

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

Unravelling Mysteries of  
The Great Learning  
Divide:  
Barriers to Learning

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Education in Adult Education

At Massey University, Palmerston North,  
New Zealand

Phillipa June Eagle-Ashmore  
2007

## Section A

## Abstract

This thesis was motivated by a personal determination to alter my own beliefs about what I, as a learner, was capable of achieving and, in the process, unravel some of the mysteries surrounding students who leave school with low, or no, educational attainment.

My own limited school achievements, and subsequent success as an adult learner, have led me to question the appropriateness and relevance of our formal learning and teaching systems, particularly at school, but also in the adult sector. By looking deeply into the human mechanisms of learning and other influential factors I began to understand why my school experience had been so inadequate and gained some insight into why it is that our school learning systems are destined to fail a great number of its students.

My investigation aimed to identify why some of us appear to fail to discover our learning potential whilst others around us seem to excel. How is it that so many young people (approximately 40%) leave their schooling without gaining even the most basic skills required to enable them to manage many of the critical applications of living? Is this a reflection of ability, or does this indicate something else? What blocks or barriers have these individuals met/faced? What limitations have been imposed or imagined? How can the educators support the kind of education that enables all children grow into complete and fulfilled adults able to contribute something (positive) to their society?

Looking at Adult Learning Theories what strikes me is how these theories seem so perfectly applicable across all learning and teaching situations. They are not 'rocket science', as the saying goes, but perfectly logical and reasonable assumptions about the needs, motivations and goals of the majority of learners. Why are they not more widely employed? Memories of my own secondary school learning suggest that these theories have not been a feature of our formal school systems. Had they been I believe some of us might have achieved different outcomes.

## Preface

Within the following pages is the culmination of thoughts, reflections, questions and ideas that have nagged at me for many years. The fact that this document has finally made it to print is no less than a miracle.

With myself as a case study I began my inquiry with the belief that school attainment, mine and others, was not necessarily reflective of our innate individual possibilities (potential). My inquiry was not established to prove or disprove my theory but rather to investigate the factors that may lead to some of us not reaching our educational aspirations at school.

When the journey began in 2004 I had no idea of the challenges ahead of me, and I don't mean the endless hours of reading and data review. Considering my topic it is highly appropriate that, in undertaking a study of "barriers" to learning and achievement, I should, during the creation of my thesis, have to meet and overcome a significant number of personal challenges or barriers – and I have.

## Acknowledgements

Regular interactions with my supervisors provided invaluable advice, feedback, support, and encouragement, without which this marathon may never have been concluded. My appreciation and gratitude to them both; Dr. Linda Leach who has been with me throughout this prolonged journey and helped me to maintain a tangible hold on my goals and Associate Professor Nick Zepke whose particular style of feedback has surprised, challenged and encouraged me in my endeavours. My learning has been enhanced by their input. The end result is testament to the power of self-belief and determination.

To my friend, Dianne, a special thank you for taking time out of your weekend to proof read some of my work.

# Table of Contents

## Section A

Abstract	(iii)
Preface and Acknowledgements	(iv)
Table of Contents	(v)
Glossary	(vi)

## Section B

Chapter One – Introduction	1
Chapter Two – Literary Review	18
Chapter Three – Methodology	40
Chapter Four – Data Analysis	53
Chapter Five –Discussing the Research Findings	72
Chapter Six – Conclusion and Recommendations	92

## Section C

Appendices	99
Bibliography	119

## Glossary

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Syndrome: abr. ADHD** is a common cause of learning difficulties in children. It is generally agreed among the scientific community that ADHD is a biological condition resulting from dysfunction in the brain.

**Decile Rating:** The Ministry of Education gives each secondary school a Decile rating between one and 10. This rating is based on census information regarding the socio-economic status of the community it operates in. Decile One schools are the 10% of schools with the highest level of enrolment from low socio-economic communities, whilst Decile 10 have the lowest number of such students.

**Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand: abr. DFNZ.** The Dyslexia Foundation of New Zealand is a registered Charitable Trust that was established in October 2006, to provide a voice for and services to all dyslexic people in NZ and those supporting them.

