

TE MATAURANGA/Education

Reading help available for adults

There may be 100,000 adult New Zealanders who cannot read or write well enough to do everyday things like filling in forms or sitting a driving licence test.

That's the estimate of the National Council of Education. It's an educated guess; the actual number isn't known and would be almost impossible to research for people are reluctant to admit they have a reading or writing problem.

Which isn't surprising; our society has long equated illiteracy with low intelligence and so many non-readers have come to believe that it's their own fault — that they are "too dumb" to learn to read. And they go to great lengths to disguise their disability. They plead bad eyesight or lack of time, they rely on members of their family or prodigious feats of memory, they avoid situations where they may be expected to read or write.

"THICK-AS-A-BRICK"

So the problem remains, largely, a hidden one and the myth that illiteracy is confined to a few "thick-as-a-brick" unfortunates is perpetuated. But in recent years there has been a growing and world-wide movement devoted to uncovering and combatting adult illiteracy, and the people concerned claim that the problem is growing — not because of falling educational standards but because people need higher and higher reading ability simply to cope with the ordinary demands of an increasingly complex society.

THE ARA SCHEME

In New Zealand the first Adult Reading Assistance group was set up in 1974, and there are now 86 such groups scattered throughout the country. The ARA scheme is a voluntary organisation which provides free, confidential, one-to-one tutoring for adults who have difficulty with reading, writing or spelling.

The tutors are given a shorter training course which aims at giving a basic knowledge of various teaching methods and an understanding of the frustrations involved in being an adult learner-reader.

The emphasis is on an exchange of knowledge, for adult students invariably have areas of knowledge or skill which the tutor does not. It's an approach that has proved to be highly successful.

New Zealand's ARA scheme has more than 1500 tutors and over 3000 past or present students, some of whom have now become tutors. But these students are probably only "the tip of the iceberg".

The people who come forward for reading/writing assistance are those who are most strongly motivated — they may need a driving licence, or have to pass trade examinations or want to help their own children with reading skills — and possibly those whose problem is less severe.

FEW MAORI STUDENTS

These students come from all walks of life and perhaps their only common factor is that at some point in their life circumstances or some incident, have resulted in a "mental block" towards reading. Other generalisations can be made; there have been more women students than men, and a very small percentage of Maori students. But they tell more about those who seek help than those who need it.

There also tends to be a stronger response to the scheme in urban areas; it's easier for country people to avoid reading or writing situations and there is generally less emphasis on academic ability.

The reasons why few Maoris have become involved with the Adult Reading scheme, either as students or tutors, could, it's been suggested, have to do with inherent shyness and perhaps some suspicion of an organisation which is predominantly Pakeha and middle-class.

But the ARA would like to bridge any gaps in mutual understanding and the way of doing this is through the social activities that are organised by the group. For instance, a highlight for Northland, and some Auckland, ARA groups was the weekend they spent at the Motatau Marae — an occasion which was

widely and warmly written about by students in subsequent ARA newsletters.

MAORI TUTOR

Gina is an Adult Reading tutor and a Maori. She was one of four Maoris in her training group — an unusually high proportion. She joined partly because, as a primary school teacher, she was concerned about reading problems, but also because "I was asked by someone I felt I couldn't refuse".

Since her training she has had two students, both Maori.

"They came because they knew people within the scheme who encouraged them. They were both religious, and I think that was an incentive for them to come forward.

"I feel that on the whole Maori parents don't read to their children enough, or talk to them enough. It puts the children at a great disadvantage. In my experience the parents simply don't know how important it is that children are read to and talked to.

"I feel that schools should take more responsibility; children aren't being educated for living, for parenthood. And there's still a widespread assumption, among staff, that Maori children will be low achievers.

"One thing I'm sure of, from observation of my own school, is that the number of school leavers with reading and writing problems isn't likely to lessen in the foreseeable future."

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There is almost sure to be an ARA group in your area. Each group has a co-ordinator and he/she arranges tutor training programmes and matches each student with a tutor. Times and places for lessons are arranged by mutual agreement between student and tutor, and learning is at the pace, and towards the goals, set by the student. If student and tutor prove to be less than compatible another tutor will be found.

So if you know of someone whose life is being limited and made difficult by reading or writing problems nudge them (or firmly point them) in the direction of their nearest Adult Reading Assistance group.