

Contradicting the stereotype:

Case studies of success despite literacy difficulties

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Workplace Learning Initiatives Pty Ltd



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Key messages

This study set out to investigate how successful people with limited literacy have achieved and sustained employability.

- ✧ Based on ten case histories, the study reveals that individuals achieve success in their lives, despite their literacy difficulties. However, the strategies adopted often involve some degree of deception, avoidance and dependence. It is not an easy path. Perseverance, networks and technologies emerge as key strategies used by these people, and resilience is identified as a significant personal attribute for success.
- ✧ The study reinforces the observation that schools and adult literacy education providers have a relatively narrow interpretation of what counts as success. The lives of the individuals represented in this study show that broader interpretations and multiple pathways to success are possible and needed. A focus on positive capabilities rather than perceived deficits will open up possibilities for learning, personal development and vocational success.

Executive summary

This project began with the observation that some individuals are able to succeed in life and employment, despite continuing difficulties with literacy. Such people are *contradicting the stereotype*, which is often painted of adults lacking literacy skills. This study identifies and explores the strategies and behaviour of ten individuals who agreed to share their life stories with us. These stories are presented in digital form on the accompanying CD-ROM, produced as part of this project.

It is hoped that this report and the digital stories will encourage adult literacy educators and policy-makers to re-think some of the assumptions and taken-for-granted 'truths' about what it means to experience difficulties with literacy, and what the consequences of such difficulties may be.

What is 'success'?

The project enabled us to explore notions of 'success', which proves to be a slippery concept. We considered a range of indicators to be relevant. These included economic independence and continuous employment, stable relationships and successful parenting. Other criteria, which some may find surprising for this group, included academic achievement, attainment in business and wealth generation. In various ways, the individuals whose stories are told in this project are living successful lives. However, their success has not been due to mastery over the written word. Perseverance, networks and technologies emerge as key strategies, and resilience is identified as a significant attribute for success.

What is 'il/literacy'?

Most practitioners working within the adult literacy field consciously avoid the term 'illiteracy'. However, the participants in this study self-identified as having severe and continuing difficulties with reading and writing. Some had been diagnosed as dyslexic and/or with learning disabilities.

The various labels (such as 'dyslexic' or 'learning-disabled') are shown to be double-edged. On the one hand, they may promote prejudicial judgements, serving to relegate people into pigeon holes in life by defining them in terms of their disability. On the other hand, such diagnoses can provide, in some cases, a platform for the development of 'alternative' strategies, building on capabilities and a positive orientation to life and learning. The label may serve to liberate and to empower. Having identified and accepted that there is a disability, new strategies and resources can be brought to bear to provide support for individuals. Such approaches can lift an intolerable burden of expectations regarding literacy learning. These issues are further discussed in the literature and the findings of the study.

This study also suggests the value of further exploring what we have termed 'para-literacy'. Despite their avowed difficulty with and resistance to literacy, virtually all of the participants in

the study used written texts, at least to some extent. In a sense, they were simultaneously rejecting and adopting literacy skills. Some theorists, embracing the notion of ‘multi-literacies’ might suggest that, in their own ways, these individuals are literate after all—and (in a limited sense) we could agree. Yet it seems inaccurate to use the term ‘literate’ for individuals who are consciously resisting and rejecting literacy as a strategy for success. For this stance we are proposing the term ‘para-literacy’.

We also note that, while resisting the need to read the written word, these successful individuals were very adept at ‘reading the world’ (Freire 1983). However, their accounts suggest that their strategies and interpretive skills are not legitimated by the world at large, and by educational institutions in particular.

The questions

The study set out to investigate how successful people with limited literacy have achieved and sustained employability. We were interested in how they developed resilience in the face of significant setbacks and whether their strategies are transferable to the contemporary and often fluid worlds of work and employment. We were also interested in whether literacy teaching had been of assistance, and what teaching approaches, interventions and resources have assisted in achieving sustainable employability.

Employability, resilience and transferability

In relation to questions on employability, resilience and transferability, the findings highlight the importance of:

- ✧ an individual’s sense of personal autonomy, self-direction and identity
- ✧ the ability of the individual to accept responsibility for his/her own life and learning
- ✧ the capacity for critical and independent thinking—which is not dependent upon literacy skills
- ✧ the role of family, friends, employers and others in providing strategic support to enable individuals with literacy difficulties to maintain self-esteem and develop positive strategies for learning and personal development. In many cases these relationships have sustained individuals in spite of the corrosive effects of their experiences in education
- ✧ the need for assistance to employers and educators to help them enable people with limited literacy to make contributions commensurate with their potential.

Literacy, teaching strategies and resources

In relation to questions on literacy, teaching strategies and other resources, the findings highlight the importance of:

- ✧ the relative and subjective nature of ‘literacy’—which takes different forms and has different meanings (and value) according to the lives people lead
- ✧ the relative importance of other (non-literacy) skills which might be characterised as ‘generic’ and/or employability skills
- ✧ the role of multiple intelligences (Gardner 1985, 2003), particularly those other than linguistic intelligence which provide ‘alternative’ strengths, strategies and pathways
- ✧ the value of appropriate technological aids, including digital technologies which enable individuals to function more independently (for example, speech recognition software).

Technological assistance can overcome many of the barriers, but the technology is not promoted as an option to employers, educators or people with literacy difficulties (as, for instance, it may be for people with more recognised disabilities). Some helpful technologies are also expensive and no assistance is available to defray the cost.

One of the significant findings of this study is its reinforcement of the observation that schools and adult education providers teach particular literacy/ies. Teachers' expectations of learners may be shaped within relatively narrow, scholastic interpretations of what counts as successful reading and writing. When these expectations are not met, for whatever reasons, it is often the learners (rather than the expectations) who are deemed to have failed. The lives of the individuals represented in this study show that broader interpretations and multiple pathways to success are possible.

The study also suggests the value of re-thinking assumptions about what is 'essential' or 'necessary', and asking whether, in some circumstances, there might be equally legitimate, but quite different ways to move forward.

Issues and implications

The study raises issues and implications for diverse groups with interests in adult literacy, vocational education and employment. These audiences include: adult literacy and vocational educators; academics, researchers and teacher educators; adults with literacy difficulties; school teachers; employment/careers advisors (the pathmakers); education policy-makers and employers/human resources personnel (the gatekeepers). The implications for each of these particular audiences are discussed in the report. However, taken as a whole, and in brief, the major issues and implications of the study are:

- ✧ Focusing on the positive, on capabilities (rather than perceived deficits), opens up possibilities for learning, personal development, and vocational success.
- ✧ While it is increasingly important, literacy is not the only criteria for personal, vocational or employment success and critical thinking; education and achievement are not dependent upon literacy (although it may help).
- ✧ Literacy takes many legitimate shapes and forms—the teacher's literacy is not the only one.
- ✧ People with minimal formal literacy may have exceptional skills (including entrepreneurialism and creative capacities), which may be hidden behind a veil of uncertainty and apprehension.
- ✧ There is value in identifying, developing and celebrating multiple forms of intelligence and capability within learners and recognising that the 'new basics' include developing diverse capacities for 'learning how to learn'. A key dimension of this is developing a positive sense of self as a learner—an identity, self-concept and self-confidence which enables robust learning and the capacity to rebound from setbacks.
- ✧ Employees not practising conventional or expected literacy skills are likely to conceal their non-compliance unless employment relationships are open and trusting.

The study also suggests the value of:

- ✧ recognising the strategic role of social, kinship, and other relationships within which the learner is embedded. Literacy is a social practice. Hence the value of others—friends, family, partner, workmates etc.—who can provide a web of support, both personal and practical, should not be ignored
- ✧ re-thinking and broadening the concept of 'disability' and 'disability/learning support services' to enable adults with literacy difficulties to access appropriate support services. This is particularly important in the context of initiatives to address lifelong learning, the retention of older workers and the needs of an ageing population

- ✧ helping learners in some instances to disconnect their sense of self-worth from literacy achievement, thus lifting the ‘weight’ from literacy, making it easier to bear and to learn
- ✧ recognising and legitimating ‘para-literacy’ skills which may help to build autonomy and independent learning
- ✧ recognising the importance of supportive technologies, including digital technologies, not only to facilitate literacy learning, but to provide tools which facilitate ‘alternative’ strategies (which may actually involve less reading and less writing in the conventional sense), but which will support the learners in their journeys towards their goals
- ✧ undertaking further research to illuminate the diverse para-literacies in action within workplace and educational settings, thereby providing more appropriate advice, resources and information to employers and educators to accommodate workers and learners who cannot easily decipher or produce text.