**Dyslexia:** Dyslexia is a spectrum of specific learning difficulties and is evident when accurate and/or fluent reading and writing skills, particularly phonological awareness, develop incompletely or with great difficulty. This may include difficulties with one or more of reading, writing, spelling, numeracy or musical notation. These difficulties are persistent despite access to learning opportunities that are effective and appropriate for most other children. (MOE, 2007, working definition)

**Education:** The Collins English Dictionary describes 'education' as "the act or process of acquiring knowledge, especially systematically during childhood and adolescence, the knowledge or training acquired by this process, the act or process of imparting knowledge, especially at school, college or university, the theory of teaching and learning, a particular kind of instruction (e.g. a university education)". (Collins, 1994) For the purposes of this research and the discussions within it, 'education' describes the formal process from which learning for life and employment is gained.

Achievement, in the context of education and learning, refers to the acquisition of recognised educational accomplishments; for example School Certificate or NCEA Level One, University Entrance or NCEA Level Two, Bursary or NCEA Level Three, National Certificate in Business Administration and Computing Level Three)

**Education Review Office: abr. ERO.** ERO reviews schools and early childhood education services every three years, and publishes national reports on current education practice.

**Evidence Based Practices:** According to MOE (2005) this means “a combination of research, which links actions and behaviours to students’ academic and social outcomes; data and information about student learning progress (from assessments, teacher observations, student work samples, and feedback from students families and whanau); and information about students and their lives outside school.” (MOE, 2005)

**Ministry of Education: abr. MOE.** The Ministry of Education works directly for the Minister and Associate Minister of Education, and the Minister and Associate Ministers for Tertiary Education. They are primarily involved in policy development and review.

**National Certificate in Educational Achievement: abr. NCEA.** NCEA is New Zealand's main national qualification for secondary school students and part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It has replaced School Certificate and University Entrance as secondary school qualifications.

**New Zealand Qualifications Authority: abr. NZQA.** The New Zealand Qualifications Authority is the National Body that co-ordinates qualifications in secondary schools and in post-school education and training.

**Tertiary Education Commission: abr. TEC.** TEC is the government agency responsible for administering funding to tertiary institutions on behalf of the Government.



## Section B

# Chapter One - Introduction

## Background

Whilst researching information for a study on 'Intelligence' I recall reading about the development of the early intelligence (IQ) tests; and how their main purpose was to identify those children who, the teachers believed, were most likely to succeed (academically), and, by default, those who were least likely to succeed in the (academic) school system. The assumption here was that IQ tests accurately measure (intellectual) ability.

Not surprisingly there was an element of the self-fulfilling prophecy whereby those who performed poorly in the IQ tests (for whatever reason) were given little help or encouragement from the teachers (to do anything educationally significant) and so fell out into the cavernous gap the system had created.

Thank goodness things have changed! Or, have they? The 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALs) Report indicated that a large number of New Zealanders lack the literacy and numeracy capabilities to, independently, manage many of the expectations of everyday life. From the analysis of the IALs test results it became clear that, amongst our New Zealand adult population, approximately 40% had left school with inadequate skills. Currently around 20% of young New Zealanders reportedly leave school with minimal or no educational qualifications. Approximately 12% of these are recorded as having achieved "little or no formal attainment". (MOE, 2005, Education Counts > Statistics: Schooling > School Leavers <http://educationcounts.edcentre.govt.nz/statistics/>)

Recent Ministry of Education Statistics tell us that around 25% of school leavers have gained no or low qualifications whilst at secondary school and many of these have markedly low levels of literacy. (Statistical Information about students leaving secondary schools during 2003, [www.minedu.govt.nz](http://www.minedu.govt.nz)) In 2003 15.3% of school leavers (8195 students) left with no qualifications, whilst a further 9.3% (4983 students) achieved only a few credits (14+) at Level 1. The same report reveals that a further

8.2% (4398 students) left school having achieved NCEA at Level 1 only. In 2005 and 2006 evidence suggests the low or non achievement figure has dropped slightly to around 18-20%.

