned but jeppers, when kids have bad attitude, bad manners you think, "Well, stuff you then." And so even though it's one of those...it's not one of the three 'R's', it actually is very, very destructive in all sorts of other ways.

Less frequently mentioned literacy needs

Of the other less frequently mentioned categories, most titles are self-explanatory. The 'other literacy needs' were a series of a dozen individual responses like: "a supportive workplace", "developing new ways of thinking", "creativity", 'learning to have fun', and "learning to run a business". 'Other training needs' included "visual triggers", "socialisation", "making training specific to needs", "females training with other females", and "being treated like a grown-up". The specific knowledge or set of skills included "responding to the changing needs of the day" and "hands on training".

Grouping literacy needs

When the codes are grouped into more general categories of needs, three clear groupings emerge: traditional literacies; non-traditional literacies; and training needs. From the tables below (which provide numbers of respondents as an approximate guide to levels of concern only, not as a statistical measure), it is apparent that non-traditional literacies as a need are mentioned by almost three times as many respondents as traditional literacies. Training needs are the category of least concern – again, this is to be expected given these are non-participants' responses.

Table 2. Major Clusters of Non-participants' Perceived Literacy Needs

Category	Sub-Category	Respondent Number
Non-traditional Literacies Most Frequent Cluster	Computer Skills	28
	Communication Skills	24
	Cultural Literacy or Whakapapa	23
	Life Skills	20
	Bilingualism or Te Reo	6
	Specific Knowledge Set or Skills	6
	Thinking and Understanding	6
	Attitude Including Confidence	16
	Other	12
	Research Skills	4
	Driver's Licence and Form Filling	3
Total		148
Traditional (3R) Literacies & Science Second Most Frequent Cluster	Reading and/or Writing	22
	Maths	21
	English	4
	Academic Qualifications or Credits	3
Total		50
Training-related Needs Third Most Frequent Cluster	Training Needs: Other	8
	Training Need: One-on-One	6
	Training Need: Group Work	5
	Training Need: Learning How To Learn	4
	Training in Own Community	4
	Training Need: Feedback	3
Total		30

Non-participants' perceptions of literacy needs for children

Thirty-two of the non-participants made a total of 47 comments about what they believed to be the literacy needs of children. Again relatively few mentioned reading and/or writing although a number spoke about broader aspects of education and working hard. While some isolated "knowing about computers" as a literacy need, others linked this knowledge with other things "technology, literacy, communication, work ethic." A few stated that qualifications were important to give young people

choices or as one respondent put it “He needs to be able to walk out into the world with all its trappings to say, ‘Now I will pick up my plum.’”

There was a theme of a wide range health and safety aspects from knowing about “Drugs, alcohol and sex” to understanding they need physical activity. People skills were stressed by a number, with one expressing it as “learning where you fit in”, another as “manners”, and yet another as “respecting yourself and others”. One respondent talked about children learning from watching their parents at work. Another spoke of “a healthy degree of scepticism” that related to another’s view of being knowledgeable about media messages. Such ideas were closely melded with the need for confidence.

Another series of answers emphasised the need for ‘children to be allowed to be children’ and linked to this was the importance of nurture and, as one respondent put it, the need to “bring a sense of truth but not destroy the creativity”.

Non-participants’ perceptions of barriers to literacy

Perceived barriers to literacy for non-participants have been coded according to 30 code areas. The “top 10” barriers along with the number of interviewees who mentioned them and the number of comments are shown in Table 3. There follows a brief discussion of the major barriers.

Table 3. The “Top Ten” Perceived Barriers to Literacy of Non-participants

Literacy Barrier	Number of Respondents	Number of Responses
Economic	24	47
Family Environment	18	30
School not meeting Needs	16	31
Health-related Barriers	15	23
School Teaching	14	24
Own Attitude or Motivation	13	23
Family or Community Commitments	12	17
Moving Schools	11	13
School Streaming	11	18
Goal Orientation and Disempowerment	9	10

Economic barriers

For non-participants, the most frequently mentioned barrier to literacy was economic. This included the cost of courses in the present time (particularly the prospect of a student loan, which is perceived extremely negatively), the need to work to meet financial commitments or just to survive (and therefore an inability to find time or jus-

tification for study), and financial factors in the past which respondents perceived had negatively affected their learning. Almost two-thirds of respondents mentioned an economic barrier. For example, one said,

Do not put me in a job where I need to be trained for 6 months. I need to earn money. And I'm not being snotty about it or anything like that, but I can't afford to go and do 6 months training in a supermarket when I...yeah...I need money.

Another commented that some "Māori families were just barely struggling to live, like Mum said. Their major deal is how to feed their children, how to clothe them, so education goes by the by." The cost of education today was also a barrier: "There's no way I'm going to go and saddle myself with a \$30,000...or even a \$10,000 loan", and, "I sent away for some courses, but I'm a woman living on my own. I can't afford it."

Family environment

The next most frequently mentioned barrier to literacy was family environment. Just over half of the respondents indicated that factors such as family violence, negative messages from parents or other close family members, or lack of support for learning in the home (either because parents would not, or could not offer guidance) had constituted a barrier to their learning. For example, "My mother used to try and keep me from going to school so I could stay home and help her". Another respondent described the family environment as "a Once Were Warriors life, it was dark and rotten". Some of these same respondents had elsewhere mentioned other factors in their home environment that were actually conducive to learning, so it is not a simple case of the home environment either helping or hindering literacy. For these respondents some family members or attributes of home life were supportive while others were not. The high frequency with which family environment is mentioned both in barriers and conduits to literacy signals the importance of literacy initiatives extending beyond schooling or training arenas and into homes and communities more broadly.

School not meeting needs

The third most frequently mentioned literacy barrier for non-participants was school not meeting their needs. This code was used for respondents who described difficulties with school but could not peg those difficulties specifically to any one factor such as teaching or curriculum (although one can clearly infer that these factors, or a lack of pastoral care generally, are often at the bottom of students feeling uninterested or bored, for example). Almost half of the respondents mentioned some broad, vague, or general sense of school not being right for them or not providing them with what they needed. For example, one had been very unhappy at an all-boys school:

When I reached secondary school I just started becoming quite introverted. I didn't like the teachers and didn't know why I was learning stuff that I didn't think I'd need or ... there was something missing about the whole thing. What life's supposed to be about? Learning maths if you're not good at it. It's an interesting subject, but I'm not good at it. And I think the reason I failed is that I just got depressed and there was no understanding, no individual support. You had to find your way and make your own friends.

