

Fletcher, J. (2009). *Second chance diverse literacy learners: Factors that influence their learning*. Australian Association for Research in Education International Education Research Conference, 29 November – 3 December, National Convention Centre, Canberra, Australia.

Second-chance diverse literacy learners: Factors that influence their learning

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Abstract

The need to enhance adults' foundation competencies in literacy is recognised worldwide. This study investigates literature to develop a framework for understanding the factors that influence literacy learning. The research records the stories of two adult second-chance, culturally diverse female students while they were completing their first semester of study in a foundation qualification that included a course in adult literacy. In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and Pasifika peoples are, on average, underachieving in literacy, so this small study specifically invited Māori and Pasifika adult students to tell the researcher of their quest to improve their literacy levels. The purpose was to draw from the women's accounts implications for adult educators working with culturally diverse, second-chance learners to determine what acts as motivators and/or barriers for and to their learning, and to explore aspects that enhance their learning. The emerging issues were the cultural capital and life experiences that the two students brought to their study, their goals and motivation to undertake their courses, the atmosphere and support they identified within their courses, what they saw as barriers to their study, and their identification of different cultural practices and expectations within their courses.

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Introduction

The need to enhance adults' foundation competencies in literacy is recognised worldwide (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2001). The community is interested in improved levels of literacy amongst its members because literate people contribute more to the greater good of the community, both in economic and social terms (Benseman 2006; Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph 2003). Furthermore, low levels of literacy are considered to be a serious issue for the development of skilled people (Satherley, Lawes and Sok 2008) in an era of rapid growth in technology, not only in the workforce but also in everyday life.

Unprecedented increases in cultural and ethnic diversity within societies are a worldwide phenomenon. This change in demographics, as reflected in the student body of education systems, is challenging educators to rethink effective pedagogical practices at school, tertiary, and workplace educational levels (Abbas 2002; Allison and Rehm 2007; Duursma et al. 2007; Hartoonian 2007). The influx of immigrants into countries in the Western world requires teachers and educators to cater for multicultural and multilingual students. Understanding how they and others associated with delivering education can best do this is becoming ever more politically relevant, given that variable educational achievement levels amongst students from different ethnic backgrounds can have a cyclical effect on educational outcomes, career opportunities and the provision of supportive home and family experiences that enhance learning (de Haan and Elbers 2005).

Changing ethnic make-up

In line with international trends, the ethnic make-up of the New Zealand population continues to change. The proportion of the total New Zealand population identifying as European (including New Zealand European) has fallen (Statistics New Zealand 2007a). The population of the indigenous people of New Zealand, Māori, grew from 13% of the total population in 1991 (Statistics New Zealand 2007a) to 14.6% in 2006 (Statistics New Zealand 2007c). The proportion of Pasifika¹ peoples in New Zealand increased from 5% in 1991 to 6.9% in 2006 (Statistics New Zealand 2007b). New Zealand's Pasifika population comprises recently arrived immigrants and second- or third-generation New Zealand-born Pasifika, and each Pasifika group is diverse in cultural practices and language.

These demographic changes in New Zealand, in what has traditionally been a European-dominated society with predominantly European-based education systems, challenge educators internationally to ascertain pedagogical practices that more effectively meet the needs of the growing numbers of learners with diverse ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, in New Zealand classrooms, Pasifika and Māori children tend to be marginalized (Alton-Lee 2003; Flockton and Crooks 2005, 2006; MOE 2003; OECD 2001; Timperley 2003). Many Pasifika and Māori students underachieve in literacy and exhibit disengagement and alienation at school (Alton-Lee 2003; Flockton and Crooks 2005, 2006; MOE 2003; OECD 2001). Wylie and Hodgen's (2007) longitudinal research on competent learners over a 12-year period showed that Pasifika and Māori learners tended to be in the lower quartile groups at the onset of the study and that they generally were still in that band of achievement at age 16.

Adult Māori and Pasifika achievement

This pattern of underachievement continues into adulthood. The New Zealand results from the 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) showed that the majority of Māori, Pasifika and other minority groups in New Zealand had literacy levels below the standard of competence needed to effectively meet the needs of everyday life (MOE 2001). The New Zealand adult literacy strategy, *More*

¹ In New Zealand, the Ministries of Education (MOE) and Pacific Island Affairs use the term "Pasifika peoples" to describe people living in New Zealand who have migrated from the Pacific Islands or who identify with the Pacific Islands because of ancestry or heritage. According to the MOE (n. d.), the term does not refer to a single ethnicity, nationality, or culture but is a term of convenience to encompass the diverse range of peoples from the South Pacific in New Zealand who derive from a range of unique cultural and language identities (e.g., Samoan, Tongan, Tokelauan, Cook Island, Niuean).

