

Research Briefing

Adult literacy and numeracy in Aotearoa New Zealand: How does current research and organisational reporting align with the Living Standards Framework?

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Abstract. Literacy and numeracy (L+N) are foundational skills and practices that are important in everyday life. Dominant western perspectives of L+N focus on skills attainment for economic benefit and international comparison. This neoliberal approach influences policy in developed countries worldwide. However, there is growing recognition that high rates of economic productivity do not provide an accurate indicator of success for either individuals or nations. This study favours a sociomaterial approach to L+N, prioritising people's abilities to communicate and navigate their world effectively, while engaging in meaningful social practices that allow them to participate in family and community life. The study sought to understand the connections between adult L+N viewed from a sociomaterial perspective, wellbeing outcomes, and the Living Standards Framework (LSF) – a wellbeing-focused framework underpinning all policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa). Community Psychology and Kaupapa Māori lenses were applied to critically evaluate whether the LSF aligns with community psychology values and principles in Aotearoa, and, most importantly, whether it reflects Māori cultural views and values. The value of the LSF in the adult L+N education context was also examined, with particular emphasis on similarities between the LSF, L+N learning opportunities, and learner outcomes. The study found that the 2018 LSF was based on sound international principles but lacked a genuine perspective of wellbeing in Aotearoa. The 'evolved' 2021 LSF provides more Aotearoa-specific wellbeing considerations for policy-making and governance; however, it remains to be seen whether this positive change will transfer to policy development and programme delivery in the L+N sector.

Keywords: Aotearoa New Zealand, adult literacy and numeracy, Living Standards Framework, Māori, wellbeing.

Key findings

- L+N programme providers in Aotearoa face challenges of policy driven by neoliberal agendas, and the impact a neoliberal society has on learners and their outcomes. However, a neoliberal approach to adult L+N is still favoured by government funding bodies. This is despite consistent evidence that learners value social outcomes alongside skills acquisition.
- The effects of colonisation continue to impact negatively on Māori learners and whānau. Māori wellbeing frameworks, the importance of a te ao Māori approach, and the inclusion of whānau in adult L+N programmes were identified as key elements for Māori learner engagement and success.
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti) is still not being enacted in a way that ensures equitable outcomes for Māori; policy implementation favours a neoliberal approach and dilutes the intention of Te Tiriti.
- Western L+N assessment tools do not provide a truly authentic view of learners, their needs, and their outcomes. A sociomaterial view of L+N was frequently referenced as an approach that

¹ Nicki Hockings is the author of this masters' thesis study. The study was supervised by Dr Jane Furness.

resonated strongly with learners and allowed them to attain impactful outcomes for themselves and their whānau.

- Community psychology values of collaboration and empowerment were most frequently identified as important to learners, followed by holism, a strengths-based approach, diversity, relationships, biculturalism, social justice, and human flourishing.

Briefing purpose

The purpose of this research briefing is to outline the background, purpose and key outcomes of a study entitled *Adult literacy and numeracy in Aotearoa New Zealand: How does current research and organisational reporting align with the Living Standards Framework?* (Hockings, 2022). The one-year project is part of a larger MBIE-funded study being carried out by New Zealand Work Research Institute (NZWRI), Auckland University of Technology and the Māori and Psychology Research Unit (MPRU), University of Waikato². This briefing will be of interest to stakeholders in the larger study and others engaged in adult literacy and numeracy (L+N) policy and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa).

Living Standards Framework

The Living Standards Framework (LSF) was developed to provide an aspirational framework for intergenerational wellbeing in Aotearoa and underpins the government's wellbeing focus for budgetary and policy decisions. Built on the OECD approach, the local LSF has had a long gestation involving quite widespread consultation and a recent upsurge in effort to include a Māori viewpoint. Many Māori in Aotearoa are affected by adult L+N policy. Because the LSF is expected to have an increasing role in shaping all government policy decisions, including those related to L+N, the MPRU saw value in understanding the current alignment between adults' experiences in L+N programmes and the LSF. This would enable consideration of its relevance and ongoing importance as a point of reference for adult L+N policy into the future. Such understanding could make an important contribution to the larger study because no previous research had explicitly compared the LSF and its components with the experiences and outcomes adults reportedly value from their participation in L+N programmes. If adult L+N policy is to be shaped by the LSF, it is essential to understand the extent to which there is alignment between notions of wellbeing reflected in the LSF and what actually matters to adult L+N learners, especially in relation to Māori and other marginalised groups.