Another respondent said

I felt school was too regimented as it was for my own person and the rules were just pathetic. It was just like a dictatorship and I'd learnt that much that it just seemed pointless, so I decided I didn't really want to do Bursary.

Health barriers

Just under half of the respondents mentioned a health or physical barrier to learning. This included eyesight ("I can remember looking at the chalk on the board and, especially the red chalk was like 3-D to me, and...but as it turned out... I went to the optician and I've got the same condition as what my father has"), hearing difficulties, major illnesses such as diabetes, and less obvious physical issues at school such as a different rate of development from other children, or feeling too "chubby" to participate in PE and therefore deliberately finding excuses to miss school. These barriers also included mental health issues, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, which several respondents indicated had significantly disrupted their learning. For example, one respondent replied when asked whether a "bout of depression" had interrupted learning: "Oh, it got in the way of everything. I was on medication for about 2 or 3 years."

School teaching

Fourteen respondents described a specific problem with teaching during their school years that they perceived had impeded their learning. Respondents variously describe teachers they had encountered as sexist, racist, abusing their power, violent, verbally abusive, or too busy to respond to requests for help. Some of these stories were, as they were for the participant interviewees, quite shocking and traumatic. Teachers clearly have had a deep and lasting impact on their students' self-image and motivation to succeed. Respondents still had vivid memories:

I was very diffident, I was very shy, which was why, you know, a teacher getting someone like me, a very shy boy, to stand in front of a class and sing is just, a form of torture, humiliation. I quite liked achieving things, but I didn't like some teachers, particularly male teachers.

As with the participants, several respondents mentioned that they were judged not as individuals, but on the basis of judgements about their siblings. For example, one interviewee said “the teachers knew the name and sort of expected me to be like my sisters, which I thought was really weird because I’m nothing like them.” There were other damaging pre-judgements: “The teacher couldn’t be bothered and pushed me and my mate at the back and moved on to the advanced. That’s, that’s where it happened, all from there. I couldn’t be bothered learning then.” Or another respondent said,

The teacher decided the minute I walked in the door that because I was female I wasn’t capable of doing it and he said so. He said, ‘You girls can sit out the front. Girls shouldn’t do physics. You’re no good at it.’ And he set about proving to me that I wasn’t going to win for the whole year.

Attitude or motivation

Just over a third of respondents blamed their own attitude or motivational factors for their difficulties with learning. One said,

I don’t like authority, I, the real thing about my life is I hate authority, and I hate being told what to do, and I get into all sorts of trouble still, as you probably know, because I, I just don’t like asking people for permission.

Another respondent put things this way: “For some reason I rebelled completely. The only time I could learn was when it came from me, when I wanted to learn.”

Family and community commitments

Around a third of respondents had experienced difficulties balancing time for family or community commitments with study. For a couple, the time issue was a current one, but more frequently it related to the past. Sometimes this was during school years, for example, some elder siblings had responsibilities towards younger siblings which interrupted their own schooling:

I always wanted to be a journalist and then my Mum got sick, obviously. And so my teenage years were very much shaped by my Mum having a terminal illness and the family pressures that came with that. So very much my career focus took a back seat.

Another respondent said,

Once I hit intermediate, that’s when...I don’t know. Something happened to me as to...Because I’m always the oldest in the family. I take responsibility for the family. So with Mum and Dad at work, I’m the one at home cooking tea and things like that, making sure the house is clean, my sister is all right before

my parents come home. Then I serve dinner. So I took a really big responsibility when I was young and I suppose...as soon as I hit intermediate I just felt that that responsibility stressed me out a little because I was young.

Several other female respondents mentioned pregnancy and maternal obligations as a barrier to continuing with schooling or training. This barrier can often relate to economic issues: families with financial resources to purchase childcare or home-help may rely less on family members as a domestic labour source when there are small children requiring care, or in times of illness or other hardship.

School streaming

Just under one-third of respondents indicated that streaming was a barrier for them. Many felt they had been incorrectly streamed, or that streaming created a change or disruption to their schooling that, again, was not sufficiently explained or supported. The relatively high number of comments in this area indicates these respondents still feel strongly about this issue.

Moving schools

Just under a third of respondents indicated that moving schools had been a considerable barrier for them. Interestingly, this was not necessarily always related to attending multiple schools, but often related to just one move. Students experienced difficulties with moving from a large school to a small one, and vice versa. They experienced difficulty moving from a single-sex school to a co-educational setting, or vice versa. They encountered significant cultural differences between schools for which they had not been prepared. Many also experienced difficulty moving from primary to intermediate and from intermediate to college:

That was scary... a totally different culture. A lot bigger... A lot of the children in those days, in Form Two were 14 and 15 year olds, where I came from a small country school that only had two teachers. There was...it was scary for me. And we were called honkies and white maggots and things like that... absolute racism.

Another respondent had moved in the opposite direction, from a large to a small school, but found the transition equally difficult:

You were pretty anonymous, which for me, again, was quite nice. And then [we] went to Otaki and very small classes and I just felt like a bug under a microscope, didn't, didn't like it, probably was quite withdrawn, I would imagine, in those early stages.

A further respondent commented on losing his motivation for sports after moving from a small school where he could be on every sports team to a large school: he went from

Being, you know, Mr Popularity, back into a school system, you know, ah, what was it 1500 students in the Ninth, Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth, and I wasn't tall enough to be on the basketball team, hadn't played baseball in 3 years, hadn't played football. So, you know, I just didn't do anything, athletically.

Another had moved "from an all boy family to a co-ed school. Boy, I had a lot of learning to do....like how to cope with females and women. So I went totally off the rails." One respondent pinpointed problems with numeracy learning to the transition to secondary school.

These answers seem to suggest there is insufficient consideration given both to integrating new students into a school once they arrive, and to preparing students for the transition between different modes and levels of schooling. The data suggest many students need to be better equipped to manage changes during their school years, and that some kind of 'what to expect when moving schools' programme, coupled with better pastoral care for new students at a school, is warranted.