Some educationalists might have us believe we are in the midst of a learning revolution where schools and teachers recognise and make due consideration of students' differing and very individual needs. These results do not assure us of this. A more individualised approach is one of the intended revisions to current policy. In July 2005 The Minister of Education said, in support of the 2005-2010 Schooling Strategy, that he believes "we can aspire to a schooling system which challenges and supports all students to achieve their full potential..." Two years into this new strategy I wonder, are we on the right track?

Standardised testing (particularly the old IQ tests) is reportedly out of fashion and there is agreement that every person has an equitable right to and opportunity for quality education opportunities. These statistics suggest that there are still a significant number of us for whom the traditional education system is not working. Are the new policies likely to positively impact on the lost 25% of 2003?

My own schooling could be described a 'traditional' in the Western European sense. Class placement at secondary school was determined by ones achievement in a series of standardised pre-entry tests. Classes were streamed from A (highest) to F (lowest). My class of 3B (as with 3A) was filled with bright-eyed individuals exuding an abundance of potential and the expectation of high academic achievement. I wonder how many fulfilled that expectation. The system may claim to have given them the best opportunities to do so, but I for one failed to meet those high expectations in many areas.

Why do some of us fail discover our potential whilst others around us seem to excel? How do so many (25- 30%) come out of their schooling without gaining even the most basic skills required to enable them to manage many of the critical applications of living? What blocks or barriers have these individuals met/faced? What limitations

have been imposed or imagined? How can we, the educators, trainers, teachers support the development of a true 'knowledge society' where all our children grow into complete and fulfilled adults able to contribute something (positive) to their society? What can we do differently to better support those for whom the system appears to be failing?

This is not about to evolve into a teacher-bashing session, yet, inevitably asking these questions leads us to search deeply into the education and training systems that we all experience for at least ten years of our lives, and possibly as many as fifteen or even twenty, and the principles and beliefs upon which those systems are based.

### My Story

"Why are you wasting your time on that study rubbish?" my husband enquired one day "What use will it be?" *"I am doing it because I now know I can!"* I replied. "Why don't you do something more useful like cooking my dinner?" he responded, dismissively. I felt another failure looming.

#### First Impressions:

In accordance with New Zealand's socially expected norm, at the age of five I was marched off to my first school. And marching I did, for two miles down the road to the local country school. Here I was initiated into the wonderful world of learning, a world with four specialist subjects; comparison, competition, assimilation and normalisation. I learned to read and to write. I learned that it is important to be the best. I learned to run and play sport. I learned that it is important to win. I learned to judge myself against others. I learned to wear labels.

My early memories of primary school are sketchy, but I do remember being very excited for my first school. I did enjoy the learning. I was extremely shy and remember, on my first day, being too frightened to ask permission to leave to go to the toilet. The discomfort I bore for the rest of that day was a damp reminder of my stupidity. At that age, for me, teacher's approval was paramount, and the teacher was pretty close to 'God'.

I believe I was mentally well equipped for reading and writing; my father's influence. I loved reading and writing and, apparently, performed at a reading age two years ahead of my actual age, progressing to Year 2 level within six months of starting school. By year 7 and 8 (then form one and two) reports reveal that I had settled to a more average performance overall, but continued to demonstrate strong ability in language.

#### Changing Impressions:

Changing schools may not impact seriously on the academic learning in the early years, but it certainly challenges one's social skills. By the time I was eleven I had attended four different schools. My parents were share-milkers; dairy farmers who contracted to manage another's farm and dairy herd and received a share of the profits. These contracts were normally short term, most frequently one or two seasons (years). I was lucky to spend four years at my third school and it was here that I won prizes at agricultural day and made two life-long friends. On reflection, my departure from this school marked a decline in my motivation and performance. But despite the moves, once I had overcome the initial first day or first week nervousness I relished most days I spent at each of my primary schools. In my country schools I had the same teacher for almost every subject and the same classmates. It made for continuity in learning. This could be a serious disadvantage if one developed a bad relationship with one's teacher, but my ingrained need to please probably ensured that never happened.