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Than Words (MOE 2001), emphasises raising the level of adult literacy as an urgent priority. It states that a significant improvement in adult literacy is “critical for the transformation and modernisation of the New Zealand economy” (4), given that literacy levels impact on individuals’ income-earning potential. Certainly, families of most Pasifika and Māori children tend to cluster in the lower socio-economic levels (Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph 2003). The situation is a vicious cycle. Low literacy attainment in school, which is, in part, a product of low literacy levels and resources at home, leads to inability to earn, which leads to maintenance of a low literacy home environment. Encouraging parents, caregivers and whānau² to support their children’s learning can produce gains in children’s literacy and numeracy (MOE 2001).

Literature review

This review explores the multiple layers and contextual factors that influence practice in adult basic education. It investigates both international and New Zealand contexts in order to provide a framework for understanding the contributing factors that, according to the literature, influences the delivery of basic skills adult literacy learning and achievement. The social ecologies within which basic skills adult literacy exist are also explored. Culturally aligned research methodologies are discussed that support New Zealand’s indigenous people, Māori, and New Zealand’s Pasifika peoples. It is hoped that these literature-based summaries will help guide the findings of this small research study along a pathway that links basic skills adult literacy, explicit teaching approaches and strategies and tertiary environments, and indicates how these together can intersect to raise adults’ literacy achievement.

Literacy within the context of adult learning

The following New Zealand-based definition of literacy, contained in an assessment for foundation learning document published by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) and endorsed by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE), fits with the many case studies reported in the publication. Foundation skills in literacy are thus *described as* “a complex web of reading, writing, speaking, listening, problem-solving, creative thinking and number skills (NZCER 2006, 3).

This definition of literacy and its purposes are not entirely uncontested. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), conducted from 1994 to 1998 and reported by Statistics Canada and the OECD (1995), employed proficiency levels to determine how well adults use information to function in society. Here, literacy was seen as a continuum of ability rather than as a construct that positions adults as either literate or not literate. This change in thinking is reflected in the literature over the past 20 or so years, where notions of literacy vary from the IALS Level 3 concept of functional literacy (Statistics Canada and OECD 1995) to the more recent view that the most important element of reading and writing is recording information in a manner that enables the audience to decode and comprehend (Wickens and Sandlin 2007).

The recently published New Zealand learning progressions for adult literacy and numeracy (Tertiary Education Commission 2008, 3) has three distinct categories relating to literacy progressions:

- Listen with understanding, speak to communicate
- Read with understanding
- Write to communicate.

However, when discussing foundation learning skills, Benseman, Sutton, and Lander (2006) suggest that many learners in adult literacy courses not only improve their reading and writing skills but also develop information communication technology and numeracy skills. They furthermore suggest that such courses support students because they give them confidence in using oral communication techniques in group situations. The three authors also raise the issue that the literacy needs of English second language learners may vary, as some may be literate in their mother tongue and therefore have very different literacy needs. But whatever the precise definition is of literacy, the acquisition of effective literacy skills has long been seen worldwide as a vital skill for the wellbeing and effective functioning of both the individual and society (see, for example, Barton and Coley 1996; Carnes et al. 2001; Pannucci 2007).

² A Maori term for family, including wider family connections.

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The international context

Cultural diversity is now part of life in many Western countries. For example, Canada according to Gill and Chalmers (2006), is recognised as “the most multicultural nation in the world”. In the United States, analyses of the nation’s changing demographics suggest that the population of students from diverse backgrounds will continue to increase and that a greater percentage of children than ever before will grow up in poverty (Abbas 2002; Duursma et al. 2007; Hartoonian 2007). The United States Bureau of Census (2000) predicted that by 2020 half of the nation’s population would be from non-Caucasian cultural backgrounds. Rumbaut (2005) reports that around 30 million people in the United States are recent immigrants, most of whom have come from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Similar changes are happening in European countries. For example, in Norway, the demographics have altered with immigrant population changes. In 2002, 6.8% of the Norwegian population were language minority students (Statistics Norway 2002).

The aforementioned IALS study (OECD 1997) raised cross-national awareness of the deficits in adult foundation literacy skills and provided comparisons across countries. New Zealand, Canada, the United States and Australia experienced similar crises in foundation adult literacy skills. The survey reported that adults with higher-level educational qualifications were more likely to participate in further literacy-based education than those with lower-level educational attainment. It also found that employed adults were more likely to participate in continuing education than were unemployed, and noted a much higher incidence of participation in work-related education than education for personal interest.

The United Nations designates literacy as a key area for all learners, and it named 2003 to 2012 the Literacy Decade (UNESCO Education 2003). Taking a similar approach, Britain promised £B1.5 to raise adult literacy and numeracy levels, beginning with a £M2 advertising campaign that aimed to raise the literacy skills of 750,000 adults by 2004 (Whittaker 2001). While the 2004 target was deemed met, 50% percent of those reaching it were 16 to 19 years of age (Appleby and Bathmaker 2006). More recently, the director of research and policy of the United Kingdom (UK) Commission for Employment and Skills (Gerritsen 2008) reported that the UK had set a target for 50% percent of its adult population to achieve one higher level of qualification than they presently had. Gerritsen estimated that this skill development would add between £B30 and £B50 to the UK’s gross domestic product (GDP).