Other barriers

About one-quarter of respondents indicated that not having a goal orientation, or feeling disempowered to reach their goals, was a barrier to their learning. A similar number indicated that when they had done some post-school training, it had either been too hard or too easy for them. Just under one-quarter indicated that a lack of confidence was a major literacy barrier. About the same number of respondents mentioned difficulties with peers (peer pressure, bullying, teasing, or other peer interference with their learning) had been a barrier at school. Seven respondents indicated that a lack of positive reinforcement or positive role models had been a barrier for them, and the same number indicated that their own behaviour at school had created a learning barrier. The remaining barriers were mentioned by six or fewer respondents and can be seen in Table 4.

Non-participants' perceived literacy barriers by cluster

All the responses are grouped according to the four general areas of lifeworld, self, schooling, and training. In the table, barriers in each area are ordered in relation to the number of participants mentioning them and the number of comments. These numbers in Table 4 give a rough indication of levels of concern only, as the data are qualitative not quantitative.

As can be seen, barriers associated with schooling are the most frequently mentioned area, although the lifeworld issues are almost as frequent. Training was the least mentioned area. The small number of responses relating to training is to be expected given these interviewees were not participants in training. Of the training aspects mentioned, the most common was that training was at the wrong pace or level.

Table 4. Non-participants' Perceived Literacy Barriers by Cluster

Cluster	Sub-Category	Respondents	Comments
School Most Frequent Cluster (Largest Number of Comments)	School not meeting Needs	16	31
	School Teaching	14	24
	School Streaming	11	18
	Changing Schools	11	13
	School Peer Pressure/Bullying	8	12
	Behaviour at School	7	9
	School Curriculum	6	7
	School Overcrowded	3	3
	School Truancy	3	5
Total			122
Family/ community/ Lifeworld Second Most Frequent Cluster	Economic	24	47
	Family Environment	18	30
	Family/Community Commitment	12	17
	No Positive Reinforcement or Role Models	7	9
	Other	6	6
	Geographic Isolation	5	5
	Not Taught Te Reo because of Social Pressures	2	3
	Stigma	2	2
	Employment Commitments	1	1
Total			120
Self Third Most Frequent Cluster	Health Related	15	23
	Attitude or Motivation	13	23
	Goal Orientation	9	10
	Confidence	8	11
	Academic Pursuits	4	4
	Literacy not Needed	4	5
	Age	2	3
Total			79
Training	Training at Wrong Pace/Level	9	10

Least Frequent Cluster	Training: Structural Barriers	4	6
	Training: Other	2	2
	Stigma of Using Literacy Services	2	2
	Training: Teaching	1	1
	Training Unavailable	1	1
Total			22

Non-participants' perceptions of conduits to literacy

Family environment and positive reinforcement from a teacher (or occasionally from another person such as a friend or community leader in a teaching-type role) were the two most frequently mentioned conduits to learning. Almost two-thirds of respondents mentioned family factors, and only slightly fewer respondents mentioned positive reinforcement from a teacher as a contributing factor to learning. About a quarter of respondents described internal goal orientation as a pathway to learning, and one-fifth mentioned other factors.

Respondents indicated that family environments conducive to learning were those that encouraged independent learning and self-discipline, but also provided support when needed. For example, one respondent's mother gave dictionaries for presents and encouraged the children to use them:

She would not tell us any meanings of any words. We had to look them up. She made us. I'd say, 'How do we spell 'a certain word'. And she'd go, 'Look it up.' And you had to write it phonetically and then try and find your phonetic word which wasn't even in there. And then she made you think logically what would the spelling be, then. So it was a struggle but you got through. You learn to do it, the process, quicker.

Respondents were also inspired by parents or family members whom they perceived as working hard, towards clear goals. For example, one said he looked up to an older cousin who is like a mentor to him. This cousin lives in Wanganui and is about 22 years of age. He is encouraging him to perhaps go back to school rather than to go out and get a job. Another said "My mother gave me far more than school did, than education did."

In contrast to other comments of bad school and learning experiences, 19 respondents described inspirational teachers – often in some depth and detail. These teachers had personal qualities of warmth, support, mutual respect, and nurturing that went beyond teaching. "He was the only teacher I knew that created a space where everyone in the class was on an equal footing", or "He recognised me as an individual person

and he nurtured me through.” Others spoke of those who used innovative teaching methods such as games and competitions to motivate.

Of the eleven respondents who spoke about their own goal orientation that acted as a conduit to learning, most were related to having a fixed career goal, such as hair-dressing, the air force, incorporating drawing skills into a job as a draftsman, and so on. But others spoke of having more options than their parents or those around them: “I’m very self-motivated...I felt that people were trapped in their lives and I didn’t want to be trapped in mine.”

Non-participants’ perceived barriers to employment

Non-participants’ responses about barriers to employment were coded according to 18 categories. The most frequent are summarised in the table below and reflect the spread of respondents, as some respondents referred to themselves as facing significant employment barriers, while some respondents were referring to others who were unemployed or seeking work in contrast to themselves.

Table 5. Non-participants’ Perceived Barriers to Employment

Employment Barrier	Number of Respondents	Number of Responses
Individual Circumstance	13	24
Confidence	10	15
Age	7	11
Attitudinal (Not Confidence)	7	8
Application Forms, etc.	5	7
Literacy Required	5	9
Health	5	5
Qualifications	5	7

The most frequent category, loosely labelled ‘individual circumstance’, was a variety of diverse responses some of which related to time out of the workplace being a barrier and others to a variety of interpersonal issues. More cohesive were the comments made by ten of the respondents that lack of confidence – especially among the unemployed – was a significant barrier. Typical comments were “I’ve been rejected so many times and that put me on a downer a bit”, and “Everyone loses heart. The minute you’re unemployed, you do lose heart.”

Seven respondents had found their age a barrier. They said such things as: “Let’s face it, once you’re 50, nobody wants you”, or “You can talk about ageism as much as you like, but, boy, is it strong out there.” A similar number identified attitude as a problem, most of these were talking about the attitude (work ethic) of others, some from

their perspective as employers. The barriers formed by the need to fill in forms, for literacy, and for qualifications in today's workplace were mentioned by five people each. Five respondents also mentioned that health and disability problems were a barrier for them. A few respondents mentioned employers not recognising their skills, family commitments, lack of specialist knowledge, or poor self presentation. One respondent each mentioned geographic isolation, lack of experience, and time needed for study as barriers to employment.

