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Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato



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## Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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## Community and family literacies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Critical analysis of current policies and practices

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### Introduction to Special Section

This special section on community and family literacy has arisen because we wanted to make a case to position it more positively in both education and the wider policy and public arenas. The neoliberal, compliance-driven, economic agenda appears to discount much of what actually matters to people in their everyday lives. We seek to redress this in the four articles for this issue.

Community literacy education has been trivialised by equating it with evening courses in exotic cookery or twilight golf. Yet by providing networks of reciprocated support and learning, community literacy education gives people a sense of belonging, a way into the community for those who live isolated lives, who are unable to find jobs or who are separated from their families. Most importantly, community literacy education addresses people's concerns in their everyday lives, such as navigating health care, understanding consumer rights, and dealing with regulatory agencies. It takes the perspective of learners as agentive, resourceful people, and it eschews the dominant institutional view that starts from negative images of people as deficient social and economic burdens.

The typical institutional view of families is that parents are to blame for children's school literacy problems, and that they pass on low literacy generationally, along with low incomes, problems of poverty, crime and poor health. Families are seen as needing to be fixed, to rid society of all its ills, starting with low literacy levels. Yet, the critical understanding of families achieved by such authors as Auerbach (2005) and Moll, Amanti, Neff & González (1992), has shown the richness of family literacy life. Policies that recognise families' strengths, as well as the challenges they face, enhance families as they interact with and contribute to their communities and the wider world. Such policies promote the vitality of the family as the essential foundation of communities and societies in which full and active participation in life can be experienced by everyone.

In this current era of diminishing government social safety nets, we see an urgent need for people to have a voice in society and to be able to build mutually supportive communities and families. Paying more than lip service to family and community wellbeing can reinforce all of society's wellbeing.

There are two overarching themes in the articles. The first is the capacity of community and family literacy education to create space for the kind of literacy learning that addresses the real concerns people have in their lives, so that they, their families and their communities may thrive. The second is the continuation of the struggle against authorities that many people experience in their efforts to express the knowledge and values that a meaningful life entails for them, their families and their communities.



Although family and community concerns are as multifaceted and complex as other spheres of literacy and numeracy education, we include four incisive articles that critically explore these issues and offer positive ways forward.

Anna Mosley is an international development practitioner who has undertaken postgraduate study and volunteer experience in adult literacy education. Anna's article deals with the challenges of centrally funded family and whānau literacy programmes as they grapple with aligning cultural and community literacy practices with central government requirements for functional testing regimes. Anna explores the role of national qualifications in shaping the choices available to the Solomon Group in the redesigning of Whānau Ara Mua. The exchange value of unit standards, recorded on participants' nationally collated learning record, is pitted against the use value of locally relevant content, which is not formally acknowledged. She finds that current assessment schemes fail to recognise and promote people's indigenous knowledges, but that there is potential to do so.

Āneta Rāwiri (Whanganui and Ngāpuhi), a pūkenga (researcher) at Te Wānanga o Raukawa, powerfully presents the dilemma confronting Māori in striving to ensure that the promises of *Te Tiriti o Aotearoa* are met in educational settings. Āneta first places Māori and indigenous peoples' aspirations and experiences of literacy into historical context. She brings us into the present day with her account of the Whanganui iwi and the contemporary endeavour of Te Wānanga o Raukawa, established by a confederation of three iwi, to interpret what literacy is and what it is for, in ways that reflect kaupapa tuku iho, ancestral values and philosophy. She remains optimistic that relationships with the state can be transformed so that Māori aspirations are fully realised.

Tajinder Kaur is a language and literacy tutor of former refugees for English Language Partners and a Masters student at the University of Waikato. Her research with a former Syrian refugee calls on literacy and language educators to recognise the determination and resourcefulness of refugees and their families. Tajinder's article reveals an adult learner and her family's deep engagement with challenging multilingual multiliteracies. The complex emotional, relational and cultural contexts of their everyday literacy practices attest to their active, ongoing learning. Tajinder shows not only the need to acknowledge former refugees' strengths, but also the importance of opportunities to participate in literacy and language learning that is relevant to people's lives.

Katrina Taupo, a researcher in the Business Development Team at Literacy Aotearoa National Office, describes three Literacy Aotearoa whānau literacy programmes tailored to the cultural and social lives of Māori individuals and their whānau. Labelled *Business as Unusual*, these programmes confront the dominant neoliberal economically-driven approach. They emphasise wellbeing outcomes in everyday life, cultural practices and values, which wrap around literacy and numeracy skills acquisition. In the Literacy Aotearoa programmes, learning goals are set and assessed collaboratively with individual students as well as through formal assessments. The Literacy Aotearoa programmes point to ways that community and cultural values can drive literacy and numeracy education rather than remain in the background.

Finally, we hope that these articles capture a counter discourse to the coercive ideologies of current tertiary education policies. Together, they make a powerful call for *people's* literacy and numeracy education.

Auebach, E. (1995). Deconstructing the discourse of strength in family literacy. *Journal Reading Behavior*, 27(4), 643–661.

Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 132–141.