The New Zealand context

The IALS survey (OECD 1997) provided compelling evidence of the crisis in foundation adult literacy within New Zealand society. The New Zealand results showed that:

- 40 percent (or approximately one million people) did not have the necessary skills to participate in a knowledge society;
- 18 percent had very low levels of literacy;
- Māori and Pacific island peoples were over-represented in those with low levels;
- Unemployed people and those working in the primary and manufacturing sectors were over-represented in the group with low levels; and

There was a relationship between low levels of education and low levels of literacy. (NZCER 2006, 4)

In response to this information, the New Zealand government developed a policy document (MOE 2001) that gave urgent priority to raising the level of adult literacy and called for sustained action over the next generation in this regard with the aim of moving the New Zealand economy forward. The 2004–2007 Tertiary Education Strategy also brought in policy and measures to raise basic skills for all adults so they could contribute to a knowledge society by increasing access to foundation education in a range of learning areas (NZCER 2006). However, these initiatives were developed in a situation where the lack of high-quality research on adult literacy, language and numeracy in New Zealand (Benseman 2006; MOE 2005) gave no clear direction on how best to raise adult basic skills achievement. Moreover, Benseman, Sutton, and Lander (2006) when investigating the extent and breadth of foundation learning in New Zealand, found no agreed list of foundation skills providers and thus realised the impracticality of undertaking a survey of providers.

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In 2006, Satherley, Lawes, and Sok (2008) undertook a survey, known as ALL, of adult literacy and life skills and compared their data with that of the 1996 IALS survey. They found that the percentage of the adult population with very low literacy skills had decreased over the 10-year period between the two surveys. However, the portion of the population underachieving was still of significant concern. For example, 13% remained well below the achievement benchmark in prose literacy, as did 14% relative to document literacy. The ALL survey also investigated participation rates in up-skilling. Over the 10-year period, there was no significant change in the participation rate in formal up-skilling in document literacy at the lower levels (Levels 1 and 2) and at the higher levels (Levels 4 and 5) of achievement.

Cultural considerations relative to literacy

Literacy is culturally bound. Families and communities play a critical place in literacy development. Successful literacy instruction builds on the knowledge and understandings that students bring to the learning environment from their diverse cultural and language backgrounds (Alton-Lee 2003; Au and Raphael 2000; Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph 2003). When partnerships are developed between family and the educator, instruction is more effective (Gee 1990). The notion of cultural capital holds that students' academic achievements are shaped by the family's and the school's social and cultural resources (Bourdieu and Passerson 1977).

Improving the literacy of low-literate parents has a positive impact on children's achievement (Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph 2003). Improved literacy among adults also has positive impacts on the literacy acquisition of the next generation. For example, Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph (2003) and Wylie (2005) found that improved literacy of mothers had a positive long-term effect on their children's achievement. These considerations, Benseman (2006) observed, are behind the New Zealand government's funding of not only the more traditional modes of literacy development for adults (such as evening and workplace-based courses) but also family-oriented adult literacy programmes. This funding, Benseman explains, is built on the premise that engaging parents and children together in literacy activities enhances the literacy levels of both and establishes learning communities around schools.

Culturally appropriate research methodology

According to Barton and Coley (1996), a critical feature of an inclusive society is listening to the voices of the oppressed. In this regard, numerous commentators (Bishop and Glynn 1999; Huffer 2004; Mahina 2004; Smith 1999) argue that using traditional European research methodology when conducting research related to Māori and Pasifika compromises the validity of the research findings. They suggest that this methodology often looks for the negative rather than providing information necessary to bring about needed change. Bishop and Glynn (1999) challenge the dominance of Western-based traditional individualistic research with Māori and promotes research methodologies that enable the realisation of self-determination and power sharing.

These commentators do not suggest that non-Māori and non-Pasifika not engage in research with Māori and Pasifika, but rather that they conduct their work in a manner commensurate with Māori and Pasifika world views. Bishop (1996), for example, recommends that non-Māori should be involved in Māori research. Leaving this work entirely to Māori, he says, abrogates the responsibility of non-Māori as Treaty of Waitangi³ partners. Thus, when undertaking cross-cultural research, researchers need to discuss and re-negotiate its content with the research participants and the community stakeholders, and they should not consider the research process complete unless they have gained permission from the community they are researching.

Pasifika researchers (see, for example, Anae et al. 2001) advocate the use of Pasifika research methodologies that are sensitive to contemporary Pacific contexts, advance Pacific issues and include the Pacific concepts of collective ownership. Explanations of Pasifika research methodology commonly use terms and metaphors that Pasifika peoples are familiar with. Koloto (2003), for example, in her study uses the term *kakala* (information) in relation to data-gathering processes. Pasifika researchers such as Mahina

³ The Treaty of Waitangi is a legal agreement concerning the governance of New Zealand. It was signed by Māori and by the European settlers of New Zealand in the 19th century.