The experience of people with literacy difficulties who do not seek adult literacy programs is poorly understood, covert and unsupported. More work needs to be done to understand their needs and to assist employers and educators to maximise opportunities for these people.

Introduction

This study adopts an alternative stance on the question of adult literacy, in that it rejects the ‘deficit model’, which sees individuals lacking literacy skills as deficient (see also Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin [eds] 1994). The study set out to explore the ‘positively deviant’ (Sternin 2000) strategies and behaviour of the participants. It profiles individuals who still have literacy difficulties but have nonetheless achieved, and it investigates the balance of skills referred to by other researchers (for example, Falk & Millar 2002) who have concluded that literacy is important but not, in itself, important enough for success in life and work.

The study proceeds from the assumption that there may be something to gain from a focus on what these individuals *can* do and how they are living their lives, *despite* literacy difficulties. In this respect the research is informed by the concept of ‘appreciative enquiry’ (Cooperrider et al. 1999; Hall & Hammond 2003). Hall and Hammond argue that traditional ‘diagnostic’ approaches aim to define the problem, fix what’s broken, and focus on decay. By contrast, appreciative enquiry searches for solutions which already exist to some extent. It aims to amplify what is working and to focus on life-giving forces. It proceeds from the question: ‘What is working well around here?’ rather than the negative focus of ‘What problems are you having?’.

Our literature search indicated that this approach had not been adopted before in this field. In the light of the Blue Sky Project (ANTA 2002), we believed such research might generate fresh thinking in literacy matters.

The study was qualitative in nature, based upon a purposive sample of ten individuals who shared their life stories in face-to-face interviews.

Defining ‘success’

The study embraced a relatively simple definition of success based on the work of Montgomery (1987) who discusses concepts of success and motivation in some detail. He commences by debunking two common myths. The first is that success is about fame or prominence. The second is that success is about beating others—what he calls the ‘Barnum and Bailey death-or-glory theory of success’.

Montgomery suggests success should be possible for everyone, and it is about being ‘reasonably happy most of the time—and enjoying life—reasonable enjoyment most of the time’ (1987, p.1). Later he elaborates:

A real success is the person who performs at or close to the best of her or his ability, most of the time, in all of the important areas of his or her life. She or he will be as successful as his or her inherited potential, past experiences and present circumstances permit, in the careers of her or his choice, in intimate and social relationships, and in the recreations of his or her choice. She or he is making the realistic best of what he or she got in the lottery of life.

(Montgomery 1987, p.25)

Success in this instance is personally constructed and has an individual authorship. This view of success was adopted for this study. Hence success is the achievement of whatever the individual cites as meaningful and will vary from subject to subject.

Methodology

The methodology of the study is discussed in more detail on the accompanying CD-ROM. The study was qualitative in nature, based on descriptive case study methods. It was informed by precedents which recognised the value of narrative and autobiography in social, educational and literacy research (Bruner 1983, 1988; Willis 1994, 1998; Meek 1991; Waterhouse 1999, 2003).

The ten participants contributing to the study were identified through networking and purposive 'snowball' sampling (Caulley 1994), whereby one contact leads the researcher onto another. The participants' literacy difficulties and their capabilities were verified by the interviewing researcher and in several cases through contact with adult literacy practitioners. All participants were from native English speaking backgrounds. They were interviewed face to face, and the data audio-recorded, along with field notes and digital images. In each case, individuals were invited to bring to the interview pieces of personal memorabilia which symbolised for them some aspect of their success. These items provided a focus for story-telling and the construction of life narratives.

Research questions

The study set out to investigate the following questions:

- ✧ How have successful people with limited literacy achieved and sustained employability?
- ✧ How have such people developed resilience in the face of significant setbacks?
- ✧ Are these factors/strategies transferable to the contemporary work environment?
- ✧ Has literacy teaching been of assistance?
- ✧ What formal and informal teaching approaches, interventions and resources have assisted in achieving sustainable employability?

Literature review

The following literature review informed the data-gathering process and, in particular, the emergent analysis of the data. The review provides an overview of the literature according to the following themes:

- ✧ adult literacy background
- ✧ narrative and 'life course' analysis
- ✧ exploring notions of resilience.

Adult literacy background

The literacy discourse discusses the plight of adults with limited literacy in terms of the limitations for personal growth and career satisfaction, the resource loss and the cost to the community and the economy (Quelch 2000; Wickert 2004; Adult Learning Australia 2004; Kilpatrick & Millar 2004). Compounding these concerns are the vulnerabilities poor literacy creates in relation to safety and production quality (Black 2004). With the increased textualisation of the workplace (Waterhouse & Virgona 2004; Jackson 2000; Farrell 2001), the argument is made that those with limited literacy have a bleak future (Watson, Nicholson & Sharplin 2001). We also note that adult literacy classes are full of learners who have battled their limited literacy for many years, making small incremental steps towards their goal of literate independence. Griffin et al. (1997) report that 30% of their original sample was still enrolled in literacy classes five years after the longitudinal study began. Even after extended training, few arrive at a point where they declare themselves untroubled by their level of literacy.

And yet there are examples of people with limited literacy who demonstrate considerable success in sustaining employment, in changing jobs, in managing businesses, particularly small business, and in supporting and contributing to family and community life in a variety of ways. Anecdotally, it is common knowledge that there are prominent and highly successful people in commerce and business reputed to be dyslexic, illiterate or unschooled. Adult literacy teachers can also identify small but significant numbers of learners who are successful in their work endeavours, who are sufficiently entrepreneurial to maintain the pace of the commercial world, sufficiently resilient to withstand change, and who meet their own life goals.

One might ask, how can this be, if, as the public discourse suggests, such things are impossible for the functionally 'illiterate'?

One useful line of inquiry is suggested by the work of Falk and others (Falk, Golding & Balatti 2000; Falk & Kilpatrick 2000; Cox 1995; Kearns 2004) investigating the concept of social capital. Falk (2000) points out that some socially disadvantaged people seem unable to secure employment despite having followed the 'right' path.

These long-term unemployed people try to gain an education and qualifications that will act as a ticket to a job. They repeatedly follow the 'right' procedures, they access and

attempt to access courses that show them how to get jobs, and how to acquire skills for those jobs, only to have the doors shut, the courses gone or inaccessible, the jobs not there, the promises broken ... When they do hear of networks that include employed people, they find that those people did not, in recent times at least, get their jobs by joining the employment placement agency queues. (Falk 2000, p.49)

Falk points out that many of these disadvantaged people have 'fallen' for the policy line: 'that training—even lifelong learning, is likely to result in employment' (p.49). The truth, Falk suggests, is rather more complex and has much to do with the nature of social capital and social networks 'with their associated oil of trust' (p.49). Secondly, he suggests there has been a misconception of literacy as an entity rather than as a social process. Falk argues that 'basic literacy skills by themselves are simply not enough. What is needed are the social skills as well' (Falk 2000, p.59).

Such social skills, he argues, are essential for the application or the use of literacy. These findings are also consistent with the emerging body of literature on generic or 'employability' skills (Mulcahy & James 2000; Owen & Bound 2001; DeSeCo project 2002; Australian Council of Chamber and Industry & Business Council of Australia 2002; Virgona et al. 2003; NCVET 2003a, 2003b). This body of work highlights the significance of attitude and aptitude in relation to employment and employability, and the critical importance of identity construction and re-construction in the employment market.

This literature, embracing notions of human *and* social capital, provides a useful backdrop for the consideration of literacy and employability in this study. Such issues go to the heart of the first research question, noted earlier.

This study is also informed by the notions of *distributed literacy*, *distributed cognition* and *communities of practice*. Following models offered by Barton and Hamilton (1998) in their work on the literacies of communities, this project engaged co-workers, life partners and support people in discussion where possible. Where appropriate, researchers also spent time within the individual's work environment to establish an understanding of the coping strategies *in context*. Such strategies reflect our understandings of literacy as a situated social practice and the idea that knowledge and skills can be distributed and shared within a group of people. Hence individuals can achieve tasks they would not be capable of achieving alone, and there are important relationships and interdependencies involved.