Non-participants' perceptions of what literacy means

Non-participants were asked to describe what they understood as the meaning of the word 'literacy'. The most frequent response from 13 respondents showed they perceived literacy as restricted to '3R' type functional skills. Typical comments were: "It means you're able to read"; "how good you are at reading"; "being able to read and write and comprehend things", and "The image that pops into my head is the ability to read, absorb, assess, and disseminate".

Eight respondents saw the meaning as encompassing wider skills and multiple literacies. As one respondent said:

It means different things to different people, and I think when you ask people from different cultural backgrounds what that means, you're going to get a whole variety of answers. For some people having that sense of...like, for Maori people, having a sense of whakapapa and understanding where you fit into the larger picture and having a strong sense of oral history and oral traditions.

For another respondent it included being able to talk to someone and also "general understanding and commonsense". Yet another said:

Literacy, to me, is...the key element to being a human being...right from the basic skills of language, communication, of understanding, comprehension, right through to it's sense of art, music, love of art, love of music, love of books, love of intelligent kinds of things that are presented...Literacy is about understanding and then being able to relay that understanding back, where appropriate, to the world, to your family, to your friends, your job.

For seven of the respondents the term was meaningless or one they knew nothing about. Comments here ranged from a simple "It's not a word I've ever used" through to a more hostile "It is still a misnomer, you know. It's a piece of jargon".

Three of the respondents made deficit-related comments that they applied to themselves. For instance “I know I’m not the best reader or writer. I try”; “I sort of recognise the limitations there.”

Conclusions

The 40 members of the Wanganui community who were not undertaking adult literacy training and who took part in the ‘non-participant’ interviews were a diverse group. A significant proportion had come to us through a number of concerned community agencies and had many life experiences in common with those on literacy courses. Others were selected from among community members interviewed as part of a large community phone survey who had offered to take part in a further interview. These interviewees represented a wide range of education levels, work experience, and incomes.

The similarities between the non-participants and the 88 participants in their responses were interesting. There were close links between what the two groups perceived as literacy and learning needs. Computer skills topped the list (as they did in a broader community survey). One major difference was that non-participants placed cultural literacy or an understanding of whakapapa third on their list (compared with 11th for participants) and believed an opportunity to learn about their cultural background and whakapapa would be a motivator for their attendance. However, the overall similarities between the non-participants and participants became very clear when the literacy and learning needs were grouped. Non-traditional literacies (including communication, life skills, and ‘attitude’) were endorsed by both groups more often than traditional literacy needs, which were second, and training needs, which were third.

Such findings are reflected in the perspectives brought to us from the broader literacy project, illustrating the complexity of what is understood as ‘literacy’. These findings also reflect findings from employers who see communication skills as part of basic literacy and who want employees with life skills. Providers of adult literacy training are aware of the contextualised nature of literacy and the importance of confidence and communication skills in enabling basic literacy and other learning. Evidence from their students shows they believe confidence and goal orientation are major outcomes of their courses.

Non-participants differed from participants in their perceptions of barriers to literacy and learning. While the main barrier for participants was health², for non-participants it was economic – particularly course costs, student loans, and the cost

² The importance and impact of health issues as a barrier to literacy is discussed in both Tilley et al. (2006), and Sligo, Culligan, Comrie, Tilley, and Vaccarino (2006).

versus the benefit of giving up work time. This is particularly interesting given the Government's policy focus on continuing training and life-long learning to meet the goals of a 'knowledge economy or society'. It suggests learning and employment are seen by some as mutually exclusive – you cannot learn and still maintain your current level of employment. With the Government's focus on up-skilling the workforce, the perception of learning stopping once a job is attained (probably fuelled by the lack of resources to encourage continual learning while in employment) needs to change, if the aspiration to become a 'knowledge society' is to become a reality.

Frequently interlinked with the economic barriers mentioned by non-participants was the barrier imposed by various restrictive or negative aspects of the family environment, as discussed by 18 interviewees. These comments find echoes in the experience of participants, in the comments made by Wanganui community stakeholders about the intergenerational nature of literacy difficulties, and in the evidence (from such studies as IALS) of the connection between unemployment and lower levels of literacy. Clearly, literacy issues are embedded in a complex of societal, political, and cultural interactions. Policies that address the efficient and effective teaching of adult literacy to national standards in order to meet economic and employment goals, can by their nature deal only with one aspect of the issues surrounding literacy and employment. Research into adult literacy training provision in Wanganui, shows tutors recognise that personal and economic restraints continue to hold back students and that they struggle within the limits of their role to meet some of these welfare needs among their students (Neilson & Culligan, 2005).

One major common barrier to literacy and learning mentioned by both participants and non-participants was that their schools had not met their needs. While most non-participants did not report the very negative experiences mentioned by the participants, some had encountered various forms of discrimination. More often, there was a lack of 'fit' between the interviewee and school, where learning styles and individual needs could not be accommodated, and this situation was made worse by a lack of pastoral care. Given the importance, for literacy outcomes, of length of time at school, there is a strong implication for greater resources to be given to secondary schools for early intervention and greater support for those who appear to be struggling (Sligo, Comrie, Culligan, Tilley, & Vaccarino, 2006).

Through an awareness of the wide-ranging definitions of literacy, and approaching the research from a strengths-based, multi-literacies perspective, we sought to encourage all our interviewees and stakeholders to speak from their own perspectives and perceptions of the term. Participants and non-participants came up with similar comments about what they thought literacy was – most frequent were variations on the 3R and school-based traditional literacies. A smaller, but still significant, number had a broader definition that included such aspects as communication and understanding. Third were those who did not know what literacy meant to them; a few viewed literacy from a deficit model, constructing it as a problem.

Our survey of 400 members of the Wanganui community indicated people were inclined to take 3R-type literacy for granted. Just 12 of the community sample mentioned reading, writing, or numeracy skills as important for employment when answering an open-ended question. When prompted, however, a large majority viewed these skills as vital. Our in-depth interviews, with both participants and non-participants, reinforced the importance of non-traditional literacies as perceived learning needs. When asked about the word 'literacy', however, there is a retreat to the 3R definition, which interestingly is frequently combined with negative connotations of schooling. Moreover, a surprising number of non-participants did not understand, nor wished to understand, the term, while others immediately thought of 'illiteracy'.