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(2004), Manu'atu and Kepa (2002) and Vaoleti (2003) favour a methodology that they call *talanoa*. This qualitative, oral interactive approach to research allows for authenticity and cultural integrity. The methodology provides a culturally appropriate setting for the researcher and those researched to talk spontaneously about whatever arises. Conversation flows freely without the intrusion of a formal structure comprising predetermined questions, such as those set out in a questionnaire. This process helps reduce the gap between the researched and researchers and gives the researched shared ownership over the direction and focus of the discourse (Fa'afai, Parkhill, and Fletcher 2006).

According to Vaoleti (2003), non-Western groups of people who are the subject of research often lose power when (what he considers to be) Western methodologies are imposed on them. *Poto he anga* (consultation and accountability) is an important part of the process, and is apparent at the earliest stages of the research through the researchers inviting the participants to contribute to the research design. The offer may be declined, but it nonetheless demonstrates the commitment to inclusiveness. The ultimate aim of research on the Pacific region and its peoples, says Vaoleti, is to constructively address issues facing these peoples in a manner that strives to ensure everyone involved (researchers, researched and any other stakeholders) is inter-accountable and that the research activities reflect this premise and align with the agreed purpose for and anticipated outcomes of the research.

Penetito and Sanga (2002) provide support for Vaoleti's emphases when they argue that Māori and Pasifika need to be part of a research ethos that helps them to contribute and to be in the world as Māori and Pasifika peoples. Their research not only records conversations on some of the key concerns about research related to these cultures but also seeks to guide on how best to conduct research to advance education for Māori and Pasifika. Research should not "stand alone" but be integral to the ways of life and practice of the Pasifika community. It also should allow Pasifika control of the agenda and outcomes of that research. The *mana* (a Māori term for status, influence, power) of the research and the researched must be maintained, especially in terms of the research contributing to the development of those researched. And, more particularly, the researcher needs to be collaboratively involved with the researched in developing the research as a story or narrative in which the efforts of both are integral to the end product. As Bishop (1996) observes, Māori have strong preferences for narrative, as story historically was the common method of passing on knowledge. Narrative, Bishop continues, uncovers the many experiences and voices of the participants and allows the diversities of truth to be heard, while allowing power and control to reside within the domain of the research participants.

Positioning the researcher

The question of who should undertake this research and the appropriate research methodology to use in this regard can be problematic in tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although these institutions may have strong goals in promoting Māori and Pasifika peoples, they tend to have low percentages of Māori and Pasifika amongst their academic staff. This situation is particularly evident in the South Island of New Zealand where the proportions of Māori and Pasifika in the general population are lower than those in the rest of the country and where this research study took place.

These considerations had a direct bearing on the research documented in this article. As the developer for an adult foundation qualification, one of the writers of the course on improving literacy skills and a lecturer in literacy at the degree level, I was interested in understanding how best to support second-chance adult Māori and Pasifika and students entering tertiary study. Moreover, as a *palagi/pakeha*⁴ researcher, I considered it necessary to use a research methodology appropriate for Māori and Pasifika. This study therefore sought not only answers to my actual research question but also endeavoured to put into practice a Pasifika research methodology that I had previously used (see (Fa'afai, Parkhill, and Fletcher 2006; Fa'afai and Fletcher 2002)). The body of work surrounding this methodology considers that it is appropriate for research work involving Pasifika, and possibly involving Māori.

⁴ *Pakeha* is a Māori term for a non-Māori person and *palagi* is a Pasifika term for a non-Pasifika person.

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Method

In accordance with Pasifika research guidelines (see, for example, Anae et al. 2001; Tupuola 1993; Vaioleti 2003), Māori and Pasifika stakeholders agreed to support me (as a *palagi/pakeha* researcher) and my research by speaking for their cultural communities and ensuring cultural sensitivity. The Pasifika elder was a Tokelauan, a lecturer at the tertiary institution, the chairperson of one of the MOE's Pacific Island reference groups, a member of the Pacific Island Advisory Committee for the MOE, and a member of the Schools' Consultative Committee for the MOE. The Māori elder was from Kahungunu descent⁵ and a lecturer in Māori at the tertiary institution. I invited them to join the lunches that provided the venue for data collection, which they did. Together, we discussed key issues surrounding the proposed research methodology. This included the selection of the research topic, methodological approach (including sampling and instruments used to gather the data), analyzing the data, identifying themes and disseminating the research findings.

All students of Māori and Pasifika ethnicity attending morning courses in adult literacy at the college of education where I work were invited by letter and face-to-face request to participate in this research. Three students (all women) agreed to be involved. During the first semester, the participants were invited to lunch each week after attending lectures. The lunch was provided in the knowledge that sharing *kai*⁶ is an important part of Māori and Pasifika cultures.