Perkins (1993) also provides a precedent for such an approach. He contrasts a 'person-solo' perspective with the potential of a more comprehensive 'person-plus' analysis:

Most views of thinking and learning lean toward the person-solo, neglecting the ways in which people employ the surround (including other people) to support, to share, and undertake outright aspects of cognitive processing. In contrast, one can take a person-plus perspective on thinking and learning, treating the person-plus surround as one system, counting as part of the thinking what gets done or partly done in the surround, counting as learning traces left in the surround (assuming it stays accessible) as well as the person, and in general picking the lock of a person-solo view of thinking and learning.

(Perkins 1997, p.104)

Work by Lave and Wenger (1996) also highlights the significance of the 'community of practice' in ways that cause us to re-think what it means to learn and function effectively within particular settings. This study had its primary focus upon the individuals who chose to participate. However, in recognising that individuals do not operate in isolation, we considered the significance of the social, relational and community context, and the part it plays in fostering success (despite continuing frustrations with literacy).

Narrative and ‘life course’ analysis

Our aim was to encourage narrative approaches, enabling our participants to tell their stories so that we might better understand their ‘positively deviant’ practices, using an approach informed by Bruner (1994). The significance of research by Bruner and others is in their focus on biography and narrative.

Gotlib and Wheaton ([eds] 1997) discuss trajectories and turning points in the life course, with particular reference to the ways individuals respond to, and cope with, stress and adversity. In this study, bearing in mind the conventional wisdom about literacy, we might suppose that adults lacking literacy skills may be experiencing certain stress in their day-to-day lives.

The notion of a life trajectory might be likened, metaphorically, to that of a path, a lifeline or course. There is a sense of life being ‘on track’ and, at times, a sense that decisions, circumstances and events bring about a shift or change from the established trajectory.

A trajectory is the stable component of a direction toward a life destination and is characterized by a given probability of occurrence. A trajectory refers to the tendency to persistence in life course patterns. (Gotlib & Wheaton [eds] 1997, p.2)

A ‘turning point’ these researchers define as:

A change in direction in the life course, with respect to a previously established trajectory, that has the long-term impact of altering the probability of life destinations. (Gotlib & Wheaton [eds] 1997, p.5)

The ‘life course perspective’ and the concept of a life trajectory usefully informs the life stories revealed in this study. In Helen’s story, for instance, we see how the experience of independent overseas travel was transformative for her. Merriam and Clark (1991) adopt a related idea in their consideration of ‘lifelines’ which could be tracked and represented graphically as a means for further analysis and reflection. Their strategies bear similarities to the ‘life mapping’ process discussed by Gray and Ridden.

Gray and Ridden (1999) present the life stories, including life maps, of 14 individuals diagnosed with learning disabilities. They note in their introduction that very often such individuals are defined, by others in terms of their perceived disability rather than in terms of their capabilities:

Gender, age, ethnicity, religious persuasion, sexual orientation and even the possession of money are all overlooked, and the only determinant of identity of any strength or power is the label ‘disability’. ... [Their collection of life stories] attempts to accentuate the humanity of and the differences between ... people who seem to share little except the label of learning disability, and to suggest some ways in which the abuse of that label has led to an erosion of their identities and a restriction on their abilities to exercise choice. (Gray & Ridden 1999, pp.9–10).

The authors argue that the process of life mapping and constructing life stories can be a helpful, even liberating process, helping individuals to better understand themselves and their life journey. Our aim was to have individuals tell their own stories, with particular reference to literacy and other coping skills, effective strategies and ‘survival’ tactics. We hoped that telling their stories would be useful for the participants in this study. More importantly however, we believed that their stories might be useful for a much broader audience, including others with literacy difficulties and those living or working with them.

Such research approaches might be contrasted with more quantitative studies, such as surveys which may reveal (for instance) patterns of engagement, participation and completion in adult education, but be unable to illuminate the significance of that engagement or its meaning to the individuals involved. Rather than defining complex contextual (and individual) variables out of the field of study, narrative qualitative research is more likely to engage these factors as ‘grist to

the (research) mill'. The aim is to construct a rich narrative of the social practice or life experience, so that the researchers, and subsequent audiences, can gain a sense of what it was really like then and there.

Further precedents for such approaches may be found in the work of Bruner (1988, 1994), Albright (1994), Diamond (1997), Willis and Neville (1996), Willis (1998), Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) and Waterhouse (1999) which adopted both 'life mapping' and 'lifeline' processes to investigate the nature of experiential learning and adult literacy.

Exploring notions of resilience

A further key concept, and body of literature, informing this study is captured in the notion of *resilience*. Like the concept of literacy, the concept of resilience seems straightforward enough at an everyday, common sense level—yet it proves more elusive upon closer examination. The popular literature abounds with examples of extraordinary resilience demonstrated by individuals overcoming (seemingly) insurmountable odds. A few examples include:

- ✧ a female cyclist, who recovers from horrific injuries after being smashed by a lorry, to become an outstanding pilot (Shepherd 1994)
- ✧ another cyclist who faces down terminal cancer, to not only race again, but win the gruelling Tour de France five times (Armstrong & Jenkins 2002; Armstrong 2003)
- ✧ a blind man who learns rock climbing and subsequently climbs through the 'death zone' to the very top of the world, the summit of Mount Everest (Weißenmayer 2001)
- ✧ a political activist who persists through 27 years of imprisonment to emerge as the leader of his nation and an inspired humanist and statesman (Mandela 1995).

Such stories, and there are many others, inspire us with the potential of human beings and provide insights into seemingly exceptional individuals.

However, the notion of resilience also sits closer to home, and closer to the focus of this study. We might consider, for instance, the story of a country lad who leaves school 'without even learning the alphabet' and ends up as a self-made business man and proprietor of Australia's most successful bakery (O'Toole & Tarling 2000). O'Toole says of his school experience:

High school was so hard for me because I didn't have the basics. I learned nothing in primary school, and I mean nothing. I didn't even know where Australia was on the map.
(O'Toole & Tarling 2000, p.53)

What are the factors at work in such success, despite the self-acknowledged difficulty with literacy?

A further inspiring and thought-provoking example is provided by another contemporary Australian. At primary school David Pescud was repeatedly caned for 'refusing' to read.

At 14 his father drowned in front of him while trying to save David from a swollen river. By 16 he was suicidal. At 17 he was diagnosed with profound dyslexia ... [However] David went from being an illiterate 'failure' to managing several successful businesses. By 45 he had earned enough to retire and pursue his dream of sailing full time. (O'Neill 2003)

This however is not the end of Pescud's story. He has since established and dedicated himself to the organisation Sailors with disAbilities. In the 1998 Sydney-to-Hobart ocean-racing classic he skippered a crew which included a blind man, an amputee and a 12-year-old dyslexic boy. They survived the 'fatal storm' (Mundle 2000) which tragically claimed several other sailors' lives in that fateful race; they also won their category.

Pescud continues to struggle with the printed word. He now says of himself:

For me, it is too late, even though I sometimes get several calls a week from jokers trying to tell me they can cure me. My memory for whole words has increased over the years, but I will never be able to read as most people understand it. (O'Neill 2003, p.252)

Yet despite Pescud's continuing struggle 'in a sea of words', this sailor has, arguably, charted a successful course through life, and navigated it effectively.

There are lessons in such life stories. In the past the adult literacy movement has sought to learn from the lessons of 'successful' adults who have had literacy difficulties. Over 20 years ago the Australian Council for Adult Literacy invited two such individuals as key speakers for its national conference: successful actress Joan Brockenshire and union activist George Stewart (Australian Council for Adult Literacy 1982, pp.11–15). Both spoke to the conference of their difficulties with the written word. Yet their presence and their lives were testimony to resilience and success.

Researchers have sought to better understand what it is that enables some individuals to not only survive difficult circumstances, but, in some cases, go on to exceed what most people would consider to be reasonable expectations. They have sought to define the nature of resilience and its characteristics. Norman Garmezy, recognised by many as the founder of research on resilience, says, 'Resilience is manifest competence despite exposure to significant stressors ... you can't talk about resilience in the absence of stress' (Garmezy in Glantz & Johnson [eds] 1999, p.7).