#### Second Impressions:

School days are supposed to be the best of our lives, but, from the age of thirteen, I hated them! I worked conscientiously, attended regularly and, for the most part, kept up with my work expectations. My school reports, whilst never 'bad' usually contained some comments indicating that teachers felt that my achievements did not accurately reflect my potential. I made a genuine attempt to make some sense of the copious quantity of notes and references presented by each of my teachers but struggled to see how it was in any way relevant to my future. Doing well at secondary school was always my goal, but in the end, 'successful' is not how I describe my secondary school years.

Amongst my most vivid school day memories are those times spent with friends, English lessons with Miss Newton, school musical productions, and those disgustingly unattractive 'bloomers' we had to wear for PE.

#### Parental Impressions:

I am aware of the powerful influence parental attitudes had on my behaviour and my achievements during my secondary school years. Both saw value in education and wanted us to do well. My father held high expectations for us, particularly for linguistic correctness, and for broad general knowledge. I constantly aspired to be good enough to receive his praise but rarely did. When I ventured to seek information from him I was frequently asked, "Don't you know that? What do they teach you at school?" His responses left me feeling deflated and stupid. Over time questions to my father ceased.

My mother was more encouraging, although, her confession that she too had never had much success at mathematics only supported my developing view that I had little hope in that subject! Her own memories of school were not entirely positive. My mother did show some interest in my work and generally appeared happy if she felt I was doing my best, but I was left with the clear impression that it was up to me to just get on with it.

#### Positive Impressions:

Secondary school was definitely a low point in my educational experience, but it was not all bad. Some of my favourite memories from secondary school are of my times in the school choir. We were fortunate to have an inspiring music teacher and choir master who produced some exceptional school performances. The benefits (social, personal and educational) gained from participating in these extraordinary events were immeasurable.

Music gave me a buzz; still does. I especially loved to sing. I was never going to be a Hayley Westenra but once produced my own unique rendition of House of the Rising

Sun to our entire school at morning assembly. This unexpected performance from one of their most unassuming students must have been a huge shock for my teachers, and peers. I recall that it was a particular source of amusement for my geography teacher who compared me to the then famous folk-rock singer, Janis Joplin. At the time I was not sure whether to be flattered or insulted; it briefly put me at the centre of attention. From the perspective of a fifteen year old it seemed that fame could be a guaranteed ticket to popularity and I was hoping for a bit of that.

#### Relevant Impressions:

When I reflect on my time in secondary school I recall an overall feeling of confusion. I wanted to do well but could not come to terms with the endless learning and memorising of information, much of which was of minimal or no interest to me at the time. I had no aspirations to be a scientist of any kind, yet it was compulsory to study at least one of Biology, Chemistry or Physics. If I had been able to choose I would have studied only English, French, Music and Drama, and perhaps another language. I was interested in learning German but I discovered that French and German were considered alternatives rather than choices. Music and Art also clashed on the timetable.

Somehow I never managed to find any real sense of meaning and purpose from anything at secondary school and by the fifth form (year 11) I was beginning to feel less than competent. Actually I considered myself a very 'average' student. A few years later, having completed a three year primary teacher training certificate, it was this deep seated image of mediocrity, coupled with an anxiety about failure that led me to decide against enrolling for a further year, as many of my associates did. I believed that I did not possess the capability to complete a Bachelor of Education degree; no-one explained to me that I had already completed some of the papers. University was only for the highly intelligent and academically capable and I had no reason to believe I belonged in that category.

#### Strong Impressions:

From an early age I appeared to have a natural aptitude for English and became quite an expert in the particulars of spelling and grammar. Creative writing too was an area

of achievement for me. It was also an area for escape from an increasing sense of being a failure. A natural writer and competent reader, I found English lessons enjoyable and rewarding. Music was another area of pleasure and I managed to achieve average results in French. I felt an affinity with things French and an interest that the teacher managed to hold, so I enjoyed those classes too. Unfortunately, success at secondary school was dependent on more than one or two subjects. There was also Geography, Biology, Science, and of course, the dreaded Mathematics to conquer!