Before commencing the research, I and a female research assistant (a *palagi/pakeha* interested in promoting education for Māori and Pasifika in her role as a provider of course information) and the participants discussed and agreed on several issues. The discussion included a focus on the research methodology of *talanoa*, and the participants agreed to use it. In accordance with this methodology, the participants would not be asked prepared questions. Instead, the sessions would be guided by whatever topic came up naturally through the participants telling their stories. The research assistant and I also discussed with the participants how they would like the data recorded. We decided with them that the assistant would take informal notes, and that these would be given to the participants so they could adapt them where they felt necessary. The participants did not want to be audio-taped. We told them that the purpose of the study was to find out how best to support Pasifika and Māori second-chance adult learners. To get the "talk going", I occasionally, in the early lunchtime sessions, asked very general questions, such as, "What has been happening?" and "How are things going?" As rapport developed between the research assistant, the participants and me over the lunchtime sessions, this "prompting" became no longer necessary.

We discussed confidentiality with the participants, and together agreed that the specific ethnicity of each participant would not be disclosed. This was partly because the students were from small communities where they might be identified given their preparedness to disclose personal details surrounding their lives. For the purpose of confidentiality, the women were given the European pseudonyms of Maria, Anna and Wendy. The participants chose to collectively be called the "island girls", as they all agreed that they came from islands of varying sizes, regardless of their differing ethnicities.

We also agreed that one of us would say a *karakia*⁷ at the beginning of each lunch session, which the participants elected to hold in a private, small room near their lecture room. They decided against using the institution's Pasifika room or the *whare*⁸ because other Māori and Pasifika students were often in there, and the participants wanted somewhere more discrete.

During the research process, the research assistant and I shared with the participants some of the emerging themes that we had identified from their stories. We invited them to make any changes to these

⁵ An *iwi* (tribe) from the North Island of New Zealand.

⁶ *Kai* is a Māori term for food.

⁷ A Māori term for prayer. It is customary for Māori and Pasifika peoples to say a prayer before sharing food.

⁸ The tertiary institution provides a Pasifika room for Pasifika students and a *whare* (a meeting place with rooms and kitchen attached) for Māori students to gather together and use for study, student mentoring, meetings and collegial support.

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themes and to suggest others. When I had finished drafting the stories, we decided that only two of the stories would be used. The rationale for this was that the third participant had missed some of the sessions due to personal issues and was relocating elsewhere in New Zealand. It would have been difficult to ensure her story received the same amount of collaboration as the stories of the other two participants. We then gave the drafted stories to the two remaining participants to read and to change as they saw fit. The changes they made were often to ensure that the details would be more anonymous. One of the participants wanted a number of changes, so she and I jointly worked through the script on the computer and refined her story.

During the final part of the research, a Māori elder, of Ngai Tahu descent,⁹ who also held a Māori leadership position in the MOE, joined the research process. As a key stakeholder who works to improve educational opportunities for Māori, she provided guidance in cultural appropriateness and insight in how the research could contribute to those researched (Mertens 1998; Penetito and Sanga 2002). The participants and the stakeholders were given the research writings prior to sharing *kai* at a joint lunch. The research participants, the Māori and Pasifika elders/stakeholders and I then collaboratively decided on our conclusions for the research. Once I had written these down, I gave them to the three stakeholders and the two research participants for further feedback. This provision for the participants to be co-creators with the researcher and the stakeholders in the research process, to identify real issues and speculate on solutions for them with minimal imposition, was done not only to empower the participants but also to help legitimate the findings and allow for the inter-accountability called for by Spoonley (1999) and Vaiotele (2003).

A limitation of the research is that its conclusions are drawn from the stories of two women only, one who identified herself as Māori and the other as Pasifika. However, this fact is also the strength of this project, as it gave time for researcher and participants to engage in a collaborative journey wherein the voices of the participants and the richness of their personal journey into tertiary study could be readily and validly uncovered. Another limitation of the research is that because I, a lecturer at the tertiary institution (but not in the courses the participants were undertaking), conducted the research, the findings cannot be viewed as unbiased. The power relationships and vested interests in the programme may have constrained the course participants and prevented open discussion. The data therefore need to be viewed with caution because of potential for bias, although I endeavoured to minimise this by emphasising to the students that we needed their honest and open comments.

Findings and discussion

The themes and conclusions were drawn collaboratively with the community elders, the researched and the researcher during the research writing process and during a lunchtime *fono/hui*¹⁰ convened specifically for this purpose. The main themes to emerge from the students' narratives were the following: the cultural capital and life experiences that the two students brought to their study; their experiences of moving from a rural island environment to an urban city environment; their experiences of undertaking courses in the basic skills qualification; their goals and motivation to undertake the courses; the atmosphere of the courses and support they received within them; what they saw as barriers to their study; and their identification of different cultural practices and expectations within the courses.

Narratives

1. The cultural capital and life experiences that the students brought to their learning

The prior schooling experiences of the two adult learners were unique to their own circumstances. Both shared information about their educational backgrounds.