Hence we may define resilience simply as the capacity to adapt subsequent to stressful life events. Deveson reminds us that the term 'resilience' comes from the Latin, *re-silire*, 'to spring back' (2003, p.24).

Garmezy argues that resilience is the result of a combination of factors, which include biological predispositions, as well as social and psychological factors. Resilience can be seen in social and family structures as well as in individuals. Hence family, social and organisational support structures can be important, acting as protective factors shielding and/or mitigating stress factors. Garmezy's reference to organisational supports is mirrored by other researchers. Leshner (in Glantz & Johnson [eds] 1999, p.2) refers to 'one of the cardinal tenets' of the field as a *systems approach* that incorporates a focus on the interaction of multiple factors that might contribute to or prevent resilience.

The complexity of the multiple variables involved, and the slipperiness of the resilience concept is also highlighted by Kaplan (1999). He highlights the need for more rigorous and comprehensive theory-building regarding human development and the complex relationships between environmental context, stressors and multiple outcomes. This argument is further strengthened by Tarter and Vanyukov (1999) re-visiting the validity of the resilience construct.

Glantz and Sloboda (in Glantz & Johnson [eds] 1999) also offer a re-conceptualisation of the resilience concept. They argue that it is a useful *descriptive* term, rather than an explanatory concept. Their stance also stresses the importance of *systemic* factors which combine, in complex ways to produce outcomes, both expected and unexpected. Like others, they stress the importance of considering the positive outcomes, which sometimes result for individuals facing or emerging from stressful situations. They note that (with the exception of the emerging literature on resilience) positive outcomes have largely been ignored, while negative outcomes have traditionally been the focus of academic investigation.

The focus on negatives, rather than positive possibilities, is decried by others in the field who see the need for a greater focus on the capabilities of individuals rather than *disabilities*. The argument is well illustrated by Deveson (2003) who writes eloquently and with critical insight about resilience and the human spirit. She notes that: 'Negativity fills the mind with doubt and makes resilience near impossible' (p.122). With multiple accounts of resilience in different

contexts and circumstances, she illustrates the qualities of resilience and explores the factors which enable and foster it on the one hand, or disable and destroy it on the other.

One illustration of the power of focusing on strengths is provided in the story of David, a man affected by a 'particularly virulent form of schizophrenia' (Deveson 2003, p.136). Deveson reports on how David's health and wellbeing were significantly altered.

A few years ago, at a regular half-yearly treatment meeting, one of his social workers was reporting on David's considerable deficits, when the psychiatrist said, 'I don't want to hear all that again. That's his illness, and we haven't been able to change that for years. Tell me about his strengths. We would do better to work with those'. (Deveson 2003, p.137)

The resulting change in strategy saw David engaging successfully with new interests and challenges, leading to a happier and more fulfilling life.

Mona (David's mother) says that once a conscious effort was put into developing her son's strengths, the turnabout in his behaviour and sense of wellbeing was dramatic'. (Deveson 2003, p.138).

Deveson's stories demonstrate resilience in the face of seemingly crushing circumstances. A key enabling factor is the continuing presence of a positive outlook and a focus on strengths and capabilities rather than on negatives. This focus on positives and capabilities, rather than disability was an informing principle in this study. Rejection of commonly accepted myths is part of the process. Citing research by Rockwell, Deveson outlines four persistent myths which disable people and undermine resilience. These are:

- ✧ the myth of predetermination, that people will never be able to escape the cycles of violence, poverty or failure which have haunted the lives of their parents;
- ✧ the myth of irreparable damage, which holds that some children can be so damaged by their experiences, they have no hope for the future;
- ✧ the myth of identity, which labels or dismisses people who are ill, or at risk ...
- ✧ the myth that ultimately it doesn't matter. (Deveson 2003, pp.128–29)

Deveson also refers to the importance of emotional maturity (p.62) or emotional intelligence which enables individuals to resist—or to spring back—in the face of challenges. Such emotional maturity is characterised by:

Self-esteem and self-confidence; the capacity to create and maintain friendships with peers and to gain the support of adults; a well founded sense of trust; a sense of purpose; a set of values and beliefs that guide responses to the world; and a feeling of having some kind of 'internal locus of control'. (Deveson 2003, pp.62–3)

Goleman (1996) has also written extensively on 'emotional intelligence'. He argues that the emotional response is quite capable of 'hijacking' the brain so that, at times, rational thinking and acting become impossible. He suggests that 'emotional intelligence' is a kind of 'master aptitude' (1996, p.80) which shapes confidence, self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, zeal and motivation, empathy and social deftness. As such, emotional intelligence is intrinsically linked to personal resilience.

Related work by Seligman (1990) is worth noting here. Seligman argues that, not only is optimism essential for a successful life, it can be learned and developed. Seligman's earlier work, as an experimental and clinical psychologist was on helplessness. He found that under certain conditions laboratory animals learned to be helpless. Shifting from a focus on helplessness, Seligman became increasingly interested in optimism—and pessimism—as 'explanatory styles'. The explanatory style, he argues, can have a profound effect upon an individual's life and wellbeing. An understanding of one's own style and habitual thinking can play a key role in sustaining optimism—and resilience.

Such self-knowledge and understanding is dependent upon what Gardner (1985) might call ‘intra-personal intelligence’. Gardner (1985), whose work informs that of Goleman, cited earlier, suggests that there are multiple intelligences of which the ‘personal intelligences’, intra- and inter-personal intelligence, form significant bands. Gardner now proposes eight intelligences in total, these include:

- ✧ linguistic
- ✧ musical
- ✧ logical-mathematical
- ✧ spatial
- ✧ bodily-kinesthetic
- ✧ personal intelligences—interpersonal and intrapersonal
- ✧ naturalistic (Gardner 1985, 2003).

An important aspect of Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences is that the various abilities he characterises as intelligences are relatively independent. That is, ability in one area does not necessarily infer ability in another. Conversely, weakness, underdevelopment or disability in one intelligence, does not necessarily carry over to other intelligences, a phenomena well illustrated by the participants in this study. Gardner’s multiple *frames of mind* offer another useful point of reference for our study.

The literatures on literacy as social practice, narrative method and life course analysis, resilience, and multiple intelligences provided a series of conceptual tools or lenses through which the data from the interviews could be viewed and analysed. Collectively, this body of literature was valuable for the insights it offered and the legitimacy it gave to taking a stance which contradicted the stereotypes of deficiency and dependence for those with limited literacy.

Findings

Synopsis: Stories of ten participants

This has been a somewhat unusual project for us, as researchers, because the principal product of the study is not necessarily this report. The heart of this research is reflected in the set of ten case studies which have been presented as a series of digital stories on the accompanying CD-ROM. Each story is unique, and even the digital presentations were able to capture only a sample of the richness of the lived experience so generously shared by our participants during the storytelling processes.

In distilling these stories even further here, into very brief textual representations, we are very mindful that the distinctive qualities of each story are substantially lost. We cannot reflect here the unique voice of each participant and their particular insights and contributions. The value in case study research rests upon the richness of the description and the insights provided. Hence we encourage readers to a consideration of the accompanying digital stories on the CD-ROM.

However, in their briefest form, the participants stories are here presented.

Ray's story: Triumph over unrelenting mishap and personal tragedy

Literacy is only one of the obstacles that stand in the way of Ray's determination to achieve success, particularly financial success. Ray is firm in his belief that he cannot master literacy but he demonstrates a wily business acumen and a capacity to overcome daunting setbacks. In the process, he has come to reappraise the values that have driven him and to redefine success. The lessons of a devastating tragedy in his life opened a new dimension in his personality. As a result, he learned to make space for a gentler self that could cherish and nurture alongside his immense capacity for hard work and money making.

Corrie's story: Unbridled intelligence tethered to an unerring drive to achieve

Corrie learned the rigours of hard work from his father who ruled over his family with an iron fist. Failure was abhorrent and when Corrie fell short at school, he strode into the work world determined to disconnect from any notion of failure. Before long he was running his own business. He started as a farm labourer and moved onto working on the roads in bridge building. When the company owner stepped aside, Corrie took command of the bridge building company and led it to unprecedented heights. Despite his poor literacy, he came to undertake sophisticated freeway contracts and invented equipment and processes to streamline the operations. Corrie does the work of an engineer, although his general literacy remains undeveloped.

