

Ko te ngako te kōrero: Māori understandings of literacy and numeracy

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Introduction

This article introduces an adult literacy and numeracy study being undertaken by researchers in the Māori and Psychology Research Unit (MPRU) at Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato (University of Waikato). Our project, focuses on Māori experiences of learning and is part of a larger research programme led by the New Zealand Work Research Institute (NZWRI) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Entitled *The expression, experience and transcendence of low skill in Aotearoa New Zealand*, the programme is a collaboration between AUT, the University of Waikato, Portland State University and the OECD. Funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) Endeavour Grant, this five-year programme began in 2019 and is now nearing the end of its third year.

Brief overview of the larger research programme

The overarching goal of the programme is to provide evidence-based, actionable policy recommendations to improve life-course trajectories and socio-economic outcomes of adults living with low levels of literacy and/or numeracy and to lift Māori and Pacific incomes and skills (NZWRI, n.d.). The programme aims to shape the ways in which literacy and numeracy issues in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa) are addressed, with a focus on effective intervention.

Programme aims include:

1. Building a detailed population-wide picture of those with low literacy and numeracy skills;
2. Analysing their life-course pathways and effectiveness of interventions with respect to a range of economic and social outcomes;
3. Forecasting future changes in population skill level;
4. Developing an understanding of the barriers and enablers that build resilience to risk, along with pathways to transcend low skills (NZWRI, n.d.).

Overall, the programme emphasises the importance of ensuring that the voices of people disproportionately represented among those living with low skills are at the foreground of our research. To do this, a mixed method approach enables the team to provide a big-picture view of how literacy and numeracy experiences impact on people's lives in Aotearoa. Initially an examination of the 2016 New Zealand Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) survey data was undertaken. This led on to an exploration of possible links between the survey participant's data and the large administrative data set known as the

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Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI). Contained within the IDI are health, education, justice, income, housing and employment information of New Zealand citizens. An empirical portrait of the PIACC respondents was produced as a first step in understanding the characteristics of the New Zealand population living with low literacy and/or numeracy (Erwin et al, 2021).

A Waikato based qualitative study

The MPRU team are contributing to the larger research programme through collaborations with two agencies that are located in the Waikato. Our project uses case study and qualitative methods to engage narrative information primarily with Māori. Similarly, Maulupeivoa Dr Betty Ofe-Grant is taking a qualitative approach to her project that engages with Pacific communities. Both projects intend to present narrative information of how skill acquisition interplays with everyday family, community life and wider societal participation amongst these Indigenous groups.

Led by senior Māori researchers, our work has utilised a Kaupapa Māori approach to this study (Smith, 2015). The MPRU researchers working directly with the agencies had pre-established connections with them and further strengthened these relationships through co-designing the research questions and procedures. Staff from both agencies recruited participants as they were best placed to do so in a way that ensured participants did not feel under threat or coerced by research. Agency staff were trained as interviewers to ensure a 'by Māori, with Māori, for Māori' approach. Approximately twenty adults accessing services at each agency are being interviewed. The interviews are almost complete, participants have checked their transcripts, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) has commenced.

We are hearing from people about the strategies, supports and barriers they face while navigating everyday life. Participants have generously shared their narratives with us, providing rich description of their learning journeys, the pathways they have taken towards living their lives as they wish to live them and what has helped and what has hindered them along the way. They are describing different types of literacy they engage with in their day-to-day lives and their future aspirations. This is the first time that in-depth narratives of people's literacy and numeracy experiences *and* big quantitative data sets have been brought together in adult literacy and numeracy research in Aotearoa and is of both local and international interest.

The case studies provide an opportunity to bring to life the quantitative part of the project, to illuminate how, locally and in their everyday lives, adults and whānau navigate the challenges that literacy and numeracy interactions can present, and what this means for living lives they choose. Our next step is to work with our partners in the overall research programme to illuminate the 'reality' of people's lives that can otherwise be lost amongst the big numerical pictures. Our wider literature searches demonstrate that literacy for Māori is a set of multi-literacies that moves beyond the limitations of text, capturing traditional forms of knowledge and knowing. More importantly, literacy for Māori first and foremost must be conceptualised as bi-literacy. Initial findings from the stories we have collected highlight what is already well-known to the sector, that adults are skilled in multiple ways beyond what literacy and numeracy measures focus on and that adults will engage with passion and enthusiasm when learning is relevant to their wider lives.

We in the MPRU team are either community psychologists or social policy researchers. Three of us are Māori and two of us have been involved in adult literacy field for over 20 years. We are involved in this study because of our commitment to enhancing a broader understanding of literacy and numeracy that can help prevent other social problems and health issues. We know that social, political and environmental systems have not, but need to, support literacies that are essential to participation in the lives people value (reference). We know too, that literacy and numeracy issues are a consequence of oppression including colonisation and racism and are therefore a social justice issue. We understand that literacy and numeracy is a social and cultural practice and not merely about skills (Barton & Hamilton, 2000); that there are many literacies based not just on alphabetic script, but also on graphics, sound, geography and spatial relationships for example (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Maori Adult Literacy Working Party, 2001); and that the value of literacy lies in its uses and meaning in people's lives, not least of which is its contribution to individual, whānau and community wellbeing (Furness, 2017).

Work available thus far

To date a number of papers exploring aspects of the research programme are published on the programme website <https://workresearch.aut.ac.nz/research/low-literacy-and-numeracy-research>. It is important to note that these are *working* papers and as such they reflect the research team's *developing* understanding which will necessarily expand and *evolve* as the research progresses, enabling us to be confident in the recommendations we ultimately propose. Examples of working papers providing some background to our project are highlighted below.

As per programme aim 1, and noted above, a comprehensive empirical portrait of our population who live with low literacy and numeracy is presented in Erwin et al. (2020). Built on discussions with key stakeholders, Furness et al. (2021) describes our literacy and numeracy intervention landscape and highlights its known complexity. Taking an ecological approach and with a focus on learner strengths, a learner-centred theoretical framework is presented; a second stage of developing a more culturally responsive model is underway following advice from Māori and Pacific scholars. Continuing with a strengths-based approach, Cochrane et al. (2022) reveal the complex relationships between Indigeneity, gender, socio-economic status and adult skills. Significantly, they also redefine groups classified as having “low skill” within PIACC to instead be considered to have “high potential”, emphasising learner agency. Finally, we note the work of our MPRU masters' student who writes about Treasury's Living Standards Framework and considers its relevance in the context of adult literacy and numeracy and the wellbeing of all New Zealanders (Hockings, 2022).

Looking forward to 2024

We have an exciting two years ahead where we will continue to thematically analyse the qualitative data we have collected in order to make sense of the narratives provided by our Indigenous participants. Thus, we hope to ultimately assist in building evidence-based

justification to inform policy makers of the importance of listening, and responding to, the voices of those who are most affected by low literacy and numeracy in Aotearoa.

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