I did all my schooling in [name of place], and finished when I was 16 years old. I had to do correspondence, as there was no high school there. We couldn't afford for me to

⁹ Ngai Tahu is an iwi (tribe) from the South Island of New Zealand.

¹⁰ *Fono* (Pasifika) and *hui* (Māori) are terms for a discussion, usually with a group of people.

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board at a school, so I had no choice but to do correspondence. This was done at the primary school, with the principal there to help. (Anna)

I have been a long time out of school. I wasn't educated in New Zealand so it's very different. I came to New Zealand in 1986. (Maria)

Both of the researched were combining parenting along with their own personal study. This meant they had to juggle their parenting and study commitments.

Until my youngest child went to school, I had been teacher-aiding on and off in a preschool. I had to give it up for the last four years because I needed to support my children. I have brought up my children on my own. I have had to learn how to deal with one of my children's behaviour, which has been a growing journey for me. (Anna)

2. Moving to a city

Maintaining their own cultural identity and language and that of their children was a strong consideration once the women had moved into a large city with a predominantly European culture. For Maria, for example, the desire to retain her first language and learn English raised important issues in respect of her family life and her engagement with the wider New Zealand community.

I say to my child that if you don't speak our Island language, you can't go to our Island. So he does speak our Island language at home. If I speak to him in our Island language, he must speak back in our Island language.

When I started work in New Zealand, it was also difficult, as I was used to speaking my own language all the time. It was good for my English, working with non-Islanders. I like reading in English. I go to the library and I read English magazines, which all improve my English. I feel comfortable with different cultures, and I am not ashamed to speak in front of English speakers.

For Anna, the move from a small community to city life had been a life-changing experience.

I come from a large family. I am not from [name of city where she now lives]. I was born on one of the Islands. It was quite scary moving from there to a city. I moved here about 20 years ago. The move from country to city life was scary. I was basically brought up by my grandparents. I have a very close extended family, and we always look after one another's children. In the olden days, in our islands, the firstborn went to the grandparents.

Maria also talked about her role relative to and relationship with her wider family, whom she was endeavouring to support. She said that their needs were another matter that she had to balance in her life. She was aware of the sacrifices some of her relatives had made to come to live in New Zealand, and this awareness added to the pressure she felt from relatives still back in her island who were seeking financial support from her.

Some of my relatives had to really downgrade their jobs when they came here. They had good jobs in their own country and then had to do things such as apple picking when they came here.

People from home [my Island] ring and say that they need money, for example to help school my brothers' and sisters' children, but they have partners and full-time jobs, whereas I have a child by myself and a part-time job, so I say, "You do it," to them.

This pressure to send money to her family was an issue that Maria frequently raised during our sessions. The conflict between the cultural expectation that Maria should support her family back in the island and her battle to survive financially in New Zealand as a single parent was an obvious source of ongoing anxiety for her.

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3. The experience of undertaking courses in the basic skills qualification

As the two students shared their experiences during their weeks of being a student, it was apparent that understanding what their lecturers were teaching was a particularly important issue for both of them.

If I don't understand in class, I sometimes ask the lecturer. Also we [the students in the classes] help each other and share with each other. It makes it easier when I talk to others and the lecturers. The lecturers are good in that they are very understandable in the way they speak. (Maria)

I take in what the lecturers are saying, and then I think, what did they say? I am doing the literacy course because I didn't know how I would cope with the written assignments. (Anna)

Both Anna and Maria said they gained confidence in their classes as the semester progressed.

I like all three of my courses. The literacy course is the one where we all come together. We have all been working together, the same crowd. I have to think more, think harder, but I enjoy it. It's good getting to know the others, share notes with one another and get all different ideas about things. (Anna)

I am finding the courses interesting. First of all, I was scared to speak in front of the class, in case I said the wrong words, but my sister told me that those pakeha just want to hear what you have to say. I have no problem talking to people of another culture when I am on my own, but when others are there or join the conversation, I stop. (Maria)

The women's comments suggested that lecturers who made connections to the students' lives made learning more meaningful. For example, lecturers who used humour and/or cultural connections helped Maria's learning.

The literacy teacher is great. He makes jokes, plays games and makes it more interesting. Another course is quite interesting because Māori carvings are all related to maths. (Maria)

4. Why the women enrolled in the courses

As the lunchtime sessions with the two women progressed, their motivation for undertaking the courses unfolded. Anna's aspirations were closely connected to her children and personal circumstances at different periods in her life. The following comments were recorded over several of our lunchtime sessions.

I used to go to polytech¹¹ and worked with children, elderly and the disabled for five months. I was going to be a teacher-aide and study, but never ended up going. I was on the benefit and didn't know that I could get assistance to do the course. I started a course a few years ago but the circumstances at that time ... I've always thought about the different paths we take, and it always ends up back where the kids are. Now I am getting assistance for the courses through WINZ.¹²

I have been working part-time at night for the past few years, but I was still on the benefit. This year I had a talk with my children to say that I want to go and study, so I can pick myself up too. So they have bucked their ideas up a bit. Teacher-aiding has

¹¹ A term commonly used in New Zealand to refer to polytechnic institutes. These provide tertiary training and qualifications in a range of employment areas.