Matthew's story: Academic and creative success in defiance of low literacy levels

Matthew understands his creative intelligence but has struggled to develop it because educational institutions (and to some extent employers) believe that the prerequisite for creativity is literacy. At one level he has proved them wrong. Matthew achieved a degree in graphic design using every 'para-literacy' (a concept described in detail later in this chapter) and support resource within his ambit to overcome the literacy hurdles. He has been very successful in his line of work and has set up his own business as a graphic artist, but he is still frustrated by his poor literacy and yearns to further expand his creative boundaries. He believes his options are limited without literacy and so he struggles on to build the skills.

Helen's story: Immense struggle and final triumph over the messages of schools and society

For most of her schooling years, Helen's teachers determined that she was stupid and beyond help, until the school succumbed to pressure and offered her the assistance of a scribe. Her battle to maintain her sense of self-worth was the theme of her childhood. With the support of her family, Helen built her capacity to learn and took the necessary risks in life to seek the goals she has set herself. She has now graduated from La Trobe University and has commenced a new degree course. Helen's progress has been assisted by voice recognition technology, the university's disabilities unit and her untiring parents. However, Helen's greatest achievement is her internal journey. She has arrived at a destination where she can claim her space in the world despite her learning disability.

James' story: From concealment and shame to a new world of poetry and creative language

James snaked his way through a devious course of jobs, always afraid of being exposed with his literacy deficiencies. Now, having sustained a serious back injury, job possibilities have narrowed. As a result, James has decided to confront and overcome his literacy difficulties. With his growing confidence, he has unlocked a new creativity and a world of words which excites him and holds new promise of a different way of life.

Margaret's story: Growing up with a recognised disability and securing work with a supportive employer

Margaret's disability was identified before she was born. Under the guidance of a medical specialist, Margaret's development was carefully monitored and encouraged. Her schooling, at a special school, was a positive experience and she entered the adulthood convinced of what she *could* do and her capacity to increase her repertoire. She now has permanent work caring for the disabled. The conversation with her employer, Jonie, demonstrates an enlightened, inclusive management model for employers to consider.

Melissa's story: Quiet, defiance nurtured by a strong scaffold of friendship and family support

Melissa's response to her academic shortcomings was to lie low and hide behind her friends. She was diagnosed with dyslexia in secondary school. The medics outlined a grim prognosis of a life of dependence. She was offered no intervention measures and abandoned formal schooling for the world of work at the age of 15. She has maintained employment ever since. She refused to believe her prognosis and has gradually taught herself to be independent. She now knows the

sense of triumph in overcoming her fears and attempting personal challenges. At the same time she is tempered by uncertainty and still protects herself from the public accusation of illiteracy.

John's story: A fighter who demands his place in the world and celebrates dyslexia

John's story is inspiring because of his single-handed combat with the world of education that attempted to exclude him, and his subsequent entrepreneurial success in the business and financial sector. In his book, *Dyslexia: How do we learn?*, John tells the story of his distressing childhood and how he overcame literacy hurdles as an adult. In his interview for this project he talks about the mind of the dyslexic and the unique capabilities they offer. However, in his view, dyslexia is poorly understood by educators, resulting in children who are alienated from learning and convinced of their ineptitude as worthwhile human beings.

Mick's story: A country kid climbing the career hierarchy as a concreter for the local government

Mick tells how his poor achievement at school led him into labouring work. He joined the council roadwork team in his 20s and moved up from labourer to his current position as ganger. He has attended literacy classes over the years but still has poor literacy skills. Nonetheless, he has achieved all the essential tickets and licences required at work, including that of workplace training and assessment. While there has been little call for literacy skills at work or at home, he muses on the way work is changing, and fears the growing demands that accompany the devolution of management responsibilities. It may be that they will force him back down the tree from whence he came.

Tim's story: A young man whose successful career has come to an end due to a severe back injury

Tim's family did not have high academic expectations of him as a child. They were a trade family and they expected him to have a similar career. Tim became a bricklayer and achieved awards during his apprenticeship. Driven by an ethic of hard work, he was a highly valued employee and a good problem-solver. However, a back injury brought this lifestyle to an end. Reluctantly he has had to put his mind to a different career. He feels he has no option but to develop his literacy skills. Tentatively he is finding that he can succeed, that reading can be enjoyable and that computers are useful tools for opening new avenues of knowledge.

Addressing the research questions

Question 1: How have successful people with limited literacy achieved and sustained employability?

All participants in this study have sustained employment throughout their working lives by choosing jobs that match their marketable skills and their levels of literacy. However, dealing with employability obstacles persists as an ongoing challenge for each of the individuals. The four common strategies described below have been used by all the participants with various levels of candour and transparency. They have each learned to:

- ✧ hide their literacy deficits by making excuses and withdrawing from situations that threaten exposure. This has been the primary strategy for Melissa, James and Ray

- ✧ call upon trusted support people to complete literacy tasks, for instance, by taking work home or purchasing literacy assistance through secretarial services. All participants have adopted such strategies to some extent, but particularly, Matthew, John, Melissa and Corrie
- ✧ use the literacy resources of the work team in the work environment to share literacy tasks and distribute the literacy responsibility, as Mick, Corrie and John have done
- ✧ address the problem directly by attending adult literacy classes, such as John, James and Tim have done.

However, only Margaret and Helen have adopted the following strategies:

- ✧ confronting authority and peers head on by calling upon the disability discourse and demanding that the world makes space for them
- ✧ making use of technological interventions such as voice-activated software.

Many of the characters in these profiles have perfected the art of ducking and weaving around literacy obstacles. Ray and James stand out as masters. However, this survival strategy carries a cost. This has been particularly so for James who left one job after another when he feared he was about to be exposed as having inadequate literacy. Ray chose to bluff his way through, slipping between the cracks and depending on his reputation as a competent and reliable worker. Melissa has depended upon her family and friends to assist her to slide past the hurdles. It is only Helen and Margaret who have consistently squared off against those who believe literacy is a necessary part of being a civilised, competent adult. They had demanded acceptance for who they are, without apology.

Most of the men in our study have sustained a plentiful livelihood built around their physical strength in jobs where the literacy demands have been minimal. Two, however, have been forced to change their life's direction because of severe back injuries. Both Tim and James have decided that literacy is the essential component in taking a new trajectory. Both have sought out adult literacy classes and experienced success in their literacy learning.

Others however, such as Mick and Corrie, have not faltered in their career progression. For Mick, work literacy was seen as the composite of team literacy, so that all members assist in form-filling, drafting and editing. There is a distributed literacy responsibility. The team knows that Mick has limitations in the literacy field, but other team members are in a similar position and they all depend upon members with higher literacy levels.

This interpretation of team work may not sit comfortably with all employers. John, however, is an employer who has identified teamwork as one of the most important ingredients of employee suitability. In his view, an open acceptance and exchange of skills is integral to the success of his business ventures, whether those skills be literacy, information technology or technical. However, most of the people in our sample have been shamed into withdrawing from teams. While, on the one hand, their development may profit most from open, trusting exchange of skills, most individuals and indeed workplaces are not at ease with the suggestion that the exchange of skills may include literacy. Margaret and her manager Jonie provided a working example of an environment that accepts work teams as a composite of a range of individual strengths and needs, including literacy. Jonie is an exception, but she offers an inspiring model of inclusive employment.

The most consistent generic skill that all participants exhibited has been their visual acuity and capacity for learning. Ray, James, Corrie, Mick and Tim have all depended on their powers of observation and analysis to learn new skills. Without recourse to texts, they have learned to drive complex construction equipment and workplace machinery. Ray and Corrie have excelled as repairers, adaptors and inventors of equipment using their powers of self-learning through observation and action.

John is convinced of the power of dyslexics to think outside the square and find solutions to problems that elude most literate individuals. John believes that dyslexia is a gift that allows a unique perspective on life. He would like to write another book, which he says, will be called *Thank God I am dyslexic*. Consistent with John's observation are those in the sample who display high levels of creativity. Matthew and Corrie are obvious examples, but John's entrepreneurial skills are also highly creative.