The response of non-participants when asked to define 'literacy' provides additional evidence for what we are coming to see as a major problem of marketing. How can we identify low levels of literacy within the adult population as an issue without reinforcing negative stereotyping and undermining the fragile levels of confidence among those we wish to reach? Can 'literacy' be rescued from the narrow confines of a 3R formal education definition? Conversely, how can we ensure that the importance of basic foundational literacy is not lost among a welter of too broad definitions? How can policy approaches end up promoting literacy merely as a step on the ladder to employment and lifelong learning?

Among this welter of potential problems, it is perhaps most encouraging to revisit comments interviewees made about the learning needs of children. Here, a few participants – approaching the question from the point of employment – mentioned the need for reading, writing, and maths. However, they recognised the importance of education in its broadest sense, of working hard, and of being able to cope with the modern world. This was combined with a strong belief in the need for nurture, protection, and building confidence in the young. In this way our interviewees have distilled a series of core values to underpin the teaching of tomorrow's citizens. The documents that guide education policy could do worse than incorporate these values arising from the words of a group of 'ordinary' citizens.

Community Stakeholder Perspectives on Literacy and Employment

Introduction

The Literacy and Employment Research Programme seeks to investigate the perspectives and experiences of those impacted by literacy and employment issues, and aims to develop solutions for areas of concern within the Wanganui and District Community. The perspectives of participants in adult literacy programmes, non-participants, general community members, employers, and adult literacy providers were explored between 2004 and 2006. However, the perceptions and experiences of community agencies in Wanganui and Districts had yet to be explored in detail. Stakeholders from a variety of community sectors, including justice, social, employment, and educational services, have their own concerns and suggestions on literacy and employment that other groups may share or, indeed, may not have yet considered.

Two focus group meetings with community stakeholders were held during May 2006 to identify what key representatives of the community viewed as the issues relating to literacy and employment in the Wanganui region, and what they felt should be done to address these issues. The key findings below from these group meetings form an initial analysis. Focus group meetings with community stakeholders are ongoing, and a more in-depth analysis including future focus groups will be made available at a future date.

Method

A focus group method was chosen to allow discussion of literacy and employment issues, and a growth of understanding among community stakeholders about the commonalities and differences of experience faced by others in the same community. The focus groups were held in local Council meeting rooms and facilitated by Richard Thompson, an independent, experienced facilitator from Wanganui. The question areas were derived through a process of several discussions within the Literacy and Employment Research Team (both university and community). These question areas are attached as Appendix One. Each group lasted for approximately 90 minutes; two members of the Wanganui District Library Literacy and Employment research team also attended. The number of participants per focus group was kept to a maximum of 7 to allow time for each participant to make a contribution.

Participants

Participants in the focus groups were selected from those community agencies who had initially expressed interest in the Literacy and Employment project from its in-

ception in 2004, as well as representatives from some additional agencies. The 13 participants were involved at senior management level in the education, employment, criminal justice, disability, social service, and counselling sectors, as well as in the provision of services to Maori, local council, and community development.

Findings

Definitions of literacy

Most definitions given focused on *communication* as the purpose or outcome of literacy, with a variety of communication methods discussed. There was overall agreement that literacy involves reading and comprehension, as well as writing. However, there was some debate about written communication as some respondents felt this could be seen simply as a form of transmitting oral messages, or, in a broader sense, as an opportunity to formulate and fine-tune thoughts. Communication was also seen to incorporate action, for instance, through the use of hands in terms of actions or sign language.

Literacy was seen by some as a continuum of skills. It was described as something without which modern society cannot function. Literacy, or communication, was seen as dependent on:

- the situation or context within which it takes place. It is important to know what needs are motivating people, for example, are they attempting to reach a long-term goal or address a crisis situation.
- motivational and emotional aspects. Literacy was described as the ability to communicate your thoughts beyond yourself and having confidence in the ability to communicate was viewed as important. An emotion, such as the fear of being found out, were felt to have a great impact on what a person thinks and does. Participants reported that there was an emotional impact for those who have difficulties with this form of literacy, which can be expressed as anger and frustration.
- participating in and responding to information. The ability to use language as a tool was viewed as crucial to the ability to participate optimally in society.

There were mixed opinions about whether the definition of 'literacy' should be broad or narrow. If considered in a broader sense, literacy can include visual and oral aspects. Some participants felt there are dangers if the definition becomes too broad, e.g., the practical impact of having an unclear or overly academic definition. If the definition of literacy was all encompassing, it would be difficult to determine where a

person would fit in a literacy continuum, and thus allow a measure of progress in skills or abilities.

Another danger was the promotion of traditional literacy (reading, writing, maths skills) achievement as leading to fulfilment in life, financial or otherwise. This was seen as potentially leading to disappointment or an increased sense of failure in those who have struggled with literacy and employment in the past. Other factors including social capital and organisational capital were seen as important in concert with literacy and other human capital skills in order to perform optimally within a chosen field.

The danger of equating educational level attained with effective literacy skills was also seen as important. It was felt that, rather than being related to a lack of traditional literacy skills, low performance in a particular job might instead reflect a lack of skills for that particular job or within that particular culture (workplace or cultural literacies).

Community stakeholder perceptions of literacy levels in Wanganui

Several respondents explicitly stated their responses were based on their interactions with particular sub-groups of the Wanganui Community, and should not be taken as a picture of the Community as a whole.

There was agreement that basic literacy levels are actually lower than is generally recognized in the wider community, and that the seriousness of this problem in Wanganui was underestimated. However, it was seen as important to consider this at different levels, for example, youth may have difficulty with one form of literacy but communicate very effectively through another form such as texting. Again, literacy skills can be viewed on a continuum and encompass varying types of communications or literacy, which may result in a profile of strengths and weaknesses within an individual.