¹² WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand) offers financial assistance for adult learners who meet set criteria.

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been an on/off thing for me, as my qualifications weren't high enough, so now I am doing something about it.

I am doing the courses because of my child's abilities. I went to my child's school to help out and do writing and reading with the children. I get a lot out of doing this. I want to use the certificate so I can become a teacher-aide.

I want to finish the certificate this year, then do the special needs course next year so I can get a job as a teacher-aide. It is my dream.

My social services case manager is very supportive of my goals. She is very supportive of me doing the certificate so I can become a teacher-aide next year. Doing it has opened a lot of doors for me.

Anna was proud that she was now in a position where she was better able to support her children's schooling.

The study has helped, as I can now help my children with their homework. For some reason I feel much better, that finally I can help them. What they are learning is what I am learning too.

Maria's aspirations for study to improve her literacy and life chances centred on her child. *It's really important to be able to help my child with his homework. I am doing this to help him, but also so that I have a further qualification. I am not involved in any Island communities or anything. I don't want to be involved, apart from get-togethers when I see lots of my Island people. I see others when I visit cousins. I go to church. I explained about the certificate to some people at church. They were interested. I needed a priest to sign a form for my child's school. A nun told me that they would be looking for a teacher-aide when I have finished the course.*

I don't have pressure from my families about studying. It is my thing, in my own time. My sisters keep ringing and ask me how I am going. I rang my sister, who is a teacher, to ask her for help with an assignment. Everyone, including my son, is happy with it.

5. Atmosphere and support within the courses

The classroom dynamics and relationships with other students that evolved during the semester impacted on both Maria and Anna.

My biggest fear when I first came was that I wouldn't know anyone and would they be friendly. I thought I would have to sit on my own, but everyone is very friendly, and they all say hello. Most probably some of the others felt like this too, because there are so many different cultures. It's so great because you meet so many people. It's great to make friends. (Maria)

On the first day I thought, "Oh my god!" because the class was full of young ones, but now I have realised that there are more mature students there. There are a lot of life experiences among the mature students, and they have a big influence in the classes. I have met lots of people who are in a similar situation to me. I am used to mixing with people from mixed cultures. (Anna)

As the semester progressed, both Maria and Anna gained confidence and self-esteem through their interactions with the other class members.

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The groups [the students in each course] are great because of the mixture of young and old students. We are not separate. It feels like we've all known each other for ages. There is lots of conversation. There are males also, which is good. (Maria)

Everyone is included in the same way. It has really helped with my self-esteem and confidence. It's good to get to know more people, and everyone gets along very well. The lecturers use simple English to explain things, which is good. (Maria)

6. Barriers to their study

As Maria and Anna became more at ease during the ongoing sessions with the researcher, barriers they were encountering to their study emerged. Work and personal commitments were ongoing constraints, and for Anna meant she could not make use of the free tutoring provided by the tertiary institution.

I did an assignment most of the weekend. We had to do it last week between the paper run and work, so it was a real rush. I would have liked to have written the assignment out again, but I didn't have time. At the moment, I have no time for the extra free tutoring.

I have given up my night job so I can concentrate on my studies. It seems funny being at home now and not racing off to work. I am doing three courses this semester. I want to do the Te Reo¹³ course but it's at night and I would have to get someone in to look after my family. I catch the bus to come here. Night classes are more of a hassle with having to get in a babysitter and travel by bus.

Maria was endeavouring to balance a high workload, personal study and caring for her son.

I am doing three courses this semester and three next semester. I work a three-day week (36 hours) or a four-day week (48 hours) with my 12-hour shift-work job. I alternate between the two. I like the three-day week, as it means that I have lots of time to spend with my son.

On Tuesdays, Mondays and Wednesdays, I have a one-hour sleep in the morning, then I can't sleep when I get home from my course lectures. I try to have a lie-down, but I can't sleep. On Sunday night I work a 12-hour shift. I have another job in the morning at a rest-home, then I go back to the other job with no sleep! It's quite physical work standing all the time and doing a lot of reaching. I spend 12 hours working on one machine. I like doing the shift work, as it means a three- or four-day week with the weekend off. This means that I spend more time with my boy. On Tuesdays I have to find someone to take him home to my sister's place. I was going to give up one job, but then we wouldn't be able to survive financially. For me, personally, I have no time for the free tutoring support. I know that there are free computing courses here, but I'd have to find the time!

7. Different cultural practices

Maria discussed some of the practices occurring in her classes that she considered did not fit in with her cultural expectations.

In one class, we did role-plays of good and bad listeners. In my culture it is rude to make eye contact the whole time someone is talking to you, whereas Westerners use eye contact as an indicator that they are paying attention, so my Island people look like they are not listening when they are!