Forced upon their own resources, many of those in the sample have an intuitive understanding of what others require of them. They are highly proficient in reading the world and the needs of the workplace. Hence, Corrie, Tim, Ray and others are highly valued for their exceptional levels of skill. Many have excelled in developing networks based on reciprocity and a reputation of competence. This has assisted Corrie and Matthew to build their own businesses untethered to the limitations of job descriptions and employer notions of literacy.

Para-literacy skills

Perhaps ironically, some people might argue that most of the participants in this study—despite their avowed, and empirically confirmed, literacy difficulties—are actually making effective use of literacy strategies. When we talk, in the Freirean (Freire 1983, p.10) sense, of 'reading the world' as a precursor to reading the word, we suggest reading (and literacy) as a broadly defined process of interpretation and meaning-making. All of the participants in this study were 'reading' in this sense. Indeed in this sense, many demonstrated impressive acuity in their 'readings' of the world. Most participants also made at least occasional use of print. Some were also capable writers, although they rarely, if ever, picked up a pen or pencil. They 'wrote' using audiotape and/or digital technologies, including software programs that converted voice into text, or they created and negotiated texts with a scribe.

The concept of 'multi-literacies' (New London Group 1996; Lonsdale & McCurry 2004) opens up, multiplies and legitimates diverse understandings of literacy. Under a framework of multiple literacies an argument might be made that these individuals are 'literate' after all. That is, it might be argued that they are adopting and developing their own particular literacies (we might call them personal literacies, family literacies or micro-literacies), despite the individuals' rejections of 'literacy' per se.

Nevertheless, if we consider literacy in conventional terms, as most people understand it, as a process of creating meaning through the construction and interpretation of texts, then the participants in this study were deliberately avoiding and consciously rejecting literacy. However, we could argue their use of literacy is a type of para-literacy.

When we think of a 'para-professional' worker, we think of someone doing work which is not dissimilar to that of a professional, but usually without the same degree of authority and independence; a para-medical compared with a medical doctor, for instance. Other examples might be those of a law clerk working in the office of a solicitor, or a draughtsperson working for an architect. In such scenarios the para-professional often lacks the autonomy of the professional, although s/he may use many of the tools, understandings and strategies of the professional. This does not mean to imply, however, that the para-professional is entirely dependent. On the contrary, para-professionals often operate quite independently in their own fields of practice and (ironically) it may be that professionals would struggle to cope with the demands of the para-professional's work life. In some circumstances para-professionals may choose to become professionals—but their legitimate identity and continuing practice is not dependent upon such a shift.

We might think of the individuals participating in our study, those *contradicting the stereotype*, as para-literate rather than illiterate. Corrie could make his way through a tender document recognising key words and completing complex mathematical calculations. James and Melissa

could complete the warehouse paperwork responding to key words they kept on lists in their pockets. Margaret could complete care plan notes if given time to take work home.

However, despite their seeming use, at least to some extent, of 'literacy' tools and skills, they continue to run apart (parallel) from the mainstream literacy. Their para-literacy skills, like those of para-professionals, can become extremely sophisticated (even challenging those of 'full' professionals). However, such skills do not take them to quite the same place on the literacy map as those of other literacies. It may also be that their continuing use of their para-literacy skills serves to maintain the distance; they serve as a protective mechanism, just as a parapet does atop a wall.

We do not need to conceive of these para-literacy skills as deficient because they do not correspond precisely to those of the conventionally, or 'fully' literate (whatever that might be in these multi-literacy days). We might more usefully think of these skills as valuable and important, perhaps even as essential in maintaining a positive sense of self and capability. If such skills were better recognised, better understood and appreciated, they might be reinforced, developed and legitimated in ways to support learner autonomy, personal growth and employment pathways.

Question 2: How have such people developed resilience in the face of significant setbacks?

As noted earlier, the literature reveals the concept of resilience to be as slippery and problematic as the concept of literacy. However, the literature also offers potential frameworks for considering the factors which may facilitate or compromise resilience. These include family and significant others, notions of community, and so on. Also mentioned are the significance of spirituality and self-belief, and the explanatory style adopted by the individual (optimism versus pessimism etc.). This body of literature offers some 'alternative' perspectives to consider within the orthodox discourse of adult literacy studies.

Within our data, each person's story was decidedly different, but the features they held in common were unequivocal. Firstly, every story was intensely emotional and personal. No one told a story of steady, even, successive achievements towards an available goal. It was rather a faltering, lonely struggle down an uncertain path forged alone. It was an emotional journey with many setbacks. For each person the tussle has been primarily around their identity: were they as worthy as others? Dare they stand alongside others and command the same level of respect? The findings of this study are consistent with findings of earlier research (Grant 1986; Gribble 1983); namely, that English literacy difficulties for adults from native English speaking backgrounds generate emotional burdens that corrode confidence and positive assertiveness.

All have been beset by almost insurmountable twin challenges: social judgement and rejection on the one hand, and on the other, the practical literacy obstacles that have stood in the way of achieving their goals. For Helen, John, Margaret, Melissa and others, there have been people in the background supporting and encouraging. But at some point in the journey, each person has had to take personal ownership of the problem, which is, in itself, a burden that cannot be shared.

The essence of their success lies in their rejection of the deficit identity. All the participants have moved on to an acceptance of themselves as talented individuals who, at the same time, have a literacy difficulty. For some, particularly Helen, Ray and Margaret, that means accepting that they will circumvent literacy tasks or use assistance to deal with functions that demand literacy responses. They have been liberated from their deficit shackles by saying, as Helen did:

It is not me. It is a learning disability ... I'm not ashamed of who I am now and if they ask me to do something that I can't do, I'm prepared to say, 'Well I can't do that and this is why I can't do that and if you don't like that, well that's your problem, that's not my problem any more'.

Having stood with dignity in the shoes of illiteracy, individuals are emboldened to command respect and the rights of the literate world, which includes access to education, the development of skills through lifelong learning and meaningful employment. John, for instance, demanded his right to be a student in his outdoor education course because he had the necessary skills and knowledge, even if not the literacy. Having battered down the fence that imprisoned and diminished his talents, John envisaged the limitations he experienced as his own responsibility. As he wrote in his book:

We all have comfort levels which allow us to expand and grow to the boundaries of our limitations. But if the walls of your comfort levels were broken down, there would be no limit to your ability to achieve and experience ... Often we make our own boundaries.
(O'Shea & Dalton 1994, p.38)

John is speaking to those with similar problems to his own, in recognition that few people will make space for them. He suggests those with literacy difficulties need to confront their own problems and elbow their way into those places where they need to be.

Participants in this study have managed their employability by managing themselves and their own identity. They have not withdrawn and accepted a life of dependency that awaits those without resilience. Each person has been prepared for resilience in a different way. Lane (1979) in his study of the childhood of 16 prominent Australians, divides his population into two types:

... risk-taking creators (or as Kerry Packer puts it, the builders of Jumbos) and the equally brilliant but more passive people who have made their mark in a 'public service' type of occupation.
(Lane 1979, p. 191)

The latter have been nurtured and supported while the risk-takers have been forced on to their own devices and have had to turn adversity into opportunity. In our sample we see both types represented, but at some level, all successful people with learning disabilities are risk-takers, otherwise they would retreat from employment, learning and interaction.

Question 3: Are these factors/strategies transferable to the contemporary work environment?

The case study participants have strongly developed skills in visual learning, creativity, problem-solving and, for some, organisational management. These capacities have been acutely tied to their personal survival, both in work and in the community. Transfer of these skills has been well practised, as individuals rely upon their receptive capacity to absorb information and to organise it in a useable form without paper records. Recreational, backyard workshed, social contexts and workplaces were all points of skills transfer.

However, many participants referred to the constraints they experienced at work that limited their learning and the transfer of skills. Fearing that they may be exposed and humiliated, participation in many work activities was tentative and they were often unwilling to draw attention to themselves. They have taken jobs that are often repetitive and unchallenging in order to accommodate their literacy level. Melissa talked about experiencing boredom at work but at the same time not volunteering for new work challenges fearing they would involve literacy. Tim withdrew from a training program when it became apparent that he may have to write in front of the group. Helen talked about being a loner, having learned to survive throughout her childhood and youth with few friends. Teamwork has not been a skill that many have been willing to risk.

