

# Research Summary



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*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

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## In their voice: Adult learners' perspectives on literacy and numeracy, learning and wellbeing

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This research summary outlines the background, purpose and key findings/insights of a project entitled *In their voice: Adult learners' perspectives on literacy and numeracy, learning and wellbeing*. The project is described in full in Furness, Piercy-Cameron and Greensill (2023). *In their voice* is part of a larger, 5-year, 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 Waikato.<sup>1 2</sup> The project is one of two qualitative case studies undertaken by MPRU which examines adults' experiences as they navigate their lives and develop their literacy and numeracy (L+N) repertoire as part of their aspirations for themselves and their families. The case study summarised here was undertaken in partnership with Literacy Aotearoa, a leading adult L+N provider in Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa), focusing mainly but not exclusively on Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand)<sup>3</sup> adult L+N learners and their *whānau* (immediate and extended family).

This summary will be of interest to stakeholders in the MBIE-funded study and others engaged in adult L+N policy and practice in Aotearoa. It also provides a concise account for the research participants and others to share with their *whānau* and communities.

### Background and context

The study has taken place at a time when adult L+N policy is at a crossroads in three senses. Policy over the last 23 years has only marginally improved L+N on the measures government uses with adults, yet it is known that wide-ranging, holistic benefits accrue from adult L+N education that values and embodies Māori interests and ways of being. Second, the most recent iteration of L+N policy expired in 2017 and is yet to be replaced, opening an opportunity for reconceptualisation and transformation of adult L+N policy. Third, Māori educators have articulated and demonstrated over decades the content and approaches for L+N learning that are of interest and value to Māori adults and *whānau*, but these remain by-and-large systemically unsupported. Nevertheless, government expectation is that all policy in Aotearoa accounts for wellbeing outcomes as set out in the *Living Standards Framework* and *He Ara Waiora* (The Treasury, 2021, n. d.).

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<sup>1</sup> Other collaborators include Professor Steve Reder, University of Portland, and the OECD.

<sup>2</sup> The larger project is entitled *The expression, experience and transcendence of low skill in Aotearoa New Zealand (2019–2024)*. It aims to provide policy recommendations to improve life-course trajectories and socio-economic outcomes for adults with low L+N skills in Aotearoa.

<sup>3</sup> English descriptions of Māori words are taken principally from the context provided by the participants, supplemented where relevant from Te Aka Māori – Māori Dictionary online <https://maoridictionary.co.nz> or as stated.

The standpoint for this study is that the Eurocentric perspective of literacy that shapes much of adult L+N policy in Aotearoa – reading and writing alphabetic text, usually in English, and primarily for economic purposes – is inadequate for realising the aspirations of Māori (Furness, et al., 2023). This view of literacy severely limits the extent to which Māori expectations for adult L+N education and for Māori prosperity are realised, contrary to the word and the spirit of *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (The Treaty of Waitangi). Viewing literacy through sociocultural, sociomaterial, critical literacies and Indigenous lenses, the study advocates for a much broader understanding of literacy and its purposes to decolonise adult L+N policy for the future. Supporting this aspiration, the study advances the notion of multiple meanings of literacy in which Māori perspectives are valued, upheld and promoted. Māori perspectives are understood as centring on *whakapapa* (genealogy or the “process of layering one thing upon another” (Mahuika, 2019, p. 1)), which provides the framework for connectedness of all things and is the basis for Māori identity and for comprehending and interpreting the world.

### Research aims and activities

The research process was informed by *Kaupapa Māori* (a Māori agenda) to the extent possible. Māori researchers conducted all but one interview and contributed to the thematic analysis of participants’ narratives. Two *Pakehā* (New Zealanders of primarily British or European descent) researchers worked closely with the Māori team members and were guided by them. The specific approach for this case study was co-designed with Literacy Aotearoa to ensure participants’ needs and aspirations in the research were met. Twenty adults (15 Māori, one Samoan and four Pākehā) graciously agreed to share their insights and were interviewed individually, in pairs or in a focus group according to their choice. They were aged from early 20s to late 60s and varied in their qualifications and learning challenges. The same number of men and women took part. Participants were mainly in English-language based programmes (personalised group intensive L+N programme, digital literacy, driver licence) or *te reo Māori* (the Māori language). The following questions directed the interviews and focus groups:

1. What has motivated people/whānau to make change in their lives?
2. What was the pathway that people/whānau have taken to make change in their lives?
3. What are people’s experiences of their efforts to make change in their lives?
4. What have been supports or facilitators, barriers or challenges in their efforts?

The narrative transcripts were analysed from a critical sociocultural and strengths-based standpoint. Findings were described and discussed in relation to the following broad thematic categories:

1. What matters to people in their lives – views of wellbeing, values and aspirations
2. Learning and life pathways – experiences of learning, schooling and post school
3. What enables people to live the lives they choose
4. What makes it harder for people to live the lives they choose.