There are other cultural differences too. We sit down immediately when we go somewhere whereas Westerners wait until someone says to have a seat. On my

¹³ Māori language.

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Island, we don't stand around and talk, we sit straight down. I was nervous when I first came here because I sat down straight away and thought, oh no, have I done the wrong thing?

Another difference is that if a person from my Island walks past or between people who are sitting down, they always say excuse me and bend to walk low. Walking lower is polite because you are making yourself less noticeable.

These cultural differences that became apparent to Maria during her study in a European-oriented environment provide insights for European lecturers into other cultural mores.

Collaboratively drawn conclusions

Maria's and Anna's stories confirm earlier findings, both anecdotal and published (see, for example, Dickie 2000; Fa'aoi and Fletcher 2002), that Māori and Pasifika women who are second-chance adult students do not necessarily undertake tertiary study for themselves. They come for their whānau and children, seeking to improve matters for them in particular and for Māori and Pasifika peoples in general. Vaioleti (2003) reinforces these findings in his belief that most Pasifika are part of a collective, interdependent system where most learning activities have the key purpose of cultural continuity.

Particular issues emerged from the two women's stories. For example, giving up a part-time job means less money coming in for the family. Maria's family could not have survived financially without her continuing to work very long hours of physical work and balancing this around lectures, study and family. Sleep was a luxury. The decisions and sacrifices made were traded off for the long-term benefits of completing a tertiary qualification. Anna's fragile balancing of work, money, study, sleep and family commitments is also evident in the findings of earlier research on barriers for Pasifika student-teachers (Dickie 2000; Fa'aoi, Parkhill, and Fletcher 2006; Mara and Tuhipa 1996).

Tertiary providers and lecturers need to understand the barriers to educational access that these conditions form for Māori and Pasifika and the implications of these barriers. To give a more detailed example of just one such barrier, attendance for Anna at an evening course required her to find childcare and use the local bus service. An added implication for Anna was the cost of childcare occasioned by her having to give up some of her part-time work to allow time for study.

Tertiary providers also need to recognise the need for more flexible provision so that the exigencies of everyday life can be met. These might include late arrival at lectures or late assignments. The reason given by the students may not tell the entire story. Family difficulties in the home may have a higher priority. Lecturers therefore should not have one hard and fast rule for all students. Certainly, the community elders consulted during this research believed that lecturers should visit students and their families whenever difficulties arise so that these can be jointly resolved.

While *mata'ofa* and *aroha* (Pasifika and Māori terms for care, love, passion) for students' wellbeing should encourage lecturers to put in this extra work, a more feasible means of achieving this goal might be in order, given the demands on lecturers' time within today's tertiary environment. The suggestion here is that tertiary providers employ a Pasifika person and a Māori person whose roles would include liaising with academic staff to share the positive happenings and the concerns encountered by Pasifika and Māori students. The liaison persons' role would include visiting students in their homes whenever concerns arise and providing feedback to academic staff on how the students could be supported. The role would also involve visiting Māori and Pasifika communities and their churches to discuss issues and seek the wisdom of the elders.

The women's stories in this article also highlight their passion to help and understand their children. The students' huge step into a different environment brought struggle and determination. Support and encouragement from their whānau helped ease the constraints of finding time to study and the family surviving financially. The women believed that their stories would show other Māori and Pasifika people that they too could successfully complete tertiary study.

The second part of this research was the exploring the feasibility, appropriateness and usefulness of a *palagil/pakeha* researching Pasifika and Māori peoples, using a research methodology that was culturally appropriate, and where Pasifika and Māori elders condoned and guided this research. The time it took to gather the data when using *talanoa* might be seen as a constraint of this methodology, but it was this time expenditure that showed the usefulness of *talanoa* in eliciting richness of data.

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Seeking advice and guidance throughout the research process with Pasifika and Māori elders provided opportunity for me to facilitate and co-create the research. The wisdom of the Pasifika and Māori elders aided the deconstruction of data. Nobody can be totally objective when undertaking research: even when endeavouring to put oneself in another person's shoes, there is still an essence of subjectivity from one's own upbringing and cultural background. This was evident when the elders, the researched and I gathered together to draw collaborative conclusions. Because of the elders' rich backgrounds with Pasifika and Māori, *talanoa* triggered for them other similar situations as they interpreted the data. This brought a depth to the interpretation of the data that I alone would not have been able to ascertain.

It does seem that *talanoa* may be a safer and better way of gathering and interpreting data from Pasifika and Māori people than traditional Western methods. It gives the researched and their elders ownership of the research. It allows the researched to develop trust in the researcher and the research process, as they are involved in co-constructing the research. Comments from the elders during the *talanoa* process indicated that they believed this methodology is useful in empowering their communities and informing non-Pasifika and non-Māori about Pasifika and Māori issues. Certainly, the trust and rapport that developed between researched and researcher over the several weeks of meetings for *talanoa* provided a key to beginning to understand the strength and courage of second-chance adult tertiary students as they journey through tertiary study.

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