In contrast, self-reliance has been a quality that all had developed. A strategy of concealment and self-preservation against negative judgement was a muscle that had been regularly flexed in the workplace. As a result, autonomy at work has been a work style that many have preferred. Most of the participants in the project saw themselves as having an unusual learning style where they needed to observe carefully and experiment to master new equipment or processes. They have

sought space and time to do this, and sometimes work environments are not sympathetic to this style of learning.

Many people in the sample had experienced workplace cultures that were punitive and discriminative. In some instances they may have been jumping at shadows. Participants feared that supervisors and peers would react in a punitive way if their poor literacy was exposed, and they were unwilling to test their hypothesis. A small, owner-operated business where they would be liberated from the need to conceal and be defensive has been the goal of almost all participants. Matthew, John, Corrie and Ray achieved this very successfully.

However, the other participants have now found a work or study environment that accommodates their learning style and allows them to transfer their skills. Melissa is the only one who still conceals her literacy from her co-workers. She is also the one most dissatisfied by her work and who often shies away from learning.

So are their success strategies transferable to the 'new' world of work? Well, yes and no. Deception and concealment do work, some of the time, but they are also high-cost personal strategies with some undesirable consequences: loss of intimacy, isolation, living in stress and fear of exposure. Exposure and even confrontation also 'works', some of the time, but it too can have some undesirable after-effects, unpredictable responses, negativity, judgemental reactions, rejection.

It could be argued that a pre-condition for success for our participants has been the etching-out of a work and living environment that allows them space to be who they are. In such environments they have been able to transfer their talent and to redraft it to the application at hand. It is noteworthy that those who have been most creative in their work life have owned their own businesses.

Question 4: Has literacy teaching been of assistance?

Literacy begins in early life, in the home and at school, when the child's relationship to print is most formative. Most people in this study, particularly the older members, were sidelined when they failed to respond positively to the literacy teaching approaches offered by teachers in class. Corrie, Mick, Ray and James were quickly left behind and for them, school ranged from an experience that was not enjoyable to one that was distressing. They reported that teachers tended to ignore them as they slipped further behind. While failure in the classroom was an everyday occurrence, they spoke of other children in their classes whose progress was poor so they did not feel alone in their failure. In fact some wore it as a badge of honour. However, for these people, the school had no solutions and offered no interventions. The school's response to their poor performance was to advise the parents that their children should leave as soon as they reached the legal age.

The younger members of the group, Tim, Melissa and Matthew, had a slightly different experience of school. They were identified as having problems at an early age, and some attention was paid to naming the problem. A shift in pedagogical thinking marked this group as different from older members of the sample. It appears that teachers took a more holistic perspective, taking into account the social, emotional and educational development of their learners. Teachers stressed their successes in other curriculum areas and explained that their literacy difficulty may resolve itself in time. For some, the negativity of their classroom experience was balanced by positive achievement on the sports field or in the trades workshop where they were 'good with their hands'. While their school experiences were not highly positive, these three did not experience the severe distress of the two who attended private schools, Helen and John. These two talked of trauma, humiliation and misery at school. They were identified at an early age as having problems. The consequence was a barrage of tests and intervention measures. Physical and intelligence tests, special assistance and technical remedies such as special glasses, cast an

unnerving spotlight on them which set them apart from their peers and reinforced a sense of alienation. John writes:

Being a rebel or a disturbance in class became a necessity for me. In junior school my nickname was 'Trouble' and later it changed to 'Brains'. At times I felt so inadequate that if I didn't do something, I thought I might explode ... I had built up such a negative feeling about myself that before long the most basic things became impossible. I was catching a disease more dangerous than dyslexia; I was becoming scared to learn. I had very low self-esteem and a mental picture that I was useless. (O'Shea & Dalton 1994, p.11)

John reacted by becoming a 'trouble maker' in class, as did many of the males in the sample. The other option was that of the class clown. This was a role that provided social capital if not academic capital. The girls however chose to retreat wherever they could find camouflage. John talks about the 'flight or fight' response. Most of our sample shows evidence of both these reactions at times.

There was only one person who reported having a very positive schooling experience. That was Margaret, who went to a special school and for whom each step along the learning path was greeted with joy. Margaret's story is a very positive story of achievement. She is able to name her skills and celebrates them in a very conscious way.

Having moved into adulthood, many in our sample have found that adult literacy programs have not assisted them sufficiently to persist in the courses they offer. Helen, Ray and Margaret in particular believe that fluency in conventional literacy is not available to them. They have therefore sought other solutions. Corrie, Mick and Melissa have had a taste of adult literacy classes, but have not persisted.

Other individuals have found that literacy classes have performed an important function both in acquiring necessary skills and in linking literacy learners together. It is common for adults with literacy difficulties in our community, particularly those from English speaking families, to believe they are the only ones with the condition. Finding other like-minded individuals has been a great homecoming for some. Realising that others have this difficulty allows some to reframe their experiences and form a positive identity. The support and encouragement of teachers has been very important, along with the practical techniques for their growth in literacy. James and John have benefited particularly from these programs.

A recent project which bears on this issue is that by Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) investigating the *pedagogy* of generic skills in adult and community education (ACE). A significant finding of this study is the emphasis it places on the pedagogical *relationships* and *processes* which facilitate literacy learning and the development of generic/employability skills in adult education settings. Hence we may make a distinction between the value of 'literacy' per se and the importance of good teaching and the relationships, personal capacities and 'identity resources' (Falk & Balatti 2003) developed through a strong and effective teaching-learning dynamic.

Question 5: What formal and informal teaching approaches, interventions and resources have assisted in achieving sustainable employability?

People with reading and writing limitations have, on the whole, been set outside the disability discourse. While most universities and colleges acknowledge dyslexia as a learning disability, the thought of generally naming people with literacy difficulties as 'disabled' within the community is an anathema to most adult educators—and this is not what we are advocating. However, during our project discussions we likened the circumstances of some of our participants to those of individuals with physical disabilities who were nevertheless still expected to climb stairs when a ramp could be provided. The ramp not only assists the physically disabled, but a wide range of other people as well, the visually impaired and children, for instance. Its provision enhances the

access for all. Within the literacy field the spirit of this strategy is reflected in the ‘plain English’ movement which aims to make written communication easier for everyone. Another example is in the widespread use of graphic language in signs and symbols.

However, the findings of this study suggest that this approach could be taken further. We have seen that at least some who have claimed ‘disability’ status have sought assistance rather than remediation. That is to say, they have determined that they can not and will not learn to read and write in the way ‘society’ seems to expect. Every confrontation with print reinforces the failure they have experienced in the past and their best efforts produce no progress. They are (understandably) unwilling to continue down this path.

The adult and community education and adult literacy and basic education sectors profess pedagogical approaches which are learner-centred. This is borne out by those who flourish in adult literacy programs, including people such as James, John and Tim. However, this study also reveals learners who are not successful in developing their literacy and who are seeking other solutions to realise their goals. Their perception is that the resources and programs available are about improving reading and writing (which they cannot do). Their stories seem to reflect a singular framing of the problem and those who do not fit the frame are left to find their own way through the maze as best they can.

For some, technology has offered partial solutions. Speech recognition software has allowed people to write using computers. Print recognition software ‘reads’ texts for them on the computer. However, most participants in this study, as well as the adult literacy and basic education teachers we encountered had little or no knowledge of these alternatives.

Virtual communities have also established networks of people with similar literacy problems. These networks have assisted in breaking down the isolation which appears to be endemic to the condition. They also assist in sharing new technological advancements.

Most people in the project sample were very isolated, believing they were shamefully different from people around them. Their need to protect themselves from exposure led to situations where they felt forced at times to withdraw and/or deceive. The community at large is very punitive towards people who do not read and write their native tongue. They are presumed to be ignorant, stupid and sometimes untrustworthy. The tragic irony is that some of the strategies individuals feel compelled to adopt may tend to reinforce some of these stereotypes and prejudices.

Other disabled groups have had the benefit of community education programs that are slowly changing attitudes towards them. This is not the case for the print-disabled. Community attitudes need to be broadened to recognise the other intelligences that are important in successful employment and to embrace the contribution these people can make. A redefining of disability could release government funds to offset the cost of the supportive technologies available and to support employment incentives.