The community stakeholders discussed how Census data indicate that Wanganui as a whole is not well-educated, implying, in their view, that there are many with a low level of traditional literacy. It was the experience of these stakeholders, many of whom are employers, that more people are leaving school with a far lower level of literacy than would be expected. The effects of this include frustration and a general lack of opportunities. Specific literacy difficulties mentioned within the focus groups included not knowing how to work out the meaning of a word or how to use language to achieve their goals. Stakeholders discussed how individuals with literacy difficulties presented to them from across several age groupings, including both those who have just left school and more mature individuals who have a history of difficulties and a general lack of confidence.

Issues dealing with the identification of literacy difficulties included the ability of many individuals to “cover up” any difficulties they might have. (Some reference to this is made in the report ‘Perspectives of Adult Literacy Learners 2004–2006: A report from the Adult Literacy and Employment Programme’³ where coping strategies of adult literacy training participants are briefly discussed). While the structure of some organisations or services was seen as making traditional literacy difficulties hard to identify, other organisations were not aware of the importance of literacy, and thus made no attempt to identify it. It was acknowledged, however, that not all organisations are unaware, and some community agencies in particular, try to identify literacy difficulties in clients by asking them to read something back.

Perceptions of awareness of literacy levels in Wanganui

There was a strong level of agreement that the wider community believes levels of literacy in Wanganui are higher than they actually are. Reasons offered for this misconception included:

- people being unwilling to admit to literacy problems and being very good at hiding them;
- schools are believed to provide people with adequate literacy skills, when a number of school leavers do not actually have a reasonable level of literacy;
- there are a variety of groups in Wanganui who may be unaware of the issues;
- some people are unaware of their own difficulties as they mix with others of similar literacy levels;
- skills in using technology such as cell phones and computer games can lead to an assumption that some young people also have adequate literacy skills – ‘computer literacy’ is confused with other literacy and numeracy skills;
- some people may be verbally skilled but have difficulty with written communication;
- some are literate in particular areas (for instance, their own job), but have difficulty transferring skills to other methods of communicating or other situations.

Knowledge of local literacy providers and resources available

Overall, knowledge of the assistance available for those with low traditional literacy was seen as low. Participants agreed that without assistance, most of those requiring literacy assistance would have difficulty identifying where to find it. This was thought to be due to three factors: most publicity is in written form, and those with low traditional literacy would be unable or less likely to make effective use of this; it was felt that there must be motivation to learn these skills, before any assistance can be found and accessed; the stakeholders’ experiences led them to believe that clients generally depended on other people to learn about available services (via word of mouth), and depended on someone else to actually take them to the literacy training

³ See reference list for Tilley et al. (2006).

provider. Simply telling someone about the services available was not seen as very effective.

A number of focus group participants demonstrated an awareness of a specialist literacy provider operating in Wanganui. Some knowledge of other Private Training Establishments (PTEs) was also demonstrated, along with awareness that literacy is integrated into some of the PTEs' wider, usually vocationally-based, programmes.

It was indicated that other groups in the community have a reduced awareness of literacy issues and what to do about them. For example, the social work, counselling, and health professions were seen to lack understanding of literacy issues (such as how it may be hidden and the shame involved) and of ways to identify it (this could be more the issue of literacy itself than a lack of knowledge of where to go for assistance). A very experienced senior professional gave the example of many phone calls made to identify one appropriate resource for a client, to demonstrate how difficult this would be for someone with less knowledge of and experience in this community. While employers could be an important source of motivation for people to attend literacy training provision, the respondents estimated that up to 90% of employers would also have difficulty knowing where to direct people for literacy training. This general lack of awareness of the significance and impacts of low levels of traditional literacy, as well as a low awareness of the literacy training options available, was a consistent finding in other aspects of the study (see Comrie et al., 2005, for a discussion of the results of the community survey, and Franklin, Olsson, Comrie, Sligo, Culligan, Tilley, and Vaccarino, 2005, for a discussion of employer perspectives).

The links between literacy and employment

In summary, there was consensus among participants that literacy and employment are inextricably linked. However, this link is not necessarily a straightforward one, and wider issues must also be considered.

It was seen to be very important that a person is literate in terms of a) gaining employment or b) becoming self-employed. Two participants reported on recent local surveys of employers and businesses where literacy, numeracy, and communication skills were identified as the highest priority training needs. To gain employment, people need to be able to read and write, to understand advertisements, to fill in application forms, to write resumes, and to understand their employment agreements. Without these skills, many work opportunities will not be available to a job seeker. People who are quite capable of carrying out a job may lose the opportunity to obtain employment as they are unable to express themselves adequately or competently when applying.

The ability to communicate and to receive communications adequately was seen as extremely important for survival and safety in the workplace. Once employed, at least a basic level of traditional literacy is believed vital in order that instructions can

be followed, signs read, and machinery safely operated. Examples of the impact literacy difficulties could have in the workplace include: when changes are made to processes, patterns, or instructions; and difficulties in understanding leading to absenteeism, mistakes, loss of job, or even crime to make up lost wages. A relatively advanced level of literacy was seen by some participants as necessary, given the current prevalence of electronic means of communication.

Those requesting assistance to become self-employed need to have sufficient literacy skills to express what they propose to do in a business plan – many people requesting support to develop their own businesses demonstrate significant difficulty with this.

Other wider issues were also seen as impacting on the link between literacy and employment. The first was the belief that people are likely to be more motivated to increase their skills if they are already in employment or being encouraged into employment. A problem occurs when employers do not encourage professional and personal development for their employees, perhaps through not knowing the options available, or through not appreciating the spin-offs for their business. It was felt that as a large number of businesses in Wanganui are 'small businesses', human resource management and development may not be their highest priority.

The second issue concerned those who have experienced learning difficulties at school and have a history of non-participation, which may continue into the types of employment obtained. Despite a recent decrease in unemployment, there is still a group of people who are unable to remain in long-term employment. People may also be vulnerable in that their legal rights are not well protected in the employment situation. Many people are still in low-skill, low-paid jobs, and a need for more highly skilled workers remains.

Third, depending on the type of employment obtained, a gap may develop in the transition from school to the workplace when a young person is expected to write or otherwise communicate in ways not taught at school. They may also be faced with unfamiliar inter-personal dynamics, and lack the skills and confidence to stand up for their legal rights and obligations, which requires not only literacy skills, but the confidence and ability to adapt to new situations. One suggestion put forward was that it is important for young people to develop their literacy, numeracy, and social communication skills in the casual work opportunities that are available to youth after school.