Research aims and activities

The study this briefing describes explored how, and to what extent, adult L+N research and organisational reporting undertaken in Aotearoa aligns with key components of the LSF and related Māori-led documents and drew conclusions on its value for L+N policy for the future. Six key LSF documents and six L+N research reports were analysed to identify key components of the LSF and similarities between the LSF, L+N learning opportunities and previously reported learner outcomes; strengths and weaknesses of actively engaging the LSF in adult L+N programmes and policies; and ways in which the LSF is being updated to reflect Māori cultural views and values, including the extent they are reflected in L+N research and organisational reporting. To augment the document analysis, six of the report authors and key personnel from

² Other collaborators in the larger project include Professor Steve Reder, University of Portland, and the OECD.

relevant organisations such as Te Puni Kokiri were interviewed to further explore values underpinning L+N in Aotearoa.

The study was underpinned by a sociomaterial view of L+N in which L+N are regarded as social, cultural and material practices. This contrasts with the neoliberal focus on skills attainment championed by the OECD, which tends to predominate here. From a neoliberal perspective, L+N are seen as human capital enabling individuals to contribute to a competitive, globalised economy (Yasukawa & Black, 2016). The sociomaterial view of L+N, combined with applying social justice-oriented Community Psychology and Kaupapa Māori values and principles in the data analysis, enabled te ao Māori social and material elements such as whānau, iwi and hapū social structures, and storytelling, weaving, sculpture, and song as communication materials, to be recognised as relevant and important to Māori.

Key findings from research and organisational reports

- All documents referenced the challenges of policy driven by neoliberal agendas, and the impact a neoliberal society has on learners and their outcomes.
- Colonisation was repeatedly identified as a factor that continues to impact negatively on Māori learners and their whānau.
- Māori wellbeing frameworks, the importance of a te ao Māori approach, and the inclusion of whānau in adult L+N programmes were all identified as key elements for Māori learner engagement and success.
- Community Psychology values of collaboration and empowerment were most frequently identified in the reports, followed by holism, a strengths-based approach, diversity, relationships, biculturalism, social justice, and human flourishing.
- A sociomaterial view of L+N was identified in all documents, frequently referenced as an approach to adult L+N that really resonated with learners and allowed them to attain impactful outcomes for themselves and their whānau.

Key findings from report authors and key organisations

The points listed above were also reflected in the interview data. Additional author insights into the values and beliefs that underpin adult L+N research and reporting were that:

- The Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool (LNAAT) and other western assessment tools do not provide a truly authentic view of learners, their needs, and their outcomes.
- Te Tiriti is still not being enacted in a way that ensures equitable outcomes for Māori; policy implementation favours a neoliberal approach and dilutes the intention of Te Tiriti.
- A neoliberal approach to adult L+N is still favoured by government funding bodies. This is despite consistent evidence that learners value social outcomes alongside skills acquisition.

Conclusions

This research project provided an opportunity to cast a critical eye over the LSF and the underlying neoliberal approach that influences L+N policy in Aotearoa. The 2018 LSF was based on OECD-led international principles, but lacked a true perspective of wellbeing in Aotearoa. In contrast, the

document analysis, supported by the interviews, highlighted a sociomaterial, values-based approach to adult L+N education that prioritised holistic wellbeing outcomes for learners and whānau. What was discovered suggests that adult L+N programme providers and researchers in Aotearoa favour a holistic approach that counters neoliberalism and provides wellbeing outcomes for learners in the spirit of the following whakatauki: Whāia te mātauranga he oranga mō kotou – seek after learning for the sake of your wellbeing (Jones, 2022). It is therefore encouraging that the recently launched 2021 LSF (The Treasury, 2021) has taken an evolutionary step. In this iteration, the LSF is presented in a much more holistic style, acknowledging its previous shortcomings in addressing concepts of wellbeing in Aotearoa. Two accompanying Māori-led documents – *An Indigenous Approach to the Living Standards Framework* (Te Puni Kōkiri & The Treasury, 2019) and *He Ara Waiora* (McMeeking et al., 2019) – both offer a holistic, te ao Māori perspective of wellbeing. The 2021 LSF therefore provides a welcome update and the hope of genuine, Aotearoa-specific wellbeing considerations in policymaking and governance. It remains to be seen whether these positive steps transfer into changes in policy framing and programme delivery in the adult L+N sector.

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