In each of the following key findings sections we begin with one example of the many insights participants shared with us related to an aspect of each theme. The names given are not the participants’ real names.

### Key findings – What matters to people in their lives

*Wellbeing? It’s just a collectedness you will have, and you can feel it when you move in, but then you’ve got the wairua [soul, non-physical spirit of a person]. And you have your immediate whānau are here ... its being there and seeing that they’re happy, I’m happy, Mum’s happy. We’re all happy. And when we*

*get back with whānau back home and we all come together and then other whānau we have here on my mum's side – wellbeing, yeah. And it's just being happy within here too [pointing to his heart] (Teina).*

- Wellbeing was important to the participants, and they recognised its importance to whānau. They were aware of their own practices, and often those of whānau, that enhanced wellbeing and those which were detrimental.
- Participants often referred to physical or mental health as aspects of wellbeing but, most commonly, wellbeing was located within the whānau, and often also the participants' *marae* (courtyard for formal ceremonies and discussions) or *whenua* (land). The wellbeing of whānau, including having good relationships among whānau members, and the wellbeing of tribal lands were essential for their personal wellbeing.
- The interconnectedness of personal, whānau and whenua wellbeing meant that whakapapa – from *atua* (deity), *tūpuna* (ancestors) through to *mokopuna* (grandchildren or young children) – lay at the heart of being in a healthy state for themselves and their whānau.
- Pākehā participants did not include land or ancestral ties beyond grandparents as connected to their wellbeing, but the nature of their relationships with more immediate family members and friendships with others who were not related to them played an important role in the quality of their lives.
- Other valued dimensions of life and ways of being included:
  - Knowledge itself, and opportunities to learn and to pass on knowledge to others, particularly the next generations
  - Teaching and learning in *tuakana-teina* (older person – younger person) relationships where learning was reciprocated
  - Learning with others that were like them, making learning easier and more enjoyable
  - Opportunities for practical, applied learning that was of use to them in their everyday lives and work. Such learning was meaningful and purposeful because it meant they could better support their whānau, *hapū* (kinship group), and *imi* (extended kinship group) which they greatly valued.
- Māori participants' aspirations related to enhancing what was important to them in their lives for themselves and their whānau, thus personal and whānau aspirations were interconnected. Aspirations included “living a simple life”, “paddling the *waka* (canoe)” to help whānau, increasing knowledge of te reo Māori and *tikanga Māori* (Māori cultural practices), passing on knowledge to the next generation, and gaining credentials and work.
- Where the family environment was unhappy, acquiring independence from family was the impetus for enhancing L+N.

### Key findings – Learning and life pathways

*... they're really encouraging on what sort of skills you do here. ... Uncle's just scored a new welder, for maintenance and for the maunga (mountain). ... I've played with an arc welder but not a big welder. And I ended up getting it going, so I've been playing with it, and doing a few projects, which is good. And [name] straight away he goes, "Ab, hey, I think you need a course mate." "Yes, bro. How about a night course after work?" He goes, "Oh, suss it out." Yeah, and he goes, "Oh, I'll come too." I said, "Yeah. You come because you are my ride in there" (Tuhoro).*

- Several participants were aware that they had gained knowledge they valued throughout their lives from whānau members and being in the marae environment and sought to create such experiences for their own children.

- Most female participants experienced bullying and marginalisation at school from both teachers and other students. The impact of such experiences remained with them into adulthood requiring considerable courage to return to formal learning.
- Some participants left school early. While some felt this was the right decision at the time, for others leaving school without any credentials contributed to becoming stuck in a cycle of pre-employment courses or low-skilled jobs. Reflecting on their choices, some participants expressed a desire for their mokopuna to succeed at school and access more and better opportunities.
- Income support was utilised by some participants from time to time. In general, social support of varying kinds (mental health support, income support, reintegration support, L+N education, injury rehabilitation, driver licences) was useful to the participants. Exceptions to this were when pressure was exerted by an agency to take up employment.
- Key people and key moments played a transformative role in the participants' lives, linking or supporting them into new opportunities that constitute steps towards living the lives they wished.

### Key findings – What enables people to live the lives they choose

*She takes her time ... she makes it an environment where you are able to ask questions. Also just varies how we learn as well ... we're at a point now where we are asking questions in Māori and answering them how we would answer them in Māori. That is good. It gets the grey matter going and not ... I mean we are learning so don't be afraid if it's wrong (Huia).*