Some employers have expressed a desire to assist employees and to create a more inclusive workplace. Jonie outlaid the significant cost of a professional assessment. The assessment offered general recommendations but Jonie found that there are few resources she could call upon to assist in translating the recommendations into the specifics of the workplace.

Issues and implications

The study raises issues and implications for diverse groups with interests in adult literacy, vocational education and employment. In brief, some of the key issues for different constituencies are noted below.

For adult literacy and vocational educators

For adult literacy and vocational educators, the study suggests that a focus on the positive, on capabilities, rather than perceived deficits, opens up possibilities for learning, personal development, and vocational success. In a finding perhaps counter-intuitive for many adult literacy practitioners, the study suggests the value of helping learners *disconnect* their sense of self-worth from literacy achievement—lifting the ‘weight’ from literacy may make it easier to bear, and to learn.

With this finding in mind, it is important for adult educators and literacy practitioners to remember that, while important, literacy isn’t everything: critical thinking, education and achievement are not dependent upon literacy (although it may help).

These stories also highlight the importance of the alternative strategies, the personal para-literacy skills that individuals use. These skills enable them to build autonomy and independent learning. Yet they have not always been recognised and not legitimated. Perhaps the spectre of ‘cheating’ still haunts the adult literacy field—for learners and teachers alike

Following on from the above point, the study also highlights the strategic role of social, kinship, and other relationships within which the learner is embedded. Since literacy is a social practice, an over-emphasis on entirely independent, autonomous reading and writing may alienate the learner from essential support structures and be counter-productive to the desired learning.

Finally, for adult educators and literacy practitioners, the study suggests the value of renewed attention to the contribution of technologies, including digital technologies. Such aids may provide support, not only to facilitate literacy learning, but to facilitate ‘alternative’ strategies which may actually involve *less* reading and *less* writing in the conventional sense. While this might also seem counter-intuitive for literacy teachers, adopting such aids and strategies may support the learner in his/her journey towards his/her goals.

For adults with literacy difficulties

For adults with literacy difficulties, the study suggests the importance of realising that there are many possible pathways to and forms of ‘success’. The stories of these individuals remind us all, including others with literacy difficulties, that achievement, including educational achievement, is not entirely determined by or dependent upon literacy skills. It is also important for those struggling with literacy to remember that:

- ✧ Literacy is only one of many possible measures or indicators of intelligence and capability.
- ✧ ‘Literacy’ takes many legitimate shapes and forms; the ‘teacher’s literacy’ (the literacy taught in the classroom) is not the only one.

The lessons of these stories also suggest the importance of accepting responsibility and taking control over one’s own life. In some cases this may precede and facilitate powerful learning and development (rather than vice versa).

Finally, for adults with literacy difficulties, the study reinforces the value of trust placed in significant others: friends, family, partner, workmates etc. who can provide a web of support, both personal and practical.

For school-based educators

For school-based educators, this research suggests the continuing importance (long recognised but not always effectively practised) of early identification of literacy learning difficulties.

The findings suggest the importance of teachers identifying, developing and celebrating multiple forms of intelligence and capability within learners. This entails thinking about what it really means to be learner-centred, to recognise and respond effectively to different learning styles and to build the unique learning identities of individuals.

Another way of stating this would be to reiterate established arguments that the ‘new basics’ include developing robust and diverse capacities for ‘learning how to learn’. (These points also hold true for adult and vocational educators.)

The study also highlights the extent to which literacy issues are about identity as much as skills. This finding suggests teachers’ responsibilities in helping learners to develop a positive sense of themselves as learners—an identity, self-concept and self-confidence which enables robust learning and the capacity to rebound from setbacks.

For employment/careers advisors (the pathmakers)

This study also speaks to employment/careers advisors, those we might characterise as ‘the pathmakers’. The findings suggest that these people need to bear in mind that, while it is important, literacy is not the only criteria for personal, vocational or employment success. Personal attributes and other generic and employment-related skills, which are not dependent upon literacy, should be considered and promoted. Insufficient attention to such matters risks missing the potential that individuals may bring to the workplace.

In the context of an ageing population, with relatively fewer younger people available for job vacancies, these issues are likely to become more important. Wickert (1989) established that older Australians are not necessarily more literate than their younger counterparts. More recently Wickert (2004) has highlighted the potential literacy needs of older workers. Those who are required to stay in the workforce longer than their predecessors may find their literacy skills increasingly challenged, particularly in relation to technology literacies. Yet these same cohorts may carry collective experience, ‘nous’ and know-how not typically found in younger candidates.

The study also illustrates that learners/job candidates may need help in identifying their own capacities and matching them to vocational/employment prospects. This is particularly the case if/when individuals are not demonstrating or practising the conventional literacy skills that might be expected.

For adult and community education/VET policy-makers

For policy-makers in adult and vocational education, the study suggests the importance of recognising the limitations of singular and narrow interpretations of literacy.

The value of (funding for) diverse forms of adult education, adult literacy and vocational provision is highlighted by this study. Such diversity of provision optimises the possibilities for learners to recognise and develop their own unique capacities and multiple intelligences.

This research also suggests the value of re-thinking and broadening the concept of ‘disability’ and ‘disability/learning support services’. Some policy reframing in this context may enable adults with literacy difficulties to access appropriate support services. This is also particularly important in the context of initiatives to address lifelong learning, the retention of older workers, and the needs of an ageing population.

There is also a need for programs and support services to help employers realise the mutual goals they share with ‘illiterate’—or para-literate employees.

For employers/human resources personnel (the gatekeepers)

For the gatekeepers, employers and human resources personnel, the primary message is that the lack of expected literacy skills (in an employee and/or job candidate) does not necessarily signal lack of intelligence, capability or potential, particularly when literacy is assessed within narrow frames of reference. Critical thinking, generic skills and other attributes for ‘employability’ and effective vocational performance are not necessarily dependent on literacy skills.

This research reminds us that judgements about workers and/or employment candidates on the basis of perceived literacy ‘deficits’ may serve to alienate and disenfranchise individuals with a great deal to offer the workplace, particularly if creative and ‘alternative’ intelligences are desired.

It is also worth noting that concealment is still a common and (unfortunately) necessary strategy for individuals with literacy difficulties. Thus employees not practising conventional or expected literacy skills are likely to conceal their behaviour. Unless employment relationships are sufficiently open and trusting to allow discussion which is non-discriminating and non-threatening, then concealment strategies are likely to continue.

Nevertheless, employers/human resources personnel can play a significant role in helping employees, including those with literacy difficulties, to effectively meet the performance requirements of the workplace. They can do so by:

- ✧ displaying positive attitudes
- ✧ adopting inclusive employment practices
- ✧ opening up non-judgemental dialogue about workplace learning (and literacy) issues
- ✧ promoting effective functioning teams with distributed responsibilities (including literacy)
- ✧ assisting with appropriate technologies where possible.

For academics, researchers and teacher educators

For academics, researchers and teacher educators, the study suggests the need for more research to illuminate the nature of the diverse (para) literacies in action utilised by people with severe literacy difficulties within workplace and educational settings.

The study suggests the substantial and largely unrealised capacity that people with literacy difficulties might offer the workplace and academic endeavour. However, there is a need for continuing research to better understand how employers and workplaces can assist people with literacy difficulties to make mutually beneficial contributions. There is also a great deal more to be learned about how to better utilise and develop the intelligences of those who avoid literacy.

There is also a need to provide appropriate advice, resources and information to employers and educators to accommodate workers and learners who cannot easily decipher or produce text.

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About the CD-ROM

Contradicting the stereotype investigates the lives of adults from English speaking backgrounds who have been successful in life and work, despite persistent difficulties with literacy.

The case studies of the ten individuals who contributed to the research project are presented as digital stories on a CD-ROM.

These digital case studies tell each individual's story using images and text and the voices of the individuals themselves, along with the voices of the researchers. The project team believes these digital stories will be of value to adult learners, as well as adult educators and researchers with an interest in empowering people to live full and successful lives.

The CD-ROM is included with the hard copy of the report, *Contradicting the stereotype*, which can be purchased from NCVER. It is also available separately free of charge. The CD-ROM also carries the complete report on the research project.

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