Barriers to achieving 'functional literacy'

For the purpose of these focus groups, 'functional literacy' was defined as:

the ability to function as a member of a community and contribute to it, and to be able to access and effectively use available resources in the community, and the ability to move towards achieving personal potential

Barriers to people achieving this form of literacy were classified in the following areas:

1. School and educational issues:

It was generally felt that the fundamentals of reading and writing are not taught effectively in schools. Students may leave school with few or no word skills, no knowledge of processes, or no ability to use language as a tool. Further examples of barriers in school environments included some teachers' low expectancy of certain socio-economic groups, which lead to a lack of follow-up to ensure homework is done; and students facing disabilities, ranging from major physical disabilities to communication and sensory impairments to social and behavioural issues.

2. Family influences:

A lack of role models for younger people was seen as a barrier, particularly in family environments where generations have been unemployed. Some students may be encouraged to stop attending classes by family members who feel threatened by their success, perhaps because it is more comfortable to stay with what is familiar than take a risk with something new. Family environment was found to play a role both through acting as a barrier to learning, and as a conduit to learning in the larger study.

3. Special and medical needs :

Special needs (e.g., dyslexia, sensory impairments, mental health difficulties such as depression, brain injury, and poor nutrition) can form barriers to functional literacy development, especially when appropriate support services are not in place.

4. Emotional barriers:

A lack of motivation to learn or work on difficulties was seen as a major problem particularly as it requires a lot of motivation and courage to admit to having literacy difficulties. This relates to the wider community view that embarrassment or stigma would work to stop people from going to a literacy training course (Comrie et al., 2005). The community stakeholders added that it can be difficult to commit to increasing literacy skills if people feel they can get by without doing so, and live in a "good enough" way. There has to be a perceived gain to the participant, otherwise it is difficult to move towards change. Little can be achieved if a person does not see the applicability to themselves in learning new skills.

Finally, the focus group participants commented on the emotional barriers inherent in learning, even when a student had begun a literacy training programme. They discussed emotional "baggage", i.e. fear of expressing themselves and low self-esteem as barriers to learning, particularly for older students. Peer pressure was also added to this as a potential barrier. Even for those who had decided to make a change in their literacy abilities, the difficulty of finding someone to trust to help them learn these skills could be yet another barrier.

5. Funding and availability of services:

In summary, the lack of stable funding for services and the inability of some in need to access literacy training opportunities while still maintaining their employment, is an area of concern, especially regarding Government policy which aims to focus on up-skilling the workforce, and lifelong learning.

Two points were raised here. First, service provision depends on government funding, which is not constant and ongoing. A service recommended to someone may not actually be there when the client goes to access it. Second, many literacy services open only during working hours, but those in work cannot afford to give up their employment to attend, as they may have a family financially dependent on them.

6. Financial barriers:

Financial barriers were seen to exist even when there are no course fees to pay, and include the cost to the student of not being at work, of getting to the course, and of giving up something else to be there. Many may not prioritise literacy training if they are on a limited budget or benefit, particularly where life priorities must come before what could be seen as an unnecessary cost, for instance, when a choice must be made between spending money on training or buying food.

7. Societal assumptions and attitudes:

Certain societal assumptions and attitudes were seen as barriers to functional literacy as defined above. One was the assumption that people have a similar understanding of earning power and hierarchies in the employment world, when this may in fact not be the case. The ability to adapt to differing uses of language, or to understand that the same words may mean different things to different people, is not necessarily shared by all. It is a barrier if people in the community (including professionals and assisting agencies) assume that "if I know what I am communicating, you will too."

Some respondents believed that the attitude of some young people was not conducive to functional literacy learning, commenting that young people now expect to be entertained (passively) rather than actively obtaining valuable experiences, which stops them wanting to learn something new; and, young people do not see the need to know a lot of different words or the need to learn to write well, as they are able to use other methods of communication, such as texting. Some young people were also viewed as unwilling to participate in something if it is not fun.

Some general comments were also made about overall learner attitudes, for example, those who did not wish to participate or learn something new if it is not absolutely necessary in their lives.

8. Barriers to increasing functional literacy in the workplace:

Depending on the culture of the workplace (including peer pressure within it), employees might refuse to participate in functional literacy training programmes.

9. Methods of information provision:

Advertising by literacy training providers in written formats was a barrier to those with traditional literacy difficulties finding out for themselves about literacy provision options. Also, information given out by community agencies was not always presented in a user-friendly way, even vital information such as legal obligations, etc.

10. The influence of popular culture:

The influence of popular culture was seen as another barrier by respondents who commented that today's 'heroes' do not necessarily promote reading and writing as a priority.

Suggested interventions and initiatives for addressing literacy concerns

The community stakeholders suggested that there needs to be a coordinated approach to all the literacy needs and barriers faced by individuals and society. It was emphasised that no one approach or agency could address all the pertinent issues; indeed, it was thought necessary to identify all the strands and needs, and have a community-wide approach to meeting these needs. Community-wide solutions also need have to be multi-faceted, available at all levels of the community, and cover all ages.

Organisations and adult literacy providers working together to address the literacy needs of a community must be well-funded both to provide interventions and to identify and research the issues further. 'Band aid' solutions do not work. For an intervention to be effective, sufficient training of tutors and the availability of back-up to these adult literacy providers and community agencies is vital. The respondents suggested a cost-benefit analysis would be a helpful exercise to emphasise to funders that what is spent now in terms of prevention will save money on larger concerns in the future.

The motivation of potential learners to take risks and learn something new could be increased if appropriate training opportunities were made available and awareness was increased of the range of services available.

Suggestions for employers

Community stakeholders had a variety of suggestions for employers to encourage continued literacy education within their staff. One of these suggestions was post-placement support, similar to supported employment programmes that have been used very successfully in the disability sector. By providing all the required supports to both the individual and the employer, training can continue while the person remains in employment. To encourage ongoing training and professional development within their staff, employers (especially those running small businesses) require more incentives and increased awareness of the potential benefits to themselves. Com-

bined with this, must also be an increased employer awareness of the value of raising literacy levels among their employees.

Respondents also felt that processes need to be in place to identify those with literacy needs in the workplace, and to allow for this by verbal explanation or other means when instructions or processes change. One suggestion was for the inclusion of teaching elements of communication and literacy skills within apprenticeships.