- All the participants loved knowing things and gaining new knowledge and skills. It was important that the knowledge they had the opportunity to gain was relevant to their interests and concerns – of practical value in their everyday lives.
- *Mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge) and *te reo Māori* were highly prized by the Māori participants irrespective of personal or whānau engagement in *te ao Māori* (the Māori world). They welcomed opportunities to expand their reo and build their knowledge of tribal stories.
- Participants wanted the foundational knowledge they missed at school or lacked confidence in. They recognised reading, writing and mathematics as important in supporting their aspirations, enabling them to engage in interesting work and work that they valued.
- They relished opportunities to gain specific and higher level skills and knowledge that was purposeful and meaningful. For example, enhanced digital skills improved their work efficacy and benefitted their iwi, which was important to them. The digital skills were also useful in managing their financial lives and enhanced their connectedness with whānau.
- Positive and welcoming learning environments were crucial to overcoming fears about learning spaces which remained after traumatic school experiences. Feeling seen, valued and cared for enabled participants to engage in learning again safely and not only acquire new knowledge and skills but contribute to the social and educational activities of the classroom (express their ideas and opinions, ask questions, help others).
- Tutors' sound knowledge of what was being taught was valued by the participants as were pedagogical practices such as the participants being able to choose topics, having fun as a class, having a delivery pace that was manageable and having teaching methodologies (visual and aural) that worked for them.
- Being challenged in their learning without experiencing unbearable pressure enabled the participants' to see themselves as capable adults and contributors in their communities.
- Connectedness, a sense of belonging, and awareness of whakapapa enabled participants to move towards living the lives they wished. This was evident in the participants' desire to learn skills that

would be of value to their whānau, hapū and iwi or that would enable them to live independently of an unhappy family environment and their courage in overcoming their fears to do so.

- Actions that were directly supportive included: accompanying the participant to the L+N programme for the first time, being informed of job opportunities or being employed in iwi environments, and learning specific bodies of knowledge from parents or grandparents that they valued. Actions that were generally supportive included encouragement from parents. Life events such as having children or mokopuna inspired participants to make positive changes in their lives.

### Key findings – What makes it harder for people to live the lives they choose

*... there was another learning experience, too, for say [a] Māori young fulla. In the Pākehā world, we always got sort of, what we were told was, if you get over the first year or so, you'll make it through. Because they sort of treated us a bit hard, like Māori/Pākehā thing. We were told to dig trenches, dig holes, concrete work. Not do the flash inside finishings and all that (Rangi).*

- Physical health, mental health and learning challenges affected many of the participants through requiring particular self-care efforts, a change in job, overcoming stigmatisation and finding appropriate support to learn, participate and contribute; in short, to live the lives they choose.
- Some participants experienced lasting trauma in their lives as such events as the loss of whānau and family harm as children and/or as adults disrupted learning and life pathways.
- Racism and bullying at school had the effect of steering some participants in directions which may not have been their first choice if their experiences had been more positive. Racism was also experienced in post-school training, reducing opportunities to learn particular sets of skills.
- Low confidence in their abilities and fear in learning environments shaped participants choices during their schooling and as adults. Prior to participating in the Literacy Aotearoa L+N programmes, some participants had continued to have poor experiences of learning post school.
- Low English-language based L+N and foundational skills limited participants' choices in further study and work. Absence of qualifications reflecting their abilities also limited options for the kinds of work they could do.

### Conclusions

The study shows the centrality of te ao Māori in the lives of Māori adults and whānau. It is fundamental to Māori identity and wellbeing and remains throughout their lives even when they have experienced periods of disconnection. Enacted valuing of te ao Māori within the programmes enabled participants to feel safe to be who they are, excited about their L+N learning, and looking forward to meaningful outcomes for themselves and their whānau despite the oft-present anxiety about returning to a classroom. Relatedly, prioritising the wellbeing of the learners through caring and respectful learning environments is crucial to coming to and staying in L+N learning opportunities which can then provide an opportunity to transcend hurtful past learning experiences and enable participants to see themselves as capable learners and contributing adults in the world. These characteristics of the participants' learning experiences in the study programmes reflected values and ways of being fundamental to being Māori which meant the dissonance often experienced in other learning settings was not present and participants could enjoy learning what and how was important to them.

The study notes that L+N in the Eurocentric meaning was addressed in the L+N programmes our participants attended (for example digital skills for work were taught) but the programmes simultaneously embodied broader meanings and purposes of literacy that are not typically foregrounded in L+N policy in

Aotearoa. The study contends that the enactment in the programmes of Māori values and ways of being and doing allowed transformative learning to occur, not just for the Māori learners but for everyone. The study demonstrated that L+N learning valued by learners themselves is best defined as the acquisition of knowledge and skills that have meaning and are useful in their lives, can contribute to better lives for whānau, hapū and iwi and can be passed on to future generations. Defined from this viewpoint, valued L+N includes matauranga Māori and Māori cultural practices, values and language; foundational skills and knowledge in English missed at school; and specific skills for changing times including work and everyday personal, family and community life that centres whānau wellbeing.

The study calls for a change in the definition and rationalisation embedded in current (though expired) adult L+N policy from a narrow economy-focused approach to a broad and culturally inclusive definition and rationalisation. This requires detachment from a singular view of what literacy is to a view of literacy as a multiple construct; in other words, seeing literacy as having many meanings. Accompanying this embrace of literacies, Māori perspectives of L+N must move from the margins of adult L+N policy to the centre, led by Māori.

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