



National Research and Development Centre
for adult literacy and numeracy

Research briefing



Priority groups

This is one of a series of publications produced to provide up-to-date summaries of recent research findings from the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and associated organisations. The series features summaries in each of the following areas:

- Family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN)
- Formative assessment
- Numeracy
- Persistence
- Priority groups
- Progression

Priority groups

Introduction

This paper summarises the key messages from recent NRDC research and development activity on priority groups within Skills for Life. It looks at research on a variety of social groups, including Minority Ethnic learners, Muslim learners, young offenders, the homeless, the unemployed and others at risk of social exclusion.

Within the learning and skills sector there is a renewed focus on social inclusion and research on priority groups and vulnerable learners presents both challenges and reasons for optimism. While some Minority Ethnic groups in Further Education (FE) perform worse than White learners, others perform better; Muslim females are particularly likely to be engaged in education.

Basic skills education for young offenders can and does work – the key is getting the content right. Vulnerable learners such as the homeless are not intrinsically hard to reach; instead, they are willing and able to engage and progress if provision reaches out to them, meets their needs and responds to them as individuals.



Priority groups

What the research shows

Minority Ethnic learners

Minority Ethnic individuals suffer a range of comparative economic disadvantages, including lower rates of employment (Frumkin et al. 2008). However, they are more likely than their White peers to take advantage of Further Education (FE). Achievements rates in the FE system have increased for every ethnic category over the past three years. However – and here is a cause for serious concern – there continue to be persistent gaps between the success rates of many Minority Ethnic groups and White learners. The former tend to do less well, and the gap between the lowest performing groups and others may be widening. Also, Minority Ethnic learners are more likely to drop out of education between ages 16–18, whereas White learners are more likely to drop out at 19 or over.

Progression and achievement

Some Minority Ethnic groups, e.g. Indian and Chinese, have high success rates. Black learners of African heritage have higher success rates than those of Caribbean heritage. Success rates also vary over time. For example, Black Caribbean heritage learners improve at above average rates when young but lose ground in their teenage years.

The time it takes to complete the same FE qualification appears to vary across ethnicities. Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi males appear to take between six months and two years longer than White learners. Routes to success also vary, with Indian and Chinese learners more likely to progress to Higher Education (HE) via A-levels, whereas Black learners are more likely to progress to HE via FE or vocational routes.

Participation

There is good news with regard to participation: there were substantial increases in the numbers of Black learners participating in full Level 2 courses in 2005/06 compared with 2004/05. However, Minority Ethnic learners report feeling less satisfied with teachers than White learners. This may be related to the ethnic composition of the teaching workforce. Minority Ethnic representation is limited: only about 7% of FE staff are from Minority Ethnic groups, and these groups are not promoted as regularly as their White peers. Of 389 FE colleges, only 147 have Minority Ethnic governors.

Muslims who have lived in the UK since birth have very similar qualification profiles to the rest of the population.

Apprenticeships

Within apprenticeships there are some areas in which Minority Ethnic learners do better than White learners. In addition, in some areas Minority Ethnic groups who generally perform less well overall outperform other groups, both Minority Ethnic and White. However, Minority Ethnic groups suffer lower employment returns. Only 48% of Minority Ethnic young people completing work-based learning training find jobs, as compared with 72% of White young people.

Research identifies numerous barriers to improved Minority Ethnic success, including: financial constraints;

perception of education as irrelevant; inadequate information, advice, and guidance; and lack of mentors or role models. However, research also indicates that effective practice addressing these issues can help overcome these barriers.

Muslim learners

Compared to individuals of other faiths or with no faith, Muslims are more likely to have no qualifications, and Muslim females are particularly unlikely to have qualifications. However, in recent NRDC research Muslims aged 16 to 24 were more engaged in learning than individuals of other religions or with no religion, and Muslim females were participating in study at higher rates than females in the other groups. The relative lack of qualifications in the Muslim population appears to be a product not of ethnicity but of immigration. Muslims who have lived in the UK since birth have very similar qualification profiles to the rest of the population.

Overall, Muslims in our research were more likely than the other groups to be currently engaged in education, and the gender balance of Muslims engaged in learning was equal (26% of females and 27% of males). Among individuals with no qualifications, Muslims were more than twice as likely as Christians to be engaged in learning (16% versus 7%).

Young offenders

More than half of young offenders are below Level 1 in literacy, with a similar number being below Level 1 in numeracy (Hurry et al., forthcoming 2008). While there is a clear imperative to improve these individuals' literacy, language and numeracy skills, NRDC research reveals a strong tension between young offenders' need for skills and their tendency to have negative

views of education, often seeing it as boring, irrelevant, and a step backwards from a goal that many of them do aspire to: getting a job.

Given this emphasis on employment, embedding offers clear opportunities. However, it is not always an option, particularly in custodial settings, where there is currently not enough vocational provision. Contextualisation of literacy, language and numeracy learning offers another route to improved basic skills and NRDC development projects have shown that when learning becomes more contextualised, students become more engaged. Young offenders can undoubtedly benefit from formal education; the key is getting the content right.