#### Weak Impressions:

Mathematics was another thing altogether. Algebra had me totally beaten from the start and, when my third form (year 9) teacher was not able to adequately explain the mysteries of it I slowly faded into the background. With another 35 pupils to attend to I guess he cannot be held completely accountable for my mathematical ineptitudes, but the experience of repeated failure certainly reinforced my own quickly developing view that I was never going to master mathematics.

I entered the fourth form programmed for ultimate failure in mathematics. Along with two friends, both equally disheartened and wanting to focus on something more positive, we set up 'the failure challenge'. The challenge was to achieve the lowest possible marks in any test. The criteria for entry into this challenge included fully attempting every question to the best of our ability. The teacher simply accepted our proven ineptitude and largely ignored us for the rest of the year. Nothing was done to improve the quality or achievement of our time allocated to mathematics. No one seemed to care. Possibly they were overwhelmed – it was a large class. We amused ourselves quietly with various activities but few of them were mathematical.

#### Insurmountable Impressions:

Fifth form was School Certificate year, now NCEA level one. My greatest challenge was staying awake long enough to complete my endless mountain of homework. I was up at 6.30 every morning, left the house at 7.15, cycled twenty minutes to catch the bus, arriving at school at 8.30 a.m. The school day ended at 3.35, buses left 10 minutes later and at 4.30 I was on my bicycle again making my way home, mostly



uphill! It was a long and tiring day and I would far rather have gone out and helped my father with the animals than stayed in my room studying for a science test.

On reflection I think I was suffering a sort of depression for much of my fifth and sixth form years. There were so many subjects, so much to do and all of it involved copying endless notes and diagrams, learning masses of facts and figures, many of which I had little real understanding, in order to be able to regurgitate them in some meaningful order in an examination or test. Perhaps that was the critical factor, it all lacked meaning – for me. It became too hard; a struggle against perpetual tiredness and lack of focus. I closeted myself away in my form room most lunch times, doing what I loved – writing. I produced stories and poetry and held conversations with my then favourite teacher. She was a major ray of sunshine in an otherwise meaningless and exhausting routine.

Teachers were always hugely important to me and I consider myself fortunate to have had two very good ones – both of them English teachers. What made one teacher so special was her ability to really take an interest in each of us as individuals. She would always make time to listen. She also shared her own life, which made her a real human being, rather than a font of all knowledge. The other fostered my particular talent and interest in reading and language and lent me books from her personal collection. She was probably most influential in my choice to go ahead with my interview for teacher training.

#### Future Choices:

It was clear to me that both my parents considered schooling important and wanted me to do well, particularly in the academic side of it. I was more interested in the arts and fantasised about being an actress, or a writer. My mother made it clear that, in her view, acting was not a 'real' career option. She expressed her views emphatically and, probably because her approval was still important to me, I became a primary teacher. One interview, three years of study and one year classroom teaching and I received my Diploma. As I recall, in addition to my English teacher's encouragement, this career choice was prompted by the fact that several of my classmates and good friends were

going on to teachers college. Ironically, since Teachers College, I have lost touch with all of them.

### Third Impressions:

It was a very young and naive sixteen and a half year old who left secondary school to enter Teachers Training College. I was articulate, well presented and interviewed well. I was told I had done well to be accepted at such a young age, yet felt ashamed of my school achievements. I had achieved only two School Certificate passes, English and French, obtained Sixth Form Certificate in five subjects, but failed to achieve consistently enough to be accredited with University Entrance. I had struggled to prepare for the University Entrance examinations, finding them extremely stressful and failed to 'cut the mustard'.

At Teachers College I did well in my course work, especially English, yet failed my first end-of-year examinations and had to re-sit. I found it difficult to concentrate for long periods and struggled to organise my thoughts under the pressure of examination conditions; I actually expected to fail. I can recall sitting in one examination and breaking out into a cold sweat as I strained to recall the information I had attempted to cram into my exhausted brain the previous day.