Suggestions for schools

The importance of considering learning styles and preferred places of working for school-age children was discussed, as well as the need to make learning enjoyable. A suggestion was made for more widespread use of the Books in Schools Programme, which could encourage the importance of exposure to books from an early age. Further, changes in education can be driven by technology, for example, students could now be encouraged to write through 'blogs' and by using texting to communicate.

A system was needed to identify those students with literacy difficulties so that they were not overlooked, and left school with no assistance. To enable a smoother more successful transition from school to work, the use of a 'supported employment model' based on the model currently used in the disability sector, was emphasised.

Suggestions for youth and school leavers

There were two main suggestions for youth and school leavers. The first was that youth and school leavers should be encouraged to attend courses such as the new 'Make It Take It' course in Wanganui. This programme is designed to provide brief introductory courses for those who have fallen through the gaps at school.

Second, attendance at local libraries and literacy providers should be promoted at the right level for youth and attendance encouraged through youth. Attendance could be encouraged through the use of attractive media such as DVDs and X-Boxes. Youth could be taught to read using materials that interest them, such as computer games and cell phone manuals. This use of youth-targeted materials could act not only as motivators to attend, but as motivators to persist in learning.

Suggestions for other community organizations

The involvement of other community organisations in enhancing the literacy levels of their communities was suggested. Many of the current literacy training providers offer vocational courses that include integrated literacy (these services are outlined in Culligan, Neilson, Comrie, Sligo, and Vaccarino, 2006). However, with regard to other courses being run in the community, the inclusion of integrated literacy could be a means whereby those who prefer to take only brief, focused courses (such as a driver's licence) could be offered information or initial assistance with literacy learning. Driving licence programmes might include some integrated literacy. The end

result of gaining a driver's licence was seen as a very effective way of encouraging young people to attend.

Further, the community stakeholders endorsed one of the key findings of the participant interviews when they suggested that promotion of courses as 'practical' rather than as 'literacy' courses could encourage more people to attend. One suggestion was to replace the term 'literacy course' with 'personal development course'.

The focus group participant's emphasised the importance of how information is communicated and presented by Government agencies and local council. As such information must be able understood by all sectors of the community, it should be presented in a straightforward and user-friendly manner (but not so simplistically so that important issues are omitted).

Respondents felt that to encourage change for one person it is important to involve the whole family. Such involvement could be achieved through the Computers in Homes initiative, in which computer technology is made available to families along with training in their use. Encouraging parents to support their own children's learning can be an effective way of increasing literacies. Further, involvement of the community in family, individual, or community learning would be useful. The use of educational facilities, such as primary schools, as 'community centres' that are open every day of the week, could provide centres for learning based in a familiar environment. In this way, reading material, computers, and other resources (which may already be present in these facilities) are thus used to maximum benefit for the whole community. Community links, such as a key person in a community or sub-culture, could also endorse these community centres as a means of demonstrating the value of learning to a person who may not have otherwise tried it. This idea ties in with the findings from the participant interviews, where the majority of respondents had entered a programme of study following a word-of-mouth endorsement from family or friends (Tilley et al., 2006).

A further suggestion was for training modules, including literacy and budgeting, to be offered as an option in the place of finite sentences for some offenders. On completion of these modules, prisoners could then be considered for early release. Use of these skills in employment after release might reduce the numbers who re-offend.

Suggestions for further research

Several suggestions for further research were noted by focus group participants. The first was to examine the literacy skills of those who are unemployed, given the current high employment rate in New Zealand. The purpose of this research would be to gain understanding of how literacy impacts on the employment options available to the long-term unemployed.

A further suggestion was for a discussion with the newly formed Youth Council in Wanganui, as this would provide some useful insights into literacy and employment issues for local youth. This suggestion has been taken up by the Literacy and Employment Project Team. One of the future planned community stakeholder focus groups is to meet with the Youth Council to hear their views on literacy and employment issues.

A final suggestion was that the Wanganui District Library should be approached to analyse membership data for useful insights into literacy trends in the Wanganui community.

Responsibility for addressing literacy concerns

The Government was seen as the overarching agency responsible for following up literacy issues identified through research with sufficient funding for literacy training providers and initiatives.

Agencies and government departments dealing with the public were seen to have a duty to make information more user-friendly. These agencies were also seen to be responsible for prioritizing of the issue of literacy so that it becomes an important part of their organizational objectives and culture. The need to develop further understanding about low literacy and ways in which it can be clearly identified was emphasised.

The focus group respondents felt schools and pre-schools have a responsibility to teach fundamental skills, to awaken interest in literacy at an early age, and to identify and respond to those students with difficulties. The Government was seen as responsible for funding schools adequately to do this. However, the community stakeholders also suggested that a level of responsibility exists within the community itself to help those who do not 'fit into' school, and who require other methods of assistance to develop their literacy skills. The whole community needs to be involved in this, through discussion and other processes that encourage reflection (for example, these focus groups).

Occupational Health and Safety (OSH) were seen as a point of responsibility for educating employers about literacy (and safety) in the workplace. Employers were seen as potentially taking a major role in addressing literacy concerns.

Future directions

The above is an analysis of discussions with two community stakeholder focus groups held in early 2006. More focus groups are planned, particularly the inclusion

of a Youth Council group. Such inclusions will add to the initial findings discussed here and will be included, along with a more in-depth analysis, in future reports.

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Appendix A. Focus Group Questions

Question 1. What is understood by the term 'literacy'?

Question 2. What are community stakeholder's perceptions of literacy levels in Wanganui?

Question 3. What is the level of knowledge about local providers and resources?

Question 4. What are the perceived links between literacy and employment?

Question 5. What are the barriers to achieving functional literacy?

Question 6. What would be effective initiatives and interventions to address literacy concerns?

Question 7. Who has the responsibility to address these concerns?

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This report provides a broader perspective to adult literacy issues, adding to reports from adult literacy training providers and the views of students in adult literacy courses. Most of the report describes the views of a spectrum of Wanganui and District community members on literacy training and learning issues and their relationship to employment.

These interviews provide a useful contrast with findings from people on adult literacy courses. The report also contains insights from two focus groups of Wanganui community stakeholders, including representatives of government departments and local social service agencies.

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