Despite the tensions inherent in young offender settings, we found that literacy and numeracy classes did improve skills. However, attitudes to education remained ambivalent. When learners were asked how they would feel about taking additional literacy or numeracy courses in the future, only slightly more than a third (37% for literacy, 38% for numeracy) said they would be happy to do so.

The homeless

Homeless learners often have a wide range of complex, overlapping needs which affect their ability and motivation to learn (Barton et al. 2006). It can be a tremendous challenge to balance such needs with those of provider organisations and funding and accreditation bodies. In terms of engaging learners, real-life literacy practices, particularly with a campaigning focus, can act as strong motivators for homeless and other vulnerable learners, particularly when learners play an active role in deciding what they will be doing, why they are

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doing it and the language in which it should be expressed. However, this process cannot be easily replicated in traditional classroom settings with a focus on functional skill development.

An individualised, flexible and holistic approach is needed when working with vulnerable adults, including the homeless. This often necessitates one-to-one and small group work, followed, where possible, by referral to more mainstream opportunities. Even when learners display an antipathy to formal learning situations, they can benefit greatly from Skills for Life, but the provision must be adjusted to their needs and circumstances. Homeless learners are not intrinsically hard to reach; they are willing to engage if provision reaches out to them, meets their needs and responds to them as individuals.

The unemployed

Both men and women are more likely to be employed if they have higher levels of literacy, language and numeracy. In terms of getting and keeping jobs, research (Tusting and Barton 2007) shows that unemployed people do best if offered tailored, individual solutions. It is also clear that positive, supportive relationships with personal advisers are important. Evidence indicates that subsidised jobs help to get people into work in the short term. However, moving

into employment without gaining sufficient skills appears to be problematic: individuals who get jobs but lack basic skills or are otherwise not job-ready tend not to stay employed for long. A common complaint from employers has been that unemployed individuals do not receive enough basic skills and motivational training before starting work.

Other learners at risk of social exclusion

Many vulnerable learners have had very negative previous experiences of education and authority figures. As adults, they may experience a range of barriers to learning, including physical, mental, social and emotional constraints (Barton et al. 2006). Social circumstances mean that many lead turbulent and unpredictable lives. Effective practices for helping multiply-disadvantaged learners include the setting of flexible, achievable timescales and progression routes which reflect individuals' circumstances and aspirations. When working with learners who have complex needs, teachers also need to build bridges between different types of provision.

NRDC research has found that many vulnerable learners see themselves as living outside the world of 'normality'. However, these same respondents report sharing the common range of aspirations associated with 'normal' lives: wanting a safe, settled life; a good home; loving family relationships; rewarding work; and good health. Properly provided, Skills for Life can help them achieve these aims.

Priority groups

Scope of this paper

This paper is based on a number of NRDC research and development projects. These include:

Minority ethnic groups: Success rates in further education

This report (Frumkin et al. 2008) explores the educational success rates of ethnic minorities in England, focusing primarily on post-16 education and training in the FE sector.

Engaging the Muslim community in learning

This two-part study for the Experience Corps consists of a literature review of existing research and a qualitative investigation using the Labour Force Survey of households.

Developing inclusive learning: A toolkit for practitioners and managers

This toolkit (Vorhaus et al. 2007) is the product of research and development work carried out at HMYOI Huntercombe. The toolkit offers guidance on good practice and a set of resources to support the work of practitioners and managers in YOIs.

Improving the literacy and numeracy of disaffected young people in custody

This study, which has produced several research and development reports (Hurry et al. 2005, forthcoming 2008), combines quantitative and qualitative methods to explore ways of improving literacy and numeracy provision for young offenders.

Relating adults' lives and learning: Participation and engagement in different settings

This report (Barton et al. 2006) focuses on engagement and participation among learners in community settings. The research was ethnographic, generating detailed case studies of individuals and groups in a variety of community settings.

Programmes for unemployed people since the 1970s: The changing place of literacy, language and numeracy

This report (Tusting and Barton 2007) reviews government initiatives and programmes for unemployed people and jobseekers since the 1970s, focusing specifically on the varying role of literacy, language and numeracy education in these programmes.

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Priority groups

Key points

- Achievement rates in the FE system have increased for every ethnic group over the past three years. However, there continue to be persistent gaps between the success rates of many Minority Ethnic groups and White learners.
- While Muslims in the UK are less likely to have qualifications than are individuals of other religions or with no religion, Muslims aged 16 to 24 are more likely to be engaged in education than their peers. Female Muslims are just as likely to be engaged in education as males.
- The qualification levels of Muslims who were born in the UK are very similar to those of the total UK population.
- Young offenders tend to have a need for improved basic skills, but an antipathy towards formal education. Embedding and contextualisation can increase their engagement and motivation.
- Subsidised jobs help to get people into work in the short term, but without basic and key skills this employment is often not sustainable.
- Vulnerable learners are not intrinsically hard to reach; they are willing to engage if provision reaches out to them, meets their needs and responds to them as individuals.

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