Again, music became a major attraction. Our tutorials were usually quite formal but whenever I could I escaped to the music room and composed simple tunes. Most of our work was assessed in groups and as one who was not good at putting 'me' forward, I generally took a back seat, quietly offering ideas, but never taking the lead. I passed my music option, but achieved only a 'C'.

Meeting assignment deadlines too were often an insurmountable challenge; under the pressure of high expectations I found it difficult to transfer my thoughts to a logical and coherent written presentation. Frequently I scraped in at the last minute with something that was at best mediocre. I passed, but was rarely proud of my work. I always felt I should be able to do better but failed at the last post.

On reflection I believe the struggle was predominantly to do with confidence, or rather the lack of it. All my 'failures' were flavoured by an inherent lack of self-belief; I simply wasn't clever enough. My anxieties were ultimately my undoing. They interfered with my concentration so much that even an average achievement under examination conditions involved extreme mental and emotional conflict. The results only confirmed my beliefs about my ability.

#### The Burning Question:

What happened to transform the bright inquisitive five-year old into the hesitant and unconfident young adult who later emerged from secondary school? How did this struggling student with apparently average ability manage to later meet the requirements for Masters level study, and receive 'A' grade results for assignments?

#### Competing Impressions:

Right from the beginning, school was an intensely competitive environment. At primary school reading and writing groups were determined by (academic) 'ability', as assessed through Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs). These tests are still being used in New Zealand schools as a guide for teachers setting up groups of children for effective instruction. They provide an estimate of student ability and also provide a guide the teacher can use in selecting suitable instructional materials and exercises. Teachers can also convert Level Scores to an equivalent reading age level.

At secondary school our classes were streamed according to (tested) academic ability at the time we enrolled, 'A' being the highest stream. The focus was on the academic (science, math, physics, history, geography), rather than practical or business subjects (typing, book-keeping, home science). I was shocked when two of my classmates were removed from the 'B' to the 'E' stream class because they chose to study Book-keeping and typing rather than languages. The clear message was that such practical (technical) skills were held in lower esteem within the school system.

School reports included “place in class” as an indicator of success. Teachers frequently used other students work as benchmarks for the rest of us, which may have built the esteem of the owner of that work but often left me feeling inadequate.

On reflection, with a different approach and possibly in a less competitive and more individually focused environment I now believe I could have achieved much better results and even mastered the basic requirements for secondary school mathematics. At the time I interpreted my results as indicators of at the most very average competence overall and total incompetence in mathematics. From then forward anything mathematical filled me with trepidation. I was forced to face those fears head on at Teachers College and was proud and shocked at how easily I managed to do so.

#### Adult Impressions:

Reflecting on my adult learning experiences I have identified three things that have supported my achievements; developing good time management skills, being interested in the subject matter and being able to see the direct relevance of that learning to my life and my work. Ultimately end what has made a positive difference for me is people; those who believed in me enough to give me the opportunity. Low self opinion is persistently difficult to overcome but success in one area does open the door for success in other areas.

Twenty years later I found myself in a fulfilling job, not teaching, but still in education. I achieved my new position by merit of (assessed) ability. My interview took an entire day. It involved a series of grueling aptitude tests, report writing, statistical reckoning and behavioural questioning. Out of ten applicants I was one of two chosen. Apparently I passed the tests! I wanted the job desperately and I believed I could do it. I wonder, did it make a difference that I had visualised myself in the job?

With my new found success came new understanding of my potential. I looked back and wondered “why did I do so poorly at school?” Why was my ability so sadly unapparent throughout secondary school years? As a five year old I had been considered exceptional and thrived at school, as a fifteen year old I was suffering from

nervous eczema and headaches, having a great deal of difficulty concentrating on my studies and frequently struggling to find any real understanding of what I was doing and why.

#### Lasting Impressions:

Despite current 'success' I have carried a sense of disappointment and shame at my mediocre school achievements with me to this day. It is in part due to my desire to better understand what led to such an outcome accompanied by a determination to prove to myself that I could have been a better than 'average' student that have motivated me to carry on with my studies.

"Does failure at school necessarily mean failure at life?" Ruth Laugeson (2003) explores this question in a Sunday Star Times feature. Reading her report of the experiences of several prominent and apparently successful New Zealanders confirms for me that there are no simple answers. For example, Peter Johnston, now a university professor and expert in reading and literacy, the purpose of school was a mystery. Teachers' reports suggest Johnston put little effort into his work. Why did someone with so much ability fail to demonstrate his true potential at school?

There are many published examples of New Zealanders who have performed poorly at school and gone on to become successful. None that I have read has suggested that their success was easy to achieve, nor that success at school would *not* have aided or accelerated their progress. One time Prime Minister, Jenny Shipley is quoted as saying "had I had my time again I would have been more diligent." (Laugeson, 2003, np) There continues to be a significant number for whom time at school is largely unproductive and negative attitudes toward formal education prevail. I believe it is worthwhile exploring possible reasons for this.

## Thesis

Experience with a wide range of learners, learning situations and institutions over a number of years has led me to consider the existence of specific causal factors that have the potential to either block or enhance an individual's learning opportunities, to

promote or diminish their chance of achievement in an education and training system that claims to offer “equal opportunities for all New Zealanders”. From an educational provider’s perspective many of these will be exogenous factors, largely outside the control of a school or tertiary institution, however their impact is such that I believe they cannot be ignored if we are serious in our quest for equitable learning opportunities. Such issues must be acknowledged and managed with view to minimising their negative impact on learning outcomes.

Government legislation has required, since 1990, that school boards of trustees ‘identify, analyse and address *“barriers to learning”*. (Education Review Office, 1995, p4) The schools’ response to this legislative requirement is the subject of two reports completed by The New Zealand Education Review Office, over the period 1995-1996. The first hurdle was to develop an understanding of the concept ‘barriers to learning’; identify the barriers relevant to their learners, how might these barriers impact on students’ achievements and what the school might do to minimise or eliminate these barriers? Agreement on the interpretation of barriers was the first challenge to schools.

In July 2005 The Ministry of Education (MOE) published their new Schooling Strategy 2005-2010. In his forward the Minister of Education acknowledges that “as a nation we want each student to be well equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and sense of identity they need to give them the best chances in life.” (MOE, 2005, np) This view of education is reflected in the Tertiary Education Strategy 2007-2012, which promotes the development of “a broad and inclusive system that provides access to quality, relevant tertiary education for all.” (MOE, 2007, np) For both strategies the value of “effective teaching” is recognised as one of the critical factor to success.

### Capability

Entering into discussions about ‘ability’ and ‘potential’ as it relates to schooling and learning is tantamount to entering a minefield. It is not so much the term (ability, capability, aptitude or potential) but the assumption that anyone or any process can accurately assess the innate potential of an individual that is up for debate. The concept of unrealised potential or capability has some significance in my research; it was from the discovery that earlier perceptions of my own capability (with regard to

university study in particular) were erroneous that this project evolved. I have opted for the term 'capability', believing it to be less emotive than other terms. Capability in this sense is not only about current knowledge, abilities or performance but also about individual growth and potential. Capability is about what an individual can achieve given the motivation, tools and opportunity. Stephenson suggested, "Capability is a holistic concept, an integration of knowledge, skills and personal qualities used effectively and appropriately in unfamiliar as well as familiar situations." (Stephenson, 1997, p9-10)

Over the past ten or twelve years there has been an attempt to move our educational focus, particularly in the area of vocational learning, from pure skill and knowledge acquisition to developing *capability*. This change of thinking reflects an understanding that skills learned in school or work can be transferrable into other areas of our lives and between different jobs and workplaces. Through this thinking evolved the revolutionary idea that, rather than a university degree, what individuals most need in order to be prepared for the workforce is "confidence in their ability to master different working environments and to become more effective in them, the capability to develop their skills and knowledge on a regular and routine basis and the commitment to drive their learning forward". (Stephenson, 1997, p9-10) Current acceptance of this philosophy is reflected in The Tertiary Education Strategy where it states "the government recognises that a significant amount of learning occurs in families, communities and the workplace." (TEC, 2007, pp 4:3)

### My Research

Reflection upon my personal learning experiences, and the awareness that they are not unique, has inspired me to explore, and attempt to unravel, some mysteries of the great learning divide: the gap between ability (potential) and achievement.

Reading the Adult Literacy Strategy, *More than Words* (2001) I learned that, amongst our New Zealand adult population, as many as 40% of New Zealanders leave school with inadequate skills. The 1996 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALs) Report indicated that a large number lack the literacy and numeracy capabilities to, independently, manage many of the expectations of everyday life. Each year, around

20% of young New Zealanders leave school with minimal or no educational qualifications. Approximately 12% of these are recorded as having achieved “little or no formal attainment”. This research was driven by a desire to better understand what factors are most likely to be contributing to the low, or lack of, achievement of many (15-20%) school leavers. It follows that one should also be concerned at how this lack of achievement impacts on their future; how have early experiences influenced their attitude and approach to further learning opportunities as adult learners?

The results of the IAL Survey indicate approximately 40% of NZ adults have not achieved success through their schooling and have entered the community with limited skills in the foundational elements. This unavoidably has a flow down effect with their children missing out on support with school and homework, starting with not being read to as youngsters and often leading to disinterest and ultimately disengagement resulting in poor educational achievement. This is a serious issue and should be of concern to every New Zealander.

Over a period of almost seven years I facilitated vocational and educational learning opportunities for adults, who presented with no or low school achievements and usually had a low expectation of their abilities. Low educational achievement was one key entry criterion for these programmes. What struck me was how many of these students, although educationally unsuccessful thus far, presented with obvious (unrealised) potential. From my experiences teaching and working with these “second chance” adult learners, plus the recollections of my own educational journey, I came to make the following **assumptions**:

- Poor educational achievement is not determined by student ability and is often the result of social, emotional, family or other issues or influences. In other words, educational achievement does not always reflect capability or potential.
- Our educational systems, our learning and teaching processes, including curricula design, are themselves critical factors in the disengagement and ultimate non-achievement of some students.
- By creating a more flexible, accessible and responsive learning environment, as well as developing more contextually relevant curricula, educators can improve educational achievements for most low achieving students.



My research is founded upon the belief that, unless we can identify the specific nature of these barriers and how they impact on student learning it is unlikely we will be able to begin to effectively address the issues they present and large numbers of New Zealanders may unnecessarily be denied the equal opportunity for education that the Government policies promote but historically proves to be so difficult to attain.

This inquiry began by considering the following questions:

- What are some of the key factors that ultimately determine individual educational achievement (success)?
- To what degree does educational achievement reflect an individual's actual achievement potential, or capability?
- To what degree do our institutional learning systems and processes (appear to) support, or limit, individual educational performance and achievement? Specifically, which factors tend to support individual educational achievement and which factors tend to limit individual educational achievement?
- What positive/practical changes could be made to teaching environments, processes and methodologies in order to maximise the effectiveness of the education opportunities that are available?
  - How best can educators encourage and support New Zealanders to continue their education and training and develop the skills they will require to participate in and contribute to our future economy?
  - What changes could be made to systems and processes to enable more New Zealanders to participate (successfully) in education and training to higher levels?

### Research Questions

Believing that for many of us, educational achievement is not always a reflection of our actual capability and that, as a result of multiple extraneous factors, many of us fail to achieve our educational potential I set out to explore, through questionnaires and interviews the following:

What are some of the factors that lead to many of us failing to achieve the desired (positive) results at school, despite apparent capability?

**Barriers inside the system:** what barriers (inside or within the educational institution) seem to have contributed to some individuals not reaching their (educational) potential at school?

**Barriers outside the system:** what external factors (factors outside the educational institution) seem to have contributed to the apparent failure of some individuals to reach their educational potential?

**Positive/Supportive influences outside and inside:** What factors (internal and external) appear to have *supported* individuals to achieve their educational potential?

The main focus of this study is to investigate a number of factors, which may contribute to the apparent failure of many New Zealanders to achieve their potential at school, and in their adult years, and some consideration of how we may be able to alter the trends.